

HUNGRY FOR MORE: AMERICAN FOOD WRITING AND GLOBALIZATION

by

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ABSTRACT

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My dissertation, *Hungry for More: American Food Writing and Globalization*, investigates several food-focused texts including novels, travelogues, culinary memoirs, and TV shows. I take an interdisciplinary approach by incorporating literary theory into the field of food studies to argue that food texts from the United States reveal a growing anxiety towards what, how, and where we eat. As I show, food writing plays a prominent role in shaping many Americans' interactions with the world. More specifically, I argue that globalization has changed, and continues to transform, access and attachments to food.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I examine culinary memoirs to analyze how the selected texts depict immigrant and diasporic communities that reproduce specific dishes to maintain active connections to their homelands while simultaneously critiquing nationalistic calls to assimilate and forget their cultural practices. In my second chapter, I explore the work of Anthony Bourdain. As arguably the most famous and beloved travel host and food writer in the United States, I argue that Bourdain's work often exoticizes the cultures he attempted to present with nuance and that his literary style and televisual vocabulary often utilized misogynistic tropes that diminished the voices of female chefs and critics. My third chapter analyzes two novels that describe the environmental toll of

our globalized food system, while my fourth chapter examines two recent memoirs on food justice and disaster relief that provide potential solutions for developing a more equitable food system in the US in the wake of humanitarian disasters. My work ultimately reveals that American food writing expresses a larger anxiety toward the economic, political, and cultural changes brought about through globalization while it simultaneously celebrates its bounties.

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## Introduction

I've spent my time at UWM researching how American food writing documents the interconnected economic, political, and cultural processes of globalization that have completely transformed what Americans eat. When I first came to UWM, I knew that I wanted to study food because I sensed there was shift in what we were eating and what it meant. In 2012, America was in the grip of a transformation to our food culture. In 2011, The Food Channel, a food-focused website, predicted that 2012 would see the continued rise of "inconspicuous consumption," claiming that diners would be willing to spend more money for less food of a higher quality. They also predicted food tourism to increase, expecting travelers to visit countries around the world solely to consume new dishes. Furthermore, they predicted that social media networks, such as Instagram and YouTube, would lead to a democratization of consumption. While they predictably forecasted that restaurant prices would increase, they adroitly noticed the rise of a small band of self-taught chefs and food connoisseurs taking up audiences' and diners' time, attention, and money. The Food Channel's prognostications of 2012 turned out to be fairly accurate, and since then American consumers have seen even more changes to their diet since then.

More so than at any other time in its history, America now embraces a diverse range of foods, celebrating immigrant cuisines that were once reviled or merely once considered curios. Magazines like *Bon Appétit* and *Food & Wine*, two of the most prominent food media outlets in the United States, encourage readers to celebrate this abundance by eating and cooking a wide array of foods from immigrant communities. Indeed, this explosion of interest in cooking and eating can be seen even in academia where the interdisciplinary field of food studies has become a common sight in many colleges' course catalogs.

Americans are not only more interested in eating a wide variety of food they are also more interested in learning where their food comes from, listening to the histories of the people who produced it, and using their food choices to enact political and economic change. It's of little surprise then that the growing interest in food has paralleled the growth of an academic discipline that investigates the various kinds of meaning we attach to our growing, cooking, and eating food.

One of the persistent themes I've noticed throughout my study is how the role of hunger has shaped our food media. We see ever growing climate-change induced famines, wars, and economic collapses creating more precarity around the world. In 2021, the United Nations World Food Programme (2021) reported that a projected 957 million people in 93 countries did not have enough food, almost 200 million more people than they had projected in 2020. In the United States, the non-profit organization Feeding America (2021) predicted that 42 million Americans would experience food insecurity, almost 1 in 8 of the nation's total population. The persistence of climate change and global pandemics all but assures that these numbers will continue to grow, particularly affecting people living in the global South and racial minorities in the U.S. Around the world there is growing hunger, but there is also a growing metaphorical hunger to seek out stability, comfort, and meaning in a period of upheaval.

Globalization entails a process of continuous destruction and renewal, producing new tastes and practices while modifying or erasing old ones. However, this dissertation will approach globalization by way of the transnational. In mapping out the approach of the transnational, my project springs forth from what Michael Kearney articulates as globalization's disjunctive relationships with time and space. In an essay from 2004, he

argues: “Globalization entails a shift from two-dimensional Euclidian space with its center and peripheries and sharp boundaries, to a multidimensional global space with unbounded, often discontinuous and interpenetrating sub-spaces” (219). The “unbounded,” “discontinuous” sub-spaces that globalization produces demands a critical investigation at localized sites of impact. By conceptualizing the foodways of America as such a sub-space, this dissertation examines how hunger manifests in a variety of contexts across globalization’s transnational flows. The transnational critical approach of my dissertation will allow this project to investigate globalization when these authors describe how their food moves, and has already moved, beyond national borders. As Paul Giles argues, by engaging with globalization’s border crossings, transnational approaches to the global can: “probe the significance of cultural jagged edges, structural paradoxes, or other forms of apparent incoherence and illuminate our understanding of where the culture of the United States is positioned within a framework of broader global affairs” (65). This dissertation will investigate the jagged edges of America’s foodways and examine how food practices respond to political, economic, cultural, and ecological changes in America’s transnational food system. I do this by analyzing a variety of food writing texts, including culinary memoirs, travelogues, television shows, novels, and humanitarian memoirs.

Roughly thirty years ago, Anthony Giddens presciently foresaw the key elements of what he called “high modernity” in that the current, dominant mode of organizing individuals and systems involves a “reflexive project of the self” within a context of lifestyle choices (5). Giddens envisions that as global influences come into contact with once localized spaces, whether by digital communication technologies or trade, traditional practices (such as industry, cuisine, or fashion) fade away or evolve. Daily life thus becomes

an arena where individuals navigate the global and the local through consumptive choices. Giddens argues that individual meaning and attachment stems from global interactions of technological, economic, and political systems. For example, droughts in North Africa mean a reliance on wheat exports from Ukraine, but war in that country disrupts those exports, forcing affected trade partners to find new, often more expensive alternatives for food, meaning ultimately that individuals must make new or different food choices.

Giddens argues that no one can really opt-out of globalization, which makes it one of the defining features of modernity. He says that modernity trends towards globality, meaning local experiences are eventually exported to other areas of the world, “Globalisation means that, in respect of the consequences of at least some disembedding mechanisms, no one can ‘opt out’ of the transformations brought about by modernity” (22). He provides the examples of nuclear war or global climate change, but we might also return to the aforementioned agricultural realm to see how globalization determines choices within a local context. Arjun Appadurai argues that globalization’s transnational flows have fetishized production, obfuscating the transnational relations between producers and consumers and that from this obfuscation arises an imagined ideal of locality. For Appadurai, people come to desire the local, or the “spectacle of local control, national productivity and territorial sovereignty” (“Disjuncture” 306) in order to provide grounding or stability within a world defined by fluid movement. Furthermore, he argues that global advertising has led to a belief that “the real seat of agency” comes from our consumptive choices. In other words, we have no choice but to choose; our food and hobbies become our primary way of engaging with the world. We are led to believe that we are in control of the decisions we make but in fact our actions are at best prescribed to use from a limited set of

options that transnational global production forces have made available to us. Appadurai argues that globalization's obfuscation of transnational networks and the illusion of choice have alienated people from their environments, as all of our actions become subsumed to the flows of capital. Part of my interest in analyzing food writing and globalization is how food allows us to think through the relationship between time and space. Given that the contemporary food system requires moving vast amounts of produce and goods across land and sea, asking where our food comes from and how it arrived to our table is more timely than ever before. In light of the need to find new agricultural spaces to meet the demands of an ever-growing, hungry populace around the world, our critique of the food system needs to account for the ways in which relationships across great distances are collapsed.

Ultimately, the experience borne from globalization is a loss of place, permanence, and meaning. It is not the aim of this dissertation to solve these issues per se, but rather, to understand them within the framework of food and more specifically food media. Indeed, as Giddens notes, if all we have are the illusion of lifestyle choices to live each day or to provide a sense of grounding, what then are our choices, how do they come to us, and what do our food practices mean? This dissertation attempts to answer those questions within the context of food writing from the last thirty years, roughly around the end of the Soviet Union and the starting point of Fukuyama's famous declaration on "the end of history." The field of food studies has examined these questions over a similar timespan.

### **Transnational Literary Food Studies**

I take an interdisciplinary approach by incorporating literary theory into the field of food studies to argue that food texts from the United States reveal a growing anxiety

towards what, how, and where we eat. As I show, food writing plays a prominent role in shaping many Americans' interactions with the world. More specifically, I argue that globalization has changed, and continues to transform, access and attachments to food. The field of food studies greatly informs my analytical approach to this dissertation, especially in my efforts to examine the role that cuisines play as visible signifiers of community. As food plays such an integral role in structuring the day-to-day activities of most people, the theoretical frameworks that appear in food studies often point to multiple academic fields including sociology, anthropology, and literary studies. Scholars investigate and attempt to codify the economic and cultural processes that underlie consumptive practices and pinpoint sites of resistance against dominant economic and cultural forces.

As a discipline, food studies originates from outside literary studies. According to Marion Nestle and W. Alex McIntosh (2010), a molecular biologist and sociologist, respectively, food studies as a discipline began to cohere in 1996 when NYU hired a “food studies professor” to advise graduate students. However, the field can trace its roots further back within anthropology. Anthropologist Sidney Mintz’s 1985 book, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, provided an ethnographic investigation into how the production, marketing, and consumption of sugar shaped colonization, industrialization, and the everyday habits of modern life. Before Mintz, Wendell Berry’s 1977 book *The Unsettling of America* was a treatise against industrialized farming by providing an ecological critique of corporatized agribusiness. While not a sociologist by training or trade, Berry showed academic and non-academic readers alike how American farming practices have been destroying the land and changing cultural attitudes through a data-driven analysis of fertilizer usage rates, crop production rates, and economic

concentration of farmland, mixed with personal elegies of his own farming practices. In “The Culinary Triangle” (1966), Claude Lévi-Strauss argued that culinary acts, such as smoking or boiling meat, reveal the structure of a society. Regardless of when or where exactly the discipline begins, the field is still not only relatively new, but also highly interdisciplinary, with most of its practitioners drawing from multiple academic fields to make its claims.

Indeed, it is uncommon to see strict academic boundaries in many of the food studies conferences or journals, with contributors and attendees hailing from literary studies, anthropology, chemistry, economics, and political science. This breadth of academic interest in the topic can often make it difficult to pinpoint specific trends or concerns beyond a generally growing interest in examining food. And it is only recently that literary studies has begun to take seriously literary depictions of food. The first edition of Routledge’s reader *Literature and Food Studies* released in 2017. There remains only a small number of published academic works that utilize literary analysis for engaging with food studies, with Wenying Xu’s *Eating Identities* and Vivian Nun Halloran’s *The Immigrant Kitchen* as the most prominent examples. While most literary or media studies investigations on food tend to focus on abundance and pleasure, this dissertation looks at food writing and food-centered texts with each chapter analyzing both literal and metaphorical hungers being fed or abated. This dissertation fills a gap in the field of interdisciplinary food studies by providing comparative literary analyses of transnational, literary food texts.

In general, transnational literary texts are written not only for different national audiences, but often serve as an attempt to reproduce or uncover histories or traditions

that have remained hidden. In her book, *Writing Outside the Nation*, Azade Seyhan argues that transnational modes of writing:

can potentially redress the ruptures in history and collective memory caused by the unavailability of sources, archives, and recorded narratives. By uncovering obscure poetic traditions, discovering forgotten idioms and grammars, and restoring neglected individual and collective stories to literary history, it introduces the riches of hitherto neglected cultures into modern literary consciousness. (13)

Seyhan claims that for authors who have migrated across national borders, their literary texts can serve to recover what might have been lost in the border crossings. Often, they can serve as archives or records of endangered cultural practices or histories.

Transnational food texts in particular are deeply concerned with uncovering and documenting culinary traditions. Many audiences flock to these texts with the belief that they can gain some sort of truth or insight into another group. This desire to know communities can be seen as an attempt to find some “grounding” in a world that seems increasingly borderless. However, works of non-fiction are inherently subjective texts, always containing traces of personal experiences or anecdotes, and always susceptible to human shortcomings of memory retrieval. Nevertheless, contemporary readers remain drawn to the transnational food texts’ various processes for trying to reconstruct a version of the “truth” or the “real.” The texts I study in this dissertation reveal the centralizing role food plays in grounding the ethical, moral, and political concerns of what it means to be an American in globalization.

This dissertation is composed of four chapters. For most chapters, I compare two different food texts written by two different authors, apart from chapter two where I look at multiple media forms from a single author. These texts are inherently transnational in nature, informed by the cross-border movement of people and goods. Each text was written by an American-based author and published in the time span since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, with the earliest book published in 1998 and the most recent one in 2018. This does not mean that each text only focuses on stories told within that twenty-year time span as many of the books cover personal, cultural, and political events that took place long before then. I chose books within this long contemporary moment as they coincide with the rise of digital communication technologies and the proliferation of a new kind of food media. Before the Food Network was launched in 1993 to cable television subscribers, food media was the domain of morning show segments, public television, or magazines with a niche readership. As I cover in chapter two, cooking and food media until then were mostly seen as the purview of women, especially stay-at-home mothers preparing meals within a heterosexual family unit. Since the mid-90s though, food media has appealed to a wider audience and there are now countless publications, social media channels, and publications catering to every imaginable audience, from novices to experts covering cuisines from around the world. The food texts I examine in this dissertation reflect the variety of a transnational food media landscape and therefore includes culinary memoirs, autobiographies, television programs, and novels.

## Organization of Dissertation

In my first chapter, I examine culinary memoirs to analyze how the selected texts depict immigrant and diasporic communities that reproduce specific dishes to maintain active connections to their homelands while simultaneously critiquing nationalistic calls to assimilate and forget their cultural practices. In Anya Von Bremzen's *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* and Ntozake Shange's *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can*, the authors attempt to reconstruct and share with readers their own family and cultural history through the twinned acts of writing and cooking. For Von Bremzen, the Soviet Union and Russia are inextricable aspects of her upbringing, yet her book aims to unravel the history of Russia since 1900, and thus, what it might mean to be Russian after the fall of the Soviet Union while living in the United States. Shange, on the other hand, focuses on the history of the slave trade and its attendant displacement of African peoples across the world.

Through their culinary memoirs, both authors reveal the fraught and imprecise practice of memory-making and preserving transnational connections to the past in the face of global histories of starvation, exploitation, and tenuous celebrations. Vivian Nun Halloran argues that non-fiction food writing can help authors work out what she refers to as the "trauma of immigration" (7). Authors can write about food as a kind of therapy to help cope with or manage personal pain. But Halloran goes one step further by suggesting that these texts also serve a social justice function inasmuch as they seek to redress many immigrant, diasporic, and exilic communities inequitable access to food. Food writing becomes a way of reflecting on the choices that immigrant communities have had to make in both claiming an American identity and maintaining "the cultural heritage of their ancestral homeland" (Halloran 8). I extend Halloran's argument to analyze these texts by

showing that these culinary memoirs reproduce displacement. My chapter argues these books are literary representations of the hallmarks of globalization. While they still celebrate and share their cultural practices with readers, these texts emphasize histories of hunger, starvation, and oppression rather than minimizing these aspects. In doing so, these authors promote new forms of reading and cooking that are rooted in empathy as opposed to only curiosity or pleasure.

Chapter two explores the work of Anthony Bourdain. In my first chapter, I argue that the appeal of food literature comes from the belief that cooking and/or eating the food of another people provides the means to form a new empathetic connection with unfamiliar communities. No doubt, studying what people eat, where they eat, how they eat, and why they eat provides us valuable insight into the lived experiences of other people. Bourdain was celebrated for the ways in which highlights the glorious bounty and unbridled pleasure of food throughout the world. If my first chapter highlights what has been lost when people move to new lands, this second chapter then explores a host who highlights what Western audiences, specifically Americans, can gain from moving across the world.

In this chapter, I analyze Bourdain's books *Kitchen Confidential* and *A Cook's Tour*, along with a selection of episodes from his tv shows *A Cook's Tour*, *No Reservations*, and *Parts Unknown*. I argue that Bourdain's deeply singular voice commanded such a large presence in food media because of his neo-colonial vision of travel that emphasized individual pleasure of other cultures as a tool for personal change. Under the guise of cosmopolitanism, Bourdain often espoused a belief that he belonged to a larger, global community and thus had a duty to take in and consume as much of the world as he could.

As the embodiment of what I call American cosmopolitanism, Bourdain eagerly promoted a variety of food cultures but in service of personal satisfaction. This chapter shows how Bourdain's work often exoticizes the cultures he attempted to present with nuance that is paradoxically rooted in his stated desire to become a real-life version of Joseph Conrad's Colonel Kurtz. Further, I show that his literary style and televisual vocabulary often utilized misogynistic tropes that diminished the voices of female chefs and critics. While Bourdain did much to elevate and promote the cultures of non-white and female chefs around the world, his work often reinforced and reified a masculine approach that eventually culminated in the revelation of structural sexual harassment, assault, and abuse throughout the restaurant industry and led to the public and criminal reckoning of many of his close industry friends in the fall of 2017.

My third chapter analyzes two novels that describe the environmental toll of our globalized food system and the limitations of proposed alternatives. Here, I argue that Ruth Ann Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* and Robin Sloan's *Sourdough* emblemize many Americans' anxieties concerning both the industrialization of food and local, sustainably sourced alternative modes of production. As multinational agricultural corporations have granted American consumers greater and more consistent access to a wide variety of produce than at any previous moment in history. Simultaneously, improvements in digital media technologies have allowed people from around the world to share their meals instantaneously and granted them access to knowledge of new cuisines. At a glance, it would seem that the processes of globalization have ushered in an era of cosmopolitan understanding for consumers. As I showed in my second chapter, food media now not only routinely celebrates the foods of immigrant communities, but also now routinely advocates

for increased conspicuous consumption of local, organic foodstuffs to combat the environmental dangers wrought by multinational agricultural industries.

As Paul Hirst and Graham Thompson note, that while individual nation-states maintain responsibility for protecting their borders and determining local laws, these protective measures begin to reflect “systemic interdependence” on “international determinants of their sphere of operation” (10). In other words, nation-state’s policies have begun to reflect the needs of global economic interests as opposed to local. Thus, we can note that modernity through globalization has stretched out potential points of contact and diminished regulatory environments, resulting in a neoliberal food system underpinned by deregulation, exploitative labor practices, and the obfuscation of emergent modes of resistance. Both Ozeki and Sloan reflect these economic and political realities by presenting fictional accounts of resistance. But as my analysis shows, these books show the limitations of individual resistance to systemic problems. Indeed, the alternatives presented end up becoming subsumed in rhetorics of individual choice, the refinement of standardization practices, and a belief that the current transnational food chain can somehow be “fixed” with the proper adjustments. In other words, these books become reflections of how efforts to resist an unjust food system can become agents for maintaining it.

My fourth and final chapter examines two recent memoirs, *The Good Food Revolution* by Will Allen and *We Fed an Island* by José Andrés, on food justice and disaster relief that provide potential solutions for developing a more equitable food system in the US in the wake of humanitarian disasters. My analysis of chapter three ends with an unresolved question, “How do we resolve an unjust food system?” As mentioned earlier, globalization has further displaced where our food is actually grown or produced, meaning

that the labor required to make food has itself become increasingly invisible. But a corollary to this displacement is that hunger within the United States, and indeed across the world, has become more invisible to us. It happens to individuals in their homes, on the streets, or in shelters out of view from most of us. My argument in this chapter stems, in part, from Zygmunt Bauman's concept of the "wasted lives" of modernity, people around the world that are the refuse of globalization that are regarded as a necessary byproduct of economic progress and standardization. These wasted lives are cared for by what Didier Fassin calls "humanitarian reason," a system of administrative beneficence where the wealthy and powerful develop specific non-governmental organizations and government programs to provide aid. All too commonly, these lives are treated as abstracted obligations devoid of humanity and the bureaucratic systems meant to help reflect this perspective. However, I argue that the texts in this chapter resist the desire to treat hunger and food inequity as an abstract problem. Instead, they treat the recipients of food aid and local food activists as individuals attempting, as best they can, to navigate the material conditions of an unjust food system.

Throughout this dissertation I trace at least four interconnected ways in which recent transnational American authors have used food and hunger to respond to globalization: 1.) to embrace and celebrate the diversity of flavors and cultural contacts that globalization has allowed; 2.) to critique the exploitative labor practices and hungers that underpin and sustain such diversity; 3.) to reproduce and share occluded histories that global capitalism has attempted to ablate in the name of wealth accumulation; 4.) to produce literary forms like the culinary memoir that compel readers to take part in new kinds of reading that build empathetic, transnational communities. By looking at hunger in

a variety of forms and across a number of contexts, my dissertation ultimately reveals that American food writing expresses a larger anxiety toward the economic, political, and cultural changes brought about through globalization while it simultaneously celebrates its bounties.

## Chapter 1: Transnational Culinary Memoirs and Hungry Memories

America has a long, well-documented history of exploiting immigrant and diasporic food cultures. As Fred Gardaphé and Wenying Xu have argued, throughout American history, immigrant restaurants and cuisines have often served as a place to mark outsiders in need of reformation: “Immigrant foodways have been traditionally perceived by mainstream culture as markers of ethnic inferiority. In US history, efforts have been made to Americanize the immigrant by reforming his or her appetite and eating habits” (9). Immigrants, exiles, refugees, slaves, and their descendants have all, at some point in American history, been told to forget their past by changing what they ate. For these immigrant communities, many often choose to ignore these assimilationist calls to forget their past by continuing to cook the food of their ancestors. Recently, what was once reviled for so long has come into vogue for American consumers. Greater access to the Internet and the growth of food-centered media has granted audiences new, instantaneous access to knowledge of the food cultures from around the world. American consumers eat a more diverse range of foods than earlier generations and they’re more discerning about their food’s journey from farm to table and consuming unfamiliar and new ingredients. Because of this knowledge, they’ve turned with new vigor to food literature such as travelogues, cookbooks, and food-focused texts in the hopes that they will be granted access to new food cultures, tempted by the promise of authentic, embodied experiences contained within.

This constellation of food-focused literature has produced a transnational discourse of authenticity that plays an outsized role in mediating consumers’ relationship to the world especially at this contemporary moment of globalization where people, goods, and

their stories now move across the national borders of the world at an ever-quicken pace. It is within this context that a new kind of contemporary food memoir has emerged to tell the story of transnational border crossings that describe for readers in sumptuous detail how personal engagements with food have helped to satisfy their hunger. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson link the rise in popularity of these culinary memoir, or what they refer to as both “gastrography” and “food memoirs,” to audiences’ wider interest in stories that articulate the development of subjective identities. For them, readers seek out these texts because they allow readers the opportunity to satisfy their hunger to experience the world in a convenient, simple way: “The rise of gastrography may announce a radically personal form of memoir, in which ‘you are what you eat,’ with its provocative suggestion that the subjectivity of another can be ‘cooked up,’ reproduced, and tasted” (150). For them, the inclusion of recipes serves as an invitational “treat” to readers that allows readers to reproduce the culture of another and, therefore, gain new insight into the lived experiences of another. But it is not just the readers who gain from this interaction, as Smith and Watson argue that authors have the opportunity to share their culture and tell the story of their communities by way of food, “[by] educating the dominant community about histories and cultures occluded in urban life” (148). Culinary memoirs thus archive and preserve cultural practices and histories threatened with erasure by the dominant cultural forces around them. Because of their role in preserving cultural histories, analyzing culinary memoirs can therefore provide unique insight into the role hunger plays in constructing identity the contemporary manifestation of globalization.

The interactive nature of these culinary memoirs, and their inclusion of elements such as recipes, photos, and illustrations, when combined, all *seemingly* provide readers

with the tools to produce a celebration of globalization's cross-cultural border crossings. However, the texts I analyze in this chapter challenge readers by combining these recipes with personal histories of transnational hunger, exploitation, and loss. These texts, Ntozake Shange's *If I Can Cook, You Know God Can* (1998) and Anya Von Bremzen's *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* (2013), excavate for readers buried and occluded food histories of loss. The writing down and retelling of the meals in these books offer diasporic, displaced, and immigrant communities a path to recommit themselves to their ethnic, regional, and national identities. Furthermore, these culinary memoirs operate as a corrective agent to a frequently adulatory, uncritical food media in the United States that often misunderstands, neglects, or underappreciates the role of hunger in these authors' transnational food cultures. The food of the Soviet Union is often regarded derisively: anemic beet soups, pickled cabbages, and hardboiled eggs. The food of the African diaspora, especially in the Southern region across the United States has received acclaim and recognition, but such appraisal has often come by way of white restaurant owners and chefs finding success by cooking the foods of slaves and their descendants. The culinary memoirs from Shange and Von Bremzen both suggest that for diasporic and transnational communities, reproducing the meals of the past offers a tactile, embodied way of recovering histories that were once thought lost.

### **Eating the World**

Because of advancements in contemporary transnational communication and travel technologies, one never has to completely leave their home behind. As Nestor Garcia Canclini puts it: "Our globalized age...connects us effectively to many societies; we can situate our fantasy simultaneously in multiple settings" (24). Globalization scholars from

Jan Nederveen Pieterse to Jon Tomlinson and Saskia Sassen have shown how globalization produces the dialectics of loss and recovery, celebration and mourning, expansion and consolidation. As Manfred Steger puts it, the rapid transnational flows of culture have not only produced new symbolic forms of attachment, but these transnational flows have left us with a sense that everything is being lost: “The contemporary experience of living and acting across cultural borders means both the loss of traditional meanings and the creation of new symbolic expressions. Reconstructed feelings of belonging coexist in uneasy tension with a sense of placelessness” (155). Thus, the condition of globalization is one where people continually are connected to the world but always lost. Readers are simultaneously full but still hungry, informed but ignorant, situated but displaced. This sense of placelessness rests at the heart of contemporary desires for something that can be claimed as real or authentic.

It’s within this placeless context that readers seek embodied experiences of other places by reading culinary memoirs. These texts grant readers access to something that appears “authentic” and untouched by the forces of globalization. The culinary memoir continues the introspective nature of memoir but extends its focus towards the communal by including recipes. This movement from the internal to the external thus serves as a kind of justification for a text’s claims to “authenticity.” Barbara Frey Waxman writes that for food memoirists authenticity develops by communicating specific, personal experiences mixed with a kind of generalized, ethnographic knowledge:

Food memoirists understand that they are writing about everyone’s strongest basic instincts as they tell their own life stories...[and] their depictions of intense

emotions, pleasurable recollections of communal and private food experiences, messages of familial wisdom, and insights into cultures. (364)

The heightened and sensationalized accounts of something as ordinary as food make an author's lived experiences appear more colorful and, therefore, more desirable to many readers. Transnational food memoirs provide readers from around the world with an opportunity to encounter rare or foreign foods that may not have a place in their everyday life. By consuming different kinds of ingredients or preparing unfamiliar dishes, readers believe they can configure new kinds of identity through their culinary practices. Readers' desire to recreate the dishes within these texts is not simply driven by aspirations of class mobility or travel to "exotic" locales; rather, the pleasure of producing and consuming these texts comes from the feeling of building a community through the interconnected processes of cooking, eating, and storytelling.

However, it's not only readers who are interested in the potential for building communities through reading culinary memoirs; authors also flock to the genre because of the opportunity to engage with their own local, ethnic, national, and transnational communities through food. Indeed, Alison Goeller argues that the decision to include recipes within these memoirs functions both as a kind of cultural preservation and as an opportunity to share these cultures with others. She writes:

...including a recipe in a text, writing a cookbook, or employing food images in one's writing is a way of maintaining one's culture and also of sharing it with people outside that culture, thus asserting the culture's authenticity, while at the same time contributing to its dissemination. More importantly, in the context of autobiography,

preserving a community's self-definition is also one means for preserving or asserting one's own individual self-definition. (237)

Within the context of handing down cultural practices, such as anecdotes, histories, and meals, non-fiction texts offer readers the veneer of a complete and static account. A recipe promises a continuous reference point. In other words, the value of a recipe stems from its ability to communicate both stability and change. Yet the constitutive element of a recipe is its ability to be adapted and customized as the reader-cum-cook sees fit. The final, ultimate expression of a recipe then is something of a hybrid that expresses fidelity, a link to both the original reference point and yet diverges from the reference point in personally significant ways. That divergence from the original is part of the reader's implicit self-creation that is itself a fundamental element of life narratives such as the culinary memoir.

Culinary memoirs "world" readers by informing them of "foreign" (to the readers) places and flavors by transforming readers' relationship to the text. That is to say, culinary memoirs translate the world into a reproducible practice via the recipe, and thus, the recommendation to cook the meal/dish is an invitation to reproduce the world. Cookbooks and recipes from knowledgeable sources mediate and filter the overwhelming number of cultures for us to consume. Most readers need a guide and want direction towards the real. As culinary "authenticity" has become reified and championed as the ideal form of food, "authentic" cultural products have become symbols of truth. We want the authentic and the true, and nonfictional forms would appear to grant the most amount of pure truthfulness. But as Alexander Nuetzenadel and Frank Trentmann remind us, many of the cultural products that we claim as authentic signifiers of national identity "arose in the same period as nations invented their own traditions, in the second half of the nineteenth century" (13).

In other words, the very idea of authentic cultural products comes into being at the same as the idea of national identities. However, if consuming and producing “authentic” foods that were originally used to foster the development of exclusionary national identities, we can inversely interrogate how the “authentic” culinary practices of those who have been displaced from their homes are used to resist the nationalist dictums to assimilate. What these constructed discourses of authenticity ultimately indicate is the need to destabilize rigid structures of identity framed around the simplistic and inaccurate binary of “authentic” vs “inauthentic.” Taking from Allen Weiss’s article in *Gastronomica*, I argue that we need a way of approaching authenticity that more clearly emphasizes what he refers to as the “conflicts” and “tensions” that construct the discourse of authenticity (76). If we’re to develop a more equitable and just food system in the United States, one that moves beyond the exploitation of migrant workers all around the world, we need a culinary landscape that deals more closely with the vast histories of hunger, trauma, and loss surrounding the United States’ foodways.

In her book *Soft Weapons*, Gillian Whitlock contends that contemporary life narratives, including culinary writing, communicate lived experiences with readers by encouraging empathetic reconstructions of pasts that don’t belong to readers: “Life narrative...professes subjective truths; and above all it signals to the reader an intended fidelity to history and memory. It engages the reader powerfully, imaginatively, intimately, to the point that it becomes part of our own self-creation” (12). Whitlock reminds us one of the most appealing features of life writing is that authors often explicitly encourage readers to join them in their journey by recreating their meal or visiting the same locations.

Similarly, Jopi Nyman notes that the construction of the self in food writing helps readers

and writers alike make sense of who they are and where they come from. Nyman instead argues that culinary memoirs can be used to show feelings of isolation or abandonment for those from immigrant, diasporic, or exilic backgrounds: “Through narrating stories and memories of home and family, their writings expose the formation of self in a context of cultural interchange. In this process the tropes of taste and food play a double role, stitching the group together but also separating it from the dominant” (282). Thus, for writers who have been displaced from their homelands or their communities, we need to better investigate what Xu refers to as the body’s “porous border of embodied subjectivity that lives, among other things, a social, cultural, economic, gendered, exilic, and diasporic existence” (126). By investigating the bodily responses to cooking, especially hunger, we can better address America’s food system that champions an inaccurate, reductive history of abundance. The food writing in the United States has only recently learned to write about this, or more accurately, has only recently been willing to hear these issues discussed within the realm of cookbooks. By approaching these difficult texts, at least as far as cookery books are concerned, we can better understand how hunger and loss shape our consumptive practices and desires.

### **Eating the Past**

Anya Von Bremzen’s 2013 book, *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking*, presents American audiences with an intimate look at the culinary history of the Soviet Union throughout the 20th century. In this culinary memoir, Von Bremzen relives her family’s 80-year history as subjects of the Soviet Union by beginning with the food of the Tsars and then moving forward through each decade of the 20th century, with each era culminating in a family meal in America. In many places throughout her book Von Bremzen notes the

difficulties of her project, a project that requires her to reproduce the trauma of leaving her home country. By retelling her family's move to the United States through the preparation of food, Von Bremzen's nostalgia guides her readers through the bittersweet flavors and smells of her past, which are inextricably informed by her mother's stories and their joint experience as Soviet émigrés living in America.

Born in Moscow in 1963, Von Bremzen moved with her mother, Larisa, to Philadelphia in 1974 to escape the Soviet bread lines and her father's alcoholism. While living in the United States, she initially trained as a concert pianist at Juilliard until a wrist injury prevented her from turning her musical studies into a career. She instead turned to cookbooks, working first as a translator and then as an author; she wrote her first cookbook on the regional ethnic cuisines of the USSR in 1990's *Please to the Table*. Von Bremzen would go on to pen other cookbooks, one on the food of Latin America and another on Spain, while continuing to write for various travel and food magazines. In 2013 her culinary memoir *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* released to popular acclaim, which mostly centered on the book's "more-than" status of a cookbook. *The New York Times*' Sara Wheeler praised the author for "interspersing historical material with flash-forwards and commentary as she works her way to the present," while Allah Allfrey from *All Things Considered* describes it as a "delicious book not just about recipes." Further critiques of Von Bremzen's books have often focused on how she shares the misunderstood culture of the Soviet Union with American readers. Yet these retellings of her cultural background are perpetually shot through with guilt over her family's continuous struggle to survive as she indulged in luxuries around the world after she left. As she notes in an interview with Meg Bortin:

When I started my career in the early 90s, after emigrating in the 70's, the Soviet drama of putting food on the table was still fresh. Whenever I ate at a fancy restaurant for my work, I felt pangs of guilt about all my family struggling back in Moscow. Over time Russia became a wealthy country, but I continued to be haunted by a sense that behind everything I ate professionally lay another reality: a shadow of our collective Soviet trauma.

Longing and regret loom throughout *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking*, themes not commonly associated with cookbooks. Rather, cookbooks present readers with promises of pleasure from unknown worlds. The pantheon of American food writing prioritizes pleasure. For example, Irma Rombauer's influential 1931 American cookbook lures readers in with the promise of its title: *The Joy of Cooking*, while Julia Childs' ubiquitous 1965 cookbook tome *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* has lent its title to Von Bremzen's book in the promise of treating cooking as an artistic endeavor. All throughout her book, the specter of American abundance haunts and informs her book as much as Soviet bread lines.

Von Bremzen divides chapters in *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* based on the 11 decades from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> (1900-2000s). By framing the book in this way, she guides readers through each decade by recreating a meal that best serves as a symbol of Russia during that time. Von Bremzen uniquely showcases how the nation changed from its early 20<sup>th</sup> century Tsarist rulers to the bleak, collectivist Soviet Union all the way to the nation's current post-communist rule under Putin. This text therefore presents a history of Russia and the Soviet Union to readers who might be familiar with the United States' political history with Russia but understand very little of

the nuances within each decade much less the day-to-day dramas that structured life under totalitarian rule.

For Von Bremzen, the decision to write about food stems from a desire to share both the personal and the public story of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by finding a common reference point for all Soviet citizens. In the following excerpt, she sees food as something that both united the people of the Soviet Union by functioning both as a reminder of the brutal present and as a respite of:

For any ex-citizen of a three-hundred-million-strong Soviet superpower, food is never a mere individual matter... Food was an abiding theme of Soviet political history, permeating every nook and cranny of our collective unconscious...Food anchored the domestic realities of our totalitarian state, supplying a shimmer of desire to a life that was mostly drab, sometimes absurdly comical, on occasion unbearably tragic, but just as often naively optimistic and joyous. Food...defined how Russians endured the present, imagine the future, and connected to their past.

(10)

While the pursuit of food structured people's day-to-day life, the political, agricultural, economic, and cultural pursuits of food played important roles in the larger development of the Soviet Union. Linking the personal with the political in her discussion of Soviet food affords Von Bremzen the opportunity to reflect on the changing foodscapes of her homeland throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Within the above excerpt, Von Bremzen notes that while food functioned as a symbol of hope in a grim life under totalitarianism, she's careful not to merely situate food consumption and production as simply escapist fantasy. There's a bleak, brutal history of starvation and privation that she wants to engage

with. By delinking food from the realms of celebration or pleasure, Von Bremzen insists on the routine, and often frustrating, importance that consuming food entails.

Food in this text is not merely a consumptive object used to signify the joys of the upper class or the pleasures of consumption, rather food throughout *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* becomes an opportunity to engage in troubled reflection and contemplation. Von Bremzen refers to this troubled history as her “‘poisoned madeleine’ memoir,” invoking Proust’s famous moment in *In Search of Lost Time* where his tea and biscuit caused him to recall earlier moments of his childhood.

This is my “poisoned madeleine” memoir. It was my mother, my frequent co-conspirator in the kitchen and my conduit to our past, who suggested the means to convey this epic disjunction, this unruly collision of collectivist myths and personal antimyths. We would reconstruct every decade of Soviet history—from the prequel 1910s to the postscript present day—through the prism of food. Together, we’d embark on a yearlong journey unlike any other: eating and cooking our way through decade after decade of Soviet life, using her kitchen and dining room as a time machine and an incubator of memories. Memories of wartime rationing cards and grotesque shared kitchens in communal apartments. (21-22)

In many ways, this project is not just Von Bremzen’s. She realizes the totality of her project and the importance of her mother’s help in reconstructing the taste of dishes she had no first-hand knowledge of. I’m particularly intrigued by Von Bremzen’s choice of words here to describe her mother’s kitchen and dining room as a “time machine and an incubator of memories.” Food not only grants her access to the past it also serves as a place of growth

where she can develop new transnational connections by continuing to invoke collective past hardships of her homeland.

Von Bremzen acknowledges that developing these transnational connections requires, like the nationalist, imperialist projects she critiques throughout, a certain degree of mythmaking and imagination. In other words, the entire premise of her book focuses on her attempting to recreate dishes and flavors that neither she nor her mother had ever tasted before. In a way, this project reflects some of the larger issues with other transnational memory projects, namely, the difficulty in continuing a relationship to the past when so much of the archive has been erased, destroyed, lost, or unrecorded. As she notes near the beginning of her book:

Inevitably a story about Soviet food is a chronicle of longing, of unrequited desire. So what happens when some of your most intense culinary memories involve foods you hadn't actually tasted? Memories of imaginings, of received histories; feverish collective yearning produced by seventy years of geopolitical isolation and scarcity. (Von Bremzen 9)

What remains when all that's left is a transmission of a transmission? How can one desire a feeling of desire for something they never truly wanted? How can one reproduce such bounteous meals in a book that deals with the famines from forced collectivization, war rationing, and bread lines? Von Bremzen forces readers to confront the culinary history of Russia and the Soviet Union, a confrontation that helps set the book apart from cookbooks that might prefer glossy photo spreads and pithy anecdotes detailing how a particular dish is a real crowd-pleaser. Instead, she wallows in dread and her family's hungry ghosts by chronicling their history.

Von Bremzen begins her culinary journey with the food of the Russian tsarists in the last days of their reign in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. For her, this meal is the first moment where she attempts to connect with the mythic and elusive past of her homeland. However, the preparation and consumption of the meal quickly force her to confront her own feelings of displacement and loss in the present. This meal not only serves as a symbol for a time before the enforced modernization of Russia's agricultural system, harkening back to a phase before mass-production, Von Bremzen and her mother invoke the names, experiences, and lives of their pre-Soviet ancestors. For this first dinner there is a specific item that commands the most attention and the most preparation time: the kulebiaka. The kulebiaka is a "traditional" Russian dish, existing before the Soviet Union and rarely made during its existence, which consists of mushrooms, onions, fish roe, and fish brains, essentially an entire deconstructed fish, which is then baked into a puff pastry. Von Bremzen even notes its place in the work of Chekhov where he used it to suggest the rich, gustatory possibilities within Slavic cuisine. Yet for all of the unctuous delights contained inside of the kulebiaka, the outer dough is arguably the most complicated part for Von Bremzen and her mother. Puff pastry is a very difficult dough to create, requiring precisely measured ingredients, proper kneading, and a bake that heats the interior without burning the outer shell. When cooking such an intricate dish it helps to have someone who's made it before assist. But neither Von Bremzen nor her mother had any experience with making this dish. Kulebiaka was a dish for the wealthy, a rare treat for even the aristocracy. In an ironic twist, her mother defers to her daughter's knowledge as a food writer, as if the received knowledge acquired through reading and writing has granted them first-hand access to this meal. Yet as Von Bremzen notes, she has no family tradition on which to rely

for the creation of the kulebiaka. There are literary accounts from its appearance in texts ranging from Chekhov to Tolstoy, but these are not substitutes for a written, preserved family tradition:

I inhale the sweetish tang of fermented yeast once again and try to plumb my unconscious for some collective historical taste memory. No dice. There's no yeast in my DNA. No heirloom pie recipes passed down by generations of women in the yellowing pages of family notebooks, scribbled in pre-revolutionary Russian orthography. My two grandmothers were emancipated New Soviet women, meaning they barely baked, wouldn't be caught dead cooking 'czarist.' (Von Bremzen 66)

Even though her grandmothers would never have cooked this dish, Von Bremzen imagines cooking this extravagant, pre-Soviet dish as a radical act that allows her and her mother to situate themselves within her family's own history of radicalism. What this early moment underscores for readers though is the constantly shifting nature of Russian culture even from decade-to-decade. Food didn't just mean one thing to Russian and Soviet citizens throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Food choices carried with them highly political and cultural attitudes; what was radical for her grandmothers was no longer radical for her and her mother in the present day.

While Von Bremzen successfully makes the kulebiaka she remains painfully aware that she was striving all along to recreate something that had no place in her personal memory. She wasn't performing this recreation just for herself, she was making a meal to share with people beyond her family, especially many of her mother's elderly ex-pat friends who now live in New York. Some of their guests knew these flavors; they remembered cooking and eating the dishes in the meal. Here, in a moment where Von Bremzen opines

on how little knowledge she had of how to prepare a soup and dessert for the same meal, she articulates one of the central issues within contemporary transnational American food: how to produce an authentic item for others that they can in turn recognize as authentic.

She writes:

Much like their counterparts who had fled Bolshevik Russia, Mom's Moscow old ladies possessed the magic of yeast. And that magic was lost to us. And that was the rub of tonight's project. Of the flavor of the layered Silver Age kulebiaka we had at least an inkling. But the botvinya and the Guriev kasha dessert, my responsibilities—they were total conundrums. Neither I nor Mom had a clue how they were meant to taste. (Von Bremzen 68)

Von Bremzen and her mother have taken it upon themselves to reproduce an authentic version of the dish that their fellow ex-pats would recognize. Katharina Vester argues that food memoirs serving as an important site where the past and future are stitched together. As Vester writes in *A Taste of Power*: "Recipes can pass on traditions, overcoming distances of time and space as well as differences between groups, taking part in the invention of traditions that can help to establish the story of the nation" (30). But while Vester describes how culinary memoirs are used to create national identities, Von Bremzen instead articulates a transnational identity that isn't meant to connect her to a stable, singular national identity. Rather than using this food memory solely to help cultivate a sense of her Soviet or Russian identity, this act of cooking instead articulates a personal connection to her family's past within the changing contexts of the Soviet empire and the Russian nation. Rather than constructing stability through performative recreation, Von Bremzen instead performs imperfect gestures towards authenticity.

Her book continues these imperfect gestures throughout the subsequent decades and meals, but one decade in particular stands out for how she decides to deal with the available historical record and the memories available to her family. When it comes time to recreate a “Soviet” meal of the 1940s, both Von Bremzen and her mother are unable, and unwilling, to include a recipe that would serve as a representation of the culinary history of a past that was so remarkable in its absence of delight:

In the end, we changed our minds: cooking just didn’t seem right. Instead of a recipe I offer a photo of a ration card book. Place of issue: Leningrad. Date: December 1941, the third month of the terrible Siege, which lasted nine hundred days and claimed around a million lives...the rations had fallen to 250 grams for industrial workers; for all other citizens, 125 grams—barely four ounces of something sticky and damp, adulterated with sawdust and cattle fodder and cellulose. But those 125 grams, those twenty small daily bites gotten with a puny square of paper, were often the difference between survival and death. (692-693)

The “kartochki,” meaning “cards” in English, take the place of the kulebiaka in the book’s first meal. In this moment, the collective experience is brought to the fore, both by her mother’s own personal memory of having lived through the siege and by the crowds of “soon to be ghosts,” whose voices all contribute to the image in this card. Indeed, Von Bremzen here does not minimize the experience by narrowing the scope of the hunger to just her mother, nor does she make light of the reality of the situation through the inclusion of a recipe for a thin vegetable soup or a *pain perdu*. For it is not just the stark reality of the small food portions that are shocking, but it is the inability to act in light of the historic record that is so striking, particularly for a book about reliving memory through cooking.

As a food critic, Von Bremzen visits restaurants around the world writing about her experiences at them. In many ways, her works bear the indelible trace of “travel writing,” which I will address further in my second chapter, a specific genre of literature that like the food memoir, comes from a hungry literary audience eager to read about and experience through second-hand accounts the cultures and cuisines of the world. Von Bremzen’s audience for this book stems in part from a popular fascination with the global, but her text also speaks to a very specific concern with readers in America, particularly as it was the Soviet Union’s primary opposition throughout the Cold War. This book not only sheds light on how the “other half lived” during that period of heightened military and economic tensions, but also inserts distinctly non-Russian cultures and histories that came to be encoded as “Soviet,” evinced by her inclusion of recipes such as Ukrainian borscht, the national dish of a nation that didn’t exist in the USSR, and a Georgian lamb stew, Stalin’s favorite childhood dish. Von Bremzen’s book pushes against the myth of Soviet as Russian by attempting to trace a family and collective history that is rooted not only in Russian cuisine. Her text, like many other transnational texts, works to disarticulate itself from both the Russian and Soviet traditions. In the words of Donald Pease, “In the nation, territory and people are fused; in transnational formations, they are disarticulated. The transnational prevents the closure of the nation” (5). Because her culinary memoir continually moves across nations and across decades in order to show the rapid changes that Russia and the Soviet Union underwent, Von Bremzen shows readers a destabilized identity that is an assemblage of longing, imagined memories, imperfect recreations, and ultimately, as her final chapter shows, a bittersweet attachment towards her homeland.

Von Bremzen’s transnational culinary memoir complicates national ordering and

throws it in to disarray. Instead, disarticulation or incomplete translations remain crucial to Von Bremzen's literary project. Her book recognizes the impossible task which she has set out for herself and is acutely aware of the impossibility of exactly recreating the past. She can never completely satisfy her nostalgia and her readers can never completely comprehend or reproduce both the grandeur and the horrors of the Soviet Union. The pre-Soviet kulebiaka can only ever partially be reconstructed. Pleasure can only ever be gestured to and our celebrations are always tinged with loss. While Von Bremzen invites her American readers to recreate the dishes she finds most personally and culturally resonant with Russian and Soviet cuisine, her recognition of the inescapable horrors of the past continue to bear down on the present. Cecilia Leong-Salobir et al. contend that we need new modes of "theorizing globalization by critically engaging pathways of cultural identity that exceed the nation, both spatially and temporally" (14). They contend that by moving the beyond nation we can "recover new geographies of taste and gustemic communities" (14). As Von Bremzen shows throughout her book, her attempts to chart the connection between familial and national trajectories often leads to gaps and histories that simply can't be recovered. Or, if they can't be recovered, they're unable to be completely retold through the recipe format.

Unlike her previous chapters, her final chapter doesn't center on reconstructing a meal from the past. Instead, the final chapter deals with her coming to terms with the reality of living inside the "socialist fantasy" of the nostalgia for her childhood on a trip that includes her guest starring on a Russian cooking show and visiting Lenin's mausoleum before the government throws a major military parade to honor the Soviet Union's victories in World War II. Von Bremzen returns home to contemporary Russia where she

finds a country shaped by the conjoined forces of modern, global capital and Putin's oligarchic rule. This return journey inverts the narrative of a wealthy American immigrant bringing gifts back home, and instead presents her and her family as poor American tourists unable to afford the high prices of traveling in Moscow. Indeed, before making their final stop to Moscow they stop in Odessa, Ukraine to fill up on cheaper Ukrainian snacks where she compares her family to paupers headed into war: "Anxious American paupers stocked up on cheap, delicious Odessa edibles as if preparing for combat. Putin's Moscow: a battleground, not for the fainthearted and shallow-pocketed" (250). As she travels from Ukraine to Russia, she begins to lament the difficult nature of returning home after years of imagining the moment. The Ukrainian snacks proved necessary, as the Central Market and food stalls in the Moscow of her dreams were now, in reality, a hollow shell of their once imagined glory. "On Tsvetnoy, the last of the boulevards, finally it rose ahead, my sentimental journey's destination—the Central Market. The charmed food fairyland of my childhood was now a viciously expensive new mall with edgy international brands, artily designed by a British architectural firm...The Farmer's Market held nary a farmer" (255). The market no longer contained fresh produce as it was now more of a mall filled to the brim with luxury goods marketed to the global elite.

In Moscow's Central Market, the foods of her Soviet childhood, the candies and fruits that she mentions with delight throughout the earlier portions of her book, are now replaced with expensive, artificial imports. Downstairs, the Market contained shops from Gucci, Diesel and other international fashion houses. The upstairs housed "The Farmer's Market," the creation of a local restaurant group attempting to sell luxury European import foodstuffs to a wealthy international clientele. In an attempt to force the nostalgia by

manufacturing a “madeleine-esque moment,” she buys a shockingly over-priced apple from a migrant vendor from Kyrgyzstan in the market selling seasonal produce that’s mostly surrounded by imported apple varieties from France and the UK (Von Bremzen 255). As she unenthusiastically accepts the small, mottled apple from the vendor she mentions that eating it fails to transport her back in time to any meaningful childhood moment:

“Looks homely,” I muttered. “Oh, but the heavenly taste will transport you *straight* to your dacha childhood,” our Kyrgyz lovely promised, smiling ethereally. I chewed on a wedge and grimaced. The apple was sour. Around us cute Central Asian boys in retro flat caps slavishly steered shopping carts for *eksklusiv* patrons. Somehow the sight didn’t inspire old dacha reveries. And the whole au courant local-seasonal note rang hollow too—just another bit of imported post-bling bling. (255)

The transnational flows of capital and commerce have radically disrupted the new, modern Russia by replacing the old agricultural processes with expensive imports. However, Von Bremzen’s discomfort extends beyond just the non-local foodstuffs that now fill the market. Instead, I’d like to point out the link she makes between the Central Asian migrant laborers looking for a better life in one of the world’s most expensive cities and the artificial, manufactured temple to unrestrained wealth surrounding her. Both here and throughout the rest of the chapter, she continually notes the ubiquitous presence of the migrant laborers from Central Asia who are exploited in the service of a global elite who knows no connection to history, and by extent, have no taste. Von Bremzen isn’t merely upset that the apple doesn’t taste good, it’s that the local apple is surrounded by all the hollow luxuries and exploitative labor practices of modern capital. She’s unable to conjure any emotion

approaching sentiment. Instead, she's left bitterly disillusioned and unfulfilled by life in contemporary Russia.

Now, I want to be clear here and state that Von Bremzen doesn't lament the current state of Russia because she imagines the past is somehow far superior to the present. She's not so cynical as to believe that Soviet breadlines were somehow preferable to Dutch onions in Russian food markets. She is under no illusion that her childhood fantasy was better than the present; indeed, Von Bremzen puts the past on trial throughout the final chapter by continually investigating the way the past has been appropriated in the present by Putin's government. All throughout her visit she encounters symbols of Russia's Soviet legacy: old ladies carrying photos of Stalin, military parades celebrating Soviet war victories, and long lines for Lenin's tomb to visit his undecayed, hollow corpse. The past surrounds Von Bremzen in Russia; it fills up every nook and cranny, while its misremembered excesses spill out onto the streets. As she prepares for her appearance on a Russian cooking show where she's asked to serve as an expert on Russian cooking, Von Bremzen's time away from the country grants her a clarity of memory that many Russians fail to grasp. When Dasha, a producer for the show, informs her that the episode will focus on her mastery of Soviet cuisine, Von Bremzen responds incredulously at the suggestion that she remembers life in the Soviet Union more accurately than those who didn't leave: "But isn't Moscow full of people who remember the USSR a lot better than I do? I mean, I'm from New York!" "You don't understand," said Dasha. "Here we have mishmash for our memory. But an émigré like you—you remember things clearly!" (242). The appearance of authenticity in this moment is highly dependent on a particular context, one that is highly mediated in a landscape rife with narrative voices. In Von Bremzen's case, the Russian

television audience is drawn to her because she left the USSR for America. Her *idea* of home, her *idea* of back then, gives veracity to the show's claims of granting access to a "real" Soviet meal. And it's the ways in which these claims to the "real" to the "authentic" and how they're used for political ends, that irks her. Her segment on the show is ultimately just another in a long series of Soviet-era nostalgia pieces meant to invoke a colonial history that is ultimately retooled to justify the atrocities and totalitarianism of the present. The waiting in bread lines, the Soviet chocolates, the drinking of imitation champagne, have now been replaced with expensive facsimiles of the original, but these modern facsimiles, or more accurately, these facsimiles of facsimiles, are now just used to justify the current totalitarian state – just as they were back then. She finds that the desire for totalitarianism, for a center to provide meaning and stability is so all-encompassing, so pervasive, that people desire to reproduce its food, even though the food of that time was limited.

Ultimately, *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking* shows, in part, the limitations of memory reproduction within the current food media landscape. For Von Bremzen, simply trying to reproduce the cultural products of the past also requires a critical investigation of that past, especially at a time where the past has been coopted by the forces of totalitarianism and nationalism. Von Bremzen doesn't suggest that cooking food to confront the past is a futile, meaningless gesture; instead, she argues for quite the opposite: that even in spite of the danger of cooptation, that food still has the potential to access the past in powerful, immediate, and complex ways by simultaneously evoking celebration and longing.

While Von Bremzen focuses on trying to reconstruct the past and find brief glimmers of hope that food brought to the Russian people, in the next section of this chapter I turn my focus to another culinary memoir, *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can*, by Ntozake Shange. Like *Mastering the Art of Soviet Cooking*, Shange's book serves both as a collection of recipes and personal stories to present the brutal histories of privation due to the global slave trade that the African diaspora has endured both in the United States and across the world. But rather than trying to recreate representative dishes of a particular decade as Von Bremzen does, Shange organizes her book in a slightly different manner that often collapses the narrative lines between past and present to depict the messy and difficult to organize culinary connections that link the African diaspora across time and space.

### **Resistance and the Culinary Imagination**

In Ntozake Shange's culinary memoir, *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can*, the author writes about the history of the slave trade and the displacement of African peoples across the world through sharing family recipes. By structuring her book as a combination of cookbook and memoir, Shange attempts to reconstruct and share with readers both her family and cultural history through the twinned acts of writing and cooking. By exploring how Shange invites readers to recreate the dishes of her past, this section will chart how Shange argues for the importance of the transnational food practices of African peoples within the contemporary foodways of the United States. The scope of her project is to assert that an African culinary history existed before slavery and continues to exist even after it.

Due to her work as a poet and playwright throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Shange had achieved no short measure of critical or commercial success by the time of *If I Can*

*Cook/You Know God Can's* publication in 1998. However, it's hard not to think of the book as working at some level to introduce her concerns regarding the historical exploitation and marginalization of the African diaspora to a wider audience and in a separate manner from her previous work. In the foreword to *If I Can Cook, You Know God Can*, the anthropologist and cookbook author Vertamae Grosvenor writes that the book is: "A personal culinary memoir, a travelogue with dashes of literature and pinches of music, this book is also a culinary history lesson, a history of what I call the Afro-Atlantic foodways. This heritage has been a confounding, embarrassing, and frightening inheritance for many" (xiii). The Afro-Atlantic foodways are an integral, but complex, element of the development of the United States. The history of these transnational foodways operated on a long history of exploitation and slavery, a history of brutality and violent cultural exchanges. Shange responds to this history by writing about the meals and dishes that have been of great significance to her over the course of her life. Not only does she share these experiences with her readers, but she also includes recipes within each chapter that allows her audience to reproduce these dishes at home. I return to Anne Goldman who notes that the inclusion of recipes in an autobiographical text can serve as an attempt at making cultural critiques that simultaneously act as subversive moments of resistance:

...presenting a family recipe and figuring its circulation within a community of readers provides a metaphor nonthreatening in its apparent avoidance of overt political discourse and yet culturally resonant in its evocation of the relation between the labor of the individual and her conscious efforts to reproduce familial and cultural traditions and values. That is, the reproduction of dishes...works to maintain cultural specificity in the face of assimilative pressures attempting

constantly to amalgamate cultures for the benefit of the 'melting pot' or 'national interests.' (172)

In other words, for those communities whose access to food has historically been precarious, the culinary memoir provides a literary space that allows authors such as Shange to complicate the trope of America as a place where cultures from around combine into one, more perfect mixture. Yet as Goldman notes in the quote above, this threat to the melting pot is often subversive in the culinary memoir, appearing as an invitation to cook and share in the delights of a meal rather than as a revolutionary call to political action. Rather than show how Africans have become subsumed or blended into other dominant national cultures, Shange reveals how African culinary traditions have served to work against assimilation. Shange's text and project is not just autobiographical, it is inherently global and communal in scope, with each of her twelve chapters covering a different country and the writer's personal experiences cooking and eating with the African diasporic communities around the world.

Her book blends the inwardly contemplative characteristics of memoir and frames her personal history within a larger historical context of the slave trade and the resultant food practices of Africans displaced by the slave trade around the world. From the very beginning of her project, Shange notes that the decision to focus on food stems from the transatlantic displacement of Africans to the New World throughout the long history of the slave trade:

I'm drawn to visions of Africans, like me, during the Middle Passage. I want to know what we yearned for, dreamt of, talked about, if we could manage. But then there is the problem of who could we talk to or with, since we came from so many varied

regions of the continent, a plethora of tongues forced into some pidgin dialect to dispel the possibilities that this experience of slavery, indeed, erased our human abilities/needs to communication: to share a meal. (2)

Shange contends that the desire to share a meal did not erase the slaves' ability to communicate with each other in their journeys across the Atlantic, rather in her "visions of Africans," she asserts these slaves' desire to claim their culinary traditions in the New World. She goes so far as to imagine that this instinctual desire for nourishment allowed the slaves to transcend their ethnic, regional, and linguistic differences to find common ground. Indeed, Shange argues that her book serves as a kind of rejoinder to the notion that the black experience in the United States can only be defined by emptiness and inherent loss. Rather, this text serves as an attempt at displaying the fullness and breadth of African food traditions, "These perusals of history, literature, vernacular, culture, and philosophy, 'long with absolutely fabulous receipts [Charlestonian for recipes], are meant to open our hearts and minds to what it means for black folks in the Western Hemisphere to be full" (3). But this is not a text that celebrates the virtues of overcoming and succeeding in the United States. Shange is decidedly suspicious of such narratives, of the narrative of various ethnic groups coming together and pluckily creating a new, harmonious American identity.

When describing the effect of learning to adopt American cultural practices, Shange states: "Speaking American ain't necessarily nourishing" (13). The absence of nutritional value or contentedness thus serves as a starting point for her culinary memoir. Cooking and writing about the history of African culinary traditions around the world allows Shange to assert the importance of people from the African diaspora to cook for themselves and to eat food that is quintessentially African. Indeed, as Deatra Haime writes in her review of *If I*

*Can Cook, You Know God Can*: “This is not a cookbook, it’s a food lesson, a means by which the African diasporic existence is ultimately justified... Our food isn’t reflective of our lack of culture, it is, in fact, the very opposite—it’s the foundation from which we grow and continue to thrive.” (13). Haime argues that the food of the diaspora serves as the starting point of culture for the displaced communities around the globe. Thus, to reproduce these dishes and to share them with others is to combat the cultural forces that have and continue to promote rarified, homogenous collective identities under the auspices of a singular national identity. As the nation has been historically produced and sustained through the exploitation of those from marginalized racial and gendered backgrounds, Shange’s book combats “American” ways of speaking and eating by working to decenter the nation as a system of organization:

Whether we speak or read American, we’ve had a terrible time taking freely from the tale of bounty freedom’s afforded the other Americans. I often wonder if the move to monolingualize this country is a push for the homogeneity of our foods as well. Once we read American will we cease to recognize ourselves, our delicacies and midnight treats? (5)

For her then, to eat or speak American means to give up pleasure; eating or speaking American means to give up the ability to recognize or act as oneself and even communicate yourself to others. This effort to resist certain kinds of speech thus foregrounds her decision to write the book in a colloquial, almost conversational vernacular. For example, when writing about the history of rice cultivation and slavery she states: “Some of us were carried to the New World specifically because we knew ‘bout certain crops, knew ‘bout the groomin’ and harvestin’ of rice, for instance” (46). She wants to preserve the pleasure of

African culinary traditions without foregoing or losing what she articulates as essential characteristics, in this case the language, of these traditions. Her inclusion of recipes isn't a gimmick or a cheap hook at drawing readers in to buy her book because they connect with her "folksy," down-to-earth charm; her book resists fulfilling the longstanding cultural stereotype of the Mammy figure. Instead, Shange presents an argument for the preservation of distinctly non-standardized ways of communication and cultural exchange.

Shange's culinary memoir not only contextualizes the transnational cuisine of the African diaspora both in form and content, but also presents this cuisine in a literary mode that allows her to narratively position herself in a kind of relation to the spatial displacement of the African diaspora. In other words, Shange's book continually reveals both the specificity and dynamism of the African diaspora throughout the world by showcasing their different, but interconnected, culinary practices. These culinary practices gain from their cultural exchanges but resist becoming simply tokenistic signs of positive cultural hybridity, which is arguably the fullest realization of assimilation. As bell hooks has argued, the eventual assimilation of black culture into a larger mainstream culture, in this case American culture, is a constitutive feature of global capitalism, in which: "...the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (31). Thus, while cultural exchanges can often serve to eradicate African identity by removing the history and locality of cultural practices, Shange's book instead continually presents cultural exchanges that contextualize the history of specific food practices for her reading audience.

At one point in the book, Shange writes about a recipe for “French-Fried Chitlins.” For this meal, she mentions her personal history with the dish in the method section of the recipe, a narrative and aesthetic technique she practices throughout most of her book. Right after finishing the actual recipe portion, she immediately jumps back to an introspective discussion regarding the birth of Haiti:

...I was taught to prepare chitlins by my third and fourth cousins on my mother’s side, who lived, of course, in Texas...Most of the time you spend making these 5 pounds of highfalutin chitlins will be spent cleaning them...Dip each strip into the batter, let excess drip down, and fry until golden brown. Only fry one layer at a time and be sure to move the chitlins around in the pot. After patting away excess grease with a paper towel, serve with dirty rice, greens, and corn bread. Or you can just eat them by themselves on a roll like a po’boy.

But seriously, and here I ask for a moment of quiet meditation, what did L’Ouverture, Petion, and Dessalines share for their victory dinner, realizing they were the first African nation, slave-free, in the New World? (11-12)

The speed at which this textual movement occurs is remarkable. Shange moves from personal anecdote to recipe to historical reflection within the space of two paragraphs, thus imaginatively connecting her family history and their sharing of a meal to the celebration of the first African nation in the New World. Yet within the frenetic movement that this excerpt charts, Shange also calls for a moment of “quiet meditation.” Reflection and contemplation are often absent in most cookery books, which prefer to showcase the thrill and pleasure of cooking or glorifying the action of movement. All too often, cookery books operate on a level of carnal pleasure: see, produce, consume, and repeat. Yet

Shange's culinary memoir presents a textual space, or rather a series of spaces, to present moments of reflection and contemplation on the history behind the dish and the process of meal-making. By presenting such moments throughout the text, she implores her readers to historicize their consumptive practices and thereby insert a moment of respite in the voracious history of global capitalism.

Rather than moving constantly from one meal to the next, Shange moves from one country to the next. It is of little surprise that the first dish in her chapter on Brazil is about long grain rice, as its cultivation in South America is deeply connected to the global slave trade: "The same Guinea and Angola population so fawned over by Carolinians for their skills in rice cultivation also captured the imagination and entrepreneurial needs of Brazilian planters. They ate rice, so we have instead of Carolinian rice, Brazilian rice, which differs in a number of ways" (32). This short little aside in the text helps Shange to show her readers how some of the most basic ingredients we take for granted in our cookbooks and shopping carts played a profound and important role in the development of the transnational slave trade. By contextualizing her dishes within a historical framework, Shange shows how the culinary memoir can historicize and demystify the food we eat. But just because one can be aware of and acknowledge the history of cultural exchanges and exploitations that led to the development of a cuisine does not mean that one is fully exculpated from a tendency to sentimentalize the past. Shange's rhetorical choices for presenting these recipes allows her to differentiate herself and her mode of cooking from the homogenizing forces that would attempt to sentimentalize and eventually commodify her cooking.

For example, in her recipe for shrimp caruru, a dish she encountered in the northern Brazilian state of Bahia, Shange moves seamlessly from describing the process of cooking the dish to telling her African American readers that this would allow them to “pass” as Africans in the Brazilian state of Bahia:

After we clean—you do, hopefully, know how to shell and clean shrimp—place 1 pound in melted butter, about 1 tablespoon, with chopped onion, parsley, green pepper, and tomato to taste...One second or two before you serve, add your coconut milk, that’s right, the thick one, with some dende oil and serve over your rice. If you’ve done this right, whatever color African-American you are, you can surely get by as a real Bahiano do norde, believe me. (34).

There’s a colloquial style to the language in this recipe, a rhetorical strategy which, as Anne Goldman noted of culinary memoirs earlier in this section, allows Shange to come off as nonthreatening. However, nonthreatening here shouldn’t be confused as passive, as the book, at every level, argues for the primacy of African culinary traditions and language. Shange thus does not promote a black nationalism or the diaspora’s literal return to the African continent, but instead advocates for what Ania Spyra calls, a “diversal, cosmopolitan community” (807). This transnational community of peoples displaced by the slave trade reproduces the disparate culinary practices of the African continent to forge an alimentary bond that links the descendants of the African diaspora together in the present.

One example of this transnational culinary community comes from the particular ingredients that Shange sees as part of a connected African culinary identity. In this case, Shange provides a recipe for gumbo, which leads to an extended discussion on the meaning and presence of “okra,” a vegetable brought to the United States during slavery but that

was also cultivated in West Africa. For Shange, the inclusion of this ingredient in the diets of African-Americans serves as a link to West Africa, but she notices people often struggle to eat or cook with okra:

I've seldom encountered a food that drives the primordial southern soul more than gumbo. Maybe because so many of us have such a stake in it. It's a food that couldn't exist without us.

This is why the restitution of okra's reputation is one of my projects. I love okra and my soul is shaken every time I see someone turn her head in disgust, hang his head down like someone's done somethin' to be ashamed of because we're havin' okra for supper. I do not understand this. I refuse to allow our own people to reject an Africanism that is not inanimate or residual. Okra is one of our living ties to the motherland. (74)

For Shange, when descendants of the diaspora dismiss or ignore an ingredient that is a "living tie to the motherland," they deny their very history. It's not enough for people to simply know about Africa: it has to be eaten; it has to be consumed. Okra isn't just an ingredient; it's both a product and a symbol of the African diaspora that continues to exist even after a long history of displacement and violent exploitation. By urging her readers to cook with okra, she urges them to experience a connection to their African identity. In other words, identity must continually be performed and reaffirmed. This connects with Stuart Hall's concept on the development of contemporary ethnic identity for the African diaspora when he argues that that the formation of ethnic identities in the present always involves a reconstruction or a recreation of common signifiers from the past:

The homeland is not waiting back there for the new ethnics to rediscover it. There is

a past to be learned about, but the past is now seen, and has to be grasped as a history, as something that has to be told. It is narrated. It is grasped through memory. It is grasped through desire. It is grasped through reconstruction. It is not just a fact that has been waiting to ground our identities. (35)

Sharing such a project with a wider audience through food displays the potential of culinary memoirs. The culinary memoir as a literary form allows Shange to embrace the everyday material connections of African life that continue to exist throughout the world and invite unfamiliar readers into a new understanding of the African diaspora's culinary practices.

Cooking allows Shange and her readers to continually recontextualize and reinvigorate their consumptive practices. By critically engaging with her own history through food, Shange is able to emphasize the importance of African foodways, that is to say, African culinary traditions and practices, in the United States, without simply showing her audience what ingredients to use and how to prepare a dish. She articulates the power of hunger, a power that allows her to reach out and produce a new mode of being in the world. By sharing her food with others and encouraging readers to cook her food, she ultimately encourages readers to build and sustain new relationships with the culinary practices of the past.

## **Conclusion**

The authors in this chapter note the dangers that come from only thinking about food as a source of pleasure. Rather, they present a vision of transnational food writing that emphasizes the reciprocal flows of longing and satisfaction. Celebration cannot simply come from the excesses brought about by globalization, but such celebrations must exist

due to the historical privation of food. While both books ultimately serve as celebrations of a kind, both authors remain cautiously aware of how mythologizing and reifying food cultures can be used to further nationalistic and imperialistic means.

I have argued throughout this chapter that the content and structure of these texts represents a certain kind of disenchantment or disaffection with food writing that is too simplistic, too reductive, too uncritical of trauma and pain within the stories that get told about our consumptive practices. Our imagination, as readers, often becomes redirected toward the fantastical and the luxurious. Food becomes a place of escape, and food writing, including cookbooks, become sites of daydreams and bounty. However, reading transnational culinary memoirs offers much more than just a nostalgic glimpse into the past. As Anita Mannur argues, this literary form produces a mediated kind of “culinary citizenship” that reconfigures our relationship to the nation: “a metacritique of what it means to route memory and nostalgic longing for a homeland” (“Culinary” 13). Analyzing these imaginative reconstructions of memory reveals not only the ways in which memory-making practices connect us with familial and ethnic roots, but also reveals the ways in which common-place, quotidian non-textual practices, such as cooking, resist the limiting boundaries of identification categories such as the nation. Or, to put it in the words of William Boelhower: “Autobiographical scrutiny of the national territory, however partial, inevitably gives way to an autopsy of the nation’s foundational order” (3). Non-fictional literary forms, in this case the culinary memoir, expose a profound discomfort with the exclusionary and simplistic histories of the nation by rejecting traditional fictional forms of storytelling and instead combining rhetorical and narrative structures that compel readers to take part in a new kind of affective reading. The sharing and recreation of these meals

offers diasporic, displaced, and/or immigrant communities a way to resist an uncritical celebration of the past at the table.

These culinary memoirs present affective, reproducible ways of engaging with displacement, an issue that most culinary memoirs tend to treat only blithely; many food writers tend to smooth out loss and prefer to focus on the sensual elements of their crossings. Rather, the authors I have analyzed throughout this chapter keep the rough edges; they entrench themselves in sorrow and pain but still manage to incorporate pleasure and delight throughout. In other words, these texts serve as literary representations of many of the hallmarks of globalization: displacement, loss, exploitation, border crossings, bounty, desire, stability, and change.

It's worth mentioning that both of these authors identify as women, and their relationship to food in these texts is highly informed by their familial and personal relationships with other women. But rather than reading these texts as examples of a feminized or gendered relationship to food as future readings may invite, I have instead chosen to read them in terms of their relationship to memory and loss. However, in my next chapter, I will investigate how Anthony Bourdain, arguably the largest and loudest voice in the food media landscape until his tragic death in 2018, constructed a masculine discourse of authentic food for a global audience. His presentation of the world, beginning with his role in promoting the hard-drinking, rock-n-roll image of restaurant chefs, engages with food in ways distinct from these culinary memoirs. While these culinary memoirs resist the forces of globalization, Bourdain instead embraces contemporary globalization's bounty and forms to promote a new, globally informed approach to food that is meant to appeal to mainstream audiences.

## Chapter 2: The Neo-Colonial Gaze: Anthony Bourdain and Depictions of American Travel in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> and Early 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries

Before his tragic death by suicide on June 8, 2018, Anthony Bourdain was arguably the most influential and most respected voice in American food media. On the day he passed, people from across the world of food praised him for all he had done to expand American attitudes to foods from other cultures. British chef and fellow TV personality Gordon Ramsay claimed on Twitter that “He brought the world into our homes and inspired so many to explore cultures and cities through their food” (@GordonRamsay). Tom Colicchio, another chef-cum-TV host, said: “Anthony took food TV and turned it into something serious. It was about bringing people together around food and trying to get Americans to see someone living in a Middle Eastern country [that] they weren’t terrorists. They were people who live there and had very similar issues to issues we have here, and he was able to do that through food” (Magary). Even former President Barack Obama, who appeared on an episode of Bourdain’s show *Parts Unknown* in 2016, acknowledged the outsized role he played in helping to create empathy for strangers through food: “He taught us about food—but more importantly, about its ability to bring us together. We’ll miss him” (@BarackObama). Throughout these eulogies a common idea regarding his role takes shape: Bourdain’s depiction of the world’s cuisines sparked a fundamental shift in audiences’ knowledge and appreciation of the world’s various food cultures and, by extension, toward different ethnic, racial, gendered, and national communities.

As a television host, a cookbook author, a memoirist, essayist, a novelist, and even a jiu-jitsu champion, Anthony Bourdain represented a life of possibilities. He was unmoored and untethered. As he frequently noted, he spent more than 200 days of the year traveling.

Yet, while travel around the world became the focal point of his work, he came from the world of restaurants. His 2000 book *Kitchen Confidential* launched his stratospheric rise by regaling readers with bacchanalian delights, testosterone and drug-fueled stories of restaurant chefs engaging in drunken hookups with customers and fellow staff. Bourdain was an insider who peeled away the curtain of restaurant kitchens to show the raucous, mostly male, figures that populated some of the most expensive, well-regarded restaurants in the world. There's a gap in the record on Bourdain, one that's especially difficult and uncomfortable to fill now given his death. While people generally acknowledge that he connected the world by helping viewers to appreciate the culinary practices of communities different from the ones around us, few have found it necessary to investigate Bourdain's work beyond showering him with praise.

Throughout my dissertation, I explore how contemporary American food media reveals a growing anxiety towards globalization. In my first chapter, I showed how authors use culinary memoirs to encourage readers to reproduce and recreate longing, and, by extension, critique the reductive visions of bounty promised by the global flows of unfettered, transnational capital. If the first chapter of my dissertation examines texts that present an explicitly tactile way of experiencing the world, a world full of both painful histories and pleasures that readers can consume and reproduce at home, this second chapter instead focuses on how Bourdain rendered the world in a legible way for audiences by rearticulating an American neo-colonial project in a more palatable way. By analyzing the evolution of his career in this chapter, I will show how Bourdain's work often exoticized the cultures he sought to render more complexly. Furthermore, I will discuss how Bourdain's literary style and televisual vocabulary often employed misogynistic tropes that

diminished the voices of female chefs and critics. While it is not my intention here to dismiss Bourdain's work or to discredit him, this analysis will help us to think about the ways in which contemporary food media has championed a particular vision of travel that employs masculine vision of unsatisfied hunger and longing that needs to constantly feed.

Part of Bourdain's appeal was that he showed audiences a world that was simply not possible for them to replicate. In particular, Bourdain's consumption of food, at least the consumption we saw presented in his shows and books, was mostly presented as impractical and indulgent. While he frequently highlighted the various underexamined immigrant cuisines in bustling American cities, especially New York City, the food he ate and the places he visited often verged on the sublime. By producing travel texts across a variety of media forms, Bourdain helped shape audiences' knowledge of the world's cultural practices. His books and shows focused less on prescribing a literal map for viewers to recreate his adventures on their own, but instead advocated for a particular way of looking at the world. At the forefront of his ethos was an encouragement for his audiences to be curious, travel often, eat well, take risks, see new places, and interact with people different from themselves. All of these, on the surface, appear as largely laudable goals to most. They're so laudable that they remain the defining characteristics of his legacy. But while Bourdain's restless spirit and endless appetite served as inspiration to millions, his early motivations for travel, the context in which his work functioned, and even the literary and cinematic devices he employed all reveal a deeply concerning discourse around Americans traveling abroad during the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

Bourdain's rise not only coincided with the growth of the Internet and social media, but in a post-9/11 media landscape where American audiences came to develop a new

relationship to the cultures around the world. As people around the world struggled to comprehend the devastation of those and other terrorist attacks, coupled with the United States' decision to begin two separate wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the comforting embrace of food television took hold. This chapter will show how, under the comforting genre conventions of travel television, Bourdain reframed America's colonial projects in a more palatable light by highlighting the positive traits of American travel.

He talked to locals about their food traditions, dined at the best restaurants across the globe, and shone a light on the underappreciated and underpaid work within all kinds of kitchens. While President Bush shocked and awed Iraq in March 2003, Bourdain's episodes for *A Cook's Tour* that month showed him eating barbecue in Brazil, drinking in New York dive bars after closing time, and using his industry connections to find the best meals across the Midwest that weren't from fast food chains or located in malls. Bourdain moved comfortably across the world and throughout the United States. He had very few limits on where he could go, what he could see, and how he would be received by the locals. To put it simply, he was the embodiment of American cosmopolitanism. By investigating selections from his early books *Kitchen Confidential* and *A Cook's Tour*, as well as episodes from his later television series, *No Reservations* and *Parts Unknown* I will explore how Bourdain's work both helped to promote local food cultures while he simultaneously rearticulated American colonial projects for an audience uneasy with militarism abroad, but still eager to conquer the world.

### **Imagination and Food Media**

Contemporary food media often highlights the kinds of foods that provide satisfaction or comfort. Food media stars such as Rachel Ray, Martha Stewart, and Jamie

Oliver cook meals that readers can easily make at home. While some dishes may require more effort or skill than others, for the most part, their guiding principles are convenience and satisfaction, accompanied with cookbook titles like Jamie Oliver's *5 Ingredients: Quick & Easy* or Martha Stewart's *Everyday Food: Great Food Fast*. While practically speaking, convenient meals exist for the sake of helping consumers make simple meal choices, books like these also carry with them an ideological function that promotes continuity and stability. As Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber contend, food media often provides "concrete" points of reference "within a world of uncertainty" (1). They argue that within the current period of globalization, where the exchange of ideas and people has greatly intensified and occurs more frequently, people's food provides a sense of relief. Avakian and Haber claim that at times when change feels more profound, or when change is felt more intensely, one's culinary points of reference, favorite meals, or regional specialties can serve to reassure people that life has not yet drastically changed so as to remove these experiences and sensations from their life.

But consuming food is not only done to find sites of stability during periods of change. Consumption, whether it's of food, media, or, in this case, food media can also signal a desire to form new kinds of identities. Such consumption can help individuals imagine a new place for themselves in the world or even help them to imagine a sense of empathy towards others. In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai argues that the contemporary flows of mass media and migration, through their broadening of audiences' imagination, function as central components of the formation of "modern subjectivity" (3). As he puts it, "Such media transform the field of mass mediation because they offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined

worlds” (Appadurai *Modernity* 3). To many, food media becomes an important vehicle for constructing these new kinds of selves. The mediatized depiction of these meals can assist in the formation of new modes of being in the world. Food allows people to feel as if they are no longer restrained to or affiliated with just one kind of culinary tradition since, with enough financial resources, it is easier than ever to acquire foodstuffs and culinary knowledge. On the surface then, it would seem that cooking and learning about the food of others can result in greater empathy with people around the world.

Extending from Appadurai’s analysis on the role of imagination, Victor Roudometof suggests that the global dissemination of these media forms has led to the proliferation of “transnational social spaces” that blur the line between the local and the global. For Roudometof, these social fields and community spaces are created from “the accelerated pace of transnational practices that become routine practices in social life” (68). He posits that the quickening flow of digital media and cultural practices around the globe becomes habitual, which can, in turn, lead citizens, immigrants, refugees, and members of exilic communities to feel a sense of shared belonging to the world where it might not have existed before the increased spread of these media and practices. Roudometof further claims that one of the defining social features of life under globalization has been the standardization of a cosmopolitan sense that one belongs to a larger community beyond their nation, city, or nuclear family. Similarly, globalization scholars such as Ulrich Beck have argued that cosmopolitanism presents a direct challenge to nationalism and the formation of individual national subject identities even if they never come into physical contact with one another. Ultimately, a single thread that runs through the ideas of Appadurai, Roudometof, and Beck is that our current era is marked by the rapid movement

of media that carries with it the potential to reimagine and construct new kinds of communities.

Kwame Anthony Appiah claims that this cosmopolitanism goes beyond individuals feeling a connection with strangers. Rather, he argues this imagined sense of community compels individuals to have a moral obligation to care for others across the world. Appiah writes, “we [have to] take seriously the value of not just human life but particular human lives, which also means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance” (xv). He states that it is not enough for people to just say that they care for others, they also have to express this commitment to others through more assiduous forms of consumption. With such commitment, he believes that only then can we begin to enact material change in our lives and the lives of others. I will return to this idea later in my analysis of Bourdain’s texts, as his desire to teach others through food about the various cultural practices across the globe often becomes a point of pride in such remembrances of Bourdain.

Bourdain’s work helped to shape these cosmopolitan attitudes by presenting a world of frictionless travel and endless consumption. He helped to make the world *feel* less delineated, far more interconnected through travel. Thus, generally speaking, travel hosts and other such similar guides play a crucial role during the current stage of globalization. Their insights, accumulated knowledge, and framing of interactions all play a role, however big or small, in shaping audiences’ expectations about what their own travels may look like. In this regard, Signe Rousseau reads travel hosts as mediators who recalibrate audiences’ relationships to consumption and desire. Since, she argues, food media operates on a mythologized, unending cycle of consumption and ceaseless discovery, the current state of

food media has helped foster a transnational market that “trades in a chiefly mediated—rather than lived—relationship to food and eating” (Rousseau xiii). In effect, viewing the world through food media (as opposed to firsthand travel) leaves audiences with the belief that the world is merely a plate full of various pleasures eager to be consumed by curious Western travelers.

While Rousseau posits that the function of travel television has been to redirect pleasure from the cheap and mass-produced to the more expensive and local, Eva Bakøy frames the appeal of travel and lifestyle programs in terms of political context. More specifically, she argues that travel and lifestyle programs offer a welcome reprieve from the constant media cycles of war and destruction as, “Travel programmes open a televisual space for an alternative experience of the world...through the wide-open eyes of the enthusiastic traveler” (52). Bakøy continues by claiming that escapism is not the most important function of travel television. She instead suggests that the most significant aspect of travel narratives has been for audiences to cede control over their understanding of the world to an expert. She argues that in contradistinction to the news genre that generates news and sustains itself around endless conflict, both at home and abroad, travel hosts and travel narratives present a counter-narrative to the dangers seen in the news. Instead of seeing journalists dodge bullets in war zones or report on location from the scene of a natural disaster, viewers give themselves up to amiable hosts gliding along the world, consuming everything they encounter.

I have two thoughts that I wish to explore based off of Rousseau’s and Bakøy’s arguments. The first, is that I agree with Rousseau’s analysis that hosts such as Bourdain have reconceptualized American audiences’ attitudes towards travel and consumption. As a

trained chef, Bourdain was deeply suspicious towards frozen, low-quality, and mass-produced food. He continuously advocated for a change in American's dining habits by encouraging viewers to visit local restaurants, eat fresh ingredients when possible, and to try the foods of the immigrant populations that live in their communities. Rather than leading to radical political shifts, he instead led consumers to what he viewed as the right kinds of consumption: open-minded, locally sourced, and deeply rooted in unbridled pleasure. While Bourdain was not alone in advocating for a change to American diets at this time (as his contemporaries Michael Pollan, David Chang, and Marion Nestle all argued for wholesale changes to American diets), his acerbic style, dry witticisms, and insider knowledge of restaurants all helped him to stand out from the crowd. Second, I believe that Bourdain's casual, but enthusiastic, way of moving around the world resonated deeply with American audiences, which in turn made them eager to see the world as he saw it. He was a rebel in the world of food media, a hardened and cynical veteran of restaurant kitchens that was the opposite of the warm, approachable Emeril Lagasse or Rachel Ray. It was easy for audiences to project onto him all of their unmet ambitions to see the world, which also, given the individualistic nature of the program, made it easy to see things as he saw them. Audiences conferred an enormous amount of authority in Bourdain, and he became an avatar for the adventures viewers could rarely expect to have themselves.

However, even as a host or guide attempts to empathetically present the foreign and unfamiliar to audiences, food and travel programs function as a means to perpetuating the old dichotomy of the Western "us" vs the Other "them." Casey R. Kelly argues in *Food Television and Otherness in the Age of Globalization* that contemporary televisual depictions of travel are fundamentally rooted in the preservation and advancement of Western,

imperial ideologies of hierarchy: “Even as it celebrates difference, food television still maintains distinctions between clean, orderly, and civilized eating rituals of the First World and the strange, primal, and uncanny cuisines that define the “Third World” (11). It’s in the breaking down of that dichotomy where most claim that Bourdain struck a new note for travel television. Rather than simply shriek in disgust at the most esoteric and unique dishes of unfamiliar cultures, many have argued that Bourdain should be celebrated for engendering empathy to unfamiliar cultural practices by contextualizing the messy and complex histories that led to their development.

However, Justin Bergh disagrees with this assessment by arguing that Bourdain’s intended goal of celebrating cultural practices and communities of which he knew little was instead a canny form of self-preservation in a competitive media landscape. More specifically, Bergh claims that by granting legitimacy to various underexamined communities, Bourdain simultaneously “showcases their exoticness—and thus authenticity—in order to increase his own cultural capital, while at the same time effectively flattening the differences between cultures by fashioning them into palatable, exchangeable parts” (14). Thus, for Bergh, while Bourdain worked to celebrate difference through food, the ways in which Bourdain highlighted the most lavish meals or most bizarre cultural practices, often inaccessible to most viewers and tourists, essentially reduced every encounter into consumable pieces that became tools to personal growth. Essentially, he argues that Bourdain’s search for authentic experiences in a world of cheap, artificial foodstuffs led to an inherent exoticization of the very practices Bourdain’s show was meant to “de-exoticize.” While I agree in many ways with Bergh’s analysis that Bourdain’s work “flattened” the differences between cultures, he underemphasizes the

extent to which Bourdain's work operates within the major global political events of the time, particularly in light of American militarism. In the following sections, I will show how Bourdain's depiction of travel and consumption is less rooted in the perpetuation of his own "brand" as Bergh presents, than it serves to reorient American viewers by tacitly emphasizing mastery over curiosity, knowledge, and pleasure.

### **Bourdain's Early Writing**

Like most writers, Bourdain's style and voice evolved over the course of his career. In April 1999, his first article appeared in *The New Yorker* titled "Don't Eat Before Reading This." Essentially, it was as an exposé of the working conditions of New York City's most prestigious restaurants. The article gained attention for its depiction of restaurants' unappetizing food safety practices. The title serves as a warning to potential readers with the first sentence immediately meant to shock readers: "Good food, good eating, is all about blood and organs, cruelty and decay" ("Don't Eat"). From the start, he signals to audiences that he has a darker, more cynical approach to professional cooking and eating in general. Early on, he notes that many American chefs, at least those in New York City, had by then begun to attract the same amount of acclaim and prestige as athletes and celebrities. But he quickly notes that he was not drawn to the glamorous side of cooking and was instead drawn to the much more insidious, illicit culture of working in a restaurant. He writes: "As most of us in the restaurant business know, there is a powerful strain of criminality in the industry, ranging from the dope-dealing busboy with beeper and cell phone to the restaurant owner who has two sets of accounting books. In fact, it was the unsavory side of professional cooking that attracted me to it in the first place" ("Don't Eat"). But Bourdain doesn't reveal this dark background in order to scare readers away, instead he presents it

as a way to entice readers into a new, mysterious realm, to show how, in his words, "...the professional kitchen is the last refuge of the misfit. It's a place for people with bad pasts to find a new family" ("Don't Eat"). For him, the kitchen was a familiar, comforting place where he found a sense of belonging. But by positioning himself as belonging to this group of people with sordid histories he immediately casts himself in contradistinction to the bubbly Emeril Lagasse, Julia Childs, and Mario Batali of the time. As such, the article presents a kind of general roadmap of the various themes Bourdain's future work would ultimately cover in the same precise, acerbic language that he would bring to his future television shows.

"Don't Eat Before Reading This" served as the foundation for his first book, 2000's *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*, a memoir of sorts on his career as a chef. In the book he continues to explore what he refers to as, "the dark recesses of the restaurant underbelly," by including numerous personal stories of working in kitchens for over 25 years (*Kitchen* 3). Bourdain expands upon his earlier article by stating he wasn't drawn to the kitchen just because of a love of food. He was also drawn to the chaotic, boundless energy of the restaurant kitchen. He points in fact to a specific moment early in his career where his restaurant hosted a wedding dinner. At one point while working this event, he steps outside and walks in on the restaurant's head chef having sex with the bride on her own wedding night next to a garbage can. In his own words: "While her new groom and family chawed happily on their flounder fillets and deep-fried scallops just a few yards away in the Dreadnaught dining room, here was the blushing bride, getting an impromptu send-off from a total stranger. And I knew then, dear reader, for the first time: I wanted to be a chef" (24). His book is full of scenes like this: cooking, sex, and drug abuse comingle

throughout nearly every page. Bourdain leaves no graphic detail out, preferring to expose readers to almost every pleasure he experienced throughout his cooking career.

As I've previously stated, Bourdain appealed to audiences because he helped to reimagine the public image of a chef. Instead of viewing chefs as eccentric snobs in their toques, Bourdain presented chefs more like roadies for a rock band. As Bourdain claims throughout *Kitchen Confidential*, the people that choose to work as chefs and line cooks are, in some way or another, social outcasts. But even surrounded by such a motley group of people, he finds a warm and welcoming environment in the kitchen as it allows him to feel like he belongs to a community. As he puts it, membership in this community allows him to situate himself within a larger part of history, a group that not everyone has access to. He writes:

I'm asked a lot what the best thing about cooking for a living is. And it's this: to be a part of a subculture. To be part of a historical continuum, a secret society with its own language and customs. To enjoy the instant gratification of making something good with one's hands--using all one's senses. It can be, at times, the purest and most unselfish way of giving pleasure (though oral sex has to be a close second).

*(Kitchen 65)*

This unexpected juxtaposition of a sexual aside with a quasi-anthropological ethnography of the chef sub-culture would serve as a template for Bourdain's career-long pleasure-centered approach to consumption. Beyond the message here of finding pleasure in cooking for another, the choice to subvert readers' expectations by drawing an explicit, literal connection to food and sex showed a popular readership a new way to talk about food.

Elsewhere in the book, as he reflects on the relationship between consumption, crime, and enjoyment, he informs readers that his greatest pleasures come from him seeking out challenges that need to be overcome or persevered. Bourdain writes: "I've long believed that good food, good eating, is all about risk. Whether we're talking about unpasteurized Stilton, raw oysters or working for organized crime 'associates,' food, for me, has always been an adventure" (*Kitchen* 5). In other words, he is not only drawn to cooking because of the appeal of joining a seedy brotherhood, he is also excited by the prospect of surviving one potentially dangerous act after another. In effect, preparing, consuming, and seeking out new flavors allows Bourdain the opportunity to continuously transform routine acts such as cooking and eating into metaphorical and literal journeys. Ultimately, we see here his personal motivations for working as a chef as it allowed him to see himself as an explorer who can move throughout the world, acting boldly, and surviving to tell the story.

While Bourdain saw himself as an adventurer, those feelings did not extend to the way he pictured his audience. To Bourdain, most Americans were not adventurous enough because they either did not or could not seek out the culinary experiences like his own. One of Bourdain's major concerns throughout his entire career was the general state of America's choice of food, or, more specifically, what they decided to eat. He saw the corporatization of the American restaurant landscape as leading to a larger homogenization of the restaurant industry globally. He believed the standardization of food around the world in the form of chain restaurants had prevented many American travelers from consuming new cuisines when traveling abroad. He questions this attitude by again linking food to risk:

Do we really want to travel in hermetically sealed popemobiles through the rural provinces of France, Mexico and the Far East, eating only in Hard Rock Cafes and McDonalds? Or do we want to eat without fear, tearing into the local stew, the humble taqueria's mystery meat, the sincerely offered gift of a lightly grilled fish head? I know what I want. I want it all. I want to try everything once. (*Kitchen* 74)

Here we see what Bergh earlier referred to as Bourdain's method of flattening difference in the way that eating "non-American" food is presented as a binary choice. Either Americans can eat like an American: blandly, safely, and sterilely; or they can eat as an immigrant: riskily, exotically, and dangerously. But presenting America's diverse foodscapes in this way perpetually imagines immigrant communities as always on the peripheries of culture. As in his example of the imagined taqueria's mystery meat, the food of immigrants remains both inscrutable and an obstacle to overcome. Finding the joy in the mystery meat means it needs to be earned. I believe we see here some of the first troubling signs of Bourdain's endless appetite and a neo-colonial presentation of the world. In his desire to eat everything and championing the unknown, he simultaneously exoticizes the mystery meat and patronizes the imaginary chef "sincerely" feeding him a fish head. In trying to champion these cuisines, he reduces them to curiosities.

In the early 2000's, Bourdain's often made broad pronouncements on what he viewed as the correct approach toward eating. He expressed particular ire for vegetarians and vegans since, to him, they imagine food as a site of political acts and not a source of pleasure. Once again, he casts the issue as a binary choice between adventurous omnivores, who seek out pleasure, and joyless, socially minded crusaders that pose a threat to gratification. He writes: "To me, life without veal stock, pork fat, sausage, organ meat, demi-

glace, or even stinky cheese is a life not worth living. Vegetarians, and their Hezbollah-like splinter faction, the vegans, are the enemy of everything good and decent in the human spirit, an affront to all I stand for, the pure enjoyment of food” (*Kitchen* 70). Bourdain’s combative, moralizing attitude to those who consume differently than him again reflects his highly specific approach to telling stories through food. His construction of the world reveals less about the world as it is and more as he wishes it would be. But, as Bergh notes, viewers still sought out Bourdain’s authority on the “right kind of conspicuous consumption” (14). Audiences were not put off by these attacks on chain restaurants or veganism. Rather, they were enthralled by his anger, inspired by his demand for pleasurable eating regardless of the political, ethical, or economic consequences of their choices. His early work argued for an American culinary landscape that embraced risk and guilt-free pleasure, which he argued would rectify America’s culinary woes. Ultimately, these beliefs would directly lead to a television series with the Food Network where his show would continue to explore and develop on many of these similar themes, albeit now in the context of travel and food programming.

### **Move to the Food Network**

To understand Bourdain’s place at the Food Network, it will first be necessary to contextualize the food media environment in which he rose to prominence in the late 1990s. The Food Network started in the spring of 1993 mostly airing a cobbled together program slate of Julia Child reruns and restaurant chefs hosts cooking dishes on a rotating weekly basis. When it launched, the anemic programming did not focus on cultural or culinary diversity preferring instead to air the cooking of familiar dishes that viewers could make in their own homes. Unsurprisingly, their original primary audience was women

cooking for their families, so their programming emphasized convenient, affordable, and easy meals. This focus on female audiences has a direct connection to the post-World War II image of stay-at-home mothers and wives, where most cookbooks and cooking shows were aimed at a similarly female audience. As Christina Ward shows in her book, *American Advertising Cookbooks*, food corporations such as Betty Crocker and Hormel created cookbooks explicitly aimed at encouraging female homemakers to purchase their new foodstuffs to show them how they could incorporate these new products into their meals. But while most domestic cooking has been traditionally gendered as a feminine space, the professional restaurant kitchen has been gendered as a masculine space.

The dichotomy between the feminine home and the masculine restaurant helps, in part, to explain the Food Network's initial overwhelmingly male-dominated number of restaurant chef-hosts that helped catapult the network to success. As Rebecca Swanson notes: "White men are prominent in the Food Network kitchen; however, channel programming carefully protects the concept of White masculinity by separating it from feminine, family-centered domestic labor in subtle and nuanced ways" (38). While female hosts such as Debbie Fields of Mrs. Fields fame, Donna Hanover, Clarissa Dickson Wright, and Jennifer Paterson played an important role in helping the network diversify its early programming lineup, until 2003 the network's first stars were undoubtedly its white, male hosts: Mario Batali, Alton Brown, Emeril Lagasse, Bobby Flay, and, eventually, Anthony Bourdain. While the network wasn't wildly successful right away, it eventually grew to popularity on the backs of enigmatic chef-hosts such as Batali and Lagasse preparing meals in front of live studio audiences as well as competitive cooking shows like *Iron Chef: Japan*. What was once a network solely focused on displaying America's culinary past, by the end

of the 90s and early 2000's the Food Network was a leader in showing American audiences the delectable cuisines of the present.

Not only did the network instruct viewers on how they could make these meals at home, but it also now offered them the opportunity to passively consume the world, both the familiar and the foreign, while watching an eminently enjoyable host. Moreover, the Food Network's personality-driven programs served (and continue to serve) as vehicles for advertising cookware, foodstuffs, and other household products. Whether or not audiences actually cooked the meals wasn't the point; all that mattered was that they were watching. To echo the words of food studies scholar Pauline Adema, "Food television is not about eating: It is about watching food and being entertained by the personality" (116). Ultimately, the Food Network neither tried to challenge nor disgust its viewers. It brought them comfort and relief, until Bourdain.

Bourdain's Food Network show, *A Cook's Tour*, premiered in 2002 and differed significantly from those of his fellow network stars. Rather than a cooking-based show like those of his network co-stars Batali and Lagasse, Bourdain's show was a travelogue that documented his adventures around the world as he sought out new flavors and visited countries for the first time. His show and voice came at a unique turning point in American culture. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, American audiences longed for comforting images in their media. But Bourdain's voice was vastly different to his counterparts and wasn't exactly comforting in a traditional sense. He eschewed catchphrases like Emeril's "Bam!" and did not cook for his audience, even though he came from professional kitchens. He explicitly mocked those genre conventions in his show in frequent asides that took the format of a late-night infomercial. In one such gag, he mocked his earlier *New Yorker* article

by pretending to sell bobblehead dolls and ice-cube trays as he billed himself, “Mr. Don’t Eat Fish on Mondays,” a joke that references the caption to his *New Yorker* article. An early review written by Phil Gallo in *Variety* claimed that the show’s appeal stemmed from the fact that the food on screen wasn’t easily accessible to everyone. But Gallo also notes that the scenes where Bourdain eats unfamiliar dishes that may turn off most viewers are arguably the show’s most compelling moments. He writes: “One scene involving the cutting open of a tuna, separating the toro and then eyeing the prized piece could repulse some, but it is absolutely riveting television for anyone interested in food” (Gallo). Clearly, Bourdain’s work had tapped into a larger desire to see new cuisines around the world, but the show also reveled in peeling back the manual labor and skill that went into the preparation of food. Many episodes explored the craftsmanship that goes into making food often by going back into restaurant kitchens to talk with line cooks or, for example, visiting a slaughterhouse. In so many ways, Bourdain’s work exposed the hidden backgrounds behind our meals and reveled in the dirty work.

In one episode, he visits Vietnam, where the centerpiece of the episode is a meal in which he eats an entire cobra. One of the meal’s most striking dishes was the live, palpitating cobra heart, a dish that he notes is meant to improve men’s strength and virility. The owners show him the live cobra that they open with scissors and then put the heart into a dish in front of him. He takes it like a shot while it’s covered in blood and aloofly notes that he can feel its heart beating down his esophagus. As he takes a shot of cobra blood, he even calls out Emeril’s famous catchphrase, saying this will help him “kick it up a notch.” This episode shows a rough outline of the template for the televisual work Bourdain would do throughout the rest of his career and for which he was praised. He doesn’t linger

too long on eating only extreme foods and his observations are tempered by his wit, insight, and appreciation for the cuisine. On initial viewing it would appear that Bourdain had learned from his previous stumbling blocks in *Kitchen Confidential*. It would appear he had delicately threaded the needle, so to speak, by showing audiences an unusual meal from a foreign country without reducing the whole experience to a sideshow experience.

But looking at the companion book to the show, we see a troubling reason for his choice to seek out extreme meals such as the cobra. There, he eagerly admits that many of his influences were rooted in the colonial literature of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and that he too wanted to embark on some kind of neo-colonial project. He writes:

I also wanted-to be absolutely frank-Col. Water E. Kurtz, Lord Jim, Lawrence of Arabia, Kim Philby, the Consul, Fowler, Tony Po, B. Traven, Christopher Walken...I wanted to find – no, I wanted be – one of those debauched heroes and villains out of Graham Greene, Joseph Conrad, Francis Coppola, and Michael Cimino. I wanted to wander the world in a dirty seersucker suit, getting into trouble. (*A Cook's Tour* 5)

Bourdain's shows and books never really show him training or civilizing the places he visits. Unlike Bobby Flay or Gordon Ramsey, we never saw him cooking against the locals and challenging their credentials like they did on their respective shows, *Throwdown!* and *Gordon's Great Escape*. However, I find it quite bizarre that a man who is almost universally lauded for his open-mindedness and curiosity found his inspiration for travel from some of literature's most famous colonizers. Why would audiences want to watch a man from New York who wanted to become an early 21<sup>st</sup> century version of Colonel Kurtz? I think a tentative answer might be to consider Bourdain as an avatar for Americans who were too poor, too isolated, too beaten into submission by the constant threat of war and terrorist

attacks of the time. Furthermore, to most audiences, he did not come off as a colonizer. Instead, they saw him as a disruptive force that presented a world of revelry and pleasure in the midst of 24 hours news cycles on the wars in the Middle East.

### **Move to Travel Channel**

By the time he had moved to the Travel Channel in 2005, his new show, *No Reservations*, (2005-2012) had begun to change ever so slightly. Instead of 30-minute-long episodes, his show on the Travel Channel now lasted for 60 minutes. With the increased running time, the show included more shots of the landscapes he visited and there was more time for introspection and historical context to the places he visited. He began to explore more than just the local cuisines of the lands he visited. In general, the show's scope expanded. The scenes of watching Bourdain tortured in foreign countries became less frequent as he began to seek out a wider range of culinary and artistic experiences. Don't get me wrong, viewers still saw plenty of Bourdain being tortured and eating uncommon dishes, but now he could present those unpleasant kinds of meals while simultaneously addressing the specific geopolitical issues of the time.

For example, in the 2005 Paris episode called "Why the French Don't Suck," Bourdain attempts to combat the prevailing American attitude to the French of the time that was due in large part to France's refusal to assist with the invasion of Iraq. At the beginning of the episode, a radio in his taxi tells viewers about the about the American government's recent attempt to change the name of French fries to "Freedom Fries" in the cafeteria of Congress. But rather than resort to calling the government stupid or wrong, he instead decides to show Americans what they might be missing out if they abandon the French by imploring his audience to reconsider France's culture, especially their food. For

Bourdain, he feels that his past experience as a chef can help to rectify America's approach to the world. As he cheekily says, "Cooks may be the only people in America who may understand where we've gone wrong...Cooking may just save the world" ("Why the French" 3:30). Throughout the episode he shows audiences the pleasures of eating like a local Parisian. He avoids taking them to touristy spots and instead presents them with unusual activities that might seem antithetical to most on a visit to Paris with limited time. He sits in a restaurant for 4 hours eating dinner or spends a long morning drinking coffee in a café while smoking. He moves languidly about the city, only exploring that which most catches his eye or interests him. As viewers, we follow him along on this journey because we've been told by him that as a cook, he knows the people and places to talk to that viewers at home do not. The show encourages viewers to follow him along on his trip in the hopes that we might eventually unlock the secrets to achieve peace once again between the two nations.

He returns to his comparison of American and French dining habits by later comparing what he views as a routine French dining experience. He begins by arguing that, in his experience, most Americans eat a meal at restaurants by "joyously chawing on our food unappreciatively liked doomed cattle" ("Why the French" 22:45-23:00). The French, in comparison, regard food as "important. It's part of their collective history" ("Why the French" 23:10). Similarly, he complains that most Americans travel like sheep, being herded around and never explore outside of a prescribed path that see on television or read in guidebooks. Later in the episode, he visits one of Paris' many meat markets early in the morning to show audiences the expansive nature of French cuisines. The camera lingers on images of ducks, rabbits, pigs, deer, and cows, most of the animals still retain

their fur, feathers, and eyes. It's a stark contrast to the plastic-sealed packages of proportioned meat that we see in most American supermarkets. As he shows viewers the market, he suggests that this food is different than American food because it's not "factory farmed food...It's something to be respected and celebrated for what it is" ("Why the French" 33:00-33:35). After he travels the market, the scene shifts to him in the butcher shop's breakroom, where he notices that many of the butchers are drinking wine, smoking cigarettes, and reading the newspapers all during the morning break. Throughout this episode, France is presented in contradistinction to America: where America is impetuous and belligerent, the French are languid and relatively peace-loving; American food comes from multinational factory farms filled with pesticides and chemicals, while the deeply pleasurable French food proudly bears its connection to the land and reflects the nation's reverence to pleasure. The episode ends with him sitting in a square, outside of another café while French accordion music plays. He eats a croissant, drinks a coffee, smokes a cigarette, and waxes poetically about French culture. He says the English-speaking world has an "ambivalence about pleasure" that the French don't have, and that during a time of war and an uncertain future, he urges American viewers to eat pleurably, even if it is just a simple sandwich at work. In doing so, he ends the episode by saying, "You may love life and ultimately the world, again," making a simple plea for audiences to reconsider whatever previous misgivings they may have once had about the French ("Why the French" 51:00).

But not all of his episodes would encourage such romantic notions of travel. Often, his shows incorporated bitter, cynical reflections on the state of the world. In 2006, Bourdain's visit to Beirut left a profound mark on the kinds of stories and themes he would

explore for the rest of his career, after which he began to move beyond the culinary and into the geopolitical. Filmed at the moment when Israeli forces bombarded Beirut in July 2006 in retaliation for Hezbollah paramilitary attacks, the episode earned him a 2007 Emmy award nomination for Outstanding Information Program. While most of the episodes for *No Reservations* focus on food and pleasure, for the Beirut episode, Bourdain makes a point to tell his audience that the show they produced was not the one they had originally set out to make. He narrates at the beginning that the episode is not, “a hard news account of what happened to Beirut. It’s an account of what Beirut was and could have been. It’s an account of what it felt like to be there” (“Anthony Bourdain in Beirut” 2:30). Unlike other episodes, where Bourdain would narrate over images on screen or stand in front of the camera alongside a local guide, this episode often places the host in the subject position as we see him interviewed in front of the camera. In front of the camera, he reflects on the experience of being in the middle of the city and hearing gunshots ring out nearby. As Bourdain recalls, his guide immediately expressed his fear that the country would be destroyed because of Hezbollah’s attacks on Israel. As Israeli bombs drop on the public airport and the southern part of Beirut, Bourdain begins to include residents’ reactions to the unfolding events. Later in the episode, in a prearranged scene, he visits an expensive rooftop nightclub to interview local residents on their response to Israeli airstrikes earlier in the day in the southern part of the city. They state that they feel rather indifferent to it all and that they have now become used to these kinds of attacks (“Anthony Bourdain in Beirut” 15:10).

After visiting the nightclub, the rest of the episode shows Bourdain and his production crew witnessing, in real-time, the bombing of the city. We see him flee his hotel and move

to another one across the city as he's shuttled along by a private security guard that he only refers to as, "The Wolf," in a nod to Harvey Keitel's character from *Pulp Fiction*. As bombs explode in the background, Bourdain eventually makes his way to a more secure part of the city in a hotel near the US embassy on the top of a hill. He refers to this experience as being under "house arrest," but notes that he was relatively safe, removed from the dangers going on below. During his stay here, which would last for six days, Bourdain reflects on what he identifies as the episode's central, "unflattering" metaphor: him sitting next to a hotel pool getting a suntan watching a war ("Anthony Bourdain in Beirut" 35:10). He expresses frustration that the only footage they have, the only stories they were able to capture, were "interviews with rich kids on the roof of a nightclub" ("Anthony Bourdain in Beirut" 35:30). Compared to the free-flowing movement from one restaurant to the next that we see in most of his episodes, we see very little movement here. Since he was trapped in the confines of the hotel and limited in the kinds of people he could interact with, the show bears little resemblance to the Paris episode. Eventually, his travels resume by the end of the episode, and we see him leave the country by boat. As he leaves Beirut and looks on at the city decimated by the bombs, he continually mentions how lucky he was to leave the country and go back home to his wife in New York City. He notes that many of his fellow travelers are not Americans like him, but now refugees fleeing a war zone. He concludes the episode by saying that travel has changed his perspective from the narrow-minded worldview rooted in his perspective from the kitchen. Rather than celebrate the ability of food to solve the world's problems as he had explicitly stated in the Paris episode, he now doubted the ability of food or conversation to overcome such horrors and devastation. He states:

I had begun to believe that the dinner table was the great leveler, where people from opposite sides of the world could always sit down and talk, and eat and drink, and at least find for a time common ground. Now, I'm not so sure. Maybe the world's not like that at all. Maybe in the real world, the one without cameras and happy travel shows, everybody, the good and the bad, all together are crushed under the same terrible wheel. I hope, I really hope, that I'm wrong about that. ("Anthony Bourdain in Beirut" 48:30-49:00)

Bourdain would often return to this more pragmatic, less idealistic view of the power of food throughout his program. It presented readers with a serious-minded view on the limitations of travel and recalibrated their expectations of the kinds of topics that could be covered on a travel show hosted by a chef. As Kim Ghattas, a Lebanese journalist who covered the war at the same time as Bourdain, noted after his passing: "Here was a man who had revolutionized food writing, food shows, and international reporting, all at once. But more importantly, he did it with an inimitable blend of empathy and levity, and a remarkable eye for nuance." In so much as Bourdain's work to this point had shown him moving about the world with very little effort and finding mostly pleasure wherever he went, the Beirut episode marked a turning point in how Bourdain covered geopolitical affairs on his show.

However, his shows would often turn away from the political and instead revert into the vulgar and revel in the obscene, much like he did in his earlier books. In 2010, he released two episodes that he would later refer to as "Food Porn 1" and "Food Porn 2." In these episodes, he goes into graphic detail, frequently using sexualized language to discuss the food obsessions of the professional chefs around him. In "Food Porn 2," famous porn

star Ron Jeremy joined him to introduce an upcoming show segment by saying things like: “Coming up, barbecue penetration” (“Food Porn 2” 31:00). Bourdain would interview a variety of food obsessed people including the writers, bloggers, chefs, and farmers. The first episode begins with a parody of old phone sex chat lines while a woman massages dough and eats spaghetti. The language throughout is tongue and cheek, so to speak, where the camera zooms in on plates of food. Bourdain narrates over these images by using highly sexualized language to describe the food “thick slabs of meat-on-meat action” (“Food Porn 2” 1:23). The episode moves quickly as it is set in a variety of countries and cities around the world where he meets those with a similarly singularized devotion to gustatory pleasure. We see him eating pho in Hanoi, but before he gets the chance to interact with any locals, we soon see him back in New York City where he is eating blood sausage with the Michelin-starred chef Daniel Boulud and editor for *The New York Times*, Frank Bruni. Soon after, he eats cured sausages with Cesare Casella, a noted butcher also in New York City. The meat is cut thinly, delicately, and swanky 70s synthesizer music plays in the background as Bourdain continues to make obvious allusions between sausages and penis. Throughout the scene, Casella caresses giant hunks of cured meats, lovingly petting them before delicately slicing pieces for Bourdain. Every slice is photographed slowly, in extreme close-up, again, invoking the aesthetics of hardcore pornography oriented for a male audience.

At another steak dinner in the episode, he continuously refers to the first cut of each steak as “the money shot” and notes that the meat is “quivering” as they poke at it with their knives and forks (“Food Porn 2” 25:45). He even brings up Mario Batali to describe why filet mignon is inferior to other kinds of steaks: “As Mario says, the filet is the Paris

Hilton of steaks — no fat and not much personality" ("Food Porn 2" 25:00). I bring these episodes up not to say that Bourdain was a misogynist, a pervert, or a sexual abuser. I bring these episodes into my analysis of Bourdain's work because the actual language of Bourdain's work often relied on fairly specific tropes of male sexuality and consumption. When he discussed the pleasures of food, he frequently compared the experience to sex. Furthermore, in these episodes about food obsession, every single one of his guests, except a lone Japanese sushi chef, are white. All of the chefs are male. The omission of female voices on pleasure would make it appear as if Bourdain was disinterested in their pleasure or had forgotten about it. In a series of episodes filled with celebrity cameos, it stands out that no women were interviewed here. Certainly, Bourdain did much to elevate and promote the cultures of non-white and female chefs around the world, but at many points his work often reinforced and reified a male-driven status quo.

### **Move to CNN**

Bourdain moved to CNN in the fall of 2012 to develop a new show, *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*, that allowed him to tell stories beyond food. While he visited and revisited many of the same places he had been. But rather than focus on finding new, bizarre foods to consume, Bourdain's focus shifted to the more immediate political and cultural contexts surrounding his visits and the tone of the show changed dramatically. As part of a news network, Bourdain's show blurred the line between travel show and journalism. When he met longtime friend and fellow chef Roy Choi on the Los Angeles food scene, they discussed the 1992 Rodney King riots. For the 2014 Sochi Olympics, he traveled to Moscow and met with anti-Putin political activists, including Boris Nemtsov who was assassinated a year after the episode aired. In general, he spoke less throughout and spent more time listening

to the voices of the people who lived in the places he visited. But while he had begun to pivot away from food as the focus of his show, this new series still employed much of the same visual and rhetorical language that appeared in *No Reservations*. *Parts Unknown* is more like an evolution of the work he had done on the Travel Channel, but now his celebrity persona had been well established, and he had firmly enshrined himself as the most significant voice in food and travel writing.

Most famously, in the 2016 episode “Hanoi,” Bourdain had dinner with President Obama where they drank beer, ate noodles, and discussed the rise of nativism throughout the world. The entire episode leads to this grand encounter but before then, Bourdain reflects on the changes he has noticed in the city since he had first started visiting it in 2002. As he mentions, he has a deep affection for the country, borne not only from his love of the food, but also of the nation’s war with the United States that occurred during much of his adolescence. But while the Vietnam War continues to occupy his thoughts, he notes that many young Vietnamese citizens, they can only think of the war as an “abstraction,” a distant memory from long ago (“Hanoi” 6:33). He points out that while the city was once relatively free of Western luxury retail stores and chain restaurants, the country has since relaxed its rules on free trade and opened its economy, in a strategy he calls, “a wildly free-market economy in a system that’s not” (“Hanoi” 14:30). As the episode progresses, Bourdain’s topics vary from global warming impacting the livelihood of small, remote fishing communities on Vietnam’s coasts to the tendency of American soldiers to return to the country to visit the areas they once fought in. Bourdain’s primary theme for this episode is on trauma and forgiveness, particularly as it relates to Vietnamese citizens remembering the War while simultaneously forgiving American soldiers for their role in

the fight. But Vietnam's past and changing economic landscape serve as a steppingstone to the episode's main event, his meal with the President.

As President Obama's car arrives to a throng of excited citizens waving Vietnam's flag, a gold star in the middle of a red backdrop, James Brown's "Bad Mother" plays over the images. The restaurant the two eat at is quite modest. They sit on plastic stools, drink beer from a glass, and order a meal that cost less than \$7. Filmed in May 2016, six months before the election of Donald Trump and weeks before Brexit, Bourdain brings up how the world seems to be closing in on itself, retreating from openness. He even laments that politicians back in the US are still seriously considering building a wall. As they talk about the rise of nativism around the world, Bourdain indicates that he wishes more Americans had passports to solve these problems. As he tells President Obama: "The extent to which you can see how other people live seems useful at worst and incredibly pleasurable and interesting at best" ("Hanoi" 46:34-46:50). Near the end of their dinner, the background music begins to swell and Bourdain, concerned for the future of his daughter amid what he perceives to be a growth of nationalism and xenophobia across the world, tearfully asks the President, "As the father of a young girl, is it all going to be ok?" President Obama responds, "Progress is not a straight line. There are going to be moments at any given part in the world where things are terrible but, having said all that, I think things are going to work out" ("Hanoi" 48:00-48:25). Bourdain ends the meal almost immediately afterwards without comment and simply thanks the President.

After Bourdain's passing, many critics and obituaries pointed to this exchange as a "proud American moment," with John Hendrickson writing: "Obama and Bourdain appear to be the only Westerners in the frame, but they blend in effortlessly. Both individually and

as a unit in this fleeting moment, they are ambassadors of an America that feels so far gone...As Bourdain and Obama proved in their televised meal, being a proud American doesn't have to mean you're a close-minded nativist." Hendrickson's assessment here reveals much about a color-blind approach to travel many viewers looked for from Bourdain. He praises Bourdain for his ability to "blend in effortlessly," even though he was a 6'4" white man dining with the first black president of the United States at a small noodle shop in Hanoi.

For me, Bourdain's meal with President Obama is quite telling. I argue that the meal serves as the epitome of the kind of travel Bourdain advocated: travel can facilitate greater empathy and access to untold pleasures; travelers and consumers should take an active interest in where they go and what they eat; and ultimately, consumption of the other is required to affect personal development. But beyond a dictum to consume foods that make us happy and to travel to new places, stripped of his deep voice and weathered face, Bourdain's argument for the benefits of more conspicuous consumption can often ring as slightly hollow. For example, near the end of the episode, Bourdain asks one of his guides if younger generations should remember the Vietnam war or forget it. She tearfully responds that she thinks it is important for both American and Vietnamese citizens alike to know the history "to make sure it never happens again" ("Hanoi" 52:00). As she speaks, shots of the devastation from the war appear: crashed planes, American veterans visiting war memorials, and stock news footage are all juxtaposed against her emotional plea to remember the human cost of battle. And while Bourdain implores audiences to see Vietnam as more than just a third-world country home to people that Americans once considered an enemy, the episode ultimately ends with a first-person camera perspective of Bourdain

riding on a motorcycle through the streets of Hanoi, impassively scanning the indiscriminate faces of vendors and travelers while car horns honk in the background as he rides alone into the night seeking out his next meal, his next destination. An explicit emotional appeal from an unfamiliar voice is undercut by a cinematic decision to focus on Bourdain's traveling body.

To conclude this section on Bourdain's time with CNN, I would like to briefly bring up an episode that I believe justifies my reading of Bourdain as a neo-colonial figure. In the season 8 finale, "Rome," released in December 2016, Bourdain contrasts the history of the city with black and white long shots, in the Italian post-war neo-Realist manner, that highlight the juxtaposition of his singular body against the fascist-era Rationalist style buildings in the background. He sits at a cafe drinking beers with Italian mechanics, who he calls "Rome's true heroes," and former boxers alongside his girlfriend Asia Argento, an actress and daughter of the Italian horror-film director Dario Argento, Bourdain appears like the embodiment of his colonial literary influences. We see him as comfortable, awestruck by the grandeur of the city, but still powerful. While once again chain-smoking cigarettes and quaffing down endless glasses of wine, Bourdain talks with the locals about the rise of fascism in Italy, attempting to understand how it happened in their country. Even though the episode was filmed months before the 2016 presidential election, over giant plates of pasta, Bourdain expresses concern that if fascism could occur in Italy, why couldn't it occur in the United States or in other developed Western nations.

Near the end of the episode, Bourdain reflects on the growing tides of nationalism around the world and explains that perhaps his notion of self-enlightenment through travel may not actually work. Instead, he quietly suggests while looking at a statue of King

Vittorio on horseback: “I think we’re all looking for a man on a horse to make everything better.” By acknowledging the rise of fascism as an attempt at finding control during a period of great social and political upheaval, I think Bourdain here begins to reckon with the limitations of his incredibly privileged form of travel. As he considers the limitations of his work over the last 15 years, he empathizes with those drawn in by the comfort of following orders by someone claiming to have the answers. Like he did at the end of the Beirut episode in 2006, he begins to question whether his attitude towards travel is worthwhile or even practicable by anyone other than himself. Ultimately, this sense of self-doubt about his own position as a mediator defined much of Bourdain’s work in the final season of *Parts Unknown*. He began to reflect more earnestly on his position and eventually repudiated some of his earlier work, particularly the way in which his work diminished women’s voices.

### **Reflections on Travel**

My goal here in this chapter has not been to claim that Bourdain purposefully set out to promote a colonial project. Many of his shows actively criticize and reject imperialism around the world. Instead, I want to argue here that we need to reconsider Bourdain’s legacy by thinking about how his work functioned within the context of America in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. During that roughly 20-year period, American diets and attitudes to food expanded. Consumers became more discerning in their dining out experiences and food movements promoted more local, ethically sourced, and pesticide-free foods. Bourdain championed an American diet that went beyond fast-food burgers and microwaveable meals. But during this period, America’s relationship to the world began to shift. As the country started two ill-fated wars in both Afghanistan and

Iraq after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the nation longed for stability and a sense of strength. Bourdain worked as a cultural translator and audience surrogate to an American audience struggling to understand its country's own changing relationship to the world.

As the country debated the merits of war on two fronts and many communities closed ranks on the dissidents of the war efforts abroad, Bourdain remained an avowed leftist who continually reminded his audiences that he disagreed with the Bush administration and American imperialism. On his travels, he expressed genuine concern regarding the everyday lives of citizens who would bear or had already borne the cost of war in their homeland. But even though Bourdain called for greater awareness from his audiences, the focus of his show was always on his effortless ability to visit a land, taste its pleasure, and leave having grown a little wiser.

Along with fellow chefs turned media figures such as Mario Batali, Marco Pierre White, and Gordon Ramsey, Bourdain ushered in a decidedly male food media landscape at the end of the 20th Century and in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, by late Fall 2017, cracks began to appear in the male-centered food media. At the height of the #MeToo Movement, Batali was accused of sexual harassment and misconduct by several of his current and former employees across his international restaurant empire. Quickly, the restaurant and media deals Batali had in place began to fall through and police began investigating him for sexual assault in New York. Suddenly similar accusations against many other of Bourdain's previous guests and fellow food media personalities came to light. Certainly, Bourdain is much more than what he did in his early years and during his time in restaurant kitchens. It would appear that in the last months of his life he had begun to reflect on what exactly his work communicated to readers, who it appealed to, and the

impact of the stories he had told. Shortly after the news of Batali's actions broke, Bourdain wrote a brief blog post about #MeToo, where he not only expressed his support for his girlfriend Asia Argento's accusations against Harvey Weinstein but where he also expressed remorse about the role he played in breeding a popular image of a self-interested, playboy, rock star chef: "To the extent which my work in *Kitchen Confidential* celebrated or prolonged a culture that allowed the kind of grotesque behaviors we're hearing about all too frequently is something I think about daily, with real remorse" ("On Reacting"). Clearly, we see a deeply regretful man attempting to atone for the violence and abuse his work helped to foster. He spent much of his remaining life working to legitimize the claims of sexual abuse victims against their perpetrators. And as he entered the final episodes of his show, his voice became less prominent as he preferred to let others lead the conversation. While it is difficult to ascribe correlation with causation here, viewers saw a man moved to profound change after being confronted with the systemic abuse that plagued his industry.

Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker note that within the realm of food writing and travel television, white writers and hosts, frequently from professional cooking backgrounds, occupy an outsized position in these industries. More specifically, they note that these chefs' ability to travel across lands is deeply linked to their ability to move freely around, unencumbered by racial, gender, or linguistic markers that would set them apart as true outsiders no matter where they travel. They claim that by continuing to promote the culinary travels of mostly white men, "...operates to reassure viewers that male entrepreneurial energies still flourish" (117). In effect, they argue that travel hosts like Bourdain "...betray nostalgia for a fictional America associated with a frontier mythos and

the singular masculinity—independent, competent, uncompromising—popularly associated with it” (133). While Bourdain’s body of work often explicitly critiques a colonial-settler view of conquering new lands and civilizing the native populations he meets, I am compelled to agree with their interpretation of not just his work, but the work of food media that looks only to the previous genre conventions of the past as a guide to the future. As Negra and Tasker remind us, the proliferation and reification of mostly white male voices in the food landscape ultimately leads to the continuous promotion of white male discovery as the primary mode of experiencing the world.

Audiences vested a considerable degree of authority and power onto Bourdain due, initially, to his background in the restaurant industry. As a 2014 survey of major restaurant groups in *Bloomberg* points out, just 6.3% of head chef positions were held by women across America (Sutton). In the realm of fine dining, of the 14 chefs across America that were awarded three Michelin Stars in 2019, only one was a woman (Repanich). Men have mostly dominated professional kitchens across America and therefore have been most likely to occupy esteemed positions in food media. Bourdain frequently tapped into his culinary background in his early work, and audiences eagerly listened to his stories about the debauched activities in restaurant kitchens. There can be no mistaking that his masculine framing of kitchen labor and sex provided him with a platform from which he would go on to influence the trajectory of American food media.

As Caren Kaplan suggests in her reading of travel, to view travel, as Bourdain often did, mostly in terms of personal satisfaction and self-development stems from an inherently inaccurate view that the world exists for the Western, male gaze to examine and consume (“Politics”). All too often, the dominant form of food media highlights individual

travel by presenting the world as a playground where the everyday lives and cultural practices of foreigners become the tools to personal growth for Westerners. By perpetuating the conventional genre format of a single traveler going into a foreign location to gain insider knowledge who then renders these insights into a legible form, essentially concretizes distance between audiences and the host's subjects. In effect, audiences learn more about the personal growth of the Western traveler and little about their place of travel.

Through food, Bourdain demonstrated a cosmopolitan version of American travel. He did this all at a time when the American government started two wars in the Middle East and waged a campaign of suspicion and distrust over those who didn't share its same worldview. In many ways, he appeared as the antithesis of the Bush-era foreign policy from which he sprung. But Bourdain's body of work, especially in his early shows that frequently depicted him engaging in unusual cultural practices that were meant to disturb and provoke his audiences, did much to reinstate and promote colonial notions of the rest of the world. And, as mentioned earlier, his work was deeply rooted in a masculine restaurant culture that emphasized men's pleasure at the cost of women's autonomy. Bourdain's role as a single, individual male traveling the world and the show's celebratory tone of difference was in many ways a celebration of men's roles in the kitchen, men's stories of adventure, and men's ability to uncover new insights and experiences through travel. Examining Bourdain's work over the last twenty years has revealed a greater awareness of the role masculine rhetoric and energies played in American food culture. The globalization of food media has opened the eyes of the world to once occluded practices and voices, but

these depictions still often presume that noteworthiness requires the validation of a cultural intermediary.

### Chapter Three: Technologies of Food Production, Consumption, and Automation in American Literature

My third chapter investigates two contemporary American novels: Ruth Ozeki's *My Year of Meats* (1998) and Robin Sloan's *Sourdough* (2017). I have selected these novels because they illustrate the development of the United States' global, industrialized food systems over the last two and a half decades. More specifically, these novels depict some of the various pharmaceutical, genetic, and computational technologies that transnational corporations have employed to feed the world while maximizing efficiency and profits. Together, these books highlight how food technologies and discourses around food technologies have changed over the last twenty years. By selecting novels that cover such a broad timespan, I chart how American concerns towards food have shifted from the danger of tainted, factory-farmed meat in the 1990s to the forging of uneasy alliances with alternative marketplaces in the more recent past. I begin with *My Year of Meat's* depiction of DES, diethylstilbestrol, a synthesized version of estrogen that was once used to rapidly hasten cattle growth in order to improve meat yields in the United States. As *My Year of Meats* shows, these pharmaceutical "solutions" meant to address problems of scale produce inferior foods, and more of it, that lead to devastating environmental and human consequences: infertility, the blighting of natural resources, and the exploitation of human labor. I conclude my chapter by investigating *Sourdough's* portrayal of fictional alternative market that seeks to employ automated, computerized intelligence in service of new tools that expand the very definition of food and food production. However, the technological advancements in *Sourdough* do not produce an alternative future to the industrialized food systems present in *My Year of Meats*; instead, such technologies result in the reinvigoration

of these unequal systems, just framed under a mutated version of neoliberal economic discourses.

These books depict possible strategies for addressing America's contemporary globalized food production system through individual actions. But as my analysis reveals, these novels' emphasis on individual choice ultimately expresses the difficulty of negotiating modernity's underlying contradictions. The protagonists and narrators in both novels struggle to make sense of both globalization's muddied, transnational flows of media and commodities and their own personal role within those webs. I argue these books show that even local and transnational movements working against a deeply enmeshed neoliberal, globalized food system often employ the same technologies and logics that they attempt to resist, essentially reproducing the very same cycle they nominally seek to disrupt.

### **Literary Food Studies and Globalization**

One of the defining features of modernity in globalization in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has been the continuous negotiation of employing new technologies to improve accessibility and reconciling the destructive impact such technologies have had on individuals and environments. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd frame this continuous negotiation in terms of the "traditional" versus the "authentic," noting that conceiving of the two in purely binary opposition, fails to capture the continuous mutations that define contemporary globalization. They write:

...it is neither that capitalist modernity expands and commodifies the 'traditional,' nor that it simply destroys it, making it necessary for one to look for 'pure' sites that have not yet been incorporated in order to find 'resistance' ..., but rather that both

antagonism and adaptation have been part of the process of the emergence of modernity over time. (Lowe and Lloyd 16)

They note that these continuous negotiations have slowly ebbed away at potentially stabilizing forces of collective forms of organization. The process of importing and exporting both goods and labor has effectively weakened the ability of regulatory agencies in nation-states to effectively safeguard consumers and workers by scattering out the production chains to different nodes along the world. While these nodes remain connected by financial and political institutions such as the World Trade Organization and the United Nations, Lowe and Lloyd claim that citizens have become “disempowered,” labor has been exploited, and workers remain unable to form an international mode of collective organization to address their concerns (23).

Within the field of literary food studies, recent work has called upon scholars to investigate the literary representations of labor and abstraction in the global system of food production. Anita Mannur argues that in light of many Americans growing willingness to try new kinds of foods and cuisines, literary studies of food writing and food in novels need to pay spay attention to “the labor that is displaced to produce [food], as well as the concomitant forces of globalization and racialization acting upon consumption” (“Edible” 394). More specifically, she argues that literary analyses of food need to move beyond treating it as a fetishized good that is capable of mystically transforming unequal social relationships. Rather, Mannur contends that such analyses should critically interrogate the various economic, political, and cultural forces that mystify through abstraction the labor that produces our food. Katharina Vester extends Mannur’s calls to demystify by analyzing the interconnected discourses between food and power. She writes: “Food discourses are

an important site of power relations and a site of dominance and resistance within the establishment and performance of identities in daily life” (Vester 9). Food discourses such as recipes or cooking shows carry power because they have the ability to shape readers’ knowledge of various culinary practices. Similarly, then, we can see such discourses at play in novels that pay special attention to how literary representations of food and/or food production can either subtend or resist global systems of violence and control.

In her book *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food*, Allison Carruth examines literary texts throughout the United States’ rise to global superpower in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Carruth’s analysis of food literature from the middle to late 20<sup>th</sup> century highlights how the expansion of major agricultural industries, especially after World War II, assisted in the development of American hegemony across the globe. She shows how one of the key myths surrounding American expansion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the complete removal of signs of labor from the food supply. Pre-portioned, deboned meat at grocery stores wrapped in plastic on Styrofoam trays; canned, ready-made meals; the dawn of fast food, all signified a revolutionary moment in how American’s thought of their food and where it came from. Carruth shows how narratives around American abundance and exceptionalism helped displace the image of the rural from readers’ minds, relegating farming and agricultural practices to the background. Carruth shows how multinational agricultural firms began reshaping regulatory policies and farming techniques to increase their profits by utilizing greater amounts of pesticides and producing lower-quality meats. Carruth argues that because of the proliferation of agribusiness and factory farms, contemporary American food narratives thus often present readers with stories that depict resistance to “an abstract and globalized food system via the interpersonal, the intimate,

and the everyday” (153). Ultimately, she contends that literary depictions of food present readers with the opportunity to construct new knowledge bases and reimagine their own consumptive practices. In the words of Rachel Laudan, readers have begun to develop a new “culinary ethos” that recognizes the inherent benefits of an industrialized food system while still identifying and working to address its abuses (43).

In the following sections, I extend Carruth’s and Laudan’s arguments by exploring moments from *My Year of Meats* and *Sourdough* that emblemize the difficulties of individual resistance to issues of scale. Throughout this chapter, I argue that these books present fraught, negotiated solutions from people attempting to make sense of the damage that industrialized agricultural businesses have wrought on America’s foodways. *My Year of Meats* suggests that investigative journalism and documentary-style reporting can motivate individuals to make better, more informed choices about the foods they eat. Rather than purchasing factory farm beef, the book advocates for the adoption of less meat, greater integration of foreign ingredients, foodstuffs, and a full-scale revolution of the factory farm. As my analysis of *Sourdough* reveals, discourses centered around individual action to address systemic issues has led to a profusion of endless work and a desire to believe that the return of industrial technologies into the system can provide a way forward to “fix” America’s foodways.

### ***My Year of Meats* and Telling Stories**

Released in 1998, but set in 1991, Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats* tells the story of the book’s narrator, Jane Takagi-Little, a director of a Japanese television show, *My American Wife!*, that aims to showcase the lives of American housewives to Japanese housewives. Each episode of the show tells the story of a different housewife across the country,

culminating in a meal that each housewife prepares in front of the camera for her family. As the show is sponsored by the fictional BEEF-EX corporation, each wife is shown making a different meat-focused dinner. In Jane's summary of the show she makes clear that, "Meat is the Message. Each weekly half-hour episode *My American Wife!* must culminate in the celebration of a featured meat, climaxing in its glorious consumption. It's the meat [not the Mrs.] who's the star of our show!" (Ozeki 8). Since the show is essentially a vehicle for selling meat to Japan, Jane spends the next 12 months of her life travelling around the country, looking for white women and their families that would help promote beef to Japanese housewives by making them "...feel the hearty sense of warmth, of comfort, of hearth and home—the traditional family values symbolized by red meat in rural America" (Ozeki 8). Yet, as Jane travels around the country, her story intersects with Akiko, the Tokyo-based wife of her boss, Joichi (who prefers to be called John Ueno after John Wayne) at the Japanese television production company. As Jane begins her cross-country journey, she meets new women that don't fit cozily into the program's strict guidelines for an acceptable American housewife and begins to challenge the network bosses for control of the show's content. While making the show, Jane eventually learns about the underreported history of chemically tainted beef, which has resulted in devastating health consequences for consumers, especially women. After further research on the history of chemically tainted meat in the United States, she makes it her mission to expose these harmful pharmaceutical and agricultural practices to the general public through her TV show. As Jane and Akiko both grapple with diverging issues regarding fertility, Jane simultaneously struggles with how to tell her story and how to imagine alternative futures

to industries defined by their obfuscation of facts, violent reprisal to dissent, and entrenched economic power.

*My Year of Meats* employs many different kinds of rhetorical structures throughout its narrative. Jane's story is told through the first-person, Akiko's story is written in English through the third person, and every chapter begins with a brief excerpt from Shōnagon's Heian-era *The Pillow Book* that serves as a thematic prelude to the subsequent events. Ozeki also incorporates faxes sent between individuals and incorporates large portions of her text dedicated to Jane describing her research findings on Japanese culinary habits, American obesity rates, historical geography books, and data on the history of DES use in American agriculture. When Jane provides readers with an historical account of DES, it arrives in chapter 6, after she had already been working on *My American Wife!* for five months. After attempting to film a number of non-white women and their families cooking beef-free meals, the network executive Juichi visits to remind her that the show's audience is Japanese housewives and, as such, the program must depict non-black families eating beef. He refuses to allow her to film the Purcell family, a black family from Memphis, Tennessee who couldn't afford to eat beef with enough frequency to have a traditional family beef recipe and instead cook a pork dish. Jane believes that the Purcell family would provide Japanese audiences with a different understanding of daily life in the United States, but after they leave, Juichi demands Jane film a different, white family with "beautiful beef" (Ozeki 118). He tells her that these directives come not from the Japanese network, but from BEEF-EX, an American corporation: "I didn't make up the rules. This is U.S.-sponsor show and U.S.-sponsor instruction...Meat is the message, Takagi" (Ozeki 119). This exchange directly spurs Jane to begin investigating the interconnected systems behind the

production of her show by including one of many narrative digressions on American agricultural history, which she labels “an important Documentary Interlude” (Ozeki 124).

Jane’s research reveals that DES was first used to chemically castrate male chickens so they would “develop female characteristics—plump breasts and succulent meats—desirable assets for one’s dinner” (Ozeki 124). While the FDA soon outlawed the use of DES in poultry after it was found to have a similar reaction to human males from poor, communities in the South. However, beef farmers continued to use DES to fatten their cattle. As Jane writes:

DES changed the face of meat in America. Using DES and other drugs, like antibiotics, farmers could process animals on an assembly line, like cars or computer chips. Open-field grazing for cattle became unnecessary and inefficient and soon gave way to confinement feedlot operations, or factory farms, where thousands upon thousands of penned cattle could be fattened at troughs. This was an economy of scale. It was happening everywhere, the wave of the future, the marriage of science and big business. If I sound bitter, it’s because my grandparents, the Littles, lost the family dairy farm to hormonally enhanced cows, and it broke their hearts and eventually killed them. But I’d never understood this before. (Ozeki 125)

A couple of things stand out to me from this passage. First, DES is presented in terms of automation and dehumanization. Ozeki, via Jane, portrays its adoption into the beef industry as an epochal event; DES heralded a new, technological era, marking the convergence of ‘science and big business.’ Yet, Jane’s critique of an industrial development is made personal when she notes that her grandparents lost their small dairy farm after

being unable to compete with industrialized competitors. It is only through rendering the story through her personal story where Jane confronts her own limited understanding of agribusinesses' impact on everyday farmers and their consumers. Here, Jane reflects, as she does throughout the book, that she knew discrete bits and pieces of this information but could never understand how to bring the story together. The pieces were there, but she was unsure of how to arrange them in a coherent way.

In her article, "Meat and the Millennium," Emily Cheng contends that Jane's story of uncovering the contamination of cattle provides a material grounding for dealing with transnational concerns. She argues that the book foreshadows contemporary concerns of America's economic decline through its depiction of contaminated meat at home and increasing reliance on a booming Japanese economy to purchase its goods. She reads *My Year of Meats* as a novel about resisting capitalist technologies by highlighting the violence that these practices have wrought on women, indigenous communities, immigrants, and the environment. Cheng writes, "By engaging with the process of meat production and extending the symbolic meaning of meat to subtend issues of race, gender, and the body in a transnational U.S.-Asia context, Ozeki is able to demonstrate the violence of corporate capitalism" (216). Cheng further notes that the violence inflicted upon the cattle and the landscapes parallels the acts of violence inflicted upon women by men in the novel. Cheng posits that the book finds a response to this violence through the hope of sharing stories. I would add to Cheng's reading that in addition to the importance of sharing stories, *My Year of Meats* also illustrates a desire to narrate stories of globalization in a coherent, chronological manner figured around individual action. In other words, by foregrounding her own uncertainty, Jane recognizes that the global trade of meat and pharmaceuticals

functions through obfuscation and she therefore makes it her mission to pull back the veil so others can see how dangerous these practices have been.

Jane provides further texture in her narrative of globalization when she notes that from the 1940s to the 1970s, OBGYNs routinely prescribed DES to pregnant women to prevent miscarriages or premature births. Nearly 5 million women were thought to have been treated with DES until the 1970s when it was discovered that DES led to rare forms of cancer. Jane further notes that before then though, evidence abounded regarding the harmful effects of DES on humans including, “irregular menstrual cycles, difficult pregnancies, and structural mutations of the vagina, uterus, and cervix,” leading to fertility issues in Jane’s own body (Ozeki 126). In Jane’s words, these side effects were “ignored” in favor of cheap meat, “an integral component of the American dream” (Ozeki 126). It took nearly a decade for the USDA to finally ban DES banned from livestock production, but as of the present moment, American cattle continue to receive growth hormones and various other drugs to promote quicker yields and maximized profits.

According to Jane’s research, American beef exports to Europe were banned in 1989 because of the use of artificial hormones, but a new trade agreement with Japan in 1990 liberalized the beef market. After providing this information, Jane pithily writes, “In 1991, we started production on *My American Wife!*” (Ozeki 127). Jane reflects on the scope of her research and the fundamental difficulty of piecing together all of the interconnected histories. She writes: “This was my first glimpse of the larger picture. Of course, I didn’t put these pieces together all at once. I started reading about the meat industry, and little by little, over the course of the next few months, the chronology sort of dawned on me” (Ozeki 127). Through this protracted scene on the history of DES in the US, we see the difficulties

Jane encounters with trying to reconstruct a coherent narrative of the modern food system. She notes that even with this knowledge in hand, it still took her “months” to narrate the story in a legible manner that unfamiliar or unaware audiences could follow. In *Global Appetites*, Carruth notes that these breaks in *My Year of Meats*’ narrative structure intentionally overwhelm readers with dense sections of deeply researched history. She argues that through these breaks, Ozeki reveals, “...just how thoroughly enmeshed food is with postindustrial systems of media, marketing, data management, and commerce” (Carruth 118). Jane only understands these systems after finding personal touchstones that have directly impacted on her or her family. The difficulty for writing about the production of food systems under globalization comes then, as it does for Jane, from plotting these systems in relation to one another.

Throughout the book, Jane constantly imagines the significance of the women she shares with her intended audience of Japanese housewives. However, until Akiko reaches out to Jane directly by fax, her audience remained mostly as an “abstract concept,” little more than a “demographic statistic” that she could use to prove the righteousness of her vision of the show (Ozeki 231). In the fax, Akiko divulges how unhappy her marriage to Juichi has been. She explains how she’s been forced to watch *My American Wife!* and recreate the beef dishes, not only to see how housewives would enjoy them, but also in the hopes that the rich, beef-focused meals would assist with their attempts at her getting pregnant. As Jane notes, Akiko’s personal connection to her own story once again forces her to reexamine her own relationship to transnational corporatized interests: “Now it hit me: what an arrogant and chauvinistic attitude this was. While I’d been worried about the well-being of the American women I filmed as subjects, suddenly here was the audience,

embodied in Akiko, with a name and a vulnerable identity” (Ozeki 231). When Jane recognizes how Akiko’s fertility issues parallel her own, she once again experiences another in a series of minor epiphanies that force her to interrogate how her own approach to telling the story of these women had in many ways reinscribed the very same patriarchal, hegemonic discourses she had hoped to combat. In order to tell her story, Jane continually encounters new voices, new data that force her to reconceptualize her methodology and her approach.

The events of the book come to a head when Jane travels West to film Bunny Dunn, the Texas-born wife of a Colorado cattle rancher who was once a rodeo queen. Along the way through Colorado, Jane strikes up a conversation with her driver Dave on the devastating impact cattle farming has had on the landscape. In another example of Jane’s “Documentary Interludes,” Ozeki uses the resultant conversation to share with readers how grazing has resulted in what Dave calls, “A National Crisis” (248). However, just like with DES, Dave notes that evidence of the problem has been ignored by most people, “The impact of countless hooves and mouths over the years has done more to alter the type of vegetation and landforms of the West than all the water projects, strip mines, power plants, freeways and sub-division developments combined” (Ozeki 249). Yet when Jane begins to take notes and begins imagining how she will integrate this new information into the Bunny Dunn episode, Dave laments the impossibility of attempting to translate this data in a way that actually motivates people into changing their behavior: “I just don’t know,” he said sadly, as though the sight of my enthusiasm had somehow quenched his. “All these figures, but who cares? So what? It doesn’t help one bit. Nobody is going to do anything about it, and then slowly, bit by bit, it will be too late” (Ozeki 248-249). In her analysis of

*My Year of Meats*, Summer Harrison argues that Ozeki depicts many moments throughout her book where characters express incredulity at the prospect of not just telling their story, but at also eliciting a response from their audience. As she puts it: "...the novel suggests that we need to examine the relationship between public denial and representation head on so that we can dismantle the environmental ignorance that often prevents ethical awareness" (Harrison 470). The task then for making sense of globalization's obfuscation of violence is not only bearing witness to injustices, but also overcoming deeply entrenched feelings of helplessness.

During her time at the Dunn family home and feedlot, Jane discovers that John Dunn's son, Gale, has taken over the day-to-day business operations while employing a variety of illegal and questionable, cost-cutting measures. These practices range from feeding the cattle recycled cardboard, newspaper, and even "by-products from the slaughterhouse," meaning the cattle feed on the remains of their fellow dead (Ozeki 257). Eventually, Jane and her production crew discover that the feedlot has been using another artificial form of estrogen, Lutalyse, to abort fetuses in pregnant cows in order to minimize feed costs. Like DES, Lutalyse can cause abnormal biological development in women and children leaving Jane horrified at the potential side-effects she could incur. When his father expresses frustration at the overabundance of chemicals in the meat, Gale retorts: "Times have changed... 'Profit's so small these days you gotta deal in volume, and without the drugs we'd be finished. The math just don't work out. I'm bringing more head to slaughter than he ever did. If it weren't for the modernizing I accomplished around here—'" (Ozeki 263). As the horrors of modernity continue to pile in front of Jane one after another, she continues along with her job of interviewing the family for a show still ostensibly meant to promote

beef to Japanese consumers. Jane recognizes the totality of her knowledge on the meat industry starting to coalesce yet, like Dave, feels unable to prevent the steady routinization of business from transpiring. But after witnessing production footage of Bunny's five-year-old daughter Rose undergoing signs of premature puberty, another symptom of DES, Jane resolves to continue plowing forward with shooting the episode.

One of the central themes in *My Year of Meats* concerns the difficulty in overcoming deep-seated denial to the realities of the global injustices occurring in front of our eyes. Ozeki's narrative analogizes denial in terms of biological and cultural conditions. When Jane attempts to interview Bunny for permission to share Rose's story, which Bunny initially refuses. Jane sees her own indifference reflected in Bunny's refusal, likening denial to a "swampy dream" that slowly poisons people into helplessness. She writes:

I know what denial looks like, and what it feels like too. It's a mercurial flicker of recognition in the eye, quickly blanketed with a vagueness that infuses the body like sluggish blood. It is opaque. Murky. Like wading through a swampy dream that drags at your limbs, and no matter how hard you try, you can't move forward. I know this feeling because I make television and try to walk through it on a daily basis. It feeds on convention, cowers behind etiquette, and the only way to deal with it is with a blunt frontal attack. (Ozeki 272-273)

The two metaphors of denial in this excerpt, a poison slowly overtaking the bloodstream and walking through a swamp that doesn't allow one to move forward, serve as internalized markers of the globalized systems of violence. Biologically figuring the experience of denial in this way allows Jane to find a metaphorical connection between herself and other contaminated bodies in the book. By embodying the scale of a global

phenomenon at the individual level, *My Year of Meats* begins to “denaturalize and critique” harmful corporate business practices (Williams 247). Through analogy, Ozeki’s makes legible global capitalism’s disparate, interconnected sites of violence.

After a series of events where Jane is rushed to the hospital after being knocked unconscious by a carcass on the floor of the slaughterhouse, she learns the tragic news that she has had a miscarriage of a pregnancy she never thought possible. To compound her pain, Jane finds out that she’s been fired from the show and that Juichi has finished producing an episode that sanitizes the Dunn feedlot’s industrialized abuses and extols the happy virtues of their meat-centric diet. Jane then resolves to push forward with telling her story to the public. When Jane confronts Bunny with the recorded footage of Rose’s body undergoing premature puberty, due to the saturation of DES in the beef and throughout the feedlot, Bunny first denies the reality of the situation. As Bunny later explains to Jane:

“Things you’d never even believe could ever happen just start seemin’ as normal as pie. Well, maybe not normal, but still you accept it...You just get used to it. Until something happens, that is, that wakes you up and makes you see different. That’s what happened when you all showed up. I saw [Rose] with your eyes, and everything looked different. Wrong.” (Ozeki 294).

Ozeki depicts fostering empathy with strangers as an opportunity to develop collective modes of resistance to systematized violence. Rather than conceiving of the violence wrought on them as individual nodes, disconnected from one another, Bunny and Jane see their stories as interconnected. As Bunny and Jane continue to share their stories of loss and hopelessness with one another, Ozeki suggests that a better future might be made possible by, like Jane, framing resistance as contingent upon admitting one’s past

ignorance.

*My Year of Meats* ends with a series of fortuitous, happy resolutions to the main characters' stories and justice is served to the antagonists. Akiko leaves Juichi and moves to the United States to give birth to her child. After Jane's documentary of the Dunn feedlot's continued use of DES and Rose's prematurely developing body becomes an international news story, the Japanese network cancels *My American Wife!*. Juichi is demoted and reassigned to work on commercials for local tourist attractions back in Japan. Meanwhile, Jane begins selling parts of the footage to news networks across America, Europe, and Asia. She now fields multiple offers to tell her story to an eager audience, but she notes the difficulties associated with sharing a story even as successful as hers: "Information about toxicity in food is widely available, but people don't want to hear it. Once in a while a story is spectacular enough to break through and attract media attention, but the swell quickly subsides into the general glut of bad news over which we, as citizens, have so little control" (Ozeki 334). Even though her story draws attention to the industrial meat trade's illegal and unethical business practices, Jane worries that her film will eventually become just another story in a series of negative media stories that lead others to feel as helpless as she and Bunny felt: "Fed on a media diet of really bad news, we live in a perpetual state of repressed panic. We are paralyzed by bad knowledge, from which the only escape is playing dumb. Ignorance becomes empowering because it enables people to live. Stupidity becomes proactive, a political statement. Our collective norm" (Ozeki 334). The international success of Jane's documentary posits that change is still possible, that abuses from those in power may not go unchecked. But such change is contingent upon individual media producers and consumers to first confront their own ignorance as complicit in the

systems of violence.

Jane resolves to not only share her documentary but also to tell her story through the book in readers' hands. She writes that even though she remains suspicious of writing a superficially "happy ending" to the book by showing Akiko's new happy life in America and her own work gaining greater exposure, the narrative choice allows her to envision a potential future where violent, global systems no longer invariably lead to mass suffering:

I don't think I can change my future simply by writing a happy ending. That's too easy and not so interesting. I will certainly do my best to imagine one, but in reality I will just have to wait and see...I live at the cusp of the new millennium. Whatever people may think of my book, I will make it public, bring it to light unflinchingly. That is the modern thing to do" (Ozeki 361).

Marie Illene Drews finds trouble with Ozeki's sentimental ending noting that the finality of narrative resolution gestures to a similar sense that the abusive industrial practices have been "fixed." As Drews puts it, the happy endings lead to "an unsettling conclusion for readers who know that the fires of extermination cannot be quelled so easily, if ever." (321). While I agree with Drews that Ozeki's ending demands readers to continue to recognize the abusive, enmeshed global systems of violence that continue after the book's end, I contend that Jane's admission that she lives in a dual state of uncertainty and hope sustains her vigilance. By continually recognizing her own complicity with these global systems and working to uncover new abuses, Jane thus continually confronts her feelings of ignorance and denial. In the words of Yoo Kim from his reading of the book's ending, "Compromise and hybridity...are at the core of the 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural condition" (54). Individual responses to problems of a global scale will always be fraught and tenuous, yet

Ozeki's novel reminds readers that inaction or ignorance to truth are themselves a calculated political response that only serves to further entrench the networked systems of economic, political, and cultural control.

The book's conclusion thus provides readers with a methodology for telling interpersonal stories that combat globalized systems of violence in the food chain. In *Global Appetites*, Carruth argues *My Year of Meats*: "provokes readers to feel deeply and arms them with facts in order to demystify the impersonal structures of late capitalism in general and meat capitalism in particular" (128). She posits the book presents readers with, "...an information-rich toolkit for debunking the industrialized – and postindustrial – food system" (119). Yet even with technical expertise, documentable facts, and the emotional tools of affect and empathy, Leah Milne reminds us that *My Year of Meats* demonstrates the vital need to consider the narrative relationship between an author and their audience. Jane's continuous reflection on "How to tell the story" (Ozeki 334) points to the limitations of simply documenting events as a series of decontextualized facts. Without her personal reflections and her decision to confront her own ignorance head on, the story would never have been told. Milne argues that any stories about systems need to provide readers with their own authority to make sense of the material in front of them. Milne theorizes that Jane acts as an effective surrogate mother to her readers by granting inspiring them to take individual ownership of their own narratives: "In this way, Jane is also an author who gives birth to her readers, letting them loose in a world with the wish that her text and its message has, at the least, left them better informed and able to act accordingly" (483). *My Year of Meats* ends with a call to expose the dangers of DES-contaminated beef, and, more broadly, with the hope that increased awareness and the

sharing with others would lead to shifts that would prevent others from being poisoned. In other words, Ozeki presents a way a forward for advancing ethical consumption in an era of unethically produced food. The book suggests then that the only contemporary, modern response to global forces is knowledge, empathy, and a series of small gestures extending out into the world that may eventually inspire someone else to tell their story.

### ***Sourdough and Alternative Futures of Food***

Cultural attitudes to food systems have changed in the nearly two decades since *My Year of Meats*' publication. As Amy Bentley puts it, "we have witnessed an emerging food 'revolution' that has attempted to counter [or at least circumvent] the worst aspects of the industrialization of food and its abundance of cheap, highly processed food" (82). In the decades that followed, consumers around the world, but especially in the United States, have seen the proliferation of films, shows, and literature with a similar focus to Ozeki's novel that investigate the often-grim impact of eating factory-farmed meat and produce. Books including Marion Nestle's *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health* (2002), Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006), and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals* (2009) extended Ozeki's impulse to expose not just what we ate and why, but the economic, political, and environmental toll of America's modern food system. These authors and filmmakers such as Robert Kenner, Eric Schlosser, and even Morgan Spurlock helped kickstart a national push to incorporate more organic, locally sourced foods into the American diet as an alternative to monolithic agribusinesses pushing against what they cheaply made tainted, lower quality food. By the time Robin Sloan's 2017 novel, *Sourdough*, was published, organic food and farm-to-table restaurants were no longer considered alternatives but were now fully integrated into many people's daily

consumptive practices. In his novel, Sloan takes aim though at the various ways in which seemingly healthier, more conspicuous consumption has become integrated into American life.

In *Sourdough*, Sloan questions if the growth of artisanal food practices has helped shift production out of the hands of international corporations. The book tells the story of narrator Lois Clary, a San Francisco-based transplant from Michigan who works as a programmer for the fictional company General Dexterity. Lois's busy workdays are spent writing code that teaches robotic arms to perform repetitive tasks leaving her little time to cook her own food. Instead, she and the other programmers mostly subsist on "Slurry," an unappetizing nutritive gel. With limited culinary skills, Lois often resorts to eating Slurry at home until she notices a delivery menu written both in English and an unfamiliar, Cyrillic-styled script from the nearby Clement Street Soup and Sourdough. The restaurant is run by two brothers, Beoreg (or Beo) and Chaiman, members of the fictional Mazg immigrant community. Lois soon becomes the restaurant's "Number one eater" (Sloan 14) due to the frequency with which she ordered their soup and sandwich combo. When the brothers one day suddenly tell her they have to leave the country because of issues with their work visas, they give her their sourdough starter and instruct her to feed it regularly with flour, water, and the music of the Mazg people every day to keep it alive. Enticed by the starter's sweet fragrance, she begins baking bread and marveling at the smiling faces that appear in the crust after each bake. The rest of the book chronicles Lois' journey into the world of amateur bread baking as she begins working at a new farmers market with mysterious visions for changing the production of food. As Lois combines her expertise in the fields of robotics with her burgeoning bread baking hobby, she begins producing larger volumes of

bread to sell at the market. However, as she bakes more bread, she finds that the starter no longer produces the same, sweet smell or smiling faces. As Lois finds new methods to feed the starter, incorporating starters purchased from industrial competition, she finds the Clement Street starter has started to grow even more uncontrollably. By the end of the book, Lois ends up rejecting the Clement Street starter and a life in the San Francisco food industry and moves to Berlin to start a new life with Beo, eschewing a career in its closed-loop ecosystem.

As *Sourdough* is a relatively new book, there exist very few critical readings of the book. Most reviews stem from a variety of media outlets and newspapers across the United States, which read *Sourdough* as a satire of a food industry obsessed with hyper-local food, artisanal culinary practices, and the increasing investment of venture capital into promoting sustainable food alternatives. Most reviewers commented that the book satirized the precociousness of foodies' fascination with tinkering and obsessing over food. The headline to an article on the book in *Mother Jones* reads, "From Hipster Bakers to Liquid Food, All the Times This New Book Perfectly Mocks Foodie Culture" (Oatman). Jeff Vandermeer's review of the book in *The Los Angeles Times* describes it as, "that rare thing: a satire that has a love of what it satirizes while also functioning as a modern fairy tale about, of all things, the magic of certain carbohydrates." Cory Doctorow's review parallels Vandermeer's of the novel, but reads the book not as a fairy tale, but a book grounded in meticulously accounting for the material conditions of San Francisco's contemporary restaurant and food scene: "The ensuing tale is one that plunges through so much terrain: microbial nations, assimilation and tradition, embodied consciousness and the crisis of the tech industry." Writing in *The Dallas Times*, David LaBounty sees the book as a light,

cautionary tale about the perils of automation overtaking jobs in the workplace. LaBounty sees the book as brushing over labor and automation, but I argue that *Sourdough* provides a trenchant analysis of not only the consequences of automating routine tasks, but also a cautionary tale regarding participation in alternative food systems. Ultimately, Sloan's novel reveals how deeply enmeshed alternative local food systems are with global financial interests and that individual resistance to these systems can often become romanticized stories that become subsumed within neoliberal cultural logics.

At General Dexterity, Lois' job is a "quest to end work" (Sloan 7). In one of the earliest scenes, we are introduced to the company's founder and CEO, Andrei, who speaks in broad, sweeping language about the humanistic vision of their goal to train robot arms to perform tasks such as grabbing, lifting, and sweeping. As Lois tells readers: "All of these were repetitive gestures, Andrei explained, currently executed by human muscles and human minds. Repetition was the enemy of creativity, he said. Repetition belonged to robots" (Sloan 7). We see a similar message presented throughout the early stages of the book, as Andrei routinely extols the virtuous nature of their mission, "We are on a quest to remake the conditions of human labor, so push harder all of you" (Sloan 8-9). Lois's narration here doesn't comment on the evident contradiction of Andrei requiring repetitive labor to obviate the need for different, but still no less repetitive labor, however, Lois does note a personal change caused by a life dedicated to work. She describes the first months of her job as leaving her feeling that "some vital resource [was] dwindling" that she tried to ignore (Sloan 9). At home, she describes her life as "mostly...a state of catatonic recovery, brain flaccid, cells gasping" (Sloan 9). Her job has left a physiological toll on her and her recovery doesn't occur until she begins changing her diet and performing new kinds of

repetitive tasks like baking bread. Like Jane in *My Year of Meats*, it takes narrative time and a journey for Lois to understand ways the alienating impact of her work.

After Lois receives the starter from Beo, she begins a journey of self-discovery. As she puts it, “I needed a more interesting life. I could start by learning something. I could start with the starter” (Sloan 35). As she begins baking bread, she notices a sense of satisfaction and eagerness to share her creation with others, even though she didn’t have many friends or knew any of her neighbors. When she first shares her bread with her coworkers at General Dexterity, many look at it with a mixture of suspicion and awe. A fellow programmer, Garrett, was incredulous that Lois could have baked anything on her own that wasn’t preassembled or frozen. As Lois jokes, “Garrett operated at a level of abstraction from food that made me look like Ina Garten” (Sloan 47). Shortly after, Lois recalls Garrett’s fascination with the notion that bread was baked from a living starter: “‘It was ... alive,’ he said softly. Wonderingly. He, like me, had never before considered where bread came from, or why it looked the way it did. This was us, our time and place: we could wrestle sophisticated robots into submission, but were confounded by the most basic processes of life” (Sloan 47). This moment stands out to me as an inversion of Jane’s knowledge (or lack thereof) of the meat industry in *My Year of Meats*. While Jane toiled away at uncovering the various agricultural and pharmaceutical networks tied to the production of beef process, *Sourdough* draws attention to labor technologies having displaced even basic knowledge of food production at home. But Lois notes that her conversation with Garrett served as a microcosm for contemporary relations to knowledge and the exploitation of her labor. As her job extols a humanistic mission, rooted in uplifting

humanity and obviating unnecessary human suffering, Lois sees how her ignorance of and apathy towards food has helped perpetuate a repetitive cycle of exploited labor.

After this scene, Lois starts baking bread with great frequency, going so far as to build an outdoor brick oven to improve the quality and quantity of her bakes. The on-site chef, Kate, at General Dexterity's cafeteria takes note of the bread's unique taste and offers to start paying her to bake the bread for her. Lois notes that as she continues to bake more bread, the starter begins to grow more quickly, and she too starts to feel a rush of energy that her programming job had drained from her. Quite quickly an important turn occurs in Lois's motivation, and she borrows one of the robot arms she was programming to knead the dough. She even builds a larger oven outside to bake even larger quantities for her growing number of interested clients. Now with improved resources, she ties her enjoyment of baking to the thrill of producing an item at scale:

The simple math of it was astonishing, and I felt the giddy leverage of technology—more palpably, I should add, than at any moment during my General Dexterity orientation. This was simple and direct: Before the machine, I could make two loaves. After the machine, I could make four. For the first time in my life, I realized why a person might be interested in capital. This was capital! (Sloan 67)

As Lois starts to see the ways in which she can accrue capital and use her bread to acquire more capital, *Sourdough* shifts from a simple, romantic story about one person finding personal satisfaction in learning a new skill. From here on out, the book tells the story of Lois's transition from laborer to neoliberal capitalist. "Within neoliberalism," Nelson Shake writes, "individuals are defined chiefly by their economic potential, which appears to privilege freedom and agency but actually encourages greater biopolitical standardization

and data accumulation for the sake of mapping and influencing human behavior” (145). Indeed, we see how Lois conceptualizes bread baking in terms of “math” and “leveraging” technology in order to standardize her process. Lois now sees herself either in terms of fulfilling a niche product category at various markets or teaching the robot arm new, salable skills. The rest of the book describes how Lois’s life becomes dedicated to the process of making her bakes more efficient so they can be sold to more clients.

Lois decides to extend her bread selling network by entering a competition for a market stall at the Ferry Building Marketplace, the city’s busiest market where local startups came to sell their products to eager foodies ready to display their knowledge. When Lois describes her motivation for selling the bread to a wider audience, she mentions that everyone applying for a spot at the Ferry Building wants to follow in the footsteps of Greenlight Coffee, a local coffee chain that began at the Ferry Building. Once at the market, they were able to expand their market stall into a popular local chain. After many years of local expansion, the coffee chain was eventually sold to Starbucks for \$19 million, a figure that Lois often repeats to readers throughout the book. While Lois doesn’t win a spot at the Ferry Building, one of the judges takes note of her bread and robotics background and invites her to the Marrow Fair, a mysterious, new market on the other side of town.

When Lois visits the Marrow Fair in person, she finds the market looks more like a laboratory than a place for selling food. Set on a disused former munitions base for the American military, on the island of Alameda, across the bay from downtown San Francisco, the Marrow Fair market stood in stark contrast to the densely crowded stalls outside the Ferry Building. The Marrow Fair’s manager, Lilly Belasco, notes that the market will serve “as a place for new tools” in the food industry. In order to gain a spot at the market before it

opens to the public, Lilly wants Lois to provide “pizzazz” to the market to go alongside the nitro-infused espresso, freshly ground flour made from crickets, and honey produced by bees from Chernobyl that filtered out most of the radioactive materials from the honey. Lilly argues she wants Lois to create “robot bread” with one of the robotic arms from General Dexterity (Sloan 105). The laboratory-like nature of the Marrow Fair market invites parallels to Ulrich Beck’s envisioning of neoliberal society as a laboratory, where “decisions concerning, and the monitoring of, technological progress become a collective problem” (*World* 111). As part of an avant-garde community of artisanal food makers meant to create new solutions to problems across the global food chain, Lois begins to recognize that combining her technical knowledge with the Clement Street starter could potentially revolutionize the ways in which Americans eat.

Lois soon meets her fellow Marrow Fair vendors members. Arguably, one of the most significant people she meets is Dr. Jaina Mitra and her “Lembas” cakes, microbial cultures that “are manufactured whole by living organisms” in her “bioreactor” (Sloan 124). According to Dr. Mitra, the Lembas cakes function similarly to Slurry in that they both attempt to provide cheap, convenient, and nutrient-rich food. Dr. Mitra attempts to distinguish her product from Slurry, not only by manufacturing a solid foodstuff, but also by conceptualizing the self-created food as a solution to global hunger. As Dr. Mitra explains:

“...I don’t want people to eat Lembas all day, every day...It’s your quick lunch. It’s what you eat in the car. It solves food security, because once I get the microbial community stabilized, we’ll be able to produce it literally *anywhere*...Trust me, I have no desire to replace all of this.” She lifted her hands to encompass the Marrow

Fair. "It's fast food I want to replace, and all the other terrible stuff people eat when they get impatient." (124)

We see here another moment where neoliberal approaches to solving hunger through profit accumulation are treated with serious reverence by Lois. Lois's narrative perspective of Dr. Mitra never portrays her as misguided or as antagonistic. While Lois's motives are rooted mostly in profit, the two share a common belief that selling their food will directly lead to positive social change. But while Lois fails to interrogate Dr. Mitra's message here, we can see that the language of neoliberal enterprise has co-opted the language of the global hunger crisis in order to sell a product whose own creator sees it as an alternative to Starbucks' breakfast sandwiches. While Lembas could have the potential to usher in a new era of cheap, easily accessible, sustainable food for the hungry billions around the world, Dr. Mitra's mission statement ultimately sees her work as a substitute for fast food. She doesn't want to change the system so much as take the place of specific nodes along it.

While Dr. Mitra hopes to create replacements to food production systems, her aims don't fully align to those of the Marrow Fair's owner, Mr. Marrow. For most of the book, Mr. Marrow only communicates by phone with Lilly Belasco. A week before the Fair is set to open, Mr. Marrow reveals his vision for how the tools developed at the Marrow Fair will bring about a new revolution in food. Appearing as a picture of a fish on a monitor, through a distorted voice, he explains that he envisages the Fair as an incubator to a third system of food production that transcends both factory farms and local, organic farms. I will provide an extended quote to fully capture the breadth of his message:

"There is a great realignment coming," the fish intoned. "It will be equal to the upheaval of the 1950s. You have heard me say this before. In those years, the entire

experience of eating in America was remade. Packaging, refrigeration, the interstate highways—you can trace it all back. ... “We can build a new system.” The shiver of pleasure that ran through the assembled vendors was so intense I felt it like a rattling gust. They believed the fish. The fish was their prophet. “On both sides, they’ve failed us,” the fish said. “Of course, we know about the industrialists. Their corn syrup and cheese product. Their factory farms ringed by rivers of blood and shit, blazing bonfires of disease barely contained by antibiotic blankets. These are among the most disgusting scenes in the history of this planet.” ... “But on the other side...the organic farms, the precious restaurants...these are toy supply chains. ‘Farm to table,’ they say. Well. When you go from farm to table, you leave a lot of people out.” The crowd was silent. “I think more poorly of these people than I do of the industrialists, because they know better. They know it’s all broken, and what do they do? They plant vegetables in the backyard.” (Sloan 182-183)

Mr. Marrow’s depiction of industrialized farming vividly recalls images of the feedlot from *My Year of Meats*. But while Ozeki’s novel imagines a future of food rooted in eating local, ethically sourced goods, Mr. Marrow’s vision for the future of food sees that route as pious and not committed deeply enough to enacting change at a global level. And whereas Ozeki’s novel advocates for a food production system with fewer industrial and commercial interests, Mr. Marrow ironically suggests that the problem with farm to table supply chains is that they leave behind third-party interests. In sum, his vision of the future advocates for greater integration of labor and chemical technologies, while simultaneously gesturing to more sustainable forms of food production. Just like the conversation with Dr. Mitra, these ideas remain unchallenged in the book and are even presented as inspiring.

Unsurprisingly, the speech motivates Lois to finally quit her full-time job with General Dexterity and dedicate herself to the Marrow Fair's mission. In exchange for twenty percent of all future proceeds, Mr. Marrow agrees to purchase a refurbished robot arm for Lois for \$40,000. Lois not only decides to train the arm to learn how to assist her with baking bread but also plans to build an application program interface (API) to train the arms in new kitchen skills. As she notes: "There's so much more to do. So many skills! Knives, food processors, frying pans ... the arm could reach right into the oil. There's a marketplace for ArmOS extensions, and I'm going to sell kitchen skills." (186). Lois adroitly notices a gap in the food market that she recognizes her expertise can fill. While food manufacturing and preparation is certainly not new, Lois plans to sell applications in ArmOS's closed programming ecosystem. Lois's plan draws parallels to the business practices of Apple Inc.'s iOS or Google's Android OS, where users are able to sell applications that accomplish a variety of tasks in a virtual marketplace. It quickly becomes apparent that Mr. Marrow cares less about the unique bread Lois bakes than in the opportunity to position the Fair as maintaining an ownership stake in a new means of production.

The rest of the book follows an unexpected trajectory including scenes where Lois meets the efficiency-driven CEO of Slurry who asks her to help provide her starter to assist in Dr. Mitra's work on Lembas. Eventually, Dr. Mitra combines her Lembas with a portion of Lois's starter which causes the Lembas bread to grow uncontrollably eventually growing so large that it literally grows into the sky, overrunning the Marrow Fair. While these scenes contain many moments worthy of further analysis, I would instead like to jump ahead to the very end of the novel where we learn the true identity of Mr. Marrow. After the cleanup,

Lois meets with the Mr. Marrow in person who turns out to be Charlotte Clingstone, a famous chef whose Café Candide trained many of the city's most famous and well-respected chefs and bakers. When Lois later asks why she hid her identity to start the Marrow Fair, Charlotte responds that the rebellious impulses that started the restaurant had now transformed into a safe routine that hundreds of people relied on for their livelihoods. Running the Marrow Fair in secret offered her the opportunity to be "the reckless one. The disrupter...I wanted a place to break things, and that place is my Marrow Fair" (253). In her article, "The Green Avant-Garde: Food Hackers and Cyberagrarians," Allison Carruth notes in the late 1960s, there existed a strong connection between avant-garde art and food activism. As radical artists of the time employed aesthetic practices such as collage and conceptual art to "mobilize radical social change," so too did food activists adopt countercultural forms to produce new kinds of foods (Carruth 16). Carruth points out that the food practices from this time largely began in and around Berkeley, California and that famed chef Alice Waters, an obvious cognate to Charlotte Clingstone, helped champion a then countercultural response to the abstract, industrial food system that had begun to take hold in the country. Sloan draws a direct connection between the "disruption" language of Silicon Valley, the history of food justice movements, and the Marrow Fair.

At her restaurant, Chez Panisse, Waters' locally sourced, seasonal menu eventually became the springboard for the now contemporary Slow Food movement and, in turn, the proliferation of food discourse extolling the virtues of local, organic food. Similarly, Carruth argues that contemporary food hackers, like the ones in the Marrow Fair, "reject the cultural divisions of craft from innovation and art from science" (17). Stemming from

Carruth's analysis, I argue that Sloan's characters at the Marrow Fair typify a rejection of the binary between industrialization and artisanal practices that often frame the discourse of contemporary American foodways. Sloan presents a hybridized, third-way approach that embraces modern computing technologies while employing traditional techniques. Indeed, as Charlotte notes in her admission to Lois, "I believe everything I ever said as Mr. Marrow. I believe, also, that this restaurant is a precious place. Can't I believe both? I think I can" (Sloan 252). Charlotte's dialectical embrace of the farm-to-table food system and her third-way Marrow Fair innovation incubator fails to fully account for how the technologies being developed at the fair just reinscribe the very same systems she's looking to overthrow. Charlotte's dreams of sustainable innovation are no more sustainable than the very food systems she attempts to overthrow. By emphasizing profit-accumulation, standardization, and lax regulations she has merely rebranded the current food system without providing a truly meaningful alternative. Thus, while Sloan presents an alternative future for food through the Marrow Fair, his book's ending also underlines a suspicious approach to simply solving agricultural problems by introducing new technologies.

The book ends with Lois leaving San Francisco for Berlin to meet with Beo, who has been communicating with her by email throughout the whole book. As we see a budding romance start to form throughout their letters, Lois leaves to start a new life and learn how to bake with him. In her email to Beo, she tells him she doesn't want to use the starter of the Mazg, as it is too likely to corrupt those who bake from it. In the mythical story that Beo recounts to Lois earlier in the book, the starter takes over the island of the Mazg and leaves them permanently stateless. Similarly, after Dr. Mitra incorporates the starter into her Lembas cakes and causes a tower of Lembas to grow out into the air and take over the

entire Marrow Fair, Lois laments that even though the starter produced phenomenal bread, its ceaseless desire to conquer new bread cultures made it far too dangerous and impractical to continue using in commercial applications. Instead, she suggests that they work together in his new restaurant so she can learn the necessary kitchen skills from him to improve the Vitruvian robot arm's skills. She writes to Beo,

I want to learn how to use knives correctly, and which vegetables are which, and how to make my own spicy soup...If you can teach me, I can teach the Vitruvian, and then those skills can be shared in a new way, thanks to my former employer. The world is going to change, I think—slowly at first, then faster than anyone expects. It's going to be a weird time, but along the way I think I can get rich. We can get rich.  
(Sloan 258)

I am struck by this last line in particular because I think Sloan weaves a fantastical, unassuming critique of his main character throughout that has heretofore gone unnoticed by reviewers. The production of homemade bread, a hobby, a craft, even romance at the very end, all become functional distillates of a neoliberal, capitalistic drive to incorporate every function of one's life into the acquisition of capital. Lois sees a new food revolution slowly taking place, one where the means of production become even further automated due to technologies like the robot arm and ArmOS. Lois wants to play an ownership role in dictating the future of food.

In one of the few academic analyses of *Sourdough*, Justin Nordstrom reads *Sourdough's* ending of Lois and Beo working together in multicultural Berlin as utopian. For Nordstrom, the opportunity to combine ancient culinary practices and Silicon Valley tech leads to a new future of food production that celebrates differences in culture and technical

skill: "Sloan seems to suggest that Lois and Beo...are ready to bring their utopian experiences in San Francisco with them into the broader world, using food and innovation to create utopian communities in different geographic locations" (Nordstrom 308). Instead, I read the book's closing lines, when Lois promises to find her role in the food system, as a romantic ode to work. Lois concludes her letter: "In Berlin, it will grow. It will make no faces and sing no songs, but I guarantee you, it will do its part. And, Beo, working there with you, I will set myself, at last, to the task of learning mine" (Sloan 259). Sloan satirizes an ethos dedicated to non-stop labor, even when it comes to love. Lois has changed throughout the course of the novel; she now has the capacity to cook for herself and others and she appears to have found a way to build interpersonal relationships with others through food. But by the end of the book, Lois sees no other future for herself other than one committed to finding a profitable role for her in the global food system. As my analysis of *Sourdough* reveals, discourses centered around individual action to address systemic issues has led to a profusion of endless work and a desire to believe that the integration of sustainable technologies into the system can provide a way forward to America's foodways.

## **Conclusion**

*My Year of Meats* and *Sourdough* both show the limitations of placing the burden of systemic change in the hands of the individual. As my chapter shows, the knowledge production technologies in these books that facilitate individual resistance to hegemonic power are often in danger of becoming subsumed or co-opted by the transnational agricultural and economic food technologies they seek to displace. In both of these novels, change occurs after the economic systems and their networks are revealed to the world, but the economic and political networks remain in place; nothing is ever radically changed,

just adapted. Such is the transformative property of modernity in globalization, that even narratives of resistance can become integrated into transnational, corporatized networks.

In order to feed the almost 1 billion hungry people around the world, the global food system will require radical changes in order to meet this urgent need. The novels in this chapter tell stories of individual resistance to global forces and reveal the limitations of that approach, and those limitations point to a question that still goes begging, “How do we resolve an unjust food system?” What can be done to feed hungry people both in our local communities and across the country? In my final chapter, I examine non-fiction texts that depict food activism from below. These books tell the stories of grassroots organizations that attempt to address the perilous impacts of economic blight and environmental disaster on American communities primarily inhabited by low-wage racial and ethnic minorities. If we are to “fix” our broken global food system, we must not only focus on problems of production scale or business needs as the books in this chapter do. My next chapter argues that we also have to consider the desires of those in need and providing meaningful aid that fulfills peoples’ desires.

## Chapter Four – Building Sustainable Communities: The Fight for Food Justice

As I have shown in my previous chapters, many food texts in the United States in the last three decades reveal various forms of unsatisfied hungers in the globally interconnected economic, political, and cultural networks that constitute our food system. In Chapter 1, I show how food-based memoirs rooted can preserve connections to distant homelands by focusing on hunger and loss instead of only pleasure. In Chapter 2, I examine how Anthony Bourdain's unsatisfied desire to eat new foods and meet new people helped promote unfamiliar and foreign food cultures to mainstream American audiences. In Chapter 3, I analyze two novels concerned with the United States' increasingly industrialized food system. My analysis of both novels in that chapter concludes by acknowledging the difficulties of producing alternative futures to the current state of food as both books reveal the limits of working both against and within industrialized food systems in order to feed the world. Building off those concerns for developing alternative, sustainable food futures, in Chapter 4 I will explore two non-fiction texts that recount the stories of humanitarian organizations who have attempted to build more just, equitable food futures in the wake of different kinds of ecological, economic disasters. The goal of this chapter will be to think about these humanitarian books to explore how they both reinforce and push against humanitarian reason, a mode of governance that manages disasters as opposed to preventing their occurrence.

This chapter begins with a question that ended Chapter 3: how do we respond to inequities in the food system? If, as I show in that chapter, the food system has struggled to resolve issues of industrialized meat and that alternative food markets can become coopted by the very forces they attempt to disrupt, then what other alternatives might exist to

address the various food crises that regularly afflict those living in poverty as well as large proportions of immigrants and peoples of color in the United States. In light of the growing threat of climate-change induced natural disasters including hurricanes, famines, and heat waves, coupled with pervasive food deserts and diet-induced health problems in America's urban centers, the contemporary American food system appears to be crying out for a hero or heroes to lead the charge against these issues. In this chapter, I analyze two recent memoirs from food activists, *The Good Food Revolution* by Will Allen and *We Fed an Island* by José Andrés. Both authors have been championed by scholars, activists, politicians, and the media for their efforts in fighting two very different, but inter-related, food issues. These books treat the subjects of their food aid not as obligations but as individuals attempting to navigate the devastating consequences of food and relief systems that have systematically failed to provide for them. As my analysis will show, these books present an alternative to the prevailing logic of aid work, humanitarian reason. According to Didier Fassin, humanitarian governments pay "particular attention...on suffering and misfortune," and have produced a humanitarian reason, a moral framework that informs responses for alleviating suffering (7). Humanitarian reason thus provides aid or relief after a disaster has already occurred and manages the lives of suffering people. This cultural logic no doubt informs the kinds of policies and funding allocations for helping those in need, but the texts in this chapter speak to a need to move beyond humanitarian reason and to develop new ways of feeding the many hungry peoples around the world.

Through these non-fiction texts, I will analyze how each book highlights the real-life role food has played in helping to develop, sustain, and provide relief to communities that have been devastated by neglect, abandonment, and environmental disaster. These texts

reveal how governmental inaction and legacies of racialized oppression and colonization have continued to make the fight for sustainable food futures difficult. I see these texts as motivated by a desire to respond to the forces of globalization by encouraging readers to examine a community's relationship with the way its food is produced and distributed. Analyzing these narratives of food inequality and injustice broadens critical approaches to food writing; as food writing tends to focus on journeys of individual enlightenment, discovery, and pleasure through food, these texts instead focus on telling the stories of individuals attempting to respond to urgent food needs. These books present stories of numerous individuals, not just each author, learning new skills to produce sustainable, healthy, and community-based food systems. But as I will show in my analysis, that while these texts present solutions, these solutions become imbricated into the very political and economic barriers that they seek to overcome. While my chapter is not meant to present the hopelessness of overcoming the forces of the globalized food system, my purpose is to resist simply romanticizing and valorizing the work of locally focused, community driven humanitarian approaches.

In this chapter, I also want to investigate how these texts, and others like them, shape readers' understanding of the practices of food justice. As Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman note, that unlike the recent proliferation of foodie culture in the United States which mostly caters to white, middle-class individuals, food justice activism instead attempts to redress the racial and economic imbalances in the present food system. More specifically, they note that such activism involves, "low-income communities and communities of color [seeking] to create local food systems that meet their own food needs" (Alkon and Agyeman 6). These very same communities often have little to no say in

the kinds of foods that are available in their neighborhoods, with many relying mostly on diets of easily accessible, cheap, and heavily processed food. As globalization has shifted the productive centers of agriculture away from urban environments (supplemented by cheap imports of transnational goods) and control of agriculture has shrunk to the hands of a small number of corporations, food justice movements work to redistribute people's power within the food system. In the words of Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Josh, in their book *Food Justice*, "food justice...ensures that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produce, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly" (6). Many of the struggles for food justice aren't simply about people getting enough food to eat, they're about ensuring communities have the skills and tools to continue to create sustainable environments that meet the various economic, political, and biological needs of the people that live there. As Stephen Schneider puts it, sustainable food movements work to achieve "increased autonomy or democratization of social and cultural arenas" (385). The texts I analyze in the following pages present themselves as a roadmap for enacting various forms of food justice, as they not only demonstrate specific actions that have been undertaken, but they also operate as manifestos of what America's approach should look like moving forward. Both books propose new, justice-based food futures informed by financial and emotional investment from either their communities or the federal government building empathetic connections with those in need.

### ***The Good Food Revolution and Sustainable Organizing***

The first text I will study is *The Good Food Revolution: Growing Healthy Food, People, and Communities* (2012) by Will Allen with Charles Wilson. A memoir of sorts, the book charts Allen's life first as the son of Southern sharecroppers, through his time as a

professional basketball player, and then to his work as an urban farmer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In 1993, Allen started Growing Power, a community-driven urban farm in the northwest portion of Milwaukee whose vision statement was to, “[inspire] communities to build sustainable food systems that are equitable and ecologically sound, creating a just world, one food-secure community at a time” (“Growing Power”). In 2009, a year after he received a MacArthur Genius Award for his work with Growing Power, *The New York Times* profiled Allen, hailing him as the “go-to expert on urban farming,” while detailing his attempts to provide fresh produce to a portion of Milwaukee’s community that had been historically deprived of convenient access to healthy, sustainably sourced foods (Royte). Allen employed members of the community to work Growing Power’s numerous farming projects and developed the urban farm into a nationally recognized organization that inspired similarly focused projects across the country. However, shortly after Allen retired from the organization in 2017, Growing Power’s board of directors dissolved the organization due to what it viewed as an unsustainable business model in the face of mounting debts.

Released at the height of Growing Power’s acclaim and impact, Allen’s 2012 book provides insight into how the organization became one of the leading voices for justice and equity, particularly for black and immigrant communities, in America’s food system. Allen’s urban farm was a contact zone of sorts, where people previously unfamiliar with food production were exposed to new skills and practices that led to a renaissance of community-based, socially justice-oriented urban farms throughout the country. As such, the book often presents several individuals within Growing Power who tell their personal stories of racism, poverty, and food insecurity across racially segregated American cities

rife with income inequality and vast disparities in access to healthy, nutritious food. Allen's food revolution stems from his dream is to "create environments that provide people with the chance for better lives" (105). Allen proposes a good food revolution as a way to enact ecological change and provide economic opportunity to peoples of color and those living in entrenched poverty, "The work of creating a new food system will offer work that engages both the spirit and the body. It will allow people the satisfaction of seeing and tasting the results of their labor. It will require the cultivation of human relationships that are off the grid, as well as an attitude of respect toward the natural world" (169). Even in light of *Growing Power's* dissolution, Allen's book requires new critical analysis for the ways in which it envisions tackling America's unequal food system by reconsidering the relationship between community spaces, food, and race.

The book begins with a foreword from Eric Schlosser, the writer of *Fast Food Nation* (2001) and co-producer of the film *Food Inc.* (2008). Schlosser's involvement signals Allen's status within the contemporary food movement, describing Allen as a "a pioneer of urban agriculture and a leader in today's food movement. He understood, long before most, that America's food system is profoundly broken—and that a new one, locally based and committed to social justice, must replace it" (10). But while Schlosser continues his praise of Allen's work, he notes his farming practices "are not yet reliably profitable...[which] does not diminish their importance" (10). I want to return to the ability to turn a profit later in this section, but suffice to say now, even at the time of the book's publication, the ability of the organization to make the organization profitable was under question. Regardless, Schlosser portrays Allen as a trustworthy expert who will eventually steer the ship in the right direction, imploring readers to listen to Allen's words. Schlosser concludes the

foreword by extolling the strength of Allen's farming philosophy, "He has spent years working among the poor, preaching a message of compassion and self-reliance. I admire what Will Allen has achieved. And I hope others, many others, will soon follow in his path" (10). With these words in mind, we, as readers and now curious followers of Allen, are meant to read the rest of the book as a guide for enacting the kind of "good food revolution" that the book's title promises.

One of Allen's most important concerns he hopes to address with his work is rebuilding what he sees as the fractured relationship between the Black community and farming. He spends much of the early sections in the book discussing the long history of Black people growing and cultivating food, first as slaves, then as sharecroppers, and then up to the present as farmers who cultivate only 0.0004% of the farmland in the nation. Hanna Garth and Ashanté M. Reese note that many of the current injustices in America's food system, "are the afterlife of slavery" (2). Allen shows these aftereffects by detailing that at the time of the book's writing there are "only 18,000 black people who name farming as their primary occupation," and fewer than 25 black farmers in the state of Wisconsin in 1990, when he began farming (12). Because black farmers have had almost no power in determining the kinds of foods that get made, Allen states that the health of the Black community has declined precipitously throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

In inner-city communities throughout the United States, it is easier—and often less expensive—to buy a Twinkie or frosted cupcakes or a box of fried chicken than fresh vegetables or fruits. Our current generation of young people rarely eat fresh foods, don't know how to grow or prepare them, and in many cases, can't even identify

them. They have become entirely dependent on a food system that is harming them. (14)

For Allen, the current food system kills people, especially Black people, because consumers have become alienated from the means of food production. Furthermore, he argues that that Black Americans in particular have left behind the traumatic stigma of slavery and sharecropping. But paradoxically, this journey to leave the past behind has led to what he calls a dependency on the very system that extracts life from the people it claims to be serving.

Allen spends the next significant portion of his book describing his internal struggle where he initially tried to “fight his family’s history” of farming, both as slaves and sharecroppers. In one moment, he describes the struggle as between modernity and something approaching a more traditionalist, or “authentic,” life: “For a long time, I had put my faith in different values. I had sought a life in professional basketball and then in the corporate world” (Allen 14). Allen’s shift from working the land to trusting the corporate world echoes Wendell Berry’s prescient vision of the future of agriculture in his 1977 book *The Unsettling of America*, “The people will eat what the corporations decide for them to eat. They will be detached and remote from the sources of their life, joined to them only by corporate tolerance. They will have become consumers purely—consumptive machines—which is to say, the slaves of producers” (79). Berry predicted, quite correctly, an agricultural system mostly devoid of humans, mechanized at every level by new farming technologies and a profit-driven rationality, and in turn, making humans into “consumptive machines.” In the notes section of *The Good Food Revolution*, Allen notes that *The Unsettling of America* played a foundational role in theorizing the role of agriculture and community,

even though he never mentions the book by name. We can see Allen resisting the mechanization of farming, and by extension, the mechanization of the self, in his return to farming.

In the first part of his book, titled "Roots," Allen further characterizes his resistance as "swimming against a current that had carried my family and millions of other black people out of South Carolina and into Northern cities...I was a reluctant inheritor of my agricultural history. It was a past that I spent most of my young life trying to escape" (29). Allen describes the currents of progress, of modernity, carrying Black Americans, seemingly inevitably, North where the promises of good jobs and new lives awaited them. But as Allen posits, leaving behind the geographical boundaries of enslaved lands did not mean that Black communities had also left behind civil rights abuses, systemic racism, and economic hardship. Allen argues that what Black Americans found when they moved away from their agricultural history was more of the same inequalities they had encountered from the past, just in a new form. He posits many Black Americans living in urban poverty had lost their cultural roots and lacked a sense of community. He points out that in the neighborhoods immediately surrounding the site of Growing Power, in Milwaukee's north side, "A third of the people in the neighborhood were living below the federal poverty level. The community was 97 percent black. Almost half of the households were headed by a single parent. About half of the men did not have legitimate work. The children often had no place to go after school" (Allen 26). While we see Allen go on to a brief career in professional basketball and other jobs, he somehow always found a way back to farming and producing vegetables on any available land. After he leaves his corporate job and buys

the last available farm space in Milwaukee, Allen quickly begins to conceive of ways to revitalize the surrounding community.

As Allen shows time and again throughout the book, the purpose of the farm is to build community; without community, the organization would only be fulfilling part of its mission statement. In a city like Milwaukee, many Black residents live in concentrated areas of urban poverty after decades of government de-investment in Black neighborhoods. What we see in his push to develop long-lasting, permanent relations with the community is a kind of rejection against not only the industrialized scale of globalization but also a rejection against the sped-up time scale of globalization by resurrecting an alternative food system, one that's more local and regionally based than transnational. He writes:

I realized that by bringing farming and fresh food to the city, I could play a part in healing a painful rift in African American history between its agricultural past and its urban present. I could help to rebrand farming as something that could be entrepreneurial and black-owned rather than something associated with sharecropping and slavery. I felt a deeper sense of obligation to forward the revolution in the food system in which I had now invested my life. (Allen 113)

Allen's vision of black-owned agriculture here aligns with the values of food equity activists. The food access scholar Samina Raya defines food equity as operating under the core goal that food systems become democratized and run by local communities. At the core of Allen's approach then is building interpersonal relationships between producers and consumers, first, by sourcing labor from the surrounding community members and second, by selling the fresh produce back to the community.

As mentioned earlier, Allen specifically wanted to improve access to healthy foods by offering “affordable alternatives to junk food in inner-city communities” (83). To prove the benefits of his approach, he recounts the many times he has seen kids visit his farming operations and undergo a kind of minor epiphany: “Children often come into my facility for the first time with their pockets filled with candy, acting wild. Something changes in them when they walk up to my worm systems and put their hands in the soil for the first time. They mellow. It can be a spiritual thing simply to touch the earth if you have been disconnected from it for so long” (Allen 91). Allen, like Berry, argues that the deleterious effects of modernity can begin to heal by moving away from the corporatized junk and touching the soil. Allen claims that revealing this spiritual element to children and young adults can help create new agricultural and distributional models that are “emotionally satisfying” (103). Rather than growing food on an industrialized, mass-produced scale, he situates his farming at a “human scale,” a slow-moving, interpersonal form of agriculture built to redress centuries of racial and economic inequality. Similar to Lois Clary in *Sourdough*, Allen finds meaning and health from producing his own food, but unlike her, he does not attempt to mechanize his work. Human labor, investing personal energy and time into the project, is the point.

One of the biggest selling points of *Growing Power* was its supposedly sustainable agricultural practices. Allen and his team went to great lengths to develop renewable ecosystem for the farm, ranging from anaerobic digestion and composting to vermiculture and aquaponics, to name just a few. Allen devotes large sections of his book describing the stories of how he came to learn, test, and refine these practices to work at *Growing Power*. But in recounting these practices, he provides reflections on the processes, allegorizing the

connection between agricultural practices and healing the scars of economic inequality and racism. To give one example, he describes how Growing Power began to cultivate worms to repair the damaged soil the farm stood on. He would feed worms with used coffee grounds or brewery waste from local companies, which would in turn produce natural fertilizer. While it required many years of experimenting to perfect the formula, Allen saw the practice as worthwhile, if not for the fact that it helped Growing Power to avoid relying on synthetic, petroleum-based fertilizers, then also for the lessons they imparted on him. To Allen, cultivating the worms paralleled the experience of building a socially informed, urban farm in a community lacking many basic resources:

The worms taught me. I couldn't expect to put them in a box with inadequate resources and have them do well. They required husbandry, and they demanded the kind of attention and care you would pay to sheep or pigs. The worms also made me reflect again on what it took to improve the lives of people. You couldn't place folks in the middle of a blighted neighborhood—without a strong family unit and without easy access to healthy food—and expect them to thrive. If you could create an environment in which people felt secure and healthy, though, you could provide the possibility of a better life. (72)

Allen's vision of the better life advocates for manual labor, long stretches of time, and community investment. Allen pragmatically recognizes that redeveloping the community cannot occur in a vacuum; communities and individuals do not magically transform overnight. The problems that many urban communities face requires complex solutions that address a number of socio-economic barriers including housing, isolation, abuse, mental health, addiction, and poverty. Farming allows Allen a way to start mending those

wounds by offering his farm as a place where people could have their spiritual needs met along with their economic and nutritional needs.

Ashanté Reese refers to Allen's intervention as "Black placemaking," a way to transform discarded public spaces by Black citizens to develop new "cultural meanings and geographic resonance" (32). For Reese, Black people in the United States have routinely been pushed out or ignored because governments and financial institutions see little economic incentive to invest in these areas. It is telling then when Allen brings up a well-documented moment in history where he was approached by the Walmart corporation with a million-dollar check for Growing Power to invest in more resources to help build out their operations. As Allen notes in the book, he "gratefully accepted their grant without hesitation" (72). At the time the deal was announced in 2011, Allen's decision to accept money from the largest food retailer in America was met with a flurry of dissent given Walmart's history of underpaying farmers, offering low-paying jobs, and forcing out local grocery stores. Andy Fischer in *Civil Eats* claimed the food justice movement does not need to include those "entities whose practices undermine our long-term goals." Food policy activist, Michele Simon, questioned if Walmart was, like the tobacco industry before them, buying their silence by funding boutique philanthropic adventures while simultaneously garnering positive press coverage. Allen's response is brief, but worth noting, "The current food distribution system is so entrenched that it is going to take decades to modify it. In the short term, we need to work with the institutions that we have. If Walmart wants to buy more local food and to invest in local farmers, I am going to meet that gesture in good faith" (123). In many ways, this event invokes a question posited by Andrew Newman and Yuson Jung, "In following a social entrepreneurship line of thinking, is it possible to buy and sell

one's way to the betterment of broader communities and not just for the enrichment of the individual bottom-line-minded entrepreneur?" (151). Allen's decision to accept Walmart's money recognizes a broader truth about many local food organizations and many humanitarian organizations in general, many of them simply require outside funding to sustain their operations. Allen notes that without outside grants, he would only have enough money to fund six full time positions, but not enough to employ the over 100 employees he required to run the whole organization. He opines that he is essentially forced to take money from an organization like Walmart, but he attempts to spin the decision as a positive that results in more food being produced for his community.

Deciding who to take money from is neither new in the realm of non-profits nor unique to Growing Power. Every American non-profit must operate within the political and economic structures from which they exist. Growing Power's attempts at self-sustainability and accepting money from corporatized interests is part and parcel of a neoliberal order that espouses the values of self-reliance and the beneficence of the free market. But I want to stress here, that being a part of the system and working within such systems to reform, or in the words of Allen, to revolutionize the system, doesn't immediately negate the work being done. While Growing Power ultimately failed, that failure points not to the need to perfect a quasi-neoliberal market approach such as Growing Powers, but to a need to make organizations like Growing Power unnecessary in the first place. As the novelist Arundhati Roy says in regard to similarly funded Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), "In the long run, NGOs are accountable to their funders, not to the people they work among. They're what botanists would call an indicator species. It's almost as though the greater the devastation caused by neoliberalism, the greater the outbreak of NGOs." Allen notes

repeatedly throughout the book that his project is just the first step of many in developing larger change to a complex, multi-faceted issue, writing, “The honest truth is that with urban agriculture, we are not there yet. We have not yet made it reliably profitable. I think we can, though. I see my own work as part of a long continuum” (123). Allen keenly sees the need to address the racial, gender, and geographic issues as part of a broader tactic to addressing inequality and needed Walmart’s money to attempt to meet those goals. But as *The Good Food Revolution* shows, the work of community organizations requires negotiating the very same economic and cultural landscape it’s attempting to repair.

While urban agricultural movements like Growing Power may appear to be or even call themselves revolutionary, their reliance on grants and outside funding points to how such organizations are deeply embedded with globalization. Because they attempt to repair the disasters wrought by capital disinvestment brought about by and maintained through neoliberalism, urban agricultural movements are inherently reactive to a neoliberal order. As a result, these organizations are restrained from making the radical transformations they seek. Yeheskel Hasenfeld and Eve E. Garrow argue that the current funding model centered based on “contracts, privatization, and marketization chills nonprofit human-service organizations’ interest in and ability to engage in policy advocacy. It also limits their ability to mobilize for expansion of social rights. Advocacy, when it does occur, typically centers on obtaining benefits and resources for local constituencies” (318). In other words, positioning Growing Power as a market-based, self-sustaining entity means that the organization tacitly, but not joyfully, embraced a neoliberal approach to enacting change. As Penn Loh and Julian Agyeman note, “many of the efforts to localize the food system, support food entrepreneurs, and shift food aid to nonprofits can be seen as part of

neoliberalization processes” (260). Throughout the book and the archive of their press material, Growing Power repeatedly emphasized that it wanted to improve “access” to food by creating new markets that would lead to new jobs. In a quite unrevolutionary move, Allen explicitly states that he doesn’t want to do away with for-profit food companies and claims that he believes there is room for both for-profit and non-profit food companies (126).

However, Allen’s vision of a broad, diverse coalition of scholars, academics, activists, and community members farming on public lands is revolutionary in its own way (128). It fulfills many of the goals of food studies scholars from a range of disciplines arguing that “use value must be privileged over exchange value” and that cities need to conceive of the “production of fresh and healthy food...as a public good...rather than simply a commodity” (McClintock 166). As Michelle Glowa points out, urban farm organizations like Growing Power can have the power to “enact land politics that can either reimagine or reinforce contemporary property relations, by both drawing on threads of neoliberal privatization and development and resisting those threads” (233). Furthermore, we can read *The Good Food Revolution* as a fascinating account of the complex work that individuals and organizations necessarily encounter when addressing the intertwined issues of racism, colonialism, and poverty in the fight for food justice. We should see *The Good Food Revolution* not only as a story of one man’s fight to promote urban growing initiatives, but we should also see it as the story of a community becoming resilient and more sustainable by building interdependency with one another (Morales 169). In conclusion, I echo Josée Johnston and Kate Cairns when they urge food system activists to adopt Will Allen’s holistic, community-based approach to food justice “[which] is not simply a product to be

marketed but a normative vision for reorganizing the food system to provide access for the many, not just choice for the few” (232). While Growing Power no longer exists, community-based urban farming projects around the country still attempt to promote a more just food system. As the story of Growing Power shows, radically reconceptualizing the use of public lands and building stronger interpersonal bonds between community members can produce limited gains in the fight for food justice. But Growing Power’s inability to sustain itself in the long run without continued investment from the very governmental and corporatized interests that produced the unjust food system shows the need to find new ways to enact a more equitable food system. As Allen’s book shows, humanitarian reason can be combated by telling the stories of hungry people with dignity and by reminding readers that new forms of agriculture can be developed just down the street. For many Americans living in urban environments, the place where our food is grown can seem like a world away, made by people we’ll never meet or know. *The Good Food Revolution* proposes that shortening those distances and building empathetic connections can work to dismantle, piece-by-piece, the historically racist, unjust food system.

### **Humanitarian Narratives and Neoliberal Heroes**

While Allen’s book focuses on steps to resolving slow-burning crises, the next text I examine focuses on responses to an urgent, catastrophic natural disaster. Chef José Andrés’ 2018 book, *We Fed an Island: The True Story of Rebuilding Puerto Rico, One Meal at a Time*, tells the story of how his not-for-profit, non-governmental organization, World Central Kitchen (WCK), provided food relief to Puerto Rico after the island was devastated by Hurricane Maria in 2017. Arriving just four days after the natural disaster, Andrés argues

Hurricane Maria's devastation was amplified by centuries of colonial exploitation, followed by years of systematic neglect and governmental failure. As a celebrity chef turned activist, Andrés formed World Central Kitchen in response to the 2010 Haitian earthquake to provide emergency food relief to the country. In the years since, WCK has continued its mission to "use food to empower communities and strengthen economies," ("Our Mission") by working with networks of local kitchens and chefs to provide food relief to communities in need across the world and throughout the United States. In his book, Andrés notes food relief efforts often fail because they tend to focus on following inefficient, slow-moving bureaucracies. He argues that disaster relief organizations, volunteers, and donors, "...need to build a new model of disaster relief and food aid that understands the needs and desires of the receiver, and we need to do that right now" (Andrés 4). Andrés shows how the current approach to food aid in the United States and its territories in times of crises often relies on a patchwork assemblage of businesses, non-profit organizations, and governmental responses. In the face of the Trump administration's inaction and inability to provide disaster relief to Puerto Rico, Andrés' book shows how WCK aided in disaster relief efforts to Puerto Ricans, providing more meals than the Red Cross even months after the hurricane. Andrés later sought to rejuvenate the nation's food system by developing more local farms instead of relying on food imports from the mainland United States.

*We Fed an Island* presents a boots-on-the-ground, first-hand account that marks many of the features of humanitarian narratives. Luis Fernando Restrepo notes that one of the defining characteristics of this genre is the way that the texts "mediate the misery of distant others for a metropolitan audience" (346). For Restrepo, humanitarian narratives turn the suffering of other humans into "objects of concern" that inspire cosmopolitan

audiences into recognition of forgotten or underreported disasters (347). Thomas Laquer argues that humanitarian narratives stem from public texts of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries that brought to light the suffering of individuals to expose what he calls “the lineaments of causality and of human agency: ameliorative actions is represented as possible, effective, and therefore morally imperative” (178). In other words, humanitarian narratives present a framework for identifying human suffering written as an appeal to a distant cosmopolitan audience with the capital and economic resources to help address the solution. *We Fed an Island* reads almost like Andrés’ diary, following his journey to Puerto Rico and across the island with precise detail and lengthy dialogues. Like *The Good Food Revolution*, it also includes plenty of reflective asides where Andrés contemplates the effectiveness of the actions he took and lays out a new vision for what humanitarian relief should look like modeled after WCK. But, as the following analysis will show, Andrés espouses a neoliberal vision for addressing the problems caused by governmental neglect and the very same neoliberal economic cuts that exacerbated the destruction of the natural disaster.

Andrés begins by describing that he arrived in Puerto Rico 5 days after Hurricane Maria touched down on the island, bringing with him roughly \$5,000 in cash to hand out to survivors and accompanied by a documentarian friend, Nate Mook. He quickly found that the island’s communication infrastructure, electricity, and roads were all devastated. People on the island were unable to contact one another to let them know if they were alive or what resources they needed. On the flight over, Andrés recalls his vision for providing relief:

We needed a robust technology platform that could handle multiple food requests and manage our supplies. We needed to be able to track those requests and the

deliveries, as well as manage the donations we hoped would arrive. I dreamed of a system where people could text a website with the food request: maybe a shelter needed four hundred meals, and the system would locate the nearest kitchen that could help cook those meals. It was going to be a localized approach, with World Central Kitchen as the clearinghouse with the best technology. We were dreaming big dreams because the desperation seemed so overwhelming. You should never feel guilty about feeling ambitious when you're trying to help other people. If you don't dream, then reality will never change. (14)

A grand vision of change is a common theme in both *The Good Food Revolution* and *We Fed an Island*, and, more broadly, similarly focused humanitarian texts. Many reviewers have lauded Andrés for his ambition and passion for helping others. *Kirkus Reviews* called his story, “courageous,” and claimed that the book “should be required reading for anyone involved in disaster response.” Tim Karman, of *The Washington Post*, praised Andrés’ work, calling it “a manifesto asking governments and nonprofit groups to rethink the way they feed people after a natural disaster.” Reviewers and activists pointed out that in light of the Trump administration’s inaction to provide meaningful relief to the devastated island, much of the work was left to ambitious entrepreneurs, NGOs, and a patchwork of community organizations. Andrés viewed WCK as a way to modernize the model for disaster relief by positioning the organization as the focal point for providing food relief.

Many scenes in the book involve Andrés recounting meetings he held with corporate executives from Coca-Cola and Empire Gas and high-level government representatives, including the U.S Attorney and Puerto Rico’s Secretary of State. Given the scale of the disaster, the limited infrastructure left in the wake of the hurricane, and the inherently

powerful connections between private capital and government needs, it's unsurprising that these meeting thought of the disaster in terms of a disruption to markets. But Andrés quickly becomes frustrated with the tone of their conversation. He writes, "In our meeting, a group of business leaders were doing what the private sector does so well: solving the market's problems...For the sake of individuals and businesses, these leaders needed to restore the fuel supply chain as rapidly as possible" (Andrés 15). He describes the anger he felt at people in power directing time and resources to fuel for cars but not to food for humans. He writes, "I wanted to see food relief in action. After an hour of listening to empty words, I grew frustrated and walked out" (Andrés 16). Andrés uses this moment to generalize on what he sees as one of the central issues with current disaster relief responses: the lack of a centralized vision for providing care. For him, the current method focuses too much on providing market-based solutions that serve corporatized interests for reopening international trade rather than providing vital food and water for humans through markets.

However, Andrés frequently extols the virtues of a market-based economic recovery so long as resources are directed to local communities. He envisions WCK as a food-based version of Médecins sans Frontiers (Doctors Without Borders), where chefs and food producers from around the world would be ready to spring into action to feed people in the wake of natural disasters, in part by looking to revitalize the economy:

My dream was to find a way to feed the many in ways that would help the local economy. We could create a network of chefs, like Doctors Without Borders, to help in a crisis. Rather than dumping food aid on an already struggling economy, we would source our supplies locally, wherever possible, and help put the farmers and

suppliers back in business. Ultimately, we would develop viable food businesses—from farms to restaurants—that could help deliver local services to the people in greatest need. (Andrés 42)

Like Allen, Andrés believes that communities who struggle to find food, even after natural disasters, often lack the economic resources or advantages to provide for themselves. A report from *The New York Times* written four days before Andrés arrived on the island noted that Puerto Rico imported roughly 85 percent of its food, relying on shipments from either neighboring Caribbean islands that were also devastated by the hurricane or the US mainland (Robles and Ferré-Sadurní). Additionally, Puerto Rico's recent economic situation has been dire, with the government accumulating over \$70 billion in debt and a 44% poverty rate, with around 40% of the island experiencing food insecurity (Ayala and Kennedy). As the book progresses and he begins to feed the island by preparing paella and homemade sandwiches for thousands, Andrés imagines that by utilizing available local resources and businesses, WCK can help Puerto Rico become more self-sufficient even after disaster relief efforts are over.

Andrés explains that the structure for WCK stems from the DC Central Kitchen founded by Robert Egger. As he puts it, Andrés was inspired by how the organization fed the homeless community by taking leftover and donated food from local hotels, restaurants, and catering companies. DC Central Kitchen also trained its population to become chefs so that they could then find jobs in the very same hotels and restaurants. On his homepage, Egger lists a series of endorsements from major celebrities, politicians, and newspapers, extolling the self-sustaining nature of his model. The *Financial Times* says, "Mr. Egger's goal has been nothing short of overhauling the way hunger and poverty are

viewed, at the same time as managing a community group like a viable business.” Hilary Clinton praised the organization for offering “opportunities” instead of “hand-outs,” while Katie Couric writes, “people are given an opportunity to learn a marketable trade, get a good job, and put their lives back together again.” The entire organization is premised on the neoliberal vision of self-reliance, meaning that individuals are best served by “by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade” (Harvey 2). Andrés has nothing to say on neoliberalism precisely but does advance some of its basic principles, namely, that the problems of food injustice and economic inequality can be solved through skills training, the importance of individual solutions to systemic problems, and market-based approaches to the running of community services.

Andrés admits he was inspired by the idea of developing a “social enterprise that could fund itself,” convinced that such an organization’s political messaging could make policy inroads (45). He writes that Egger found political success by appealing to both major political parties in the US, “Democrats could support the community spirit of caring for those in need; Republicans could support the premise of self-help that lay at the heart of the work. (Andrés 45). This concept of a self-sustaining “social enterprise” plays an important role in Andres’ approach to disaster relief. For Andrés, WCK’s true aid comes not only from building organizations that provided food to those in need of immediate relief, but also in developing skills-training and promoting private business. He later mentions his excitement at sharing his vision with then Republican Speaker of the House Paul Ryan on how WCK could lead the way in providing food relief. Like Egger, he thought that his message would be well received by politicians from both sides of the aisle:

In a couple of days, House Speaker Paul Ryan was coming to visit Puerto Rico and I spoke to his office as we drove to the airport. I wanted to make sure they knew this wasn't a partisan dispute. We were the private sector trying to help fix a public problem. In many ways, we were the conservative solution to big government bureaucracy. There was a lot in our approach that Paul Ryan could support. (167)

Throughout the book, Andrés explicitly embraces a food relief model that is informed by his background as a restaurateur and business owner. He notes that his background as a successful small-business owner and approach can potentially foster bipartisanship between Republicans and Democrats.

In many ways, the model Andrés argues for was already in effect before he created WCK. In one section of the book, Andrés describes a strategy document created by the National Mass Care Council, a joint organization between the Red Cross and FEMA. He quotes from it directly to highlight how the current approach “makes clear that nobody is really in charge...[which] it prides itself on that lack of structure” (74). Instead, operational oversight is maintained by a combination of governmental, non-governmental organizations, religious organizations, and various businesses from the private sector. But Andrés says this approach is unworkable in practice as it stifles the agility it seeks to foster: “This is a great idea in many cases: to be adaptable and open to anyone who can help, especially the private sector. However, the reality was the opposite: rigid, closed, unresponsive and unwelcoming to the private sector mind-set” (74-75). The private sector mind-set plays an important role throughout *We Fed an Island*, as Andrés continually describes the issue with Puerto Rico's recovery as one of governmental neglect, which the only cure for is by following the logic of the private industry. The book stages this

government indifference by contrasting Andrés' action with President Trump's inaction. He brings up the infamous moments of Trump tweeting out attacks against Puerto Rican politicians and the image of him tossing rolls of paper towels indiscriminately to citizens to show that the governmental response was destined to be ineffective as it was run by a man more interested in generating publicity than in solving the issues at hand.

But Andres' larger philosophy to solving disaster, beyond Puerto Rico or Houston, goes beyond just a personal critique of Trump's administration by promoting the privatization of relief instead of strengthening governmental programs. For Andrés, governmental programs are wasteful as evidenced in a section where he describes how the government gave out a \$156 million contract to a small company in Atlanta with one employee to provide 30 million MREs that went unfulfilled (58). He argues that the federal government's traditional approach is poorly planned, run by people without expertise of local environments, and leads to lowered standards. Andrés recounts an experience with a FEMA official in charge of offering Andrés a new contract to provide resources but is told, "Food isn't a priority right now" (77). Andrés rationalizes this response as borne by the shackles of bureaucracy,

I just wanted to feed people as quickly as they needed food, which is to say, every day. It felt like he had been at FEMA for so long that there was only one way he could look at the world. He was a sympathetic man, sensitive to the needs of Puerto Rico, but he seemed handcuffed by the system...he also could see no way to cut through all the red tape to help the Puerto Rican people. (77)

As he saw it, government processes and order prohibited individual drive; it limited the scope of help that the private sector could provide, if it only would be given the necessary

support. Essentially, the unfulfilled contracts and apathy stem from a sick “food relief system, managed by FEMA and the big nonprofits, that does not understand food or the people it’s supposed to be feeding” (Andrés 112-113). The response fails because it doesn’t try to empathize or rather, it cannot empathize with the people they serve.

Andrés depicts himself as an outsider, a tireless man who just wants to help people no matter the physical toll or financial cost. He views the major players in food relief as more concerned with maintaining their power rather than providing food and water to people in need. In the book, he is rebuked a number of times by diplomats, politicians, and other leaders with the power to distribute resources, but as he puts it, “They certainly don’t want a loud-mouthed chef telling them to think in a different way” (Andrés 116). Andrés notes that even though he was running out of money to donate and was low on supplies after just a week in Puerto Rico he was able to persevere by reminding himself of what was at stake if he gave up. He recalls one moment after a meeting with local business leaders where he laid out his plan to “mobilize the entire private sector quickly” by setting up their base of operations in San Juan’s Coliseo, the city’s largest indoor arena that had enough space for them to produce 10,000 meals a day within a week of opening (Andrés 95). Andrés notes that the work was exhausting; he had lost 25 pounds after just 12 days of being on the island: “I was barely eating myself, but I couldn’t stop thinking of the people who were drinking rainwater and going to bed hungry that night...We all were driven by the need to feed an island whose suffering we were still only beginning to understand” (95). As Andrés saw it, the energy and resources he had spent on trying to feed Puerto Rico was similar to opening a restaurant, but that the return he sought on investment was “knowing that Puerto Ricans would not go hungry” (103). Specifically, Andrés depicts

himself as a new kind of philanthropist and activist who employs specialized knowledge and skills that can help to uniquely address food crises. In this way, I see Andrés as a kind of evolution of the rockstar chef-lifestyle I discuss in Chapter 2.

As I show there, Anthony Bourdain, symbolized a kind of frictionless, but thoughtful, travel around the world. Andrés was a frequent guest on Bourdain's TV shows where he would often serve as a culinary interlocutor to Bourdain when traveling to predominately Spanish-speaking parts of the world. Apart from publishing *We Fed an Island*, Bourdain never really engaged in any sustained philanthropic activities, at least not publicly. In his time on TV, Andrés was more known to viewers as an affable, talented chef of multiple high-end restaurants with a passion for eating meals at restaurants owned by immigrants. But whereas Bourdain was a consumptive avatar for fulfilling viewers' desires of endless consumption, Andrés can be seen as an avatar for a different kind of wish fulfilment. Not only does Andrés embody the skills and expertise of high-end cuisine, not only is he well-traveled, but he also donates his time and resources generously to noble causes. Like Allen, he presents readers with a compelling story of making a difference in the world by simply going out and doing, expertise be damned. As he writes, "We had no idea how anyone had done this before, or how the official powers were planning to do it now. But we solved the problems as they popped up, as chefs do, and we just started cooking" (Andrés 125). He notes that the atmosphere of the kitchen environment motivated him and his crew, with the volunteers and chefs often reveling in embracing the chaos of the natural disaster: "Chefs understand how to create order out of chaos, just as they know how to control the fire to cook great meals. There were lots of moments when we didn't know what to do in the early days. The conversation would go like this: What the fuck do we do next? Okay,

let's keep cooking. That's a good plan!" (235). WCK quickly expanded across the island, building a network of satellite centers based out of restaurants and available school kitchens staffed by trained chefs and volunteers. One month after the hurricane struck, WCK had served 1.5 million meals. By the time they closed their kitchens in June 2018, 9 months later, they had served 3.7 million meals ("Meet the People").

Andrés concludes by urging for a change to the approach of NGOs and governments in their response to disaster relief. Rather than a single critique of the Trump administration, here he presents a more generalizable roadmap of the foreseeable future of disaster response, but once again couched in the financialized language of investment: "We have to challenge their thinking to have a return on our investment. As an American and as a citizen of the world, I felt let down by the lack of readiness and preparedness of the Red Cross and the Salvation Army in Puerto Rico. They could have done better, but instead it was just business as usual. It was disaster boredom. It was just another crisis" (237). He calls for a network of "Food First Responders" (Andrés 237) ready to go before disasters occur, and for "disaster experts to work with the food experts to build a new model of disaster relief that is effective and efficient, driven by the right priorities" (Andrés 248). One has to ask then, by way of concluding this section, what exactly are these priorities? By all accounts, Andrés seeks a series of changes to disaster relief that include better preparedness, greater coordination between organizations, and far more consideration for survivors' need to eat quality, delicious, nourishing food. In his words, "I want people to say this is the first hunger relief operation where the food was good. I want people to say this is the first hunger relief operation where the food was good" (151). In this way, like Allen, Andrés sees the fight for food in a disaster context as a fight for recognizing the humanity of

others. While Allen sees food as a vehicle for transforming social relationships within urban communities, Andrés instead sees food as a means of recognizing the similarities of humans across the world, and, in the case of Puerto Rico, as recognizing the needs of fellow Americans.

### **Reflections on Food Justice and Humanitarian Narratives**

I want to conclude this chapter by answering a question I might have asked at the beginning, “Why read these books in the first place?” Apart from their obvious thematic relevance to the study of food justice and the solutions they provide to fix the contemporary food system, I perhaps have not made it clear what these texts help us to understand about the structure of globalization. In globalization’s wake, we see the intensification of climate change, income inequality, and food insecurity. Agricultural centers have moved further and further away from the places where food is actually consumed meaning labor has become more and more invisible to us. As Michael Denning notes, we see this invisibility reflected across many forms of storytelling, where the depiction of work remains invisible as well (433). I suggest these texts, to a degree, depict the work of food justice as a remedying effect to the obfuscation of agricultural labor that has only intensified in the last 30 years or so. But beyond merely depicting work, these texts exist to draw awareness of their subjects, to extol the virtuousness of their work, and to motivate readers to join their movement. After all, it’s no coincidence that both texts include links to their organization’s website and promotional materials. In this way, these texts serve as testaments to the nature of humanitarian reason and neoliberal governance since they function as generators of sympathetic responses to crises borne out of modernity.

Food insecurity, malnutrition, poverty, poor agricultural infrastructure, and so much more all generate and are generated by a system of compassionate, benevolent responders ready to help those that have been systematically rejected or discarded. Zygmunt Bauman argues that these precarious lives, or what he calls the “wasted lives” of modernity is comprised of vast populations across the globe, “of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay” (9). He specifies that the values of order-building, mechanization, and economic progress have led to systems where humans are no longer seen, acknowledged, or cared for. Rather, this waste has become “simultaneously a most harrowing problem and a most closely guarded secret of our times” (Bauman 12). Few want to acknowledge that problems exist in our food system, and even fewer want to join in the fight to fix it. Furthermore, our current solutions often fail because they function under the belief that market-based solutions will solve the problems created by public disinvestment. Didier Fassin notes that current relief models operate under a principal that the “precarious lives” should be governed by “humanitarian reason” and solutions are enacted by those “who have power over them” (4). For Fassin, humanitarian reason solicits emotional responses from subjects of wealthier nations or regions that in turn lead to a compassionate act of grace, of assistance, aid, or action to the literary objects (i.e., those in need of relief). These compassionate responses become institutionalized as compassionately minded organizations and governments rise up to meet the need. But Fassin critiques the logic of humanitarian reason for its focus on “the biological life of the destitute and unfortunate, the life in the name of which they are given aid, [rather] than to their biographical life, the life through which they could, independently, give a meaning to their own existence” (254). David Palumbo-Liu extends this thought by encouraging

readers “to see others not ‘as they are,’ ...but framed within precisely those mediating and objective structures that are exposed for what they are—non-natural, human-made systems” (195-196). As my analysis has shown, these texts treat their subjects not as obligations, but as individual humans living out the material reality of an unjust food system and broken disaster relief system.

Equally important we, as readers, need to resist an impulse to substitute our reading for doing. As Joseph Slaughter cautions, by reading humanitarian narratives in this way, “we muddle the matter of caring for others with literary matters by turning another’s suffering into a...problem of ethical suspension and imaginary identification that simply gratifies our desire to do something by making reading a form of righting” (51).

Approaching issues of food justice in the same way we approach a text turns food justice into a solipsistic endeavor. But to read these texts simply as a way to inspire change within us as readers, renders the subjects of these texts, abandoned, discarded lives and communities, as distant Others who will always be problems for us to solve.

## Conclusion: Reflections on Food Writing and Globalization from Below

This dissertation initially came out of a simple desire to read more food and travel writing. When I began this project so many years ago, I initially set out with an ambitious, myopic goal to argue for the vitality of reading cookbooks with the same vigor and attention that we afford novels. It was my belief then that cookbooks and food writing more broadly were treated as non-literary or too simplistic to benefit from protracted literary analysis. But what I have found from the countless hours of researching, reading, and writing that went into this dissertation that there is a growing interest in food writing criticism. It is my hope that my dissertation will only help further push the claim that culinary writing deserves a place in our syllabi and literary anthologies. No doubt there are a number of other texts I could have read and include in this dissertation. In fact, of the initial 10 or so books I initially proposed to study in my dissertation proposal, only three have been included in this current version. But it is my belief that this dissertation provides a comparative methodology and an example of how to perform critical analysis of popular literary forms.

In 2000, Arjun Appadurai argued for a grassroots globalization that “creates forms of knowledge transfer and social mobilization that proceed independently of the actions of corporate capital and the nation-state system” (“Grassroots” 3). In essence, he claimed an urgent need for academic research to work on behalf of the poor and oppressed peoples around the world by championing “democratic and autonomous” methods for resisting the global power structures and forces that actively harm billions around the world. His words, or some version of them, have stuck with me, especially as I have tried to explain my research to those outside of academia or even the field of literature, “Why does my

research matter?" Through my doctoral studies and thousands of hours of sessions working with fellow doctoral candidates from a variety of disciplines at the campus writing center, I asked that question of others but had always felt unsure or hesitant to answer it myself. But upon completing this project I have found an answer that takes me back to my original reason for studying: many people read cookbooks and watch travel programs. These are popular literary and media forms, and they do not exist in an ideological or political vacuum. Cookbooks, humanitarian memoirs, and travel programs are some of the most common ways that most people come to understand something about the world around them. They directly inform what people choose to eat, what political or humanitarian causes they choose to invest in, and what places they decide to travel. Given my training, I can think of no more impactful or consequential area of research to contribute to Appadurai's vision of "globalization from below" than studying food.

I have written this dissertation with an eye to considering how non-academic audiences may approach my selection of texts, methodology, and findings. It has been important for me to try to make my claims meaningful beyond academic readers, although I certainly hope that my claims have proved meaningful for them as well. It is my sincere belief that the texts I have selected in this dissertation reflect a growing concern with hunger and that a critical analysis of them reveals the central role that hunger can play in the popular discourse of food. Global climate change continues to radically transform our agricultural industries and inhabitable land, and social media and digital communication technologies continue to allow us to see these developments instantaneously. Our ability to see the world has radically shifted in the last 30 years, and the technologies that were available back then have only become more fully integrated into our everyday lives.

Because of this, we have the ability to see the hungry peoples of the world in a new, more immediate way. Producers, consumers, and food writers all have a duty to acknowledge and help address the growing hunger in our world. But as my analysis in chapter four points out, we have to resist the urge to substitute reading about food justice as actually enacting food justice. Certainly, gaining awareness of a problem is the first step in a long process of enacting change, but reading must not be the endpoint. Food media is inherently designed to compel readers and viewers to take action, to recreate the dishes we read about or to travel to the places we see on television. We are meant to respond to these depictions in some sort of way. Having fed ourselves on the knowledge of the hunger globalization has wrought, we must carry our knowledge out into the world and to redistribute globalization's bounty to those in need. The current attempts at changing our food system have borne limited gains, but we must continue to mobilize and democratize the global food system by building transnational communities centered in empathy, equity, and justice.

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