

# Introduction

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“By studying what Americans have been eating since the colonial era, we are further enlightened to the conflicting ways in which Americans have chosen to define themselves, their culture, their beliefs, and the changes those definitions have undergone over time. Understanding the American diet is the first step toward grasping the larger truths, the complex American narratives that have long been swept under the table, and the evolving answers to the question: What does it mean to be American?”

—Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture*<sup>1</sup>

The time is right for a special issue of *American Studies* on “Food in America.” Scholarship on food studies in an American context and in an interdisciplinarily-framed set of approaches has been growing in both published volumes and in professional meetings.<sup>2</sup> Interest in food studies is at an all-time high, and the research field may be said to be “coming of age” in relationship to American Studies. Indeed, the writing on food politics alone is overwhelming. But such contemporary “foodie” issues as social concerns over agribusiness, nutrition and disease in America, environmentalism, and the future of food practices are also proceeding in conversation with scholars who are increasingly studying food practices and American history as definitive ways to understand evolving American identities.

The history of food studies and its relationship to American Studies is relatively recent. It has deep roots, however, in the intertwining of approaches from anthropology, geography, science studies, and history.<sup>3</sup> Most important to the establishment of ongoing American Studies interventions into food studies were works that examined American food habits as ethnic histories that evolve over time through contact with other American groups. For example, Donna Gabaccia's *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (1998), Harvey Levenstein's *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (2003), and Hasia R. Diner's *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (2001) all set the stage for understanding how diet and food practices undergird ethnic identity, assimilation, and resistance to assimilation.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, as Warren Belasco noted in 2006, even such common expressions about American identity as "the melting pot" or "the mixing bowl" evoke food metaphors and practices in relationship to issues of immigration, diversity and multiculturalism, and assimilation.<sup>5</sup>

Recent titles build upon this foundation. *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (2013), edited by Elizabeth Engelhardt, John Edge, and Ted Ownby asserts that regional, gendered, and racial identities may be understood through the lens of food practices and practitioners.<sup>6</sup> Marcie Cohen Ferris furthers this line of thought in *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (2014) where food as "cuisine and commodity" has shaped the struggles and identities of the antebellum Plantation South through to civil rights protests at lunch counters of the 1960s.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Psyche Williams-Forsen's *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (2006) and Rebecca Sharpless' *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (2010) are part of a growing number of titles examining African American identity and its relationship to food practices.<sup>8</sup> In their hands, it is not just ethnic cuisines that are important for understanding identity but the entire domestic front of food production and preparation. The logical outcome of their scholarship is the 2015 collection of essays edited by Jennifer Jensen Wallach with essays by both Williams-Forsen and Sharpless, *Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop: Rethinking African American Foodways from Slavery to Obama*, a volume that demonstrates how food practices in the hands of African Americans have served as a mode of cultural resistance.<sup>9</sup>

Carolyn de la Peña's *Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners from Saccharin to Splenda* (2010) tackles another integral angle to contemporary food studies, as she explores the relationships among chemical companies, pharmaceutical firms, and consumers for the ways that food – even in the shape of sweeteners – becomes a complex technology put to cultural use.<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Jensen Wallach's *How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture* (2013) is the logical outgrowth of approaches like de la Peña's and the interest in minority cultures in its intertwining of ethnic histories with the impact of industrial technologies on American food practices.<sup>11</sup>

I cite this bibliography to call attention to the fact that food studies is evolving from a fledgling field to one of maturity. There is a critical mass of scholars working on the subject, and they understand the relationship of food to American identity not only through ethnic studies but through relationships to histories of technology, domesticity in general, and contemporary issues and problems. Food serves as a lens through which larger questions of American identities, assimilationist practices, and resistance to assimilation are served.

Food studies research also often relies on undervalued and underused archives of materials, especially cookbooks, but also housekeeping manuals, menus, and food and appliance advertising and trade publications. Food studies frequently requires scholars to consider these materials as cultural artifacts and design methods for their interpretation as historical evidence.<sup>12</sup> In addition, food studies research often expands upon approaches and methods associated with more traditional objects of cultural study – literature, visual arts, popular culture – in order to shed light on previously unexamined aspects and cultural politics of artistic production.<sup>13</sup> Food studies has the potential to be valuable not only to those who practice scholarship in food studies but to anyone in American Studies interested in the expansion of the field’s research materials and methods.

This volume addresses the range of approaches to food studies in American culture and to the heterogeneity of the subject itself. It begins with an essay, “Gathering Around Hull-House Dining Tables,” by Carrie Helms Tippen and Sarah Robbins, that tackles head-on the tradition of linking food to the history of ethnic identities by overturning the idea that the early twentieth century emergent social work movement used cooking and food consumption only to promote immigrant assimilation and to discourage ethnic identities. Through examination of Hull-House scrapbooks, photographs, and bulletin board clippings as well as through period memoirs, the authors portray a much more complex picture of an evolving settlement house food culture that actually encouraged constructive, even multicultural relationships.

In this volume are also three essays representative of new interdisciplinary approaches to food’s meanings in literature, art, and popular culture in the U.S. Stephanie Tsank’s “The Ideal Observer Meets the Ideal Consumer: Realism, Domestic Science, and Immigrant Foodways in Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia* (1918)” links Cather’s depiction of immigrant foodways to the ideologies of rising contemporary movements in both American literary realism and in home economics, and she effectively demonstrates how Cather articulates the tensions surrounding the nativist values associated with each of these movements. “Sugar Babies: Confections of American Childhood in Vik Muniz’s *Sugar Children* and Kara Walker’s *Marvelous Sugar Baby*,” by Tashima Thomas, takes up sugar sculptures of black children that address a violent history of sugar production, colonization, and the hyper-sexualization and consumption of black bodies. Emily J. H. Contois’s “Welcome to Flavortown: Guy Fieri’s Populist American Food Culture” turns to popular culture and the rise of the Food Network star for an analysis of how food figures into a specifically 21st century mass-mediated

ideologization about American identity that utilizes themes and tropes of rebelliousness, populist nostalgia, democratic definitions of taste, and multiculturalism.

Again building on a foundation of earlier American Studies food scholarship, “Free Food, Free Space: People’s Stews and the Spatial Identity Politics of People’s Parks,” by Kera Lovell, picks up on Warren Belasco’s 1989 discussion of the relationship between food consumption and the culture-changing politics of the late 1960s counterculture movement.<sup>14</sup> Lovell uses both archival materials and interviews to examine the potluck meals (people’s stews) collaborated upon in people’s parks as a demonstration of how food preparation and consumption were key rich, exemplary markers of the experience of cultural resistance.

Two articles in this volume also focus on food politics within contemporary social politics, addressing the entire matter of food itself as an important vehicle implicated in controversies of modern social justice. “Zombification, Social Death, and the Slaughterhouse: U.S. Industrial Practices of Livestock Slaughter,” by S. Marek Muller, and “The Post-Incarceration Kitchen: Food-Based Community Organizing and Employment After Imprisonment,” by Elissa Underwood Marek, speak more directly to two different ways that the business of food is conducted within a larger political sphere. Muller’s article tackles how both animals and laborers are de-valued and produced at the site of the slaughterhouse as disposable entities, using the trope of the “zombie” to show how this is rhetorically and psychologically achieved. The author ultimately argues for the need for justice for both humans and animals. Marek’s essay on the post-incarceration kitchen also addresses a contemporary social injustice – the entire network of punitive practices regarding incarceration and the ways they serve as the State’s means of oppression of minorities. Marek examines the phenomenon of food businesses that employ former prisoners, individuals whose criminal histories often preclude most employment possibilities, as a means of resistance against state practices. Using public policy regulations, employer documents, and interviews with owners and employees, Marek demonstrates how food entrepreneurship can exemplify progressive politics for creating change.

Thus, the articles contained within this volume run the gamut of histories of how food preparation and consumption practices shaped American identities in the past to food imagery as a carrier for national ideological assertions and anxieties to the centrality of food manufacturing and businesses as sites for important American institutional practices intertwined with the modern corporate state. More importantly, perhaps, these food-driven essays represent the best of American Studies traditions of addressing lives and conditions of the under-represented, of understanding American identities through a lens that draws out social markers of difference, and of imaginatively using an array of cultural artifacts, public and archival records, and interviews and direct observations. Throughout, despite the heterogeneity of the articles’ topics and time frames, this volume takes food seriously as a subject for cultural analysis and for its centrality in mediating social, cultural, political, and economic processes in both

the American past and present. As a whole, therefore, the food issue of *American Studies* is more than the sum of its parts: it represents the way an emergent research field in American Studies illuminates relevant questions to democracy today and to taking a stand on those questions.

## Notes

1. Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *How America Eats: A Social History of U.S. Food and Culture* (Plymouth, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), back cover.
2. Food panels regularly occur at the American Studies Association annual meeting, and at least 19 American Studies programs now offer courses on food in America (University of Iowa, University of Minnesota, University of Texas at Austin, Brandeis University, Brown University, Yale University, University of Oklahoma, University of Southern Florida, SUNY-Buffalo, Rutgers University, University of Maryland-Baltimore County, University of Maryland-College Park, Miami University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Washington-Tacoma, University of Wyoming, Stanford University, University of California-Berkeley, and University of California-Davis).
3. It is important to note, however, the groundbreaking work of American Studies scholar Warren Belasco in the 1980s in identifying the relationship of the politics of American foodways in *Appetite for Change: How the Counterculture Took on the Food Industry* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1989) as central to sweeping cultural and political change.
4. Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998); Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2003); and Hasia R. Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).
5. Warren Belasco, *Meals to Come: A History of the Future of Food* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 20-21. In fact, building upon both the work of Gabaccia and Belasco, Camille Bégin's *Taste of the Nation: The New Deal Search for America's Food* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016) studies Depression-era food writing and the use of the "melting pot" metaphor as a means of social expression and oppression.
6. Elizabeth Engelhardt, John Edge, and Ted Ownby, eds. *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013).
7. Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).
8. Psyche Williams-Forsyth, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
9. Jennifer Jensen Wallach, ed. *Dethroning the Deceitful Pork Chop: Rethinking African American Foodways from Slavery to Obama* (Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press, 2015).
10. Carolyn de la Peña, *Empty Pleasures: The Story of Artificial Sweeteners from Saccharin to Splenda* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
11. Jensen Wallach, *How America Eats*.
12. In this regard, some model studies are Janet Theophano's *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives Through the Cookbooks They Wrote* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Jessamyn Neuhaus's *Manly Meals and Mom's Home Cooking: Cookbooks and Gender in Modern America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Katharina Vester's *A Taste of Power: Food and American Identities* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015); and Megan Elias's *Food on the Page: Cookbooks and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).
13. A number of recent titles take on the project of examining literary examples and genres for depictions of foods and food practices as indexes to larger cultural frameworks of such things as domesticity, empire, environmentalism, scientific and medical reception, and social or national identities and memories; see: Amy Tigner and Allison Carruth, *Literature and Food Studies* (NY: Routledge, 2018); Allison Carruth, *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- Books that tackle the equally broad subject of food in popular culture (and particularly in the mass media) include: Fabio Parasecoli, *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2008); Kathleen Lebesco and Peter Naccarato, eds. *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Food and Popular Culture* (NY and London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018); Sherrie A. Inness, ed. *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).
14. Belasco, *Appetite for Change*.