

Food Deserts (and Oases) of the Landscape and Mind

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One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.

– Virginia Woolf

Eating at fast food outlets and other restaurants is simply a manifestation of the commodification of time coupled with the relatively low value many Americans have placed on the food they eat.

– Andrew F. Smith

Encyclopedia of Junk Food and Fast Food (2006)

IMMANUEL KANT'S *Critique of Judgment*: is it the missing link in the controversies surrounding U.S. agricultural reform and the storm of media attention on the global food shortage, factory farm industry, federal food assistance programs, and GMO crops?

It occurred to me—while ruminating on the twenty-first-century U.S. food industry's industrialization of agriculture and on local Chicago efforts to eliminate food deserts and support local farmers—that Kant's paradox of taste could serve as a natural segue between these two different ways of looking at food. For Kant, "taste" is a means of perception both subjective and universal; "taste" and "judgment" are highly particularized memes that mark an individual's distinction from mass culture and opinion. They act as portals into both a locality (however fetishized in buy-local movements and tourist economies) and a place (*terroir*).

Kant cites France and Italy as gourmandise cultures *par excellence*, but also concedes that "deliciousness" corresponds to individual palates: in other words, some food is qualitatively "better" than others, but there is no universal standard of taste.¹

Contemporary science describes the olfactory sense as most directly evocative of memory, yet it's far easier to evoke the memory of taste in language. Literary accounts abound in which a food item serves as a portal for time transport to memories long forgotten or inspiration for new journeys to come, from Proust's tea-dipped madeleine to Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (at the very least smell and taste are connected: in the words of Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, the two form a single sense "whose laboratory is the mouth and whose chimney is the nose").²

The development of what Michael Clune calls preferential judgments begins with the assertion of preferential judgments about food (first, as a child, and then, in more sophisticated degrees, as an adult). These assertions manifest themselves along class lines: the gustatory decadence of the upper class; the "foodie" culture of the (disappearing) middle class; and the compromised access to healthy food and stereotypically unhealthy diets of the working poor.

The latter problem is fueled not only by the prepackaged and preservative-laden food provided by government-funded foods stamps and school lunch programs, but also the widespread lack of access to both nutritional information and the financing to purchase fresh, healthy food. The class divide in the market for industrialized food production is exhibited by the gamut that runs from convenience stores to wholesale supermarket chains to the niche market of health-food superstores such as Whole Foods (reaping more than \$9 billion in annual revenue from the production and sale of organic, health-conscious food marketed to the upper-middle and upper classes).

A stretch of the imagination is needed to place one of Western philosophy's weightiest tomes in conversation with investigative media such as *Food, Inc.*, Kara Newman's *The Secret Financial Life of Food: From Commodities Markets to Supermarkets*, and David Kirby's *Animal Factory*, but it is one that bears out. Along with Kirby, Jonathan Safran Foer (*Eating Animals*) and other contemporary authors indict government for its weak controls or even subsidization of multinational corporations. They believe this laxness is responsible for the environmental, animal-rights and health-care crises relating to factory farms and to the supply of cheap and preservative-laden food grown with petroleum-based chemicals and sold to U.S. consumers. As with all late capitalist enterprises, the food industry in the U.S. will continue unchecked if money is to be made off GMO crops, Americans' lust for meat, or the sale of toxic, nutrient-depleted foods, but if a consumer desire arises for fresh, organic food, corporations (and the FDA) will supply the demand of that market instead (and it already has in niche-market, high-end health food superstores like Whole Foods).

Whither Kant? The working poor, in their lives of day-to-day contingency, are severely limited in their choices not only of where to live but what to eat. The flexing of “preferential judgments” (likes and dislikes, as well as career, housing, and relationship choices) is a class issue, as is the reduction of, in neoliberal politics, identitarian claims of sexuality, gender, race, and ethnicity, rather than claims of economic disparity.

Theodor Adorno defined aesthetic development thus: “The trajectory leading to aesthetic autonomy passes through the stage of disinterestedness; and well it should, for it was during this stage that art emancipated itself from cuisine and pornography... . However, art does not come to rest in disinterestedness. It moves on.” Sexual, artistic and political expression today often funnels down to consumption (or scopophilic spectatorships) rather than participation, and purchasing (at its most base level, food and restaurant choices) power. Beginning to differentiate survival from life, and group identification from the refinement of one’s own preferential choices (existential, aesthetic, sensory) requires, as Kant would agree, the determination of, in the words of poet William Carlos Williams, “what tastes good.”

In his 1935 poem “To a Poor Old Woman” Williams watches her:

*munching a plum on
the street a paper bag
of them in her hand*

*They taste good to her
They taste good
to her. They taste
good to her...*

Critic Stephen Burt, in a close reading of this poem, deploys Kant’s subjective-universal criteria for evaluating the validity of judgment: in the second stanza, the plums are said to taste good *to her* (subjective

assessment); secondly, to simply “taste good” (objective assessment); thirdly, in a breakdown of sentience and evaluation all-together (“They taste/ good to her”).⁵

There’s no accounting for taste, as the medievalists said, but poverty does severely limit one’s access to the varieties of experience and to time for reflection and thoughtful engagement with sensory or aesthetic objects. This dense poem underscores Williams’ proletariat sympathies and represents modernism’s crisis of authority as a personal process, not an aristocratic (or, today, monetary) designation by those in power: the art of depicting how subjectivity is formed.

“Food desert” (signifying urban neighborhoods and rural towns without ready access to healthy, affordable food) came into the popular lexicon in 2006, based on a study conducted by the Mari Gallagher Research and Consulting Group. An analysis of block-by-block grocery-access data in Chicago (and, subsequently, in Louisville, Harlem, Savannah, Birmingham, Los Angeles, and rural Michigan), the study demonstrated that the mortality rates of food desert residents are higher than those for people affected by diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Proving the effectiveness of private research in fueling government action, the *Economist* reported in 2012, six years after the publication of Gallagher’s study, that Chicago’s food desert had shrunk by 40 percent to a mere 384,000 people, citing the Food-4-Less store in Englewood as an example of increased access to fresh food for almost 41,000 South Side residents. Michelle Obama and Rahm Emanuel, Chicago’s mayor, have also pressured retailers such as Walmart, SUPERVALU and Walgreens to open grocery stores in underserved areas, and Walgreens, a chain of almost 7,800 drug stores, now has a large selection of fresh food in ten “food oasis” stores in Chicago (Walgreens has also promised that over the next five years it will provide more fresh food in 19 other sites in the city, most of them food deserts, and in 1,000 other stores across the country).³

U.S. agriculture is undergoing rapid change: the 2008 Farm Bill (a bill up for amendment every five years), which provided \$25 million in funding to U.S. farms, expired on October 1, 2012 and is currently under deliberation in Congress. This legislation particularly affects

the 47 million Americans who face low food security (including access, quantity, and quality, whether or not the individual or family receives government aid), as well as the two million farms on U.S. soil, but also impacts the U.S. population of 314 million in a general sense. Since first instituted in 1965, the Farm Bill has highlighted bipartisan conflict between fiscal conservatives and liberals. This year's half-trillion bill is no exception: it proposes a reduction of land conservation spending and farm subsidies, even as it proposes a contribution of \$1 trillion over the next decade not just to farmers (through loans, subsidies, and crop insurance for commodity crops conservation programs), but to agricultural exports, and to food aid for U.S. citizens and citizens of other nations.⁴

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Discussions of Kant's *sensus communis*, categorical imperative, Kingdom of Ends, and mathematical and dynamic sublimates have taken a hairpin curve in the monthly potluck and literary salon I take turns hosting with my writer friends. For several weeks—over tomato bisque, kale chips, and Swedish pancakes with lingonberries—we charted food metaphors, the canon of culinary writing, and foodie culture as manifestations of the-feast-or-famine global supply chain binding the First and agriculturally desolate Third worlds. Literary critics and food writers (new culture magazines such as *Lucky Peach* vex this distinction) describe unsatisfying textual and food objects with recourse to literal terms for taste (saccharine, bland, indigestible) and, positively, as robust, satisfying, wholesome. The wine industry's nomenclature even describes the “mouthfeel” of a given blend (oaky, vegetal, velvety, austere).

We have questioned, too, whether regional cuisines and signature dishes (Southern heirloom and Southern reconstruction cooking, as styled in Chicago; New England Clam Chowder) represent the last stronghold of resistance to the globalization of U.S. culture into a geographically segregated yet indistinct melting pot, in which privately owned ethnic food restaurants, languages other than English and

Spanish, and cultural traditions beyond those liquidated and sold on the marketplace (Christmas, Valentine's Day) struggle to survive.

We also noted how subject-object binaries (animate being-inanimate matter, man-woman, human-animal, master-slave, the chosen and the damned)—in fueling wars, discrimination, and human rights atrocities, a line blurred in post-colonial, transgendered, and eco-literatures—speak to the fundamental fear of being metonymically reduced, through one's name or habits, to a body part or food (“bleeding heart,” “frosted flake,” “couch potato”). We not only are what we eat, my friend Elaine pointed out, but are judged on our palatability and digestibility (commodification-cum-cannibalism), as in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, as well.

Research campaigns such as Gallagher's mitigate the power of corporate monopolies and advertisers, as well as of strategic lobbying by federal, state, and local governments. They also diminish the influence of progressive for-profit and non-profit organizations regarding city planning, privatization, relief programs, and, especially today, diabetes and the obesity epidemic in children and adults.

The global food shortage, malnutrition, and the Western factory farm industry afflicting billions of people and animals worldwide are epidemics tied to corporate interests. Still, citizen-driven initiatives such as the slow-food, farm-to-table, and low-carbon diet movements suggest formidable resistances to bigger-better-faster consumerist rhetoric and to the corporate machines that create both the demand and supply for false “needs.” Local agri-business is also flourishing and has inspired a return to the “pleasures of the table”—and the pleasures of friends, family, and community. Our psycho-social and cognitive “need” for human interaction, shared meals, and community beyond reliance on a partner or nuclear family may not lend itself to FDA analytics (the food pyramid). Emphasizing the pleasures of the table leads to less attention to what we eat and more to how it is prepared, who prepares it, under what conditions it is produced, shipped and prepared, and whether those conditions are denatured or life-sustaining, sensed on a cellular or biochemical level.

Overindulgence on special occasions is normal as well as culturally coded (in China, it's considered rude to not finish one's helping; in Iraq, far ruder to not leave food untouched, signifying either praise for the cook, or appreciation beyond the need to overindulge). Chronic overeating (overkill beyond the point of satiety or even sentient perception) speaks more to gluttonous sensibilities than to a viable desire for more food, entrees, spices, larger portion sizes than our bodies need, or desire.

The rise of "affect theory" (the writings of Eve Sedgwick, Lauren Berlant, and others), and the recent spate of books on the sensory-emotional body (M.J. Rose's *The Book of Lost Fragrances*) and the ritualistic power of food and social bonding (Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*), are also carving a path away from the dualistic mind/body separation (and subsequent "devaluation" of the body) that has undergirded Western thought since Descartes's *cogito*.

Kantian disinterest is often misunderstood as criticality without desire: by "disinterested," however, Kant meant the intense aliveness one feels when simply perceiving the image, as opposed to the pleasure one takes in possessing or consuming it. Consuming rather than appreciating a person, or sensory pleasures, is a direct result of the objectification of the subject into a commodity (and, in labor relations, human capital), and can only be curtailed by the work of becoming educated "consumers" (of material and immaterial goods) as a necessary progression beyond Kantian disinterest as a safeguard against self-interested overconsumption.

Kant's definition of pleasure includes the desire to make it last, referring explicitly to pleasures that lose their luster through habituation. While maintaining a state of sustained perceptual intensity is, especially in our ADHD-addled world, near-impossible, texts, people and dishes that have an "aroma," a "texture," and an "aftertaste," are worlds worth savoring. They are not rapidly consumed, in a haste to return to work. Our hunger for substance, often goes unmet. Substance can here be read literally (nutritious food) as well as metonymically: Artaud wished to be done with the Judgment of God, and moderns, with the fetish of (however totalized,

institutionalized, or coopted by fascist *regimes*—the French word for "diet") meaning, itself.

U.S. consumers contributed \$632 billion to the restaurant industry in 2012. Eating out was the number one leisure activity of the middle class (should we see in it a refusal to accumulate assets with one's discretionary income?). In contrast, the lower-middle and lower classes eat fast food as their primary restaurant option. This disparity is telling. The fitness industry, tangentially, pulled in revenues of \$22 billion in 2012, from those who can afford gym memberships, personal trainers, and the time away from work to exercise. Health and wellness (statistically, and as a quality of life index) are marked, indelibly, by class.

Urbanites often restaurant-hop nightly: reprioritization of home cooking for ourselves and each other, growing awareness of our complicity in the machine of the global food industry, community gardening and local food distribution are all ways to turn "philosophies of taste" into mobilized activism. In Chicago, such collectives include Soup & Bread, a weekly event where free soup is served and donations collected for hunger charities, the Resource Center (a pioneer in urban agriculture), and the Illinois Local Food, Farms, and Jobs Council. Participants in such collectives envision a complete transformation of the region's and the state's food systems.

The live questions of food security, industrialized agriculture, the "silent spring" of our generation (genetically-engineered crops), government assistance, and foreign aid, currently under debate in Congress, include whether to increase or decrease funding for the Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) and SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition and Assistance Program), and what crops to insure and subsidize, as well as whether to continue funding, not nuclear weapons or NASA, but companies such as Monsanto and GMO labs and farms. However, most of the projected allocation (\$768.2 billion out of \$969 billion), according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, is destined for food-stamp programs such as SNAP.

These fiscal concerns strike at the literal root of capitalist ideology and portend a culture war of symbolic and aesthetic capital. Flexible accumulation under late capitalism (a system that tends, despite anti-trust legislation, toward monopoly power, outsourced labor, and tax shelters), entails cycling between laws of scarcity and surplus, as well as economic measures (austerity, inflation, stimulus) in an attempt to regulate commodity cycles (the volatility of supply and demand, and a fixed price index). This is the aegis of our heavily subsidized American agriculture, dairy, and meat industries, wherein—as much contemporary media (i.e. *Survivor*, *The Hunger Games*) suggests—the lifestyle choices of the 99 percent are characterized not by the purchase, and conspicuous consumption of luxury goods, based on, (as in wartime) rations, or trade and negotiation in a barter or gift economy (spices, contraband goods, black markets), but on competition for Darwinian survival. The feudal battle between the aristocratic and peasant classes rages on.

The national and global crises of wealth and resource disparity (extremes of hedonism and indigence) undergird, as a matter of conscience and conscious living, the money we spend on food, as source of nourishment, as medium of social bonding, or, in extremis, as only outlet for sensory pleasure. We explore the latest foodie hybrid to titillate a sensation-junkie palate (Pan-Asian fusion; maple-bacon chocolate). And, sadly, what looks like epicureanism for the middle class, can also be a ruse: discretionary income wasted on the relatively inexpensive hobby of food obsession (high-end condiments, kitchen gadgets), political choice diminished to whether we want our Hannah Bretzel sandwich with havarti or gouda, and intimacy reduced to two people watching each other devour dead cows at a burger bar. This is to say nothing of the physical and socio-emotional toll of addiction, for those suffering from anorexia, bulimia, or binge-eating disorder, the aftereffects of a food coma or diet reliant on overprocessed (fast and junk) foods.

If a middle ground can be found between “eat to live” and “live to eat” paradigms, allowing for both pleasure and necessity, there is hope, too, for a beyond, in eco-socialist forms, to the schizoid cycles of a

credit (debt) economy. On the other side of global capitalism’s binary logic: community, art, meaningful work, and alternative energy, fuel and transportation technologies (shifts toward real, and sustainable, world change). ■

END NOTES

¹Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), 52-53.

²Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Philosopher in the Kitchen*, trans. Anne Drayton (New York: Penguin Books, 1970), 41.

³“Just deserts: Poor access to fresh food is a solvable health problem,” *The Economist*, Oct. 29, 2011.

⁴Scott Neuman, “Why The Farm Bill’s Provisions Will Matter To You,” NPR.org, June 12, 2012.

⁵Stephen Burt, *Close Calls with Nonsense* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2009), 331.