Feasts and Fasts: Towards a Modernist Food Studies

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Artificial Color: Modern Food and Racial Fictions. Catherine Keyser. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 232. $74.00 (cloth).

The Art of Hunger: Aesthetic Autonomy and the Afterlives of Modernism. Alys Moody. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 240. $74.00 (cloth).

Gastro–Modernism: Food, Literature, Culture. Ed. Derek Gladwin. Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2019. Pp. 256. $120.00 (cloth).

Modernist food studies is an emerging field, and it is thriving. It is a significant new subfield because, as these three volumes demonstrate, food is richly significant for material, cultural and political examinations of formal modernism. The books under review here contribute to a rapidly growing site of inquiry; they join, most notably, the special issue of Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities, “Tasting Modernism” (2014), the “Modernist Food Studies” special issue of Modernism/modernity on the web platform (May 2019), and the edited collection Modernism and Food Studies: Politics, Aesthetics, and the Avant-Garde (2019).[1](#ckahsq8oxpth) *Like Modernism and Food Studies,* Gastro–Modernism (2019) is a collection of critical essays. Each volume groups its essays in thematic clusters, addressing the cultural, the aesthetic, the affective and the social elements of diet. Artificial Color (2019) examines the intersection of food studies and race in American modernisms. And The Art of Hunger(2018) provides a retrospective on modernism via some postmodern authors who acknowledged themselves indebted to a certain mythology of what modernism was or could have been. In this version of modernism, hunger is an aesthetic and food is vulgar because material. In the modernisms of the other two volumes, hunger and food are both political and inextricable from modernist aesthetics. The tension between these two positions is a significant and a productive one.

Catherine Keyser, author of Artificial Color, emphasizes the newness of modernist food studies in her introduction tothe “Modernist Food Studies” cluster on Modernism/modernity’s sPrint Plus:

Until recently, modernist food studies has been like dinner at Clarissa Dalloway’s party: apparently on offer, but mostly offstage. While scholars have counted chestnuts peeled and cocktails quaffed by Ernest Hemingway, and contemplated the savor of urine in the kidneys gobbled by Leopold Bloom, it is not until quite recently that the methodologies of food studies—rather than merely its objects of study—have vitally shaped modernist inquiry and vice versa.

One of these methodologies is a material and interrelational examination of formal modernism. Here aesthetics are shaped by encounters with the messy or authoritative structures of modernity: economic, social, and cultural. Artificial Color: Modern Food and Racial Fictions takes a three–pronged approach to “alimentary representation,” a “critical eating studies” methodology which Keyser has adopted from Kyla Wazana Tompkins’s Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century (Keyser, 3). These three areas are “direct allusions to food technologies and systems; embodied tropes of incorporation, abjection, and expulsion that structure these texts; and ambivalent cultural fantasies about racial difference mobilized by these meditations on ingestion” (3). Food is everything here. Keyser’s authors write about food in their non-fiction and in their fiction. They develop dietetic metaphors for bodies and those bodies’ relations with other bodies. They construct further metaphors for race, culture, and society from the base matter of food and eating.

Typical of this wide–reaching alimentary cultural production is Jean Toomer, from whom Keyser takes her title.. Jean Toomer’s unpublished 1935 memoir describes his time working at a soda fountain (17),connecting that experience to the effervescent, bubbling, fizzing and fluid–mixing metaphors in Cane. In the memoir, Toomer writes of the segregated soda fountain and the excitement and wonder of artificially colored and flavored sodas. In *Cane*, he allegorizes soda and its qualities, as well as drawing attention to the complex intersection of exoticized black bodies and exotic tropical fruits and flavors. We have here direct allusions to food (or drink) technologies, embodiment as metaphor, and sophisticated “cultural fantasies about racial difference”:

[T]hese tropes shed light on Toomer’s liminal aesthetic, the racialized discourses infusing soft drink production and marketing in the modern period, and the aspirant artificiality of experimental modernism. Toomer, unlike his peers in the Harlem Renaissance or in the white avant-garde, associated this last possibility with an overhaul of racial categorization and bodily experience. (20)

Keyser’s point here is that for Toomer, artificial, mixed and new foods present an opportunity to think through racial categories. Throughout this volume, Keyser draws our attention to the “moments in modern literature when race becomes recognizable as artificial thanks to its dynamic relationship with consumption” (4). Her analysis here necessarily becomes concerned with dichotomies: purity vs. impurity, mutability vs. immutability, artificiality vs. naturalness, and exoticism vs. whiteness. This last category is particularly problematized. Whiteness as unexotic and pale food as plain and uninspiring but nevertheless wholesome and pure is a recurring trope in the fiction and non-fiction Keyser discusses: Toomer, the Schuyler family, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Zora Neale Hurston, and Dorothy West. For Toomer, soda is a trope “for the shifting prism of color consciousness”; “a potent analogy for race as inheritance or invention” (34). The Schuylers—the writers Josephine and George S. Schulyer feed their celebrity child Philippa(who is not so much child as test-subject) a scientific diet, including fruit and raw foods, which retain “an aura of primitive purity”. This “eugenic ideal blended a dream of the past with a vision of the future” (72).

Both Hemingway the author and the “white men” in his fiction continually face “choices between abstinence and excess, rural virtue and urban vice, pure localism and adulterated cosmopolitanism. Because they keep opting for the latter while admiring the former, they seem destined for deracination and decadence” (83). Hemingway’s characters’ engagements with localism and with food culture are continually fraught with this tension. Stein, by contrast, “simultaneously allies her artistry with French peasant culture and models rural cosmopolitanism, a process of transnational affiliation inflected with the cultural legacy of Jewish diaspora” (89). She forages for mushrooms, she eats like a local, and she (and more importantly Alice) collects the recipes of her local neighbors in a miscellany of her own. For the Fitzgeralds, the American South and Mediterranean Europe are both “ambiguous and suspect” racialized spaces (113). “In both Tender Is the Night and Save Me the Waltz, Mediterranean diet and drink [coffee, wine, and sugar syrup] betray how difficult it is to produce and protect the white body” (116). For Hurston and West, the commodification of exotic fruit is a helpful cipher for the commodification of the black female body. Here again, the same tropes surface in the fiction and the non–fiction writings. For West in particular, “The modern food industry habitually framed the exotic body as livelier, juicier, chocolatier, and sweeter than the unmarked white body” (164). Both writers, Keyser insists, “are skeptical of views of racial agency that do not take into account the deep structures that support white supremacy in [the US]” (169). They are skeptical too, and in the same terms, of systems of food production, transportation, and consumption.

In Artificial Color everything is interconnected. The ecosystems which produce food and the commercial systems which distribute it are political. The politics of race, class, and culture are inextricably connected to the systems in which they operate. Many of Keyser’s writers also wrote advice on diet and nutrition, or on modern food technologies and the futures of race, both in terms of eugenics and a more nebulous emphasis on racial intermixtures as per Toomer’s soda. Keyser’s juxtaposition of their food writing with the fiction illuminates how references to food and to eating in their fiction, then, are not referring directly to societal and political concerns. The social and political is inscribed on the body, albeit a body that is unstable. Keyser’s authors raise the issue of “the mutability of the body and the insufficiency of the social categories that attempt to contain it” (3). Throughout Artificial Color, Keyser maintains our focus on each of these interconnected but complex strands of thought: cultural production and food production are never too far apart.

As far back as 1993, Maud Ellmann’s The Hunger Artists posited that in that late twentieth-century, “the body” had become “the latest shibboleth of literary theory”; “the last bastion of materiality.”2 In her reading of that material turn, “the body seems to stand for an incontestable reality” (3). Ellmann returns to Foucault to argue that “the body is an artifact of culture” and to Gayatri Spivak to emphasize that “‘there is no such thing as an uncoded body’” (4, 5). In fact, Artificial Color exemplifies of the kind of material analysis of political bodies Ellmann was calling for in the 1990s: where physical bodies are culturally mediated continually and are never fixed, never stable. Nonetheless, they are important. Whereas Ellmann works to establish a framework for bodies and materiality which is critically sophisticated, her argument itself moves away from bodies and focuses on the impulse towards immateriality, with hunger or starvation as “deconstruction of the flesh” (4). Alys Moody’s The Art of Hunger makes a similar rhetorical move.

Unlike Artificial Color and Gastro–Modernism, Alys Moody’s The Art of Hunger is not about food but the lack of it. But the difference is not only topical; Moody views modernism as elite and scornful of mass culture, and as concerned primarily with “aesthetic autonomy” (Moody, The Art of Hunger, 3). Her modernist writers (Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller, and André Breton) follow an “Art of Hunger” tradition in which hunger “dramatizes [an] anti-commercial, autonomous modernism” (34–35). This anti–commercial modernism is no longer the only modernism if it ever was, but it is the version of modernism which inspired Moody’s later writers, Samuel Beckett, Paul Auster, and J M. Coetzee, “who understood themselves to be writing after modernism, in all senses of the word” (28). Moody is interested in modernism “as a retrospective construct” rather than in modernism per se (24).

In her conclusion, Moody admits that: “In some respects, this is a strange book to have written in the second decade of the twenty-first century” (199). She cites the geographical and temporal expansion of the modernist canon, particularly in light of Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz’s new modernist studies and Susan Stanford Friedman’s insistence on a temporal expansion of the field, beyond traditional historical boundaries. These expansions are both beyond the purview of the monograph and Moody’s argument about modernism’s afterlives; and are, in some way, she says, representative of the very elitism she claims for modernism and its later critics:

Modernism, in short, continues to signal a position in the literary field—a position of high cultural capital and low financial returns, sustained by its relative autonomy—and the expansion of the term suggests both the prestige of this position and its availability to authors who, too late or too far away, might not otherwise have occupied it. (200)

Other recent critics of modernism, she points out, have highlighted aspects of modernism’s political engagement and its ethical potential. She cites Derek Attridge who, in Moody’s summary, sees modernism as “holding the text separate enough from the reader to permit a true ethical relation” (202). The “Art of Hunger” tradition, in Moody’s view, is a modernism with neither of these potentials and which is, in fact: “an anti-politics of literature. It is also an anti-ethics. It cannot provide a model for liberation, because it does not experience itself as free, and it cannot provide a model for social relations, because it refuses society” (202). The type of modernism she discusses is “neither good nor redemptive” (202). Moody’s modernism is, very different from the American modernisms outlined in Artificial Color, which, although certainly not always good and rarely redemptive, are continually engaged with politics, ethics, society, and other wider structures.

The Art of Hunger takes its name from Paul Auster’s MA thesis of the same name which focused on Knut Hamsun, Kafka, and Beckett as exemplary of a modernist “tradition of hunger and asociality” (113). Auster, living in Paris after submitting his MA, and trying to write, positions himself as a starving artist in precisely the terms in which he argued for each of his writers as part of that tradition. In this chapter, against a background of student protests in American universities and activist discussions about whether art had any right to claim itself as apolitical, “Auster insists on the writer’s autonomy from political and social demands, as well as from community itself” (125). Moody shows Beckett, too, striving to be apolitical, with starvation in his later works dramatizing “the impossibility of an a- or anti-political aesthetic autonomy in a context that produces the politicization of art in all its forms” (74). J. M. Coetzee, in the final chapter, is shown to be similarly battling with a concept of art as autonomous as against a prevailing “consensus” that “literature’s role” was and should be “part of a larger project of anti-apartheid liberation”:

For a white South African with an Afrikaner surname like Coetzee, to insist on the autonomy of art was to risk complicity with the status quo—to risk assent to the apartheid regime. Coetzee’s writing in the 1980s therefore develops out of a complex maneuver that seeks to defend an autonomous position, while refusing the co-optation of this autonomy to a conservative politics. (156–57)

All three of these writers fail. They fail “in part because aesthetic autonomy requires an audience that is not available to them, a society of artists that is neither an uncomprehending mass audience nor the complete absence of an audience” (6). This society of artists is available to the modernists, in Moody’s account, but not to these later writers looking back at modernism. Modernists like Hemingway “are embedded within a bohemian social milieu that makes their behavior intelligible as a form of aesthetic practice” and thus more readily attain aesthetic autonomy through both physical and performative hunger (6).

Moody also has a chapter in Gastro–Modernism, in which she again argues for the centrality of the starving artist figure in modernist literature. This chapter begins with a consideration of Ernest Hemingway’s retrospective account of his encounter with some paintings at the Luxembourg museum in Paris, and particularly with some paintings by Cézanne—a scene which is also recounted in The Art of Hunger. Hemingway says of this experience that “all the paintings were sharpened and clearer and more beautiful if you were belly-empty and hollow-hungry.”3 His aesthetic experience is heightened by his hunger and this enables a kind of communion with the work of Cézanne and by implication with the artist himself, who Hemingway imagines as also hungry. Moody calls this moment of connection “a kind of sociality among modernist artists, joined together in their shared merging of aesthetic experience and physical starvation” (Gastro–Modernism, 83). However, it is difficult to see how this starving artist figure is anything more than one strand among many in what Moody calls “the modernist period’s self-mythologization” (83). Even in the same text—Ernest Hemingway’s A Moveable Feast—we have more complex and layered engagements with food’s availability and appeal than just this heightened sense of the aesthetic.

Another chapter in Gastro–Modernism, by Michel Delville and Andrew Norris, points to the prevalence of food and eating scenes in A Moveable Feast, and asks why Hemingway’s reminiscences tend to dwell “so heavily on the food and drink available in Paris at the time, its affordability, its variety, and the wholesome pleasures it offered?” (136). Their first example is of Hemingway eating oysters and drinking wine, sating his hunger: “I lost the empty feeling and began to be happy and to make plans” (136). Here satiation is key to artistic productivity, if not to the kind of pure aesthetic vision Moody describes. One cannot be an artist however, even a modernist one, without some measure of each. Catherine Keyser’s Artificial Color also refers to “the gourmandism of the Lost Generation” and analyzes many a scenes of eating and enjoyment across Hemingway’s works (Keyser, Artificial Color, 77). Hemingway can, it seems, be taken by different critics as representative of both the starving anti–commercial artist whose performative hunger signals membership of a society of artists and as a gourmand whose physical needs are not only demanding of his attention but sources of inspiration in themselves. Hunger for Hemingway is perhaps more profound because he takes so much pleasure in learning about food culture and so much relish in eating.

Peter Childsalso addresses lack and plenty in his chapter “The Social and Cultural Uses of Food Separation.” He discusses Hamsun’s Hunger and Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” in similar terms to Moody but emphasizes, instead, the political implications of self–starvation. He also contrasts Hamsun’s “perceived association between malnutrition and creativity” with “the similarly autobiographical portrayal [of hunger] in Down and Out in Paris and London, in which, despite the didactic intentions of Orwell’s asceticism, the narrator sees nothing ennobling or enlightening in enforced hunger” (Gastro–Modernism, 72). Orwell’s narrator, instead, tells that hunger mainly creates “a fixation on the next source of food” (72). Hunger, then, is only central to one particular kind of aesthetic modernism, and is never as perfectly autonomous as the postmodern modernists, looking back, would have liked to have thought.

Derek Gladwin’s excellent introduction to Gastro-Modernism parses many of the issues we face when constructing a modernist food studies as subfield and also acts as a useful guide to the development of food studies more generally. Gladwin is clear that he thinks the new modernist studies enables the kind of work literary food studies in modernism is doing now: “The goal” of new modernist studies, he says, “is to renegotiate traditional barriers between ‘high art’ and popular forms of culture, refiguring the exclusive and privileged notion of canons, and magnifying matters of production, dissemination, and reception” (8). Thus:

food production and consumption are both literally and metaphorically everywhere in modernist literature and culture, reflecting the relationship among colonialism, agriculturalism, and industrialism in the early twentieth century. These political and social circumstances surrounding the modernist period create cultural responses to social issues. To this end, modernists engage with the food culture known as gastronomy to express anxieties about modernity as much as to celebrate the excesses modern lifestyles produce. (4)

The approach here is methodologically similar to Keyser’s work, and Gladwin references, as Keyser does, Kyla Wazana Tompkins’s Racial Indigestion, hailing her as “one of the initial gastrocritics” (12). Food production is political, its distribution is political and its consumption is political. The international politics of food production are thus also cultural, and the cultural is comestible.

Tomoko Aoyama’s chapter on the Japanese modernist writer Osaki Midori, in this volume, perhaps most obviously pushes at the boundaries of our concepts of modernism, in a brilliant analysis of the textual role of food and excrement in the literary representation of girlish identity and the portrayal of love. Kelly Sullivan’s “Late Modernist Rationing” draws on the Mass Observation Archives to historicize modernism’s preoccupations with food systems, food poverty, and lack: “writers highlight food and food consumption as a palatable means of discussing their reactions to perceived shifts in class and power in British society” (117). Vivian Halloran’s “Weight-Loss Regimes as Improvisation in Louis Armstrong’s and Duke Ellington’s Life Writing” brings together music, auto/biography, and dietetics to explore both these artists’ “physical self-fashioning” (as well as their careful management of their fame and reputation) and wider trends in modernity, in which “[t]he emergence of a mass audience with disposable income led to the development of popular niche industries, such as weight-loss book publishing, the growth of a national magazine industry, and the sale of musical records” (208). In each of these accounts, the global movements of modernity inform a more local or intra-national understanding of food systems and cultures: the Japanese anko (sweet bean paste) as a constituent ingredient of ohagi, a traditional sweet for the Bon Festival, when “the spirits of the dead are supposed to return”; the eggs in Elizabeth Bowen’s “Careless Talk” being an insistent recurring theme because of the “1941 egg shortage”; Duke Ellington’s penchant for both the French “pie à la mode” and the American “banana split” seen to be a marker of his uneasy position at the intersection of “high and low culture,” or European and American traditions (27, 125, 204-5).

For Moody, modernism is characterized by a “disdain for appetitive art,” and perhaps more strongly, a “scorn for culinary art,” which “reflects a commitment to aesthetic autonomy. It suggests that art that is too readily consumed is unserious and unaesthetic, and seeks to demarcate a zone of high art, uncontaminated by the temptation of easy pleasures or the desires of the flesh” (Moody, The Art of Hunger, 13, 14). In The Art of Hunger, modernist artists achieve a kind of autonomy, in part through social consensus about what that autonomy looks like (anti–commercial, hungry, and pure). Artistic autonomy begins to fall apart with postmodernism, in which the “starving artist” tradition:

becomes a path by which post-war and contemporary writing negotiates its relationship to modernism, and works through the fate of aesthetic autonomy beyond the modernist era. It offers an alternate version of aesthetic autonomy—less certain of its social position, and less utopian in its claims—that remains more tenable during moments of aesthetic autonomy’s most acute crises, as modernist autonomy seems, repeatedly, to enter what feels like its death throes (3)

In a reading of both Gastro-Modernism and Artificial Color, however, it is not at all clear that modernist autonomy was ever really achieved, and never really “intelligible as a form of aesthetic practice” (Moody, The Art of Hunger, 6). The authors discussed in Artificial Color engage with food as culture, system, and tradition in order to demonstrate their uneasiness with the cultural and traditional systems in which they find themselves. Every chapter of Gastro-Modernism (and, for that matter, Modernism and Food Studies, a worthy sister volume to *Gastro-Modernism*) shows that the authors under discussion are precisely “unfree” (a recurring term of Moody’s) in their relationship with materiality and politics, and that food and its consumption is a helpful way of reading this messy and material modernism. Not only are these modernists implicated in food’s inescapable materiality, but some of them also celebrate food as pleasurable, exciting, and sensuous. Jeremy Diaper points out that with the recent publication of T. S. Eliot’s letters, “Eliot’s relish of food and fare has emerged as a notable aspect of his life [. . .] his avid delight in food regularly comes to the fore” (Gastro-Modernism, 177). Cocktails in Noël Coward’s plays, writes Gregory Mackie, are “glamorous, sophisticated [. . .] modernity’s quaffable talisman” (100). Childs quotes at length from that “description of delicious food,” the famous boeuf en daube scene in To The Lighthouse, and quotes Forster’s appreciation of Woolf’s food sense:

“It is always helpful, when reading her, to look out for the passages which describe eating. They are invariably good. They are a sharp reminder that here is a woman who is alert sensuously. She had an enlightened greediness which gentlemen themselves might envy.” (Forster quoted in Childs, Gastro–Modernism, 77)

Crucially, though, Woolf is also positioned as a possible anorexic. Eliot’s invocations of eating in his poetry are always ambivalent. Cocktails are an affectation; a symbol of enjoyment merely. In Artificial Color, Philippa Schuyler’s diet is claimed as delicious, with its emphasis on “paradisiacal fruit,” but it is a diet adopted mainly in terms of scientific rationality (Keyser, 63). Both Hemingway and Stein, Keyser says, “create an expatriate identity based upon sensuous immersion in food” (75). However, the Fitzgeralds are both suspicious of food particularly when it is sensuous. For them, sticky and exotic food troubles definitions of whiteness. Zora Neale Hurston celebrates plentiful food and particularly flavorsome food, but uses fatness as a cipher for corruption and laziness. The modernist attitude to food is one of continual push–pull between sensual enjoyment and cultural morality, as well as being a way to reflect upon social and cultural systems.

Keyser’s introduction to “Modernist Food Studies” acknowledges this tension between delight and disgust and points to an abject middle ground:

This cluster does not explore modernism as an instantiation of formal and dietary discipline—though there is surely more to be said on the subject of canonical modernism and anal retention. Instead it devotes itself—with gusto—to modernism as often ecstatic and sometimes terrifying dissolution: man becomes lobster, queer coteries eat cake, Surrealists stage inedible objects in a mind-bending (and stomach-turning) buffet.

The key to this assimilation is also connectivity. As Keyser further points out in her introduction, the “eating imperative” must necessarily be an entanglement. Eating connects us to systems, “the social, economic, political, and ecological world.” The emergent modernist food studies which these three volumes represent then is very much of its moment and is a logical next step in our continued critical exploration of the legacy of new modernist studies and its political, cross-cultural, and material turn. Food signifies so strongly because it is at the same time ordinary and extraordinary. Who gets to eat what, where, when, and how are fraught questions.

# Notes

[1](#y92np152kdwb) “Tasting Modernism,” ed. J. Michelle Coghlan, special issue, Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities 2, no. 1 (2014); “Modernist Food Studies,” ed. Catherine Keyser, special issue, Modernism/modernity Print Plus 4, cycle 1 (2019); Modernism and Food Studies: Politics, Aesthetics, and the Avant-Garde*,* ed. Jessica Martell, Adam Fajardo, and Philip Keel Geheber (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2019).

2 Maud Ellmann, The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing, and Imprisonment (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 3.

3 Ernest Hemingway, A Moveable Feast (London: Vintage, 2000), 59.