

War rations and the food politics of late modernism.

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Allison Carruth

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

War Rations and the Food Politics of Late Modernism

Allison Carruth (bio)

We all eat food; and whatever sacrifices we may have to make to

take care of the needs of our fighting men, the American people will continue to be better fed than any other nation on earth

—Elmer Davis, Director of the Office of War Information (1942)

Nothing nourishing, / common dealt out food; / no better reading / than keeps us destitute.

—Lorine Niedecker (1945)

Food, U.S. propaganda director Elmer Davis suggested in 1942, was a profoundly political matter during the Second World War. As global famine conditions and national rationing programs came to define the daily lives of most people, agriculture and eating became fraught emblems of military power, war trade, and political allegiances. In the context of transatlantic literary culture, the wartime politics of food animates a wide range of modernist writers.¹ By the same token, food writers such as M. F. K. Fisher and Elizabeth David adapt modernist aesthetics to the project of instructing home cooks on how to prepare gourmet meals out of scarce resources and black market ingredients. We should thus consider avant-garde writers such as Samuel Beckett and Lorine Niedecker to be coextensive with these gastronomical figures; considered together, their works constitute an expressly transcultural form of late modernism that turns on a cultural divide between austerity and luxury (or what George Orwell [**End Page 767**] terms “luxury feeding”) as well as a felt anxiety vis-à-vis the expanding power of the United States and its food-centered economy.

Although no critical account attends to the preoccupation with food in literary modernism, that preoccupation proves to be a productive area of inquiry for modernist studies. In treating food aesthetically, modernist writers neither resist the culture of consumption nor disavow the “social life of things,” to cite Fredric Jameson and Arjun Appadurai respectively, but squarely confront the global market in the practices and ideologies that fuel the food economy.² In what follows, I investigate the conceptual interplay of global scarcity and U.S. overproduction in four

texts of the Second World War: Objectivist poet Lorine Niedecker's *New Goose* poems (1935–1945), American food writer M. F. K. Fisher's *How to Cook a Wolf* (1942), British cookery writer Elizabeth David's *A Book of Mediterranean Food* (1950), and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953). We can understand these texts both as artifacts of late modernism and as historical interventions in the transatlantic power of food during the Second World War, thus taking seriously Jameson's claim that the affirmation of modernism's autonomy from politics "requires a good deal of (ideological) footwork to sustain" (*SM*, 164).³ By way of definition, I take late modernism to be a transitional literary movement that includes avant-garde and popular texts and that bridges modernism and postmodernism, on the one hand, and the Depression and Second World War, on the other.⁴ Making a particular case for the significance of M. F. K. Fisher to the account of late modernism, I further suggest that Anglo-American literature in this period cannot be understood apart from a transatlantic context or from the shifting power relationships of U.S. capitalism and British imperialism.

The Poetics of Rationing and the War Economy

In one of her many war-inflected poems, Objectivist poet Lorine Niedecker correlates the weapons of the Second World War with the economics of U.S. agriculture and daily habits of farmworkers. Opening with a reference to the atomic bomb, the poem moves on to describe the dairy town of Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin and the print shop where Niedecker worked as a copyeditor for *Hoard's Dairyman* from 1944 to 1950.⁵

In the great snowfall before the bomb
colored yule tree lights
windows, the only glow for contemplation
along this road.

I worked the print shop
right down among em

the folk from whom all poetry flows
and dreadfully much else.

I was Blondie

I carried my bundles of hog feeder price lists [**End Page 768**]

down by Larry the Lug,

I'd never get anywhere

because I'd never had suction,

pull, you know, favor, drag,

well-oiled protection.

I heard their...

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Allison Carruth is an Assistant Professor at the University of Oregon. She has published articles in *Modern Drama*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, and the forthcoming collection *Pastorals of Ecology*. Among her works in progress are a book manuscript entitled "Monsanto's Garden: Food, Power and the Global Imaginary" along with essays on Seamus Heaney and contemporary BioArt.



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Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
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