The Mediality of Sugar (Edited volume)

Deadline: Jun 1, 2015

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Call for Contributions

Nadja Gernalzick and Joseph Imorde, Editors

The Mediality of Sugar

"Sugar is not a vegetable:" Other than as a natural substance, sugar - the food - may be conceptualized as a medium, or so the quotation from Gertrude Stein's Tender Buttons (1914) suggests. This call for contributions proposes a conceptualization of food as medium and takes the mediality of food by the example of sugar as a point of departure. Cane sugar has certainly mediatized and modified many peoples, cultures, and political or economic systems, in colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and in today's world of a global food industry. In literature or works of the visual arts, sugar has a distinct iconography and is found in manifold metaphorical and figural uses. Examples are James Grainger's georgic poem The Sugar-Cane of 1764, Phillis Wheatley's brief "On Being Brought from Africa to America" of 1773, Jean Toomer's modernist prose Cane of 1923, Edwidge Danticat's historical novel The Farming of Bones of 1998, or Kara Walker's sculpture with social intervention A Subtlety; or, The Marvelous Sugar Baby of 2014.
If sugar is read as a medium, the appearance of sugar in a novel, for instance, is a case of intermedial reference. Walker's sculpture may be media combination, in the media-theoretical differentiations argued by Irina Rajewsky, among others. It may be that it has only become possible to recognize sugar and other foods as media since the technology and design that is part of any agri'culture' and food production has today become obvious, or, readily observable to the consumer. In a communication studies model of mediality, food may be conceptualized as a message from the producer to the consumer. Sugar, as food, carries manifold significations regarding class, gender, race, sexuality, and other categories of identification.
Recent years have seen a widening of interest in food cultures and also in the cultures and histories of sugar and its by-products, such as rum, or, more recently, bio-ethanol. It was Fernando Ortíz who brought sociological attention to cane sugar and the regimes of its production in his Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar (trans. Harriet de Onís) of 1940, and it was Eric Williams who drew historiographic and political-science attention to cane sugar through his Capitalism and Slavery of 1944. For what if not sugar cane was the most profitable crop under early capitalist modes of production in the Caribbean slave economies and the triangular trade that Williams holds to have amassed the capital for the Industrial Revolution? Williams' thesis and its critique of the moral grounds of abolitionism has been reconsidered in Seymour Drescher's Econocide: British Slavery in the Era of Abolition of 1977 and in British Capitalism and Caribbean Slavery, edited by Barbara L. Solow and Stanley Engerman of 1987. Still, the role of cane sugar and later beet

sugar must remain undisputed in the history of industrial capitalism and for contemporary forms of world capitalism, in which sugar is still partly produced under highly exploitative conditions, and in which transnationally operating, monopolistic sugar companies benefit locally from heavy subsidies, e.g. in the E.U. and in the U.S. The claim that taxation on rum was incendiary to the U.S. revolution is related to cane sugar, as is the Haitian Revolution as successful slave revolution. Cane sugar and its economy thus appear in close relation to narratives of universal emancipation, a nexus implied in Susan Buck-Morss' "Hegel and Haiti" of 2000, among other revaluations of the Haitian Revolution.

The anthropological and historical perspectives on the role of sugar in the global labor economy and under conditions of slavery and racism have been extended by Sidney Mintz in Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History of 1985 and by Elizabeth Abbott in Sugar: A Bittersweet History of 2009. The world impact of the sugar cane industry has been researched by James H. Galloway in The Sugar Cane Industry: An Historical Geography from Its Origins to 1914 of 1989 and by Sucheta Mazumdar in Sugar and Society in China: Peasants, Technology and the World Market of 1998. Several documentaries in the past decade - such as Brian McKenna's Big Sugar: Sweet, White, and Deadly of 2005, Bill Haney's The Price of Sugar, or Amy Serrano's The Sugar Babies: The Plight of the Children of Agricultural Workers in the Sugar Industry of the Dominican Republic, both of 2007 - have aimed at using the medium film to raise awareness of the complexities and also injustices that are part of the production of cane sugar today. Studies of food and foodscapes from culinary, food design, ecological, or health perspectives further widen the spectrum of the analysis and critique of sugar cultures, such as in Reinaldo Funes Monzote's From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba: An Environmental History since 1492 (trans. Alex Martin) of 2004.

Invited are contributions on cane sugar from cultural, literary, visual arts, or media studies approaches, engaging thematic but especially also figural uses of cane sugar. Views that incorporate economics or social and political sciences are expressedly welcome. Moreover, beet sugar or sugar substitutes, alternative sugars, or other products of sugar cane or of beet sugar are of interest, such as rum or ethanol. Discussions of food design, packaging design, and marketing of sugar products by major sugar companies for respective consumer cultures are wanted.
The volume is introduced by an essay on the mediality of food by the example of sugar, and, for the essays in the volume, explorations and discussions of mediality in relation to cane sugar in any form are particularly desired. Since cane sugar as a cultural phenomenon is and has been transnationally operative and effective and since literary works or works of the visual arts or of any medium that engage cane sugar are transnational by consequence - if not always by surface visibility - the volume takes a comparativist outlook.

Please submit your proposals of 300 words and a short CV by June 1, 2015 to Nadja Germalzick (nadja.gernalzick@ens.unibe.ch) and Joseph Imorde (imorde@kunstgeschichte.uni-siegen.de) Notification of acceptance will be by September 1, 2015. Completed essays of between 5000 and 7000 words, in MLA format, are due November 30, 2015. Inclusion of figures is welcome as are contributions in languages other than English (to be translated).

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