

# “O Taste and See”: Daily Prayer as Wise, Savoring, and Saving Action

Jill Y. Crainshaw

O taste and see that the Lord is good.  
—Psalm 34:8

What is the difference between tasting and savoring something? I was asked some months ago to speak to a group of clergy persons about self-care. As I prepared for the presentation, a question surfaced for me: What is the difference between tasting and savoring?<sup>1</sup> A personal point of reference for this question is food. I enjoy cooking, and I relish opportunities to experience culinary excellence. I look forward to sampling unusual foods, experiencing gastronomic delights, learning how different chefs—both professionally trained and homegrown—create foods that nourish and amaze. “Tasting” and “taste” are important to my encounters with food. I enjoy tasting foods—ascertaining “the flavor of by taking a little into the mouth”<sup>2</sup>—and certain flavors particularly appeal to my sense of taste. But to “savor” a food or dining experience? To savor is, for me, a somewhat different matter. The word *savor* is derived from the Latin *sapere*, which is related to another Latin word, *sapientia*, or wisdom. To savor is “to have the experience of, to taste or smell with pleasure, to delight in.”<sup>3</sup> Savoring something requires a certain amount of patience and perhaps even wisdom.

In a world as fast-paced, frenzied, and frantic as ours, savoring can be an elusive practice. We taste countless things every day, it seems, but rarely do we have (or take) the time to savor any of those things, to taste them with pleasure, to

observe them with relish or delight, to consider with curiosity and care their breadth and depth. Yet researchers and practitioners in a number of fields have noted that savoring life is important to personal well-being.<sup>4</sup> Savoring is also important to societal well-being, to the overall health of human communities. People who savor creation cultivate wisdom for caring about creation. People who savor the food that creation provides cultivate wisdom about sustainable food sources and a concern for equitable food accessibility. People who savor life seek strategies for improving the health and life of creation and of all humanity.

For me as a Christian liturgical theologian, savoring that leads to personal and societal well-being is connected to theology and worship. To savor is to take up a sacred practice—a sacramental and liturgical practice—of paying attention to God’s good creation and our role as human beings as a part of creation. Daily prayer is such a practice.

Christians have long known that practices of daily prayer connect public worship with personal life, devotion, and biblical study. I believe that daily prayer, particularly when it arises out of and returns to public worship, shapes personal and communal habits of savoring life. Daily prayer teaches us how to taste and see—how to savor—God’s goodness, both at the eucharistic feast table and at kitchen or restaurant or boardroom tables. Could it be that because daily prayer is a savoring practice it might also be a saving practice?

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## Daily Prayer as Savoring and Sagacious Practice

All human beings share the capacity to savor the earth and the life it gives. How does daily prayer, offered in the presence of the One who gives life, foster and strengthen this capacity? How is daily prayer a sagacious, or wise, practice?

Broadly defined, “prayer” is “a solemn request for help or expression of thanks addressed to God or an object of worship.”<sup>5</sup> “Prayer” denotes how religious people communicate with their traditions’ deities. The shape and content of prayers depends on many things—the religious perspective of the one praying, the prayer’s landscape (the prayer’s geographical, cultural, denominational, historical context), beliefs about prayer’s efficacy, the individual or communal nature of the prayer.

The term *daily prayer* in Christian traditions refers to the practices individuals and communities embody each day in their efforts to speak to or hear a word from God. Daily prayer is the way people seek God’s presence as they traverse their Monday through Saturday life terrains. Christians have, in different times and places, gravitated toward varied daily prayer practices. Some practices—both in their content and patterns—are carefully scripted. Versions

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of these practices can be found in denominational prayer books such as the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, the Roman Catholic *Daily Roman Missal*, the Eastern Orthodox *Synekdemos*, the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*, and others. Though some traditions follow less formalized prayer patterns, they nevertheless emphasize the importance of praying daily. Christians across a diverse spectrum of beliefs share in common a conviction that praying daily, routinely, and usually multiple times throughout each day, is vital to deepening faith and cultivating a sense of personal if not communal well-being.

A historic prayer form that continues to capture the imaginations of individual Christian believers and faith communities is the liturgy of the hours. The earliest form of the liturgy of the hours, described by several church fathers in the second and third centuries, included morning and evening prayers as well as prayers at other set times during the day. This prayer pattern emerged out of Jewish practices of reciting prayers throughout each day, often at the third, sixth, and ninth hours and at midnight. By the end of the sixth century of the Common Era, the liturgy of the hours, also called the daily office or the divine office, regularly included seven moments of prayer—sundown (vespers), night (compline), dawn (lauds), early morning (prime), mid-morning (terce), noon (sext), and afternoon (none). Benedict, a monk in Italy, is credited with articulating in the fifth century a link between daily prayer times and daily work: “*Orare est laborare, laborare est orare*” (To pray is to work, to work is to pray). Other monastic communities also connected manual work and rhythms of daily prayer.<sup>6</sup> Nuanced forms of the liturgy of the hours emerged over time across Catholicism, especially as different monastic communities developed prayer practices distinctive to their contexts.

Over the course of Christian history, daily prayer forms quite different from the liturgy of the hours also emerged. Some communities rejected fixed forms such as those prevalent in the Eastern and Western Catholic Church. This was especially the case during the Reformation. Perhaps most enduring in Protestantism are the daily office’s “major hours,” or morning and evening prayers. Morning and evening prayer, again reflecting Jewish roots, are based on Scripture, particularly the psalms, and usually include prayers, songs, and intercessions especially crafted for the beginning and the ending of each day.

Forms of morning and evening prayer emerged in churches across the theological spectrum and remain vital in individual and communal prayer practices today. “Prayer meetings” and prayer societies became popular and influential forms of communal prayer in American religion during the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many congregations today continue to hold midweek prayer services that include Scripture reading and Bible study, singing, and prayer. Also, daily devotional guides published by many different denominations and other groups provide Scripture readings and meditations for each calendar day.

Recent years have seen renewed Protestant interest in daily prayer and particularly in the daily office. This renewal includes efforts to reclaim aspects of the liturgy of the hours. Many denominations now include in their hymnals or supplemental worship aids daily prayer resources. Also, a number of recently formed intentional communities (“new monastics” or “new monasticism” is used to refer to some of these communities) include versions of the daily office in their corporate practices. Other daily prayer resources are available online, many of them intentionally crafted with contemporary concerns and issues in mind. Examples include Celtic daily prayer from the Northumbria community; *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, created by New Zealander Anglicans; *The Divine Hours*, a trilogy of prayer guides for the liturgical year compiled by Phyllis Tickle, a well-known voice within the emerging church movement; and *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals*, a print and web-based collection of morning, midday, evening, and occasional prayers arranged to be used in a yearly cycle.

*Common Prayer* was developed by Shane Claibourne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro, leaders within the new monastic movement. The primary audience for *Common Prayer* is evangelical Christians, but the content of each day’s prayers is drawn from a range of historical and contemporary cultural and denominational sources. The writers of *Common Prayer* state that “[l]iturgy is soul food” and “offers us another way of seeing the world.”<sup>7</sup> A primary purpose of *Common Prayer’s* prayer cycle is to “interrupt” life’s usual schedules with God’s holy rhythms, to weave together through prayer what transcends time with what is most common to human time.<sup>8</sup>

This purpose is not unlike that of other emerging daily prayer resources and is connected to what early Christians believed about prayer and how those beliefs shaped what became the daily office. The call of daily prayer was and is to invite believers individually and in community to experience the entirety of their lives as guided by rhythms of praise to the Creator. Daily prayer also cultivates an awareness of the sacramentality of all life. The daily office asks us to pause throughout each day to pay attention to how God is present with God’s people in both momentous and mundane life realities. For example, daily prayer can remind us: God is with God’s people in the bread on the eucharistic table *and* in the bread at supper tables. God is with God’s

people in the grains of the field that become the bread at both tables and in the hands of the hourly wage worker who bakes the bread that we purchase at local grocery stores.

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Daily prayer’s attentive pauses connect our human comings and goings, our life risings and settings, to the rising and setting of the sun and the changing of the seasons, to the seasons of creation and life. Daily prayer’s pauses deepen our recognition of God’s persistent diurnal work to create, incarnate, and resurrect. Praying daily—morning and evening and at moments in between—connects all of our senses to the deeper realities present in each moment of life and in every fiber of creation.

In “The Universe as Cosmic Liturgy,” theologian Thomas Berry offers these insights about the transformative powers of creation’s rhythms as humans live and work within those rhythms:

Each morning we awaken as the sun rises and light spreads over Earth. We rise and go about our day’s work. When evening comes and darkness spreads over Earth we cease our work and return to the quiet of home. We may linger awhile enjoying the evening with family or friends. Then we drift off into sleep. . . . As in this day-night sequence, so in seasonal sequence, we experience changes in our ways of being. In autumn our children may spend their days in school and we alter our daily regime accordingly. In springtime

we may go out more freely into the warmth of sunshine where some of us plant gardens. In summertime we may visit the seashore to find relief from the limitations that winter imposed upon us. In each of these seasons we celebrate festivals that give human expression to our sense of meaning in the universe and its sequence of transformations.<sup>9</sup>

Berry's words echo the wisdom of Psalm 104:

You have made the moon to mark the seasons;  
the sun knows its time for setting.  
You make darkness, and it is night,  
when all the animals of the forest come  
    creeping out.  
The young lions roar for their prey,  
seeking their food from God.  
When the sun rises, they withdraw  
and lie down in their dens.  
People go out to their work  
and to their labor until the evening.  
(Ps. 104:19–23)

Both Berry's and the psalmist's insights alert us to the universe's cosmic liturgy and humanity's part in that liturgy. Whether we work through long nights as nocturnal laborers, or in the fields from sunrise to sunset, or in homes or businesses at unpredictable hours, God is somehow with us and God's rhythms of life somehow sustain us.

Berry argues that people today have largely become disconnected from this cosmic liturgy. We have lost our awareness of a "self-emergent universe" through which "the divine becomes present" to human consciousness and community.<sup>10</sup> Thus, we have replaced habits of gratitude and thanksgiving with those that destroy, violate, and exploit the earth and its people. Habits of tasting, seeing, and savoring are vital to healthy human lives and communities. The generous spirit birthed by and flowing from these habits emboldens us to cease death-generating practices and instead celebrate the cosmos's inevitable and gracious gifts of life, death, and persistent life-renewal.

How does daily prayer reconnect us to the universe's cosmic liturgy? How does it shape life-savoring and life-giving dispositions and habits? Daily prayer is liturgy, or *leitourgia*; it is the "work of the people" to join daily with God in God's creative and redeeming work in the world. This

means that daily prayer is also "wisdom work." It heightens our awareness of how God is present in all creation and in every aspect of human living. Daily prayer invites and teaches us to taste, see, and savor God's grace—whether we are embodying a Sunday liturgy in a church sanctuary, or sitting down at a chaotically littered desk in an office early on Monday morning, or mowing the lawn on a Friday afternoon, or cleaning the kitchen after a far too late and much too rushed evening meal with weary family members.

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Primary biblical sources for wisdom work are the wisdom writings within the Hebrew Scriptures. The best known of these are Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes, and what are referred to as wisdom psalms. Wisdom writings are also found in deuterocanonical sources, the Wisdom of Solomon and Sirach.<sup>11</sup> A goal of these biblical wisdom writers was to shape the dispositions of persons in the community so that they would have "eyes to see and ears to hear" (Prov. 20:12) God's presence in their everyday lives, and could cultivate the insight necessary for making ethical choices that would lead to communal and personal well-being.<sup>12</sup>

According to the writer who penned the Wisdom of Solomon in the second or first century before the Common Era, wisdom "pervades and permeates all things" (Wisdom 7:24). The writer places a prayer resonant with this belief on King Solomon's lips. In this prayer, Solomon prays for "wisdom," for the capacity

to know the structure of the world and the  
    activity of the elements;  
the beginning and end and middle of times,  
the alternations of the solstices and the changes  
    of the seasons,  
the cycles of the year and the constellations

of the stars,  
the natures of animals and the tempers  
of wild animals,  
the powers of spirits and the thoughts  
of human beings,  
the varieties of plants and the virtues of roots.  
(Wisdom 7:17–20)<sup>13</sup>

Exemplified in this text is a theme common to biblical wisdom texts. Wisdom, ancient biblical writers emphasize, encompasses *what* we know and *how* we know about God and God's presence.

"Get wisdom," proverbial sages implore students under their tutelage. "Whatever else you get," we are told in Proverbs 4, "get insight." Where are wisdom and insight to be found? Wisdom comes from God, biblical wisdom emphasizes, and God's wisdom has infused creation from the beginning. God founded the earth "by wisdom," established the heavens "by understanding," and broke open the deep "by God's knowledge" (Prov. 3:19–20).

Grounded in this conviction, ancient sages glimpsed wisdom everywhere—both in the particular skills and disposition of heart required to do everyday work (Exod. 31:1–6; 35:1–4, 21–29) and in the extravagantly mysterious "work" of the cosmos (Prov. 8:22–31), both in the diligence of ants and badgers (Prov. 30:24–28) and in the mythic activities of Behemoth and Leviathan (Job 40).<sup>14</sup> Even as biblical writers depicted wisdom as a certain kind of knowledge and attitude of heart to be cultivated, however, they also personified wisdom as a woman. In Hebrew, Wisdom was *Hokmah*; in Greek, *Sophia*. Wisdom/*Hokmah*/*Sophia* appears in many biblical wisdom writings as a humanization of God's presence. In Proverbs, for example, *Hokmah* speaks out at the city's entrance gates (Prov. 1), traverses urban streets (Prov. 8), works beside God to create the world and then rejoices in the world's rich beauty and delights "in the human race" (Prov. 8), and sets a feast table in the house she has built (Prov. 9).

Daily prayer is sagacious practice—wisdom work—because, like the Wisdom writings and Wisdom personified within those writings, it calls us to pay attention to how God is with us in God's good creation. "Pay attention to human life," *Hokmah* in Proverbs challenges those who pass her in the streets or who travel by her house. The practices of daily prayer strike a similar chord: *Pay attention* to how God is with us in the sights, smells,

sounds, and especially stories that we inhabit and live out each day. Pause and offer wise and grateful attentiveness to these everyday, often earthy things, because they "connect us to vibrant theological truths that dwell *within lived human experiences*."<sup>15</sup>

By inviting us to pause and pay attention to the sacramentality of all life, daily prayer joins *Hokmah* in teaching us to savor life. This is the wisdom of daily prayer. It evokes within us an appetite for life and invites from us a commitment to sustaining life and to making the delights of life available to all people. Cosmologist Brian Swimme links cosmology and science with wisdom. "Cosmology," he writes, "is a wisdom tradition drawing upon not just science but religion and art and philosophy. Its principal aim is not the gathering of facts and theories as much as it is the transformation of the human. . . . Cosmology aims at *embedding a human being in the numinous dynamics of our solar system*."<sup>16</sup> Swimme's view of the place of humans in the cosmos is striking: "I am just so profoundly happy serving out the role of the human as the realm in which the universe and the Earth reflects upon and tastes its beauty."<sup>17</sup>

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Perhaps daily prayer can teach us  
how to be at home in the universe,  
sunset to sunrise to sunset, in this  
wisely reflective and sacramental way.

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## Daily Prayer as Saving Action

Liturgical theologian Laurence Hull Stookey writes that "to be deeply Christian is to know and live out the conviction that the whole human family dwells at the intersection of time and eternity."<sup>18</sup> Where do time and eternity touch? Time and eternity touch in those moments and places where God has made God's home with humanity. *Hokmah* was with God at the beginning of God's work (Prov. 8:1, 22–31); *Hokmah* also builds a dwelling place where people can savor at her feast table the gifts of creation (Prov. 9). God's Word, God's Logos or Wisdom, was with God in the beginning; God's Word becomes flesh and lives among humanity (John 1:1, 14).<sup>19</sup> God's saving work in Christ comes to fruition while God—Wisdom and Word—is dwelling on earth with humanity in the person of Jesus.

Practices of daily prayer stir within us again and again the recognition that *we* dwell here, on

God's benevolent earth. We are a part of God's good creation; God's good creation daily saves us by providing for our physical needs and offering to us sensual and spiritual delights. When we move in our prayer lives with and to the rhythms of the earth—sunset into night, night breaking into dawn becoming early and then mid-morning, morning giving way to noon and afternoon, and afternoon drawing us toward yet again another sunset—we are also reminded: God continues to dwell *with* us here on this earth, our home. God is incarnate *in* us, in our lives. God is at home with us in the neighborhoods and cities where we laugh and play, worship and work, lament and celebrate. God is saving—redeeming—us each and every day.

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Perhaps that means that the work of daily prayer is, in a sense, saving work, as it shapes in us the desire to follow Jesus' concrete examples of generous love for all people and attentive care for creation. Theologian Rebecca Ann Parker expresses it this way in *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*:

To say paradise is accessible here and now is not to say the world is perfect or that we should focus on the good and deny the evil and pain around and within us. The serpent lives in the garden, and paradise is a place of struggle, a place where suffering happens and where destructive systems that harm life have to be resisted. But as the early Christian church understood, here is where the hand of comfort can be extended, the deep breath can be taken, and we can live at home in the world, knowing this is enough.<sup>20</sup>

This knowledge, this wisdom, is fostered as we pray together through each day's hours and minutes.

Novelist E. B. White is credited with reflecting in an interview that "if the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If it were merely

challenging, that would be no problem. But I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve (or save) the world and a desire to enjoy (or savor) the world. This makes it hard to plan the day."<sup>21</sup> Taking up daily prayer, perhaps we can learn how rhythms of saving and savoring dance together in our lives and communities. Indeed, when we pray daily, we learn anew how to savor God's here and now gifts of generous grace. We are also challenged to recommit ourselves with each sunset and sunrise to reclaiming, renewing, and even saving God's good earth and to being mindful of and prophetically thankful for the beauty and value of all God's people.

## Notes

1. Two resources inspired the thoughts for the clergy presentation and subsequently for this essay: Kirk Byron Jones, *Addicted to Hurry: Spiritual Strategies for Slowing Down* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), and Robert Farrar Capon, *The Supper of the Lamb: A Culinary Entertainment* (New York: Doubleday, 1969). Both authors, in their unique ways, encourage savoring life.
2. *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. "taste," accessed December 8, 2013, [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/taste](http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/taste).
3. *Ibid.*, s.v. "savor," accessed December 8, 2013, [merriam-webster.com/dictionary/savor](http://merriam-webster.com/dictionary/savor).
4. See Fred Bryant and Joseph Veroff, *Savoring: A New Model of Positive Experience* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007); Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of this World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), Nook book; Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), Nook book; Barbara Frederickson, "How Does Religion Benefit Health and Well-Being? Are Positive Emotions Active Ingredients?" *Religion and Psychology* 13, no. 3 (2002): 209–13.
5. *Oxford Dictionaries Online*, s.v. "prayer," accessed November 26, 2013, [oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/prayer](http://oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/prayer).
6. Lonni Collins Pratt and Daniel Horman, *Benedict's Way: An Ancient Monk's Insights for a Balanced Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2000); Fred Bahnson, *Soil and Sacrament: A Spiritual Memoir of Food and Faith* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), describes time he spent with Trappist monks at Mepkin Abbey in South Carolina experiencing the rhythms of work and prayer in their community.
7. Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 7–8, Nook book.

8. Ibid.
9. Thomas Berry, *The Christian Future and the Fate of the Earth* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 96.
10. Ibid., 115.
11. “Deuterocanonical” refers to books and passages that are not part of the Hebrew Bible but that are deemed by some traditions to be part of the Christian Old Testament. Deuterocanonical sources are considered canonical by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians. Most Protestants do not consider them to be canonical. Deuterocanonical sources are included under a separate heading in a number of versions of the Bible. See *Merriam-Webster Online*, s.v. “deuterocanonical,” accessed December 8, 2013, merriam-webster.com/dictionary/deuterocanonical.
12. William Brown, *Character in Crisis: A Fresh Approach to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 49.
13. The Wisdom of Solomon, also called the Book of Wisdom or Wisdom, is thought to have been written in Greek but in the style of Hebrew verse. While the author attributes the book to Solomon, most scholars today argue that it was likely written after the death of Solomon, probably in the second or first century before the Common Era. See David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1979), and Leo Perdue, *Wisdom Literature: A Theological History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).
14. For a discussion of wisdom and work in Exodus, see Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture—An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 139–54.
15. Jill Crainshaw, “Wording Wisdom: The Wise, Strange, and Holy Work of Worship,” *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy* 3–13. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 8, 2013).
16. Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos: Humanity and the New Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 31.
17. Brian Swimme, interview with Lauren de Boer, “Science as Wisdom: The New Story as a Way Forward,” *EarthLight Magazine* 26 (Summer 1997): 10–22, earthlight.org/interview26.html, accessed December 6, 2013.
18. Lawrence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ’s Time in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 2ff.
19. A number of scholars link *logos* in John with Wisdom in Hebrew and Greek sources. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise*, p. 49, write that “in the Septuagint, the Hebrew feminine noun *Hokmah* (Wisdom) in Proverbs became *Sophia* (Wisdom), which was linked to Word, as the principle of creation.” This link between *logos* and Wisdom emerges in the first chapter of the Gospel of John. See also Raymond E. Brown, *The Anchor Bible: The Gospel According to John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), cxxv; Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is* (New York: Crossroads Publishing Co., 2002); Sheri D. Kling, “Wisdom became flesh: An analysis of the prologue to the Gospel of John,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 40, no. 3: 179–87, *ATLA Serials, Religion Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 8, 2013); Sharon Ringe, *Wisdom’s Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), web, December 8, 2013.
20. John A. Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker, *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 15, Nook book.
21. Martha White, ed., *In the Words of E. B. White: Quotations from America’s Most Companionable Writers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).