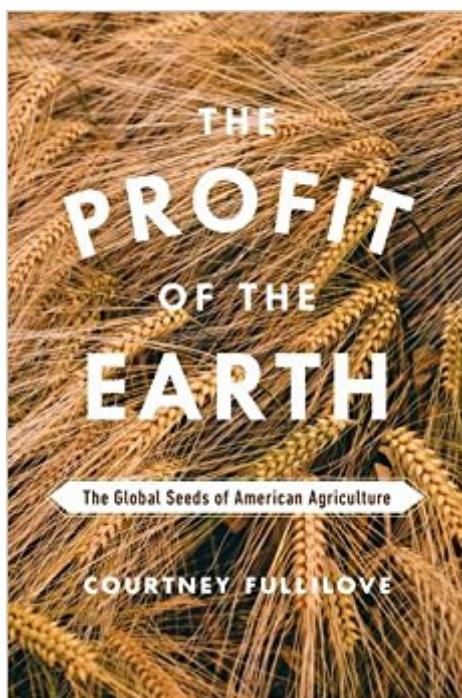


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The Profit Of The Earth: The Global Seeds Of American Agriculture



Synopsis

While there is enormous public interest in biodiversity, food sourcing, and sustainable agriculture, romantic attachments to heirloom seeds and family farms have provoked misleading fantasies of an unrecoverable agrarian past. The reality, as Courtney Fullilove shows, is that seeds are inherently political objects transformed by the ways they are gathered, preserved, distributed, regenerated, and improved. In *The Profit of the Earth*, Fullilove unearths the history of American agricultural development and of seeds as tools and talismans put in its service. *Organized into three thematic parts, The Profit of the Earth is a narrative history of the collection, circulation, and preservation of seeds. Fullilove begins with the political economy of agricultural improvement, recovering the efforts of the US Patent Office and the nascent US Department of Agriculture to import seeds and cuttings for free distribution to American farmers. She then turns to immigrant agricultural knowledge, exploring how public and private institutions attempting to boost midwestern wheat yields drew on the resources of willing and unwilling settlers. Last, she explores the impact of these cereal monocultures on biocultural diversity, chronicling a fin-de-siècle Ohio pharmacist's attempt to source Purple Coneflower from the diminishing prairie.* Through these captivating narratives of improvisation, appropriation, and loss, Fullilove explores contradictions between ideologies of property rights and common use that persist in national and international development—ultimately challenging readers to rethink fantasies of global agriculture's past and future.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

“The Profit of the Earth” takes as its premise that no matter how much human activity has narrowed this range, the history embedded in seeds can recover the biodiversity of the past, help scholars recognize the complexity of the present, and inform humanity about how to expand the possibilities of its future. Fullilove has a knack for recovering historical subjects that, in both the literal and metaphorical sense, have been lost in the weeds. Never losing sight of the tragic dimensions of the Anthropocene, her end result cuts across the longest spans of time and the smallest dimensions of space to capture the making of an agricultural empire in its fullest historical scope. (Edge Effects) “Seeds are one of humanity’s earliest and best technologies. Centuries of seed selection have generated small, human-tweaked packages that deliver life, health, and beauty. The Profit of the Earth offers an insightful and engaging history of that ongoing process.” (Joyce E. Chaplin, Harvard University) Fullilove is a genuinely original thinker whose insights transcend the boundaries between American and global history, as well as between the histories of science, technology, the environment, and capitalism. The Profit of the Earth shows how American agricultural development arose from the interactions with the natural environment—and one another—of farmers, government agencies, and entrepreneurs at home and overseas. It is a strikingly new portrait of how the United States became an agricultural superpower. (Eric Foner, Columbia University) “How did the United States become the breadbasket of the world? In this riveting book, Mesopotamian agriculturalists, Washington bureaucrats, plains farmers, and Russian scientists create new strains of grains, appropriate ancient knowledge, conquer foreign territories, and build a powerful state in the service of agricultural power and profit. Fullilove situates a quintessential national story—the farming economy of the midwest—in a global framework, forcing us to rethink the advent of modern agriculture in the United States.” (Sven Beckert, Harvard University)

Courtney Fullilove is assistant professor of history, environmental studies, and science in society at Wesleyan University, in Connecticut.

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