EATING THE ATLANTIC: 
NINETEENTH-CENTURY U.S. AND CARIBBEAN LITERATURE AND THE 
GASTROAESTHETIC

A dissertation presented 
by

Elizabeth Hopwood

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

The study of foodways within literature has largely been framed in terms of consumers and comestibles; “Eating the Atlantic” shifts such an account by recognizing the production of raw foodstuffs by enslaved individuals and considering food not only as a form of sustenance, but as a shaper of aesthetic communities of taste. By connecting the history of consumption with stories of production, I reposition excluded agents to the center of Atlantic histories and shift accounts of the aesthetic to show how the formation of a culture of taste relied upon labor.

To do this, I turn to nineteenth-century literature, including West Indian slave narratives, domestic novels, cookbooks, and newspapers that circulated throughout North America, England, and the Caribbean. I introduce the term “gastroaesthetic” as a lens to read how the site of food production and consumption shapes our values and judgments on a cultural level. Following the gastronomic narrative of a text reveals a great deal about those who participate within a system of foodways, particularly the enslaved individuals who were tasked with producing commodities like sugar and salt that Europeans traded across the Atlantic. In the nineteenth century in particular, this framework can better help us understand histories of colonialism, empire, erasure, and Atlantic cultural production.
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Introduction: Consider the Pineapple

In 1941, M.F.K. Fisher published a poetic ode to the cooking and eating of oysters. *Consider the Oyster* chronicles the “dreadful but exciting” life of the sea urchin while asking readers to pay particular attention to not only the immediate, experiential joy of eating oysters but also to the oyster’s unsettling legacy as a living organism consumed through culture. In 2004, David Foster Wallace wrote a piece for *Gourmet* magazine called “Consider the Lobster.” As a riff on Fisher’s carefully attended-to treatment of the particularity of food, “Consider the Lobster” begins as a review of the 2003 Maine Lobster Festival and calls for a consideration of the meaningfulness of the symbol, the life of and behind the comestible. Wallace argues that while “Everyone knows what a lobster is,” they have not yet *considered* the lobster. To *consider* is to employ critique and *reconsider* the value of the sign by way of its otherwise-unintelligible (and necessarily complicated) cultural histories—there is a life to the thing we consume. Wallace marvels at the lobster’s upward trajectory from a low class food unsuitable even for prisoners of the colonial penal system (“Giant sea-insects,” he calls them. “Garbagemen of the sea, eater of dead stuff”), to its status today as an expensive delicacy and a capital commodity. The crux of his consideration is the morality of boiling lobsters alive. His version of “consider” as *critique* asks, what would it mean for the Maine festival-goers to reckon with two ideas: one, that a lobster suffers, and two, that it would prefer not to? Is the lobster, as comestible object and symbol, so entrenched within a New England culture that it is always already eaten without consideration? If the lobster suffers in an unconsidered manner, is the cultural festival nothing more than a “Roman circus or medieval torture-fest”? Wallace remains unsure. One answer, or at least a response, emerges in the space between aesthetics and morality, between the gustatory and the ethical, between the commodities of culture and the politics and political histories of
digestion. Are awareness and empathy enough? In asking readers to consider the lobster, Wallace is calling on them to consider themselves as well—as eaters and as consumers of an aesthetic experience. Whether it’s oysters or lobsters, or something else entirely, what is the real and symbolic significance of food in relation to how we construct our sense of self, our histories, our cultures, our communities? What are we failing to consider when we satisfy a desire within an external, consumable world, when we choose to stomach suffering to stuff ourselves with these things, these lives, these values we name as edible?

I point to Fisher and Wallace to situate myself to the ongoing study of how food operates in critical relations to culture, history, and lived experience—what we might call foodways. To consider foodways is to consider the gustatory bodily effects of food and narrative with stories of empire and resistance—what I’m calling the gastroaesthetic. Reading food means swallowing and digesting; narratives of food appeal to different sensory modes that shapes arguments and values. An argument about enslavement operates differently at the level of the mind, the stomach, and the social when the food is on the table (or when the table doesn’t exist at all). Salt might season one’s turkey dinner at Thanksgiving, or it might corrode an enslaved woman’s skin until it splits and festers. I’m not just talking about a foodways in relation to salt as seasoning taste, but the values, knowledges, and practices that operate as sustenance to forms of self, community, and culture. How do audiences stomach these histories or experiences and how does food operate as a narratological and rhetorical device?

At the intersections of text, culture, and food, I reconsider stories of labor, taste, and domesticity in the nineteenth century. I propose the gastroaesthetic as a response to the injunctions that have come before, in response to the growing interdisciplinary field of food studies, and in response to scholarship of the early Atlantic, to consider how food practices shape
cultural values and aesthetic judgments throughout the nineteenth century into the present. When I speak of food practices, I mean not only consumers or producers but also those who consider the act of stomaching, or the experiencing/witnessing of suffering, the belly aches, and the body-politic. In the history of cultural criticism and scholarship, food operates as a means through which to understand the formation of cultural and national imaginaries. We can see this through both the commodities consumed and the rituals they engender. Sugarcane, for instance, became part of an Atlantic world appetite and culture in Europe, while its production depended on the back-breaking labor of enslaved individuals in the Caribbean. Salt was similarly produced by slave labor, some of it no doubt ending up on tables of early Thanksgiving feasts that gave thanks for military victories and U.S. nationhood. Food practices—not only consuming in the colonies and in the metropole, but how and by whom food and raw materials are produced—realigned aesthetic values (changing cultural appetites and commodity relations), built social relations and communities, and became part of national and trans-national identity formations. Histories of food culture and culinary practice have largely been framed in terms of consumers and comestibles; my project shifts such an account of food practices by tracing the production of raw foodstuffs by enslaved individuals and considering food not only as a form of sustenance, but as a shaper of cultural and aesthetic communities. In the nineteenth century in particular, this framework can better help us understand histories of colonialism, empire, erasure, and Atlantic production. This project will, at turns, consider the kitchen, consider the cook, and consider the cake in their textual moments across the nineteenth century. Likewise, I will consider salt, cookbooks, and Thanksgiving, all to investigate not only the cultural histories of food practices, but also the individuals, communities, and erasures that begin to emerge in their consideration.

Now, let’s consider the pineapple.
While I primarily focus on the long nineteenth century, I am influenced by earlier New World encounters of colonialism and empire. A key text for me is Richard Ligon’s 1657 *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados*, which he wrote following a three-year stay on the island as a plantation manager. This volume, published in London, includes descriptions and illustrations of the island’s agriculture, topography, and architecture, including sketches of plant life and sugarcane machinery. In his narrative, Ligon narrates his encounter with the pineapple for his English audience. This description so captivated his readers that another writer, John Evelyn, compared his own first taste of the fruit in a diary entry in 1668 to the “ravishing varieties of deliciousness described in Captain Ligon’s history.” Ligon’s attempt to catalogue and categorize the pineapple (among other fruits) is a colonial project wherein his narrative is part of an effort to order the New World. He treats the pineapple as an aesthetic object both delicious and strange: the description is presented to readers as a kind of finale to his broader cataloguing of local fruits. Calling it “Pine,” he writes that its unique taste is an amalgamation of all other tastes that have been perfectly unified and combined in one beautiful fruit:

Now to close up all that can be said of fruits, I must name the Pine, for in that single name, all that is excellent in a superlative degree, for beauty and taste, is totally and summarily included...when it comes to be eaten, nothing of rare taste can be thought on that is not there, nor is it imaginable, that so full a Harmony of tastes can be raised, out of so many parts, and all distinguishable (113).

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1 My thanks to William Bond for his research on the publication and reception history of Ligon’s text, and for pointing me to the passage about the pineapple. Ligon’s text, including Bond’s editorial headnote, can be found at [http://ecdaproject.org/commons/a-true-and-exact-history-of-the-island-of-barbados-1657/](http://ecdaproject.org/commons/a-true-and-exact-history-of-the-island-of-barbados-1657/) (doi March 24 2016)

2 Pineapples were so prized in England that, in the eighteenth-century, they could be rented for a party centerpiece for the equivalent of $8000/day. For more on the cultural and economic history of pineapples, see *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* by Gary Y. Okihiro.
Ligon follows with instructions for planting, harvesting, and preparing the fruit for eating, an act of translation for British readers who could only imagine the strangeness of this fruit and wonder at the perfect commingling of taste and beauty that it engenders.

There’s another narrative of the pineapple that Ligon does not enable his audience to consider in direct relation to the aesthetic encounter with the pineapple. He negates the narrative of enslaved labor in the production of consumables to enable the act of stomaching despite the horrors of human bondage: a narrative of enslaved individuals laboring on the plantation he managed, who likely would have been involved with the growing and harvesting of the pineapple. This counter-narrative of labor, slavery, and colonialism has been replaced with the narrative of taste and beauty that is recorded in his treatise. This is a narrative of an aesthetic experience that involves a process of erasure through colonialism, the negation of human exploitation, and enforced labor. In his manual, Ligon tries to re-discover and domesticate the pineapple and other native fruits and plants. In trying to make them intelligible and familiar, he flattens the existing world to which they belonged.

Today, the pineapple remains as a symbol that denotes both home and the tropics, forging an ostensible harmony between the domestic and the exotic. In the nineteenth century, when captains transporting goods along the North American Atlantic coast had figured out how to ship pineapples without them rotting, it was a boon to bring them back to New England from plantations. Captains would place the fruit on the thresholds of their houses to indicate a safe voyage home. Today, walking through the streets of New England port towns like Newport, Rhode Island or Nantucket, one cannot avoid a proliferation of pineapple souvenirs: pineapple fine art prints, pineapple jewelry, pineapple coasters, pineapple salt and pepper shakers. If we

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draw a line from Ligon’s pineapple to the contemporary pineapple printed on a Martha’s Vineyard tote bag, we can begin to see how one story of the fruit has been privileged, while the story of colonial ideology, imperialism, and forced labor has been erased.

A narrative of food, in this case the pineapple, reveals less an essential quality or nature of that food than it does the ideology at work in narrating its history, taste, and cultural value. Without the gastroaesthetic, the pineapple tells the story of neutral discovery, productive colonial enterprise, and tasteful forms of empires of consumption in the New World. To consider the pineapple is to reframe and acknowledge the rhetorical operation of foodways in an Atlantic political and cultural process of worlding. Ligon removes the fruit from the context of forced labor to tantalize the reader’s senses but also to make the aesthetic experience sensible as stomacheable. Consider the following detailed account that avoids turning the stomach:

The rinde being taken off, we lay the fruit in a dish, and cut it in slices, halfe an inch thick; and as the knife goes in, there issues out of the pores of the fruit, a liquor, cleer as Rock-water, neer about six spoonfulls, which is eaten with a spoon; and as you taste it, you finde it in a high degree delicious, but so milde, as you can distinguish no taste all; but when you bite a piece of the fruit, it is so violently sharp, as you would think it would fetch all the skin off your mouth; but, before your tongue have made a second triall upon your palat, you shall perceive such a sweetnesse to follow, as perfectly to cure that vigorous sharpnesse; and between these two extreams, of sharp and sweet, lies the relish and flaver of all fruits that are excellent; and those tastes will change and flow so fast upon your palat, as your fancy can hardly keep way with them, to distinguish the one from the other… (117)
This marrying of pleasure with excess (sweet but biting, or to recall the oyster, “dreadful but exciting”) is a recurring trope in foodways discourse. Ligon’s invocation of the senses—the visual of the thick, juicy slices lying in a dish, the violence of the first, acidic bite, the sweetness that follows—involves in the reader a very real, gustatory response. Unlike other textual descriptions of agriculture, plants, flora, or fauna, describing food within a text triggers bodily responses in the reader who might find him or herself involuntarily salivating, or experiencing a gnawing rumbling of the belly. In presenting the colonial narrative of the pineapple in terms of discovery, exoticism, and through invoking the senses and stomachs of his readers, Ligon allows his readers to quite literally stomach the experience of colonialism by keeping separate the moral question of slavery from the act of consuming the tropics. Here, I mean “stomach” as a verb: to endure, to bear, or to tolerate. Ligon consumes the pineapple and writes a history of the pineapple for the New World, but as a colonizer, he doesn’t consider the pineapple in terms of labor or production.

Through readings of novels, narratives, images, and cookbooks, this project seeks to consider food in terms of such stories of erasure. Over the past two decades, scholars of nineteenth-century American literature have begun to push on national frameworks to consider the U.S. as part of a broader Atlantic geography and history, one that links the Americas to Africa, England, and the Caribbean, and examines cultural, economic, and political exchange. Even more recently, literary scholarship has looked to the interdisciplinary field of food studies to understand how acts of eating construct a shared sense of national and cultural belonging. My research starts at the intersections of these conversations to argue that the Atlantic produces an aesthetic, or a culture of taste, at the site of food practices broadly, and in sites of food production in particular. The fields of anthropology, sociology, and history have long provided
frameworks for considering how food commodities and crops transformed world economies and how foods united groups of people. Within anthropology and history, scholars such as Sidney Mintz, Matthew Parker, and Cynthia M. Kennedy have explored how slaves produced sugar and salt, crops that effectively shaped the economy and culture of the U.S. and Caribbean. Within literary studies, scholars such as Kyla Wazana Tompkins, Rafia Zafar, Lauren Klein, and Meredith M. Gadsby have focused on a more expansive critique of the politics, practices, and social beliefs that surround the act of eating, particularly for African Americans. Scholars like Elizabeth Maddock Dillon have argued that social and cultural reproduction in colonial spaces deeply informed North American and European imperial aesthetics. However, none of these works have addressed the central question of how Atlantic food practices—particularly the contributions of enslaved individuals—formed a culture of taste in the nineteenth century. The decisions made about what is edible, what to eat, what to serve, who cooks and prepares meals, who produces key ingredients, and with whom meals are shared determines the shape of cultural transactions between different groups of people, establishing systems of community and social affiliation while also drawing borders between groups of people.

There is a gap between thinking about consumption as an aesthetic experience, and thinking about production. In part to address this gap, I propose a reading of texts through the gastroaesthetic in order to understand how an aesthetic—a culture of taste—is formed around, because of, at the site of food practices, which include both consumption (what is cooked, served, eaten, advertised, circulated, accessible, valued) and production (labor, including that of raw materials, and their histories). To read Ligon’s pineapple, for instance, through a gastroaesthetic lens is to consider more deeply the erasures of a colonial narrative at a moment when Ligon asks readers to literally and figuratively “stomach” the realities of colonialism and
plantation slavery. Labor and native populations are supplanted by the beauty and taste he “discovers” in the fruit. This is part of a gastroaesthetic: a sense of taste and design that is informed by food. But the other part of a gastroaesthetic that my dissertation draws on is the untold story of that aesthetic production. The pineapples that came home with the ship captains were very likely harvested by an enslaved labor force. The labor, blood, sweat, and skill of an enslaved population is literally erased from the object they are producing. The result is an aesthetic object and communal feeling about that object that reifies particular aspects of taste while disregarding the actual origins of it. Reading such moments, objects, and texts through the lens of a gastroaesthetic is my contribution to conversations about aesthetic production and literary production in the nineteenth century.

When we think about aesthetics, we think about how one senses and makes sensible the external world. I want to consider how aesthetics pertains to food, not to re-evaluate or redefine an aesthetic philosophy, but to sketch out a methodology by which we might more closely consider the cultural histories, transactions, and communities that the production and consumption of food engenders. Value systems have been assigned to food practices long before Brillat-Savarin uttered “Tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you what you are.” Claude Levi-Strauss reminds us that the rules concerning what one eats raw and what one eats cooked are some of the fundamental taboos of culture, something that is constructed and yet enforced in order to define groups of individuals and their levels of domesticity and civility. In thinking through aesthetics as they relate to the gastronomic, I’m drawing on theories and ideas outlined by Immanuel Kant and David Hume as well as scholars like Simon Gikandi, Jacques Ranciere, Lauren Klein, and Elizabeth Maddock Dillon in order to arrive at a way to read with one’s stomach. That is to say, I draw on theories of aesthetic thought—and depart from them in many
ways—to posit a model of reading by which we ask ourselves: *Can I stomach this? And if so, how or why?* Before applying the term “gastroaesthetic” to the readings that follow, I want to first attend to how I’m conceiving of the term itself: first, to identify what I mean by “gastro,” and then, how I’m conceiving of “aesthetic” (which I’ll further break up into community, taste, and judgment/reason). Finally, I carefully consider the term “text” as it applies to the gastroaesthetic and to my project of literary studies, the “table” upon which the gastro and the aesthetic converge to be read.

**Gastro**

“Gastro” comes from *gastros*, the Greek word for stomach. I’m using “gastro” as my key term here rather than “gastronomic” or “gastronomy,” because I want to attend not only to the study of food and eating, but also to the site of the stomach itself. Kyla Wazana Tompkins introduces the idea of *critical eating studies*, rather than food studies, as a way to think about how eating is a way to perform racial identity in nineteenth-century American literature. Specifically, she locates the mouth as both the site of eating and of language, the orifice through which one might communicate or be silenced. Tompkins’s model of connecting the mouth with access to power has been instrumental to my thinking through how consumption and production are similarly borne out at the site of the body. When I talk about the gastro, I’m invoking the question of whether one can “stomach” what’s happening at the moment of eating. Gastroaesthetics is about an interrogation of cultures of taste in the moments of consumption and production. A gastroaesthetic asks, what about taste or cultural value is consumable—what can we stomach? Can Ligon’s readers stomach the idea of colonialism and plantation slavery? Can Mary Prince’s readers stomach the fact that slavery is taking place in the nineteenth century? What about those laboring in the plantation or serving dinner in a dining room: Can they stomach...
it? I proposed above that we might “read with our stomachs” to show the confluence of taste and labor. When we pair the “gastro” with the aesthetic (which I’ll more fully unpack below), we get into the figurative belly of the aesthetic: the moments when taste and value are made and unmade.

**Aesthetics: Community, Taste, Judgment**

To show how I’m applying aesthetics to my study, I’m breaking the term into three related parts that I see as most important for applying the term to the narratives that follow: community, taste, and judgment.

In many ways, community is what’s at the heart of this project—showing how communities of taste, communities of labor, and communities of text might be uncovered by approaching nineteenth-century Atlantic literature through the lens of food. I use the term “community” to point to formations of individuals in particular geographical, temporal, and textual moments: for instance, the unnamed enslaved individuals with whom Mary Prince labors on the salt pond, or the untold number of mammy figures invoked through the text of a cookbook. I see community as intimately related to the project of aesthetics—how a communal sensing and perceiving of objects and experiences can enact a community. In other words, I’m interested in how the aesthetic enables (or disrupts) communal tastes. For Immanuel Kant, for instance, what binds a community is a “sensus communis,” the ability to communally sense and experience a universal, shared judgment. Kant understands “sensus communis” as “the idea of a communal sense, i.e., a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (a priori) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole…” (Kant 173). But scholars such as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon have posited it as something a bit different, one where “the shared terrain of aesthetic value is one that
creates community (as well as exclusions from it) rather than one that emerges from it” (Dillon *Atlantic Aesthesis* 1). This model of aesthesis emphasizes the activity of the meaning-making rather than the object, and points to moments of New World community formation that are not limited to readers and writers of English (Dillon *Aesthesis* 5). Drawing on work by Jacques Ranciere, one additional component I’d like to add to a discussion of community, foodways, and aesthetics is the idea of dissensus. Ranciere locates political dissensus in “a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice” (2). I use this formulation of political dissensus to locate breakdowns in unproblematic formations of culture. Instead of focusing on broad, common conceptions of culture, I’m interested in micro-formations of communities. In linking a dissensual community of taste with the domestic, I examine the “political stage” of the table, or kitchen, or plantation, when agents of production articulate their own sense and sensibility about the common.

My project locates such communities of tastes forming around disagreement and debates, such as debates about enslaved labor and the paradox of a free nation being built upon the backs of enslaved labor. For instance, I locate community and aesthetic judgments at the site of salt pond labor with Mary Prince, particularly within moments of dissensus. Similarly, I read the dissensus of the dining room table and the Thanksgiving table as one from which particular stories of community and erasure emerge. This both complements and departs from the idea that the goal of aesthetic judgment is to produce political subjects united by consent. In my readings, attending to the gastroaesthetic allows us to see communities built upon dissensus and disagreement. In the chapters that follow, I think about community as it relates not only to
dissensus but in terms of commodities in order to move from thinking solely about “cultures of taste” to thinking instead about communities of taste.

The idea of “taste” is critical to understanding the gastroaesthetic. Lauren Klein points to how the notion of “taste” was used prior to the concept of “the aesthetic” in order to articulate ideas about aesthetic experiences and aesthetic judgments: “Before the word aesthetic had entered common parlance, philosophers and cultural critics relied on the metaphor of the sense of taste—the actual, gustatory sense—in order to formulate their ideas about subjective experience and judgment” (404). As sensory reflection, taste points back to the gastro: what is tasted upon the tongue then settles (peaceably or not) in one’s stomach. It can be useful to think of lowercase-t taste as Lisa M. Heldke calls it, “the thing your tongue (and nose) do” while uppercase-T Taste is more aligned with “the thing the art critic has.” My project—and the gastroaesthetic—considers both and indeed, the two usages are not mutually exclusive. We might think of T/taste as the ability to perceive and make meaning of what is sensed, to turn sensory experiences into judgments, reasons, even morality.

In terms of “the thing your tongue (and nose) do,” Brillat-Savarin defines taste as belonging to one of the six senses and the “means of which we approve anything which is edible and palatable” (29). He then breaks the concept of taste into two uses: “It invites us, by means of pleasure, to make good the losses which we suffer through the action of life.” and “It helps us to choose, from the various substances offered us by Nature, those which are suitable as food.” Taste involves the sensory act of determining the palatability of foods. What counts as a comestible depends upon what value has been collectively assigned to that object. David Hume, meanwhile, in “Standards of Taste,” has argued, “in each creature, there is a sound and a defective state; and the former alone can be supposed to afford us a true standard of taste and
sentiment.” This begs the question, who is included in this “sound” state which affords true standards? Enslaved individuals would have been found lacking in abilities to judge standards of taste—suggesting that they are always already less-than, incapacitated. For Hume, to be a good arbiter of taste, one must already have access and agency to both sense and judge: “Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character” (Hume I.XXIII.24). Hume’s usage of taste more closely aligns to “the thing the art critic has,” which we might read to mean reflection or judgment. Within the concept of aesthetics, it’s not enough to merely sense something, but one must also make sense and meaning out of it—reflect and judge an object or experience. Senses alone can’t govern the ability to make meaning, and standards/principles of taste only arise when one can use one’s faculties to arrive at a judgment about that object. The judgment is certainly based on the ability to sense, but the senses alone call for an action, which is what I’m calling judgment/reflection. I’m interested in the interplay between bodily “taste” and judgment/reason “Taste” and in thinking through their chicken-and-egg relationship. Does the ability to reason govern one’s ability to experiences sensations? Or does one’s sensory experience allow for the formation of judgment? I’m particularly influenced by how I might apply Dillon’s idea of an “aesthetics from below” (Dillon Aesthesis 3) to scenes of food production and consumption.

Text

Finally, I offer “text” as a term for understanding how the gastroaesthetic operates. We can look to narrative, language, and symbols to uncover moments of gastroaesthetic discourse. In my third chapter, I explore the cookbook, for instance, as a genre through which the gastroaesthetic reveals a narrative of erasure of laboring bodies and skilled agents. I’m interested
in thinking through rhetorical and structural conditions of a foodways discourse of literature in the nineteenth century. I do so not in an attempt to construct a singular narrative of foodways, but to provide a methodology or a model for thinking about the relationship between food culture, politics, and erasure in this historical moment, and considering how these kinds of narratives emerge throughout literary genres. To this end, my study engages with the domestic novel, the slave narrative, illustrations and images, architectural floor plans, cookbooks and recipes, poetry, women’s journals, political treatises, and speeches. I also consider commodities as texts and the table as text, because in doing so, I can more closely read cultural histories in terms of the agents that have often been erased from their production.

The Gastroaesthetic

By linking the “gastro” with the “aesthetic” I’m calling for negotiating meaning in the space between coherence and incoherence, between consensus and dissensus, between the thing that has happened and the space of the not-yet. The aesthetic is not divorced from lived experience or social issues: it’s embodied, it’s particularized. We can see this emerge at Ligon’s not-yet consideration of the pineapple. We might also see this borne out on the dining room table, a site that bookends my projects in the first and fourth chapters. The gastroaesthetic marks the link between modernity and the table: the idea of sitting around a communal space marks a measure of civility. But that idea is incomplete without considering the role production (specifically enslaved labor production, production in sugar fields, in kitchens, etc.) plays in crystallizing ideas about “the table.”

Consider the pineapple. Consider the gastroaesthetic. Consider that by attending more closely to the agents and spaces of production, we might begin to draw a broader story of the nineteenth-century Atlantic World. Consider this 1836 image of a Thanksgiving table by Samuel
Goodrich, which I’ll more closely read in Chapter Four, as another way to imagine the gastroaesthetic emerging at the site of the table.

Around a table sits a family: father, grandfather, mother, children, siblings (marking a community). Upon the table is a covered dish ready to be eaten (marking the gastro). The family sits in a well-appointed dining room, furnished with a grandfather clock, a hearth, art upon the walls, curtains drawn open to let in the light. They are well-dressed, seated facing one another, considering the table before them, considering one another. We cannot tell their thoughts or judgments, but here, in a private domestic setting, as a family partakes in a dinner, they model a nineteenth-century image of virtue and domesticity. One way to reading this image is to see community and consensus. But if we look at the doorway, the threshold between the kitchen and dining room, we see a person disrupting the moment of consensus. New questions emerge: How can they stomach eating this food? There’s sugar in their tea, there’s salt on their food. Where did those ingredients come from? Who cooked their meal? Who is in the doorway holding a
platter, and why does his or her face not appear? What story is not being told? The gastroaesthetic puts into relation all of these elements, and renders scenes of eating, consumption, and production as strange. That is to say, that the table and modernity are linked is dependent upon narratives and histories of production. Thus, attending to gastroaesthetic is not only seeing value within the object of food or the act of eating. It is seeing other stories emerge; it’s political, it’s dissensual, it’s about trying to stomach the thing that’s often not sensible.

In the chapters that follow, my project traces narratives of production and consumption throughout Atlantic texts. My study begins in the sugar plantations of the West Indies and the kitchens of nineteenth-century domestic literature in order to frame ways in which foodways organize concepts and symbols of the domestic, from sugar (which invokes colonialism and forced labor), to cooks (counter-agents skilled at shaping and disrupting the domestic), to cakes (a symbol of a domestic union). I consider kitchens as sites that collapse the strict divisions between public and private spaces and instead show two different stories of domesticity—one that is centered on consumption, and the other, production. I begin with considering how the dining room table disrupts domestic order. In particular, I draw attention to how kitchens, cooks, and cakes map racialized and domestic labor onto otherwise-familiar tropes of the sentimental domestic tradition, particularly within moments of community and familial formation.

Nineteenth-century literary studies for the past two decades have focused on domestic sentimental literature and the divide between public and private spaces. I start with the kitchen scenes of Harriet Wilson’s Our Nig to show how the labor of the kitchen unmakes otherwise-familiar tropes of the sentimental domestic tradition. I conclude with a discussion of sugarcane plantations and cakes: particularly how the wedding cake marks moments of social affiliation and authorized domestic unions in Theodora Elizabeth Lynch’s Years Ago.
Chapter Two, *The Labor of Taste-making and Tasteless Labor in The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave*, further explores connections between food practices, domesticity, and taste-making within sites of enforced labor and unfreedom. I point to a paradox of how aesthetics operated in the nineteenth-century Atlantic World: even as skilled enslaved laborers produced commodities that would come to define taste, they were excluded from the aesthetic outcomes such an inhumane system enabled. *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself* emphasizes the role of enslaved persons within an Atlantic framework of taste. In this chapter I introduce the term “labor of taste” as a play on Simon Gikandi’s “culture of taste” to show how sensation and judgment are formed in, and reliant upon, a sphere of Atlantic production, such as Prince’s labor in the salt ponds of Turks Island. I propose an alternative understanding about cultures of taste that is centered on Prince’s articulations of community-formation.

My third chapter continues thinking through labor, taste, production, and consumption within food practices. Part of my goal is to take an otherwise-familiar genre—the cookbook—and “make it strange,” or to show how, by reading it as a literary text, characters and narratives appear that make claims about aesthetic judgments and community formation. “Strange Books: Nineteenth-Century Cookbooks and the Textuality of Taste” considers the cookbook as a text that ostensibly marks taste and virtue while relying on the erasure and appropriation of racialized labor and its histories. I focus on a specific post-Reconstruction moment in New Orleans. Focusing on the headnotes and recipes in a popular 1900 *Picayune Creole Cookbook*, I show how the version of white domesticity that emerges in the pages of the cookbook is dependent on the erasure the labor of the black female body.
Food facilitates the creation of particular communities—not just those who eat common foods but those who produce it, who write about it, who cook it, and who celebrate it. In my final chapter, “The Politics of Consumption: The Domestic Imaginary of Thanksgiving Literature,” I return to the idea of the table to examine how communities are formed and sustained via a uniquely American holiday that holds the table as the center—Thanksgiving. The primary claim that I make is that not only communities but communities of taste are enabled by the holiday. These communities of taste can be seen in the production of a national identity but also in the racialized erasure of the black body from considerations of Thanksgiving, especially in the years surrounding the Civil War. I read editorials by Sarah Josepha Hale, the “mother of Thanksgiving,” who petitioned numerous governors and state leaders (including President Lincoln) for Thanksgiving to become an annual holiday in order to unite the nation. I also read Hale’s *Northwood* (1852), a domestic novel about a New England Thanksgiving, as well as Absalom Jones’s sermon for a Thanksgiving to commemorate the end of the transatlantic slave trade (1808). Both authors conceive of Thanksgiving as a political occasion that might respond or react to issues of race and national unity. Using these texts and a series of images from *Harper’s Weekly,* I examine how Thanksgiving’s proponents and celebrants tried to write—and eat—an ideal of the nation into being.
Chapter One: Cakes, Cooks, and Kitchens: Domestic Disruption as Community-Making in American/Atlantic Novels

In the anonymously authored 1808 text *Woman of Colour*, racial difference and sameness is negotiated at the dining room table. Upon traveling from Jamaica to her cousin’s English home, Olivia, the free, titular “woman of colour,” is served a bowl of boiled rice at dinner. Rather than a hospitable gesture, the rice is intended as an insult orchestrated by Olivia’s cousin’s wife, the white mistress of the house. By serving Olivia rice instead of the bread that the rest of the family will eat, Mrs. Merton intends to stigmatize Olivia. Not only does this different food separate Olivia from the British-born relations, but it aligns her with the enslaved individuals of Jamaica. Olivia, however, recognizes the offense and bites back by proclaiming, “I thank you for studying my palate, but I assure you there is no occasion; I eat just as you do, I believe; and though, in Jamaica, our poor slaves (*my brothers and sisters*, smiling) are kept upon rice as their chief food, yet they would be glad to exchange it for a little of your nice wheaten bread here” (77-78). By refusing the rice and reaching for the bread, Olivia challenges the racial and national designations Mrs. Merton has tried to place upon her. Moreover, she upsets both the meal and an ideology of racial superiority when she aligns herself *both* with her enslaved “brothers and sisters” of Jamaica and with the Merton family. Whereas for Mrs. Merton, the table may be a site for consolidating a white, British family, Olivia invokes and makes visible another community—that of enslaved individuals.

The dining room table is a gathering space, enabling the coming-together of social relations and kin. On one level, the dining room table is a site of convergence, community, and consumption. Read this way, the table, in symbol and rhetoric, aligns itself with the well-ordered version of domesticity imagined by Catherine Beecher and other writers of nineteenth-century
domestic treatises. However, as Olivia shows in her denouncement of the rice, even the most carefully arranged dining room table is always in danger of toppling. Dining room scenes in nineteenth-century domestic novels present us with a question: how does this ostensible site of leisure become the site where domestic anxieties and disruptions are played out? In this chapter, I focus on scenes of dining and cooking, but I also consider how the agents and objects (cooks and cakes) that move between kitchen and dining room architect not only a nineteenth-century eating culture, but also cultures and communities of taste.

Domestic ideology situates itself within the house; it both depends upon and governs the order of the house. For instance, Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe frame a model of an American home built upon the tenets of health, economy, and taste in *The American Woman’s Home, or Principles of Domestic Science*, a conduct manual and domestic treatise published in 1869. Dedicated to “the women of America, in whose hands rest the real destinies of the republic,” the guide responds to an increasing interest in learning the art and science of home economics, particularly by middle-class families whose matriarchs were responsible for organizing and overseeing the household. Beecher and Beecher Stowe take seriously the stakes of domesticity as a project by which an American community of well-run, stable households could be established and maintained. Such households, in turn, might produce cohesive family units built upon the stable foundation of good taste. One of the ways they see this occurring is through the ordering of the rooms in the home. To the Beechers and their readers, a “neat and cheerful kitchen” is a necessary first step to a well-ordered life. Their mandates for a well-ordered kitchen suggests that it “should always, if possible, be entirely above-ground and well lighted…The walls should often be cleaned and white-washed, to promote a neat look and pure air…A clock is a very important article in the kitchen, in order to secure regularity at meals…”
These instructions, and the blueprints below, suggest the significance and thought behind the kitchen’s placement in the home. By the nineteenth century, the colonial hearth that burned day and night in the central room of the house would have been replaced by a cooking fire (and eventually, ovens) that were placed in the kitchen proper, delineated from the drawing room with sliding doors meant to shut out heat and smells from the kitchen. The hearth—which also doubled as the fireplace—was the center of activity in a colonial house; this was the space for eating, heating the home, and, because it was a source of light, reading, writing, and conversing. Rather than a space of familial gathering, by the nineteenth century the kitchen became the area of the home where messiness, smells, and disorder were meant to be contained. But, as Kyla Wazana Tompkins shows, even as the physical hearth disappeared from the architecture of a home, its ideology remained. Tompkins writes that “the hearth lingers in the memory of antebellum U.S. writers, suturing food and eating to literary culture” (16) and that “the fireplace remained not only at the literal center of colonial northeastern house but at the symbolic center of domestic life for the strongest of material reasons” (20).

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3 Tompkins details how New England homes were built around the stone chimney (which mirrored British designs), while Chesapeake-area homes tended to have two chimneys on opposite sides of the house. See also Plante, Ellen, M. The American Kitchen, which chronicles cooking advancements and technologies in the American home.
While in the eighteenth century the hearth was the center of the home, by the nineteenth century, the dining room took over as the central, symbolic space for sociability, gathering, and consumption. This was particularly true for middle- to upper-class families, whose use of slave labor or employment of domestic servants meant that those in the space of leisure were able to consume without labor. The mistress could take on a managerial role rather than laboring herself, and the work that she was doing was dictated by women’s journals and conduct manuals. But I also want to trouble the binary of labor/leisure, dining room/kitchen in particular ways. Scholars tend to present the kitchen as a site of violence and labor, considering, for instance, the horrific acts of brutality occurring in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *Our Nig*. Mary Titus, for instance, sees the threshold between dining room and kitchen as “highly symbolic,” writing that it “represents a crucial margin across which food passes; we could name this threshold the locus of the second most intimate possible relation between blacks and whites” (247). Christina Sharpe points to
Frederick Douglass’s kitchen as a space where intimacy is erased and replaced with violence. Scholars such as Gillian Brown have turned to the kitchen as a scene of domestic production within nineteenth-century American fiction, usefully pointing to how scenes of clean and messy kitchens in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* show how the slave trade made its way into the private space of the home. I agree that the kitchen is a recurring site of violence, particularly for enslaved women, but I also want to suggest that the kitchen is a site of skilled knowledge, resistance, and sociality. Furthermore, I want to suggest that the dining room, a site of attempted order, is disrupted by communities of production (such as in *Our Nig* and *Woman of Colour*). I explore these spaces through the gastroaesthetic—that is, by reading through a foodway lens that interrogates cultures of taste in the moments of consumption and production. In my introduction, I detailed how I think about aesthetics as the formation of particular communities of taste, and suggested that this might be done by approaching nineteenth-century Atlantic literature through the lens of food. In the readings that follow, I draw a distinction between communities of consumption in spaces absent of labor and communities of production, which occur in sites of labor.

To define how I’m using aesthetics, I begin with Kant’s figuring of a “sensus communis” in shaping a communal sense of taste, but I also employ Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s response of considering an “aesthesis from below,” meaning the ongoing activity of making an aesthetic that is “grounded in the material sensate conditions of living in shared terrain—rather than aesthetics from above, or the imposition of a set of tastes that colonize subjects by way of bodily sentience and norms of civility” (Dillon *Atlantic Aesthesis* 3). I see a community of consumption as a shared agreement upon notions of taste without consideration of labor or production. That is to say, an aesthetic community framed in terms of consumption is one that elides and erases production. Here, the aesthetized subject is in process of consuming, but divorced from labor.
Those members sitting around the table and eating, unproblematically, create the community. To return to the example I opened with, in *Woman of Colour*, Mrs. Merton and her family create an aesthetic community when they gather around the table and eat bread, absent of Olivia. Although individual judgments and feelings may not be uniform or universal across the table, the values and ideas entering into that space enact a community of consumption. In the space of the nineteenth-century, such communities are divorced from enslaved labor. An aesthetic community framed in terms of production has another value set. Olivia, for instance, calls to the table the intelligibility of enslaved men and women in Jamaica. When she disrupts the table, another community emerges—one producing taste within sites of unfreedom. In my introduction, I walked through how I’m understanding “community”: these communities might look different from an assemblage of named persons presented in a singular geographical or temporal scene. Instead, the kinds of communities I’m thinking about are often unnamed, scattered across brief textual moments, but to recognize them is to attend to communities that have otherwise been erased. In using the gastroaesthetic, I’m trying to see how food helps us understand how to approach communities and contested spaces. This chapter will extend work done on domesticity by attending to readings of the gastroaesthetic within nineteenth-century domestic novels and asking how communities are produced within ordered and disordered domestic space in the nineteenth century, both in the U.S. and in the Caribbean.  

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4 A small set of novels written by travelers like Mary Peabody Mann are set upon the sugar plantation, often featuring an American visitor to the island whose position about abolition is changed once forced to witness the horrors of sugar cane slavery. In Theodora Elizabeth Lynch’s 1865 *Years Ago: A Tale of West Indian Domestic Life*, guests of the household, occupants of the household, and slaves are rewarded with sugar, acknowledging its “strengthening” capacity and overall “nourishment”: “Strange to say, they always seem merry and well at this time of extra exertion, and are allowed to drink as much cane-liquor and syrup as they can, and to suck as many canes as they like; and all this, people say, is very nourishing and strengthening” (35). No mention, however, is given to the other side effect of sugar, the quick carbohydrate energy that slaves would need in order to continue laboring at times of “extra exertion.” Nevertheless, the young female protagonist and her overseer husband turn abolitionist by the novel’s end, vowing to do their part to end slavery. Lynch also wrote a travelogue in 1856, nine years before *Years Ago*. Titled *Wonders of the West Indies*, it gives descriptions of individual islands, focusing on the vegetation, climate, and natural wonders while deploring slavery. In her chapter on St. Domingo she laments: “We know that it...
the long line of important scholarship that has been done on nineteenth-century domesticity. But rather than revising an understanding of the domestic ideology, I’m interested in looking at what’s on the table in moments of domestic-making. In the analyses that follow, I move through the kitchen and dining room scenes of Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* to the kitchens and plantations of Cuba in Mary Peabody Mann’s *Juanita: A Romance of Real Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago*. I conclude with a treatment of the communities that are formed by the production of sugar—in particular, how the wedding cakes of *Juanita* and Theodora Elizabeth Lynch’s *Years Ago: A Tale* has been fanned by sighs, watered by tears, and cultivated here at the sacrifice of liberty and life, mostly to enrich those who never visited the place where it grew—who never even thought of the dark channel of suffering through which their supplies of wealth had to pass ere they ministered to their luxury” (68).

Cyrus Francis Perkins’s *Catherine, or Busha’s Mistress: A Stirring Romance of the Days of Slavery in Jamaica* (written in 1854-55 and published in 1911), is also set on a slave plantation and, like in *Years Ago*, includes scenes where sugar is both toil and reward. In one scene in particular, slaves angry at the murder of their beloved friend Father Williams are promised “an allowance of sugar and rum” in order to cease “acts of the most flagrant insubordination” (97) and avoid an uprising brought on by their grief. Yet such imagery of sugar as a happy reward is divorced from the realities of sugar production, which Ashton Warner’s 1831 narrative *Negro Slavery Described by a Negro: Being the Narrative of Ashton Warner, a Native of St. Vincent’s* details as “so hard that any slave, newly put to it, in the course of a month becomes so weak that often he is totally unfit for labor” (34).

Domesticity has traditionally been understood in either American or European notions of nation-building and genealogical kinship. Building off Nancy Armstrong’s articulation of domesticity as a mode of producing a middle class, where virtue began to matter more than genealogy, domesticity was found within a woman’s character rather than her name. As a term, “domicile” refers to the home or a house but it is also a way to sustain a unit of identity. American domesticity has traditionally been understood as based on character and the creation of new white families. Gillian Brown links the rise of nineteenth century American domesticity to the history of individualism as well as the market whereby the home was figured as a refuge from the instabilities of the economic market. She points to sexual division of individualism as occurring from this. Domesticity, then, becomes a way of cataloguing, ordering one’s life and family unit, and this is largely based on American sentimentalism, whereby women “thus claim and typify an anti-market individualism” (6). In “Manifest Domesticity,” Amy Kaplan re-imagine American domesticity as more fluid than originally assumed. By positioning not just the home but the nation in contrast with the “foreign,” she recontextualizes domesticity as moving “in contradictory circuits both to expand and contract the boundaries of home and nation and to produce shifting conceptions of the foreign” (583). She locates this shift specifically with the rise of Manifest Destiny in the U.S. and its pursuant contact zones and “violent confrontations with Indians, Mexicans, and European empires” (583). Scholars such as Tompkins, Jeanne Boydston, and Gillian Brown have viewed domestic labor in an industrial economy as both “socially devalued” (Tompkins) and “requiring new ways of viewing the relationship of labor to its products and of the worker to his or her work” (Boydston ). Many literary scholars have pushed on the ideals of domesticity espoused by Beecher, Beecher Stowe, and their contemporaries by considering how a domestic ideology was never just about the private space of the home, but invoked anxieties about the nation (Karen Sánchez-Eppler, Amy Kaplan, Ann Stoler, Nancy Armstrong) and race and slavery (Gillian Brown, Carolyn Vellenga Berman, Laura Smith).
of West Indian Domestic Life serve an aesthetic function that produce Atlantic communities born out of sugar production.

**Kitchen Scenes**

Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) has become a useful text for studying the disruption of the domestic, particularly within sites of unfreedom: in Frado’s case, indentured servitude. In aesthetic communities framed by production, the kitchen might be read not only as a scene of violence, but also of skilled labor and social life. That is to say, social life and taste can emerge from sites of labor. My reading of *Our Nig* moves through the violence of the kitchen of Wilson’s text to also show some reversals to the bare-labor narrative of the kitchen and the emergence of Frado’s articulation of her own individuated selfhood.\(^6\) Mark McWilliams (96-97) focuses on how racial power dynamics are played out in the kitchen, specifically in regard to Frado’s work—in the so-called “kitchen scenes.” McWilliams points to how the kitchen is rendered not as a scene of familial comfort but a space of terror, enforced labor and brutality based upon race (97). Abandoned by her mother and stepfather, Frado is left at the house of the Bellmonts, who, at the charge of the cruel Mrs. Bellmont, raise her to be a servant/slave, despite her technically “free” stature. Mrs. Bellmont and her daughter Mary never fail to remind Frado of her exclusion from the familial unit. Besides the brutal beatings Frado is subjected to at the slightest misstep, Frado is made to work all hours of the day. She is given rags to wear, has her long hair cut short, and is made to labor in the sun to further darken her brown skin. Notably, Frado’s exclusion from the family is also signaled by her lack of access to a place at the dining

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\(^6\) I’m using Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s concept of “bare labor” which revises Giorgio Agamben’s idea of “bare life” in order to show “the centrality of black labor to the colony” (Dillon *New World Drama* 132).
table. Instead, she eats scraps in the kitchen, a place where Mrs. Bellmont deliberately keeps “a rawhide, always at hand,” a place that becomes a site of punishment, terror, and torture.

The anxiety of containing sights, smells, and sounds within the kitchen that is hinted at in *American Woman’s Home* is made explicit within *Our Nig*. Frado is figuratively tethered to the kitchen throughout the text. Frado is depicted as a body that labors, and a body that is always in some relation to the kitchen. Her bedroom is described as “an unfinished chamber over the kitchen,” and she eats “standing, by the kitchen table.” That she is textually tied to the space of the kitchen emphasizes how domestic-making is figured in the sentimental tradition, the kitchen and its laborers being neatly contained. But I also read Frado as disrupting this domestic project within her scenes of labor: “In Mrs. Bellmont's presence she was under restraint; but in the kitchen, and among her schoolmates, the pent up fires burst forth” (29). In particular, we see such fires burst forth in a scene when Frado crosses over the threshold of the kitchen into the dining room.

Frado is forced to eats scraps of food standing in the kitchen until James, the eldest son in the family, visits and invites Frado to “sit down at the table and eat.” Although unable to fully intervene in or stop Mrs. Bellmont’s cruel treatment of Frado, James and his brother Jack are allies to Frado. And so James issues the following command: “‘She WILL, mother,’ said he, calmly, but imperatively; ‘I’m determined; she works hard; I’ve watched her. Now, while I stay, she is going to sit down HERE, and eat such food as we eat.’” The act of sitting down and eating at the same table is James’s way of constructing a familial unit and of recognizing Frado’s basic humanity. When Jack arrives, he makes a point to marvel at Frado’s new position over the kitchen threshold as he, “would often tarry in the dining-room, to see Nig in her new place at the family table.”
Although readers are never shown Frado actually eating with the family, presumably her “new place” continues despite Mrs. Bellmont’s disapproval. Mrs. Bellmont is fine with eating the food that has been produced by black hands, but not with sitting across the table from that body, which suggests that her aesthetic experiences are being framed only by consumption, not by production. This begins to change when the dining room is disrupted in a scene where Frado’s “pent up fires burst forth” to undermine Mrs. Bellmont’s categorization of her as unfit to eat as the family does:

As he was thus sitting one day, after the family had finished dinner, Frado seated herself in her mistress’ chair, and was just reaching for a clean dessert plate which was on the table, when her mistress entered.

‘Put that plate down; you shall not have a clean one; eat from mine,’ continued she. Nig hesitated. To eat after James, his wife or Jack, would have been pleasant; but to be commanded to do what was disagreeable by her mistress, BECAUSE it was disagreeable, was trying. Quickly looking about, she took the plate, called Fido to wash it, which he did to the best of his ability; then, wiping her knife and fork on the cloth, she proceeded to eat her dinner.

First, I want to draw on Mary Titus’s articulation of the separation of the dining room from the kitchen in order to understand the significance of Frado’s (tentative) access to the dining area. Titus argues that within nineteenth-century literature, the dining room signified particular nuances of both Northern and Southern living: “Dinner, properly prepared and consumed, indicates culture, achieved and enacted. The dining room, the table and sideboard, the linens, silver, and china, the courses, and the gestures appropriate to consuming each were all given special attention by nineteenth-century Americans” (244). Particularly, elaborate meals served in
their own dedicated room, with careful tablescapes and place settings, “served as the demarcations of social status in a society where newcomers could too easily voice a righteous egalitarianism” (Titus 244). Thinking back to the blueprints of the kitchen and household that Beecher and Beecher Stowe provided, there is a strict delineation between the space of the kitchen and the space of the dining room. Titus remarks that “Delicious, exquisite dishes, beautiful china, elegant table rituals, even recipes equaled culture—but the labor of cooking itself generally did not” (245). I take this assessment further to argue for the presence of an aesthetic of labor within the kitchen. It is from within this formation of taste and culture that Frado is able to articulate her chosen alliance with an animal over Mrs. Bellmont’s base inhumanity.

In considering the fraught relationship between slavery and domesticy, Julia Stern argues that “slavery functions as the uncanny doppelganger of domesticity, the central middle-class ideology of antebellum America” (441). She sees Wilson’s kitchen as the “heart of the house,” an “emotionally laden terrain” turned into a “lively type of Hell” (Stern 449). But I want to suggest that labor is not divorced from domesticity and that, in Frado’s disruption of the domestic space of the dining room, it instead produces taste and community. Domesticity is interrupted when the “labor” of the kitchen and the “culture” of the dining room are collapsed by way of figures (like Frado) moving between them. Furthermore, in choosing to align herself with an animal rather than eat from Mrs. Bellmont’s plate, Frado rhetorically figures Mrs. Bellmont as the non-human at the table, showing how the household is not a moral one as long as it depends upon the cruel mistreatment of Frado. Kyla Wazana Tompkins argues that Our Nig uses domestic tropes to show the fracturing of domesticity in a so-called abolitionist house. She explains that food metaphors operate differently in Our Nig than they do in sentimental novels.
like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in that readers are shown scenes of brutality and violence. The kitchen is figured as a violent space in order to reverse the trope of the sentimental home and hearth. I want to point out though, that the setting of the dining room is significant here. Frado, not being allowed access to a seat at the table or her own dinner plate, disrupts the idea of domesticity Mrs. Bellmont imagines.

**Cooks, Resistance, and Aestheticized Labor**

I’m interested in who the agents are behind the making of the domestic: the matriarch or the slave? Who creates order and disorder in the house? The following two sections focus on the act of making, forced labor, and cakes. My readings show that the ones making disorder are the Mrs. Mertons and the Mrs. Bellmonts, the ones sitting around the table. If kitchens are the site of labor, then the cooks are its agents and its makers. Of kitchens and cooks, Tompkins writes, “The kitchen is not only where the cook performs her designated labor; it is the space from which the cook, that servant-figure so broadly stereotyped over the past two centuries, threatens to speak” (17). This section will consider how cooks operate as agents of domestic disruption and community formation in Mary Peabody Mann’s domestic novel *Juanita: A Romance of Real Life in Cuba Fifty Years Ago*, published in Boston in 1887. I focus on Mann’s text in particular because the sentimental tradition has often focused on a narrow range of North American texts rather than sentimental texts that are set in the Caribbean. The Caribbean, however, is central when we think of the history of production within the nineteenth century.

Mann, born in Massachusetts in 1806, was the wife of education reformer Horace Mann, and lived in Salem, Massachusetts and Maine, where she taught and wrote books, including a cookbook called *Christianity in the Kitchen*, a children’s book, and the novel, *Juanita*, which was published posthumously. Mann accompanied her sister Sophia (wife of Nathaniel
Hawthorne) to Cuba from December 1833 to April 1835 and later wrote *Juanita* based on her time there. *Juanita*, at once a romance, a history, and an abolitionist work that draws on sentimental and Gothic discourses, tells the story of Helen Wentworth’s extended stay in Cuba to visit her wealthy childhood friend Isabella Rodriguez, a Marchioness who lives with her husband the Marquis on a sugar plantation. Arriving from New England with “the northern feeling upon the subject of slavery,” (8) Helen is distraught to discover that not only does her friend’s husband own a sugar plantation running on slave labor, but that the slaves are routinely abused and harshly punished. Set in the 1830s, the novel begins in Africa, where a young prince is about to be married. The ceremony is interrupted by kidnappers who brutally take the survivors to Cuba, including the young couple who are then separated and sold to different plantations. The narrative follows Helen for the rest of the story. She meets Camilla, a slave and cook, as well as the beautiful Juanita, the titular character of the book. Out of the many characters in Mann’s novel who move in and out of the space of the Great House, none is so intriguing as Camilla, the cook/trickster figure of the novel. Camilla is described as loving the Marquis and the Marchioness “very much” but spending “half her time…making their lives uncomfortable, by the exercise of just so much power as her privileged age and her useful office gave her” (92). At one moment, the Marquis scolds Camilla for making too much noise and using too much water to wash the floor. Upon receiving the chastisement, Camilla appears dumb, crestfallen, and animalistic: “Camilla made no reply, but stood motionless, her long, orang-outang [sic] arms hanging limp at her sides, and her eyelids cast down, until he was fairly out of sight, when disappeared into the pantry” (85). But the pantry provides Camilla an infusion of power: the next day she boycotts her chores, leaving the salon and galleries “wholly unwashed,” leading to a

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7 This is a cruel appellation given to Camilla by one of the young boys of the house: “Don Pepe, the youngest of the brothers, enjoyed nothing more than playing off the old orang-outang, as he always called Camilla” (57)
great “annoyance of ants, spiders, and dust all day” (85). Camilla’s power within the household positions her as both necessary to the family and a threat to both the private space of the plantation home and to colonial order, a threat to the distinctly fixed borders between Creole mistress and slave. She spends most of her day in the plantation house, but routinely visits the field slaves, notably the “chicken-house,” (86) a makeshift nursery for the plantation children. Here, Camilla cares for and regularly requests the assistance of an injured little girl known as Muerta-Viva (Dead-Alive). Thus, while Camilla is charged with creating a sense of domestic order within the household, she simultaneously disrupts that order in a way that makes visible an aesthetic experience not only within the kitchen, but in the plantation as well.

Camilla occupies a unique position within the plantation household: not the head cook, she is nonetheless referred to as the “queen of pastry cooks” (79) and part of the “aristocracy of the household department” (98). To further assert her position as a house slave, she refers to the field hands (whom she considers subordinates) as the “Canailla” (98). Although it is left unexplained in the text, this nickname has three possible implications. First, caña is the Spanish for sugar cane. By naming the field slaves after their association with the plant, Camilla fixes their identity as essentially linked with labor. “Cañailla” is also a type of mollusk eaten in Cuba. Its deep purple ink, once used for dyes, could be a reference both to the darker skins of field slaves who labored under the sun and to the idea that domestic privileges were accessible only to those with lighter skins. Lastly, “Canailla” phonetically sounds like “Camilla.” In her attempt to mark the field slaves as a distinct, subordinate group, she rhetorically removes the border that separates

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8 At the novel’s end, Camilla dies of old age and is succeeded by Muerta-Viva, “having learned the arts of housekeeping by her frequent assistance of Camilla” and is even paid for her “nice pastry work and the candying of fruits, in which she excelled” (220), suggesting a continuation of Camilla’s labor and an interminable legacy of slavery.
them, implying both that such borders are not permanent and that she is capable of crossing from one side to another.

Tompkins argues that the cook is of central importance to our understanding of the discourses that arise from antebellum writings about the home and hearth, particularly because of the ambivalent power the cook holds, a power that “threatens to infuse the food she produces—that her employers will eat—with the stifled political affect that the walls of the kitchen are supposed to contain” (17). Quite literally, cooks hold the power to infuse the food with anything they like: *Our Nig’s* Frado at one point contemplates poisoning her mistress. The narrator of *Juanita* notes how “there is no such thing as privacy on a plantation; the negroes are rapid means of communication” (57) and the kitchen is figured as the particular locus of gossip exchange; it is also a space where Camilla, the queen of pastry-cooks, has near-constant access, and complete control over. Isabella describes Camilla’s kitchen pantry as a place where culinary miracles are performed: “In that little pantry from which you see her emerge, she performs miracles of that sort. It is a small place, but everything in it is kept in neat order, and out of it come the rarest viands, cakes, custards, tarts, sweetmeats, candied fruits, and all the devices of French and Spanish cooking” (79). Camilla’s work is figured not as labor, but as a miracle. Read together, the field, kitchen/pantry, and plantation house can be understood as what Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg term, a “built landscape,” (2) a socially constructed place rather than a space

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9 The kitchen is also figured as the communication hub in Cyrus Francis Perkins’s *Busha’s Mistress*, where it’s described as “decidedly, the very best place on an estate for hearing the news of the day” (61).

10 In sentimental rhetoric that extends to the present day, labor is replaced with love. We also see this occur in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, when Aunt Chloe is described: “A cook she certainly was, in the very bone and centre of her soul. Not a chicken or turkey or duck in the barn-yard but looked grave when they saw her approaching, and seemed evidently to be reflecting on their latter-end; and certain it was that she was always meditating on trussing, stuffing and roasting, to a degree that was calculated to inspire terror in any reflecting fowl living. Her corn-cake, in all its varieties of hoe-cake, dodgers, muffins, and other species too numerous to mention, was a sublime mystery to all less practiced compounders; and she would shake her fat sides with honest pride and merriment, as she would narrate the fruitless efforts that one and another of her compeers had made to attain to her elevation” (Chapter IV).
of physical dimension. Work on room-by-room inventories of Caribbean plantations shows how kitchens were purposefully structured at the periphery of the household. Edward A. Chappel’s study of slave quarters in Bermuda shows a typical blueprint for the household structure: “As in the Chesapeake, Carolina, and British Caribbean, detached kitchens and quarters were an attractive alternative for the wealthiest slave owners. They provided more effective racial and functional segregation, removing sounds, smells, and heat from under the same roof” (74). Tom and Camilla’s “cooking cabin” is likewise described as “about twenty rods from the mansion” (63). In the socially constructed place of the kitchen, physically separate from the domestic order of the plantation house, Camilla exercises control.

Camilla, although frequently in the kitchen, is not the head cook. That position belongs to Tom, “the kindest, lovingest, and most faithful of servants, barring his [drinking] infirmity” (61). Whereas Tom dutifully performs the work that is expected of him, Camilla is known for her near-constant “schemes” (61). Tom follows orders, but Camilla revels in disorder: “She was never so happy as when others were unhappy; the greater confusion, the higher her spirits rose” (61). Camilla successfully navigates the physical borders within a plantation household, but she also works to disrupt the domestic order of the house. Amy Kaplan suggests that the “the private feminized space of the home both infused and bolstered the public male arena of the market” (581); by disrupting the order of the plantation home, Camilla also disrupts the colonial order that perpetuates slavery.¹¹

Part of Camilla’s power lies in her ability to make herself indispensable to the running of the household while being a broker between the plantation and the house. Frequently caught eavesdropping and snooping on her mistress, she is described as “an old negress, with

¹¹ Scholars who suggest a paradigm for understanding the influence of a “women’s sphere” on the public arena include Nina Baym, Barbara Welter, Nancy Cott, Gillian Brown, Mary Kelley, and Shirley Samuels.
preternaturally active motions” (42); upon meeting her, Helen describes her as “a privileged character” (43). Particular narrative attention is paid to her unique way of speaking and listening. As Isabella informs Helen, “‘Camilla pretends not to understand English, but we are sure she does’” (43). Camilla’s speech is represented as a series of repetitions, exclamation, and incomplete sentences punctuated by hyphens and breaks, such as when she “accidentally” reveals to her mistress that she saw Helen roaming the slave quarters at night:

A, yes! pupil of my eyes! much dust, much dust!—poor Carlo!—poor Jacobo!—the Marquis, the Marquis walks—the Marquis walk too fast—the Marquis walks in the night—the Marquis does not sleep—the Marquis should sleep—my lady slept a little—the young lady had better not walk—the dogs—the dogs—the young lady must not walk alone—good lady—good lady—the dogs, my lady, the dogs! (42-43).

Here we see Camilla routinely engaging in what Tompkins calls “domestic insurrection.” Camilla “can” speak English but pretends not to; her rhetoric is a source of annoyance (the rambling and the repetition) but also a source of information (the canny, “accidental” revealing of what she is not supposed to know). Tompkins reads the “hot-tempered and insolent cook” as being a trope of domestic literature, even written about by Sarah Josepha Hale, who warns, “If she is cross, intemperate, and wasteful, the mischief and discomfort she causes are very great” (qtd. in Tompkins 45). Camilla, like Frado, is written as a threat to the domestic order, but I want to instead suggest that they can be read as articulating an aesthetic sense and sensibility that emerges at the very site of their labor and unfreedom. Camilla uses her mobility, her orality, and her power as head slave and pastry queen to, like Frado, “bite back” and show an alternative domestic ideology, one where labor, not miracles, is what gets the pastries to the table. She
claims this domestic space by exercising rhetorical power and inhabiting spaces that are off-limits for her white mistresses. When Helen asks Isabella why they keep Camilla in the household, Isabella admits to Camilla’s power over the house:

Because she knows how to do everything, and I cannot keep house without her.

That she knows this, is my misfortune. She has a true genius for organization, and is accomplished in every household art. She has her corps of sweepers, house-washers, dish-washers, laundry-women, errand-boys...She can always judge of the quantity of food to be provided for any occasion, and has her reserved forces for an emergency—saves all her nice scraps for the hospital, and never is so completely in her element as when there is too much to do. (79)

Beyond knowing how to run the household and food supply, Camilla exercises power over the household through her proximity to the Rodriguez’s meals. Isabella employs rhetoric popular with the white plantocracy by assuring Helen that she is a slave to her slave: “...if she is displeased with me, she knows she can annoy me by having a very meager dinner, or by spoiling whatever she touches. I am her slave, I assure you. If I go to make any inquiries,—about the dessert, for instance,—I shall only make the matter worse” (59). Beyond making decisions about dessert, Camilla’s proximity to the family’s food is a constant source of both comfort and threat for Isabella. The pastry-queen enacts a sense of resistance in her skilled labor that continuously upsets and disrupts her mistress’s domestic order.

**Sweetness and Health**

My final reading of sites of production is located in the item that’s being made: the cake. What happens when we consider the aesthetic object of the wedding cake as being framed by a story of production? I suggest that doing so allows us to more closely attend to the making and
unmaking of Atlantic World social relations. I read the cake as a way of organizing particular kinds of domestic unions, thereby forming particular kinds of community. I read this first in *Juanita: A Romance in Real Life in Cuba* (1887), then in Theodora Elizabeth Lynch’s 1865 novel *Years Ago: A Tale of West Indian Domestic Life*. *Juanita* opens not on Cuban soil but in Africa, where kidnappers interrupt a wedding ceremony to capture and sell a young couple and their family and friends. The violence that accompanies the attack is interposed with a scene of African pastoral and tranquility. Before shots are fired, particular attention is assigned to the African wedding cake, made not of the sugar and flour to which nineteenth-century readers would be accustomed, but of butterfly wings and honey:

> The older members of the party were resting in the shade; the younger girls and lads were chasing the innumerable butterflies of all hues and sizes, and pulling off their brilliant wings by way of preparing the more solid parts of these “flying jewels” for what was to be the wedding cake,—a favorite food of the Africans, which was to be made with their bodies and with honey from the wild bees’ nests, and cooked over embers that were burning on a little reach of pebbly beach by the river. (4)

This cake is never consumed: the marauders invade the celebration before the marriage ceremony is complete. Once in Cuba, the couple is separated and enslaved, stripped of their rights to marry. The marriage and consummation between the young chief and his would-be bride is held in suspended animation throughout the text. Instead, the novel focuses on the creole marriages of the plantocracy, particularly Ludovico and Caroline’s partnership, which, although ill-advised, is entirely appropriate within Cuban society. After Caroline’s death, Ludovico plans to marry Juanita, but their marriage, like the African wedding at the onset of the novel, is
disrupted by violence and murder. But the novel concludes with the same image of the African wedding cake, translated into the creole Cuban tradition (sugar instead of honey, tropical fruits instead of butterflies). Part of Ludovico’s plans to “ameliorate, if not abolish” slavery include allowing his remaining slaves to marry: “The wedding-cake made of tropical fruits, and not of butterflies, gave a sanction and dignity to the daily life which had hitherto been wanting” (220).

In emphasizing the wedding cake as the symbol not only of marriage but also of a “dignified” and socially appropriate life, the narrative sanctions the wedding cake, with its long history of sugar slavery, as a means by which marriage might be authorized. It also establishes colonial marriage as one of the only means (besides abolition) by which slaves might access a “dignified”—that is to say, colonial Creole—life. That these two scenes of wedding cakes bookend the novel shows the anxiety about appropriate social reproduction, but it also shows a transformation: as sugar becomes wedding cake, it effaces the pain involved in its production. The wedding cake is the aesthetic object that emerges when the memory of the production of sugar has erased. Part of thinking through aesthetic communities framed by food production involves putting these stories and histories back onto the table. The wedding cake is very much a story about sugar and sugarcane slavery in the Caribbean.

Wedding cakes can be seen as one of the many ways in which sugar was consumed: for mid-nineteenth-century health reformers, sugar was a threat to public health and for earlier abolitionists, it was a threat to moral health. But we might also consider wedding cakes as edible markers that celebrate appropriate partnerships that ensure the futurity of empire. Wedding cakes become a symbol of what Gayle Rubin calls a sex/gender system, whereby marriage is a way to consolidate and build empires that relies on the “exchange of women” in order to create new kinship systems. I use Rubin’s framework for considering the bodies performing the labor that
enables such systems. Thus if wedding cakes are confections universally known to symbolize appropriate and legally sanctioned kinship systems (and empire), how are we to account for those bodies harvesting the sugar and building the cakes? Mann’s novel frequently and persistently uses the wedding cake as a symbol for the futurity of empire and the ways in which slavery might disrupt it. This connection between wedding cakes, sugar plantation slavery, and consumption also occurs in an 1865 novel by Theodora Elizabeth Lynch. In a scene from the domestic novel *Years Ago: A Tale of West Indian Domestic Life*, particular weight is assigned to the presence—or lack thereof—of a cake. Lynch’s novel is set in Kingston, Jamaica against the backdrop of the French Revolution and on the eve of the Haitian Revolution. Written in the form of a diary, what the narrator, Dorothy, or “Doss” calls a “half novel, half history—a kind of attempt at writing a book” (107), Doss chronicles the life of a wealthy plantation-owning family, including her devotion to her father, the romantic prospects of her sisters Phillipa and Lucille, and the development of her own romantic feelings for Hugh, a neighboring plantation owner and her eventual husband.

Although she purports her diary to be about day-to-day domestic matters, Doss consistently captures her family’s thoughts on political matters happening abroad as well as ideas on religion and slavery. Upon discovering that her sister has secretly married a “Kingston tradesman” deemed “unequally yoked” to the creole family’s social status, Doss, the narrator of the novel, records her family’s shock and anger. She describes how it was “dreadful to see my father’s anger…‘You are married to that fellow!’ he said, ‘and I have been cherishing a serpent as my child’” (174). For her mother, Doss acknowledges that “there was a mortified and distressed tone in her voice as she greeted her son-in-law, which made me remember in an instant all the grand hopes she had entertained for Phil, all her wild dreams of grandeur for the
prettiest and most attractive of her daughters, and I felt much for her” (182). The family’s distress points to the importance of a sanctioned union that might preserve familial formation, particularly within the colonies; this moment reflects an attempt of domestic making (Phil earlier rejects a more “appropriate” marriage offer) and unmaking (Phil’s choice to marry beneath her social status out of desire). Soon after Phil’s shocking confession about their clandestine vows, the young man is brought to the house to be reunited with his bride. Wanting to demonstrate their disapproval but unwilling to make a public scene, the family’s lack of one specific food signals both their grudging acceptance of a new son-in-law as well as their inability to sanction the union. The scene is one of a marriage breakfast, a meal that normally marks the authorized nuptials between two marital partners that likewise legitimates the shoring up of familial, communal, cultural, national, and taste traditions: “Then followed a repast, very substantial, yet tastily arranged with flowers. We were not allowed to call it a bridal breakfast; and to divest it entirely of this character, papa would not permit the appearance of any cake whatever” (183). Without the cake, the marriage is still, of course, legal and binding, but for Doss’s family, it is stripped of celebration: the aesthetic function of this marriage is in contest with the legal function: the absence of the cake suggests that the ingredients binding a proper marriage require more than legality. That the absence or presence of a cake might have anything at all to do with the legality of marriage acts might, on the surface, seem surprising. But I suggest that this scene articulates the importance of cake as a symbol for sanctioned marriage. In the consumption of the cake, the aesthetic serves an authoritative function too; the aesthetic moment of eating marks the

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12 For a history of wedding cakes, see Charsley: “By the 1850s, at least in the metropolitan middle class, an alternative focus had been established. An etiquette book from the 1850s reviews some of the customs associated with wedding cakes at this period: “After being cut according to the usages observed on such occasions; but it shows clearly that the cutting of the cake, handing it round and drinking a toast had by then become a proper conclusion to the wedding 'breakfast.' Twenty-five years later the bride was certainly 'cutting up and distributing the cake at the breakfast and amongst her friends” (Simon Charsley 240)
sanctioning as much as a legal document. This scene of domestic unmaking points to a
gastroaesthetics that shaped Atlantic world models of domestic practice. The marriage breakfast
gone awry underscores the constitutive process of authorizing sanctioned unions by way of food practice and cultures of taste. The nonpresence of the cake at the unhappy bride and bridegroom’s table, then, is simultaneously a product of economic systems built upon sugar—which, within the space of the novel and the nineteenth-century Atlantic, is the product of forced labor of black subjects. Moreover the trope of the “cake” marks a moment of convergence that is at once political, economic, and aesthetic—a sign and site of the refinement of sugar as commodity production and the refinement of taste in domestic relation formation.

In Mann’s Juanita and Lynch’s Years Ago, sugar lingers in the background of the texts, representing sites of labor that form a space of domestic identity for women. The consumption of these commodities is very much tied to their production and is visible at the site of the slave woman’s body. Implicating the consumer as linked to the site of labor production was not a new idea for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionists, particularly those who advocated against sugar consumption. Charlotte Sussman explains the rift between sugar-supporters and those who boycotted the product pointing to a discourse that posits the Caribbean as part of the “body” of England. Advocates of the sugar slave trade, then, focused on the so-called “natural” flow of goods between grower and consumer as an “exchange of liquids between two bodies” akin to “a breast-feeding mother and her child” (Sussman 111-112). Proponents of abolition, on the other hand, located sugar not as a necessity or even a luxury, but as a threat both to the slaves who produced it and the Europeans who consumed it. Sussman reads William Fox’s 1791 pamphlet, “An Address to the People of Great Britain, on the utility of refraining from the use of West India Sugar and Rum” as a call to arms to consumers to consider how slavery, and in turn,
sugar, is “a threat to a bodily orifice, as pollution that might enter through the mouth” (Sussman 114). Fox’s treaty implicates sugar consumers as cannibals: “So necessarily connected are our consumption of the commodity, and the misery arising from it…that in every pound of sugar used, (the produce of slaves imported from Africa), we may be considered as consuming two ounces of human flesh” (qtd. in Sussman 115). This analogy casts sugar-eaters as cannibals while linking slave bodies to the very foods they were producing. The aesthetic function of a wedding cake in the context of sugar and sugar production suggests how sugar makes possible marriage both as a commodity and an economy. One cannot talk about cake-baking in the nineteenth century without considering its relationship to the racialized labor of sugar plantations. Recognized marriage requires aesthetic celebration and legitimacy, but also involves slave markets and production occurring outside the marriage breakfast’s window: production upon the sugar plantation owned by Doss’s family. The wedding cake is intended to create/signify different types of community: that of the newly married, legally recognized heterosexual (white) couple. As a commodity, however, it embodies a different community built around the slaves who work the sugar plantations. Sugar makes and unmakes domestic formations as both an ingredient and a commodity with aesthetic, political, and economic meaning; as a plantation owner, Doss and Phil’s father is not only able to provide and support his family, but is poised to make a marriage match for his daughters based upon the economic exchange of wealth. Against the model of Phil’s doomed marriage is the promise of a sanctioned one: that of Doss to the neighboring sugar plantation owner, Hugh. Although Hugh declares partway through the text that he will no longer purchase slaves, his wealth is similarly facilitated by sugar cane production. In Doss’s family, the daughters demonstrate two different models of marriage and this is the approved one, the one between equals of status and taste. But it is
nonetheless a domestic making predicated upon a sugar marriage market. Sugar—one of the main ingredients for a cake—would not have been in short supply, considering the family’s (and the novel’s) investment in sugar production.

This rhetoric extends not only throughout the later nineteenth century (such as in Mann’s text), but also resonates more widely throughout the transatlantic to the mid-nineteenth-century U.S. health reform movement. In particular, Mann’s novelistic representation of cake pushes against her later articulation of it “ominous” and “poison.” In 1857, Mann published *Christianity in the kitchen: A physiological cookbook* (1857), an extensive collection of recipes that advises readers and cooks in simple, healthy meals that espouse Christian values by avoiding “injurious ingredients” [9]. Steeped in Christian sentiment, Mann’s cookbook reified the idea that purity of the mind was necessarily connected to the corporeal body.13 Echoing Sylvester Graham’s nineteenth-century food reform movement, Mann’s recipes and instructions are imbued with a nationalistic discourse, insisting “health is one of the indispensable conditions of the highest morality and beneficence” (1). One of the first foods she finds fault with is wedding cake, which “should never find [its] way to any Christian table” because “it looks ominous to see a bridal party celebrating nuptials by taking poison” (2), i.e., sugar. Mann reads wedding cakes (full of sugar, flour, and other ingredients presumably ill-equipped to redeem the nineteenth-century U.S. citizen) as a threat to public health. In this text, Mann does not overtly align herself with abolitionists who boycotted slave-produced sugar. Instead, she finds fault with sugar’s innate unhealthfulness. Echoing Sylvester Graham and other health reformists of the mid-nineteenth century, Mann asserts that her cookbook “will differ from all other cookery books, in leaving out from the composition of breads, cakes, pies and puddings” (31). Mann’s cookbook, if not her

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13 Such ideas would hardly be a surprise to her readers; by 1833 Sylvester Graham had published on the connections between health, food, and character, urging readers to adopt a sparse vegetarian diet.
references to food within her novel, seem to echo the U.S. health reform movement wherein
domestic manuals, recipes, and newspapers extolled pure foods that might promote “domestic
order, civic health, and moral well-being” (Tompkins 64).\(^{14}\) Mann encourages one to pay
attention to time of eating, quality of eating, and quantity of eating. She advocates quality foods
that are simply cooked. But she also pays particular attention to the how of the eating, noting, for
instance, that natives of tropical location use spices more sparingly and that one should eat foods
that are grown locally. In advocating certain location-bound modes of eating in order to improve
a uniquely American appetite and body, Mann’s cookbook demarcates boundaries between the
national and the foreign that are necessarily complicated when we consider the labor production
of such foods, including the sugar that goes into wedding cakes.

Taken apart, the cake is simply an assemblage of raw ingredients, mixed together, baked,
and cooled. But disassembling it may also reveal the complex system of production (of sugar, by
enslaved individuals) along with high-stakes domestic production across the Atlantic: forming
sanctioned unions. Putting it back together, the cake comes to represent marriage, unions,
consumption, and the formation of a culture of taste (or aesthetic) that is heavily rooted in
enslaved sugar production. The object of the cake makes visible the marriage of production and
consumption that is hidden in plain sight in the novel.

**Conclusion**

I began this chapter with a reading of how aesthetic community formations take place
across the dining room table, an ostensible place of order where family and guests can gather and

\(^{14}\) Tompkins describes the American reform movement as “synchronic with the Second Great Awakening, both
movements reaching their apogee during the 1830s and 1840s, when the twin issues of slavery and imperialism,
converging in the Mexican war and the conflict over the admission of new slave states, polarized political stances in
the new nation” (55-56), the focus on health (in addition to temperance) as “the union of physiological and moral
well-being with civic virtue” (56).
consume. I then read scenes from several nineteenth-century domestic novels to show how alternate communities might be located in sites of food production. These are communities that speak to histories of slavery and enforced labor that have been effaced from stories of consumption. These are also communities that take, as their starting point, the articulation of one’s own sense and sensibility, and using that as a way of “biting back” (Olivia, Frado, Camilla). The table might be said to provide and practice a lived order, but it also can reveal disorder by inviting different subjects, agents, or even commodities into that space. I’d like to bookend this chapter with a gastroaesthetic reading of a canonical scene where production interrupts consumption. In an early scene from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of Seven Gables*. Miss Hepzibah Pyncheon, impoverished resident of the seven-gabled house in Salem, Massachusetts, must open a shop in a spare room in order to make money. Alongside Hepzibah’s goods of Indian meal, apples, brown sugar, beans, and split peas are cookies made in the image of Jim Crow “executing his world-renowned dance, in gingerbread.” This gingerbread cookie is the first item Hepzibah sells when she opens. The customer, a boy described as “the little cannibal of Jim Crow,” immediately bites the head off the cookie and, moments later, returns to demand another: “I want that other Jim Crow.” We could read this scene as an economic transaction. We might also read this scene in terms of a symbolic violence enacted upon the black body, figured as literally and figuratively edible in nineteenth-century literature and imagery. Both of these readings have merit, but if we follow the model I’ve laid out in this chapter and read through the gastroaesthetic, we might ask how taste is being formed at the site of the stomach. This calls forth another narrative, one where this “young cannibal” belies a much longer history of commodity production, enslaved labor, and the making of racialized bodies across the Atlantic World. Far from being an isolated New England town, Salem was a port to
the world and a crucial part of the shipping industry. In consuming the body of the gingerbread man made with sugar that came from an enslaved labor force, the designation of the “young cannibal” carries a much weightier meaning. Therefore, we can see a clearer line from the sugar-producing islands of the Caribbean and the town of Salem, and, with it, a clearer connection between the Jim Crow cookie and the figures surrounding it. The seller, the young consumer, the cookie made in the image of a black body, and the agents producing the sugar that ended up in the cookie reposition excluded agents to the center of Atlantic histories and shift accounts of the aesthetic to show how the formation of a culture of taste relied upon labor. An aesthetic experience of production can be seen in tandem with the existing story of consumption. In calling for continued attention to the stories of production with stories of consumption, we can begin to locate connections between the cookies consumed on Hawthorne’s New England streets with the enslaved men and women who produced sugar in the West Indies.
Chapter Two: The Labor of Taste-making and Tasteless Labor in *The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*

In his 1825 treatise on tastemaking and gastronomy, French gastronome and writer, Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin defines the meaning and functions of the senses, writing, “The last few centuries have also seen important advances in the sphere of taste; the discovery of sugar and its uses, alcohol, ices, vanilla, tea, and coffee have provided our palate with hitherto unknown sensations” (33). Brillat-Savarin, employing the language of empire, argues for not only the “discovery” of an otherwise “unknown” sense but a possible new sensibility: an expanded, sophisticated palate. These “hitherto unknown sensations,” allow the consumer to experience taste in terms of the human sensorium, that melding of body and mind that enables one to fully receive and interpret sensory experiences. In so doing, Brillat-Savarin echoes an understanding of taste that relies just as much upon one’s ability to experience it as it does one’s ability to then make sense of it. The entrance of sugar and its offshoots—rum, molasses, pastry, cakes—into the culinary milieu and cultural aesthetic is framed not merely as a fleeting sensation of the tongue but as an “important advance” within a presumably already-existing “sphere of taste.” But Brillat-Savarin’s assertion points to a paradox of how aesthetics operated in the nineteenth-century Atlantic World: even as skilled enslaved laborers produced objects that would become paragons of taste, they were excluded from the aesthetic outcomes such an inhumane system enabled. Scottish Enlightenment philosophers such as Lord Kames, Archibald Allison, and Adam Smith emphasized that aesthetics must involve both a sensory experience and the ability to reflect upon and assess that experience. The “sphere of taste” Brillat-Savarin proposes rehearses this account as it is composed of both objects that are tasted, judged, and valued (sugar, alcohol, vanilla), and human subjects with the ability to participate in the act of tasting and judging. Who
is the “our” of “our palate”? Who is included in the sphere of sense and sensibility? In other words, who is able to sense and who is not, and for what reasons? Notably absent from this sphere and excluded from participation in these Western notions of aesthetic experience and judgment are African and non-Anglo subjects whose lives and limbs were destroyed in the production of sugar and other commodities that traveled the Atlantic. Seen this way, the sphere narrows.

I begin with this account of aesthetic theories of the Atlantic World in order to frame a discussion about commodity production and labor. My reading of labor in the 1831 slave narrative *The History of Mary Prince*, a narrative of one woman’s life within and beyond the corrosion and preservation of the Turks Island salt ponds, necessitates a discussion about how taste is formed and how the development of white taste was predicated on the consumption of commodities produced by black subject. What role does labor play in the formation of Atlantic World taste, particularly for enslaved individuals? How might we locate aesthetic experiences as occurring within commodity production? In my first chapter I outlined a model for reading the formation of aesthetic communities at the site of production. This chapter extends that line of inquiry but situates it more specifically in relation to commodity production in the Atlantic and asks: how is taste being produced in sites of slave labor? To read labor as a critical part of formations of cultures of taste not only reveals the limited ways aesthetics were applied in this period, but also emphasizes the role of enslaved persons within the Atlantic framework of aesthetics. By “limited,” I mean both the exclusionary practices of aesthetic discourse and empire as well as the ways in which aesthetic theories expose the limitations of its ostensibly transformative outcomes. Scenes of eating always already involve scenes of production, but conceptions of “taste” in the Hume-ian or Bourdieu-ian sense have been built upon the sensory
experience of the eating and the judgments that follow. Friedrich Schiller argues that aesthetic experiences leads the subject toward upright and virtuous judgment. Simon Gikandi explores the connections between the enslaved individual and what he terms “cultures of taste”: the emergence and consolidation of a “the cultured subjects of modernity, whose lives are available to us through the monument and institutions of European civilizations” (ix). I want to follow Gikandi’s important work in locating relationships between the institution of slavery and the culture of taste, and to put forth an alternative understanding about cultures of taste that is centered around how labor produces taste and taste produces labor. By “labor of taste-making,” I mean the production work involved in creating the objects of consumption: in the Brillat-Savarin quotation above, then, we might think about how and by whom the sugar, alcohol, ices, vanilla, tea, and coffee were made. In some ways, this has heretofore been seen as tasteless labor in two ways: first, the skilled laborers producing sugar and other commodities were seen as being always already devoid of a sense of reason, judgment, or beauty as defined by prevailing understandings of aesthetics: labor was supposedly devoid of taste. Second, the act of enslaving humans to produce these commodities is, at its very core, lacking any sense of propriety, judgment, reason, or appropriateness: the act itself is tasteless in part because it violates human community. One critique of the slave trade from the British was that it was antithetical to moral or cultural values, i.e., it was “tasteless” or lacking proper taste. Prince’s narrative is in part a history of salt production, consumption practices, and the presence of black subjugation and labor. In reading the historical relation of labor and taste within Prince’s narrative, I aim to locate where and how residual traces of salt left by Prince and her community are reproduced across nineteenth-century, twentieth-century, and contemporary conceptions of the aesthetic.
The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Narrative, Related by Herself was published in England in 1831. While working in the home of Thomas Pringle of the Anti-Slavery Society, Prince dictated her narrative to abolitionist Susanna Strickland.\textsuperscript{15} The narrative is prefaced by Pringle, who writes that “the idea of writing Mary Prince’s history was first suggested by herself” so that British readers might begin to understand a life of bondage. Pringle positions himself as editor by describing his fact-checking as “carefully examining her on every fact and circumstance detailed” (1) and insisting that his presence in the narrative is minimal: “it was written out fully, with all the narrator’s repetitions and prolixities,” and afterwards, “pruned into its present shape.” Although he explains that he is publishing the narrative on his own accord, and that “the Anti-Slavery Society have no concern whatever with this publication,” he and Strickland nonetheless appeal to an abolitionist rhetoric by highlighting Prince’s suffering. As Elizabeth Bohls reminds us, "The History of Mary Prince is the necessarily impure product of an awkward collaboration, involving unequal power relations and subject to social and political pressures” (167), including an abolitionist edit to her language and sexual history for the sake of a Christian readership. In recounting her life in the West Indies, Prince describes her years of enslavement in which she was separated from her family and moved across thirteen different residences, including ones in Bermuda, Antigua, Turk’s Island, and finally, England. Prince’s text was widely read throughout England, and ran into three printings within the first year of its publication. Prince published her narrative in England, within a climate of vociferous debates about abolition. Emancipation in the British colonies would be declared three years later, in 1834, although freedom would take another four years after that, following an “apprenticeship” period where slaves were meant to be educated. Ifeoma Nwankwo suggests that the British West

\textsuperscript{15} Scholars have discussed how mediation functions in slave narratives in general, and in Mary Prince in particular. For a discussion of Caribbean slave narratives and notions of embeddedness, see Nicole N. Aljoe’s Creole Testimonies: Slave Narratives from the British West Indies (1709-1838).
Indies was already a “physical and ideological battleground” (159) wherein the British Crown tried to control a shifting geography of economic rises and falls due to the American and Haitian Revolutions, looming threats of slave revolt, and a growing abolitionist movement.

Throughout her account, Prince describes the labor she was forced to exert and the cruel punishments she suffered at the hands of her various masters and mistresses. Although she initially describes learning, as a girl, domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning, picking cotton, and washing, Prince was also subject to labor within the salt ponds of Turks Island. Her vivid descriptions of the work involved in salt production, along with the lasting bodily afflictions caused by this work, are one of the most striking and poignant aspects of the narrative.

Of her time in the salt ponds, Prince writes:

I was immediately sent to work in the salt water with the rest of the slaves. This work was perfectly new to me. I was given a half barrel and a shovel, and had to stand up to my knees in the water, from four o’clock in the morning till nine, when we were given some Indian corn boiled in water, which we were obliged to swallow as fast as we could for fear the rain should come on and melt the salt. We were then called again to our tasks, and worked through the heat of the day; the sun flaming upon our heads like fire, and raising salt blisters in those parts which were not completely covered. Our feet and legs, from standing in the salt water for so many hours, soon became full of dreadful boils, which eat down in some cases to the very bone, afflicting the sufferers with great torment. We came home at twelve; ate our corn soup, called blawly, as fast as we could, and went back to our employment till dark at night. We then shovelled up the salt in large heaps,
and went down to the sea, where we washed the pickle from our limbs, and

cleaned the barrows and shovels from the salt. (15)

In her description of bodies ravaged by this work, of limbs full of “boils that eat…down to the

very bone” (15), Prince connects the physicality of slave labor to the materiality of her existence:

her survival is predicated on both her ability to work and her ability to make sense of the

experience, which she does via the narrative that she produces. In *The History of Mary Prince*,

then, we see the rift between the culture of taste and the labor required to produce it. The

enslaved black population creates commodities for the use and enjoyment of white consumers in

the Atlantic.

Lauren Klein, in her examination of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison’s cultures of
taste, points to the paradox of an early American aesthetic that is reliant on enslaved labor force. For a figure like Mary Prince, a Kantian aesthetic education is always already inaccessible. Where then, might we located Mary Prince’s culture of taste? An initial search for an aesthetic within Mary Prince’s might read it apart from or outside her labor, but I want to underscore that the aesthetic moment does not only occur at the moment of consumption, wherein Prince’s labor turns into an ingestible product like salted meat or even table salt that someone else ingests. Instead, the aesthetic moment is occurring within the site of unfreedom itself, and in her articulation of communities formed at the site of commodity production. Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo explores the “roots and routes” of Prince’s narrative by placing Prince as a transnational subject who negotiated her own self-identity and her relationships to home, the Caribbean, and the world (158). Nwankwo argues that Prince “vociferously avows the importance of her Black, female, West Indian voice, and that of her fellow slaves, in [these] debates over the present and future of the West Indies” (161-162), and that she does so by
emphasizing her roots and routes—that is to say, her awareness of and connection to the Atlantic beyond Bermuda, what Nwankwo calls “cosmopolitan consciousness” (162). Nwankwo uses this term to mean “the coexistence of an interest in, knowledge of, and engagement with the world at large with the embrace of a racially based notion of community” (162). I want to contribute to Nwankwo’s account by locating Prince’s aesthetic moment and a culture of taste not within an object, but within the labor, particularly the bodily labor, used to produce that object. The concept of reflection—the merging of experience with reason—was fundamental to eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought, and Prince’s narrative challenges the notion that enslaved people are incapable of such assessment. “I know what slaves feel,” she attests, “I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me. The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery—that they don’t want to be free—that man is either ignorant or a lying person” (34). The strains of aesthetic theory that historically emerged from Scottish and German schools of philosophical thought (Lord Kames, Adam Smith, Kant, Schiller) can be broadly understood as the combination of bodily sensation and the emergent feelings and judgments that one derives from such sensations. The goal of such an aesthetic project was, as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon traces in “Sentimental Aesthetics,” not only a communal sense of humanity, but also self-government. By relying on one’s inner judgment and tastes, an autonomous subject could emerge, one who “enacted their freedom in a moral and lawful manner, thereby creating the ground for a new political community—a community of taste—united by individual consent and judgment rather than by constraint and subordination” (Dillon 498). Dillon’s important work examines the political and social implications of these strands of aesthetic thought, arguing that, for Schiller, an aesthetic education enables a freedom that is congruent with social normativity and lawfulness (Dillon 503). Prince’s narrative evokes both bodily sensations—the “sun flaming
upon our heads like fire,” and limbs full of “dreadful boils,”—as well as perceptions upon the state of slavery. The work calls to mind Francis Hutcheson’s distinction between sensation and perception: “Those ideas which are raised in the mind upon the presence of external objects, and their acting upon our bodies, are called sensations. We find that the mind in such cases is passive, and has not power directly to prevent the perception or ideas, or to vary it at its reception, as long as we continue our bodies in a state fit to be acted upon by the external object” (An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design). Prince’s ability to survive as an enslaved woman directly depends upon her ability to make sense of her experience. Her mind must internalize, reason, and judge and it must do so as her body is being destroyed. She talks about the abuses of the body “till we are quite done up” (34). Her survival depends upon aesthetics. Read this way, her narrative reveals an improper balance in aesthetic theory as it has been understood.

Mary Prince’s narrative points to not only the extension of the aesthetic line from Kant to Schiller to Hume and so on, but to another node in the network of taste-formation, one that situates the origins of commodities as shaping (and being shaped by) the bodies of enslaved laborers. These enslaved laborers contributed to the formation of a deeply embedded and longstanding cultures of taste invested in notions of purity, innocence, virtue, and whiteness. I locate such values as coming out of a nineteenth-century racialized culture of taste that is always already pitched against a culture of enslavement, brutality, and commodity production of enforced labor. That a moment of aesthetic should occur around a comestible like salt is significant. By perceiving and assessing taste, one might elevate the sensation of eating from something rooted in the physicality of the body and all its gluttonous rudeness to something both civilized and civilizing. Gigante explains that “bodily taste may be tied to the fleshy organ of the
tongue, its sensory ‘tentacles’ or ‘papillae,’ but mental taste conceived of as a feeling or sentiment of beauty entailed more than physical sensation” (13). By locating such moments of labor and reflection in Prince, a wider view of Atlantic aesthetic begins to emerge, one that is shaped not by pleasure and sensual feeling, but by its critique of the system itself. However, the act of eating—particularly in the long nineteenth century and particularly within the Atlantic world—cannot be divorced from the act of production.

**Stories of Salt**

As a commodity, a seasoning, and a preservative, salt not only helped build empire but also carried particular symbolic resonance for enslaved Africans. Salt has a long history, particularly in the early Atlantic World. In the early colonial era of the Americas, the salt stirred into soups and used to preserve fish and vegetables would likely have come from the Caribbean, particularly Turks Island. Although salt exists all over the earth, until the twentieth century, salt was a sought-after commodity that represented wealth and was used as currency—even stockpiled in the basements of homes of Caribbean salt merchants (Kurlansky 12).

As a preservative, salt absorbs moisture and prevents the growth of harmful mold and bacteria that are otherwise destroyed by the heat from cooking. We might think of salt as an early technology, a form of cooking in the absence of ovens, stoves, or even fires. Claude Levi-Strauss, in *The Raw and the Cooked*, links the invention of cooking to the development of fundamental taboos about culture and cultural practices: what is edible? What is inedible? And how might we judge between the two? But salt transcends such decrees that cooking cannot be absent from modernity. Early acts of food preservation were not only necessary for survival, but for the formation of economies. In Mark Kurlansky’s comprehensive account of the world history of salt, he argues that salt was, long before sugar, one “one of the first international
commodities of trade; it production was one of the first industries and, inevitably, the first state monopoly” (12). Salt was routinely traded and shipped from parts of Africa; Kurlansky locates the earliest known salt journey in 1000 B.C., and traces salt’s economic importance to the saltworks of fifth century Rome. Stories of salt’s production and trade span China to Africa to North America (Kurlansky 19); there are few places on the globe that have not been influenced, in some way, by the mineral, whether culturally, economically, or politically. As Kurlansky explains, the idea that salt is virtually everywhere across the planet is a relatively recent geological finding, and yet for centuries it has been used for everything from currency to preservative. Kurlansky notes that “the history of the Americas is one of constant warfare over salt. Whoever controlled salt was in power. This was true before Europeans arrived, and it continued to be the reality until after the American Civil War” (203). In the context of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Atlantic World, salt was no less important.

By the time of the Sugar Revolution of the Caribbean in the seventeenth century and eighteenth century, Caribbean islands with salt marshes were sought after by the British, the Swedish, and the Danes (Kurlansky 209). Irish beef (and eventually New England cod) was being salted to provide inexpensive food for enslaved laborers on sugar plantation. The demanding work of cutting, harvesting, hauling, and boiling sugarcane meant that enslaved laborers required a high-protein, high-salt, reliable source of food. For plantation owners, who didn’t want to cede any sugar-producing land to growing food for hundreds of thousands of slaves, the solution was to bring in cured, salted beef and cod (Kurlansky Cod 81, Kennedy 217). Salt production in the Caribbean was mostly centered on the Turks Island, which is the site of Mary Prince’s labor in the salt ponds. So-called “Turks Island salt,” produced from Grand Turk, Salt Cay, and South Caicos would come to dominate the salt market until World War II
(Kennedy 219). Geologically, these islands had the ideal conditions for producing salt. Unlike the more complicated machinery involved in sugar production, salt gathering relied on nature and human labor, but with physical consequences no less dangerous or damaging. To produce salt, laborers would rake up crystals that had been evaporated by the sun along edges of lagoons, then load it into ships. As a commodity, besides being used to salt cod, salt was used medicinally, as a preservative for other meats, and as a seasoning.

Kurlansky explains how, in the Caribbean, “the leading cargo carried to North America—more tonnage than ever sugar, molasses, or rum—was salt. The leading return cargo from North America to the Caribbean was salt cod, used to feed slaves on sugar plantations” (211). Eighteenth-century Bermudian salt (and the salt collected in the group of islands in its southern chain, including Turk, South Caicos, and Salt Cay) was gathered by slaves and a crew of sailors, then shipped and sold in the North American colonies. The triangular route would have looked something like this: New Englanders would import fish from Bilbao, Spain, a trading partner with Boston. New England sailors would take this fish and other Spanish goods to the West Indies and sell them for salt. They would return to Boston with commodities from both the Caribbean and the Mediterranean (salt, cotton, indigo, tobacco). By 1645, the route began to include African slaves, purchased in Cape Verde Islands and sold in Barbados for salt, sugar, wine, and tobacco (Kurlansky Cod 82). Kurlansky points out that New England port towns like Salem were deeply implicated in the engine of slavery:

Regardless of how many ships did or did not carry slaves to and from Salem, or how many New England merchants did or did not buy or sell Africans, the New England merchants of the cod trade were deeply involved in slavery, not only because they supplied the plantation system but also because they facilitated the
trade in Africans. In West Africa, slaves could be purchased with cured cod, and to this day there is still a West African market for salt cod and stockfish. (Kurlansky Cod 82).

In the eighteenth century, New England in particular was heavily invested in the Caribbean because of its salt production, continuing to sell and trade salted cod even as colonists began to develop their own saltworks. Kurlansky points to the moral contradiction Alexis de Tocqueville writes about in his 1835 study, *De la democratie en Amerique*, in which New England society, ostensible proponents of liberty and abolition, gained wealth by shipping salt cod to Caribbean plantations—literally feeding the sugar-plantation engine (Cod 83). Kurlansky notes that “By the first decade of the eighteenth century, more than 300 ships left Boston in a good year for the West Indies” (83). The Turks Island Company, which is likely the site of Prince’s labor, was an important national company in the nineteenth century, with a saltworks also located in San Francisco Bay (Kurlansky Salt 431). Salt was even embedded into the visual imagery of the Turks and Caicos colony, whose crest included Salt Cay saltworks, featuring salt rakers and salt piles.17

Salt’s significance to the Atlantic is also steeped in metaphor. In Afro-Caribbean cultures, it appears in myth and legends as a substance imbued with powers beyond preservation, a way to keep evil spirits at bay (Kurlansky Salt 8). Meredith Gadsby examines the connections between salt and slavery by reading the doubled linguistic term “sucking salt” within Caribbean literature.

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16 By 1860, Kurlansky notes, the U.S. had become a huge producer and consumer of salt, with saltworks in Virginia, Kentucky, Florida, Texas, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania (257). However, the U.S. still relied on imported salt, with salt from the British Caribbean coming to New Orleans: “From 1857 to 1860, 350 tons of British salt were unloaded in New Orleans every day, ballast for the cotton trade” (258). For a discussion of salt’s production and consumption during the American Civil War, see Kurlansky’s “The War Between the Salts” in *Salt: A World History*.

17 Kurlansky notes how, when the crest was sent to England for the flag to be designed, the English designer mistook the salt mounds for igloos, and drew doors on them. This image remained the crest of Turks and Caicos until 1968.
“Sucking salt,” a phrase with Dominican, Guyanese, Tobagonian, and Trinidadian origins (2) is meant to indicate suffering as well as survival (3). She offers the Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage’s definition: “To suffer much hardship; to have a rough time of it, as in ‘You’re right boy, we have good luck or we would have been sucking salt by now, like this bunch of paupers” (2). Gadsby locates “sucking salt” imagery within the many permutations of the legend “Sjaki and the Flying Slave.” Most useful for my argument are the legend’s common themes of bondage and freedom: in order to free themselves from slavery, slaves are said to have flown back over the Middle Passage and home to Africa. However, once salt is consumed—usually in the form of rations ordered by a master intent on keeping his slaves bound to the plantation—the spirit is rendered too heavy to fly. The legend highlights the “spiritual as well as physical rejection of the system of slavery” (Gadsby 21) wherein salt becomes a sign of the immobility and restriction accompanying a life of bondage. Gadsby links the origins of the legend to Surinam, but other permutations exist throughout the African diaspora.

Unlike its “twin” commodity, sugar, salt was not a luxury item consumed only by wealthy Europeans. But, like sugar, salt not only effectively refined tastes and cultural production throughout the Atlantic, but was also one part of the engine that drove the transatlantic slave trade. The legacy of salt, then, is deeply entwined with the history of transatlantic slave trade—salt and sugar production, combined, formed a cyclical phenomenon in which slavery was internally perpetuated via its own stolen labor. Boycotts of sugar across England and America took up the cause and the imagery of “blood sugar,” wherein abolitionists urged consumers to not consume or purchase commodities that had been produced via slave labor. Although there are no records of boycotts of salt as there was of sugar, (perhaps because salt was seen as necessary rather than frivolous), Prince’ narrative echoes abolitionist rhetoric that
Kutzinski's The Sugar Masters: Stinchombe’s also Stuart B. Schwartz’s the same pattern of ‘economic development’; in the same 109 years, miles in area, received 252,500 African slaves. Jamaica, which in 1655 had been invaded by the British, followed (Parker 296). The effect this had on Pudding, hitherto made of fish or light meat, now embarked on its unhealthy history as a separate sweet course”

greater coffee, tea, and cocoa, jams, processed foods, chocolate and confectionery were now being consumed in much entire Atlantic economy” (81). By 1770, “sugar had achieved a revolution in eating habits in England. Along with

cyclingly, fueled by Europe’s growing sweet tooth: “This dilemma of anxious ingestion ensnared British consumers en masse as an unceasing craving for sweetened beverage drove forward the engine of slavery, which drove the entire Atlantic economy” (81). By 1770, “sugar had achieved a revolution in eating habits in England. Along with coffee, tea, and cocoa, jams, processed foods, chocolate and confectionery were now being consumed in much greater quantities. Treacle was spread on bread and put on porridge. Breakfast became sweet, rather than savoury. Pudding, hitherto made of fish or light meat, now embarked on its unhealthy history as a separate sweet course” (Parker 296). The effect this had on the slave trade was enormous: “From 1701 to 1810 Barbados, a mere 166 square miles in area, received 252,500 African slaves. Jamaica, which in 1655 had been invaded by the British, followed the same pattern of ‘economic development’; in the same 109 years, it received 662,400 slaves” (Parker 53). See also Stuart B. Schwartz’s Tropical Babylons: Sugar and the Making of the Atlantic World, 1450-1680; Arthur L. Stinchombe’s Sugar Island Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment: The Political Economy of the Caribbean World; The Sugar Masters: Richard Follett’s Planters and Slaves in Louisiana’s Cane World, 1820-1860; and Vera M. Kutzinski’s Sugar’s Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism.

As compared to the many volumes on sugar studies, salt has been critically under-studied. Mark Kurlansky, Meredith Gadsby, and Cynthia M. Kennedy are scholars I identify in this chapter who have recently studied the importance of salt and salted foods, particularly its links to slavery. Gadsby identifies how salted foods “originated in the days of slavery, when plantation owners purchased large portions of inexpensive dried and salt-cured meats and fish for slaves from England” (20-21). For more on the histories of sugar as developing a world economy based on slave labor, see Sidney Mintz’s Sweetness and Power; Arthur L. Stinchombe’s Sugar Slavery in the Age of Enlightenment: The Political Economy of the Caribbean World. Sugar’s history, of course, predates the West Indies. Matthew Parker identifies the islands of New Guinea as the “ancestral home of sugar cane” (9), which spread westwards to India and Persia by the sixth century AD. Christopher Columbus brought sugar cane seedlings to the New World in 1493, where it flourished in the Caribbean soil. The art and technology of planting and manufacturing sugar was learned from the Portuguese (who maintained numerous plantations in Brazil) and Dutch, and numerous would-be planters traveled from England to Barbados in the 17th century to make their fortune in sugar. Sidney Mintz identifies the demand for sugar as increasing as tea/coffee consumption increased by the eighteenth century, and points out the strangeness that two crops from opposite sides of the globe should be consumed together, noting “It was remarkable not only for what it shows us about the English economy, already in large measure a nation of wage earners, but also for what it reveals about the intimacy of the links between colony and metropolis, fashioned by capital” (116). Thus, sugar took on a political as well as prosaic character to British drinkers of tea, solidifying itself as a cultural marker of Britain. Hannah Glas’s confectionary cookbook from 1760, for instance, is proof of how extensively sugar had entered into the British imagination by the 18th century. Mintz identifies sugar as reframing the British and colonial appetite, effectively restructuring meals and, with it, social structure, order, and class. As part of a “tea complex,” sugar was found not only within the tea but as a crucial ingredient for the cakes, cookies, pies, and pastries that accompanied the tea, forming a meal that came synonymous with British society (121-122). Mintz argues that as sugar became relatively easy to acquire, it became “endowed with ritual meanings by those who consumed it, meanings specific to the social and cultural position of the users. This is a part of the extensification itself: a recasting of meanings, now detached from the past, and from those given by other social groups” (122). Mimi Sheller’s work on sugar, Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies, explains how the sugar industry and Europe’s growing sweet tooth was fueled by slavery which was, cyclically, fueled by Europe’s growing sweet tooth: “This dilemma of anxious ingestion ensnared British consumers
laborer and consumer, it also produces and reproduces race. I want to continue this conversation by considering the commodity of salt and the tastes it engendered. Mary Prince’s narrative then, shows not only how bodies produced salt but how salt produced taste. Chilling in its machination, Prince reveals a symbolically cannibalistic system of production that had far-reaching economic and cultural effects throughout the Atlantic.

**Commodity Aesthetics: Mary Prince, Mortie, and the Shaker Salt Girl**

We might read Prince’s description of labor in the salt ponds in terms of corrosion and violence but what happens if we look at it in terms of developing or establishing a labor of taste? I read Prince’s depictions of salt labor to press on ideas of how such salt labor—and, by extension—other commodity-related labor allows us to turn from an alternative narration of food that is based on production rather than consumption. This aesthetic emerges in a landscape of increasing consumerism. Scholars such as Simon Gikandi and Denise Gigante point to the correlation of developing cultures of taste with an emergent consumerism. As Gikandi points out, by the eighteenth century, consumption became a marker for social standing in England, but such “aggressive acquisitiveness and free spending” was incongruous with the “doctrine of politeness and regulated behavior that was at the core of the culture of taste” (19). In this age of increased consumption, a need to define and reproduce sets of civilized behavior were even more important: “This is why debates about art, culture, the aesthetic, or taste in the early eighteenth century seemed constantly driven by a torsion of anxiety created by the drive for consumption, expanding trade, and the need to regulate behavior” (Gikandi 19). Gigante points to a Consumer Revolution as marking the cultural changes that began to emerge in the nineteenth century with regard to taste: “By the turn of the nineteenth century, the dialectical counterpart to taste was not only bodily appetite but also the wider sphere of material desires fed by consumer culture” (3).
This system of consumerism is particularly critical in Prince’s moment, and because of the commodity she was immersed in: salt. This section will look at some stories of salt as a model for how we might connect notions of production with consumption, and a “culture of taste” with a “labor of taste.” From an imperial perspective, the consumer's experiences of salt is a history of progress and discovery. For Mary Prince, it's a history of subjugation and violence that exposes a problem of judgment. This section will trace two salt advertisements with nineteenth-century roots in order to reveal the two histories of salt and aesthetic experience. When read as advertisements reflecting particular notions of a culture of taste, these salt ads define culture in a way that rehearses an old narrative about Western cultural values and notions of purity. On a micro-level, they reveal a problem with an eighteenth-century model of aesthetics that reifies a Kantian narrative. But when read alongside Prince’s text—and particularly her ability to both sense and judge—this narrative changes.

*Mary and Mortie*

The year 2014 marked the 100th year birthday of the Morton Salt Company’s “Umbrella Girl,” arguably the only salt advertising icon to endure in public imagination. The 1914 iteration of “Mortie,” so-called, depicts a girl with pre-Shirley-Temple ringlets (see Figure 1). In one hand she clutches an oversized umbrella to ward off a downpour; her other arm cradles a carton of Morton’s salt. Over the years, Mortie underwent numerous edits and makeovers: in

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[1] To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the creation of the Morton Salt Girl, Morton launched mortonsaltgirl100.com, a site that collects crowd-sourced social media, images, and news related to Mortie. Included is a timeline of Mortie’s history, a recipe for a salted caramel birthday cupcake, an invitation to “Join the Party” by posting to Mortie’s official Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Flickr, Pinterest, and email. The company also launched a “100 parties in 100 days” campaign, hosted by consumers “100 consumers who wanted to celebrate the history and future of this American icon” (http://mortonsaltgirl100.com/ Accessed August 2014)
1941, she was transformed from black pen-and-ink into color, a burst of sunshine in an otherwise perpetual rainstorm.  

How did Mortie become the spokeswoman of salt? How did she turn from a company mascot into (at least according to the company), an “American icon”? The brand’s tagline, “When it rains it pours” is meant to convey the idea that Morton’s salt is of such high quality and purity that not even rain will cause clumping. This anti-caking concept was important to the brand; however, the marketing campaign team hired to address this practical feature was also concerned with image—cue: Mortie. A revolutionary anti-caking salt wasn’t enough to sell more product: it sold far better when accompanied by a picture of a smiling, cheerful trademark, thereby developing an aesthetic around the relationship between the consumer and the commodity. Bailey Doogan chronicles her work as an artist on the 1967 Morton Girl design. She describes

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20 The Morton Salt Company purchased the saltworks on Great Inagua Island in the Bahamas in 1955. Today, they produce road salt, industrial salt for water softening, and fishery salt for cod fisherman there. Kurlansky notes that Bahamians buy their water softeners from Florida, and that none of Great Inagua’s salt stays in the Bahamas.
not only the many iterations Mortie took before she was approved by the board of directors, but also how Mortie’s very assemblage was fragmented and fraught:

Back to the drawing board, and eventually, like Frankenstein’s monster, Mortie took shape: a head from a designer, a hand from a freelancer, legs from an illustrator, the hair, dress, and shoes from—who cares?—we were all getting paid. Mortie ended up with the requisite cuteness and spunkiness, strutting her stuff in a downpour; letting all the product run out to salinate the rain water. Brackish little bitch! (Doogan 99)

What’s at stake in branding salt is divorcing the image (Mortie) from the origin (the murky, brackish ponds). In so doing, production is also divorced from consumption. But when read alongside Mary Prince, the ad men’s invocation of “brackishness” brings to mind not only the ponds but its laborers. Despite the revisions and re-drawings of Mortie, her essence remained fixed: she was to be spunky, cute, innocent, pure, in terms that were coded as feminine. Doogan facetiously labels her piecemeal assemblage as “brackish”—as if Mortie herself was resisting the mold circumscribed by the boardmen (who, Doogan recounts, shouted such revisions as “No long hair! She looks like a hippie!...She looks like a smarty pants!” “Too Jewish!” “No dark hair!” “Looks like a dyke to me!” Too easy!” “Not enough leg,”) even as she came to life. Prince’s narrative—her description of the salt ponds “eat[ing] down…to the very bone” offers a reversal of this assemblage; as Mortie is pieced together one body part at a time, Prince’s narrative chronicles both the disassemblage of a body: the slow erosion of the physical self, eaten away and destroyed by the corrosive powers of salt, as well as the creation of a network of enslaved women and men who, along with producing commodities, produced networks, tastes,
and cultures throughout the Atlantic. If Mortie is a symbol of a culture of taste, Prince is the labor. There can be no Morties without Princes.

The continuous branding and re-branding of Mortie belies particular American anxieties about cleanliness, purity, and domesticity within the nineteenth century. By 1869, Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe had published *The American Woman’s Home*, a treatise and conduct manual of home economics that stressed the significance of cleanliness and sanitation within the home. The twentieth-century cultures of taste reflected in Mortie are not simply reflective, but a product of a nineteenth-century taste culture within the U.S. The aesthetic dimension of foodways in the nineteenth century is partly defined by anxieties related to nation-building, and is largely shaped by transatlantic politics, economics, and culture. Kyla Wazana Tompkins has made important connections between images of food across popular nineteenth-century genres like novels, domestic manuals, and religious tracts with an urge to reify a unified and cohesive national people. She writes “Across all these genres, images of breached borders, of orifices and openings in the body and weak joints in the home, were meant to symbolize threats to national-cum-familial well-being” (55). The preservation and continued success of the nation was inextricable from the formation of family units. Wazana draws an “ideological line” between shifting national U.S. borders and the kitchen, “an opening in the home through which commodities flowed” and finally to the “political life of the mouth—a dense and eroticized point for the transfer of power” (55). This orifice is bigger than Tompkins has even imagined, leading to entirely other histories and geographies including Prince’s narrative. This opening is present in the narrative of Morton salt: Mortie was invented—and continues today—to sell salt with a side of wholesomeness. That whiteness and salt should be connected in the minds of American consumers isn’t surprising. But what’s worth examining more closely are salt’s many signifiers;
Kurlansky argues that salt and its signifiers have been given “what Freud might have considered an irrational attachment” because of our association between the mineral and its abilities to preserve foods by absorbing water, thereby preventing the growth of bacteria and mold. How, then, might salt preserve wholesomeness? Precisely through a brand icon like Mortie, who has stood for a century for the innocence, purity, cleanliness, virtuousness, and sheer incorruptibility of her favorite seasoning and, in so doing, the innocence, purity, cleanliness, etc., of American taste. Returning to the twentieth-century advent of salt marketing and branding helps illuminate the careful decisions made about how salt might be branded in a twentieth-century consumer society. Moreover, such advertisements reinforce a narrative that emphasizes an aesthetic rooted in refinement and whiteness by way of young white women invested in domestic tasks. By 1915, Morton was printing newspaper columns with the headline “Perfectly Pure is Morton Salt Which Local Ladies Know,” decrying other brands as “so poor that it seems they should be legislated off the market,” and insisting that “Morton Salt is absolutely pure, beyond the suggestion of any slightest taint” (Bisbee Daily Review, November 21, 1915.).
PERFECTLY PURE IS MORTON SALT WHICH LOCAL LADIES KNOW

Salt is an ingredient of practically all table dishes; insist upon the Morton brand and be sure you’re right.

Salt is an article of such constant use, both for use as a culinary ingredient and for table purposes, that one must always demand the purest brand. There are many brands of salt on the American market. Some of them are fairly good. Others are so poor that it seems that they should be legislated off the market. But there is a salt which is super-excellent, so pure and good that it seems the public owes its producers a debt of gratitude. This salt is rapidly being recognized as the best, beyond a doubt, on the American market. It is so manifestly ahead of all others that it has placed the name of its manufacturer in a peculiarly enviable position. It is the product of the Morton Salt Co. and is sold, not only in the United States, but in many parts of Europe.

Did you ever stop to realize that there is scarcely a food of any kind into which salt does not enter as an important ingredient. Maybe you have not thought much about this but, surely, you will admit the truth of this statement.

Figure 3: Via Chronicling America
One other such brand, Diamond Crystal, also debuted a feminine face of salt. A 1911 advertisement by Diamond Crystal (Figure 4) depicts the “Travels of the Shaker Salt Doll, in the Royal Table Lands of the World.” The advertisement shows an illustration of a young woman in dress and bonnet. Like Mortie, she cradles a container of Diamond Salt in one arm and a suitcase in the other. She is positioned in the foreground of a map of the Atlantic. Notably, the United States is labeled on the map, along with England, Africa, Spain, and France—the routes of Atlantic world production. In the map, the salt shaker, an icon squarely positioned in the center of Michigan, has come home to roost in St. Clair, which is literally flagged by salt. Absent from the map is the Caribbean archipelago, the site of salt production labor in an Atlantic world context. Salt, of course, is not a distinctly American mineral. Its uses span the globe over centuries, and it is attached to many metaphors and associations. As a tool that wards off decay, salt was soon associated with longevity and permanence within the cultural imagination.

Figure 4: Via http://www.theriaults.com/ Accessed August 2014. “AMERICAN ADVERTISING PAPER DOLL BOOKLET FOR SHAKER SALT: “Colorful booklet tells the tale of The Little Shaker lady as she travels the
world, and includes 8 uncut pages of paper dolls and costumes based upon these travels, and including The Little Shaker Lady herself. Copyright 1911 for Diamond Crystal Salt. Excellent condition.”

The picture of the Shaker Salt girl reinforces a narrative that situates salt as a commodity important to Americans both at home and across the Atlantic. The young woman stands to the left of the United States, ready to explore the world—or at least the parts of it that are depicted and, thus, deemed worthy of exploration. With the map in the background, the Salt Shaker girl is both everywhere (signaling salt’s transatlantic origins and influences) and in one place (signaling the spot upon which a culture of taste becomes fixed). Mary Prince, however, is also everywhere—in the commodities she and her fellow enslaved community produced, in her forced migration across the West Indies, in the text circulating the Atlantic, and in the very notion of how cultures of taste are established and maintained. That is to say, considering the imagery, aesthetics, and values put forth by these advertisements alongside a labor of taste is to make visible or incorporate the West Indies into the project of nineteenth-century commodity and cultural transactions, and to reframe the early narrative of salt as one that necessarily shapes and is shaped by figures like Mary Prince. The erasure of the Caribbean from the map is interesting when considered against Prince’s narrative, which specifically writes Caribbean islands and America in to her conception of the world, what Nwankwo calls her “cosmopolitan cartography through her verbal marking of America and the West Indies” (173). Elizabeth Bohls states, “Home is a privilege that not everyone shares” (165), and this is particularly true for enslaved individuals. Bohls writes of Prince’s domestic labor as allowing her to “challenge the idealized image of the home as nurturing haven” (Bohls 166); that is, Prince’s conception of home is informed by the sense of community she finds. We can read her narrative as a reversal of this map: Prince puts the Caribbean into the history of production by articulating her own sense of rootedness and home throughout her travels.
There are similarities between the two faces of these brands: both women, both white, both carefully nestling their respective cartons of salt in one arm as they would an infant, while using the other to hold an accessory that further signifies the brand’s image. These images also articulate a representation of women that moves beyond as much as it reproduces normative nineteenth-century images of women as simultaneously domestic and stable and yet also adventurous and, in their stepping out of their homes into the rain and across the continent, somewhat progressive or uniquely “American” in their respective quests. The drawings of these young women are endowed with ideals associated with womanhood, femininity, and domesticity: they are portrayed as innocent, smiling, ideals of refined “little ladies.” Neither are positioned within a domestic setting of kitchen or dining room. The Shaker Salt girl is, in fact, ready to take on (parts of) the globe far from home. Within these images, then, salt is depicted as simultaneously tasteful and tempting: a chance to experience the “royal table lands of the world” without setting foot outside one’s kitchen. The Salt Shaker doll becomes a proxy for the early American woman: suitcase in hand, one proverbial foot on a world map and the other firmly positioned at home in St. Clair, Michigan. However, the success of these ads in creating a story of salt is dependent on the erasure and occlusion of salt’s actual history of production. This is a history of violence and black subjugation, and also a history of individuals who, despite their conditions, have a place, a presence, and an impact upon cultures of taste. For salt to succeed as a commodity along with sugar and coffee, for it to be successfully marketed and brand-recognized, the Mary Princes must be replaced by the Morties, real women with dolls, the Caribbean by maps that showcase the Atlantic while erasing the Caribbean. I put these women (or representations of women) in conversation with one another in order to highlight historical and geo-spatial parallels between salt production and the perpetuation of Enlightenment-era aesthetic
ideas and ideals. I identify immediate connections between historical food production and its contemporary resonances by suggesting that Prince’s narrative asserts not only an alternate version of domestic labor, but also a reversal of an aesthetic judgment that excluded her.

In the advertising campaigns, women are used to brand salt as pure, feminized, and white. The character of Mortie was drawn to appeal to women using salt in recipes. But unlike other popular advertising brands (such as Aunt Jemima) that relied on racist caricatures and romanticized images of antebellum South, salt’s advertising history was literally white-washed. Mary Prince’s narrative describes her work in the salt ponds not in terms of consumption and quality of the mineral, but in terms of bodily suffering. Whether Prince had any knowledge of where the salt was going after it was produced, how it was being used or by whom, she does not say. Her narrative focuses specifically on the degenerative, painful aspects of the labor itself.

While current scholarship on salt’s history establishes the mineral as a crucial building block in colonial expansion (Kurlansky, Kennedy), there remains a need to locate and uncover embedded stories and narratives of saltworks labor, particularly within the Atlantic, not only to recover the life stories of these skilled laborers, but to more firmly establish and begin to define the particular aesthetic and cultural production that their work engendered. As Prince describes the dreadful working conditions, she also emphasizes both a community formation and a cultural aesthetic that is often neglected in nineteenth-century depictions of West Indian slave labor. She situates herself in her narrative as belonging to this labor of taste—systems necessarily created and sustained by way of forced participation within production chains.

I put these women (or representations of women) in conversation with one another in order to highlight historical and geo-spatial parallels between salt production and taste-making.

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21 The Mortie salt girl is an interesting corollary to brands like Aunt Jemima (see Slave in a Box by M.M. Manring), wherein trademarks are exaggerated caricatures depicting a fictitious, romanticized antebellum past.
Commodity generates taste-making for a white Atlantic public who rely on human capital to produce their goods. But *community* generates taste-making for Prince. I identify immediate connections between historical food production and its contemporary resonances by suggesting that Prince’s narrative asserts a model of historically unintelligible community formation. Prince continuously forms social affiliations throughout her text: despite belonging to a site of unfreedom, she seeks out and articulates bonds—even temporary ones—with fellow slaves, providing them names and personhood not only within the site of labor, but within the rhetorical space of her printed text. Even as a mobile subject who moves between homes, islands of the West Indies, and across the Atlantic to England, Prince understands herself as belonging to a larger community and network. These moments of community are aesthetic moments for Prince, ones that enable her to articulate a sense of meaning, value, and camaraderie in an otherwise-unstable and painful life.

In one scene, she describes the kindness of “Aunt Hetty,” providing her a supper of sweet potatoes and milk upon her first evening at a new master’s house (10). Hetty is described as a “French Black…whom my master took in privateering from another vessel.” Only minutes after Prince’s arrival, Hetty sets to cooking sweet potatoes for dinner, before bustling around with her many evening duties: penning the sheep and cattle in for the night, tending to the horse, feeding the hogs and cows, preparing beds and putting the children to sleep. Prince describes her as “the only friendly face I had as yet seen,” and tells of how Hetty “gave me my supper of potatoes and milk, and a blanket to sleep upon, which she spread for me in the passage before the door of Mrs. I—’s chamber” (10). In sharing this meal, Prince finds nourishment that is a far cry from the corrosion of the salt ponds. She recalls Hetty’s friendship and kindness in this offering before then describing a brutal beating Hetty endures later that night. Prince’s aesthetic moment
is an aesthetics or, as Dillon has described, an “aesthesis”, a making, framed by scenes of production in order to make sense and community in the face of terror.

We can also see Prince's articulation of a community in a scene when Prince is sent from Captain I—’s house to Turk’s Island. She travels for four weeks on a sloop, which she says was “unusually long.” The food and water begins to run low, so that they are “put upon short allowances.” Prince relates how she “almost would have been starved had it not been for the kindness of a black man called Anthony, and his wife, who had brought their own victuals, and shared them with me” (15). Throughout the narrative, Prince names the many men and women with whom she interacts and to whose suffering she bears witness. She speaks of old Daniel, who is stripped, beaten, and scourged with salt water (17). In naming and recognizing him, she speaks to a broader community of enslaved laborers and humans in bondage, expressing empathy in both her retelling of his pain and by using the pronoun “we”: “He was an object of pity and terror to the whole gang of slaves, and in his wretched case we saw, each of us, our own lot, if we should live to be as old” (17). Prince also tells of a slave named Ben who is caught and beaten for stealing rice (18), and Sarah, a “little old woman” who “was not quite right in the head,” who is thrown into prickly-bear bushes. Sarah’s body “was so grievously wounded, that her body swelled and festered all over, and she died in a few days after” (18).

These social affiliations are often brief, but they are meaningful in that they demonstrate alternative kinship and community systems being formed within a slave system. Prince’s articulation of community allows her to replace hunger with nourishment, pain with empathy. Nwankwo argues that Prince presents herself as part of a “collective, whose members share the same emotions, experiences, and dreams,” the effect of which is to highlight not only an individual voice, but the voice of a community (164). I agree with Nwankwo’s assessment that
Prince’s “we” operates as a community-formation for Prince that exists outside linguistic or geographical boundaries. Elizabeth Bohls, too, sees community formation, or what she calls “affective connections” (177) as a saving grace for Prince, particularly when she speaks on behalf of the slaves who can not testify to their own suffering, such as Daniel. After describing Sarah’s pain and punishment, Prince writes, “In telling my own sorrows, I cannot pass by those of my fellow-slaves—for when I think of my own griefs, I remember theirs.” Prince’s idea of community and aesthetic is not bound to objects or commodities, but in such moments of experience and community.

To reframe Prince’s narrative in terms of a labor of taste is to move toward a more expansive, complex system of kinship structures and sociability formed within the space of enslaved labor. Thinking through salt pond labor in terms of a labor of taste moves us away from the unilateral, inhuman commodity chains that have framed a narrative of the Atlantic.

Commodity chains emphasize the unilateral production, sale, and shipment of goods and commodities across the Atlantic, from the colony to the metropole. The movement across the ocean is particularly important: to focus only on how goods are created in the West Indies and shipped out across the Atlantic is to further reinforce the colonial ideology that social reproduction occurs only in the metropole while the colonies are sites of labor. Looking at a labor of taste allows us to re-shift attention to those individuals (enslaved) producing the goods, to recognize their culture and subjectivity, and to see how they form aesthetic judgments about the system of slavery. If we instead shift our thinking from commodity chains to a labor of taste, then we can look at nineteenth-century Caribbean writings in a way that doesn’t just focus on the imperial/colonial history but also on the voices of the enslaved and further recognizes their role in shaping an Atlantic economy and an Atlantic aesthetic. Commodity chains denote the non-
human, the dehumanization of a subject by mechanization. But with a turn toward considering
the aesthetic contribution of these individuals, we can re-see the commodities they are
producing. To consider how these notions of taste are formed, I first rely on the idea that the
Atlantic as a world-economy, which, as articulated by Immanuel Wallerstein, is “marked by an
axial division of labor between core-like production processes and peripheral production
processes, which resulted in an unequal exchange favoring those involved in core-like
production processes” (Wallerstein 17). I focus on both the division of labor and exchange/flow
of capital and goods that he references, but also consider how such markets enable, rather than
restrict, social and cultural reproduction within the colonial space of the Atlantic. Atlantic
literary studies has contended with how social and cultural reproduction within colonial
structures occurred. Elizabeth Maddock Dillon (“Secret History”) argues against the notion that
culture flowed uni-directionally from the European metropole to the colonies in the West Indies.
Instead of maintaining the image of the Caribbean as death zone of forced labor, Dillon
demonstrates how creole culture is formed and informed within this space and how cultural
aesthetics, like the many commodities traveling through the Atlantic, traveled back to the
metropole. Through a reading of The Secret History by Leonara Sansay, Dillon identifies the
existence of social reproduction within the creole colonial space of the Caribbean through
networks of women. Dillon argues that “national culture required an erasure of colonialism” (98)
via a discourse that historically saw the West Indies as a site of labor and production.
Domesticity is figured as a premiere site of social reproduction, but it is also a site that has
historically been closed off for enslaved women like Mary Prince. I want to further explore the
relationships I see between social reproduction, domesticity, and commodities within the West
Indies in order to show a connection between Prince’s work and the creation of her networks. In
her articulation of perception and sensation, Prince also plays with the idea of preservation by
posing the question of what is being preserved within the space of enslavement. In the scene
where Hetty, her friend and maternal figure, dies, Prince mourns her loss and briefly wishes that
she too could follow Hetty to death. But then she adds “But the hand of that God whom then I
knew not, was stretched over me; and I was mercifully preserved for better things.” In describing
herself as being “preserved for better things,” Prince directly invokes the protective qualities of
salt. Salt is a paradoxical mineral, both a corrosive and a preservative. It eats away at flesh but
also retains, protects. It’s also worth pointing out that salt as a preservative actually changes the
chemical makeup of a food, the result of which is close to cooking: what was raw is now cooked.
Prince leans heavily on both sugar and salt as metaphors throughout her narrative (“to be free is
very sweet” “Oh, the trials! The trials! They make the salt water come into my eyes…”).
Michelle Speitz sees salt as the “linguistic linchpin” of Prince’s narrative. She writes:

Pertaining to the sugar trade, the association between sweetness and freedom
hybridizes the qualities of the sugar trade and of sugar the commodity: sugar
signifies the pain and harm slavery incurs, while standing as a celebrated
consumable with a taste so palatable that it can represent slavery’s opposite,
freedom. In contrast, sweetness for Prince is only ever the antithesis of salt; salt is
not her preservation.

I agree with Speitz that salt, in Prince’s history and in her narrative, becomes a defining feature
of her life as a slave. Her labor in the ponds affects her far beyond the time she spends there; she
describes the work she did at St. Turk’s as being the worst she had to endure (20) and she later is
subject to a variety of physical ailments like rheumatism and “Saint Anthony’s fire”— a bacterial
infection that is caused by skin ulcerations and poor lymphatic draining— that leave her in great
pain and at times unable to use her left leg. Salt was, for Prince, a corrosive, deadly symbol of pain and suffering. But I also want to challenge Speitz’s assertion that “salt is not her preservation” by thinking through Prince’s labor of taste in the site of the salt ponds. Salt pond labor was anguishing and corrosive for Prince and her fellow slaves. Running throughout her text are moments of corrosion and nourishment. Salt corrodes, but Prince’s ability to assess, judge, and reflect preserved her mind and sensibility within the horrors of slavery.

Prince describes how weekends were spent making trusses out of long soft grass to lay on their legs and feet, which were “so full of salt boils that we could get no rest lying upon the bare boards” (16). Prince also recounts the torture of a slave named Old Daniel, whose open wounds would be further subjected to a bucket of salt water “till the man writhed on the ground like a worm, and screamed aloud with agony” and whose wounds, “full of maggots” would never heal (17). She discusses how “a great bowl of hot salt water, with salt mixed with it” is given to them as medicine when they fell ill (16-17) and how thinking about her condition brings the salt to her eyes. To Prince, salt is more than the site of forced labor. Such literal images of salt appear throughout her narrative while the figurative image of salt as both tears and the concentrated sweat of the slaves is what drives both the narrative and the transatlantic economy. There is no question that work in the salt ponds is characterized as degenerative, corrosive, violent, even cannibalistic. The salt literally consumes her as it corrodes her (and other slaves’) skin and causes her limbs to swell, leading to long-lasting affliction. We can imagine that the salt she is producing is used as a preservative, but in her description of the work, the salt is not preserving her, but eating away at her flesh, and will eventually be consumed in the form of salt fish by other slaves. We might also think of salt more literally as the Atlantic Ocean (Smallwater: Saltwater Slavery) and think of how it facilitates/is a channel for movement that is both corrosive
and violent (slave ships) and regenerative. As a domestic subject, Prince is also moving, very much like the salt, sugar, coffee, and other commodities that traveled through the commodity chains: her mobile relations conforms some sort of domestic identity and community. In considering how Prince generates a more expansive understanding of social and cultural reproduction, I understand her labor and reflections as a series of utterances that have aesthetic value. Prince literally embodies salt—on the sea, in the ponds, and in terms of her body being corroded. Yet she also offers in her narrative some sense of preservation and regeneration within her very reflections.

Contemporary considerations of taste—the salt and pepper on one’s dining room table—might not yet bring to mind the men and women of St. Turks or the networks that were engendered because of and in spite of their conditions. Drawing out of this narrative, we might begin to consider how other enslaved subjects used the genre of slave narratives and their experiences with food as commodity, labor, sustenance and pleasure both within the Caribbean and even in North America, to not only make intelligible an often-invisible labor force that drove a wider economy, but to redraw the boundaries of the aesthetic in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. If we look at that scene of bodily violence with salt production, we can see a deep irony given that the story of salt in the U.S. has been so oriented around whiteness, purity, and preservation. If include Prince’s story and think of her text as present in the cultivation of a sphere of taste and formulation of aesthetic judgment, then we can see how a commodity produces not just a site of production, but a site of aesthetics in the site of production. Enslaved individuals like Mary Prince not only had the ability to experience aesthetics and taste, but to formulate understandings of taste themselves.
Chapter Three: Strange Books: Nineteenth-Century Cookbooks

and the Textuality of Taste

A recipe is supposed to be a formula, a means prescribed for producing a desired result, whether that be an atomic weapon, a well-trained Pekingese, or an omelet. There can be no frills about it, no ambiguities...and above all no “little secrets.” M.F.K Fisher

Atlantic world histories of food culture and culinary practices have largely been framed in terms of the consumer and comestibles, whereas sites of production have been understood as politically and culturally situated outside, or other than, the sacred space of the domestic. My project thus far has argued for a shift in such an account of food practices by more prominently positioning the stories of a gastroaesthetic taking shape within sites of production in colonial spaces. These are the stories by and about the enslaved agents of production who remind us that the Caribbean functioned as an epicenter of cultural and social (re)production where food was not only a form of sustenance but a shaper of broader Atlantic world cultures and communities of taste. In this chapter I turn to a form of print culture that produces and reproduces cultural values and histories in ways that recall the rhetoric of the nineteenth-century sentimental novel: the cookbook. Part of my goal is to make this familiar and recognizable genre strange, to tease out the “little secrets” of which M.F.K Fisher is so wary, and to examine the constructs and narratives of these texts in the context of taste-making in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world. I’m interested in cookbooks because they speak to both macro and micro moments of taste formation; they sustain and support existing value systems and offer new modes of taste-making through the promotion and dissemination of cooking knowledges that speak to negotiations between cultural heritages and values. I argue that cookbooks of the nineteenth century in
particular demonstrate how aesthetics emerge in the process of *poesis*, or making. Cookbooks offer literal instructions on how to make and shape meals, and they also provide narratives that make claims about aesthetic values and judgments both in and out of the kitchen.

In both the critical and public imagination, the pages of cookbooks are as tinged with sentimentality as they are with splatters of oil. Cookbooks—particularly those well-worn, dusty versions one ostensibly remembers from one’s grandmother’s pantry—have been read (and often romanticized) as a genre that gives voice to women, passes along familial knowledge, and connects a reader to a sense of culture, comfort, and home. Since the 1990s, critical attention has been paid to how cookbooks reveal the stories of women’s private and familial lives. Scholars such as Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster have regarded the cookbook as an object that merits serious socio-linguistic and/or literary analysis. Andrea K. Newlyn has argued against the so-called “inconsequential” consideration of the cookbook as a literary text, suggesting that “nineteenth-century private domestic cookbooks are explicit emblems of women’s relegation to the private sphere, maintaining, as they did, institutionalized patriarchal systems, and serving the organizational core of that system, the family” (32). In efforts to understand how these “emblems” might tell diverse stories of the domestic, scholars of food and cultural studies have taken up the project of reading cookbooks as both cultural artifacts and literary/historical texts. Anne Bower, for instance, sees cookbooks as forming “a genre governed by distinct codes and conventions” (29), while Newlyn suggests that cookbooks have not been included within a larger American literary canon because of their association with the feminine sphere and their ties to sentimental rhetoric. Much important work has been done in recovering cookbooks as objects of study and recognizing their value because of, not in spite of, their close ties to the domestic
sphere and a sentimental tradition. Scholars have shown how cookbooks serve a deeply political function for women, providing women agency by way of accessing the marketplace, sharing information, and passing down knowledge. In many ways, cookbooks are texts that bridge the Habermasian spheres of the public and the private: the secrets of one woman’s kitchen become public knowledge as the text is printed, purchased, read, and practiced in efforts to fortify and sustain a tasteful home. Critical attention has been paid to how a woman used the cookbook to tell her and her family’s stories; to make make visible middle class domestic work (Beetham 20); to protect a family from disorganization and disorder (Newlyn); to show her ability to navigate multiple social networks (Theophano); and to express her opinions about political and social issues outside her kitchen (Theophano). In teasing out the master narratives that scholars have read within cookbooks, the emphasis has been on cookbooks’ power to tell and share stories with their readers; several authors point to the Latin root of the word “recipe”, *recipere*—to give and to receive—to note how the cookbook, the recipes therein, and the meals that emerge are part of a system of culinary and cultural exchange (Forster, Newlyn).

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22 The zenith of the cultural and literary recovery of cookbooks is roughly between late 1980s/early 1990s to the mid-2000s, when critical attention was increasingly paid to the culture, lives, and literature of nineteenth-century women and, with them, artifacts such as the cookbook, quilts, scrapbooks, gardens, embroidery (Theophano). The cookbooks that have been studied as objects of the print public and private sphere include published manuscripts that span multiple editions, community cookbooks, and private family heirlooms that were passed down from one generation to another. Important work that reads the cookbook as a compelling and fundamental cultural object has been done by Laura Shapiro (1986), Susan Leonardo (1989), Anne Bower (1997), Arlene Avakian (1997), Glynis Ridley (1999), Colleen Cotter (1997), Janet Theophano (2002), Andrea K. Newlyn (2003), Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster (2003), Margaret Beetham (2003). Following on this work has been increased scholarship on how non-white cookbooks were read and understood in the nineteenth-century, particularly the contributions of black culinary narratives and texts. See: Doris Witt “In Search of Our Mothers’ Cookbooks: Gathering African-American Culinary Traditions” (1991); Rafia Zafar “The Signifying Dish” (1999); “What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking” (2001); and “Elegy and Remembrance in the Cookbooks of Alice B. Toklas and Edna Lewis” (2013); Jan Longone “Early Black-Authored American Cookbooks” (2001) and Christina Bolzman “The Legacy of Malinda Russell” (2012).
While scholars have underscored various ways in which women have used cookbooks, my effort to “make cookbooks strange” responds to an imperative to move beyond the familiar narratives to which they’ve been constrained, and to consider more closely the work cookbooks do in creating and sustaining cultures of taste in a time and geography where taste-making and community/national formation was particularly in flux. I’m interested in thinking more carefully about how cookbooks—texts that ostensibly instruct the reader on how to prepare food—actually present scenes of consumption that are constructed as unrelated to scenes of production, and how the cookbook reader is always already imagined as a middle-class white woman. In the analyses that follow, I attend to the cultural exchanges enacted in cookbooks and recipes. These exchanges occur between the author, the reader and the cook; they often occur in prefaces, in lists of ingredients and categories of recipes, or in headnotes that gesture toward a romanticized past or imagined domestic future. These exchanges, I argue, interrupt the sense of “home” that cookbooks otherwise purport to create.

Perhaps more than any other genre, the objective of the cookbook is to construct a place of home. However, attending closely to the narratives within its pages, as well as the commodities used in recipes, belies anxieties about how communities form and function in the wake of (and face of) invisible labor and a colonial economy. The sugar, molasses, cakes, soups, and breads that fill the pages of U.S. cookbooks are meant to mark “homeyness,” but they are based on raw materials, recipes, and even labor that has circulated the distant locations of the Atlantic. Read this way, we might take the romanticized reading of the cookbook as something that constructs domestic, private spaces, and instead see the genre as ones that marks a distinction between the domestic and the “other.” This obscures the history of the production of commodities; in order to construct a home, it necessarily forecloses that which is not “the home”: 
namely, the labor, the ingredients, the scenes of production involved. Reading cookbooks this way provides a means through which to make visible the stories of labor and production that buttress formations of taste.²³

**Towards a Literary Cookbook Methodology**

In the discussions that follow, I analyze how the format and structure of recipes can be read together to establish, dismantle, or obscure the cultures of taste that are otherwise enabled by the text. I draw on the theories of Colleen Cotter and Lauren Klein in order to investigate the circulation of food via language in these texts, and to map a new methodology for reading narratives in cookbooks. This methodology equally investigates structure, ingredients, and narrative in order to critically analyze how cookbooks shape and define notions of taste. Contemporary readers are familiar with the structure of recipes within cookbooks: recipes are organized by categories and given titles; an optional headnote might include anything from recipe origins to anecdotes or serving recommendation. A list of ingredients and measurements follow, along with step-by-step instructions (typically written in paragraph form). Cookery books in various forms have existed since at least the seventeenth century, but were only solidified into the format we recognize today between 1860 and 1900 as British publishers began to realize their commercial successes (Beetham). These books were offshoots of the general household book which published recipes alongside etiquette, parenting, and household management advice. The origins of the recipe structure can be traced to 1816 England with Dr. William Kitchiner’s *The Cook’s Oracle*, where he eschewed “the rule of thumb” and provided exact measurements.

²³ See Amy Kaplan’s “Manifest Domesticity” for an explanation of how domesticity relies upon racialized othering as a “mobile and often unstable discourse that can expand or contract the boundaries of home and nation” (26). See also my work in Chapters 1 and 2 where I argue that labor and production provide a means through which taste is formed and made intelligible.
and order of use (Fisher). Credit for the standard recipe format with ingredient list and instructions is then given to the 1861 publication of *Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management* and its numerous spin-offs (Beetham). American recipes would soon be similarly formatted; the earliest accounts of which date either 1887, with *The Boston Cookbook* (Cotter) or 1896 with Fannie Merritt Farmer’s *The Boston Cooking-School Book* (Fisher). The distinguished food writer M.F.K Fisher made her feelings plain about the importance of the standardized recipe format, arguing in 1966 that “A good recipe, for modern convenience, should consist of three parts: name, ingredients, method. The first will perforce give some sort of description: for instance, one does not simply say ‘Cake’ or ‘Bread,’ but ‘Golden Sponge Cake,’ ‘Greek Honey Bread’” (23). It is within this structure of a recipe that narrative appears and, as the opening epitaph of this chapter demonstrates, makes plain any “ambiguities” or “secrets” the cook may be concealing.

In her linguistic study of how recipes define community, Colleen Cotter analyzes the narrative framework of a recipe and then examines its syntactic and semantic regularities. The implication of this form is that language constructs community, establishes personal identity, and signifies to the reader who belongs and who is the outsider. Cotter breaks a recipe structure into title, list, orientation component (what I identified above as “headnote”); actions (such as “place,” “pour,” “stir”); evaluation clauses (descriptive language that requires some prior knowledge of the reader such as “the size of pea” or “desired thickness”); and coda (57-58). What I find particularly useful for the literary study of cookbooks—and what I’ll be pointing to in the analyses that follows—are the orientation and evaluative components. As Cotter explains, “Evaluation clauses, in tandem with the list items and instructional actions, combine to offer a subjectivity and objectivity of experience that goes with the transmission of any subtextual
messages inherent in the text” (63). Read together, these segments of narrative integrate subjective statements into an otherwise formalized, structured genre. Cotter also points to the ways that the reader’s knowledge often clashes with the instructions given: what happens, for instance, when the reader does not have the necessary prior knowledge to carry out the formula? “Because of the subjective nature of evaluation clauses,” Cotter explains, “the reader’s own background knowledge or shared or divergent assumptions potently mingle with the narrative evaluation, allowing unconscious judgments to be formed—about herself, her community, and her place in the world” (63). What does this mean for the reader? On one level, it means very little—the reader unclear about how to “cut shortening into flour” would either make an educated guess or consult another text or a neighbor. But when considered in the context of how knowledge is formed and disseminated throughout both the private and the public spheres, the relationship between reader and writer carries a much weightier significance—one of taste. Indeed, both the headnote and the evaluative clauses work to promote a community of taste and tastefulness from author to reader.

To understand how taste operates in cookbooks, I turn to Lauren Klein’s account of senses of taste in the early republic. As Klein explains, “taste”—the literal experience of the senses—was used as a metaphor for talking about the registers of aesthetic experience, as “gustatory sense seemed to best represent the way in which aesthetic experiences are first registered by the body and then processed by the mind.” Klein examines how the concept of taste—in particular, good taste—was valued by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison as a means through which to declare themselves and the nation at large as arbiters and practitioners of good taste. For Jefferson, “pleasures of the table [are]...an essential means of cultivating the French quality of bon goût” (good taste).” Klein grapples with the paradox of a nation that is, on
the one hand, promoting and cultivating good taste at both the table and beyond, and, on the other hand, building and sustaining that very same nation on the backs of an enslaved human population. In other words, how can a sense of good taste be developed and defined by a nation so reliant on the horrors of slavery? She points to Jefferson’s writings about dinner and his familiarity with his enslaved cook James Hemming, as “an attempt to reconcile a sense of taste that expressed the ideals of the republic with a taste for food prepared by the men and women he enslaved” (404). Adding cookbooks to this conversation further reveals the complexities and repercussions of two competing historical narratives: one of Jefferson’s burgeoning nation of “bon goût,” and one of a nation built upon an enslaved labor force. After all, for a cookbook to succeed in the print public sphere, it needed to carefully situate itself as a tome that presented and instructed readers on how to best practice the arts of good taste at home. These readers, especially in the mid-nineteenth-century, were more often than not white women who were interested in home economics and adding to their culinary repertoire. The popularity of cookbooks increased both as middle-class women had to cook for themselves in the absence of slavery and domestic servitude (see the Creole Picayune Cookbook), and, somewhat contradictorily, in moments of upward economic mobility, when, as Felicity Cloake explains, “upper-middle-class women started to delegate domestic responsibilities to their servants” as “many began to consider it somewhat unseemly for the lady of the house to dirty her fingers in the kitchen.” The stakes of cooking well were greater than basic dietary sustenance or even appetite; the ability to cook and serve appropriate, tasteful meals reflected one’s ability to be a moral individual who was part of a larger unit of family, community, and nation. Patricia Yaeger’s critique of Lee Bailey’s Southern Foods and Plantation Houses (1990), a James Beard-award-winning cookbook/photography book of Southern recipes and food history, and
photographs of plantation homes and gardens, uses Mikhail Bakhtin’s term “edible labor” to think through the connections between Southern food and Southern labor. She argues that the “fact of labor is elaborately concealed” in Bailey’s celebration of a romanticized antebellum lifestyle (152). Furthermore, she suggests that the book presents “good taste” as a means through which to “repeat the worst parameters of white southern sovereignty” (152): “But while Lee Bailey has foregrounded these tasteful details to add to Southern Food’s opulence and persuade the hungry reader to buy this book, they also invoke a more dangerous ideology: an ideology in which everything ‘grotesque’ about the plantation world is closeted” (153-154). Moving from the early republic to the nineteenth century and, as Yaeger points to, even the contemporary moment, cookbooks remain a genre where communities of good taste are narrated, learned, and negotiated in response to their particular political and cultural moments. For example, the first American cookbook, *American Cookery*, by Amelia Simmons (1796) sought to instruct a young nation by emphasis on the usage of American products. The first Jamaican cookery book, by way of contrast, is authored by a white British woman, Caroline Sullivan, who resides in the Caribbean and seeks to curate and translate otherwise-unfamiliar recipes and ingredients for newcomers to the island. The *Picayune Creole Cookbook*, which I investigate more fully below, is a response to a change in both the nation and the household: with the end of slavery and domestic servitude, white women were returning to the kitchens, and the authors of the *Picayune* sought to preserve creole recipes for the ages.

The appeal of cookbooks is more than instructional: their functions are as aesthetic and literary as they are didactic. The cookbook offers the reader a place to imagine herself in the center of her own domestic space, creating menus to appeal to her husband, children, and guests. Cookbooks invoke a sense of imagination, an allure and promise that is part aspirational (“here’s
what you could do”) and part formulaic (“here’s how to do it”). Readers are given a means to enjoy and experience domestic tranquility—an aesthetics built around steps, instructions, and order. In thinking through a methodology of analyzing cookbooks as literary texts, it is useful to place the texts within a longer tradition of domestic fiction written by women in the long nineteenth century. Reading cookbooks this way borrows from practices employed by the food scholars and cultural critics mentioned above, and illuminates the cookbook as a literary form that draws on the tenets of domestic fiction outlined by scholars such as Jane Tompkins, Nina Baym and Susan Harris. We might imagine the “protagonist” of the cookbook as a resourceful middle-class, ostensibly white, literate woman whose objective is to construct and maintain a clean, proper home.24 This would have particularly been true around the publication of Fannie Farmer’s *Boston Cooking School Book* in 1896, which came three decades after the Civil War and the rise of sentimental novels and conduct manuals. This was a moment when both nationality and white womanhood were being defined and redefined in a post-emancipatory era. Even the critical outcomes of the genres line up. Of the domestic novel, Tompkins argues that it "represents a monumental effort to reorganize culture from the woman's point of view; that this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition, and resourcefulness; and that, in certain cases, it offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville" (83). Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has explored the connections between sentimental writing and aesthetics, arguing that we might be able to assign aesthetic value and political implications to such texts. The rhetorical patterns of constructing domesticity in the sentimental novel are reproduced within the

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24 Indeed, this categorization of the imagined audience was likely for many, but not all, of nineteenth-century cookbooks. Doris Witt, for instance, discusses *The Federation Cookbook: A Collection of Tested Recipes, Contributed by the Colored Women of the State of California* (1910), which “foregrounds a middle-class model of black female identity” (107). For more detail on African-American cookbooks and foodways, see *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* by Toni Tipton-Martin; *Beyond Gumbo* by Jessica B. Harris, and *High on a Hog* by Jessica B. Harris.
cookbook. A novel, after all, offers a recipe of sorts for domesticity, and a cookbook authorizes methods for building community by pointing to what’s native, what’s foreign, what’s known, what’s unknowable, what’s edible, and what ingredients are obtainable. In the analysis of the cookbooks that follow, I explore how cookbooks construct (and/or deconstruct) both a culture of taste and a recipe for domesticity inasmuch as they mark instances of “othering” in order to negotiate a sense of home. These cookbooks show how the concept of home is complicated in colonial and post-emancipatory sites and how “home” is framed in terms of appropriation and erasure as much as it is framed in terms of good taste. The methodology that I’m modeling focuses a literary and Atlanticist lens on the cookbook to consider what I’ve called their “strangeness”: that is to say, to reveal alternative narratives about domesticity and modes of labor. Applying a literary and Atlanticist frame to cookbooks means we don’t read domesticity in a universal way: cookbooks and the act of labor become unfamiliar.

**Cookbook Literacy: Reading, Writing, and Exchange**

Certainly, the relationship women had to cookbooks in the nineteenth century was not universal, either in terms of reading or writing them. Whereas white middle-class women might have consulted cookbooks to advise slaves or domestic servants on what to prepare, in the years following the Civil War, middle-class women were increasingly looking to cookbooks for help on how to manage their kitchens (van Willigen). During the early 1700s in the American colonies, white, lower and middle-class women were charged with preparing meals and tending to the house and garden (Plante 15). With more merchants to sell meats, produce, cloth, and other wares, by the early nineteenth century, domestic tasks and responsibilities changed according to the particular needs of families. Plante explains how Northern middle-class colonial homes often hired seasonal help or relied on an indentured servant to cook and clean. The
Southern homemaker was often charged with managing slaves. (Plante 16, 20). By the 1820s and 1830s, immigrants arriving in Northern cities were hired as “domestic servants” to do the cooking and housework. But even as domestic servitude increased, tenets of virtue were ascribed to the middle class woman in terms of her ability to manage a kitchen. Sarah Josepha Hale and Catharine Beecher championed the domestic arts and sciences as important for all women, even middle-class women who could afford help. In the years following the Civil War, “middle-class families were suffering the effects of the economic depression that lasted from 1873-1878” (Plante 110). In terms of literacy, the cookbook provided a site for women to learn and practice reading and writing skills: “Cookbooks and recipe collections were a ‘place’ where they could engage in compiling, editing, categorizing, composing, and responding to written texts” (Theophano 156). Much of this knowledge was handed down from one generation to the next. Plante explains the use of cookbooks as ancillary to an oral tradition that passed through families: “Cookery methods were handed down from mother to daughter until domestic servants took over in the kitchen during the 1830s and 1840s and prior to this it was assumed women knew how to cook but needed a helping hand with what to cook” (Plante 25).

This would be true for the educated but likely not the case for enslaved women, who were forbidden from reading and often relied on oral traditions to pass on recipes. Yentsch points to the literacy rates of white and blacks that she compiled using 1900 U.S. Census data: “in Alabama, there were 2,100 literate blacks and 338,000 literate whites; in Georgia, 1,300 and 379,000; in Louisiana, 18,000 and 284,000; in Mississippi, 1,400 and 314,000; in North Carolina, 600 and 210,000; in South Carolina, 600 and 284,000; and in Virginia, 7,000 and 214,000” (Yentsch 92, n. 42) Enslaved women might learn a recipe by having it read to them by a plantation wife or daughter (Yentsch 68-69), and they also relied on their senses in learning
how to construct a dish. Whit explains how “Slaves used smell and taste, touch, sight and sound in order to cook. Those techniques were rarely written down but were communicated within the oral tradition” (Whit 52). As Doris Witt has noted: “Much African American cultural transmission was oral,” including passing down recipes and cooking skills and techniques. These recipes and techniques were often uncredited. Although a domestic novel like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* portrays black women as inherently possessing the secrets and tricks of delicious cookery, in reality these women learned to cook by practice, oral history, and handing down recipes.

Two competing, conflicting narratives of black women cooks prevailed throughout the nineteenth century. The first is that black cooks inherently possessed the secrets and skills of cookery—the idea that their dishes derived not from labor but a sense of effortless talent or even love (*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for instance). The second narrative is that black women did not possess the means by which to learn the art and science of cookery, and needed to be instructed by the white plantation wives and mistresses who would read recipes aloud until the enslaved cook learned then. Both narratives paint the enslaved cook as being devoid of the ability to construct and practice culinary knowledge within the kitchen. This embedded history supposes that an enslaved cook wouldn’t need a cookbook, and that her culinary skill was automated rather than attached to any sort of domestic virtue like it was for the nineteenth-century homemaker. In reality, “blacks invented new dishes, taught whites how to cook and even on occasion wrote cookbooks...but they seldom received credit for their accomplishments” (Whitt 51). All too often, the contributions of black cooks were subsumed by plantation mistresses: “Many white families believed their own cook’s skills topped all others, but confidence in, and praise of, a cook’s skill did not ensure that she received credit for her recipes. Occasionally, plantation mistresses and urban white women acknowledged their cooks’ creations and
contributions (e.g., okra à la Maulie). More often they did not. White mistresses claimed
ownership of not only their cooks but also their cooks’ everyday creations” (Yentsch 68).
Therefore, it is not surprising that cookbooks like the Picayune, which I discuss below, are
marketed for white women readers who might then be imagined to instruct their slaves or
domestic servants in how to prepare dishes or what meals to prepare.

In the analyses that follow, I contend with the complex relationships between cookbooks
and whiteness, blackness, and modes of labor. The Picayune Creole Cookbook was first
published by an anonymous group of editors of the Daily Picayune in New Orleans in 1900, and
has since undergone multiple editions and printings in 1901, 1906, 1916, 1922, 1928, 1936,
primary object of study because this text, like other cookbooks, is not a neutral, didactic
narrative, and the narratives it contain are far more unstable than previously recognized,
particularly in terms of how identity is articulated and negotiated across the Atlantic.25 The
Picayune offers a narrative that moves through post-emancipatory moments within the U.S. and
the Caribbean to show a relationship between the cookbook, labor, and concepts of whiteness
and blackness. But perhaps most critically, it model a systems of exchange between author,
reader, and cook that I wish to trouble. The genre of the cookbook purports a relationship

25 There are many other nineteenth-century cookbooks equally worthy of study. Others include Malinda Russell’s A
Domestic Cookbook (1866); Hannah Glasse’s The Art of Cookery, Made Plain and Easy (1747); Amelia Simmons’
American Cookery, the first known American cookbook (1796); Robert Roberts’ The House Servant’s Directory: A
Monitor for Private Families (1827), the first book to be commercially published by a black American man; Abby
Fishers’ What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking, the second cookbook published by a black female
American (and possible former slave) (1881); Eliza Leslie’s collection of cookbooks such as Seventy-Five Receipts
for Pastry, Cakes, and Sweetmeats (1828) and Directions for Cookery, in its Various Branches (1837); Mary
Randolph’s The Virginia Housewife (1838), which was reprinted nineteen times before the Civil War; and Fanny
Farmer’s Boston Cooking-School Cook Book, which has thirteen editions, from 1896 until 1990. Many of these and
other American cookbooks have been digitized and can be found at Feeding America: The Historic American
Cookbook Project, a project by Michigan State University: digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/index.html
between author(s) and reader(s). But the agents involved are actually a more complex network that is neither given nor consistent. For instance, a cookbook might be written with an imagined audience of a white woman in mind. That white woman might then inform her slave or domestic servant on how to cook. Or the audience might be, in the case of the *Jamaica Cookery Book*, ostensibly white women or upper-class creole women, but the cookbook may have been used by other creoles or black populations. There are countless models of authorship and readership for the cookbook, and I’m interested in how these agents announce themselves within the recipes they produce, and which agents are left invisible. We might begin with a literary relationship between Author and Reader. But cookbooks present a third agent—the cook—who may not be the reader, and may or may not be the author. Then, of course, there’s the object of the text itself, which cuts across all the lines.

Figure 5: Cookbook and textual exchange

In the cookbooks I read in this chapter we can see the following agents and networks:

- white middle class woman addressing an audience of other white middle class women and creole women (Sullivan’s *Jamaica Cookery Book*)
white middle class men (who have gathered the recipes of black women), addressing an audience of white middle class woman (who might also then teach recipes to domestic servants) 

*Picayune Creole Cookery*

Each of these cookbooks contains a complex authorship and readership that presents itself within the headnotes and recipes. The authorship is different, but the intended readership is similar: regardless of who was actually doing the cooking, the address of a cookbook almost always seems to be white women. I point to the multiple agents involved in the actual labor of cooking in order to expand the model of the cookbook from a white middle-class model of the family, and to highlight the histories and invisible labor underscoring the genre’s production and reception. The word “recipe” comes from “recipiere,” which means both giving and receiving. Janet Floyd and Laurel Forster define it as a “process of exchange”, where “the instructions that appear to tie down the form of a dish to be shared exist in a perpetual state of exchange” (Floyd and Forster 6). In my discussion of the *Picayune*, I attend to the narratives within the headnotes of the recipes to root out the “little secrets” and stories M.F.K. Fisher warned about. But I first want to model a way of reading cookbooks that attends to the particular ingredients listed to see how the commodities I’ve discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 play out across systems of knowledge exchange. To do this, I compare recipes for salt fish across three cookbooks—the *Picayune Creole Cookbook*, the *Jamaica Cookery Book*, and the Fannie Farmer’s *The Boston Cooking-School Cookbook* (1896) to consider ingredients in terms of their accessibility and their presumed edibility, inedibility, and understandability (when does eating salt fish seem like a good idea?).

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26 B.W. Higman writes that “From the middle of the eighteenth century, English cookbooks included “West Indian” recipes. For example, the fifth edition of *The Art of Cookery* by Hannah Glasse, published in 1755, contained
Chapter 2, which put salt labor and production on the literal map of the Atlantic. In these three recipes for a salt fish dish, how do ingredient lists function as sets of particularized knowledge? In his study on Southern cuisine, David Shields carefully considers ingredients as one part of defining cuisines—the other parts include “perceptions and consciousness” (345). In closely attending to the perceptions, consciousness, and rhetoric of recipes, I want to bring to the fore the types of ingredients, recipes, and origins of food that were popular in the cultural space of the nineteenth century and their relation to the geography of colonialism. I study these three cookbooks in particular because I’m interested to see how exchange—of ingredients, knowledge—plays out across a canonical cookbook like Fannie Farmer’s, as well as within the first Caribbean cookbook to be published.

Salt Fish and Akees: The Jamaica Cookery Book

The Jamaica Cookery Book was written by Caroline Sullivan, the mistress of a Jamaican house, and published in Kingston in 1893. The second edition of Sullivan’s cookbook was published in 1897, then was lost until it discovered within a private collection in 1984. A revised version was released in 2000 and again in 2003 under the title Classic Jamaican Cooking: Traditional Recipes and Herbal Remedies. Scant is known about Caroline Sullivan, including why she lived in Jamaica or for how long, but her references to English cookery, island newcomers, and sending these recipes back to England, suggest that she was a British woman who resided in Jamaica for some time. Any other information about her must be gleaned from the text itself, where she positions herself as a white creole who has lived in Jamaica long enough to collect and curate a collection of recipes, but not long enough to self-identity as a

elaborate instructions on how ‘To dress a turtle the West Indian way.’ ...No doubt West Indian planters and merchants, and their wives, possessed copies of such cookbooks but they did not reprint them or produce works defining a particular ‘West Indian’ cuisine” (79).
Jamaican native. The *Jamaica Cookery Book* remains the earliest known English-language cookbook published in the Caribbean (Higman 79).

Sullivan dedicates an entire section to salt fish and explicitly addresses readers for whom salt fish might be unpalatable:

> It is surprising to most new-comers, to find that in Jamaica there is hardly a more popular dish among the natives and often among the upper classes than the despised salt fish, eaten at home not from choice, but as a sort of penitential dish. Here, it is the almost daily, and certainly the favourite food of the people generally; and cooked, *as they cook it*, it cannot fail to please the most fastidious.

(19)

The first recipe Sullivan provides in this category is for Salt Fish and Akees:

*Salt Fish and Akees*

One lb. of saltfish  
The fruit of twelve ackee pods  
Lard, butter and black pepper.

Soak the salt-fish over night. Put it on in cold water to boil, otherwise it hardens: throw off the first water and put it on again to boil. Carefully pick the ackees free from all red inside, which is dangerous, and boil them for about twenty minutes; add them to the saltfish which is then cut in small pieces; add some lard, butter and pepper. Some prefer the saltfish and ackees mashed together and the melted lard and butter poured over the top.

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A note about the Caribbean cookbook print culture more generally. B.W. Higman explains that “In the Caribbean and the Americas generally, printing followed on the heels of European colonization and served as a tool of the European civilizing mission. The Caribbean became a major producer of food, and manuals were written to guide this production in its agricultural and labor aspects during the period of slavery” (Higman 79). Higman puts forth several possibilities for the dearth of early Caribbean cookbooks, despite the focus of both high- and low-culture food within the planter class. He suggests that the rise of absentee planters meant that the market for cookbooks was comparatively low (80).
Although Sullivan provides a preface for readers and directly addresses newcomers, the recipe offers a number of assumptions about both recipe and process. First, she takes it for granted that readers would know what ackees are and how to find them (ackees are a fruit native to West Africa that was likely imported to Jamaica by way of the slave trade). Second, she cautions cooks to carefully pick the ackees out and avoid the “dangerous” red inside, without explaining which part of the “red” might be dangerous, or why. Lastly, Sullivan takes two foods that recall the slave trade: the ackee and the salt fish, and, in her appeal to “newcomers,” portrays them as high-end cuisine “among the upper classes”—something that likely would have been unimaginable to Mary Prince or other salt pond laborers. B.W. Higman argues that the arrival of the first regional Caribbean cookbook was self-consciously titled “Jamaican”: Sullivan’s cookbook would have “reflected the resurgence of the plantation, particularly through the banana, and the arrival of a new kind of white ‘settler’ and visitor” after the collapse of the sugar industry (80). Throughout, Sullivan is engaged in a translation among British, creole, and Jamaican cultures; her strategy of invoking a “they” and “the natives” acts as a mode of authorization (in that she has the knowledge necessary to translate, explain, and present Jamaican recipes) while invoking a kind of cosmopolitanism to suggest that “they” know what they do, she knows what “they” do, and now the reader will know as well. “They” is not a neutral pronoun. In her use of pronouns and careful rhetorical positioning, Sullivan distributes not only a collection of recipes, but particular cultures of taste. Sullivan would have been addressing both short- and long-term visitors to Jamaica, those who would stay and make a home and those who would return to England, equipped with the knowledge and experience of salt fish and googoo peas. I want to compare the ingredients of this recipe with two other similar recipes: a recipe for boiled

28 The cookbook is organized into sections, beginning with Soups (Turtle-Soup, Calilu, Pepper Pot), Fish, Salt-Fish, Meat, Vegetables, Puddings and Preserves, Ices, Fruits, Cakes, Biscuits &c., Savouries and Sauces, Drinks, Meals for Small Families, and Household Hints.
codfish from *The Picayune Creole Cookbook*, and a recipe for Creamed Salt Fish in Fannie Farmer’s cookbook.

*La Morue Bouillie, from The Picayune Creole Cookbook*

**Boiled Codfish**

La Morue Bouillie

- Codfish.
- 3 Dozen Oysters.
- 1 Tablespoonful of Butter. 1 Tablespoonful of Flour.
- 2 Gills of Fresh Cream or Milk.
- The Oyster Water.
- Salt and Pepper to Taste.
- A Dash of Cayenne.

Boil the Codfish about thirty or forty minutes, after soaking overnight; drain and serve with an Oyster Sauce, or Sauce aux Hultres, prepared as follows: Make a Cream Sauce (see recipe), only use, in this case, the strained juice of the oyster to blend the flour and butter, and add the rich cream or milk to make up the desired quantity. Scald the oysters in their own water about three minutes, and then add to the sauce, mixing thoroughly, seasoning with salt, pepper and Cayenne, using preferably celery salt; let it boil up once and serve with the boiled Codfish. Egg Sauce (see recipe) may also be used with Boiled Codfish, but is not to be compared to the Oyster Sauce.

*Creamed Salt Codfish (from The Fannie Farmer Cookbook)*

Pick salt codfish in pieces, and soak in lukewarm water, the time depending upon hardness and saltiness of the fish. Drain, and add one cup Thin White Sauce. Add one beaten egg just before sending to table. Garnish with slices of hard boiled eggs. Creamed Codfish is better made with cream slightly thickened in place of Thin White Sauce.

The Picayune’s recipe is a more complex take on the one with which Sullivan begins her book. The ingredients would have been accessible and recognizable, but the regional twist is the inclusion of oysters, a French-inspired cream sauce, and the use of cayenne and celery salt.

Meanwhile, Farmer’s recipe offers a starting point for beginner cooks: here, the ingredients are
simple, almost austere (cod, egg), widely understood and accessible. There are, to recall the M.F.K. Fisher quote at the start of this chapter, no “frills” and no “ambiguities.” As far as “little secrets,” the secrets that belie this simple dish are in the “secret” history of salt cod and its origins as an inexpensive food that drove racialized human bondage.

**In Search of Zizi: The Picayune Creole Cookbook**

But the "bandana and tignon" are fast disappearing from our kitchens.

*Picayune Creole Cookbook*, Introduction to the First Edition

In 1900, an anonymous staff member of the *Daily Picayune* newspaper visited Louisiana households and estates to interview black domestic workers and write down “from their lips the exact formulae by which the famous Creole dishes are prepared” (“Creole Cookery. A Book Which Reveals the Secrets of the Louisiana Kitchen,” *Daily Picayune*, April 15, 1900, 6. qtd in Fertel 10). From there, recipes were tested for authenticity and practicality (likely, as Fertel argues, by a white male chef) before being printed and published as *The Picayune Creole Cookbook*. Although the text proclaims that “The following recipes, gathered with care from the best Creole housekeepers of New Orleans, have been handed down from generation to generation by the old negro cooks, and preserved in all their delightful combinations by their white Creole mistresses” (35), it is unknown how closely the recipes in the cookbook resemble the originals. White men and women were thus charged with the mission to save Creole cookery—the cookery of black, enslaved and formerly enslaved women—from extinction: white men to test, publish, and approve, white women to receive the recipes and cook them for their families.
The Picayune Creole Cookbook’s ability to articulate a culinary landscape of the Atlantic hinges on the exchange, appropriation, and caricature of a non-white heritage. This text is about the formation of community, a community that was formed upon histories and very recent memories of labor and production. The cookbook is motivated by the loss of the mammy figure as much as it is inspired by her culinary skills. The Picayune Creole Cookbook announces its stakes early and often: although, the introduction explains, a cookbook of this type would have once been a “useless addition” to one’s kitchen, the increasing loss of black cooks has made the preservation and publication of Creole recipes “a necessity” (1). This necessity was rooted not in nostalgia alone but in taste, the morality and virtue that home cooking ensured. The Introduction notes that “good cooking operates to the greatest extent in the preservation of the domestic peace and happiness of a family cannot be gainsayed” (8). The introduction to the Picayune also echoes some of the tenets of frugality and health of the home economics movement: that good cooking can be done frugally and lead to a heightened sense of morality. Put another way, one might practice good morals and good taste by way of cooking, and one might practice cooking to achieve good taste and morals. As the introduction proclaims, “The moral influences of good cooking cannot be too forcibly insisted upon” (6). The woman of the household is thus charged with the responsibility of cookery in order to “preserve [her husband’s] equanimity of temper” and to provide her children “that most precious of all gifts ‘a healthy mind in a healthy body’” (6). What’s at stake is “how to live” (7), and the stakes are so high that the cookbook eschews estimates or guesswork (“she is not left to the chance of

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29 Rian Fertel explains the use of the term “Creole” in the cookbook’s title and throughout the text: “Used today, and historically, as both a noun and an adjective to signify racial, cultural, ethnic, and local identity, ‘Creole’ can also be used to refer to social standing. During the colonial era, the term was applied as a signifier to denote both excellence, by New Worlders, and degeneracy, by colonial Europe. In French and Spanish colonial Louisiana, ‘Creole,’ in its simplest iteration, designated local birth—be it people, animals, or vegetables—from a fusion of American, African, or European parentage; ‘Creole became a way to commodify local production” (16).
guessing accidentally at the proper proportions of component parts of any dish, but the relative proportions of all ingredients are given with accuracy”), and instead endeavors to articulate exact measurements “for dishes for a family of six.” Fertel identifies how the first four editions seemed to be aimed as the “white female consumer” while also invoking the “mammy character as chief cook” (11).\textsuperscript{30} It is curious, then, that the publication of this wildly successful cookbook hinged upon a white audience wishing to appropriate the so-called secrets of their black antebellum cooks.

But there are other motives for the publication of The Picayune, and they are directly related to a shifting makeup of households in the decades following the Civil War. As Yentsch explains, “In practice, the war tore apart the style of cooking epitomized by the plantation kitchen, yet it endured, rock-solid, romanticized, and aggrandized, in mythic history” (Yentsch 74). Perhaps the most enduring romanticized image of the plantation kitchen is the mammy figure. In many ways, the Picayune responded to a new model of domesticity by charging white women to shore up a romanticized culinary and cultural past. Specifically, the editors saw a need to instruct women who, having lost their enslaved cooks and, in many cases, their domestic servants as well, now had to cook for themselves. “Here, as elsewhere,” the Introduction explains, “she who had ruled as the mistress of yesterday became her own cook to-day; in nine cases out of ten the younger darkies accepted their freedom with alacrity, but in many ancient families the older Creole “négresse,” as they were called, were slow to leave the haunts of the old cuisine and the families of which they felt themselves an integral part.” In such “ancient families,” it is presumed that the young women of the household learn cooking secrets from the

\textsuperscript{30} Later editions, Fertel explains, saw a shift in both authorship and intended readership from the domestic, feminized, private space of the household to the “masculinity of the private restaurant kitchen.” He explains how “culinary proprietorship changed hands from African American female domestics to white (mostly) male professional chefs and businessmen...From 1936 onward (1938, 1942, 1945, 1947, 1954, 1966, 1971), the Creole Cook Book reverted to a standardized white, male-centric historical narrative of New Orleans cooking. It was not until the last two editions (1987 and 1989) that this racialized and gendered history disappeared” (11-12).
‘nègresse,”: “For one of the most significant changes and one of the saddest, too, in this old city, is the passing of the faithful old negro cooks—the ‘mammies,’ who felt it a pride and honor, even in poverty, to cling to the fortunes of their former masters and mistresses.” With the death of the “death” of a real-life mammy figure came the birth of a caricatured, romanticized mammy figure. In the bemoaning of the loss of the days of the “bandana and tignon” is a call for the “new white” to take up the cause of tending to her household, a task she might accomplish by cooking the historically and nostalgically tinged dishes from The Picayune Creole Cookbook:

“As the authors lament the passing of the “bandana and tignon,” (tignon is a turban headband worn by Creole Louisiana women) they refer a “new colored woman” while addressing a “new white”—women who must learn to cook for themselves. The cookbook thus becomes a way to shore up Creole cookery, elevate it to a “lost art,” and preserve its secrets for “future generations.” It does this through presenting a series of recipes that have ostensibly been attributed, influenced, or approved by the “old colored woman.” In this way, the Picayune Creole Cookbook defines the white kitchen by depicting the post-bellum mammy myth of the ultimate slave matriarch: a smiling, enslaved woman who happily cooked for the white plantation family and who, after the war, stayed in their employment out of a sense of loyalty and love. The mammy figure is understood as being born out of a desire to define feminine virtue
for white women. According to M.M. Manring, “her place in the kitchen is the key to understanding her place in white southern ideology, both male and female, antebellum and postbellum” because the presence of the mammy in a kitchen “kept white women out of it, defining not only the proper place of black women but of white women as well” (8). Research by Doris Witt, Micki McElya, Deborah White, and Manring has looked at how the mammy figure and Aunt Jemima trope has disavowed the actual contributions made not only by black female slaves but also other disenfranchised women while acting as a “site where the statuses of many other demographic groups in addition to African American women were altered according to the needs of an ever-changing country” (Witt 39). Manring further defines how Aunt Jemima’s gendered body becomes the site of “white male efforts to keep both black and white women under their control” (23). The history of scholarship around the mammy figure has largely focused on how her image is used for marketing products while restoring a romantic “moonlight and magnolias” antebellum relationship between race, slavery, and homemaking.\footnote{31} Earlier I proposed that readings of nineteenth-century Atlantic cookbooks reveal the complex and often fraught exchanges between the author, the reader and the cook, exchanges that interrupt the cookbook’s narrative of “home.” This, I argue, can be seen in the “mammy plot” of cookbooks like The Picayune Creole Cookbook that present the black mammy figure while simultaneously disavowing her. Mammy is invoked throughout the Picayune Creole Cookbook—in prefatory images, in references in recipe headnotes, in the editors’ justification for the recipes they present, and in the “secrets from Old Creoles” that are sprinkled throughout. Her presence and absence

\footnote{31}{In particular, Deborah White sees the Jezebel figure and the Mammy figure as the manifestations of the violence done to slave bodies, and argues that the Victorian ideal of womanhood is partly responsible for the romanticized domestic image invoked by Mammy. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders suggests the “Mamification era of the nation” occurred between 1820s and 1935 (Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory). See also M.M. Manring (Slave in a Box), Toni Tipton-Martin (The Jemima Code), and Micki McElya (Clinging to Mammy: the Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America).}
point to a rupture between the agents involved in the exchange of recipe and culture: that is, the exchange of recipes is not a one-to-one transaction, but instead relies upon multiple agents, appropriation, and modes of labor.

The cookbook’s introduction also offers a culinary genealogy of how knowledge was passed between white and black cooks within the Louisiana Creole household: “Creole negro cooks of nearly two hundred years ago, carefully instructed and directed by their white Creole mistresses, who received their inheritance of gastronomic lore from France, where the art of good cooking first had birth, faithfully transmitted their knowledge to their progeny, and these, quick to appreciate and understand, and with a keen intelligence and zeal born of the desire to please, improvised and improved upon the products of the cuisine of Louisiana’s mother country.” This passage, a sort of circular gastronomic genealogy, identifies the figures of the cooks and how they changed from mistresses, to slaves, to servants, and now, for the readers of the cookbook, back to mistresses or ladies of the household either cooking for themselves or instructing their servants in how to prepare food. This genealogy also draws a broader geographical map of where this knowledge originated. Rather than originating within fixed national borders, it extends throughout the Atlantic to Europe, where it comingles and becomes something new within New Orleans. The act of cooking is understood as a kind of knowledge that must be taught and passed on in order to sustain. This knowledge stems from both folklore

and from “birth,” something that is both passed down and embodied in one’s birth. This passing-on of knowledge is in itself a kind of cultural transaction or exchange, one that becomes socially authorized as it appears in print form. Rian Fertel suggests that The Picayune Creole Cook Book “made the kitchen safe for a new generation of white bourgeois homemakers by reinforcing their presumed cultural and racial superiority over African American women, who had long presided over the stovetop” (Fertel 17). Included within the frontispiece of the second edition is an illustration of a jaunty, dancing frog, attired like a waiter with a tailed jacket and bowtie, a hand towel draped across one arm. One hand holds a fork and knife and the other holds a steaming platter of food. The frog-butler is in motion: his face is upturned toward the sky in a somewhat formal air, and one leg is up, suggesting that he is moving forward.
Figure 6: From the *Picayune Creole Cookbook*

He is accompanied by a short poem:

I’m the Picayune’s weather prophet,

It’s Froggie so faithful and true;

“Tante Zoe” has asked me to help her

In serving so nicely to you,

The dishes The Picayune bade her

Prepare as a Creole cook can,
That men might grow wiser and better,

And happiness reign in the land.

The Picayune frog (which the text later reveals is the mascot of the journal) is used as a stand-in for a butler or waiter, calling to mind French cuisine and customs, which were certainly an influence of Creole cooking (also causing one to wonder whether the food upon his platter is, in a cruelly recursive imaginary, frog). While professing to be “faithful and true,” “Froggie” is a stand-in for the mammy figure, here imagined as “Tante Zoe,” who is the only one capable of producing dishes for men. Food is imbued with particular powers: it can sharpen minds (“grow wiser”) and influence moral character (“and better”), leading to “happiness” not just within the individual but across “the land.” That the domestic can influence the outside marketplace speaks to the idea that the domestic and the public were not so strictly divided. As food moves out of the kitchen and into the dining room, it also moves out of the boundaries of the private and the public into the public sphere. I am particularly interested in the figure of “Tante Zoe” invoked here and throughout the cookbook. An illustration of “Zoe” is featured in the second edition with the caption “A Creole Negro Cook (Tante Zoe, with Tureen of Gumbo File).”
Figure 7: Tante Zoe with Tureen of Gumbo File

Here we see Zoe, complete with bandana, tignon, and apron, facing the reader with a smile on her face and a pot of gumbo in her hands, her sleeves rolled up, ready to serve. Her image is intended to authenticate the “Creoleness” of the recipes that follow, but her voice remains missing. Instead, the editors of the collection details Zoe’s secrets and the ways of the “old Creoles,” without ever having Zoe speak for herself. Zoe instead becomes an aesthetic object that
reinforces the white female reader’s “new” version of home. The shifting roles in the household reverberated within the marketplace, and the mammy character began to emerge to “sell a multiplicity of southern food commodities” (Fertel 17). Thus, readers of the *Picayune Creole Cookbook* would have been familiar with this image of the mammy and what she represented: a triad of the food itself, the process of preparing it, and a nostalgic past. Fertel explains how the mammy figure began to emerge between the 1820s and 1935 to market and sell food and food-related commodities (Fertel 17) such as Aunt Jemima and pancakes. “Like her precursors, the big-breasted mammies of post-Civil War lore, Aunt Jemima prepares and is food; she/it is the ever-smiling source of sustenance for infants and adults (Witt *Black Hunger* 22). Witt suggests the image of the mammy was set up in opposition to the burgeoning “domestic science” movement of New England, whereby recipes were becoming standardized and food was valued not only for its taste but primarily for its nutritive qualities (*Black Hunger* 55). In the *Picayune Creole Cookbook*, the mammy figure is referenced and gestured to throughout, but in many ways she is as absent as she is present. In the exchange of recipes from Creole cooks to white editors to white female readers, what’s immediately lost in translation is the actual voice of the Creole cook.

“Tante Zoe” appears within the headnotes of recipes, preparing morning coffee “in her quaint, guinea-blue dress and bandana ‘tignon’” (10). She has the “secret” knowledge of how to prepare a good cup of coffee (10), including where the coffee beans should come from. She appears elsewhere throughout the cookbook, including in a recipe named after her for a “Sally Lunn” or “Pain à la Vielle Tante Zoë.” The cookbook explains how “Sally Lunn is nothing more than the old breakfast dish known to the Creoles for generations as “Pain à la Vielle Tante Zoë” (407). These recipes, and stories behind recipes, become performative; they are a way to *perform*
memories of the bandana-and-tignon days, and they are always already meant to be performed by southern white women. In addition to Zoe the cookbook references a recurring mammy figure character called Zizi. Zizi first appears in a chapter on fruit syrups:33

If you enter a well-regulated Creole household, the first thing Madame will do will be to regale you with a glass of Lemonade, or “Iced Orgeat,” or “Iced Pineapple,” etc. The syrups are put up and bottled by Madame herself, and are always at hand. Old “Tante Zizi,” in bandana and tignon, knows the customs of the household well, and does not need to be told by Madame to prepare a nice, cooling glass of ‘Sirop’ for her guest. In a few moments you will see her enter the parlor or sitting-room with a dainty silver salver, covered with a snowy napkin, and bearing, according to the number of visitors, the glasses of iced ‘Sirop.’ Of an evening, as the family sit out on the ‘Esplanade’ or the gallery to enjoy the freshening breezes, she will come again unbidden to bring her ‘people’ the daily refreshing summer drink. It is all these pretty little customs and touches that make life in a Creole household so pleasant and full of variety. (346)

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33 Although Zoe and Zizi are used almost interchangeably to represent the mammy figures of the era, there is some evidence that Zoe may have been based on a local figure called “Tante Zoe” who died around the time that the Picayune Creole Cookbook was being put together. On November 6, 1896, the Times-Picayune of New Orleans (the same newspapers that would publish The Picayune Creole Cookbook) published an obituary of Marie Madeleine Zoe, also known as “Tante Zoe.” However, this “Zoe” wasn’t a black cook, but a “famous and revered woman in the French Quarter” who lived from 1803 to 1896. In her obituary, she is said to have “exercised a strange yet beautiful influence upon the lives of nearly three-fourths of the Creole firesides.” Curiously enough, a question frames the obituary that also frames my reading of the cookbook: “Who was Tante Zoe?” The obituary explains her as being born on a plantation to “noble ancestry,” and as someone who was equally comfortable at the opera as she was tending to the sick: she “hover[ed] like a meteor between two worlds - one the gay, brilliant world of fashion, the other the poverty-stricken homes of the wretched.” http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=127422575 My thanks to Rian Fertel for providing the link to her obituary and for suggesting a possible connection between New Orlean’s esteemed “Tante Zoe” and the mammy figure of the Picayune Creole Cookbook.
In this passage, the reader is positioned as a visitor greeted by “Madame,” or mistress of a plantation household. The importance of having a well-regulated household is emphasized elsewhere throughout the cookbook: early on, the editors assert “Nothing is ever lost in a well-regulated Creole kitchen” (35). But although the Madame of a well-regulated household is the first to offer a visitor a cool drink, it is Zizi who performs the labor of not only pouring that drink but also anticipating the needs of Madame and her guests. This simple scene demonstrates a cookbook narrative that articulates a sense of “home” and good taste by distinguishing between the roles of white and black laborer. Zizi/Zoe is the one responsible for maintaining the well-regulated household so that it runs smoothly, and she is described in terms of a Creole aesthetic: her “bandana and tignon” of “Old Tante Zizi” stand in contrast to the dainty serving platter, the fresh white linens, and other “pretty little customs and touches” that are enabled by her labor. Recipes for various syrups follow, but the headnote is a recipe in and of itself on how to create and maintain a post-War Southern aesthetic.

Zizi also appears in a recipe for biscuits that echoes many of the themes of a 1899 plantation poem by Miss Howard Weedon called “Beaten Biscuit. “Beat Biscuit,” which Doris Witt explains was part of a volume of plantation school poems, narrates the recipe exchange for biscuits in a way that obscures the secrets of the cook (“An’ rules don’t no more mek a cook/ Den sermons mek a Saint”) even as it purports to reveal them (“Of course I’ll gladly give de rule/I meks beat biscuit by”).

Of course I’ll gladly give de rule  
I meks beat biscuit by,  
Dough I ain’t sure dat you will mek  
Dat bread de same as I.

‘Case cookin’s like religion is—  
Some’s ‘lected, an’ some ain’t,  
An’ rules don’t no more mek a cook
Den sermons mek a Saint.

Well, ‘bout de ‘grediances required
   I needn’t mention dem,
Of course you know of flour and things,
   How much to put, an’ when;

But soon as you is got dat dough
   Mixed up all smoove an’ neat,
Den’s when your genius gwine to show,
   To get dem biscuit beat!

Two hundred licks is what I gives
   For home-folks, never fewer,
An’ if I’m ‘pectin’ company in,
   I gives five hundred sure!


Similarly, the Picayune Creole Cookbook provides a recipe for biscuits while also noting the one component that home chefs likely will not have—Zizi herself: “It was the pride of the ancient Creole cooks as to how long they could beat these biscuits without growing tired. The steady ‘beat-beat’ would gently echo through the olden manors from the kitchen in the rear, and every one knew what to expect when Tante Zizi came in smiling with her beautiful biscuit, that had risen fresh, sweet and light without yeast powder or salt” (400). This scene summarizes the results of culinary labor from a position of knowledge, but Zizi does not speak for herself; instead, she is spoken for. And although the text imagines itself to be authoritative and instructive, much of Zizi’s secrets remain untold. Like the protagonist of “Beaten Biscuit,” there still remains much of Zizi and Zoe that is ultimately, unknowable. This unknowability creates a tension in the cookbook: even with written instructions, the “knowing” of these dishes relies on secrets and interpretation that are held by the mammy figure who is never given a voice. Instead,
she is represented in terms of labor, or what I’ve referred to as “aestheticized labor”, where the beating of the biscuits is not conceived of as work but as a point of both pride and inherent skill among the cooks. Even the image of Zoe presented in the front matter obscures the labor of cooking: labor is hinted at (her rolled-up sleeves, the sheen of her face, her hair tied up in a bandana), but what is presented to readers is the product or the object—a tureen of gumbo file. This is one of the paradoxes of the cookbook, one of the most critical ways in which we might read them “strange”: a cookbook is meant to be a book all about labor, an instruction manual and guide. But in its paratext, language, images, and source materials, the products of cooking are divorced from its labor and its history. Zoe’s gumbo file is presented smilingly, in a tureen, ready to be consumed, with little thought to the process, production, people, and origins. Labor is erased from cookbooks in order to articulate a narrative of southern white domesticity.

The unknowability of Zoe and Zizi is also in the multiple references to how “old Creoles” do things. The cookbook depends on its ability to teach the “new white” the methods and secrets of the “old Creoles.” Throughout, “the Creoles” are referred to while the unnamed authors of the cookbook assume a distance from them, while disclosing their so-called secrets to the readers. The repetition of reference to the “old Creole” way of doing things is a twist on one-to-one exchange and transmission of recipes. Recipes aren’t handed down or passed from cook to cook or mother to daughter, but instead the exchange relies on the aestheticized image of Creole labor to create new concepts of “good taste.” For example, “If the coffee appears muddy, or not clear, some of the old Creoles drop a piece of charcoal an inch thick into the water, which settles it and at once makes it clear” (11) and “good old Creoles long ago found out that coloring matters, whether in liquid form or in balls or tablets” [for soups] (14). At times the knowledge of “old Creoles” is extolled, and at others, dismissed, like the “darky tradition” involved in making turtle
soup (20-21). This recipe offers conflicting narratives. One is that the recipe will allow the reader access to and secrets of a longer Creole history. A second is that one must be a “good Creole cook” to prepare the soup in a truly authentic way. And the third is that only some of this knowledge is worth retaining, while others can be dismissed as “darky traditions.”

As recipes move into print, characters and domestic rules are produced. In addition to Zoe and Zizi, other characters presented in the *Picayune Creole Cookbook* form a scene of the marketplace in New Orleans: The markets and street food of nineteenth-century New Orleans were a busy, colorful, and noisy scene of buying and selling, particularly for black men and women: “City life offered many ways to make money within the food world and gave opportunities to increasingly more free black folk to earn enough to buy homes or freedom for relatives. Energetic women took to cooking at the market and peddling door to door. By 1823 Savannah’s free women kept shops, baked pastries, and prepared and sold sausage” (Yentsch 71). Like Zoe and Zizi, the cookbook depicts the figures of the New Orleans marketplace in nostalgic terms. The “Cala woman”, a particularly well-known New Orleanian character, was a woman who sold calas, a doughnut made with rice flour that originated from enslaved Africans working on Louisiana rice plantations.

Like Zoe and Zizi before her, the Cala women are written about in nostalgic terms: “The Cala women have almost all passed away, for, as remarked at the beginning of this book, there is a ‘new colored woman’ in New Orleans, as elsewhere in the south, and she disdains all the pretty olden industries and occupations which were a constant and genteel source of revenue to the old

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34 References to the “old Creoles” and “old Creole” way of cooking is prevalent throughout the cookbook, with many more instances worthy of analysis. Recipes for ash cake; soups; apple fritters; beignets; pie crust; Johnny cake; butter cake; café noir; creole gumbo; stage planks or gingerbread; sugar water; oyster soup; callas; crepes, rice dumplings; hominy; sweet potatoes; candy; pralines; and more, contain explicit references to the “old Creoles” or “old negro” ways of cooking.

35 For more on Southern city markets, see David Shield’s *Southern Provisions: The Creation and Revival of a Cuisine*
negro mothers and grandmothers” (184). The Cala woman, like Zoe and Zizi, has become a spectre: “Once in a while, like some ghostly voice of the past, one starts up [the cries of ‘Belle Cala Tout Chaud!’] in bed of an early morning as the weak old voice faintly penetrates your chamber. In a second more it is lost in the distance, and you turn over with a sigh for the good old times and the quaint customs of old Creole days, which gave such a beautiful and unique tinge to the life of the ancient quarter” (184). The lost “Cala women” are also joined by the “Candy woman” and the “Cream Cheese woman,” both black female vendors who sold their creations in the New Orleans streets and markets:

It was a treat to the children of this generation to see the old colored women going about with their great salvers, on which were laid snowy napkins and rows upon rows of beautiful white ‘Candi Tiré,” or “Pulled Candy,” as the name indicated. The old women used to sit in the school yards at the noon recess, and every day their stores were exhausted, whether they had “Pralines,” “La Colle,” or “Candi Tiré.” Each school had its regular “Candy woman,” who made it her duty to be there exactly as the clock struck twelve. Many a faithful old negress helped to support her former mistress in the broken fortunes of the family after the war by her sale of Molasses Candy, Pralines, La Colle, or “Maïs Tactac.” (377)

The ‘Cream Cheese Woman’ is still as common a sight on our New Orleans streets as the Cala woman was in the days gone by. She carries a covered basket in which are a number of small perforated tins in which the cheeses are… (199)

I point to these instances to further illustrate the ideas that I’ve developed throughout this section: the black women of the *Picayune Creole Cookbook* are portrayed for the sake of the
white reader—their labor is hinted at but not recounted; they do not speak for themselves; and
they are used to illustrate a romanticized antebellum past in order to create a stable post-bellum
domestic future. Consider, for instance, how the descriptions of the Cala women, Cream Cheese
Woman, and Candy Woman are set up against the description of the “Ma Belle Créole,” which
the cookbook tells us is a label for young white women (an early iteration of the “Southern
belle”) who throw and attend “crépe” parties in order to meet eligible suitors:

The word would go from mouth to mouth that some great, cheery kitchen in the
rue Esplanade, the rue Royale or the rue Rampart would be at the disposal of the
young folks for the evening for a “crépe” party, and thither the young gallants and
numbers of “ma Belle Créole” would gather, and the dexterity with which a
young lady could toss a “crépe” was often the often sesame to some young man’s
heart.

Young white women were expected to be knowledgeable about making cakes and crepes. About
the “Ma Belle Créole,” we learn that: “There is scarcely a girl who can make a good cake who
does not pride herself upon this accomplishment, and “Ma Belle Créole” is no exception to this
rule. She may not be able to make a “Ratatouille a la Creole,” a “Bisque d’Ecrevisses,” or turn a
pigeon “a la Crapaudine,” but if she knows how to make a “Gateau a l’Archange,” or a “Gateau
d’Amandes,” it will not be long before she will treat you to one of these dainty Creole cakes,
which her “maman” will be sure to tell you “Marguerite” has made all by herself” (289).

There are several stark differences to how “Ma Belle Créole” is portrayed versus the market
women. These young women demonstrate how to use food for family formation: these cake-
baking skills and subsequent parties allow for the formation of heteronormative, white domestic
family structures. Ma Belle Créole is in the act of consumption, while the Cala woman and her
sisters are always in the act of laboring. The black women of the market are discussed in terms of food, not domesticity or family formation. And while the southern belles are discussed in terms of what kinds of cakes they may or may not be able to make, they are not called the “Crépe women”—their value depends upon their beauty, virtue, and ability to create and maintain a home, not on their labor. Their bodies are not metonymic for food, and this is significant. I point to the Cala woman, the Candy woman, and the Cream Cheese woman to consider how the cookbook renders them as edible bodies, a theme that has been written about by Doris Witt (Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity) and Kyla Wazana Tompkins. Tompkins writes, “The seemingly benevolent cultural connections between black bodies and food objects...bring to the forefront the violence and ambivalence of American racial politics in which desire and disgust for black bodies commingle intimately and produce representations of market, parlor, and kitchen cannibalism” (201, “‘Everything ‘Cept Eat Us’: The Antebellum Black Body Portrayed as Edible Body”). Tompkins traces the association with black bodies and food, finding its earliest iterations in nineteenth-century novels like as Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The House of Seven Gables and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Our Nig: “While each of these novels figures this trope differently, given their political projects, in all of these texts the edible black body is linked to white, often female, embodiment” (202). Tompkins also locates this trope across early advertising images and trade cards (of, for instance, black children being eaten by alligators), and the theme of cannibalism in novels and minstrel shows where “the difference between self and other is collapsed through ingestion” (204). Read this way, the stakes of the references to Zoe, Zizi, the Cala Woman, the Cream Cheese Woman, and the Candy woman are much more dire; while the women are portrayed as unknowable and voiceless, they are also portrayed as edible bodies ready to be consumed by the white female readership. In order for the white southern
domestic project to be complete, the black bodies of Zoe, Zizi, and the Cala woman must be consumed. The implications of a cookbook that purports to teach white women the secrets of the Creole kitchen become much darker. Zoe and Zizi are invoked as a way to shape white southern domesticity; in reading cookbooks in the ways I’ve proposed—as literary narratives within an Atlanticist framework—we might look for their traces, but never quite find them. As the recipe for calas proclaim: “But the custom of making Calas still remains. In many an ancient home the good housewife tells her daughters just how ‘Tante Zizi’ made the Calas in her day, and so are preserved these ancient traditional recipes” (184).
Chapter Four: The Politics of Consumption: The Domestic Imaginary of Thanksgiving Literature

Introduction

On October 8, 1869, on the heels of the Congressional passing of the fifteenth amendment, which would grant voting rights to African American men, President Ulysses S. Grant declared a day of thanksgiving to be held on the 18th of November of the same year. His proclamation, which ran in newspapers across the country, exalted the state of the nation and its advancements in commerce, health, husbandry, and wealth. In particular, he notes that “peace has prevailed and its blessings have advanced every interest of the people in every part of the Union; harmony and fraternal intercourse have been restored and are obliterating the marks of the past conflict and estrangement” and “civil and religious liberty are secured to every inhabitant of the land whose soil is trod by none but freeman.” Grant issued this day of thanksgiving so that every American might “unite in the homage and praise due the bountiful Father of all mercy” (*Western Reserve Chronicle*, October 13, 1869). For Grant, the amendment, which stated that “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude,” marked progress toward civil liberties and away from the “past conflict and estrangement” of the Civil War and its aftermath.

The amendment would not become part of the Constitution until the following year in March of 1870; at the time of Grant’s thanksgiving, it was still being debated in state legislatures. One response to both the aims of the amendment and the Thanksgiving holiday came in the form a political cartoon by American iconographer Thomas Nast, published a political cartoon on November 22, 1869 in *Harper’s Weekly*. Titled “Uncle Sam’s
Thanksgiving,” the cartoon constructs a particularly hopeful scene of the promise and effects of universal suffrage through the commensality that a Thanksgiving table enables. In Nast’s image, the relationship between civil and religious liberty and suffrage is clearly connected, where the former can only be achieved by means of the latter.

Figure 8: Uncle Sam’s Thanksgiving by Thomas Nast

Intending to depict the spirit of Thanksgiving Day and invoke feelings of equality, patriotism, and inclusiveness, the image features a gathering of diverse Americans and American immigrants seated around an oval table. In Nast and Grant’s terms, feelings of equality are synonymous with equal access to political power, played out at the site of the Thanksgiving

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36 Nast, a political cartoonist at Harpers from 1862-1886, was the creator of popular American iconography including Santa Claus, the Republican Party elephant, and the Democratic Party donkey. At Harper’s, he also focused on cartoons and editorials about the Civil War and slavery.
table. Two iconic American figures are at either end serving as patriarch and matriarch of the feast: Uncle Sam stands, carving the turkey. Across from him, at the left side of the table, sits Columbia, the female personification of the United States, with her head turned to speak to the Asian man to her right.

Also at the table are men, women, and children from around the world: at Uncle Sam’s table, guests include people of European, African, Middle Eastern, and Asian origin who have gathered together to celebrate and uphold the ideals of self-government and universal suffrage for all citizens of all races, including African American men and immigrants who had become U.S. citizens.
The dining room in which the guests are seated is decorated with portraits of Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Ulysses S. Grant (president at the time of the drawing). A picture of Castle Garden, America’s first immigration center, is depicted behind Uncle Sam, the word “Welcome” printed on the frame. The cartoon is labeled “Uncle Sam’s Thanksgiving, the label flanked by paratext “Come One, Come All” and “Free and Equal.”

“Universal suffrage” is inscribed upon the centerpiece.
Seated around a communal table, Americans of different genders and races are depicted not only as equals, but also as equally invested in coming together to celebrate a common American holiday and, by extension, a common American identity. At Uncle Sam’s proposed Thanksgiving table, a black family sits flanked by a white family and Columbia herself (interestingly, this black family includes a woman who is only visible via the top of her bandana: our invisible “mammy” Zoe, perhaps, appearing beyond the bounds of the cookbook.) Sitting together to eat a meal is meant to imbue in diverse Americans a sense of fellow-feeling and community. Designating an annual day to do that was a political project that replaces a long genealogy of erasure with a social imaginary of equality.

I begin with Nast’s cartoon because it illuminates many of the themes I’ve explored thus far: the idea that reading texts through a gastroaesthetic lens reveals connections between aesthetics and labor, and that foodways can help us read narratives of domesticity and nation-making. In Chapter 1, I discussed how focusing on foodways—in particular, kitchens, cooks, and cakes—maps racialized and domestic labor onto otherwise-familiar tropes of the sentimental domestic tradition, particularly within moments of community and familial formation. I explored the connections between labor and aesthetics in detail through a reading of *The History of Mary Prince* in Chapter 2. My third chapter continued thinking through labor and taste, and production and consumption within food practices, by considering the cookbook as a literary text that ostensibly marks taste and virtue while relying on the erasure and appropriation of racialized labor and its histories. Throughout my project, I have shown how food necessitates talking about
different kinds of racialized and gendered labor. Food facilitates the creation of particular communities—not just of those who eat the same foods but of those who produce it, who write about it, and who cook it. While I’ve focused on the politics and aesthetics of labor and production in other chapters, in this final chapter I examine how communities are formed and sustained via a uniquely American holiday that holds the table and the meal as its center. Taste—and, as I’ve previously outlined, the communities it creates and obscures—figures in the Thanksgiving holiday as a matter of political and social belonging. Communities of taste are enabled by the holiday, and these communities are situated within explicitly political and national moments.

Histories and narratives about Thanksgiving have largely been about the entry of the political into the domestic, wherein its various rituals—homecoming, giving thanks, sitting around one table and eating the same foods—becomes a private “acting out” of what should be happening on the national level. The occasion of Thanksgiving is the occasion of enacting a nation, but despite Nast’s global rendering of American citizens, for many years Thanksgiving remained regional and localized, one-day (as opposed to annual) celebrations, fasts, or feasts to commemorate civil events, wars, and battles. In order to understand its significance and ideas of equality and brotherhood that it purportedly invoked, we first need to understand its history, especially its rise to official American holiday in the mid-nineteenth-century. Historically, Thanksgiving has emerged and re-emerged in response to wars and political events; carving a turkey invokes a national imaginary that attempts to proclaim a fraternity that transcends religion, race, and gender.³⁷ This chapter poses Thanksgiving as a politicized and political

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³⁷ Turkey was not originally part of the 1621 Thanksgiving until after the Civil War, when “turkey won its unique place among celebrants in part because of the marketing efforts of poultry producers in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, who successfully promoted turkey as Thanksgiving’s main dish” (even though it was relatively expensive at the time) (Dennis 101).
occasion that has historically responded and reacted to issues of race, class, and war, and looks at how its proponents and celebrants tried to write—and eat—an ideal of the nation into being. Despite Nast’s hopeful image, the act of Uncle Sam carving a turkey never moved past its symbolic phase, just as the fifteenth amendment took a far longer trajectory to achieving the aims Grant so optimistically laid out in his thanksgiving proclamation. As I’ll explain below, it was President Lincoln, who, five years before Grant’s proclamation, legislated Thanksgiving as an official, annual day of celebration. He did so as a way to reunite a nation torn by the Civil War, while Grant dedicated the Thanksgiving of 1869 to celebrating post-war national progress. For both Grant and Lincoln, Thanksgiving serves as the critical occasion for reflecting on public progress within a private, domestic setting. Put another way, turkey and pumpkin pie are not the only things being consumed on Thanksgiving Day; the act of eating initiates a type of communion wherein myths and narratives about the nation are celebrated and enacted. Such politics of consumption—who is eating, what are they eating, what is being performed and excised from the occasion of the day—collapse the public space of the political with the private space of the dining room. When we focus on politics of consumption, we can read Thanksgiving as a holiday about particular political issues, such as slavery and equality, as well as a holiday about the erasure of racialized individuals from the American table. In sitting around a table and eating in order to activate some semblance of equality and nationhood, participants are doing the work that can’t quite happen in the public, political realm. The texts I examine below demonstrate the rhetoric of (and limitations of) horizontal social relations as enacted through the Thanksgiving table. I also want to read the table itself as text, something that invokes a horizontal sociability in bringing people together.
**Thanksgiving’s Erasures: From Squanto to Slave**

The history of Thanksgiving is about solidifying the story of the nation that is built upon myths and legends of the Native American. In fact, Thanksgiving has erased two non-white populations of Americans from its mythology. First, as I will show in my readings of popular images and texts, in the nineteenth-century African Americans were erased from considerations of what a domestic, private, American holiday should be. Meanwhile, the Native American was put into the Thanksgiving myth, particularly in accounts of the “First Thanksgiving,” where Tisquantum (Squanto) aided the Pilgrims in their feast. This story became popular throughout the early twentieth-century, but it too is one of erasure. James Baker shows how the “Squanto” story is only partially accurate:

An authentic New England Thanksgiving was an officially declared weekday event marked by a day of religious meetings and pious gratitude for God’s favorable providence (and celebratory dinners as well). The 1621 festivities, on the other hand, with their recreations, heathen guest, three-day duration, and no mention of church far more closely resembled a secular English harvest celebration. However, this anomaly had always been considered insignificant in the face of the 1621 event’s traditional identification as the *fons et origo* of our modern holiday (16).

The “original” Thanksgiving, in other words, would have been marked by fasts, not feasts, making the table-and-turkey version an inauthentic account of America’s origins. The American Indian story of Squanto that is performed and rehashed in the popular Thanksgiving story is also one that is romanticized, and obscures the actual conflict and violence against American Indians by colonial settlerism. A colonial ideology meant that a national creation myth was better if the
land that had been “founded” was unoccupied and unclaimed. As Matthew Dennis explains, “white Americans generally preferred Indians as a vanishing race, one that European colonists and then United States citizens would replace” (83). Thanksgiving might otherwise be understood in terms of eradications: not only of American Indian culture by the violence of colonial settlerism, but of African Americans from the polity.

Scholars have shown the complicated path the holiday has taken, and its various iterations reveal nineteenth-century anxieties of the home versus the public, including issues of slavery. The politics of the dinner table extend far beyond the space of the dining and the space of the home to encompass sites of labor and unfreedom.\(^\text{38}\) Thanksgiving, then, becomes a locus for thinking through how the political projects of domesticity, freedom, and an American body politic coalesce at the table. This chapter will first discuss a brief account of the multiple histories of Thanksgiving before examining a series of images published in *Harper’s Weekly* that show conflicting depictions of Thanksgiving. Then, through readings of Absalom Jones’ “Thanksgiving sermon” (1808), Henry Bliss’s poem “Thanksgiving,” Sarah Josepha Hale’s *Northwood* (1852), and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “John Inglefield’s Thanksgiving” (1852), I will propose a new story of Thanksgiving: one born out of the politics of a national imaginary that is constructed about vision of a white nation. Images of equality like the one drawn by Nast, featuring men and women from all walks of life gathered around the table, offer one way to think through the possibilities and promises of an American holiday. But such images posit an imaginary—one that is simultaneously hopeful, naive, and politically fraught. What remains to be discussed is how the civic story space of Thanksgiving rhetorically constructs and revises a scene of what *should* be, but isn’t yet.

\(^{38}\) See, in particular, Chapters 1 and 2.
The First Thanksgivings

The contemporary Thanksgiving celebrated by Americans today is an amalgamation of familial homecoming and togetherness, turkeys and pumpkin pies, football and foliage, Pilgrims and Native Americans. Each of these elements includes a long, sometimes complicated, often mythic narrative, but each work in tandem to compose the Norman-Rockwellian image of a uniquely American holiday. Thanksgiving as we know it today began in fits and starts, and there are competing narratives about its origins, its agents, its inventors, and its periodization. The “First Thanksgiving,” we are wont to learn in elementary school, may have its origins in 1620, at Plimoth Plantation. But we might also map the starting points of other thanksgivings, or days of fasting and reflecting, in 1777, when the Continental Congress declared it a holiday, or with the 1789 declaration by George Washington or finally, with Lincoln’s proclamation in 1864. Although the lowercase “thanksgiving” (“giving of thanks”) dates from the 1620s, the proper noun “Thanksgiving Day” didn’t emerge until the 1670s, and wasn’t declared a national holiday until 1864, after years of petitioning by author and editor Sarah Josepha Hale to President Lincoln. In her study on Thanksgiving, Elizabeth Pleck describes the holiday as being “invented—and reinvented—over four major periods of time between the early nineteenth century and about 1930” (774-775). Within this period were smaller, more regional commemorations and celebrations of “giving thanks,” as well as fully fledged “Thanksgiving-ish” holidays like Founders Day that have since fallen off the calendar. And, of course, the origin story of Thanksgiving dates back to the seventeenth century. What is of particular interest

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39 Landing Day, or Forefather’s Day, was a Massachusetts “male-centered celebration of colonization, even conquest, that flourished locally early in the nineteenth century but did not ultimately attain the national prominence of Thanksgiving as an American festive institution” (Dennis 83). Dennis explains how “In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some Americans reached back self-consciously and designated the so-called Pilgrims, among many potential ancestors, as their sacred progenitors, and particular pioneers who founded America in the moment when they first trod on Plymouth Rock. If these forebears first achieved renown for their landing in 1620, they would secure lasting fame for their act of thanksgiving and hospitality in 1621” (83).
to me is in how these inventions and reinventions reflect and deflect national and political
anxieties of their time. This section will trace some of the themes of the origin stories that
surround Thanksgiving, before focusing on its nineteenth-century re-emergence.

In a note included in “Of Plimoth Plantation,” William Bradford describes how, faced
with a length of drought and the threat of a “sore famine” looming from May to July, the
colonists “set apart a solemne day of humiliation, to seek the Lord by humble and fervente
prayer, in this great distrese.” Rain soon followed and Bradford’s account of what many would
later consider the “first Thanksgiving,” is as follows:

Which did so apparently revise and quicken the decayed Corne & other fruits, as
was wonderfull to see, and made the Indeans astonished to behold; and afterwards
the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with enterchange of faire warme
weather, as, through his blessing, caused a fruitfull & liberall harvest, to their no
small comforte and rejoycing. For which mercie (in time conveniente) they also
sett aparte a day of thanksgiveing.

Although the holiday purportedly has its roots in the “fruitfull & liberall harvest” shared between
Pilgrims and Native Americans, the path from Bradford’s “day of thanksgiveing” to Sarah
Josepha Hale’s petition to Lincoln was not a direct one. Prior to Lincoln’s 1863 declaration that
the last Thursday in November will be set aside for American citizens to give thanks to God and
to “reverently humble themselves in the dust and from thence offer up penitent and fervent
prayers and supplications to the Great Disposer of Events for a return of the estimable blessings
of peace, union, and harmony throughout the land” (Lincoln Proclamation 118), hundreds of
thanksgivings were celebrated locally in response to anniversaries, commemorations, military
events, or successful harvests. Such events were particularly popular in New England, where it
was mainly a religious day of giving thanks (Pleck). Although Sarah Josepha Hale may be the “mother” of Thanksgiving, and Lincoln responsible for legislating it into being, Elizabeth Pleck points out that “prior to Lincoln, three presidents, George Washington, John Adams, and James Madison, issued ad hoc proclamations of a national day of thanksgiving” (Pleck 775), Washington to celebrate the adoption of the the Constitution and Madison to celebrate the end of the War of 1812.  

Bradford’s account of the First Thanksgiving has been mythicized into a national creation origin story. Andrew F. Smith argues that the “First Thanksgiving” Pilgrim myth came into fashion in 1841 when Alexander Young re-published a letter written in 1621 by Edward Winslow. Winslow’s letter had first been published in England to attract more settlers to Plimoth Plantation, but was then forgotten until the 1820s. Winslow describes a 3-day event at Plimoth Plantation, where many fowl were hunted and eaten, and with the “Indians coming amonst us, …we entertained and feasted.” In republishing the letter in 1841, Young declared it “the first thanksgiving, the harvest festival of New England” and cited Bradford’s “Of Plimoth Plantation”

40 For a fuller account of the trajectory of Thanksgiving celebrations, see James Baker’s Thanksgiving: A Biography. A Presidential Thanksgiving timeline would look something like this, and would have been focused on reflection, commemoration, and/or fasting during wartime days. These thanksgivings had little if nothing to do with Pilgrims or with feasting, but instead were occasions for public commemorations of nationhood. Sarah Josepha Hale’s version of Thanksgiving would, in the nineteenth-century, draw from these holidays in her appeal for Thanksgiving church services and national giving of thanks. Her version, though, would also include a meal.

• October 3, 1789: George Washington declares first Thanksgiving to be celebrated on November 11, 1789.
• February 19, 1795: Second national Thanksgiving. [In between, New England states continued holding spring, fall, days of thanksgivings.
• May 9, 1798: John Adams declares a “fast day” (but declared no Thanksgivings during his term)
• April 25: 1799: Fast Day (Adams)
• August 20, 1812: James Madison declares wartime fast day
• September 9, 1813: James Madison declares wartime fast day
• January 12 1815: James Madison declares wartime fast day
• April 13, 1815: Madison declares Thanksgiving for conclusion of the War of 1812
• post-1815: New England states maintained spring fast and fall Thanksgiving, and Thanksgiving was celebrated by individual states, mostly in late November or early December. Each year governor would officially declare date, and that’s when labor would begin
• 1863: Lincoln proclaims Thanksgiving as a national holiday
which had been lost and not published in entirety until 1856 as advancing the colonial settler project. Although the Puritans did not indicate that this event would be repeated annually, Young alleged that it was the First Thanksgiving, a model that other New England historians, writers, and teachers followed. This can be attributed in part to other writings that occurred after Lincoln’s decree, such as Reverend Increase N. Tarbox’s “Our New England Thanksgiving, Historically Considered” (1879), B.F. De Costa’s “The Origin of Thanksgiving” (1882), Jane G. Austin’s *Standish of Standish* (1889), William DeLoss Love’s *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (1895), as well as to the school room and educational trends from the 1870s to the Progressive Era. Teachers used the story of the Pilgrims to teach students—particularly immigrant and first-generation children—about a singular American history and identity. It became a familiar story that children could bring home to their immigrant parents, who might then take up the holiday as an American custom and further assimilate—a day when everyone might perform a sense of Americanness. The Pilgrims have long been assigned as the forefathers of Thanksgiving and, by turn, the nation, even though, as Pleck and Matthew Dennis point out, there are many other cultural, national, and ethnic groups who could lay equal claim as “first settlers,” including the Jamestown settlers of 1607, colonizers from Spain and Holland, and, of course, First Nations people. Smith explains one reason why the Pilgrims might have become the agreed-upon symbol of American cultural heritage: the public education system was charged with coming up with a unified story, and, in a post-Civil War era, a southern city such as Jamestown was not as appealing an option as the symbolic birthplace of the nation. This story was furthered in the Progressive era, according to Pleck, who writes that “The Progressive era invention of Thanksgiving made the Pilgrims into the first newcomers who shared the migration experience with subsequent immigrants” (779). Perhaps surprisingly, Hale’s campaign for
Thanksgiving made little reference to the Pilgrims or the First Thanksgiving, with the exception of a brief reference to the Pilgrims in an 1865 editorial in *Godey’s Lady Book*.

However, despite the story of Thanksgiving being one of generosity and equality, the holiday invoked political debate about slavery in the years leading up to and following the Civil War. In his study on the creation of American holidays, Matthew Dennis writes that “Thanksgiving is a special moment when unity and difference are conflated and negotiated” (82). This was particularly true in the antebellum period, when the private space of the home was charged with being the center of virtue and morality around which the family could sustain itself. For some, a holiday like Thanksgiving was one way to reunite families, focus on the domestic, and coalesce as one united nation. Abolitionists were mindful that this could not be accomplished in the face of slavery. Daniel Webster’s speech at the bicentennial celebration of the Pilgrim’s landing in 1820 articulated the sentiment that the nation could not truly be equal as long as men and women were enslaved: “the land is not yet wholly free from the contamination of a traffic, at which every feeling of humanity must for ever revolt, - I mean the African slave-trade. Neither public sentiment, nor the law, has hitherto been able entirely to put an end to this odious and abominable trade” (“Plymouth Oration”). With abolition rhetoric occurring alongside an increasingly public campaign for the holiday, which was already being celebrated in the North, Thanksgiving became known to Southerners as a “Yankee abolitionist holiday” (Dennis 86). The cause of unifying a country torn by slavery was taken up by Sarah Josepha Hale, whose writings I will examine more closely in the sections that follow. Pleck argues that “Hale hoped that a unifying holiday would help avert the prospect of a civil war” (775), and her 17-year-long letter-writing campaign to governors attests to her confidence that a national holiday might be enough to prevent a war. Matthew Dennis writes that Hale’s political purpose was a “politics of
de-politicization” in which Americans might embrace their commonality by forgetting or ignoring the issues that divided them (90). However, Dennis shows how Thanksgiving was deeply political even in the 1620s and 1630s, particularly with disagreements between the separating and non-separating Congregationalists about adding secular/pagan days of celebration to the calendar. He writes, “dissention and political controversy proved inescapable in New England, and the manipulation of the calendar by declaring extraordinary days of humiliation or thanksgiving functioned to settle social and political tensions as well as to aggravate them” (92).

Thanksgiving-related political turmoil continued throughout the 1680s, especially in terms of deciding who was authorized to proclaim such occasion and what occasions deserved or didn’t deserve to be publicly celebrated. Through the revolutionary and early national period, Thanksgiving proclamations and prayers were sometimes partisan, such as one decreed by a Federalist minister after Jefferson was elected, in which he said “O Lord, endow the President with a goodly portion of Thy grace, for Thou, O Lord, knowest he needs it” (Dennis 95). In the antebellum period, Thanksgiving continued to be a time to infuse the political and the personal, and it varied between “feast” and “fast” depending upon the solemnity or celebration of the occasion. Feasting, instead of fasting, also became a way to practice charity and feeding those who could not afford to do so, something for which Hale in particular advocated. In the South, Dennis writes, “governors sometimes feared the feast as an abolitionist Trojan horse” (96) whereby the day took on the work of social and political reform. Leading up to the Civil War, Hale had almost succeeded: thirty states had agreed to declare Thanksgiving as a national holiday by 1860, but the start of the War interrupted her editorial campaign.

Sarah Josepha Hale’s Thanksgiving editorials begin in 1837, when she urges that a Thanksgiving celebration in November might offer a cheerful respite for the “gloomy aspect of
the season.” She continued writing them throughout the Civil War, and concluded in 1875, long after Lincoln declared Thanksgiving as an official holiday. She makes a case for the day to occur in November to “wed” it to Christmastime, and hopes that it might “without inconvenience, be observed on the same day of November, say the last Thursday in the month, throughout all New England; and also in our sister states, who have engrafted it upon their social system.” Hale hopes that the holiday might take on a “national character” that would inspire the entire nation to “join in the commemoration of ‘In-gathering,’ which it celebrates,” including the “social and domestic ties.” Rather than invoking images of the Pilgrim, Hale turns to the “noble patrimony of our Puritan Fathers” to induce the American public to adopt the holiday. Her second editorial, in 1842, takes the genre of a short tale of a girl and her schoolmaster, both delighting in the fact that they are New Englanders who celebrate Thanksgiving, and not “Old Englishers” who are “disposed to melancholy at this season.” In the years following, Hale continues to attempt to take a New England regional model and try to make it national. In 1847, Hale announces that the governor of New Hampshire has appointed Thursday, November 25, as the day of annual thanksgiving for the state, and she implores other states to follow suite so that the “whole land would rejoice at once.”

In 1851, as civil unrest grew, so too did Hale’s imploring of a national holiday increase. This editorial, like one she had written in 1849, called for a national unity “from the Atlantic to the Pacific Border” so that "The sympathy of feeling would develop greater fervor of spirit in the thanksgivings which would rise from the altars and the hearths of twenty-three millions of the human race, who would unite in grateful remembrance of the blessings which had crowned the year, and spread a full feast for all.” The rhetoric of 1857 shifts slightly to focus on the feast, both as a means to celebrate, and to recognize and give food to those in need. Beginning with a
Bible verse that commands "Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared," A feast, she writes, is not only good for the nation but a way to be a good Christian: "Let the people of all the States and Territories set down together to the 'feast of fat things' and drink, in the sweet draught of joy and gratitude to the Divine giver of all our blessings, the pledge of renewed love to the Union, and to each other; and of peace and goodwill to all the world. During the war, Hale continued to publish, addressing the "agitations that stir the minds of men and cause the hearts of women to tremble in fear and sorrow" and urging those who can share food to do so.

Finally, after writing to the Secretary of State, Hale was advised to write directly to Lincoln. In the summer of 1863, six weeks before delivering the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln declared Thanksgiving a national holiday.41

Imagining Thanksgiving

Michael LaCombe’s work on food in the early English Atlantic world argues that food and eating are always already political, particularly in moments of encounter and political

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41 It is curious how Thanksgiving became both a secular holiday and one that is relatively free of consumerism. Hale and her predecessors imagined Thanksgiving as a day of church-going and giving thanks to God, and indeed, many celebrated in this manner before sitting down to a large afternoon or evening meal. But by the Progressive era, when Thanksgiving was being more or less formally taught to schoolchildren, it had become a secular and civic holiday rather than a religious one. And whereas early adopters of the holiday may have given or received a small token such as a Bible, today’s Thanksgiving is largely absent from the rampant gift giving that occurs on Christmas, Easter, or Valentine’s Day. This, of course, may ebb and flow with the push toward and pushback against “Black Friday”—a day of early-bird competitive shopping and door-buster sales intended to kick off the Christmas holiday gift-giving season. Still, although Black Friday takes place the day after Thanksgiving (with some stores opening their doors earlier and earlier, even on Thanksgiving evening itself, to allure buyers), I would argue that it is still intended and understood as the kick-off Christmas event, much like how Santa Claus appears as the final float of the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade (which began in 1924). It is interesting too, that even with a corporate-branded Thanksgiving Day parade, Thanksgiving remains, for the most part, a gift-less holiday that is instead focused primarily on the meal. Each year brings considerable discussions about the merits and detriments of Black Friday, discussions that date back to the early twentieth century. In 1939 President Franklin D. Roosevelt formally changed the day of Thanksgiving from the fourth Thursday in November to the third, in an attempt to create a longer Christmas shopping season. He reversed this decision two years later.
negotiation: “The chief reason food played such a vital role in public assertions of legitimacy was that it combined biological necessity with symbolism” (20). Although he is speaking about how food facilitated the formation of alliances between English settlers and Native Americans, his study is a useful one to consider connections between food and politics, particularly at moments of consumption and at the table. French gastronome Brillat-Savarin emphasizes meals as a critical juncture in the development of mankind and civilization, a place of communication and progress: “It was the meal which was responsible for the birth, or at least the elaboration of languages, not only because it was a continually recurring occasion for meetings, but also because the leisure which accompanies and succeeds the meal is naturally conducive to confidence and language” (161). Moreover, the table was the place where such communication, official business, and leisure, might occur: “The table constitutes a kind of tie between the bargainer and the bargained-with, and makes the diners more willing to receive certain impressions, to submit to certain influences; from this is born political gastronomy” (*The Physiology of Taste*). Although Nash’s cartoon pointed to some of the generative possibilities of suffrage and a united nation, *Harper’s Weekly* also published representations of black Americans on Thanksgiving that show competing ideas of Thanksgiving as both the bringing together and a critique of the nation by way of the presence or absence of the table. I want to emphasize that this focus on consumption—who is involved in eating and what they are consuming—does not eclipse the focus on production that I have emphasized throughout this project. Instead, I suggest that the Thanksgiving table is a model by which to see how notions of taste are performed in sites of consumption, and who (and what) the far-reaching effects of these performances might include or excise. Throughout this project, I’ve explain how sites of production must be read alongside sites of consumption in order to reveal a fuller Atlantic picture of how communities
and cultures of taste were developed and understood in the long nineteenth century. The dining room table is a particularly apt metaphor for thinking through how cultures, communities, and aesthetics are enacted, negotiated, and performed in sites of food practices.

James Baker’s study of Thanksgiving imagery notes that Thanksgiving advertising illustrations were common in publications like *Harper’s Weekly*, especially after the war and then again between the “golden age of American illustration” from 1880 to 1930. With the proliferation of journals and print media, “Americans internalized the stream of images and accompanying texts they encountered in schools, magazines, and stores so that it became their own personal comprehension of the holiday” (130). Readers would have been familiar with depictions of Thanksgiving involving families dining at a table, but at the same time, continued printing of these images solidified these Thanksgiving “symbols” in the minds of readers: “Once the print media created a new, multifarious symbol system for the holiday, an ‘authentic’ Thanksgiving had to involve turkey dinners, Pilgrims and Indians, family reunions, and autumnal associations, whatever an individual’s earlier conception of it might have been” (Baker 130). The images I read, including Nast’s 1869 cartoon, were printed on the earlier side of that height of American illustration. Americans, however, would have had context for understanding Thanksgiving scenes, while the illustrations would further solidify conceptions of a still-burgeoning holiday. In the images that follow I want to call attention to the ways in which the presence or absence of a table reveals layers of meaning about how Thanksgiving was imaged and imagined through print, particularly in regards to race and class. Whereas Thanksgiving is presented as a call for national cohesion, what the texts reveal is that it becomes simultaneously an occasion for social and political critique.
In this first image, American author Samuel Goodrich presents a rather solemn-looking Thanksgiving gathering. In the doorway, the threshold between kitchen and dining room, stands a black figure whose gender is indeterminate, arriving with a tray of food. Men, women, and children are seated around the table in a plain dining room. This image rehearses later tropes that would appear in *Harper’s Weekly* in the latter half of the century. For instance, “Thanksgiving Day—the Dinner,” drawn by Winslow Homer and published on November 27, 1858 captures a large family gathering mid-meal. The formal dress and the sheer amount of guests (spilling over to two tables) suggest that this was a celebratory feast (rather than, for instance, a Sunday dinner), while the image’s caption of “Thanksgiving Day” suggests that is a familial gathering in a private dining room (rather than a public gathering). A white man assumes the patriarchal position of turkey-carver, similar to Nast’s Uncle Sam, and a white woman carries in a steaming

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42 For more about the significance of the thresholds between dining room and kitchen, see Chapter 1: Kitchens, Cooks, and Cakes: Domestic Making and Unmaking in American-Atlantic Novels.
pot, while a black man—either servant or slave—pours drinks. This image is one of four that appear together to present readers with a complete storyboard of the day. The other panels are “Thanksgiving Day—Ways and Means,” which depicts a turkey hunt; “Thanksgiving Day—Arrival at the Old Home,” which shows a home’s threshold and family arriving and embracing; and “Thanksgiving Day—The Dance,” which features men, women, and children mingling and dancing in a parlor.

Figure 10: Thanksgiving Day—Ways and Means, The Dinner, Arrival at the Old Home, The Dance
When, however, that top-right frame is viewed apart from the other panels, we see that the single black man is depicted in an act of labor and servitude, rather than at a seat at the table. This image, and the images that follow, establish another story of Thanksgiving quite apart from Nash’s multi-ethnic table—one where black individuals appear by themselves (rather than surrounded by family) and standing and/or serving, rather than sitting at the table to partake in the meal. A similar scene, with repeating tropes, appear in the November 30, 1867 *Harper’s*
Weekly in a drawing by W.S.L Jewett called “A Thanksgiving Dinner Among Their Descendants.” Again, men and women gathered around a table, an older man standing up to carve the turkey, and a black servant or domestic standing to the side. The title refers to what was (and often still is) understood as a long legacy of Puritan thanksgivings.

![Figure 12: Thanksgiving: a thanksgiving dinner among their descendants. November 30, 1867, Harper’s Weekly, by W. S. L. Jewett.](image)

In this next image, published in Harper’s Weekly by S.B. McCutcheon on December 4, 1880, a black family is presented in a kitchen in the midst of culinary preparation. Again, the table is not available for them, and even the man seated continues to labor. The image is titled “Preparing the Thanksgiving Dinner” but it is unclear whose Thanksgiving they are preparing. This image is notable because it presents a group of black individuals, likely a family. It has some of the
bearings of a sentimental, domestic scene, with a family preparing for a feast in a cozy kitchen, and a table that serves as a space for food preparation. But the continued absence of a dining room and table speaks to a half-hearted inclusion of the black family into a holiday that reifies the nation’s beginnings.

This type of image that gestures toward the black individual as participating in the holiday but separate from the table, is echoed in J.W. Alexander’s “Done Brown, Sho’s Yo’ Bo’n,” published in Harper’s Weekly on November 26, 1881. Here, a bandana-and-tignon-ed “mammy” presents a large turkey. The family for whom she is serving must be imagined off-screen, but what is notable is that she, like other mammy figures in print throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century, is poised as the smiling, happy producer of food, rather than the one who sit downs to eat it.

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43 For more on the mammy figure and food, see Chapter 3: “Strange Books: Nineteenth-Century Cookbooks and the Textuality of Taste.”
Figure 13: Preparing the Thanksgiving Dinner, S. B. McCutcheon
Meanwhile, the white family is able to sit at the table and celebrate Thanksgiving unfettered. Even lower classes with meager pantries and no servants are routinely depicted as partaking in a special meal, as explained by both Henry Bliss and Sarah Josepha Hale. Perhaps one other variant of the Thanksgiving familial image is one that more explicitly links Thanksgiving and politics. In J. Keppler’s imagining of Thanksgiving Day from 1885, President Cleveland stands at the head of the table, surrounded by his cabinet officers ready to tuck into a large meal. They are delivered an oversized, uncooked turkey on a platter that read, “With Compliments of all Good Citizens.” In the middle of the table is a centerpiece that reads “Prosperity.” Unlike Nast’s
optimistic political cartoon, this one can be read as a critique of class. Still, it depicts Thanksgiving as an occasion for marking and depicting concerns of the nation. When put in conversation with Nast’s 1869 cartoon about the fifteenth amendment, these stories of just how inclusive a nation America is begins to unravel. Instead, we see competing stories of taste, class, and labor that are borne out on the table itself. Thanksgiving becomes simultaneously a celebration and a symbol of the unfinished, not-yet, future-perfect tense of America.

Figure 15: J. Keppler, “Thanksgiving Day, 1885” from Puck magazine

The idea that Thanksgiving depicts America’s unfinished business plays out across literature as well, especially as Thanksgiving we see depicted in the images above begin to enter the popular and textual imagination of the nineteenth century. In the analysis of the texts that
follow, I ground the politics of Thanksgiving with the politics of slavery, war, and class within the nineteenth century. When laid out chronologically, the primary sources reveal what I’m suggesting is a new version of the Thanksgiving story, a story of erasure that is rooted in the politics of consumption that continues to obscure production. Read together, these narratives illustrate the spectres of Thanksgivings past, present, and future, (to borrow imagery from another popular holiday), articulating what was, what is, and what might have been. Each text speaks to an articulation of Thanksgiving that arose out of a particular political moment: of the 1808 Act Prohibiting the Importation of Slaves (Jones); of the War of 1812 (Bliss); and of the end of the Civil War (Hale and Hawthorne). For these authors, Thanksgiving organizes and reorganizes the idea that the nation isn’t cohesive. In looking at these texts, we see how a holiday that ostensibly resolves the unfinished project of America instead shows that this resolution doesn’t yet exist and that the national imaginary that Thanksgiving celebrates is vastly different for everyone.

Fifty-five years before Lincoln’s Thanksgiving proclamation, another man implored the nation to consider an annual day of thanksgiving. In 1808, Absalom Jones, who was born enslaved and became the earliest ordained black Episcopal minister, preached “A Thanksgiving Sermon, preached January 1, 1808, in St. Thomas’s, or the African Episcopal Church, Philadelphia: On Account of the Abolition of the African slave trade, on that day, by the

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44 James Baker notes that although Thanksgiving-themed literature exists, it is not nearly as prevalent as Christmas-themed fiction. He writes that many Thanksgiving-centered pieces that were published in journals and early children’s’ books disappeared from the reading public, something that he notes is perhaps unusual: “Interestingly, very few treatments of the holiday appear in the works of the major New England ‘local color’ authors, despite the centrality in their work of maudlin Yankee themes such as poverty, enervated bloodlines, old maids, and the tyranny of custom. Perhaps the Thanksgiving story was already considered too much a regional stereotype by the time these stories appeared at the end of the century” (78). Novels and short stories that helped form contemporary notions of Thanksgiving include Lydia Maria Child’s “The New-England Boy’s Song About Thanksgiving” (1844); Cornelius Mathews’ Chanticler: A Thanksgiving Story of the Peabody Family (1850); “Zenas Carey’s Reward” (published in Harper’s Weekly in 1863); Mary J. Holmes’ “The Thanksgiving Party” (1865); George Hill’s Dovecote (1854); Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Oldtown Folks (1869); “Thanksgiving: A Home Scene” (published in Ladies’ Repository in December 1874); and Louisa May Alcott’s “An Old Fashioned Thanksgiving” (1881).
Congress of the United States.” Jones was born into slavery and was not manumitted until 1784, at the age of thirty-eight. Well before Hale advocated for a day of thanksgiving to unite the country and put an end to civil and racial unrest, Jones preached about the legacy of slavery, beginning with the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt. He notes that although they suffered terribly, they were not forgotten by God, who came “down from heaven, in his own person, in order to deliver them out of the hands of the Egyptians.” Jones calls on God in his current moment to appear to help the enslaved and oppressed, and locates this particular occasion as proof of God’s glory. The occasion for his sermon was the 1808 Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, which had gone into effect the month prior. In his speech he spells out the horrors of transatlantic slavery, and gives thanks that God had not forsaken the enslaved: “the ocean shall no more afford a refuge to their bodies, from impending slavery: nor shall the shores of the British West India islands, and of the United States, any more witness the anguish of families, parted for ever by a publick sale.”

Jones’s thanksgiving is not one of turkeys and Pilgrims, but of truly giving thanks for God and remembering those who have perished. Although he does not advocate that one celebrate with any sort of meal, let alone feast, he invokes the starvation of the enslaved, even as they labored in commodity-producing plantations: “He has seen them driven into the sugar; the rice, and the tobacco fields.” He talks of how little both the Egyptian enslaved had to eat (onions and leeks which “grew almost spontaneously in the land of Egypt”) as well as the meager amounts enslaved Africans were given: “He has seen them return to their smoky huts in the evening, with nothing to satisfy their hunger but a scanty allowance of roots.” He notes God’s presence in how “He came down into the United States, when they declared, in the constitution which they framed in 1788, that the trade in our African fellow-men, should cease in the year
1808.” Jones calls for the first of January, 1808, the day of the abolition of the slave trade, be set apart as a day of public thanksgiving and remembrance, and for the chance to tell future generations about the sufferings of so many.

Jones’s proclamation orients Thanksgiving as a time to reflect on the religious, social, and political reform that ended the slave trade. Moreover, Jones’s speech is an important contribution to an American print public sphere, one that scholar Joanna Brooks recognizes as “a distinctly black tradition of publication informed by black experiences of slavery and post-slavery, premised on principles of self-determination and structured by black criticisms of white political and economic dominance” (68). Jones’ speech is noteworthy in its resistance to an existing political order. His call for a Thanksgiving holiday founded on the commemoration and reflection of the slave trade anticipates the national and political rifts that would occur throughout the antebellum period. It also anticipates a later speech delivered by a formerly enslaved man, on the occasion of an American holiday: Frederick Douglass’s 1852 speech, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” The Fourth of July and Thanksgiving already have similar goals is celebrating the nation, but the Fourth of July differs in its focus on a public—rather than private—celebration. In his speech, Douglass critiques the narrative of national independence in a country built on the backs of slavery, and asks, “What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days of the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is a constant victim.” What then, we might ask of Jones’s speech, is to the American slave, Thanksgiving? The unfinished project of American independence and equality speaks across both texts—Jones’s speech is an attempt to form a holiday for the legacy of slavery and, in so doing, create a national day that belonged to him and to other descendants of the slave trade. Declaring a holiday was a powerful rhetorical move;
doing so would write the memories of slavery into the American calendar and into the American national imagery.

Of course, not only does Jones’s January 1 day of thanksgiving not exist today, but contemporary ideas of Thanksgiving are devoid of memories of the slave trade. Again, the question remains, “What, to the American slave, is Thanksgiving?” For Thanksgiving to “stick” as a national holiday, its themes of reunion, gratitude, family, domesticity, and nationalism had to align with the current cultural temperature. For Jones and the Thanksgiving—that-Wasn’t, growing tension around the issue of slavery meant that the nation had a long way to go before celebrating the abolition of the slave trade. Elizabeth Pleck argues that “Thanksgiving was—and is—a holiday of American civil religion, that is, religious belief in the national purpose and destiny” (776). This national purpose and destiny is grounded in a “City Upon a Hill” ideology of American exceptionalism that espouses egalitarianism even in the face of slavery. It is one that is rooted in the future-perfect tense of equality and liberty for some, but not all, and in the imagining of both a cohesive past and a domestic present. These tensions continue in Sarah Josepha Hale’s novel, Northwood, which also takes up the question of how the American slave might figure into (or be excised by) a national day of thanks.

Hale first wrote and published Northwood in 1827 under the title Northwood: A New England Tale. The novel, which centers on a New England family and explores themes of family, marriage, domesticity, and the damaging effects of the Southern slave system, was extremely commercially successful. Soon after its publication, Hale began editing the Ladies’ Magazine and, in 1837, she became the editor of the newly founded magazine Lady Godey’s Book. In 1852 she published a second edition of her novel with a new preface and subtitle: Life North and South: Showing the True Character of Both. The timing of the republication followed
on the heels of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*; the revised subtitle and preface work similarly to Stowe’s novel in critiquing the system of slavery by focusing on its destruction of the familial unit. In the preface to the second edition, she writes that “The great error of those who would sever the Union rather than see a slave within its borders, is, that they forget the master is their brother, as well as the servant; and that the spirit which seeks to do good to all and evil to none is the only true Christian philanthropy. Hoping that Northwood might, in some degree, aid in diffusing this true spirit, I have consented to its republication at this time.”

Although an abolitionist, Hale advocated for slaves to be educated, Christianized, and sent them to live in Liberia: the last line of her novel reads, “Liberia has solved the enigma of ages. The mission of American slavery is to Christianize Africa” (408). Matthew Dennis sees Hale’s political campaign for Thanksgiving as a means by which America’s immediate messy past might be smoothed over in favor of “invoking the common values and heroes that lay, presumably, in America’s more remote, shared colonial past” (90). Her correlation of Thanksgiving with slavery and abolition is both political as well as practical (for instance, she called for church collections to take place on Thanksgiving for the purchase and education of slaves). Hale’s vision of the Thanksgiving table is one that is rooted in the continuation of white genealogical familial formations; enslaved or formerly enslaved individuals, her writings suggest, would do better at their own table, and not part of the U.S. nation.

In her novel, Hale fictionalizes her concerns of a nation being torn apart by slavery and sets the novel the night before Thanksgiving. *Northwood* chronicles the Romilly family of New Hampshire, in particular Sidney Romilly, who lives during his childhood and adolescence with his aunt and uncle on a Southern plantation. As an adult, he visits his hometown and his parents and siblings for the first time, on the evening before Thanksgiving. Accompanying him is his
British friend, who serves as the “outsider” who is ultimately converted to the New England way of life. The novel celebrates the family, particularly the homecoming of the prodigal son, as well as New England religion, marriage, customs, and virtues. James Baker writes that “Thanksgiving fiction almost always involved middle-class families of English descent, although virtuous representatives of other groups such as poor or ‘decayed’ Yankee families, honest Irish workers, or black servants were occasionally introduced as exemplary foils to unprincipled villains or ruined relations” (80). *Northwood* has many markers of this Thanksgiving fiction: a Thanksgiving-day wedding, a Yankee farm, a homecoming, a close-knit, hard-working family at the center of the narrative, a turn away from slavery and Southern plantation life, and a posh Englishman observer who reluctantly takes to the Yankee way of life. The moral of *Northwood* is about bringing together families that have been separated, especially separated geographically (and culturally) from the North to the South. But what about enslaved families? Hale doesn’t seem to have room for them in her vision of an American homecoming/Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving was about homecoming “at a time when large-scale migration from New England had weakened kin ties” (Pleck 776). Of course, homecoming can only happen for free families, and the continued emphasis on what a blessing it is to have Sidney return to his family highlights the ruptures of family formations that slavery produced within black communities. Although divided beliefs over slavery may be the occasion for the holiday, the enslaved remain objects in the conversation, and separate from the American Thanksgiving table. Slaves are still producer of food, not consumers.

The Thanksgiving holiday is described in detail over several chapters. Frankford, the English friend, inquires of Mr. Romilly about its origins and prevalence:

“Is it a festival of your church?” said he.
“No; it is a festival of the people, and appointed by the Governor of the State.”

“But there is some reason for the custom—is there not?” inquired the Englishman.

“Certainly; our Yankees seldom do what they cannot justify by reasons of some sort,” replied the Squire. “This custom of a public Thanksgiving is, however, said to have originated in a providential manner.”

Mr. Romilly explains the origins of Thanksgiving as a celebration after a bout of famine. Hale’s version includes pilgrims, but not Native Americans; instead, the role of food-providers is credited to a ship arriving from London: “Soon after the settlement of Boston, the colony was reduced to a state of destitution, and nearly without food. In this strait the pious leaders of the pilgrim band appointed a solemn and general fast….On the very morning of the appointed day, a vessel from London arrived laden with provisions, and so the fast was changed into a Thanksgiving” (67). Frankford asks if Thanksgiving is universally celebrated and Romilly says “not yet; but I trust it will become so…” (68). For the Romilly family (and for Hale), Thanksgiving is a potentially powerful day of family, happiness, and charity. Mr. Romilly declares, “When it shall be observed, on the same day, throughout all the states and territories, it will be a grand spectacle of moral power and human happiness, such as the world has never yet witnessed” (68). This moral power, however, is one that is built upon the erasure of a black body politic so that a white nation of American citizens can consume.

After a morning church sermon on the topic of the American Revolution, the family feasts. A narratorial intrusion preempts the description of the dinner:

Although the description of a feast is a kind of literary treat, which I never much relished, and hope my readers do not, yet as this was a thanksgiving entertainment, one which was never before, I believe, served up in style to novel
epicures, I may venture to mention some of the peculiarities of the festival, without being suspected of imitating those profound and popular writers who make a good stomach the criterion of good taste; and instead of allowing their characters to display their sentiments in conversation, make them eat to display their appetites. Such authors might very well dispense with all but two characters in their books—a cook to dress their dinners, and a hero to devour them (88).

The emphasis on the “taste” and aesthetics of the Romilly home (70, 88) suggests that Thanksgiving taste is not about the flavor of the food itself, but about the ability to eat it surrounded with family, in a charitable state of mind. Hale herself was known as an arbitrator of taste in *Lady Godey’s Book*, so readers might have read this “apology” for a prolonged description of the feast with a wink, and might have very much expected to want to know what exactly these characters were feasting on. Hale is setting the scene of the model Thanksgiving, making each dish and morsel particularly important. Her menu for readers is reminiscent of the cookbook headnotes I’ve read in Chapter 3, where the *stories* of food—its origins, how to prepare, eat, and serve it—are just as important as learning the steps that go into the making of it. Hale’s feast begins with a long table, which sets the scene of consumption. The description of the feast is lengthy, but bears close reading:

> The table, covered with a damask cloth, vieing in whiteness, and nearly equaling in texture, the finest imported, though spun, woven and bleached by Mrs. Romilly's own hand, was now intended for the whole household, every child having a seat on this occasion; and the more the better, it being considered an honor for a man to sit down to his Thanksgiving dinner surrounded by a large family. The provision is always sufficient for a multitude, every farmer in the
country being, at this season of the year, plentifully supplied, and every one proud of displaying his abundance and prosperity. The roasted turkey took precedence on this occasion being placed at the head of the table; and well did it become its lordly station, sending forth the rich odor of its savory stuffing, and finely covered with the froth of the basting. At the foot of the board, a sirloin of beef, flanked on either side by a leg of pork and loin of mutton, seemed placed as a bastion to defend innumerable bowls of gravy and plates of vegetables disposed in that quarter. A goose and pair of ducklings occupied side stations on the table; the middle being graced, as it always is on such occasions, by that rich burgomaster of the provisions, called a chicken pie. This pie, which is wholly formed of the choicest parts of fowls, enriched and seasoned with a profusion of butter and pepper, and covered with an excellent puff paste, is, like the celebrated pumpkin pie, an indispensable part of a good and true Yankee Thanksgiving; the size of the pie usually denoting the gratitude of the party who prepares the feast. The one now displayed could never have had many peers. Frankford had seen nothing like it, and recollected nothing in description bearing a comparison, excepting the famous pie served up to the witty King Charles II., and containing, instead of the savory chicken, the simple knight. Plates of pickles, preserves and butter, and all the necessaries for increasing the seasoning of the viands to the demand of each palate, filled the interstices on the table, leaving hardly sufficient room for the plates of the company, a wine glass and two tumblers for each, with a slice of wheat bread lying on one of the inverted tumblers. A side table was literally loaded with the preparations for the second course, placed there to obviate the
necessity of leaving the apartment during the repast...There was a huge plumb pudding, custards, and pies of every name and description ever known in Yankee land; yet the pumpkin pie occupied the most distinguished niche. There were also several kinds of rich cake, and a variety of sweetmeats and fruits. On the sideboard was ranged a goodly number of decanters and bottles; the former filled with currant wine and the latter with excellent cider and ginger beer, a beverage Mrs. Romilly prided herself on preparing in perfection. (108-110)

First, I want to consider the labor in this scene. Hale notes that the Romillys feed and labor themselves. It is noted that they have one domestic, “Old Hester,” the town’s sole pauper, who is like a member of their own family, but that she had gone to dine with her sister, “as every one must go to their own on Thanksgiving Day. It is not indicated whether Old Hester is white or black, but her absence from the Romilly’s day emphasizes some values Hale is championing throughout her novel: first, self-reliance, and second, for the communion and reunion of (biological) families. The only “outsider” at the Romilly table is Frankford, but his narrative purpose is to be the skeptical British convert to the Yankee American way; something he fulfills early on in the novel before disappearing from the remainder. For Hale, a successful Thanksgiving must be rooted in work. Mr. Romilly even notes to Frankford that “I may at least recommend industry, for all this variety you have seen before you on the table, excepting the spices and salt, has been furnished from my own farm, and procured by our own labor and care.” (95). The foods we see—the turkey, chicken, the pumpkin pie and cakes—are noted to have all been derived from the hands or lands of the Romillys; this Thanksgiving is American-born and American-made, so it follows that the participants of the feast, in fortifying themselves, are also symbolically fortifying the nation. However, it is unlikely that the holiday is entirely
homegrown: the sugar that went into the cakes and pies would not have originated on a New Hampshire farm, nor would the salt used in the turkey have been mined on their land. The idea that it’s all grown on farm is an erasure of commodity production and labor; the family is able to stomach their Thanksgiving dinner only by ignoring the roots of slavery and the routes their food has taken to arrive on their table.

This emphasis on the American-ness of the food and liquors recalls the connection between a strengthened nation and food that Rafia Zafar has pointed to in her work on early transnational literature like Joel Barlow’s poem “Hasty Pudding,” and Robert Burns “Ode to a Haggis.” Zafar writes, “In ‘Hasty Pudding,’ Barlow attests to the literally strengthening nature of a homely cooked-grain meal and contrasts the weakened state of European civilization with the brawny good health of its former colony. But Burns had already drawn that comparison and conclusion, between an effete but gastronomically impoverished ‘center’ with a hearty culinary ‘margin’” (Zafar 140-141). At the Romilly table, American and New England foods serve to shore up ideas and ideals about a strong, industrious nation. The evening meal follows not only with dessert but also a wedding: one of the Romilly sons is married to a young woman in the village. That a day of national celebration might conclude with a socially sanctioned marriage suggests that, beyond food, another way of securing a strong nation is to attend to its formation of kinship systems. In Hale’s novel, it makes sense that turkey might be followed by wedding cake, which, like the feast above, Hale details in a kind of “literary treat” as being “conspicuous by being iced, covered with sugar plums of all colors and forms, and tastefully decorated with myrtle and evergreen.” Myrtle, a symbol of love, and evergreen, a symbol of strength, also encapsulates Hale’s hopes for a national Thanksgiving: a day rooted in love of family and strength of a nation. She also notes the “peculiar virtues” of a wedding cake in its supposed
ability to reveal one’s future: “Of this cake all the young ladies, and by their persuasions, nearly
all the young men, preserved a small slice for the purpose of placing it beneath their pillows
when retiring to rest—it being the popular opinion, that, in consequence of its peculiar virtues,
they should be favored with dreams revealing their future destiny” (107). Put together, the
Thanksgiving dinner and the wedding cake offer models for the continued strengthening of the
U.S., particularly in a nation facing civil war.

However idealistic Hale’s vision for the family and Thanksgiving are, what’s interesting
about the project of her novel is its ambition in trying to tie together food, holiday, family,
regionalism, and slavery. Despite her and her characters’ condemnation of slavery, however, the
novel repeatedly attests that slave masters are more degraded than slaves. Mr. Romilly, who
throughout the novel is characterized as a loving patriarch and moral center of the family,
denounces slavery as “a stain on our national character” (157), but also excuses America from it:
“They did not wish it; indeed they zealously opposed it. It was forced on them by Great Britain”
(157) and concedes that although it is an injustice, he “do[es] not see how the masters can, at
present, do better by their slaves than treat them humanely” and hopes for a time when “they can
be emancipated without danger to themselves or the country” (158). What’s at stake for Hale is,
ultimately, the dangers of a dissolved union. To return to the Thanksgiving feast, we see an
emphasis on the family (the patriarch who gets to sit at the head of the table calls to mind the
images I presented at the start of the chapter). Elizabeth Pleck identifies the nineteenth-century
Thanksgiving as a “domestic occasion,” which emerged from the industrial revolution’s focus on
time and discipline and scheduling and instead sought to bring family together. Such occasions
might be “a family gathering held in the home which paid homage to the ideal of the
‘affectionate family’” (773) as opposed to public, communal celebrations often held outdoors
and involving lower-class men.” Hale celebrates and champions the domestic occasion by presenting it as unmarred by slave labor, by emphasizing regionality and locality in the food on the table, and by tying Thanksgiving to the idea of weddings. Here, the table is a utopian one, groaning with local delicacies, moderate amounts of alcohol, and the literal and figurative fruits of the family’s labor. If Jones’s unfinished Thanksgiving project was the public recognition of the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, then Hale’s Thanksgiving project is one where allegories of the nation are played out. Hale’s Thanksgiving is set upon the dining room table: the table becomes a shrine or altar for enacting political and familial bonds. For Jones, there is no table.

From a foodways perspective, the symbolic performance of the coming together of a community and nation, is seen not in a flag, not in portrait, but in a table. I want to conclude with two readings of Thanksgiving texts that situate the table and its absence. In 1815, Henry Bliss published “A Thanksgiving Poem” in Pittsfield, MA. This poem celebrates and critiques Thanksgiving in the wake of the War of 1812. During the war, President James Madison had called for wartime thanksgiving and fast days on August 20, 1812, September 9, 1813, and January 12, 1815. He also called for a Thanksgiving to commemorate the end of the war, on April 13, 1815 (this would be the last presidential Thanksgiving proclamation until Lincoln). Appearing in newspapers across the country and titled “Day of Thanksgiving,” the declaration called for “a day of thanksgiving and of devout acknowledgements to Almighty God for his great goodness, manifesting in restoring to them the blessing of peace.” Bliss’s poem, published a month after the April proclamation, reflects upon the war and the day itself as a day of both

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45 Although to contemporary minds it might seem contradictory to call for a fast on a day of “thanksgiving,” the two went hand-in-hand, historically. James Baker explains that “Fast days had always entailed an option of being held in anticipation of some events as well as in response to them, and there had been a custom (begun by Charles I but enthusiastically adopted by his Puritan foes) of regular monthly Fasts in Parliament during the English Civil War. By the end of the seventeenth century a new tradition of regular springtime Fasts and autumnal Thanksgivings existed in parallel to the original practice of declaring special holidays in response to providential events” (36).
public prayer and worldly celebration, a return inward to the domestic sphere and away from the public marketplace and business place. It opens with an invocation of Columbia, the female personified symbol of the country for whom the “ardent hero” fights (“On War’s rough plains while for Columbia’s right, / With noble zeal the ardent hero fights.”) before moving away from the battlefield to consider how domestic scenes are played out in response, and in juxtaposition to, the battlefield:

Here on New-England’s climes that alien soil,
That stints the patriot’s growth, the soldier’s toil,
In life’s calm shades with her cold sons retir’d,
By softer scenes and other themes inspir’d,
Fain would the Muse from nobler subjects stray,
To sing the revels of Thanksgiving Day.

Throughout the poem’s two parts, the narrator negotiates between the showiness and displays of wealth inherent within a Thanksgiving celebration, with scenes of violence from the war. Bliss indicates that one cannot celebrate without remembering those who died. Thus he judges “wanton scenes that usher in the day” where “half the follies which the year brings forth, / Ride on its crazy wings from South to North, / And more the tax to luxury that’s paid, / And more the hurry, bustle and parade,/ And more the fuss of fashion and of pride, / Than half the days in the whole year beside.” As the poem talks about the preparation of Thanksgiving Day, the imagery moves from the marketplace inward to the domestic, illustrating people who are ordinarily working who are rushing homeward to either eat, hunt, or prepare food: “The Cookery now goes on, the baking’s laid, / And many a mammoth pie and pudding’s made, / Roast meat and gingerbread and custards rare, / Are seen and smelt and tasted everywhere.” Bliss presents some
crude imagery in his discussion of the production of the meal and its consumption, including an image of children “snatching” “red-hot” pastries and “cramming” them down their throats: “Oft when the groaning oven is releas’d, / And cakes and pastries on the table plac’d, / The children snatch them, while with bawling notes / They cram the red-hot victuals down their throats.” To Bliss, the emphasis on feasting rather than fasting, is to be critiqued: it is in this “such impious way / Vain thoughtless thousands keep Thanksgiving Day.” Bliss’s Thanksgiving is not only a stark contrast to Jones’ and Hale’s, but it also emphasizes a critical response to a Thanksgiving that emphasizes consumption at the sake of production.

“John Inglefield’s Thanksgiving” (1852) by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a short story from the collection “The Snow-Image, and Other Twice-Told Tales.” It is a very brief tale of a blacksmith named John Inglefield who, on Thanksgiving evening, sits around his hearth with his son, daughter, and apprentice. There is an empty chair next to denote the recent death of his wife. We also learn that the family has recently suffered another loss: the sudden and mysterious departure of a daughter: “Within the past year another member of his household had gone from him, but not to the grave. Yet they kept no vacant chair for her.” Much to the family’s surprise, this prodigal daughter suddenly returns. She sits in her late mother’s chair, next to her father, and proclaims, “Here I am, at last, father,” said she. ‘You ate your Thanksgiving dinner without me, but I have come back to spend the evening with you.” She greets her siblings: her brother is departing soon for a voyage to the West Indies, and he expresses that he will see her beyond the grave. The West Indies can’t quite be erased from Hawthorne’s depiction of a family that will soon be separated, and the invocation of the Caribbean calls to mind the “Jim Crow cookie” moment of *House of Seven Gables*, as well as the Salt Shaker Girl’s map of the world, where the West Indies continues to figure in as a threat to familial order. Prudence’s twin sister tries to
embrace her, but Prudence tells her she cannot, and Mary “felt that something darker than the
grave was between Prudence and herself, though they seemed so near each other in the light of
their father's hearth, where they had grown up together.” The reason for Prudence’s absence is
not explained, except that Prudence, however, departs almost as soon as she arrives, to her
family’s surprise and confusion: After Sin and evil passions glowed through its comeliness, and
wrought a horrible deformity; a smile gleamed in her eyes, as of triumphant mockery, at their
surprise and grief.”

Hawthorne’s Thanksgiving focuses not on race but with homecoming, loss of family, sin,
ghosts, and unfulfilled expectations of both family, redemption, and the limits of the holiday. In
this instance, the table is absent; the family is gathered around the hearth instead. Kyla Wazana
Tompkins has theorized the hearth, a site of familial gathering and reading aloud of literature, as
the center of the house, a space where social hierarchies are simultaneously fixed and
destabilized and where “numerous decenterings play off each other, around and within which
hierarchically related entities are reconfigured” (29). This can be seen in “John Inglefield’s
Thanksgiving,” where the familial hierarchical structure is both organized and then undone
around the hearth. In stating, “You ate your Thanksgiving dinner without me,” Prudence already
recognizes her separation from the family; what could not occur at the table cannot be reconciled
at the hearth. Put another way, the hearth, the domestic center, depends upon the table. Without a
matriarch, and missing a daughter to some untold sin, the hearth space—and by extension, the
Inglefields—are incomplete. I want to posit that it is not through the hearth but through the table
where family relations and structures are born and performed. That the family should be revisited
by a in-flesh-but-ghostly prodigal daughter (who they at first mistake for the dead mother), only
for her leave with a “sinful” and “evil” look on her face on Thanksgiving suggests a critique of
the holiday—the day isn’t enough to heal familial or national wounds. The ghosts of Thanksgiving are the ghosts of production, of cultural memory, of racialized division, and of rewriting and revising stories of American origins. These are ghosts that, as these texts show, remain to be addressed. The nineteenth-century focus and reexamination of Thanksgiving emerges in moments of political and national crisis, flux, and unrest: 1808 (end of foreign slave trade), 1815 (war), 1852 (leading up to Civil War), but each of the authors I’ve looked at show how it is in the act of eating that one “becomes/feels/is” American. This project has put forth ways of reading food within nineteenth-century literature in an effort to model how a more careful consideration of food production and consumption can change our understanding of American and Atlantic stories of labor and taste-making. In particular, it situates the Caribbean as a site of cultural making and reproduction, and attempts to more closely tie commodity with aesthetic within the long nineteenth-century. At the American table, communion is taken with turkey, the ghosts of Thanksgiving lurking in the shadows of the thresholds, the empty chairs, and the kitchens. This project ends where it began, with the table, with what I hope are new methods and frames for reading what’s upon it, who’s around it, and the spaces in between.
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