Introduction

Eating Bodies in the 19th Century

In 1900, the Thomas Edison Company produced a silent gag film called The Gator and the Pickaninny, depicting a theatrical scene in which a black child is fishing on a water shore. An alligator crawls up behind him and eats the child up; soon after, a man runs up, cuts open the alligator, and pulls the child out whole. Celebration ensues. On one level, this film does not stray far from the features we can expect from the American popular entertainment of the era, with its broad racist humor—signaled by the very term “pickaninny”—and its vaudevillian gag and dance routines. However, if we approach the film on another level, asking about the eating motif around which the film turns, it presents us with a puzzle: how does a film of a black child being eaten become legible to audiences in the early twentieth century? More than solely an insight into racist images in the period, this idea—of the edible and delicious black subject—reveals something larger about the relationship between eating and racial identity, between bodies inscribed with the marks of race and food.

Through readings of material culture—novels, chapbooks, poetry, cookbooks, and visual culture—this book examines the social and symbolic practices through which eating and food cultures inform the production of racial difference and other forms of political inequality. This is not, however, entirely a project about food. Rather, in Racial Indigestion I contribute to the growing field of food studies by examining eating; I uncover and analyze cultural texts and moments during which acts of eating cultivate political subjects by fusing the social with the biological, by imaginatively shaping the matter we experience as body and self. In five separate case studies, I examine images of mouths and bodies, of eaters and the eaten, to produce a story about the consolidation of racist ideologies in the intimate workings of the body politic as refracted through
what I term eating culture. That is, in *Racial Indigestion* I look beyond food itself to consider practices and representations of ingestion and edibility, including literary, dietetic, and visual texts in which objects, people, and political events are metaphorically and metonymically figured through the symbolic process of eating.

To date, most work in this vein has focused on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In *Racial Indigestion*, however, I uncover eating as a trope and technology of racial formation during the first 130 years of the U.S. republic. Not unlike the current foodie moment, and perhaps original to it, eating culture in that period played a significant part in the privileging of whiteness during the nineteenth century. Such anxious girding of the boundaries of whiteness, however, could only happen where those boundaries were threatened, and it is exactly as a site of racial anxiety that eating is most productively read.

My goal in making this shift from food to eating—a shift to a framework we might call critical eating studies—implicitly entails the examination of the field of food studies’ unconscious investments in the commodity itself. It is also a move that weds food studies to body theory, here with a particular focus on race in the context of the literary and cultural production of the nineteenth-century United States. The emergence of the relatively young field of food studies in the late eighties and early nineties coincided with a national explosion in food culture and the growth of what has come to be known as urban “foodies” culture, a congruence that has led some critics to dismiss the field as “scholarship-lite.” Although I do not agree with this skeptical and lazy opinion, given my decade-long involvement in the field, I do have my own criticisms. As many food studies scholars in the social sciences have noted, foodie culture is founded on problematic racial politics in which white, bourgeois, urban subject positions are articulated, on the one hand, through the consumption and informational mastery of foreign, that is, non-Anglo-American food cultures and, on the other hand, performed through romanticized and insufficiently theorized attachments to “local” or organic foodways, attachments that at times suspiciously echo nativist ideological formations. Using the readings in this book as a testing ground, I want to nudge food studies’ interests and methods away from an unreflective collaboration in the object-based fetishism of the foodie world, a collaboration that has produced an unending stream of single-commodity histories and ideologically worrisome localist politics. Instead, I hope to push us further toward a critique of the political beliefs and structures that underlie eating as a social practice.
Part of my work in this project, then, is to more closely bind food studies to feminist, queer, and gender studies, as well as to critical race theory; in doing so I interrogate eating at various historical points in order to set in relief the (un)imaginative limits of normative notions of bodily being. My approach seeks to render discursive two kinds of matter toward which so much human appetitive energy is directed: food and flesh. As we will see, what is yielded by this new framework is a move beyond the concern with skin and boundary that has dominated body studies, and thus away from an investment in surfaces that I want to argue is the intellectually limited inheritance of the epidermal ontology of race. By reading orificially, critical eating studies theorizes a flexible and circular relation between the self and the social world in order to imagine a dialogic in which we—reader and text, self and other, animal and human—recognize our bodies as vulnerable to each other in ways that are terrible—that is, full of terror—and, at other times, politically productive.

In the context of the nineteenth-century United States, the dialogical relations that underlie eating had particular consequences for a nation in the process of cultural, political, and ideological formation. Eating threatened the foundational fantasy of a contained autonomous self—the “free” Liberal self—because, as a function of its basic mechanics, eating transcended the gap between self and other, blurring the line between subject and object as food turned into tissue, muscle, and nerve and then provided the energy that drives them all. At the same time, images of food in the period often pointed to the fleshliness—the biological meatiness, even—of the body, seeming to imply a reassuring materiality of self that exists prior to, and as the condition of, discourse. As a simultaneously cultural and biological process, eating, and images thereof, were therefore often deployed in the service of fixing bodily fictions: “Tell me what you eat and I shall tell you what you are,” the eighteenth-century gastronome Anthelme Brillat-Savarin most famously said, in what is now a chestnut of food studies scholarship.

As is so often the case, it is exactly at the moment of their most anxious deployment that fictions of the self—the permanence and futurity of “what you are”—prove to be their most precarious. Understood in its Western context, by the nature of the act in which an organism yields and opens to the outer world, eating reveals the self to be reliant upon that which is beyond its epidermal limits. The very social and interdependent nature of eating, then—its dependence on the “what” of Brillat-Savarin’s “what you eat”—also lends itself to the unraveling of bodily essentialisms. But it is
not simply the “what” of what one eats that matters. It is the “where” of where we eat and where food comes from; the “when” of historically specific economic conditions and political pressures; the “how” of how food is made; and the “who” of who makes and who gets to eat it. Finally, and most important, it is the many “whys” of eating—the differing imperatives of hunger, necessity, pleasure, nostalgia, and protest—that most determine its meaning. In reckoning with each of these interrogatives, by turning them into interrogatives, we can begin to get at the materialist conditions that determine how, and why, to borrow from Judith Butler, the matter of food comes to “matter.”

The insight that the act of eating dissolves the boundary between self and other, between subject and object is not mine alone, nor is the idea that eating is also a social practice that confirms and delineates difference, demarcating social barriers and affirming group formations. However this paradox, as it appears across the nineteenth century, makes eating an important case study in the production and consolidation of fictions of national unity and racial difference in the period. If in food culture the act of fleshly materialization is rendered visible as material culture, if, as we will see in chapter 2, the mythical virtues of a wheat-centered diet arise in connection to the body ideal that underlies the antebellum project of U.S. expansion and is in turn dependent on it, then we should recognize that the study of this problematic cannot ignore the materials and processes of eating culture. Eating intervenes as a determining moment in what I argue are paradoxical and historically specific attempts to regulate embodiment, which I define as living in and through the social experience of the matter we call flesh. Nationalist foodways—and the objects fetishized therein—in turn become allegories through which the expanding nation and its attendant anxieties play out. What we see in the nineteenth century—as indeed we do today in such racialized discourses as obesity, hunger, and diabetes—is the production of social inequality at the level of the quotidian functioning of the body. What also emerges, however, are fissures and openings in the body politic, spaces where political fictions are exposed, messy, and only semidigested.

One such site, at the obvious center of eating culture, is the mouth. I do not—I would not dare—offer a single model through which to understand the mouth in nineteenth-century U.S. literature and culture. At times the mouth reveals vulnerability; at other times it is a sign of aggression. Some mouths in *Racial Indigestion* are forced open; other mouths speak, eat, and laugh with the energy generated by suppressed political affect. Some
mouts—the mouth of the reader or viewer in particular—are never visible in text or image but rather are assumed to exist, invited to engage with the page through various tropes of desire, disgust, laughter, and enjoyment. In *Racial Indigestion* the mouth is understood as a site to which and within which various political values unevenly adhere and through which food as mediated experience imperfectly bonds with the political to form the fictions that are too often understood within everyday life as racial truths.

The mouth is also a space with a cultural and erotic history of its own, one that, particularly in the overlapping of dietetic and sexual reform in the antebellum period, offers glimpses of a presexological mapping of desire, appetite, and vice. In many of the texts I investigate in this book, eating functions as a metalanguage for genital pleasure and sexual desire. But eating is often a site of erotic pleasure itself, what I call, as a means of signaling the alignment between oral pleasure and other forms of nonnormative desire, *queer alimentarity*.

At the end of the nineteenth century Freud theorized the “erotogenic significance of the labial region”—the mouth—as the second stage in the development of infantile sexuality, an autoerotic moment which, in “normal” sexual development, would later be surpassed by genital orientation toward the opposite sex. The mouth certainly does surface as a site of autoerotic pleasure in the antimasturbation and dietetic reform tracts I read in this book. However, in the map of the nervous system that was promulgated by Sylvester Graham and William Alcott, which I discuss in chapter 2, and then reinterpreted by various of their cultural inheritors, including Louisa May Alcott, whom I discuss in chapter 4, the mouth and the genitals function as coeval sites of erotic intensity in adults as well as in children. In Graham’s writing both can be overstimulated, and indeed sensual indulgence at one of those sites inevitably drives the appetitive needs of the other.

This presexological mapping of erotic and alimentary pleasure in the antebellum period had its corollary in the literal, that is, geographic, mapping of the nation, and it was at the overlap between the two that the mouth, as a doorway into the consuming body, first became a site of biopolitical intensity in the United States. Biopolitics is understood in this book not as the project of state intervention into the well-being of its population in the classic Foucauldian sense. Rather, I resituate biopolitics in the context of the United States as a collective ideological effort driven by various reform movements in the antebellum United States via a series of uneven,
asynchronous, and local campaigns, each of them reworking republicanism to construe the ideal citizen as self-policing, temperate, and moral. In the context of reform dietetics, which was closely allied with the temperance movement and antimasturbation campaigns, the ideal citizen was to be made and remade via the quotidian practices of correct consumption, self-care, and sexual hygiene.

To be “correct” within these discourses, or, more precisely, to be “virtuous,” meant to be identified with the nation-building project, both with and against the British past. The girding of these bodily ideologies became even more overdetermined as, over the course of a half century, the rapidly expanding national borders came to encompass the formerly French South and the formerly Spanish Southwest, as well as waves of new European immigration. Across that same period, the United States also propelled its borders over and decimated Native American cultures and peoples, reconstituting and relocating those First Nations, all the while grappling with the possibility of slave emancipation and black men’s enfranchisement. In that context, the construction and defense of whiteness as a majoritarian demographic seemed all the more pressing to those unwilling to remake their nation in the image of its actual inhabitants. The particular contribution of the reform movement was to stitch nationalism to the individual white body, a shift that made the project of defending the white body against various (racializing) vices dependent on a citizenry that construed politics to be an individual matter. Eating culture, tied as it was to economic and political matters of trade and expansion and thus commodity consumption, became one site of intimate political intensity, where “eating American,” that is, eating foodstuffs tied to the transplanted ecological history and foodways of the Euro-American majority—what we might think of as an early and paradoxical iteration of the “local” foods idea—was one way to produce a moral body, unswayed by dangerous appetites for exotic and overstimulating, that is, “foreign,” foods.

Within these local, national, and transnational discourses, the mouth became the focus of a disciplinary project within which the correct embodiment of the individual was understood to be of deep importance to the burgeoning nation. Such disciplinary models changed across the century, to be sure, as different cultural and political anxieties, as well as various transnational relations, occupied the cultural imagination. Each of these moments, further, took on its own allegorical relationship to both the individual body and the body politic; at each of the five moments that I discuss in this book eating played an important role,
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as a practice or representation. Following the evolution of eating culture across this period opens up new areas of inquiry into the alignment between bodies and bodies politic, revealing different forms of racial embodiment as they shifted with the political and economic contingencies of the period.

A central argument of this book, then, is that eating is central to the performative production of raced and gendered bodies in the nineteenth century. Consider for instance the following passage, written by Oliver Wendell Holmes and quoted by Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe in the nutrition chapter of the 1869 edition of *The American Woman's Home*:

Every organized being always lives immersed in a strong solution of its own elements. . . . We are all chameleons in our diet, as we are all salamanders in our habitat, inasmuch as we live always in the fire of our own smoldering combustion. . . . We are perishing and being born again at every instant . . . We do literally enter over and over again into the womb of that great mother from whom we get our bones and flesh, and blood, and marrow.17

Holmes’s allegory of constant death and rebirth intersects directly with Butler’s understanding of performativity as “ritualized repetition”—biological processes are here given a circular, iterative temporality linked to death and rebirth, making and unmaking.18 But this sense of dietary immersion in one’s own elements, of burning from within, of the self indistinguishable from the “strong solution” of its surroundings hints that from within the study of eating in the nineteenth century the production of bodily materiality looks a little different than it does within the bourgeois norms of the twenty-first century. This passage in fact points us to a messier idea of materialization, one in which, as William Ian Miller has written, we are soaking in “life soup, the roiling stuff of eating, defecation, fornication, generation, death, rot, and regeneration.”19

Holmes’s “womb of that great mother” entails an orifice out of which “our bones and flesh, and blood, and marrow” are delivered. Importantly, Holmes never specifies what orifice he means that we enter and exit, and indeed it is at the point—or perhaps more precisely from within the gorge—of the orifice that I wish to make my intervention. Reading fictions of bodily essence and materiality through the mouth points to the ways that food and eating culture provide a metalanguage through
which we tell stories about the materials that constitute both object and subject, food and flesh. More than that, examining these fictions offers new insights into the intersection of racial hierarchy with various forms of political citizenship across the period.

Because of the close link between eating, racial formation, and political culture in the period, the history of whiteness is at the center of this book. However, in Racial Indigestion eating culture is also understood as a privileged site for the representation of, and fascination with, those bodies that carry the burdens of difference and materiality, that are understood as less social, less intellectual, and, at times, less sentient: racially minoritized subjects, children, women, and, at times, animals. Often referred to as “hyperembodied” in this book, racially minoritized—mostly black and sometimes Asian—subjects are at times closely aligned with what we might think of as the bottom of the food chain.

As the following five chapters attest, there are the eaters, and then there are the eaten; similarly, there are the eaters, and then there are the hungry. The image of the black body as an edible object is a strong and consistent trope in this book, and it is an image that carries the weight of many centuries of forced labor, of coercive and violent sexual desire, and of ongoing political struggle. As we will see, however, the fantasy of a body’s edibility does not mean that body will always go down smoothly. Rather, the title of my book, Racial Indigestion, points to the idea that the constitution of whiteness via the most racist images and practices of eating culture is neither seamless nor easy. Although I trace the image of the black body as an edible object across the last half of the nineteenth century, at no point does my analysis understand the black body and therefore black subjects to be without agency. For as these images and the cultural logics that flow through them show, across the nineteenth century black bodies and subjects stick in the throat of the (white) body politic, refusing to be consumed as part of the capitalist logic of racism and slavery as well as the cultural and literary matter that they produced.

Whether impeding absorption—getting stuck in the craw or producing colicky white bodies and thereby disturbing the easy internalization of blackness—or whether testifying from the space of imminent death and expulsion from the bowels of a slave-dependent nation, black bodies and subjects in these encounters fight back, and bite back, both in the white imaginary and in domestic manuals and novels produced by black authors. Although excluded from the biopolitical, nation-building imperatives of a mostly white reform movement that nonetheless often aligned
itself with abolition, black authors and citizens insisted on their relevance and centrality to national narratives of bodily belonging.

As we will see, particularly in chapters 3 and 5, black subjects often resist through the trope of excess—of affect, of aesthetic intensity, or, as the cook Chloe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* tells us, through sheer “sauciness.” In other words, black subjects resist via the aesthetic strategy that Daphne Brooks has termed *opacity*—by refusing to be reduced to a function of white well-being. In refusing white instrumentalization black subjects in these texts interrupt the easy flow of white desire and entitlement, which appears in the desire to consume the black subject, a dialectic that, given the emphasis on texts directed at white women and children in this book, I read as the feminized inversion of the more common trope of nineteenth-century racism in which white men inhabit and impersonate blackness. What the texts examined in *Racial Indigestion* point to is that in many of those moments when racism appears to produce its most abject representations—through comic debasement, for instance—black characters and subjects inhabit the limits of language and aesthetic form, performing moments of spectacular visibility, at times despite and beyond the creator’s intentions.

From within these images, it is not simply the white mouth that is of interest, in its voracious and cannibalistic desire to experience, enjoy, and destroy the other, what bell hooks called, in her foundational formulation of the phrase, “Eating the Other.” As I show, the black mouth is a site of political intensity itself, as it consistently occupies and preempts the domination of white desire, from the kitchen, from the back of the house and below the stairs, and then ultimately in the sphere of urban commodity culture. In *Racial Indigestion*, the black mouth speaks, laughs, and eats in the face of the violent desires of white supremacy; in fact, speech, laughter, and eating are conjoined as tropes of black cultural presence and resistance. Across this book eating is an act that is also symbolic of access to the sphere of public politics and citizenship and thus metonymic of the struggle for political agency.

As a foundation for this investigation of the conjoined tropes of laughter, politics, and eating, in chapter 1 I develop a literary history of eating culture via the intertwined histories of the colonial hearth and the kitchen in the United States. Developed out of many years of teaching Rabelais and Bakhtin in my “Eating the Other” course, *Racial Indigestion* also contains an argument about the association of comedy and vernacular speech—another form of orality, or voice, that exceeds or
counters intextuation, in de Certeau’s terminology—with the politically devalued and thus often hyperembodied populations that appear with food and in food spaces: immigrants, blacks, servants, and, in particular, cooks.  

Specifically, I put these discourses into conversation with theater history and performance studies to understand literary representations of hearths and kitchens and the subaltern bodies that work there as drawn from colonial, transatlantic, and early-American theater culture, in which travesty, cross-dressing, and racial and species inversion were mutually intertwined as carnivalesque traditions. In *Racial Indigestion*, I see the kitchen as a space whose politics and representations must be analyzed in terms of abjection and inversion. The kitchen in this formulation is a space of blood and guts, plucked chickens and cooked tongue, rancid and sweet butter, rising bread and fermenting beers, and other items only semi-formed on their way to the site of ingestion, be it dining room or kitchen table. Feminist critics have long viewed the kitchen as the space within the house where the politics of both the public sphere and the home are most contentious and visible. In *Racial Indigestion*, I read that clash in the violent confrontations between mistress and servant or slave, in the unavoidable economics of what is available and affordable, in the cultural politics of who eats what and when.

My move to consider literature from the back of the house is thus a move to think specifically about how food and kitchen imagery begins to account for the viscerality of regimes of inequity organized around mythologies of difference, as well as the ways that food metaphorizes fleshly experience as a “natural” limit of social, linguistic, and literary expression. Kitchens in *Racial Indigestion* are not only sites of utopic possibility, of the possible inversion of classes of people, and of the worlding dreams of early feminism, although they are all that: they are also dystopic spaces whose abjection in the internal economy of the home allows the repressed to be represented in the visceral commonplaces of kitchen work—cutting, scraping, peeling, and boiling.

Chapter 2 shifts to an examination of the queer racial erotics of Sylvester Graham’s intimate and imperialist dietetic project, focusing specifically on the consolidation of whiteness as the racial formation at the heart of republican citizenship. In particular, I look at the politics of bread and wheat in the antebellum period, examining the transnational and imperial consequences of Sylvester Graham’s “farinaceous” diet to reveal the homology between these prescriptive cures and an imperial politics of U.S. expansion.
In some ways, my work on Graham seems to belie one of the central ideas behind this book: to shift food studies attention away from the *what* of food to the *how* of eating. But in reading these antebellum reformer texts, I hope to point to the fact that the *what* of food was in part determined by the material and symbolic processes that brought food into contact with the mouth and the digestive system. Additionally, this chapter begins to lay the claim that the commodity citizen of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries is a direct descendant of Graham and other food reformers’ ideal eaters. Much like today’s locavores and food reformers, reform dietetics invited consumers to direct their desire toward virtuous objects, to substitute a hypervigilant digestive life for critical engagement with political and economic processes. Thus, while on the surface this chapter is interested in bread as a foodstuff, it is ultimately focused on reform dietetics as an early iteration and case study in the production of the consumer-citizen as a racially specific and politically limited eater-activist.

Chapter 3 looks at Harriet Beecher Stowe’s, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s, and Harriet Wilson’s deployment of the trope of the black body as edible object during the 1850s. I use this deeply disturbing and at the same time pervasive image, written about so casually in this period, to further develop my theory of eating as a racially performative act, one through which we can unveil and ideally destabilize politically limited ideas of racial embodiment. Reversing the trope of blackface, in which blackness is *put on*, in these texts whiteness is consolidated through the metaphor of ingestion: blackness is *put in*. I begin by uncovering the allegorical effect of the edible black body as a Jim Crow cookie in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *House of Seven Gables* and then trace variations on the edible black body in two abolitionist and antiracist writers, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Wilson, as they seek to work out the place of the black subject in the white body politic.

What I hope to make clear in this chapter, however, is that those subjects pictured as edible hardly concede to that relationship. Even in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, two texts with problematic, racist representations, the consumable black body will not go down easily but rather pushes back against the body that seeks to consume and thereby obliterate it. In Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig*, Frado refuses consumption entirely, demanding a place at the table and documenting the middle-class kitchen and its visceral terrors as experiences at the edge of what may be represented and spoken. The black literary body here is put in service of the black subject and the black public sphere.
Chapter 4 returns to the reform movement’s nutritional and erotic thematics via Louisa May Alcott’s postbellum adoption of reform dietetics and antiaddiction discourse in two of her lesser-known novels, which are staged during the heart of the antebellum China trade. As the niece of William Alcott, and as Bronson Alcott’s daughter, Louisa May Alcott was subject, when young, to the enthusiastic application of Grahamite principles at her own table and could observe their effects on her mother as well, who was ultimately the organizer and producer of the family meal. Louisa May Alcott, with her family connection to reformist politics, modifies and invests themes from it in her postbellum novels. In as much as these novels are explicitly didactic, they promote the reformist ideal of white femininity, even as they mitigate the harsher, republican virtue ethic with a more accepting view of consumer citizenship. Alcott produces an image of a progressive shopping subject—the consumer activist—who buys or refuses to buy in service of her political ideals, who seeks to reduce her dependence on commodity culture but succeeds only, in fact, in suppressing or redirecting it toward other objects. At the same time, the concretizing of racial hierarchy in Alcott’s texts seems to work in tandem with the much-documented queer subtexts of her work.

I conclude the book with a discussion of race, eating, and representation in chromolithographic trade cards, an underexamined advertising medium of the late nineteenth century that, as I will argue, borrowed heavily from the theatrical model of racial impersonation in order to incite consumer desire and imagine new consuming publics. Flipping the image of the edible black body around, in chapter 5 trade cards depict people of color—African Americans and Asians—buying commodities. Following Harriet Wilson’s work in tracing the black subject coming into being, I argue that these images stand in for what we might call having a place at the political table. Eating in these advertisements is a replacement for (and thus, logically, analogous to) political power: I read these images as a sign of the presence and importance of nonwhite postbellum U.S. consumers and the booming transnational market economy.

This chapter also puts the past two decades of scholarly work on blackface into conversation with my larger argument about eating. Images of eating here illuminate the connection between desire and embodiment as it was imagined by advertisers in the period, when advertising was a disparate and ad hoc sector, not yet institutionally congealed into specialized “agencies.” In a sense, at this time advertising was much nearer popular culture, which is to say that it was articulated in the heart of everyday life,
by printers and owners of stores and the like rather than by advertising professionals. This gives the trading cards I examine an interesting status as products that have not yet been captured by any particular institution or business and that reflect the obsessions of everyday life. Often, they show a mode of looking that I will argue was borrowed from the theater, at that time one of the great venues of popular entertainment.

Ultimately, these cards stage encounters that show nineteenth-century commodity culture to have been an important sphere of racialization that was on the one hand mediated through the senses and on the other hand seen as always and already a theatrical space. As we will see, in the sphere of commodity consumption, the production of race ultimately undoes its own logic: for just as the cards often attach extreme commodity pleasure to nonwhite bodies, the consistent trope of interracial and intercultural encounter in the cards points to the existence of a shared eating culture that mediated between disparate and radically unequal demographics.