

Alimentary Domesticity

Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century. Kyla Wazana Tompkins. New York: New York University Press, 2012. 275 pp.

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<1>Kyla Wazana Tompkins's excellent book, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century*, does a remarkable job of staging for nineteenth-century studies the full literary, historical, semiotic, and theoretical implications of the growing interdiscipline of food studies. Steering clear of what we might punningly refer to as the more jejune temptations of the field, or of what Tompkins describes as "the habit of fetishizing the consumer object that is so often found in cooking history, food studies and 'foodie literature'" (145), this book pursues what is accurately described as a "truly materialist" (145) approach. Emphasizing food and eating, Tompkins foregrounds the embodied site of the mouth that both speaks and eats as crucial to the discursive production of raced and gendered subjects in the nineteenth century.

<2>To scholars working in nineteenth-century gender studies, this book is perhaps most recognizable in generic terms as a worthy heir to the great studies of domesticity of the last two decades such as Gillian Brown's *Domestic Individualism*, Lora Romero's *Home Fronts*, and Lori Merish's *Sentimental Materialism*.⁽¹⁾ Like those studies, this book has as its topological center (the middle section of the third of five chapters) as well as its leading edge (the first fruits of this project published in article form in the journal *Callaloo* in 2007) a terrifically astute reading of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-2). That reading anchors an exquisitely structured book that inscribes an arc through the nineteenth century, from the material transition from the hearth to the stove at the beginning of the antebellum period to the emergence of food advertising and food-centered commodity culture in the Gilded Age.

<3>Among the many salient objects, texts, themes, and theoretical premises that resonate across chapters, I would isolate three key elements which I discuss in greater detail below. First, this book develops an inventive and deeply-historicized consideration of the object relations that structure the connections between bodies and eating in the nineteenth century, such as hearths and stoves, wheat and sugar, china and opium, trading cards and commercial ephemera. Second, this book situates widely-read and taught literary texts including not only *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but also Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), and Melville's "I and My Chimney" (1856) alongside less-examined literary works such as Louisa May Alcott's postbellum Rose Campbell novels, antebellum dietary reform treatises by Sylvester Graham and Alcott's uncle William Alcott, and children's folktales such as *Dame Trot*

and Her Comical Cat (1809). Third, this book provides a bridge rarely found in nineteenth-century studies between a Bakhtinian celebration of the subversive potential of orality itself—of food, vernacular speech, folk culture, and mouths—that extends to the agency of characters within novels and minor figures within visual representations, *and* a Foucauldian critique of biopolitics that casts a suspicious eye on the discursive production of those very sites.

<4>The book's first chapter, "Kitchen Insurrections," begins on a Bakhtinian note with a fascinating account of the material transition in domestic architecture from the hearth to the stove, and therefore the modern displacement of cooking from the middle to the back of the home. Whereas the hearth served as a common source of heat and light as well as of fuel for cooking, and thus the place where cooking, eating, reading, and socializing all took place, with the invention of the stove those roles became increasingly bifurcated along lines of gender and eventually class and race. However, Tompkins's story is not principally one of a fall into the modern, but rather one of the persistence of the "specific literary history" (15) in which the social details of hearth and kitchen remain intermingled: through the nostalgic productions of male writers such as Melville and the "Fireside Poets"; in didactic children's literature in which stories involving a social inversion between the cook and the cooked, the eater and the eaten, retain center stage; and through the emerging commodity culture of the later nineteenth century in which one of the book's key images, the ideologically multivalent "edible body" of the racial other, is offered up for white middle-class digestive—or, as Tompkins insists, "indigestive"—incorporation.

<5>The second chapter, "'She Made the Table to Snare Them:' Sylvester Graham's Imperial Dietetics," moves the discussion from the turn of the nineteenth century to the 1830s, the grounding material object from cooking technology to the political economy of wheat, and the cultural imperatives toward the preparation and consumption of bread. As the chapter's title makes clear, it is here, in a consideration of Graham, famous for linking the regulation of diet with the regulation of the sexual appetites of young men, that the book's engagement with Foucauldian biopolitics takes shape. In a move that shows its debt to Amy Kaplan's famous conceptualization of "Manifest Domesticity," Tompkins tracks the alignment of body, home, and nation in Graham's *Treatise on Bread and Breadmaking* (1837). In particular, she demonstrates that wheat cultivation was prized as a valuable use of western lands; breadmaking was elevated as nation-building, female domestic labor; and bread *eating* was presented as an appropriately bland—"white-bread" if you will—desideratum for white folks.⁽²⁾ However, whereas a previous generation would take such a confluence as occasion for critical censure, in Tompkins's hands this archive of dietetic reform retains its Bakhtinian promise through a counterdiscourse that she names "queer alimentarity" and further defines as "a form of sensuality [with] . . . the power to disrupt the individual body and the social order" (69).

<6>In the pivotal third chapter, "'Everything 'Cept Eat Us': The Mouth as Political Organ in the Antebellum Novel," the material emphasis moves from wheat to sugar and the double entendre of the study's subtitle—"bodies eating and bodies being eaten"—comes into focus. The chapter offers novel accounts of two famous episodes of African-American "edibility" in the antebellum U.S. canon: the sale and consumption of the gingerbread "Jim Crow" cookies in *House of Seven Gables*, and the delectably objectifying description of Aunt Chloe's "black, shining face [...] so

glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with the white of eggs, like one of her own tea rusks” (Stowe 32; Tompkins 109) in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁽³⁾ It concludes with a brief but compelling analysis of the less-noticed thematics of consumption and starvation in *Our Nig*. Pushing hard against the critical tendency to read such moments as instances of the free play of white supremacy, Tompkins quite brilliantly reframes these moments as instances of an inverted minstrelsy along the lines theorized by Eric Lott in *Love and Theft*.⁽⁴⁾ Here, that is, “the symbolic possibilities of literary cannibalism” (112) comprise signs of racial terror *and* the uncomfortable and unstable—“indigestible”—consequences of attempting to contain the other within.

<7>The book’s fourth chapter, “A Wholesome Girl: Addiction, Grahamite Dietetics, and Louisa May Alcott’s Rose Campbell Novels,” revisits some of the themes of Chapter Two around diet, sexuality, and empire, while emphasizing the significant material changes wrought by the transnational trade in luxury goods that assumed center stage in postbellum consumer culture. In particular Tompkins provides an illuminating and even-handed focus on the way that the Rose Campbell novels (*Eight Cousins* [1875] and *Rose in Bloom* [1876]) both recur to the biopolitical racialization of bread of the dietetic reformers of the 1830s and critically recast those concerns as unwittingly resting atop transnational trade relations. As Tompkins demonstrates, these texts reveal that the apparent wholesomeness of domestic self-sufficiency is built upon a triangular trade powered by New England steam, the opium of the eastern Mediterranean, and the import of Chinese *objets* of porcelain and ivory. Here the unstable permeability of bodies and markets align once again, such that Chinese difference and the purported foreignness of opiate addiction come together in the image of the delectable *Chinese* body, the character of the Chinese man called Fun See who is aligned not with tea rusks like Aunt Chloe, but rather with a tea *pot* that he presents as his own porcelain doppelgänger.

<8>Chapter Five, “‘What’s De Use Taking ’Bout Dem ’Mendments?’: Trade Cards and Consumer Citizenship at the End of the Nineteenth Century,” provides an apt conceptual end point to the book’s pyramid structure by developing an archive out of the chromolithographic cards used to market food and cooking gear at the end of the nineteenth century and tying those images back to the Bakhtinian scenes of social inversion analyzed in Chapter One. Characteristic of this book, and once again to its immense credit, Tompkins assembles 38 examples of this “racial kitch”—those often grotesque images of African, Asian, Irish, and Jewish figures used at century’s end to sell industrial items ranging from cotton thread, to tobacco plugs, to stove polish—but does not subject them to censure; rather, with great literary sensitivity and semiotic inventiveness, Tompkins attends both to the self-consciousness of their theatricality and to the ideological instability of their often grotesque imagery to argue, again *à la* Eric Lott, that “in these cards, the mouth becomes a space of interracial and interethnic encounter” (162), an encounter whose consequences are ultimately beyond the knowledge or intention of the first makers, distributors, or collectors of these cultural texts.

<9>In short, this book is a highly accomplished study of great historical, archival, and conceptual range. To scholars of the nineteenth century, it provides a fruitful and inspiring example of the applicability of the food studies optic to a broad range of literary and cultural research relating to gender, sexuality, materiality, and embodiment. This is also an eminently

teachable book: its writing is engaging, its range of subject matter is inherently fascinating, and its methodological stakes are at every point rendered sufficiently transparent to appeal to students and seasoned professionals alike.

Endnotes

(1) Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining the Self in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); and Lora Romero's *Home Fronts: Domesticity and its Critics in the Antebellum United States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).(^)

(2) Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70.3 (September 1998): 581-606. (^)

(3) Harriet Beecher Stowe, "Uncle Tom's Cabin; Or, Life Among the Lowly" in Kathryn Kish Sklar, ed. *Harriet Beecher Stowe: Three Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1982).(^)

(4) Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).(^)