INFELICITOUS INCORPORATIONS: ECOLOGY, INDIGESTIBILITY, AND THE EATING BODY IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

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INELICITOUS INCORPORATIONS: ECOLOGY, INDIGESTIBILITY, AND THE EATING
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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates ways that representations of indigestibility in antebellum American literature can produce a reading of the eating body that challenges the paradigm of incorporation, which was associated with the metaphor of eating in the writings of Freud. It pays specific attention to literary figurations of insolubility and disgust, arguing that these affect both characters’ and readers’ corporeal senses, providing access to a material impression of eating. Examples are culled from the texts of Frank Webb’s The Garies and Their Friends, Herman Melville’s Poor Man’s Pudding and Rich Man’s Crumbs, Walt Whitman’s This Compost, and certain texts from the Davy Crockett Almanacs, to explore ways that antebellum renderings of indigestibility, perceived through taste, touch, and vision, addressed the bodies both of characters and readers—influencing both perceptions of identity categories such as race and class, but also of the human itself. It devotes special attention to representations of disrupted incorporation that actively instigated a felt experience of the human body as an aggregate of agentic, sometimes independent, material parts. The reading of geophagia in Toni Morrison’s Paradise, included in the conclusion, offers a perspective on how such textual renderings of the activity of eating have been addressed in our more recent history.
Acknowledgements

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Many thanks,

Bethany A. Beaupain
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Introduction

Material Incorporations: The Eating Body in Question

. . . the original system of images symbolized the working people, continuing to conquer life and food through struggle and labor and to absorb only that part of the world that has been conquered and mastered.

–Mikhail Bakhtin, Rabelais and His World

We must find another relationship to nature besides reification, possession, appropriation, and nostalgia.

–Donna J. Haraway, “Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms”

A naked figure with the pudgy cheeks of an infant but the musculature of a physically fit grown man lunges across a page of Anne Norton’s 1986 volume, Alternative Americas: A Reading of Antebellum Political Culture, a solid mass jammed in his mouth, one hand holding aloft a liquor-shaped bottle, and the other slicing across what looks like a roasted leg of fowl. This is “Infant [Davy] Crockett at the Dinner Table,” a woodcut that first ran in the 1848 Crockett Almanac (see fig. 1), and its purpose in Norton’s book is to provide an example of one of the literary embodiments of the trope of eating that was active in Western America in the early 19th century (Norton 206). Crockett, Norton writes, “made his breakfast on ‘stewed Yankee and pork steak, and by way of digestion rinsed them down with spike nails and epsom [sic] salts,’ . . . Frontier
life, as presented in the *Crockett Almanacs*, was one long meal” (206).

The 19th century eating body, then, emerges from Norton’s interpretations as a fleshly metaphoric tool of domination and disappearance: a landscape-obliterating organism of consumption and absorption. The American nation at the time used images of the Western eating body such as Crockett’s, her argument runs, both to imagine the nation’s engagement in commerce, and to demonstrate its own potential and desire for conquest—especially of the lands and natural resources that seemed to unfold ever westward. The alimentary trope, as Norton describes it, offered a way for American nationals to imagine an ecology in which substances are divided between an inside (the body of a subject), and an outside (the environment, the landscape, including all manner of inhabitants, both inanimate: “lightening,” “spike nails,” “Epsom salts,” and animate: “Yankees,” “niggers,” or “bear meat”) (Norton 206), which interact with one another primarily through the paradigm of eating. “The eater consumes. What he consumes is itself destroyed but contributes in its destruction to the aggrandizement, the growth, of the eater. Western expansion, aggressive and assimilative, followed this pattern,” Norton writes (212). Indeed, she keeps company with many cultural critics in her claim that: “The paradigm offered by eating . . . maintains the singularity of the eater” (212).

The model that Norton employs and references here, keeping company with many late 20th and early 21st century critics who stress the destructiveness of the eating process, can be traced to Freud’s use, throughout the 19th century, of eating as a metaphor to help elaborate his concepts of identification through incorporation—in which a bounded “ego” takes its object of desire from the “outside” into its “inside,” thus expanding its own borders. A “form of mastery modeled directly on the nutritional instinct” (Fuss 34) in which the infant gains control of its
outside world through orally consuming that world, the psychic incorporation of an object “coincides with that object’s destruction” according to Freud (“Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 621).

A number of theorists since then have interrogated this association of eating and identification: Diana Fuss, for example, has explored how the metaphor of eating has imposed certain restrictions on the concept of psychological identification, asking, “What exactly determines what can or cannot be psychically incorporated? What distinguishes, for the subject, an edible object from an inedible one? And how can we ultimately tell the difference between an identification and a desire, between an emotional tie and an emotional object, or, for that matter, between a self and an other?” (Fuss 36-37). And critics such as Zita Nunes¹ and Anne Anlin Cheng² have further explored the resistance of the psychologically “eaten” object and its effects on the consuming subject, especially in terms of black individuals and communities who might be seen as vulnerable to dissolution and incorporation within a white America. Work such as theirs, in emphasizing the subject’s psychological dependence on its own outside, troubles any notion of the ego’s “mastery” of its psychic objects, as well as the idea of a singular, unified subject.

¹ Nunes, in her recent book, Cannibal Democracy (2008), focuses on what “does indeed get left over, the remainder—that which resists incorporation or is expelled” in metaphoric representations of cannibalism in a system of democracy (Nunes 14), emphasizing that the material that persists beyond digestion has been changed and extracted by the digestive system: It “is not simply outside; it does not arrive or live separately within” (95).

² Cheng uses the figure of indigestibility in order to describe America’s national racial melancholy from a psychoanalytic perspective—in which the desired but lost object, in Freud, is incorporated into the ego of the subject (for Cheng, the nation), which continues to feed on it there in a kind of psychic self-cannibalism that forbids the return of the lost object exterior to the ego—a process she deems “most uneas[y] diges[t]ion” (Cheng 10).
However, we sometimes forget that representations of bodies eating affect not only the psychologically-defined subject, but also the material dimension of the eating body. Though critics such as Fuss, Nunes, and Cheng have opened up an exploration of ways in which the psychologically incorporated “other” influences the subject in the social realm, the association with psychological identification continues to reinforce a particular way of reading and interpreting the corporeal act of eating. This thesis is especially interested in the recent iteration of this trend in which many scholars who have begun to revisit the material world, eager to explore ways that humans as material beings are reminded of our interconnectedness with things that are outside our skin, tend (with some exceptions) to shy away from representations of eating—an otherwise potentially fruitful exploration of a traverse between material bodies. The issue, I think, calls for an approach that attends to the unique and troublesome history of the eating metaphor—an approach that has been bypassed by theorists who attempt to read food as agentic material. Jane Bennett, for example, is one new materialist who does devote attention to food, as a “conative bod[y] vying along side and within an other complex body . . . an actant inside and alongside . . . human beings” (Bennett 39). However, her recent book’s insightful chapter, “Edible Matter,” does not account for the special pressure that the paradigm of incorporation and absorption exerts on alimentary representations. Stacy Alaimo, in a recent anthology of feminist materialism, offers a more traditional argument, that “. . . dwelling on food . . . serves up nature as an ingestible morsel. True, we are transformed by the food we consume (as the film Supersize Me will attest), but for the most part the model of incorporation emphasizes the outline of the human—food disappears into the human body, which remains solidly bounded” (Alaimo 254).³ There is a sense, I agree, in which it is hard to resist the slide of

³ Alaimo does, in fact, explore the relationship of humans to dirt via food in a passage on growing tomatoes from
eating imagery into a reading of eating as necessarily incorporative. But it is the proposition of this paper that many such images are able, through a disruptive address of the senses, to prompt a different inscription of themselves.

Interpreting a literary or cultural text poses certain challenges for a “materialist” reading, especially when we are used to reading representations—products of language, or discourse—in terms of what they represent within a context of human speech. In fact, post-modern scholars, pointing out the impossibility of objectively apprehending the “real,” tend to avoid discussing the associated idea of “material” altogether—suggesting that because we can access material only through language, language is the only worthy topic of discussion (Alaimo and Hekman 2).

Pitting discourse against materiality, however, (as Alaimo and Hekman point out) reproduces binaries historically entrenched in Western thought (those that align categories such as “male,” “subject,” or “white,” for example, against those such as “female,” “object,” or “black”), which postmodernists usually work to deconstruct. In this thesis, which explores what I call images of “infelicitous” eating in antebellum literature, I am interested in the ways that “discourse” and “material” mingle with, merge into, and sometimes undo one another as images and interpretations shuttle between the bodies and objects that write, that are written about, and that read. I am further interested in how these textual and sensory constructs, in turn, affect reader

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Ladelle McWhorter’s Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization, but she maintains that the image only works because McWhorter emphasizes the dirt rather than the food. See also the conclusion of this thesis for a related example of a late 20th century representation of geophagia, or dirt-eating.

4 Eating as an image of multiple materialities may be further difficult to maintain because of the cognitive dissonance that the act necessarily produces. If, in eating, which I must do, I have done violence to something outside of myself, I am tempted to convince myself that the eaten thing must not be worthy of preserving.

5 See Karen Barad’s concept of “intra-agentic becoming,” and Vicky Kirby’s consideration of the “meat of the body [as] thinking material” (221), both in the compilation Material Feminisms, for examples of ways that the deconstruction of nature/discourse has been conducted.
interpretations of (and, potentially, contributions to) discourse, charging discussions and understandings of issues of identity, such as race, class, and gender with an added dimension of the corporeal that pushes at the “identity”—the “material-discursive”\(^6\) substance—of the human itself.

Reading about sense experiences (especially those connected with poverty and pain, which figure largely in the chapters that follow) is different, of course, from experiencing them live—and it is not my intent to argue otherwise. In fact, as the following chapters will indicate, textual media can produce in the reader very different reactions from those it depicts in the characters.

As with the psychoanalytical model, writings about a physical human subject “absorbing”\(^7\) material from the landscape call up images of dominion, domination, objectification, consumption, and obliteration. Such depictions tend to reinforce a perspective that emphasizes the agency and activeness of the eating subject, while rendering the eaten or potentially eaten material inert and lifeless: the latter is granted a limited agency only in service of the “subject” as a whole, once it is “absorbed” into the body. This “active human subject” opposed to a “lifeless landscape” is a representation of the world that has for more than a century

\(^6\) See Barad’s definition of material-discursive practices: “specific iterative enactments—agential intra-actions—though which matter is differently engaged and articulated (in the emergence of boundaries and meanings), reconfiguring the material-discursive field of possibilities in the iterative dynamics of intra-activity that is agency” (140).

\(^7\) Nineteenth-century French food writer Brillat Savarin defines “the distinctive quality of food” as “its ability to submit to animal assimilation” (61)—that is, “all those substances which, submitted to the action of the stomach, can be assimilated or changed into life by digestion, and can thus repair the losses which the human body suffers through the act of living” (61). Savarin differentiates between various materials that enter the mouth, specifying that the sense of taste operates only on certain substances that are what he terms “sapid,” or able to be “absorbed by the taste buds” (40)—as, one can only suppose, opposed to others, that aren’t. Mikhail Bakhtin also emphasizes the connection of bodily mastery with the idea of absorption, claiming that “the original system of images [of labor and food] symbolized the working people, continuing to conquer life and food through struggle and labor and to absorb only that part of the world that has been conquered and mastered” (282, italics mine).
been contested by findings in the realms of physical sciences, note Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, and yet has continued to exert its influence in our interpretations of texts, our social understandings, and our political decisions—reinforcing, as Coole and Frost describe it, the “conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions and the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master nature” (Coole and Frost 10).

The representation of the “landscape” as infinitely digestible troubles me on a number of fronts. It concerns me, of course, as a member of a gender that has been associated since Plato’s Khora with the “environment,” characterized as an inchoate, inert and passive mass, and available for the consumption of human (male)s endowed with subjectivity. And as a person who spent most of her childhood in the outdoors in the outdoors of Alaska and who derives pleasure from both the variety and surprise of the sensory experiences available in systems whose complexity I cannot fully track, being able to recognize an environment that can surpass the confines of my imagination—so far outside me that it has its own actions and agendas—suggests the prospect of possibility. I want a different relationship to this landscape because I want to believe that I (we) can become more that what I (we) are, and because I want to learn how to read differently that which history has identified with me.

Finally, as a “human” who eats, (and must therefore does view the landscape as a resource at the same time I try to view it as belonging to itself), the seemingly necessary connection of “food” with digestibility, and thus an implication of submission to the “will” of the consuming organism, seems to me ripe for reconsideration. This is particularly true in these post-
industrial fertilizer times, when the vastly inequitable occurrence of human “food” challenges us to think carefully about what and how much we are putting in our mouths.

**Antebellum Eating**

In keeping with Norton, recent scholarship regarding eating activities in America’s antebellum period largely underscores the ways that the practice of eating was used as a way to shore up the discrete, differentiated “purity” and agency of the individual eating body. Antebellum strivings for privacy and domesticity as a refuge from the market were not only enshrined in the home, but—as the market encroached even there—were also interpreted within the human form. Melville’s *Bartleby*, for example, explores this effort to make the body a figure of domesticity, “self-possessed” and “impenetrable” through the refusal to eat: the refusal to allow the market into the body at all, according to Gillian Brown (Brown 189). In addition, making the “right” food choices was one way to help regulate and insulate the body against the outside and conserve what was seen as a limited amount of energy. Sylvester Graham, a prominent figure in the antebellum reform community, counseled in favor of “bland” foods that would not excite supposedly wasteful and disease-inviting sexual expenditures; and the temperance movement connected middle-class respectability with discrimination regarding other types of bodily consumption, through drinking or inhaling smoke. By extension, eating was also used to perform the outline and reinforcement of identity for the “bodies” of the community and nation. Kyla Wazana Tomkins traces in Graham’s works the theory of “eating as an act of
national identification,” in which American bodies produce and reinforce their American-ness by “. . . consum[ing] American produce in the American home” (Tomkins, *Kitchen Culture* 105).  

However, laced within these conceptions of eating as one avenue to shore up identity and nationhood is the concern with the “dangers” of eating those items excluded from dietary regulations (alcohol, spices, or, in the case of Gillian’s Bartleby, any food at all). These substances were viewed as potentially disruptive to the individual body, which was also seen as a synecdoche for the community or nation. Given this set of concerns, we might expect to find literary representations of people eating the “wrong” things—especially objects of spiciness, potency, or vigor—in order to mark as abject people or communities that the dominant culture then used to buttress its perception of itself as exceptionally pure. Certainly these exist. But it might come as a surprise to us to find that many antebellum texts also include representations of human “subjects” eating “objects” that are not simply portrayed as socially objectionable and physically inadvisable—their consumption a threat to the vitality and the social positioning of the human subject—but suggest themselves to be, in some way, indigestible: materially resistant, through distaste or molecular resilience, to the body (willingly) consuming them, a direct affront to the performance of coherence and material differentiation we have come to expect from antebellum imagery.

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8 Tomkins finds Graham’s proposal flawed in that he advocates wheat bread as the primary item of “American” consumption. The advocacy of products made from wheat, which is not native to America, conveniently elides indigenous foods, such as corn—which was probably seen as too connected to the previous human inhabitants of the continent, whose link to the land white America was trying to overwrite (*Kitchen Culture* 107).

9 See, for example, Tomkins’ discussion of Graham’s equation of “spiciness” and “foreignness” in Sir John Barrow’s “A Description of Pitcairn’s Island and its Inhabitants with An Authentic Account of the Mutiny of the Ship Bounty and of the Subsequent Fortunes of the Mutineers” especially p. 134 of Tomkins’ *Kitchen Culture*. 
Infelicitous consumption

American texts from this era exhibit remarkably frequent occurrences of these types of disruptive instances of consumption. In fact, I suggest that running through many 19th century texts are instances in which these failures do not just passively exist, but, even more, have the potential to actively grip the reader in a de-hierarchizing performance of body as material, as a thing among things: a fluid assemblage of complexly related things. Attending to these scenes of indigestible eating can support a different way of reading alimentary scenes in general, one that can alert us to the activeness of the (eaten) environment, the materiality of the human, and a constitutive, productive entanglement of discourse and materiality.

Although some scholars argue that attending to food itself is enough to highlight the assemblage-like nature of the body, “not only the molecular assemblages that organize nutrition and ecology, but industrial assemblages of production and distribution, economic assemblages of cuisine and class” (Levin 2), others, such as Alaimo, stress that representations of eating are too treacherously prone to binaristic inscription, as Jane Bennett also articulates:

> Even if, as I believe, the vitality of matter is real, it will be hard to discern it, and, once discerned, hard to keep focused on. It is too close and too fugitive, as much wind as thing, impetus as entity, a movement always on the way to becoming otherwise, an effluence that is vital and engaged in trajectories but not necessarily intentions. What is more, my attention will regularly be drawn away from it by deep cultural attachments to the ideas that matter is inanimate and that real agency belongs only to humans or to God, and by the need for an action-oriented perception that must overlook much of the swirling vitality of the world. (Bennett 119)

Recent theorists, especially those in the fields of vital materialism and feminist materialism who are investigating ways to re-imagine the historical subject/landscape binary, have suggested that attending to the activeness of the “environment,” as well as the materiality of the body and the
reading brain, can disrupt the tendency to view the “outside” as solely composed of passive resources for the use of human bodies/brains/socialities. For example, Bennett focuses on accenting the activeness and agency of matter, while William Cohen has explored ways that the Victorians were reminded of the materiality of their own bodies through paying attention to their senses. “Focusing on a somatic locus and origin of the self makes a subject of the body and, at the same time, makes an object of the self: both are feeling things, but in different senses,” writes Cohen in his recent book on Victorian material conceptions of the body, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (9). “The body acquires a special status . . . since it can be simultaneously the subject and object of perception” (17).

Although incorporation-based critical interpretations of scenes of eating in antebellum (and even current) literature and culture have reinforced in the popular imagination the idea of the human subject as alone in its liveliness and subjectivity, in opposition to an inert landscape, I propose here that when we focus on fissures in the process—on what we might call, via Austin, “infelicitous” incorporations, or texts and textual moments in which physical reactions of revulsion and indigestion are legible—we can recognize how scenes of eating can complicate the subject/landscape binary, as eaten materials thrust their presence upon the reader in a way that is both corporeally and psychologically difficult to ignore. When a material article fails in its job—when it breaks or ceases to work as we expect it to—it is in a sense withdrawn from the economic or social system as a predictable “object,” and instead we begin to view it as

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10 J.L. Austin uses the term “infelicity” to describe instances in which a performative, an “issuing of [an] utterance [that is] performing . . . an action,” fails to successfully perform that action “correctly,” “completely,” and with proper intent and conduct (See Austin 6 and 14-15). I borrow the term here to help imagine representations of eating, which might utter, through visual or sense-based impressions, an activity of “incorporation” in which the consumed food does not dissolve into or enlarge the body of the eater, as an interpretation of incorporation might command, but instead implies that it has its own agenda.
something different—a “thing,” according to Bill Brown. When the material assemblage that “ceases working” is within the human body, then, it also helps to disrupt ideas of the unity and coherence of the material human organism. I propose that eating is a particularly helpful example of such a process, as it is the locus/intersection of imagining an “outside” piece of the world coming “inside” the human. The machinations of eating and the associated imagining of inert materials disappearing within a monolithic human subject can be disrupted in a number of ways: the potentially ingested object/thing may cause such a disruption at the site of the taste buds, through disgust and revulsion; it can cause a disruption at the site of the stomach or bowels, through the interior feeling (“touch”) of indigestion; or it can cause the disruption after having been disaggregated and dispersed throughout the flesh of the body, through a toxic reaction unsanctioned by the “central” intelligence of the consuming subject’s brain.

Consider again the images of Davy Crockett used to support Norton’s argument. According to Norton, Crockett’s choices of “commonly uneaten or inedible foods” served mainly to “express the Westerner’s pervasive involvement with nature,” in the sense that the eater could claim to take on the powers of the eaten. “In the West, you were what you ate,” she

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Brown defines a “thing” as a kind of “subject/object relation” that works against objectification; it does not allow us to name some kind of object that we then do not notice, but instead is invested with other kinds of value—value from memories, for example, or from other emotional connections we might make (Brown BigThink). “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” (Brown, Things, 4). I would like to think about Brown’s idea of a piece of material leaving its “object” status and gaining “thing” status when it does something unexpected as a material assemblage loosening itself (by “breaking” or “failing”) from a particular type of human categorization. Brown’s theory implies, I think, that this would then leave the object available to be re-classification according to other human modes of categorization (memories, emotions). But I suggest that it is also a chance for that “object” to be noticed as an assemblage of active material that may act in unpredictable ways, and thus challenging the notion of human categorization altogether.

I will focus in this thesis on disaggregation and disgust. Perhaps because it is not as closely tied to eating, the trope of toxicity has been comparatively eagerly taken up by critics (see, for example, Mel Chen’s essay, “Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections” and Stacy Alaimo’s “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature”).

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argues, adding that the unusual choices of articles of consumption functioned also to distinguish
the Westerner from “civilized men,” presumably Easterners (Norton 207). Crockett, for Norton,
appears as the expression of the ultimate landscape-absorbing subject.

But a reading of the Almanacs themselves suggests another way to interpret the
“American comic hero’s” scenes of eating. Norton, significantly, relied for her examples of
metaphors of the American West primarily upon folklorist Richard Dorson’s edited and
excerpted Davy Crockett: American Comic Legend, which is less a reprinting of the almanacs
than a limited collection of selected stories and images that Dorson compiled and published in
1939.13 Among the tales that Dorson’s edition does not include is that of “Colonel Crockett and
the Mud Turtles,” from the 1839 Almanac. In this story, Crockett is bitten by the dog belonging
to a group of Shawnee Indians who are preparing some live snapping turtles for consumption.
After Crockett retaliates by pinching the dog’s tail with one of the turtles’ severed heads, one of
the Shawnees challenges him to an oral—and digestive—duel:

The Shawnee that owned the dog give me such a tanyard grin as I thought nobody
but Davy Crockett could equal; but he had heern tell of me before, and thought it
war not best to aggrafy the matter, though it war plain his fingers itched to be at
my topknot. But to work he went, and cut up the turkles [sic] and put all their
harts into a wooden bowl, where they kept hoping about like so many live cricket
balls made of Injee rubber. He took one up and swallowed it, and looked me rite
in the face and sez he, ‘No Big Knife do that! BigKnife soft heart too much!’ —
and the others all grunted like so many bacon pigs at corn time. Now I never too
k a stump in my life, and if anybody axes you who will, you may tell him that it ar
not Davy Crockett, espeshully from an Injun savage. So I swallered three of the
turkles harts right off, and I’d done it if I’d knowed they’d been rank pisen. They
didn’t kill me, though I own I feel pretty considerable squamish every time I think
of a snapping turkle, and I felt as if all the Paddies in Murphy land war dancing

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13 Michael A. Lofaro, in a very informative introduction to a 1987 collection of full almanacs from what he calls the
“transition period” of Crockett, emphasizes that the character of Crockett was not designed solely by the
backwoodsman/senator himself, but was an amalgam of writings from Crockett, his associates, and probably many
different editors and publishing houses, most of which were located in the East (Lofaro xxxviii).
an Irish jig in my belly for three days arter. But all the Injun savages allotted I war the greatest brave ever they seen. ... [Footnote: “The heart of a snapping turtle will retain life, or at least muscular action, several days after it is separated from the body.”] (Tall Tales 31, italics mine)

Here, the ingestion of articles, in contrast to Norton’s assertions, entails a show of courage not so much because of the body’s capacity to digest and eliminate the object of consumption, but because of its ability to consume that which leaves a residue and reminder of its independence from the consuming body, through the definitively vibrant action of “dancing.”

Davy Crockett’s exaggeratedly omnivorous body, even while it may metaphorically point to westward expansion, appears here with its post-consumption indigestion imaginatively available to the reader’s senses: a much more anxious composite construction of materials than a unified, “singular” “figure,” “body,” or “subject.” With this in mind, we can perceive the ambivalence of Crockett’s boast of his ability to eat “spike nails,” for example, which he lists as part of his breakfast. The impressiveness of the feat may be his ability to digestively break down and assimilate something so tough as iron; but it may also be the chutzpah to retain such sharp and resilient implements—with the potential to work strenuously against what the human brain might prefer for the human flesh—in his body. Certain of the textual illustrations included in the original almanacs suggest a preoccupation with the latter idea, by visually juxtaposing the “body” with material that works against the tissues of the flesh and resists disaggregation and absorption. For example, The

Pirates [sic] Head from the 1839 Almanac (see fig. 2) portrays a male head impaled on a pole, with the spike of the pole protruding from the oral cavity—joining the sharp object and the body’s interior through the threshold of the mouth. In another woodcut (reproduced in Norton’s Alternative Americas to illustrate the Western trope of “oratorical prowess” [206]), the head of a man is rendered in fleshy, soft-looking curves, but immediately adjacent to his open mouth is a cone-shaped flurry of what look like caltrops, the tetrahedronal spikes historically thrown down to impale the feet of soldiers or horses’ hoofs—or, more recently, tires. The image is titled Picture of Ben Harding’s Voice, (see fig. 3) and though the text suggests that it is meant to emphasize the “ruff [sic] . . . voice” of Crockett’s friend Ben Harding, the print leaves an ambiguous visual impression: are these sharp spikes going out of into the facial orifice? And what, precisely, is the relationship of this angular material to the rounded flesh it abuts? These images do not support the theory that the representation of eating—in the Crockett Almanacs, especially—“maintains the singularity of the eater.” Instead, they highlight the mouth as the gateway of potentially violent and independent materials, which declare their active presence as entities separate from the human body with which they are juxtaposed, and by which they are implied to have been or to be immanently enveloped.

Here, attention to representations of eating in its failure to digest—even the images on which Norton bases her own argument--can, in fact, often reveal and instigate a sensory awareness

of the activeness of the ingested landscape. It is felt within the body of the reader, who is not sure whether to identify with the trickster figure of Crockett, or whether to survey his embattled body with dismay—experiences that generate an unsettling sense, an unsettled sense. Through appeals to both the distance sense of vision and the proximate sense of touch (as imagined from within the mouth or further within the digestive system), these disruptive representations of eating implant in national memory the very disruption and aggregate nature of the materially unified body that they may at first glance seem to endorse. Attending to the activeness and independence of materials disruptive to the body emphasizes the other disparate materials that comprise it; indeed, such attention highlights the fact that the body is made entirely of disparate and independent materials that carry their own histories and have their own relationships and ties to the landscape, forming their own alliances that may or may not settle peacefully within the body that consumed them.

The first chapter of this thesis will investigate a complex but focused intervention of the disruption of the body within social space, tracking the ways that the reader is directly implicated, through sensory engagement, in the experience of indigestion in the second known novel published by an African American, Frank Webb. This work, *The Garies and Their Friends*, activates the reader’s sense of taste, baiting a desire to “eat” that slides into a desire to “incorporate”—an action met with multiple iterations of indigestion that can be perceived through the body of the reading subject. Specifically, the chapter will argue that literary representations of human consumption of substances perceived socially to be “inedible” does a particular kind of political work through appealing to the senses of taste (and to some extent touch, when perceived from within the body), as well as sight—which work in productive
dissonance. The chapter will explore how the text creatively uses of the trope of incorporation to intervene into social constructions of race and gender through troubling the experience of the body of the reader, subtly implanting a corporeal response in the very body that reads.

The second chapter explores how a story diptych by Herman Melville and a poem by Walt Whitman activate a response of indigestibility through the use of disgust. I propose there that this physiological response is uniquely able to open a space within the interpreting body (brain) of the reader (striving, always, to contain the other in language—a kind of verbal “incorporation”), for a sensorily perceived glimpse of the lives and activities of consumed materials, and thus a corporeal experience of eating that is different from one in which the subject imagines itself to be the sole actor. Whitman pushes this experience into a kind of human/nature engagement that utilizes the model of incorporation for a reinvented erotic relationality. Finally, in conclusion, I examine a current iteration of images of material indigestibility and disgust, exploring how Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* addresses specific issues of race, gender, and the human in a post-modern environment. All chapters engage with the role of the text as a medium through which the reader is both “materially” and “discursively” engaged—experiences that, considering the very synaptic material of the “discursive” brain and the discourse through which sensory experiences are felt and interpreted—pull words and bodies into the varied topography of the same landscape.
In solubility:

Uneasy Incorporations in *The Garies and Their Friends*

The tender skins of the strawberries are “peeping through” the enveloping sugar, offering florid glimpses; as the verb “peep” implies, the strawberries themselves might be regarding the diners, furtively or playfully.

–Samuel Otter, “Frank Webb’s Still Life: Rethinking Literature and Politics through *The Garies and Their Friends*”

As Samuel Otter points out in his exploration of the “surfaces”—the “details of gesture, tone, and ornament”—in Webb’s 1857 novel, *The Garies and Their Friends*, the opening scene of the novel is heavy with tantalizing morsels of food:

It was at the close of an afternoon in May, that a party might have been seen gathered around a table covered with all those delicacies that, in the household of a rich Southern planter, are regarded as almost necessaries of life. In the centre stood a dish of ripe strawberries, their plump red sides peeping though the covering of white sugar that had been plentifully sprinkled over them. Geeche [sic] limes, almost drowned in their own rich syrup, temptingly displayed their bronze-coloured forms just above the rim of the glass that contained them. Opposite, and as if to divert the gaze from lingering too long over their luscious beauty, was a dish of peaches preserved in brandy, a never-failing article in a Southern matron’s catalogue of sweets. A silver basket filled with a variety of cakes was in close proximity to a plate of corn-flappers, which were piled upon it like a mountain, and from the brown tops of which trickled tiny rivulets of butter. All these dainties, mingling their various odours [sic] with the aroma of the tea and fine old java that came steaming forth from the richly chased silver pots, could not fail to produce a very appetizing effect. (Webb 1)

Otter describes this scene as one of excess, so inviting as to induce a little “queasiness” (Otter 733). But he leaves his intriguing questions without answers: “Rivaling [the limes’] ‘luscius beauty’ are the peaches in brandy, placed ‘as if to divert the gaze’ from the limes, but the aesthetic intent here is left obscure. What is the status of the ‘as if’? Who or what is the agent? Did the ‘Southern matron’ seek the diversion, or someone else, or the narrator, or even
the fruit itself?” (Otter 733). As Otter points out, Webb does not shy away from imbuing the articles (“peeping strawberries,” for example) that are displayed—ostensibly, to be considered for consumption—with activity.

To this line of inquiry, I would add, “for whom is the food arrayed in this tempting manner? Who is beckoned by these quivering morsels?” Though we are treated to an extended conversation by the aristocratic Southern characters seated before it, none of them seems to notice the tantalizing spread before them. No one eats. On one level, this restraint works to signify the characters’ class, in a novel where the capitalist aristocracy is marked by material satiation. Though they do not (at first glance) seem to need or desire food as nourishment, they still display all the trappings of such abundance: visual, gustatory, and caloric.

But the banquet scene performs more than a passive marking of its seemingly disinterested owners. The relations between characters are not the only ones engaged by this representation, and Webb’s “as if” suggests the conscious authorial acknowledgement of and engagement with the other kind of relationship presumed by any text: the desire of the reader, who may, but also may very well not, be inured to the spectacle of drowning limes and peeping strawberries. These luscious articles seem to be daring both those at the table and those at the book to consume them. But what is the nature of this beckoning consumption: is it a material ingestion of fruit? An enjoyment of the imagined visual display? An identification with the hosts of the feast, who are able to maintain their social status through refraining from eating?

I am interested in *The Garies and Their Friends* especially for the way that, in multiple and varied instances, it uses the (discursive) medium of the text to describe (historically-based) corporeal bodies in order to affect, through the imagination and the senses, the corporeal body of
the reader—which, in turn, can affect the reader’s cognition and interpretation of the literary. More specifically, this chapter will trace how, mingling representations of forms and objects of consumption including physical eating, monetary consumption, and psychological incorporation within the varied topography of the text, *Garies* intervenes in antebellum understandings of race, class, and “objecthood” itself. The text thus facilitates a re-feeling of the inert or passive status of the “eaten,” such as the fruits and pastries on display here.

Such a spread of edibles has the capacity to stimulate, for the characters present at the table and for the reader, bodily senses that have been historically characterized as radically different from one another, both in their activation on the body and in their social significations. The vivid descriptions of the foods, with terms signifying specific flavors or gustatory memories—“limes,” “syrup,” “peaches,” “brandy,” “butter”—activate the organs of the mouth, signaling them to experience the spread, or the text, through a particular avenue of the organism. This avenue, taste, has historically been considered a proximate sense: one that, since the works of Plato, was usually thought to be experienced as close to the body. Along with the senses of smell (stimulated here in the “various odours” of Webb’s banquet scene) and touch, it has also been linked to the working classes (Bourdieu 486). At the same time, the text invokes the more aristocratically socially stratified “distancing” sense of sight, however: the diners enjoy with their eyes the articles before them, and we might also imagine them enjoying the class articulation associated with their spectatorship. For the reader, the ocular consumption is somewhat more complex. Visually descriptive terms such as “plump,” “red,” “white,” “bronze-coloured forms,” “silver basket,” “piled . . . like a mountain” encourage us, in the eye of our mind, to take the privileged position of spectatorship ourselves. But in so doing, it is not only the
fruit we observe—it is also the bodies of those seated at the table—bodies uninterrupted, yet, by the intrusion of the suspiciously active (“peeping”) treats that we already desire.

(Anthropomorphosis, often maligned, as Bennett points out, for “superstition, the divinization of nature, romanticism” [120], functions effectively here to blur the demarcation between human and strawberry, between subject and food object.)

And so both the visual survey and that engagement of unfulfilled desire to taste may continue unnoticed as the objects of the awakening taste buds slide, following Otter’s reading, from *what* is present on the table to *who* is present at the table: Emily, the “mulatto mistress” of the white Southern planter Clarence Garie. Her “’gloriously dark eyes,’ ‘jetty black’ hair, ‘light-brown complexion,’ ‘fine profile and perfectly moulded [sic] form,’” according to Otter, link “fruit and flesh . . . since the woman, too, is composed of appealing surfaces” (Otter 734).

If we consider this passage with the concept of Freudian incorporation in mind, then why does it, as highlighted by Otter, represent Emily—and, by extension, others in her family and community (with “jet black hair” and “brown complexion”)—as *delicious* to a readership that threatens to consume them, their stories and their history, in the violent act of identification, a “monstrous assassination” in which “the Other is murdered and orally incorporated before being entombed inside the subject” (Fuss 34)? Along with the stereotype of voracious orality that often accompanied black bodies in antebellum literature runs an (ironic, here) stereotype of the black body as edible, as traced by Kyla Wazana Tomkins. “At its most extreme, the connection between food and black bodies emerges in the representation of the black body *as food itself*, and thus in the desire to consume those bodies,” she writes (“Everything ‘Cept Eat Us” 201). Why, we might ask, would Webb, an African American who lived through the race riots in antebellum
Philadelphia, participate in the dissemination of such a trope through tantalizing the senses of the reader? I propose that this text in fact makes use of the incorporative compulsion (in characters and ultimately in readers), through the stimulation of the sense of taste and related dissonant visual and tactile cues, to intervene in multiple layers of psychologically and materially incorporative encounters through experiences of indigestibility. Such interventions work to upset the subject / object positioning reinforced through many antebellum images of eating, producing a reminder, perceived in the body of the reader, both of the activeness of the consumed, and the materiality of the consumer.

The text plays throughout with tropes both of digestion and of indigestion, or potential indigestion—as articulated, for example, by Mrs. Bird’s white maid, when her coworker suggests that she dine with the black visitor, Charlie: “I couldn’t do it; my victuals would turn on my stomach” (Webb 141). In a more extended treatment of such mechanisms, Webb baits a kind of incorporative consumption both of food and of black bodies, only to specifically villainize such behavior in the novel through the character of the white lawyer George Stevens. In its treatment of Stevens, the text intervenes in figurations of behaviors of other kinds of material consumption and “incorporation” through activating the material of the body (of Stevens and the reader), tying them to the very sensory experiences of eating and digestion through images of orality.

Stevens masterminds a plan to motivate a white (predominantly Irish) working-class mob to attack and disrupt the black neighborhoods of Philadelphia in an effort to lower the property values so that he can purchase land at a discount, as well as cover for his own murder of Mr. and Mrs. Garie, his distant relatives, in order to inherit their wealth. We might describe Stevens as characterized by a voracious “appetite” for acquisition symptomatic of the instability of the ego.
within capitalism, in which constant monetary consumption feeds a desire to shore up one’s own social class and race. By attempting to incorporate the black community of Philadelphia into his checkbook, Stevens (a synecdoche, Robert S. Levine suggests, for middle class white America [356]) extracts from its members a material contribution, at the level of both property and the body, to his economic growth. “No one is more intemperate,” Levine writes of Stevens “ . . . [the mob’s] plotings . . . are presented as driven by Stevens’s uncontrollable appetite for money and power . . . As secretive speculators, Stevens and his co conspirators can display themselves as model citizens in complete control of appetite” (Levine 356-357, italics mine). At the same time, the text ties Stevens’ associates explicitly to oral consumption, as Levine notes that the mob Stevens gathers is comprised primarily of “working-class drinkers” that he contacts through bars.

Stevens, in order to check up on his hired mercenaries, disguises himself as a member of the working class that he is taking advantage of (Webb describes them as “half-drunk Irishmen”) (185). In donning the clothing of a working-class drinker, Stevens believes himself to be donning a disguise which we might, as readers and spectators, assume will provide him—or us—with some of the visually-based enjoyment Eric Lott describes as a function of racial minstrelsy. In blackface minstrel shows, according to Lott, the (racialized) performed bodies serve as a screen for the projection of repellent elements in white (or here, middle-class) subjectivity.

In other words, the repellent elements repressed from white consciousness and projected onto black people were far from securely alienated—they are always already “inside,” part of “us.” Hence the threat of this projected material, and the occasional pleasure of the threat . . . white subjectivity, founded on this splitting, was and is (in the words of Stallybrass and White) a “mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear and desire” . . . absolutely dependent upon the otherness it seeks to exclude and constantly open to transgression—although, in wonderfully adaptive fashion, even the transgression may in certain cases be pleasurable. And if only to guarantee the harmlessness of such transgression, racist “othering” and similar defenses must be under continual manufacture. (Lott 36-37).
But Stevens’ disguise works instead—in one of the many moments of irony in the novel—to provide an identification of Stevens himself by those he encounters, both inside and outside the text: the garments fit too well. “By the change in his attire [Stevens] seemed completely robbed of all appearance of respectability; the most disagreeable points of his physique seemed to be brought more prominently forward by the habiliments he had assumed, they being quite in harmony with his villainous countenance” (Webb 184). The optical unsettlement here, exposing the seams of Stevens’ constructed subjectivity to both himself and the reader, allows him the slip of thought in which he conceives of his middle-class attire as also a disguise: “‘I never knew before,’ said he, mentally, ‘how far a suit of clothes goes towards giving one the appearance of a gentleman” (184). This identification is the first in a series to be visited on Stevens, in what the reader may visualize as a performance of the very “split” nature of white (middle class) subjectivity described by Lott. As if to punish his appropriative consumption of other races and classes, the text provides the reader with a series of identifications of Stevens with the peoples he has figuratively “consumed,” complete with a small taste of the physical and psychological violence to which their position in the “food chain” subjects them. He is beaten and then tarred when mistaken for a white working-class ruffian by others from a different faction of that class (187), then dunked under water when mistaken for a black man because of the tar (188). Finally, as if to drive home the violence of the position of being on the wrong end of an incorporative encounter, and in a doubling of scenes in the novel in which blacks pass as whites, he is “whitened” with lime (189).

Stevens’ mouth functions, in these scenes, as a symbol of his appetite driven by the need to shore up his identity. For example, “his lips were swelled to a size that would have been
regarded as large even on the face of a Congo negro” (189), after he “received a heavy blow in the mouth, which cut his lips and knocked out one of his front teeth” (188). The representation conjures similar images of the black mouth made grotesque in minstrelsy, especially in relation to black women. For instance, in the Smithsonian Institution’s recording of “Lubly Fan”, where the lips of the song’s subject are described as like an “oyster plant/I try to kiss dem but I can’t,/Dey am so berry large,” Lott describes as the “ambiguous, almost uncontainable edge of that rising last phrase . . . ‘Dey am so berry large’” as “allusive promise and exaggerated threat; desire so deep and consequential that it scarcely bears uttering, revulsion so necessary that utterance is ineludible” (Lott 32). In a racial inversion, Garies presents Stevens as the object of minstrelsy, an object of mockery in his very undesirable desiring, the text administering discipline on the offending orifice with the kick in the mouth.

Ouch, says the reader, uncertain why the punishment of an unsympathetic villain should cause such a reaction, having forgotten the activation of her salivary glands, the sensitization of the mouth performed by the representation of the delectable commodities at the outset of the novel. She, too, has been primed for an unconscious incorporation. And the text responds by stimulating a discipline that is felt corporeally.

Despite his punishments midway through the novel, Stevens is able to financially “consume” much of the black neighborhood that he set out to injure. But, not surprisingly, things do not end well for him. As a dying wealthy landowner, he exhibits, with the growth of material property and wealth, signs of some kind of failure of that consumption: his “emaciated” body swathed in material comforts, but written with starvation.

In a richly furnished chamber overlooking the street a dim light was burning; so dimly, in fact, that the emaciated form of Mr. Stevens was scarcely discernible
amidst the pillows and covering of the bed on which he was lying. Above him a brass head of curious workmanship held in its clenched teeth the canopy that overshadowed the bed; and as the light occasionally flickered and brightened, the curiously carved face seemed to light up with a sort of sardonic grin; and the grating of the curtain-rings, as the sick man tossed from side to side in his bed, would have suggested the idea that the odd supporter of the canopy was gnashing his brazen teeth at him. (Webb 356)

As suggested by Lori Merish (2-3), we could read Stevens here as suffering from melancholia, a condition in which (in the words of Anne Anlin Cheng, who builds on the Freudian concept of that name) a lost love object is incorporated into the ego, where it provides a kind of empty sustenance for the melancholic. “The melancholic eats the lost object—feeds on it, as it were” (8); and this process, because the melancholic has joined his or her ego to the object, becomes a kind of feeding on the self. Cheng argues that because it cannot allow the return of the digested object, the ego then becomes haunted by the very thing it has “incorporated” (8). The furiously grinning mouth above Stevens’ bed, gripping the canopy that encloses him, now implies an association of Stevens’ uncontrollable consuming incorporation and his final punishment—a consumption that, unstopped, “devours” the devourer—making the subject of the “eating” also the object, the “eaten.” This is a psychological kind of indigestibility, suggesting (through visual images of grinning mouth and emaciated body) a particular agency of the (in)digested thing. Like the “material” of the banquet food, this psychologically incorporated “thing” – the perhaps less tangible memory of “consumed” bodies, homes, and neighborhoods—engages in the reader’s experience through the activation of taste and the resulting imprint of vision. The text’s comingled use of what we might call “figurative,” types of consumption, with the “material” forms of actual eating that stimulate it, might prompt many twenty-first century critics to mark the differences between the two. But readers of antebellum America, already primed to connect
physical eating with the “intangible idea” of self improvement through the temperance doctrine, might have read them as within the same field. And so we, in present times, might likewise allow such representational conflation to allow us read the “figurative” and the “material” within the same field of the “material-discursive”: remembering, for example, the physiological, material effects on the brain through which discourse is processed, and through which memories are printed, interpreted, revised, and sometimes lost.

Further extending and broadening the assemblage of material/psychological imprints of consumption, Cheng suggests that this mechanism of melancholic digestion and denial is a characteristic of America itself. “In a sense, the racial other is in fact quite ‘assimilated’ into—or, more accurately, most uneasily digested by—American nationality,” she writes. “The history of American national idealism has always been caught in this melancholic bind between incorporation and rejection” (Cheng 10). If the only options for readerly identification were with Stevens, the end of Webb’s novel would suggest little promise, for either the eaten or the eater, in antebellum America.

But consumption in its oral manifestation occurs elsewhere in the novel, as well—and is localized especially within the black community. Here, the eating of food also seems at first to be used to mark class identity, fears, and desires. For example, members of the leisure and business classes, or those aspiring to these spheres, are almost never portrayed as eating. And Caddy Ellis, whose concern for the cleanliness of her living space is apparent throughout the novel, attaches a particular import to the space within her body. In one instance, she opens what she believes to be her lunch tin, expecting to find a familiar haricot—a dish she associates with her mother (suggesting her own family and social position). When, instead, the leftovers of the urchin-like
Kinch’s lunch threatens the potential breach of that bodily space through taste, by a material ingestion—which might suggest an identification with someone she reads as beneath her class—she responds with “horror and dismay . . . surprise and disgust . . . as she took out, piece by piece, the remains of some schoolboy’s repast” (87). Eventually, her revulsion causes her to react so violently that her brother suffers a serious injury.

Robert Levine suggests that such careful attention to the regulation of the body is drawn from the doctrine of temperance widely subscribed to in the early antebellum era, during which careful monitoring of food intake and an effort to maximize bodily potential could lead to both individual wealth and to racial uplift. “Emphasizing industry, frugality, and self-restraint, temperance, arguably the most influential reform movement of the antebellum period, was championed by a number of free blacks as a self-help program promising to bring about the social and economic elevation of the African American community” (Levine 349-350). Certainly Mr. Walters, in his injunction to Kinch to eat while Walters is writing a note for him to dispatch, “that will economize time, you know,” (200) embodies this strategy, as does Kinch, when he suggests that [over] consumption impedes mobility: “. . . I can’t eat a bit more. But the worst thing is walking down to Mr. Ellis’s. I don’t feel a bit like it, but I suppose I must” (201). The bodily consumption of the villain Stevens, limited to substances that offer either minimal “replenishing” nutrients, and/or perform destruction on the tissue of the body: medication/“drops” (357), tea (183), alcohol, cigars (128), offers a twist on this doctrine. His form of temperance excludes nutrition, but does not exclude other substances, suggesting that even when his class status changes from middle-class to leisured class, he does not invest the capital in tending to his material being.
However, in many instances, food and eating are used not to mark characters in relation to their particular class location or strivings, but to upturn both the “material” categories of substances and the social categories of class,—specifically, “food,” and where it “belongs.” Kinch, a character we might at first classify as a source of “low” comic humor, is the primary locus of such food scenes in this book, especially those that feature food conducting surprising, unsettling antics.

Images surrounding Kinch, along with his dusty clothes and street-urchin ways, would, according to the doctrine of temperance, slot him as a member of the working class, a ruffian without self-control, given to wasteful consumption and hopelessly and comically tied both to the low-class status related to the sense of taste, and to the stereotype of black excessive orality described by Lott. In one instance, he is shown feasting upon a roast duck, pouring himself glass after glass of wine, and, “having labored upon the duck until his appetite was somewhat appeased, he leant back in his chair and suffered his plate to be changed for another, which being done, he made an attack upon a peach pie, and nearly demolished it outright” (Webb 201).

Food, depicted as a passive substance, is used to discipline Kinch at the outset of the novel, in which he is pressed into service beating eggs and stoning raisins in the home of the Thomases, a white family that has hired him (Webb 35). But that food begins to press against its object status by suggesting a certain independence, even as Kinch begins his process of liberation through “misbehavior” from the Thomases. For example, the turnip, in the following pair of sentences, already takes on a playful and active air as it is lifted from the category of food into the category of weapon: “As he passed through the kitchen on his way out, he made a face at aunt Rachel, who, in return, threw at him one of the turnips she was peeling. It missed the object
for which it was intended, and came plump into the eye of Robberts, giving to that respectable
individual for some time thereafter the appearance of a prize-fighter in livery” (82). Though the
turnip begins the passage as the object of a sentence (Aunt Rachel “threw” it), it ends as the
subject (it mysteriously “missed” its object, and “came” elsewhere). Significantly, the verbs
“missed,” and “came,” indicating the action performed by the turnip, are not explicitly linked to
the human body, and thus whether they function as anthropomorphism, or some other kind of
nonhuman agency, remains ambivalent.

In a further mingling of material and discourse, food also plays at its positioning with
relation to Kinch’s body—a body which, according to the eater/eaten dichotomy, should be
internalizing and dissolving it. “Master Kinch crawled out from under a table with his head and
back covered with batter, a pan of which had been overturned upon him, in consequence of his
having been tripped up by his sword. . . Cady . . . assisted him to wash from his wooly pate what
had been intended for the next day’s meal” (210). Here, the “food” does not quietly disappear
down the gullet. Quite the contrary, it insists on its own visibility, displaying itself on the outside
of the body.

In a confounding of the senses, the image of batter soaking into Kinch’s “wooly pate”
renders food for the reader a visual experience more than a gustatory one. And, unlike the images
of meticulously prepared finished products in the opening scene, this is food in a state of
instability and viscosity, a batter uncertain of its borders, mingled with human hair. What is the
effect of this image, this montage of “food” worn on the outside of the body? Are the readers, the
spectators, to mock Kinch, his flesh clearly juxtaposed with a “degrading” mess of molecules
that we believe belongs inside the stomach? Or is the batter playing a different game, showing its
potential positions as “edible” substance are not limited to that of passive eaten material? That, in fact, it can refuse to disappear within the body, actively signify—even pull pranks?

Such a scene imagistically foreshadows Kinch’s appearance, at the wedding of Emily and Charlie that occurs near the end of the novel, dressed in fine clothing—transformed into a dandy who does not even have to work for his living. Overturning the assumptions set up earlier in the text about oral consumption necessarily impeding mobility, the image also provides a positioning of food and eating that is even more complex.

. . . Kinch, the voracity of whose appetite had not at all diminished in the length of years, makes up for [Charlie and Emily’s] abstinence by devouring the delicious round short-cakes with astonishing rapidity. He did not pretend to make more than two bites to a cake, and they slipped away down his throat as if it was a railway tunnel and they were a train of cars behind time. (Webb 341)

Traces of the earlier batter scene and the surprising twist on the relationship between eating and class mobility connect Kinch’s new clothes to his food. “Where does all that consumed material go, anyway?” our eyes start to wonder—“the outlines of his physical being have certainly not expanded.” And through imaginative spectatorship, we might imagine Kinch’s consumed (or spilled) victuals somehow transforming into his fine clothes—again creatively mingling a tangible “material” food and tangible “material” clothing with an intangible “discursive” marker, the expansion of social status. The diptych of montages—degrading batter on Kinch; fancy clothes on Kinch—not only calls attention to the questionability of assumptions based on visual images (race, class) related to this character, but to the playful and disruptive behavior of stuff that does not disappear quietly within the body quite the way we expect.

Further, the passage seems to echo the hyperbolic gustatory exploits of Davy Crockett, as the cakes disappear down Kinch’s gullet so easily as to prompt questioning. What will happen to
them there? “Cakes” may promise a certain physical disintegration within the digestive system, but their tie, through simile, to the image of railway cars—much less likely to disaggregate when submitted to digestive juices—furthers the spectator’s doubting of how to read what has disappeared into the body via the mouth. Shall we identify with the voracious Kinch, who so quickly gratifies our gustatory desires? And what, here, is chugging on into the body—if not, in the railway, modernity—the idea of “progress” or some kind of teleology to which the black American community was supposed, via temperance, to be subscribing? 14 The cakes in themselves might not retain such visual residue, as we are predisposed to think of them as dissipating obediently throughout the body after their contact with the dissolving liquids of saliva and stomach acid. But they are tied through simile to the much less obedient, heavy, metal substance of a train. And the material solidity—the reluctance to disaggregate peacefully—of the cake/train image provides a visibility accessible to us through the act of reading (that would not be accessible in the same way through the visibility of a film, say, or in “real” life)—an image of the train within the body, chugging down the esophagus to, perhaps, the final destination of the digestive track. What end, might the text be suggesting, for that train of progress?

Images such as the train in Kinch’s body or the batter on his head (or, for that matter, Davy Crockett’s woodcuts and the turtle hearts) work specifically and actively against the idea that the representation of eating must serve to reinforce the consuming subject/dissolving landscape binary. Instead, the persistence of the ingested or expelled materials inside the human serve as a reminder that the human body (not just representationally or psychologically, but also

14 For a reading of Webb that focuses on progress and temperance in the antebellum black American community, see Robert S. Levine’s “Disturbing Boundaries: Temperance, Black Elevation, and Violence in Frank J. Webb’s The Garies and Their Friends.”
materially) is itself a montage, a visual performance of unity served by the special proximity of various components with movements, even agendas, of their own, in which those components are “contextualized” within the specific gaze of the viewer or imagined gaze of the reader. Such a montage operates via a shock similar to the one Michael Taussig describes experiencing in South America, where a shaman’s own composition of history works to expose the equally montage nature of history as narrated by colonizers: “In fact we have been surreptitiously practicing montage all along in our historical and anthropological practices . . . all ethnographic practice is blindly dependent on this cutting and splicing, abutting context to context, them to us” (Taussig 45-46). Representations of bodies consuming indigestible materials also produce a montage, I would argue, especially as the visual image of a material that does not digest lingers—persists—within the body in a way that more soluble materials do not, and are thus available for perception by readers: visually, tactilely, and through taste. Such representations serve Taussig’s injunction to “bring this [montage] to conscious awareness . . . “ (46), where the juxtaposition of the indigestible object with the human body that has eaten or presumes to eat it brings to awareness the montage nature—the contingent assembly of parts—of the body itself.

This use of taste, vision, and the production of an indigestible residue as materially sensory intervention into the social dimension of antebellum America culminates in Webb’s final wedding banquet scene, constructing a representation perceptible to readers across time. The feast is laid out as if in answer to the oral craving stimulated by the inviting, but untouched delicacies at the outset of the novel:

Oh! Such a supper!—such quantities of nice things as money and skill alone can bring together. There were turkeys innocent of a bone, into which you might plunge your knife to the very hilt without coming in contact with a splinter—turkeys from which cunning cooks had extracted every bone leaving the meat
alone behind, with the skin not perceptibly broken. How brown and tempting they looked, their capacious bosoms giving rich promise of high-seasoned dressing within, and looking larger by comparison with the tiny reed-birds beside them, which lay cozily on the golden toast, looking as much as to say, ‘If you want something to remember forever, come and give me a bite!’ (376)

Webb goes on to detail a great catalogue of foods, such as stewed terrapin “into which the initiated dipped at once, and to which they for some time gave their undivided attention,” chicken salad, ham tongue, jellies, ice cream, even champagne and liquors, as well as stewed oysters, whose “fragrant macey odour [sic] wafting itself upward, and causing watery sensations in the mouth, [which] no man with a heart in his bosom could possibly refuse” (376). Finally, here are sympathetic characters who do partake of a feast and appease their own, and the identifying/consuming reader’s, appetites.

The food goes down so smoothly, almost like the digestion of a good 19th-century novel, with an ending that can be tied up, swallowed, and dispersed into the various corners of the body, now (productively) conflated, through the medium of the text, with the psyche. Delicious, it seems—especially the turkey, with nary a bone to impede the devouring process. But Samuel Otter interrogates this absence of bones: “Is the turkey itself—a product of concealed, extracted, vulnerable labor—a reminder of slavery? Is the turkey without bones a figure for novelistic abstraction and artifice, the kinds of imaginative labor performed upon the world that enable and unsettle its consumption? (Otter 741).

Otter retains his theories in the forms of questions, but it can be argued that, regardless of the intent of the author, the very absence of the bones at a textual level does indeed mark their presence inside, in the Derridian sense that "there is nothing outside the text" (Derrida 158). The bones function as an absence marking a presence, the absence of the remainder of what is left
after a meal. And absence, writes Peggy Phelan, can actually help to reinforce its presence for
the reader. “The forgetting (or stealing) of the object is a fundamental energy of its descriptive
recovering,” she suggests. And in this way, “the description itself does not reproduce the object,
it rather helps us to restage and restate the effort to remember what is lost” (Phelan 147). In their
conspicuous absence, the bones’ disturbing sensory presence is magnified. Though the turkey
may well function as a metaphoric “figure,” it also, I propose, serves as a vehicle for carrying
those invisible bones, imaginatively, inside the body of the reader.

Bones, a material figure, may well “represent” a psychological concept akin to what Zita
Nunes describes as the remainder in representations of incorporation: “that which resists
incorporation or is expelled” (Nunes 14). Nunes, specifically examining political systems, argues
that there is a historically “ubiquitous and persistent” figure tied to metaphors of cannibalistic
incorporation that troubles figurations of democracy, and yet largely goes unarticulated (Nunes
10). This often manifests itself, according to Nunes, as “excrement”—material that has been
changed and extracted by the digestive system, but persists beyond digestion, as a denied and
unspoken part of the metaphor.

But is relevant to our turkey at hand that Nunes’ remainder also appears as an assemblage
of material particularly resistant to disaggregation: bones. In W.E.B. Du Bois’ claim that he is
“bone of their [white people’s] thought and flesh of their language” (seen in Nunes 17), “the
bones of their thought suggests the indigestible residue—the resisting remainder,” Nunes writes
(95). (I agree with Otter’s suggestion that the missing bones are representative, but though we
might posit their identity to be “class/race struggle,” “violence,” or, as Otter suggests, “slavery,”
it seems more appropriate to leave them in their indigestible form, as finally unreadable: bones.)
We do not witness the turkey or its invisible osseous formations sliding down the throat of a specific character—leaving the object of that turkey’s delicious agenda (the consumer it is seeking out) unidentified, a role available for a reader now conscious also of being an eater.

But interrupting the materially felt “digestion” of the meal is a specific psychological indigestion: Mr. Ellis, who has never recovered from his assault by the mob, responds to sudden noises by traumatized exclamations reminding the family, and the text, of their recent painful history. At a gathering shortly before the wedding, for instance, he responds to an outburst of good-natured laughter by his family with terror, crying, “There they come! There they come!” and cower[ing] down in his great chair” (Webb 343). His presence at the wedding a few pages later again suggests the possibility of another, similar performance: “almost hidden in his large easy chair, [he] scarcely seemed able to comprehend the affair, and apparently labored under the impression that it was another mob, and looked a little terrified at times when the laughter or conversation grew louder than usual” (372).

Nunes ties her trope of the “remainder” not only to the “materials” of excrement and bones, but also to Freud’s concept of the symptom, a form in itself that represents the intersection of the “psychological” and the “material”: “The symptom is a creation of the psyche’s anxiety relative to that which it has produced: its remainder . . . The importance of the symptom is that it marks a presence and an absence; it marks what can never be known” (Nunes 113).

This is especially relevant given Stephen Knadler’s in-depth discussion of this episode, and the way it demonstrates the inability to put traumatic memories into language—or, we might say, their indigestibility. Mr. Ellis, “testifies . . . to a performance of denying those memories that
are not so easily scripted, not so easily made into narratives of freedom or narratives of a discursive transgression, but are only an uncompensatable loss” (Knadler 86). The boneless turkey does not go down without its bones; likewise, the reader cannot digest the wedding without the haunting remainder of unspeakable trauma of those caught within the violence of class/race desires. Webb’s final chapters, then, specifically address the consuming subject that is the reader by using taste, touch, and vision to engage—and mingle—both psychic and bodily appetite, and then to administer a meal of tasted and felt remainders: leaving the reader, after nearly 400 pages, somewhat satiated, but unsettled.
**Disgust:**

Melville, Whitman, and Rejectable Edibles

[Disgust] attacks, it overcomes us, unannounced and uncontrollable, taking sudden possession of us. Viewed from this perspective, it does not stand under the sway of consciousness, but rather makes itself felt within consciousness as a voice arriving from somewhere else.

--Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*

A man, out of curiosity, takes a bite of moldy pudding, and watches others frantically consuming day-old table scraps; another deliriously partakes of foods he recognizes as products of deteriorating corpses. These figures intimate a relationship of the body to food in which desire and disgust challenge the model of both physical and social dissolution and expansion—another, different way that 19th century American texts explore and sometimes foster experiences of indigestibility.

This chapter explores how disgust serves as a gripping sign of indigestibility in two antebellum texts: Herman Melville’s story diptych, “Poor Man’s Pudding” and “Rich Man’s Crumbs,” and Walt Whitman’s poem, *This Compost.* As a physiological reaction to objects interpreted by the body as unfit for eating, whether for social or physical reasons, disgust is tied to, and often results in, vomiting. The object, then, is rejected by and sometimes ejected from the body. Like the images of insoluble articles in the previous chapter, the consumed disgusting object does not reside happily in the mouth or the stomach, but addresses the senses with an insistence on its difference from the organism in which it (however briefly) sojourns, pushing against the trope of eating as “incorporative” and food as happily dissolving and transforming into obedient human tissue. As with the types of indigestion explored in *The Garies and Their...*
Friends, both Melville and Whitman foreground disgust to intervene in forms of relationality—in Melville, between humans, objects, and humans in different social classes; and in Whitman, between the human and the landscape, the body’s material outside. Disgust, arresting and active in its physiological and temporal effects, thrusts its disruption into the traditionally expected psychological and physical processes of characters. Readers, confronting the distress of disgust in a body they are imaginatively inhabiting, may find themselves using other senses to interpret such scenes, discovering the body they had perceived to be a tasting subject becomes also an aggregate, materially incoherent object.

Eating Poverty in Herman Melville’s “Poor Man’s Pudding” and “Rich Man’s Crumbs”

Herman Melville’s diptych, “Poor Man’s Pudding” and “Rich Man’s Crumbs” capitalizes on these effects of disgust, juxtaposing an emphasis on the thing-ness of the consumed articles (in the first tale) with an emphasis on their symbolic value and elision of their own histories (in the second). The story pair explores both resistance and lack of resistance to the sentimentalization of the poor by an unnamed, probably upper-middle-class narrator and his Virgilesque guides to the worlds of the lower classes. In the first, the unnamed narrator is encouraged by Blandmour, an acquaintance who exaggeratedly conflates the resources of the poor with those of the rich, to visit the home of the Coulters—an impoverished couple that, it turns out, is expecting one child and has recently lost two others. In the second, the same narrator is escorted by a different companion to visit the traditional opening of the Guildhall Banquet to the poor so that they can eat the remains of a royal feast from the previous day. The narrator
barely escapes from the pandemonium when he is mistaken for a participant in, rather than a spectator of, the voracious consumption.

William Cooper has commented on the varying culpabilities of the narrator, charting his “moral” state as he uses various methods of interpreting the poor. “In the beginning of each sketch, he portrays himself as someone who feels genuine concern for the plight of the poor, but ultimately betrays his inexorable attachment to the comfort and the security of his privileged class,” (144) writes Cooper, noting how the story ends with the narrator “safely ensconced in his hotel room” (146). By the end of the second story, however, the narrator is finally unable to step out of and reflect on his observations—or, we might say, to assume the role of spectator—but is instead “overcome by the traumas he has inadvertently awakened in himself” (144). In this story pair, I am especially interested in the mechanisms behind those “traumas,” and the various techniques used to facilitate or impede the “incorporation” of the experience of the poor in language, which may be what is prompting Cooper’s label of “moral decline.” These techniques harness the sense of taste, the sense of sight, and the digestive systems (with their internal senses of touch) of both characters and reader.

In the first tale, the narrator’s companion goads him to interpret the trappings of the poor through language in a series of “poetic” assumptions that, even to the reader, seem violently inappropriate: “Did you never hear of the ‘Poor Man’s Eye-water’? . . . Take this soft March snow, melt it, and bottle it. . . The very best thing in the world for weak eyes. . . the poorest man, afflicted in his eyes, can freely help himself to this same all-bountiful remedy” (Melville 166). We might call this interpretation of the unknown other a kind of “linguistic incorporation.” Representation in language, as a form of containment that performatively defines and restrains
the objects of its naming in order to maintain the coherence of the speaking subject’s view of the world, bears certain resemblances to the tropes of both eating and incorporation that I have been exploring thus far. In speech, the spoken “object” is fit (or, “incorporated,” as we commonly say—the psychological and physical paradigms of the same name sliding already into this practice of language) into the subject’s own paradigm of vocabulary and patterns of diction. The subject thus seeks “mastery” over the object (the “orality” of the incorporative drive linked elsewhere to nutrition is connected here, via the mouth, to language) in the process—facilitating the elision, within the text, of the words, history and context in which the object might explain itself.

These blatant misreadings and misspeakings help to paint “Blandmour” as the thoroughly tasteless character implied by his name. The exaggerated nature of his assumptions also sets up the expectation that the narrator will act as a foil to Blandmour’s efforts to incorporate, in the language of the wealthy, the specific material practices of the poor. His statements are designed to naturalize and sanction their lack of material resources in a manner that will to soothe the consciences of members of the upper classes, who might otherwise be disturbed by gap between their own goods and those of the people who produce those goods. In another iteration of the entanglement of discourse and material, Blandmour is portrayed as imagining “nature” as a class equalizer through the vehicle of bodily consumption (where products from a supposedly universally accessible natural world are read as equivalent to goods specifically manufactured and tailored to suit a particular human need)—including the activity of eating:

. . . Now you shall eat of one [poor man’s pudding]; and you shall eat it, too, as made, unprompted, by a poor man’s wife, and you shall eat it at a poor man’s table, and in a poor man’s house. Come now, and if after this eating, you do not say that a “Poor Man’s Pudding” is as relishable as a rich man’s, I will give up the
point altogether; which briefly is: that, through kind Nature, the poor, out of their very poverty, extract comfort. (Melville 167)

Blandmour suggests that the narrator use the material process of eating for the purpose of making a material/discursive comparison: poor to rich, in terms of “relish,” and “comfort.” These terms connote not only bodily maintenance and survival, but excess, enjoyment. Again, in his attempts to speak of the poor within his own class-based framework, Blandmour has already “consumed” them—not, significantly, through the body, but through integrating and restraining speech. By (mis)reading the poor through a discourse of comfort and enjoyment (one that applies only to a middle- or upper-class body that already has relatively strong assurance of survival, rather than one more appropriate to the constant daily struggle to exist), Blandmour’s description could be said to have, ironically, dismembered and “devoured” the materials, practices, and social beings of the poor, representing them through speech solely as components of his worldview.

Especially interesting to me here is the way that the physical incorporation of the material goods of the poor offers a unique method of contesting the similar move of the “incorporation” of the material goods of the poor in language. The narrator, in his very narrating of Blandmourn’s words and then in his own description of his experience, cannot avoid re-“ingesting” (re-speaking), in his own language, the materials he encounters. And the reader cannot avoid “ingesting” them through the act of reading. However, the consumption performed by the body of the narrator is used as a tool to interrupt and intervene into the language-based “incorporation” by the narrator, and ultimately the psychological incorporation by the reader. For example, rather than integrating the impoverished into a colonizing discourse just when the inducement to do so might be at its emotional height (as Dame Coulter speaks of her deceased children), the narrator
uses food to help him resist the temptation to perform such violence: “Plunging my spoon into the pudding, I forced some into my mouth to stop it” (Melville 171).

The narrator refuses to speak, and so (at least for this interlude in the tale) avoids further narratively incorporating the bodies and materials of this family. This impacts the reader both through the literary: the interruption (to some extent) of the narrator’s voice in the text; and through the material of the body: identifying with the narrator, we sense an impediment in our facial opening, which soon imparts a lengthy, drawn-out experience of disgust. This interlude in “digestion” is filled, punctuated, by statements of grief from Dame Coulter:

“And little Martha—Oh! Sir, she was the beauty! Bitter, bitter! But needs must be born.”

The mouthful of pudding now touched my palate, and touched it with a mouldy, briny taste. The rice, I knew, was of that damaged sort sold cheap, and the salt from the last year’s pork barrel.

“Ah, sir, if those little ones yet to enter the world were the same little ones which so sadly have left it; returning friends, not strangers, always strangers! Yet does a mother soon learn to love them; for certain, sir, they come from where the others have gone. Don’t you believe that, sir? Yes, I know all good people must. But still, still—and I fear it is wicked, and very black-hearted, too—still, strive how I may to cheer my my with thinking of little William and Martha in heaven, and with reading Dr. Doddridge there—still, still does dark grief leak in, just like the rain through our roof. I am left so lonesome now; day after day, all the day long, dear William is gone; and all the dam day long grief drizzles and drizzles down on my soul. But I pray to God to forgive me for this; and for the rest, manage it as well as I may.”

Bitter and mouldy is the “Poor Man’s Pudding,” groaned I to myself, half choked with but one little mouthful of it, which would hardly go down. (Melville 170-772)

Significantly, the narrator consumes enough of the “poor man’s pudding” only to taste it. In this partial consumption—the eating and yet not eating, the place of Brown’s “interruption”15—a space is created both for the voice of Dame Coulter (one, human, kind of potential object of

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15 See footnote 11 in the introductory chapter to this thesis.
linguistic and psychological incorporation), and for the insistent articulation—a form of expression—for the other-than-human food articles themselves. In the second iteration of the experience of disgust, the qualities of the pudding surface: “mouldy,” “bitter” (172) and “briny” (171). The pudding itself, as it resists happy dissolution in the body of the narrator, begins to disaggregate into component parts: rice and salt.

After the final reference to the disgusting taste, there is an implication that the narrator does speak the impoverished, does claim some “knowledge” of their interior desires (“I offered no pay for hospitalities gratuitous and honorable as those of a prince. I knew that such offerings would have been more than declined; charity resented”) (172). But the mold and bitterness of the food has already made its presence felt, interrupting the body of the narrator with a material reminder of its unpalatable nature, and teasing the reader, as well, to hold on her tongue something the body is violently rejecting. “‘Bitter and mouldy is the Poor Man’s Pudding,’ groaned I to myself, half choked with but one little mouthful of it, which would hardly go down . . .” (172). The mould, brine, damage, and bitterness work, through the sense of taste, towards a reaction of indigestion based on a stimulation of disgust—in other words, the digestion is “infelicitous” in the sense that the body experiences a physiological compulsion to eject the substance it finds within its mouth.

This emotional/physiological reaction we call disgust, and the variety of corporeal reactions associated with it, are germane to my argument in this chapter. For example, according to Winfried Menninghaus, who has traced the history of disgust throughout the philosophical writings in his native Germany, disgust has historically worked both as a vigorous and quasi-voluntary “violent repulsion” at the presence of a physical object or substance that is close to the
body of the subject (which can simultaneously repel, and “exert a subconscious attraction or even an open fascination”) and, by the 19th century, as a rejection of surfeit—the too beautiful or too sweet (Menninghaus 6). The “infinitely reflecting” duration of beauty popular in the 19th century has historically been tied to the distant senses of vision and hearing, which facilitate contemplation, Menninghaus notes. Taste, touch, and smell, on the other hand, have been have been marked both as “bound to the here and now,” and as “facile,” or too easy to appreciate, by the ruling classes. The coding of their sensual accessibility (and thus democratic appeal) as “vulgar” or “disgusting” serves to reify a value system attached to class difference, at the same time that it yokes the same value system, now class-inflected, to the senses (Bourdieu 486).

Thus disgust, linked to the proximate senses, the working classes, and to violent and sudden physiological reactions such as vomiting, operates within the realm of the indefinite/infinite beautiful as a temporal stop: “an indigestible block of nonreflective finitude and decision” (Menninghaus 32). In “Poor Man’s Pudding,” however, the “brief and violent” temporal interruption of disgust is, through the machinations of the text, drawn out, extended, opening a space for the incident of indigestion, and the “indigestible” materials themselves, to be experienced differently. For, though disgust may operate in an instant if a substance is rejected from the body, I would argue that when the substance to which the subject desires to say “no” remains in the body, as is the case of the moldy pudding, a state of rupture is maintained—an

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16 Kant calls disgust a “vital sensation—it affects the entire physiological body, and “cannot be localized in any single organ,” (Menninghaus 111). This violent “intrusion” into the bodily organs, “allows no room for reflection” (32).

17 I am indebted to Dana Luciano and Lori Merish for our discussion on the function of disgust in this passage, especially for noticing the textual delay and suggesting historical interpretations of the pudding components.
interruption in interpretation (here, through the senses of the body) that promotes a kind of trauma or panic insisting on its address.

Further, the delay of the disgust opens a space for reconsidering the materials involved in the process of incorporation, and here serves to emphasize the materials of the pudding as something other than a resource for human consumption, with their own histories and alternative configurations. This kind of emphasis can also slide to consideration of other materials—some of them in human form—that have been posited for incorporation: the Coulters and others in poverty, for instance. The rupture of disgust in the body, and the temporal distortion that is drawn out through textual repetition and delay, opens a kind of space through which there is a gustatory reminder of the very matter of the pudding. Melville’s depiction of the pudding’s sensual elements recall a different history—one marked by “salt,” “pork barrel,” “bitter”—than the history that Blandmour (or we) might have assigned to it (“delicious,” “pudding”).

Rather than foreclosing an object’s meaning by immediately assigning it the most available signification, such attention to an object’s material history can lead to meanings and understandings that might otherwise have been overlooked or elided, suggests Elaine Freedgood. Freedgood, who calls this reading for “strong metonymy,” argues that “metonymy’s apparently subversive ability to disrupt meaning, to be endlessly vagrant and open ended, may be attended by an equally subversive ability to recuperate historical links that are anything but random”: a process of “connecting of extratextual dots” (16). Recalling Jane Bennett’s idea of vibrant matter, Freedgood’s theory suggests that the provision of such a history may lend a particular kind of vibrancy, perhaps even an action or movement, to these items: “. . . if the force of history replaces or punctures ‘traditional literary form,’ objects may ‘start into’ a life of their own, as it
were, evincing a vitality that the novel cannot wholly contain within its system of figuration” (16).

Similarly, the rice and salt that are highlighted during the moment of disgusting consumption in Melville’s tale might be said to actively thrust forth their own histories, disrupting their placement/incorporation within the bodies of the poor or the minds of the wealthy. The rice, dogged by its market origin (it is “of that damaged sort sold cheap”), evokes a history of being raised by slaves in the American south. The salt, highlighting its age and prior association “from last year’s pork barrel” (Melville 170), might recollect the Kanawha salt production industry in western Virginia—which both relied heavily on slavery and, in its complex legal organization and strategies for controlling competition, foreshadowed the later development of corporate monopolies (Stealey 354).

Indigestion through disgust, here, works against the “all clear” that might have arisen from a simple ejection of the rejected (what Julia Kristeva would define as the “abject”) substance from the body. In Menninghaus’ account, disgust is a kind of bodily correlate for

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19 Along these lines, such insistence on attending to consumed matter might also lead us to read the strawberries featured at the Garies feast, in Chapter 1 of this thesis, as suggesting their own line of questioning—not of just their own histories, but of their own futures. Why might strawberries want to entice an eater? Perhaps we can turn to the basics of biology: to enter a host body in order for their seeds to be carried and spread to new localities through scat. Gillian Brown offers another take on this kind of self-perpetuation through the temptation of consumption in a reading of Melville’s Pierre, in which the author/narrator seeks out “the object-function at the communal feast, to becoming the meal... so that the author’s labor, understood as an extension of himself represented in his literary work, is preserved in the transmogrification of book to food. “ (Brown, “Melville’s Misanthropy: Anti-sentimentalism and Authorship” 148)

20 In Kant’s writings, Menninghaus reads disgust as “a negative form of laughter,” which, like laughter, shakes the whole body, and has a similar effect of discharging tension. “Disgust just as suddenly generates a maximal defensive tension in face of disappointed expectation—that of the ‘wholesomeness’ of what was to (about to be) taken in—in order to then immediately ‘discharge’ the tension. In both laughter and disgust, the rapid discharge of a
Freud’s concept of negation, in which he claims that any negating statement by an analysand reveals only that the material of the statement does in fact exist within the psyche, but is subject to repression (Freud, “Negation” 667). “Disgust, which undergoes a countercathexis (or a sublimation), and laughter are complementary ways of admitting an alterity that otherwise would fall prey to repression; they enable us to deal with a scandal that otherwise would overpower our system of perception and consciousness” (Menninghaus 11). In Melville’s tale, then, disgust allows both the simultaneous refusal and existence of inassimilable memories of class- and race-based oppression. And, linked through a parallel process, the material of the rice pudding as a difference from the material of the eating body of the narrator is both refused by the body and, at the same time, acknowledged by it.

For the reader, the experience is especially complex, due to the tenuous nature of readerly identification facilitated in scenes of indigestible consumption, in which the solidity of the identification with the eating character is called into question, made fragile, perhaps cut off. For example: in “Poor Man’s Pudding,” most readers would be likely to place themselves in the body of the narrator, especially as the narrator compares himself favorably to his foil, Blandmour, through reports on the latter’s egregious lack of sensitivity. The reader then begins to experience the Coulters from the point of view of the narrator, observing, through a visual and class-articulated distance, the poor. What will happen when the narrator comes to partake of their food, activating a bodily participation in their lives? Does the reader remain in the body of the narrator, or does the uncomfortable oral experience jostle her from a sense of taste outside to a sense, again, of sight—but this time, looking at the narrator’s body, observing the spoonful of rice high tension leads to a state of pleasant relaxation, or a soothing sense of ‘all clear’” (112). See also the next section of this chapter.
pudding lodged in his throat, and remembering her own inhabiting of that body? What I wish to suggest here is that there is a sense in which through the experience of disgust, the reader has now become her own object of spectatorship, highlighting the potential of the body to be not only lived in as subject, but observed as object.²¹

Spectatorship and the ocular sense are the subjects, then, of the second diptych of this pair, in which the narrator visually apprehends poor people in England consuming the remains of a feast: a scene of eating that might also be labeled disgusting. The floor “was foul as a hovel’s—as a kennel’s; the naked boards being strewed with the smaller and more wasteful fragments of the feast, while the two long parallel lines, up and down the hall, of now unrobed, shabby, dirty pine-tables were piled with less trampled wrecks” (Melville 175). And yet vision, according to Menninghaus, does not invoke disgust in the way that the interiorizing senses historically have. “In order to experience something as disgusting, it must first have entered—however partially—our sense of smell or taste; it has to be ‘taken in’ or ‘consumed’ before being judged as totally unenjoyable (at least as long as disgust does not wholly depend on a transfer by means of association)”, he writes (104-105).

Here, the narrator’s vision of others eating leads only to a reinforcement of his own spectatorship: he can enjoy vicariously identifying with the consumption of foodstuffs that the poor eat, but the food he consumes visually (even though he imaginatively inhabits the body of the eater he watches) maintains only a metaphoric or symbolic value. Here, the food does not distinguish itself as material with its own past or properties. Therefore, it facilitates rather than impedes a forgetting of the thing as other, and supports the narrator’s posture of distanced

²¹ See also William Cohen’s discussion, in Embodied, of how attention to the senses in Victorian literature brings the subject to an experience of itself as an object (6).
spectatorship criticized by Cooper. Participating discursively in the poor’s material “consumption” of royalty, while maintaining his bodily distance (like the banners that “looked down upon the floor as from his balcony Dives upon Lazarus” [176]) allows him to pronounce judgment on them, to “incorporate them” in his own linguistic map of the social world with terms such as “ferocious creatures” (174), “mob of cannibals” (175), “meagre (sic), murderous pack” (175) even Dante’s “the Lost” (175).

It is worth noting that in this second tale, vision only succeeds in interrupting the process of identification when the consuming subject becomes the object of the gaze, mimicking the effects of the rancid rice pudding (and the indigestibility that prompts the reader to relate to the eater/consumer through spectatorship, rather than identifying with him through taste). This reversal occurs when the gaze of authority falls on the body of the consuming subject through the interpellating call of the police, who mistake the narrator for a participant in the feast: “‘You! I mean you! Stand aside, or else be served and away! Here, take this pasty, and be thankful that you taste of the same dish with Her Grace the Duchess of Devonshire. Graceless ragamuffin, do you hear?’ These words were bellowed at me through the din by a red-gowned official nigh the board” (177). The text delays naming the source of the call until after it is completed, allowing a space for the identifications of the reader to be blurred—are you the object of the voice?—before the body of the narrator materializes before you as the guide describes his clothing: “See! Not only stands your hat awry and bunged on your head, but your coat is fouled and torn” (Melville 177).

The “you” in this injunction suggests a possibility of address that reaches beyond the text. And in doing so, it transmits to the reader the final, language-based indigestion of the narrator,
who (as Cooper points out) is left at the end to traumatically give up speaking of the poor, reverting only to a plea that he might not have to partake further of the material that becomes them—their food: “Heaven save me equally from the ‘Poor Man’s Pudding’ and the ‘Rich Man’s Crumbs’” (178).

The Ecology and Erotics of Walt Whitman’s “This Compost”

This Compost

(by Walt Whitman, first draft published 1856; this draft published 1881)

1
Something startles me where I thought I was safest, I withdraw from the still woods I loved, I will not go now on the pastures to walk, I will not strip the clothes from my body to meet my lover the sea, I will not touch my flesh to the earth as to other flesh to renew me.

O how can it be that the ground itself does not sicken? How can you be alive you growths of spring? How can you furnish health you blood of herbs, roots, orchards, grain? Are they not continually putting distemper’d corpses within you? Is not every continent work’d over and over with sour dead?

Where have you disposed of their carcasses? Those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations? Where have you drawn off all the foul liquid and meat? I do not see any of it upon you to-day, or perhaps I am deceiv’d, I will run a furrow with my plough, I will press my spade through the sod and turn it up underneath, I am sure I shall expose some of the foul meat.

2

Behold this compost! behold it well! Perhaps every mite has once form’d part of a sick person--yet behold! The grass of spring covers the prairies, The bean bursts noiselessly through the mould in the garden, The delicate spear of the onion pierces upward,
The apple-buds cluster together on the apple-branches,
The resurrection of the wheat appears with pale visage out of its graves,
The tinge awakes over the willow-tree and the mulberry-tree,
The he-birds carol mornings and evenings while the she-birds sit on their nests,
The young of poultry break through the hatch'd eggs,
The new-born of animals appear, the calf is dropt from the cow, the colt from the mare,
Out of its little hill faithfully rise the potato's dark green leaves,
Out of its hill rises the yellow maize-stalk, the lilacs bloom in the dooryards,
The summer growth is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead.

What chemistry!
That the winds are really not infectious,
That this is no cheat, this transparent green-wash of the sea which is so amorous after me,
That it is safe to allow it to lick my naked body all over with its tongues,
That it will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited themselves in it,
That all is clean forever and forever,
That the cool drink from the well tastes so good,
That blackberries are so flavorful and juicy,
That the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, that melons, grapes, peaches, plums, will none of them poison me,
That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,
Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once catching disease.

Now I am terrified at the Earth, it is that calm and patient,
It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,
It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions of diseas'd corpses,
It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,
It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops,
It gives such divine materials to men, and accepts such leavings from them at last.

(Whitman 309-311)

If Melville’s “Pudding and Crumbs” diptych uses disgust to stimulate indigestion and interrupt both the image and the process of incorporation, Walt Whitman’s “This Compost” is a poetic performance of psychic indigestion that uses disgust not simply to resist incorporation, but also to perform a representation of eating that engages the incorporative trope in order to establish a kind of human/landscape relationality.
In the poem, a meditation on the disappearance of “sickness” and “disease” within the natural world, the speaker helps to activate the taste buds of the reader through references to oral gratification: a “cool drink from the well [that] tastes so good,/ . . . blackberries . . . so flavorful (sic) and juicy,/ . . . the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, . . . melons, grapes, peaches, plums. . .” (37, 38, 39).

But these elements, so ripe for the eating, never settle blandly into the stomach of the narrator—or the mind of the reader. Instead, they initiate a reaction of disgust through continual reference back to the “death” from which they grow. The nature of this disgust is similar to themes from Rosencranz, Aurel Kolnai, and Bataille, where there is a revulsion not only at death, represented by the corpse, but specifically in the putrefaction of that corpse, or, in other words, “in the presence of rampant life itself”—at the indications of life where the subject does not expect life to be (Menninghaus 18, 132-133). This reaction of disgust at unexpected life could also be read as a discovery of independent movement, even intentionality, within an object that one is constantly being pulled into viewing as passively submitting to the will of the subject. It is upsetting to think that fruit, or grass, might be part of a more complex assemblage than that of human servicing; and that they might have other things on their agenda than to service the human body in being eaten or reclined upon.

What chemistry!
. . . That the fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange-orchard, that melons, grapes, peaches, plums, will none of them poison me
That when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease
Though probably every spear of grass rises out of what was once catching disease” (Whitman 31, 39-41).
This representation of disgust, though, is dealt with in a unique way, running specifically counter to the overt insistence on the Earth’s “harmless[ness] and stainless[ness]” (44) (given the antebellum dietary concerns highlighted in the introduction to this thesis, such terms imply the Earth’s suitability for eating—its consumability). The stanzas repeatedly proclaim the Earth’s (and, by extension, its products’) “clean[liness],” (36) which according to the logic of the sentence structures, transforms the rottenness within it. The vegetation “is innocent and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead” (30); the personified sea “will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited themselves in it, (34); and the Earth “distills . . . exquisite winds out of . . . infused fetor” (45). The poem even seems to be attempting to wipe away any trace of the “corruption,” as the Earth “turns harmless and stainless on its axis” (44, italics mine) and “all is clean forever and forever” (35).

Perhaps one could imagine such cleanliness being possible on a material level. However, within discourse, we could of course hardly expect such claims for complete negation to be entirely successful in a constative sense, especially in writing, where words are not always read in the linear fashion for which they might be intended, and are not erased as they are read, but remain on the page, always available for recursive glances. In “This Compost,” although the disgusting imagery of corruption is logically negated by the claims of the text, its potent descriptive imagery nearly outweighs its claims to “purity.” We might say that the poem, in a different way from Whitman’s tales, is performing its own kind of negation of the Earth’s indigestibility and its own disgustingness, allowing itself to acknowledge their existence through the explicit denial of that existence. In fact, we could say that it unconsciously “infects” even the lines that purport to be about purity. For example, in line 30, “The summer growth is innocent
and disdainful above all those strata of sour dead” the adjectives “innocent,” and “disdainful” scarcely hold up to the visual and gustatory imagery in “those strata of sour dead,” and it is the latter imagery that will resonate in readers’ sensory memory, and will activate their taste buds. Likewise, we can read the “not” in “when I recline on the grass I do not catch any disease,” (40) and the “none” in “will none of them poison me” (41), as negating impulses—which we can both glean “reasonably” through a psychoanalytic reading for the statements’ non-negated unconscious, and affectively feel for their more potent sensual imagery. Even the poem’s rendering of the sensuous lover, the sea, proclaims a negation: it “will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited themselves in it” (34) serves mainly to remind us of the fevers lurking within those waters. What’s a claim to a confidence in some abstract “chemistry” (31), when there are “fevers” in your swimming hole?

As I discussed in relation to the Melville tales, Menninghaus describes Kant’s argument that one of the functions of the reaction of disgust is to allow the existence of what is repressed. He further posits that a reaction of disgust, such as vomiting, activates the whole body (like laughter), and like laughter brings a similar feeling of peace and relief “a soothing sense of ‘all clear’” (Menninghaus 112). If that is the case, the reaction of disgust might be said to result ultimately in a greater sense of comfort, and of retreat into the safety of the closed body of the subject. Thus, the repressed knowledge of the (potentially) consumed materials’ activeness—an independence of purpose expressed through a potential malevolence to the body of the subject—could be negated through the reaction of disgust. This would leave us, again, with the closed subject that risks falling into disgust from being “too beautiful” (Menninghaus 7).
But in this poem, the process of repression is both continual, and almost explicitly performed. In fact, the poem begins with an open acknowledgement of disconcertion: “Something startles me where I thought I was safest” (1), and devotes the entire first fifteen lines to an unsettlement that causes the poet to withdraw from nature, remain clothed, and not, presumably, go swimming or roll naked on the ground (1-5). Overall, the declarations of purity do a scant job of covering the eruption of corruption. In fact, the poem ends not with a reference to the “cleanness” of nature: “It renews with such unwitting looks its prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops, / It gives such divine materials to men,” but with the corpse: “and accepts such leavings from them at last.”

And because of this textual ambivalence—this repetition of a pattern of exposure of “disgusting” matter that is then textually cancelled, then exposed again, we might approach this poem as a performance of the very process of vacillation between the knowledge of the body as a discrete entity and the knowledge of the degrees of independence of the materials that compose it. Nietzsche might call such a process “rumination,” which, according to Menninghaus, “dallies, peacefully and agreeably, with one’s own half-digested matter, instead of seeing to its convulsive expulsion. It is thus at once vomiting and not-vomiting—in its repetition, a virtually endless vomiting and equally endless pleasure taken at what has been vomited” (173). Via Kristeva, this engagement with the abject figure of the corpse is traumatic. But, as abject, it is also infinitely compelling—so much so here that it is devoured.

As in Webb’s novel and Melville’s tales, the reader is drawn in to the poem through the senses, including those of vision, touch, and, significantly for my purposes here, taste. Here, the “cool drink from the well,” the “fruits of the apple-orchard and the orange orchard,” the “melons,
grapes, peaches, plums” are already infused, through repeated references to the “sour dead,” “sicknesses,” and “poison” with a corruption that erupts if not in the belly of the poet, then in the digestive consciousness of the reader.

But unlike the indigestion invoked in Melville’s diptych, the indigestion here does not impede a relationship of imagined incorporation. Instead, it troubles the very image of incorporation, as the consumed matter, broken down into a its smallest unit (a “mite”) is not just suggested, but clearly endowed with its own social life and history, one in which the consuming body participates with both horror and pleasure: “Perhaps every mite has once form’d part of a sick person” (18), we learn, at the same time that this mite is repeatedly offered up for human consumption, tempting desire and disgust in one bite. In fact, the natural elements that the historical image of eating tempts us to construe as inert and passive here exert their own activity, and their own oral compulsions:

. . . this transparent green-wash of the sea which is so amorous after me,
That it is safe to allow it to lick my naked body all over with its tongues,
That it will not endanger me with the fevers that have deposited themselves in it,
That all is clean forever and forever.” (33-36)

This indigestion-causing “mite” within the body of the poet and the reader prompts not just the impeding of one reading of a relationship (that of incorporation), as effected by Webb’s turkey bone and Melville’s pudding, but also helps establish a vision, and a visceral feeling of, another kind of relationship—one in which the other-ness and vibrancy of what is eaten might erupt in bodily disturbance, but also might prompt another way to think about the relationships that could be had between the human body and the elements of the landscape, and its own inscape.
Conclusion

Indigestibility in the late 20th Century: Eating Earth in *Paradise*

Historically, the practice [of earth-eating] can be traced back to 100 AD with most evidence originating from Africa, and the earliest indication being from a site near Kalambo Falls on the border of Tanzania and Zambia. (Clark 2001) From its origin in Africa, the practice of geophagia spread across the world.

--Peter Hooda and Jeya Henry

Webb’s, Melville’s, and Whitman’s depictions of “infelicitous” eating suggest ways of considering food, and the interactions between food and bodies, that interrupt common assumptions about how antebellum Americans viewed the relationship between the material composition of their flesh, its exterior, and its interior. These texts appeal to the senses of vision, but also of taste and (interior) touch, producing a dissonance that can actively arrest and jostle even today’s readers’ perceptions of what it is that constitutes these material assemblies that we are. We might, with William Cohen, call such multi-valenced and aggregate performances of the body’s eating relationship with the world a “queerness of the body” or . . . “a type of antihumanism.” (134)

Those of us who live in the early 21st century are no longer shocked in the same way as our predecessors at the “disgusting”—which, as Menninghaus notes, has begun to dull from over-use in a culture that values physiological stimulation of the full body (15). And putting inorganic, even somewhat insoluble materials into our bodies that would perhaps have seemed utterly strange and indigestible a century and a half ago is a matter of course, at least for anyone who reads the label of her Twinkie wrapper.

But though the definition of “indigestibility” has perhaps shifted, depictions of the eating of things seen as inappropriate for humans continue to turn up in literary and cultural texts. One
particular type of consumption that has become comparatively widely used over the past few
decades, and which interests me because of its overt connection to what we commonly think of
as the “environment” or “landscape,” is the eating of dirt. Stacy Alaimo gestures towards this
when she reads Ladelle McWhorter’s description of her thoughtfully composted tomatoes as
synechdoches for “all plant and most animal foods that ultimately arise from the dirt . . . the very
matrix of life,” (Alaimo 254), aiding an exploration of both the agency of dirt and its
connection (via “food”) to the human body. As I noted in the introduction to this thesis, Alaimo
points out that McWhorter emphasizes the dirt in her passage about the tomatoes, since
“dwelling on food . . . serves up nature as an ingestible morsel” (Alaimo 254). McWhorter,
Alaimo seems to imply, skirts the difficulty of confronting the incorporative model by
downplaying the tomato, that which is finally put into the body. But what she misses in the use
of tomato at all as symbol for dirt is the particular and peculiar resonance of the indigestible—
indissoluble and disgusting—aspects of dirt.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, Whitman’s poem of the previous century makes these
aspects accessible in certain ways. But perhaps even more potentially arresting for the less-
easily-disgusted 21st-century reader are the depictions of the practice of earth-eating
(“geophagia” in social science circles) that appear with increasing frequency in the late

22 Alimo cites the following passage from McWharter as an example of the subject-less agency of dirt: “[Dirt]
aggregates, and depending upon how it aggregates in a particular place, how it arranges itself around various sizes of
empty space, it creates a complex water and air filtration system the rhythms of which both help to create more dirt
from exposed stone and also to support the microscopic life necessary for turning dead organic matter back into dirt.
Dirt perpetuates itself.” (Alaimo 247, McWharter 167).

23 Geophagia is commonly classified as a type of “pica,” which is defined by the Oxford Reference Online
Dictionary of Psychology as “an eating disorder of infancy or early childhood characterized by persistent eating of
inappropriate substances such as paint, plaster, string, hair, cloth, animal droppings, sand, insects, leaves, pebbles,
clay, soil, or other non-nutritive matter, but without any aversion to conventional foods, the behavior not occurring
20th/early 21st century, by writers such as Lionel Shriver, Barbara Kingsolver and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In a conclusion to the social science text Eating the Inedible, Consuming the Ineffable, Jeremy MacClancy glosses a few aspects of depictions of geophagia in literature: as a marker of rural impoverishment or nutritional desperation; as a racial/ethnic/tribal insult; as a marker of material difference and class and gender similarities that cross racial and continental divisions; as exploitative ‘magical realism,’ or for sensationalism (223-225).

I will suggest here that some of these more recent works invoking indigestibility can be read with an ecological bent in mind. This is especially true of the writings of Toni Morrison, which are often populated with characters who casually ingest articles, such as hot peppers, gravel, ice, and dirt, which seem to subvert the body/digestive system. For instance, in Paradise, which tells the story of an exclusive black patriarchal community (the town of Ruby) and the group of injured women who live on its outskirts (the community’s “remainder,” Zita Nunes calls them)24, portraying the consumption of earth allows Morrison to draw on a practice that was/is likely culturally sanctioned in parts of Africa—but that has the potential for resonance with readers in many other countries, where it is often practiced in secret. At the same time, rendering such a practice for readers within a culture that does not sanction it allows her to tap into the affective potential of disgust, disrupting the senses in order to differently inscribe bodies in question.

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as a part of a culturally sanctioned practice.” This attention to “cultural sanctions” plays significantly in late 20th and early 21st century considerations of indigestible eating.

24 In Cannibal Democracy, Nunes reads Paradise for its treatment of the figurative remainder (see the discussion of her work in the Introduction and Chapter 1 of this thesis). However, she does not address the book’s many representations of bodies eating.
Paradise is a novel particularly concerned with the establishment of physical locality—a home for the a group of dark-skinned former slaves and their descendents who wander the Midwest of America after being turned away from communities of lighter skinned former slaves. This search for a both physical and social place of the racialized body is one Morrison engages with on a regular basis, as she describes in her essay, “Home”:

These questions, which have engaged so many, have troubled all of my work. How to be both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home. How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling? They are questions of concept, of language, of trajectory of habitation, of occupation, and, although my engagement with them has been fierce, fitful and constantly (I think) evolving, they remain in my thoughts as aesthetically and politically unresolved. (5)

In a culture of slavery, where food eaten and absorbed is converted, via the body of the slave, into additional value for the master, the consumption of a product that seems to resist such a conversion is already subversive.25 And it is one that, Morrison indicates, the women living in the town of Ruby (doubly oppressed by both race and gender) regularly consumed as part of their own female culture, cultivated by Lone. This ancestral figure “. . . had taught them how to comb their breasts to set the milk flowing; what to do with the afterbirth; what direction the knife under the bed should point . . . she searched the country to get them the kind of dirt they wanted to eat” (271).

Dirt, insofar as it refrains from dissolving into the body and thus contributing to energy, interrupts the reader’s perception of the bodies of Morrison’s Ruby women as inscribed in a capitalist, buy-and-sell, labor-and reward economy, overlaid with an all-too present memory of

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25 See the nineteenth-century renderings of South American mouth masks used on enslaved humans “imposed to prevent earth-eating, which, slaveholders claimed, was practiced by suicidal slaves sunk in misery and wishing to escape punishment by whipping” (MacClancy, Afterword, 228). (My research has revealed no written record by slaves that would corroborate these slaveholder accounts of the intention of the slaves’ earth-eating.)
slavery. Like the dreams of Taussig’s Indian healer, the suggestion of soil-eating shocks our perceptions of the eating body, and clears a space for another narrative of consumption. And if we pay close attention to the soil—the dirt that is entering the mouths of these characters, whose memories of being denied a home and a belonging in a country that was equally forced on but disallowed to their ancestors—we find that we know this soil. We know it through our senses: what it smells like, what it tastes like, where it comes from. Morrison has built a web of references to it throughout the novel.

We first experience the scent of the earth of Ruby and the Convent bound up with its history—which reaches far back to the times before America was inhabited by Europeans, before today’s race, gender, and class structures had even begun to form, to the mythical pre-history of humanity: “A mineral scent was in the air, sweeping down from some Genesis time when volcanoes stirred and lava cooled quickly under relentless wind. Wind that scoured cold stone, then sculpted it and, finally, crumbled it to the bits rock hounds loved . . . She [Patricia] had noticed the mineral smell all day . . .” (Morrison, _Paradise_ 186). In the mineral scent’s next invocation, Morrison writes it into the natural features of the novel’s own time: “The wind soughed as though trying to dislodge sequins from the black crepe sky. Lilac bushes swished the side of the house. The mineral trace was overcome by the smell of supper food in the air” (190). The scent is covered here, by the “supper”—the calorie-bearing food that the inhabitants of Ruby will eat, and yet in its very naming, it persists. Eventually, that trace begins to make its way into female human bodies, through the reminiscence of Pat: “So did you [Pat’s mother, Soane, and Dovey] talk together about how you all felt? Make tea for hemorrhoids, give one another salt to lick or copper dirt to eat in secret?” (200) Then (significantly, in a novel concerned with the
problems of race and gender exclusivity), this underlying web of earth—of minerals and plants—crosses the gender boundary, mapping men into its borders: “There is honey in this land sweeter than any I [Nathan DuPres] know of, and I have cut cane in places where the dirt itself tasted like sugar, so that’s saying a heap” (204). It crosses even the boundaries of the town (the obsession of its inhabitants), in the “salty” [mineral] drink Lone shares with Consolata, along with words: “Lone gave Consolata a hot drink that tasted of pure salt . . . ‘You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don’t separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don’t unbalance His world’” (243-244). Among the many elements uniting the nervously divided town of Ruby from the Convent are the basic elements of existence: physical food, landscape.

The reader witnesses the inhabitants of Ruby struggling to establish a home in the belly of a country that has rejected them on the basis of the color of their bodies, as they grapple with the difficulties of building not only a place they are allowed to live, but also a place to which they belong. A coal-black community in the middle of the Midwest might seem out of place to readers previously unfamiliar with this aspect of black history. But as the land resides in their bodies, tiny aggregated grains of rock we might imagine coursing through a bloodstream, we can find traces of it there, in a montage that does not just mark on the flesh, but articulates itself within the flesh: it is the body, and it is distinct.

This is what Taussig might call a “healing image,” as he cites “Benjamin’s arguments concerning the importance of mimesis and the power of image as bodily matter awakening memory, awakening collective dream-time . . . the art of healing images laying at the cornerstone of power and representation, the space between art and life involved in the healing of
misfortune” (Taussig 8-9). The indigestible is used here to perform the body, imaginatively localized. In consuming the dirt of their place, the characters of Paradise are performing a psycho-biological act of home. The ground and rocks, refusing dissolution into energy, materialize within the flesh. We can see the earth in these bodies; we can smell it, taste it, and, to use one of Morrison’s terms, “re-memory” its history. Such representations can continue to stimulate us, as readers of the literary and of our own landscapes, to notice and attend to the aggregate composition of the (eating) subject—of our own bodies—on the plane of the social, the psychological, and the material.
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