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Reconstituted Narratives

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RECONSTITUTED NARRATIVES Catherine R. Peters

A Review of *An Archive of Taste: Race and Eating in the Early United States* by Lauren F. Klein. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2020. Pp. 232. \$100 cloth, \$25 paper.

In *An Archive of Taste*, Lauren F. Klein carefully considers the meanings of taste elaborated by an elite group of white men who founded the United States alongside the enslaved Afro-diasporic individuals whose skill and knowledge made it possible. Examining archival materials, such as personal papers, published tracts, cookbooks, and autobiographical accounts, as well as poetry and painting that span the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Klein constellates a range of methods to understand how eating “came to matter” (2). While Klein’s attention lingers upon some of the most well-known figures of the early republic, she simultaneously seeks to locate the enslaved Afro-diasporic tastemakers whose voices do not typically form part of the official historical archive. *An Archive of Taste* reads like a series of experiments toward thinking together philosophies of taste as well as eating and bodies, culminating in an especially lucid account regarding how computational methods demonstrate the centrality of enslaved labor to the making of the early United States.

Klein’s monograph confronts the predicament of studying a historical object, like food, that no longer exists. How did historical subjects living upon the eastern shores of the United States encounter and taste ingredients, recipes, and dishes? How did these experiences illuminate or exceed their

subject positions? To approach these and related questions, Klein employs close reading and historical analysis, in addition to what she calls “speculative methods for theorizing and even visualizing large amounts of text” (9). Her citations traverse established scholarship in the fields of nineteenth-century literary studies and food studies, including the idea that particular forms of taste informed early nationalism (which Klein glosses as *republican taste*). Additionally, the text embraces contemporary conversations, led especially by Black feminist scholars, that seek to name and confront the limits of the archive through what Klein terms “reconstituted narratives” (2, 10).

Taste, Klein reveals, has a long lineage in Western philosophical traditions. As a term, it has been variously deployed to suggest encounter, experience, and evaluation. Sometimes, it has signaled an innate sensibility or, alternatively, a cultivation of the senses toward judgment. Furthermore, different theorists of taste have selectively deployed the term toward varying ends. For the white men who led the early republic, taste meant moral judgment, even as it more literally referred to rituals and decisions at their tables.

Klein frames five chapters through categories that she both explores and challenges. Chapter 1, “Taste,” introduces the four men whose respective taste conditioned

the early republic: enslaved cook James Hemings and Thomas Jefferson; enslaved valet Paul Jennings and James Madison. Demonstrating the importance of enslaved tastemakers to *republican taste*, Klein asserts that Jefferson penned terms of emancipation in 1793 that required Hemings to train a “replacement cook” before he could be emancipated himself. Furthermore, Klein juxtaposes Jefferson’s philosophical claims regarding the alleged intemperance of Afro-diasporic people with his reliance upon Hemings’s precision in measurement at meal-times (31). That the elite white men who developed racialized notions of restraint failed to abide by them contrasts significantly with enslaved men’s household labor. For example, as Madison grew increasingly infirm, Jennings was tasked with cutting Madison’s food into pieces small enough to eat, a situation highlighting that the actual regulation of everyday meals fell, not to white republican men, but rather upon enslaved Afro-diasporic individuals.

Beyond consumption, associations between civic virtue and eating in the early republic extended to the production of food. In particular, Klein discusses Jefferson’s and Madison’s experimentation with agriculture, both as a model and metaphor for the cultivation of taste (35). These are important insights, but I also perceive

a missed opportunity to contend with the structures of settler colonialism embedded in agriculturally inflected writing, which, for example, allowed Jefferson and Madison to describe education as the engrafting of “a new man on the native stock” (37). Chapter 2, “Appetite,” close reads three different writers’ respective orientations toward taste through appetite. Following Sharon P. Holland, Marcia Ochoa, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins, Klein explores what appetite might reveal regarding historical desire, instinct, and pleasure. Could appetite, in other words, help to critique the purportedly good taste of the white male republican citizen? Klein argues that French epicure Alexandre Balthazar Grimod de la Reynière advanced critiques of his social exclusion through the staging of elaborate meals; gourmand ambassador Benjamin Franklin contended with gout, evidencing a lack of disciplined eating; and African American poet Phillis Wheatley described people as sugar in order to suggest the cannibalistic impulse embedded in its reliance on enslavement.

Chapter 3, “Satisfaction,” centers on Malinda Russell, a free black woman who used her cooking skills to eke out a living in Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, and Michigan, despite continued and targeted violence, such as robbery. Russell created a cookbook in 1866, which has been considered

the first authored by an African American writer. Through attention to Russell’s language, Klein unpacks the significance of satisfaction as pleasure, financial success, and an “externalizable, transmissible quality” that can be “elicited in others” (88). Klein also locates Russell’s divergence from culinary antecedents: unlike white cooks, Russell sometimes had to sublimate her own desires in order to satisfy the eaters whom she served. Chapter 4, “Imagination,” contrasts Lydia Maria Child’s writing with that of Harriet Jacobs in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), which addresses, among many other subjects, the fear and anxiety suffered by enslaved cooks who worked in the houses of white eaters. In particular, Jacobs indicts Dr. Flint for his violent behavior, suggesting that a cultivated sense of taste does not imply humane action. In other words, Jacobs’s portrayal of Dr. Flint, supposedly a tasteful subject, highlights the limits of taste as a guide to personal behavior and sympathetic response, a strategy often employed in the writing of white women like Lydia Maria Child (129).

Chapter 5, “Absence,” walks the reader through the steps, assumptions, and layers of digital research using *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*. For example, Klein writes that, because Jefferson rarely wrote directly to James Hemings (even though the latter could read and write in French and English),

an examination strictly of address-ees in Jefferson's papers reinscribes Hemings's absence. In contrast, computational methods demonstrate Jefferson's reliance upon enslaved plantation staff by the regular mention of their names in letters, even as these individuals' specific skills and actions elude the official archival record. One exception is a recipe for snow eggs, a kind of meringue, kept by Jefferson's granddaughter and deposited with the University of Virginia Library. That the only extant recipe attributed to James Hemings is found, not with his descendants, but in a university created according to Jefferson's specific taste emphasizes that the legacies of enslavement continue to inform how knowledge of the past is accessed.

I noted a number of instances in which Klein's attention to historical silences might have extended to Indigenous knowledge and histories. In fact, the text is peppered with references to "Indian" foodways: Jefferson's cultivation of Indigenous plants in Paris and discussion of them (22, 152); the previously mentioned settler colonial language in Jefferson and Madison's agricultural writing (37); "Tasty Indian Pudding" and "Indian mush" (92, 110); Mary Rowlandson's 1682 account (115); Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (114); and landmarks like the "Indian Queen" (135). The violence of settler colonialism in its

appropriation of Indigenous land and culture not only complicates the history of the early republic but also presents archival challenges that bear upon historical taste, eating, and bodies. How did colonization and enslavement together impact early republican taste? How might scholars narrate the landscapes that Indigenous people knew and fostered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

An Archive of Taste makes an important intervention into the fields of nineteenth-century literary studies and food studies through thoughtful citational and archival practices. Importantly, it also bridges established and emergent conversations on the challenges of archival recovery, typically written in analog, with digital research. Klein is clear that enslaved cooks Hercules and James Hemings sought and navigated escape. Paul Jennings petitioned for his legal freedom, although it was not granted until he agreed to serve in Daniel Webster's Massachusetts household. These fugitive routes emphasize that the project of republican taste was not desired by all residents of the early United States. One wonders which methods might support further speculation upon dreams, wishes, and futurities that exceeded the households of elite white enslavers.

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