An Archive of Taste
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Published by University of Minnesota Press

Klein, Lauren F.
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If the origins of the discourse of taste are most commonly traced to the British cultural critics of the early eighteenth century, the origins of the discourse of eating—if it could be described as such—are often attributed to a single man: the French epicure Alexandre Balthazar Grimod de la Reynière (1758–1837). Grimod, as he is more commonly called, was known in his own time and today for his exuberant appetite, strong opinions, and sardonic wit. Yet he appeared uncharacteristically reserved when he reported to readers in his 1804 *Almanach des Gourmands*, the second annual volume of an eight-year run, about a potential new stop on his “itinéraire nutritif” (99). The nutritive itinerary, subtitled “A Gourmand’s Walk through Various Parisian Neighborhoods,” provided an informal if opinionated account of where to acquire the most succulent roast duck, the freshest of oysters, and, at a restaurant on the corner of rue Mandar and rue Montorgueil, a wine-infused pâté of quail “fit for the table of the Gods” (99, 113).

But at the residence at 33 rue de Clichy, open to the public on Sunday afternoons, aspiring epicures could experience, according to the guide, an event “curious” as much as culinary: a demonstration of a “magnificent machine” that could electrocute a live turkey, resulting in a “truly admirable degree of tenderness” (Grimod, 224, 223). The machine’s inventor, one Monsieur Beyer, was, according to Grimod, a scientist of some repute. Beyer based his design on the electrical experiments of Benjamin Franklin, who himself had noted in a 1750 letter to a friend—also a member of the Royal Society—that “birds killed in this manner eat uncommonly tender” (*Papers*, 4:111). Franklin had died just over a decade before the publication of Grimod’s *Almanach*, but he had abandoned this particular avenue of experiment long before. Its apotheosis had been a “Party of Pleasure” on the banks of the Schuylkill in the summer of 1749,
at which guests were served a dinner of turkey killed “by the Electrical Shock; and roasted by the electrical Jack, before a Fire kindled by the Electrified Bottle” (Papers, 3:352). But by adapting the invention for everyday use, Beyer as much as Franklin, or so Grimod averred, was entitled to the “highest recognition by gourmands, and, more generally, those who take pleasure in eating perfectly cooked poultry and game, without being required to wait” (223, 224).

The nod to Beyer notwithstanding, Grimod’s willingness to credit the “celebrated doctor Franklin” as the source of this innovation is unsurprising (223). Beginning in 1752, when Franklin’s accounts of his experiments with electricity were first translated into French, he enjoyed distinguished status in that country. Twenty-five years later, when he arrived in Paris in order to take up an appointment as the first U.S. ambassador to France—he was Thomas Jefferson’s predecessor in that role—he “rode on his own coattails,” as Stacy Schiff describes: “He was the world-renowned tamer of lightning, the man who had disarmed the heavens, who had vanquished superstition with reason” (3). Once established in Paris, in December 1776, Franklin would soon add an additional commendation to that list: the man who indulged his appetite. According to the “Accounts of Extravagance” that were published in U.S. newspapers during his time abroad, Franklin dined out six nights a week (Papers, 42:101). This feat of appetitic indulgence earned him the admiration of the French and, just three years later, an incapacitating case of gout, which he famously documented in his satirical “Dialogue between Franklin and the Gout” (1780). In this regard, Franklin shared much with Grimod, who similarly “ate and drank too freely,” and otherwise “too much indulged” his appetite (Memoirs, 3:327, 326). Indeed, both men exhibited a willingness to indulge their appetites and pleasures, often to the point of excess. Furthermore, both understood their excessive indulgence in philosophical terms: as evidence of the limits of the sense of taste as a moral or political guide, premised as it was upon the ability to subject one’s appetite to reason.

As far back as Plato and Aristotle, the capacity for rational thought has been considered a key feature that separates human beings from all other living things. And for just as long, that capacity has been doubted, challenged, and subjected to critique. In many ways, the discourse of taste can be said to have been brought about not, as has been suggested thus far, as a direct extension of the basic Enlightenment belief in the human capacity for reason, but rather as a direct response to the doubts
about reason that met Enlightenment humanism’s rise. Only upon repeated insistence from key antagonists, most notably Thomas Hobbes, that appetite, and not reason, might be the dominant force that determined decisions of politics and morals, were the group of men that would come to be known as the taste philosophers prompted to theorize how such decisions came to be made. Even today, appetite remains a major foil to the sense of taste, underscoring the importance of continued attention to what Sharon P. Holland, Marcia Ochoa, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins describe as the area of scholarly inquiry at the “intersection of race, food, humanity, and animality” (396–97). They place the appetite for food, as well as for sex and other bodily pleasures, in the domain of “the visceral,” and propose that a renewed emphasis on the visceral aspects of human experience can help to “transform food studies, food systems, and food security narratives, which tend to privilege a kind of right, proper cultivation, into stories capable of making room for what might happen when civility goes awry” (398).

This chapter takes up the call to create stories that make room “for what might happen when civility goes awry” at precisely the moment when civility, itself, constituted a principal societal goal. Through an examination of the works of three writers (and eaters) from around the time of the nation’s founding, each of whom lived in or traveled to Europe at the time of the efflorescence of the discourse of taste, I serve up one possible set of stories for a transformed field of food studies. Each of these stories engages with the irrepressible force of appetite—for specific foods, for sensory pleasure, and for corporeal freedom—through which I identify the beginnings of critique of the dominant discourse of taste. Following Holland, Ochoa, and Tompkins, this critique resides in examples of the visceral aspects of appetite, in which animal instinct, sensory pleasure, and gustatory desire are each employed in order to challenge the purported stability of the sense of taste. Along with this critique comes a questioning of what I term the *tasteful subject*: the white male republican citizen viewed as uniquely capable of cultivating good taste. In formulating this concept and in identifying the questions it prompts, I draw from broader critiques of the Enlightenment subject, such as Alexander Weheliye’s challenge to the exclusionary nature of what he terms the “world of Man” (10). Later chapters more closely align with Weheliye’s aim of exploring the “cultural and political formations outside the world of Man that might offer alternative versions of humanity,” in particular
chapters 3 and 4, which explore alternatives to the theory of taste and its surrounding discourse (10). In pursuit of that eventual goal, this chapter focuses on challenges to the theory and discourse of taste that are issued from within the Enlightenment project. Similar to the “minoritarian enlightenment traditions” that Monique Allewaert identifies in her work on the American tropics, those which participate in the “disordering of the colonial projects that they also sustained,” the figures whose writing (and eating) that I explore in this chapter similarly seek to “disorder” the dominant discourse that they nevertheless still—in different ways, and for different reasons—also simultaneously seek to maintain (22).

These figures include Franklin and Grimod, as well as one additional writer and interlocutor in the discourse of taste, the African American poet Phillis Wheatley. While Wheatley’s status as an enslaved black woman would seem to strongly demarcate her life experience from the two (free) white men—as indeed it did, to no uncertain degree—her poetry directly engaged with the same theories of taste that Franklin and Grimod addressed in their work. As I will show, Wheatley’s poetic investigations were thematically related, and at times directly connected, to the discussions in which Franklin and Grimod were also engaged. These discussions concerned the limits of taste, the force of appetite, and the freedom required to explore each. As I will argue, Franklin, Grimod, and Wheatley each understood eating as an entry point into a critique of the tasteful subject, as well as of the cultivated sense of taste that served as that subject’s moral and political guide. And as we will see, each of these figures employed their actual bodies as well as the literary works their bodies produced in order to challenge the discourse of taste as it was then conceived.10

I begin with the body and body of work of Franklin. For it is in his lifelong obsession with eating, and writing about same, that he offers a rich set of examples through which to explore the personal, political, and philosophical ramifications of exerting (or, more accurately, attempting to exert) rational control over the appetites of the body. These examples expose an axis that positions enlightened restraint against excessive appetite. This excess is a form of appetite that Franklin associates with animals—with people who eat animals, with animals that eat, and with people who eat like animals. In Grimod, we find evidence of another attempt to position enlightenment against excess, in his case against an
overly cultivated sense of taste that curtails the true pleasures of the palate. Through an analysis of his performative dinners as well as his published works, I show how Grimod stages a full-bodied critique of the tasteful subject. But it is Wheatley who offers this chapter’s most complex critique of the boundedness of that idea. Through her direct engagement with contemporaneous aesthetic philosophy, Wheatley is able to put the lie to the enduring claims that the tasteful subject, its race and gender implied, could ever serve as the exemplar of either good taste or good citizenship. By countering the exclusionary definition of the tasteful subject with examples of her own tastefulness, as well as with arguments for how enslaved subjects might become refined according to the precise criteria laid out by the discourse of taste, she begins the required work of destabilizing that discourse from within.

I consider these figures separately and together because while each represents a unique position with respect to the discourse of taste, they share certain attributes and opinions. Grimod and Franklin were united by privilege; their shared social and economic status enabled them to mount critiques of the dominant discourse of taste without the fear of reprisal or personal cost. By the same token, Grimod and Wheatley shared select experiences of social difference; Grimod, who employed prosthetic hands, had no choice but to acknowledge his physical disability, just as Wheatley had no choice but to acknowledge the color of her skin. While their shared life experiences end there, as Wheatley remained enslaved until the final years of her life and died in part due to starvation, they retain a connection for how they both strategically deployed their bodies, as they knew them to be perceived by their readers, in relation to their bodies of work. A third comparison, between Wheatley and Franklin, helps to underscore this chapter’s final argumentative claim: Franklin, because of his elevated status, could do or say (or eat) anything he so desired; Wheatley emphatically could not. Indeed, Wheatley, more intimately than either Franklin or Grimod, experienced the exclusions that inhered in the idea of the tasteful subject, as well as the limitations of the sense of taste itself. None of these figures articulate a complete alternative to the theory of taste, as do the figures discussed in later chapters of this book. But their critiques of the dominant discourse, framed in their own language, and mounted from within, begin the work of dismantling that exclusionary worldview.
Eating Animals and Animals That Eat

Franklin’s “inordinate breakfast [of] four dishes of tea, with cream, and one or two buttered toasts, with slices of hung beef”—the meal that prompted rebuke from his personified gout—did not simply represent a strategic attempt to ingratiate himself with the French (Memoirs, 3:326). Rather, it reflected the culmination of nearly a lifetime of his having indulged in the pleasures of the palate. Franklin’s Autobiography documents numerous examples of his struggles to hold his appetite at bay. In one of the most famous scenes, documenting the end of his vegetarian diet, Franklin is forced to reconsider his abstemiousness in light (and smell) of fish “hot out of the Frying Pan” (87). “I had formerly been a great Lover of Fish,” he recalls, and therefore “balanc’d some time between Principle and Inclination: till I recollected, that when the Fish were opened, I saw smaller Fish taken out of their Stomachs: Then thought I, if you eat one another, I don’t see why we mayn’t eat you” (87–88). This episode has long been identified as among the most compelling examples of Franklin’s awareness, as Betsy Erkkila explains, of the “instability of ‘Reason’ as the ground of the enlightened self and the new secular order he seeks to embody” (722). As an additional confirmation of its significance, Franklin includes this “return to eating Flesh” in the two-page outline of the work, although he makes no mention of the experiment with vegetarianism that preceded it (Autobiography, 268). But in the context of the discourse of taste, this anecdote performs additional philosophical work. For one, it indicates Franklin’s awareness of the irrepressible force of appetite, as his “Dialogue with the Gout” will later confirm. For another, it reveals Franklin’s understanding of eating, as food writer Michael Pollan observes, as an act that “puts us in touch with all that we share with the other animals, and all that sets us apart” (10). By employing the fish’s eating habits as a model for his own, Franklin acknowledges more than the malleability of reason as the grounds for the “enlightened self.” He also accedes to the fundamental fluidity between the human animal and other living things.

The distinction between human and animal was central to the Enlightenment definition of the human subject, as scholars have long observed. And while many episodes in the Autobiography touch on the distinction (or lack thereof) between humans and animals, Franklin dramatizes this philosophical concern most clearly in his depiction of Samuel Keimer, the owner of the Philadelphia print shop where he found his
first formal employment. This professional opportunity set Franklin on his future life course. And yet he consistently relegates Keimer to a role as his foil, characterizing him as inferior in every way. Franklin claims, for instance, that Keimer “kn[ew] nothing of Presswork,” but Franklin, even on his first day of work, was able to “put his Press . . . into Order” (Autobiography, 78). He describes Keimer as a “Knave in his Composition,” while positioning himself as an exemplar of expository style (79). Keimer, Franklin relates, was “very ignorant of the World,” in contrast to Franklin’s vaunted knowledge of international affairs (79). The comparisons continue, culminating in Franklin’s account of his mastery over Keimer’s mind. Franklin recalls how he “us’d to work [Keimer] so with [his] Socratic Method” to the point where Keimer “would hardly answer the most common Question, without asking first, What do you intend to infer from that?” (88). This intellectual contest results in a plea of nolo contendere for Keimer, whose abilities are no match for Franklin’s enlightened mind.

Adding the proverbial insult to injury, Franklin conveys to his readers Keimer’s other egregious fault: he “was usually a great Glutton” (Autobiography, 88). Contra Franklin, who learned early in life to exhibit “perfect Inattention” to the “Victuals on the Table, whether it was well or ill dressed, in or out of season, [or] of good or bad flavour,” Keimer illustrates the negative impact of acquiescing to his “Tastes and Appetites” (55). While relating an anecdote in which the two decide to establish a “new sect,” with doctrines ranging from not shaving their beards (Keimer’s contribution) to not eating animals (obviously Franklin’s), Franklin emphasizes Keimer’s difficulty in adhering to the latter (88). He gleefully recalls:

We had our Victuals dress’d and brought to us regularly by a Woman in the Neighbourhood, who had from me a List of 40 Dishes to be prepar’ d for us at different times, in all which there was neither Fish Flesh nor Fowl. . . . I went on pleasantly, but poor Keimer suffer’d grievously, tir’d of the Project, long’d for the Flesh Pots of Egypt, and order’d a roast Pig. He invited me and two Women Friends to dine with him, but it being brought too soon upon table, he could not resist the Temptation, and ate it all up before we came. (88–89)

In contrast to Franklin’s professed indifference to the “Victuals on the Table” and, perhaps more meaningfully, in contrast to his response to the
temptation of fried Block Island cod—in which he attempts to find “balance” between his appetite and his inclination, and constructs a rational explanation for why he might indulge—Keimer is here described as wholly consumed by his appetites. He cannot even wait for Franklin to arrive before devouring the meal in its entirety. Keimer’s desirousness is underscored by Franklin’s mention of the “Women Friends” he invites to dine with them. With this additional detail, Franklin insinuates that Keimer is capable of none of the restraint that might distinguish his appetites from those of the other animals—appetites for food or even sexual pleasure. Extending Franklin’s exploration, in the fish episode, of the tenuous boundary between animal appetite and human reason, Keimer’s behavior, here, implicates him as nothing more (or less) than an animal that eats.16

Franklin continues to complicate the distinction (or lack thereof) between eating animals and animals that eat as he attempts to establish his professional independence from Keimer. In recounting his subsequent time in Keimer’s print shop, Franklin takes every opportunity to portray Keimer as the embodiment of appetite, thereby reinforcing his own image as a paragon of restraint. When the men see the governor outside of the print shop, Franklin waits patiently upstairs. Keimer, on the other hand, “r[uns] down immediately” into the street (Autobiography, 80). And when Franklin’s more measured response results in an invitation to accompany the governor to a tavern down the street, Keimer “s[tar]es like a Pig poison’d” (80). Here, Keimer does more than merely eat like an animal; he behaves as if he were the very animal he had recently consumed. As an embodiment of unrestrained appetite, Keimer comes to represent, for Franklin, the negative impact—professional as well as philosophical—of the slippage between human and animal that only reason has the power to hold at bay.

Franklin’s meeting with the governor, as it would turn out, set in motion a series of events that allowed him to travel to England, the first of his many extended stays in that country. That particular sojourn, between 1724 and 1726, coincided with an extended public debate over the question of appetite’s role in civil society.17 One year before Franklin’s arrival, in 1723, Bernard Mandeville had published an expanded version of his Hobbesian Fable of the Bees (1714). A response to the intellectual incursion of the early taste philosophers, who, as previously discussed, sought to attribute virtuous behavior to an innate moral sense, Mandeville’s revised Fable reinforced the position that the impulse toward benevo-
lence eschewed any internal basis. Based on the ideas expressed in Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), Mandeville argued that public virtue was simply a by-product of the satisfaction of instinctual desires.

Mandeville’s primary interlocutor in this debate was Francis Hutcheson, whose 1725 *Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* was (and still is) viewed as a foundational text of Scottish Enlightenment thought. As for Franklin, it has been posited that his direct exposure to this particular intellectual struggle imparted “memorable exposure to the contemporary exchange between moral philosophy and practical psychology” (Douglas Anderson, 7). However, scholars have yet to draw out the significance of the Mandeville-Hutcheson debate for Franklin in terms of the conflict between appetite and reason, and the impact of that conflict on his ideas about the cultivation of virtue and taste. This is in large part due to the difficulty of subjecting Franklin’s large and often contradictory body of work to any sustained analysis. It nevertheless bears mention that Franklin’s only explicitly philosophical work, “A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain,” composed (and printed) while in London, so closely adhered to the Mandevillian view that it earned him an invitation to meet Mandeville himself. Although Franklin later repudiated that work as juvenilia, burning all but one copy, the “Dissertation” nonetheless points to an explicit awareness, later dramatized in the relationship between Franklin and Keimer, of the consequences—personal, public, and therefore political—of indulging in animal appetite rather than exercising enlightened restraint.

But the tension between these presumed poles of appetite and restraint is precisely why eating served as such a compelling site of philosophical investigation for Franklin and his contemporaries, and continues to do so for scholars today. After all, it is not only in the exercise of enlightened restraint but also in the ability to experience the pleasures of appetite that what distinguishes humans from other animals—and also what binds them together—comes most clearly into view. Letters from Franklin’s various travels abroad document the delight he took in receiving shipments of American foodstuffs otherwise unavailable in Europe. He repeatedly requested that his wife, Deborah, send him crates of Boston cranberries and Newtown Pippins (a variety of roasting apple, which was also a favorite of Jefferson’s) (*Papers*, 8:90, 7:367). In addition, he once professed of Indian corn that “its green leaves roasted are a delicacy beyond expression” (43:74). During a mid-career trip to London in 1757,
Franklin had the opportunity to dine with David Hume himself, who, not only incidentally, “aimed to make his residence not only the intellectual but the gastronomic center of Edinburgh” (Nolan, 173). The historian J. Bennett Nolan reports that Hume “was very proud . . . of the culinary proficiency of his Peggy [Irvine, his cook], protesting that her sheep’s head soup was the best in the world” (173). According to Nolan, Hume himself “loved to go into the kitchen and concoct a soupe à la reine after the recipe given him in France by Madame de Boufflers,” and, apparently, he excelled: “Henry McKenzie, ‘the man of feeling,’ praised a bouilli which David cooked for him, and Boswell marveled at three kinds of ice cream” (173).

Ironically, it would be ice cream and its principal ingredient, sugar, that would ultimately force Franklin to interrogate the larger political and economic systems that enabled his gustatory pleasure. In 1772, he published an editorial in the London Chronicle prompted by the ruling on the Somerset Case, the landmark court decision that held that slavery was not authorized by any extant English law. In the editorial, he asks, “Can sweetening our tea, etcetera, with sugar, be a circumstance of such absolute necessity? Can the petty pleasure thence arising to the taste, compensate for so much misery produced among our fellow creatures, and such a constant butchery of the human species by this pestilential detestable traffic in the bodies and souls of men?” (Papers, 19:187). In the decades that followed, which coincided with the final years of his life, Franklin would determine that the answer to this set of questions was a resounding “no.” Because of its link to the “pestilential detestable traffic” of slave trade, sugar came to be viewed by Franklin, as by many others as the time, as “thoroughly dyed scarlet in grain” (Papers, 41:384). It was a clear instance of how the sense of taste should be exercised in order to adhere to the morally correct position. The pleasure was “petty” in this case because it lacked the depth—ethical as much as gustatory—that a cultivated sense of taste could confer.

But even as specific foodstuffs became excised from the realm of tasteful eating—the result of another (purportedly) distinctly human quality, compassion—Franklin continued to acknowledge instances in which the force of appetite could not be curtailed. In a letter to his sister, Jane Mecom, in the final years of his life, Franklin describes his own public service in terms of an act of eating. He writes: “When I inform’d your good Friend Dr. Cooper that I was order’d to France being then 70 years old, and observ’d that the Publick having as it were eaten my
Flesh, seem’d now resolv’d to pick my Bones; [Dr. Cooper] replied that he approv’d their taste for that *the nearer the Bone the sweeter the Meat*” (*Papers*, 45:248). Franklin’s humorous characterization of the sacrifice of public service—a core tenet of the moral sense philosophy to which Franklin would at least attempt to adhere—is here embodied to the utmost degree. Franklin describes the public’s consumption of his body as not merely an assertion of appetite, but of a cannibalistic one: the public eats him to the bone. Not even animals (except, evidently, Franklin’s iconic fish) participate in that practice. And yet, at least according to his sister’s “Friend,” the public demonstrates their good “taste” in doing so. On the surface, Franklin receives a witty compliment. But at a deeper level, this letter affirms how eating, the act that separates humans from animals, instead places the human on a continuum with animal instinct. The public cannot resist satisfying its appetite for Franklin’s public service, just as Keimer cannot resist the taste of roast pig. In this way, this letter serves as an equal-but-opposite companion to Franklin’s story of himself and the cod. In that case, human rationality is premised on animal rationality: if fish eat each other, then humans should be able to eat the fish. Here, however, we are shown how the act of eating, far more than a marker of civility, taste, or reason, instead connects us, as eating animals, to animals that eat. As Grimod will further imply, and as Wheatley will eventually confirm, these appetites—animalistic and, at times, approaching cannibalistic—are those which, contra the best aspirations of the taste philosophers, truly govern the world.

**From Animal Appetite to Enlightened Pleasure**

It was a similar view of the irrepressible force of appetite, as well as its pleasures, that Grimod sought to put on display when he hosted an infamous dinner—equal parts meal and performance—on an evening in early February 1783. The dinner was staged by the acting coach of Marie-Antoinette and was funded by Grimod’s family wealth, evidently without his family’s consent. It began by requiring the two dozen invited guests to wend their way through a series of dark antechambers before meeting with a “strange, terrifying monk” (qtd. in Spang, 88). Upon uttering the password “Monsieur Grimod de la Reynière, defender of the people,” the guests were then formally welcomed—in the form of incense perfumed upon them by staff dressed as choirboys—before entering into a dining
chamber. There they were served a multicourse meal on a table with a coffin as its centerpiece, leading to the dinner being described in subsequent newspaper coverage as Grimod’s “funeral dinner.” Eager to allow for the meal to be observed, if not tasted, by as many people as possible, Grimod opened a gallery overlooking the dining chamber to upward of three hundred additional viewers, who, as a result of limited seating capacity, were required to attend the meal in shifts.

In her analysis of the dinner’s staging—one of the few scholarly accounts that can be found—Rebecca Spang proposes that “Grimod created a moment that indicted both the grand couvert and the exclusionary logic inherent in the Enlightenment’s more universalist aspirations” (90). Spang’s analysis, which appears in the context of an argument about the rise of French restaurant culture, identifies two seemingly contradictory strands of Grimod’s critique: the first of the grand couvert, the French royal tradition, popularized by Louis XIV, of allowing the public to observe the king and queen’s evening meal; and the second of the secret rituals associated with freemasonry and other putatively democratic social groups. Grimod’s dinner, which coincided with the final years of France’s ancien régime (and, it should be noted, with Franklin’s tenure as ambassador to that country, although there is no evidence that the two ever met), “commented simultaneously on the ceremonies of the absolutist court and on the new institutions that claimed to abolish ceremony and establish brotherhood,” Spang explains (90). This same double critique would come to characterize Grimod’s later writing, as will soon be discussed. But there remains an unexamined valence to Grimod’s performance of pleasure, which has to do with Grimod himself: more specifically, how he employed his own cultivated appetite in order to challenge certain exclusions inherent in the discourse of taste.

In the context of an argument about Grimod’s performance of appetite, certain additional details about his body and his experience with disability become germane. As a result of a genetic condition known today as Cenani-Lenz Syndrome, Grimod was born with his fingers fused together, and he required prostheses—dual assemblages of leather, parchment, and papier-mâché—in order to both eat and write. He engaged in both acts with gusto; the former as evidenced by the dinner just described, and the latter as evidenced by his numerous publications, which included the eight-volume *Almanach des gourmands* (1803–12), as well as a manual for dinner party hosts (1808) and a variety of essays for
popular journals of culture and taste. This literary output serves as the basis for most contemporary scholarship on Grimod, although that work remains scant, as his opinionated musings are often overlooked in favor of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s more developed culinary philosophy. But in his writing as well as his eating, Grimod offers a crucial critique— not evident in Brillat-Savarin’s work—of both the narrowness of tasteful experience as it was then conceived, and the narrowness of the tasteful subject deemed capable of experiencing it.

In order to recognize the full extent of this critique, we must consider more of Grimod’s biography. Born in 1758, Grimod was shunned by his aristocratic family almost immediately. In order to disabuse the public of any suggestion that his condition might be hereditary, his parents dropped the honorific “de” from his surname and baptismal papers, and listed his godparents as “the widow of a tailor and an illiterate carpenter” (Gigante, *Gusto*, 2). Ironically, this oppressive act would be what would protect him during the Reign of Terror, and what would ensure his social acceptance amid the upwelling of anti-aristocratic sentiment that followed. But his parents also pursued more fantastical means of ensuring that the family line would not come into question, concocting a tale of how he had been injured as a result of a childhood accident, in which an absentminded caregiver had dropped him into a pigpen, where he was attacked by the hungry hogs. This story would not be dignified by its retelling were it not for the fact that, at his funeral dinner, Grimod seized on the pig as an emblem of sorts, which he used to contest the fictional as well as physical terms of his difference. According to one account, Grimod dressed up a pig in the clothes of his father and seated the animal at the head of the table (Downie, 191). According to a second, the meal’s first course consisted solely of pork (Spang, 88). According to a third, Grimod simply declared to his guests that he had descended from “pig farmers and grocers on his father’s side” (Gigante, *Gusto*, 2). In any case, Grimod’s use of the pig can be viewed as an attempt to reclaim the history that had been imposed upon him, and redirect its critical force.

The pig also represents part of Grimod’s sustained attempt, further pursued in his writing, to reclaim and repurpose the pleasures of appetite. Here, a contrast between Grimod’s performative embrace of the pig and Franklin’s rejection of same—in the form of his characterization of Keimer’s gluttony as akin to a “Pig poison’d”—becomes revealing. Whereas Franklin consistently seeks to distance himself from animal
appetite, even as he admits to often falling under its sway, Grimod attempts a deliberate detournement. For Grimod, appetite need not be excised from the sense of taste, as Franklin (and the moral sense philosophers) would have it. Rather, après Grimod, appetite itself should be cultivated, celebrated, and indulged. In this way, Grimod’s project is closely aligned with the work of Holland, Ochoa, and Tompkins, as discussed earlier in this chapter, who seek to embrace “what might happen when incivility goes awry.” And here, an additional point of confluence might be observed: Holland and colleagues place their work at the intersection of food studies and queer theory, and Grimod’s queering of his origin story—as well as of the discourse of taste—would seem to directly support these scholars’ claims. At his funeral dinner as in his published work, Grimod insists on the value of a sense of taste that originates in the body and remains connected to its pleasures. He emphatically rejects the belief that embodied pleasure, and any “incivility” it might encourage, must be removed in order for the sense of taste to be refined.

As a person whose body marked him for exclusion from the most elite Parisian circles—because of his extraordinary appetite as much as his “extraordinary body”—Grimod himself helps underscore a central point of contrast with Franklin. After all, Franklin, in spite of his own extraordinary appetite, remained secure in the innermost sanctums of social capital and political power. While firmly ensconced within similar circles, and while Franklin was in France the very same ones, Grimod remained never fully embraced. Not only was his writing consistently derided as “the product of a deranged mind,” but as a result of the funeral dinner, followed by several other stunts in short succession, Grimod himself was shunned by his family for a second time (Spang, 159). Through a lettre de cachet—a letter signed by the king used to authorize a person’s imprisonment on the grounds of maintaining public order—he was forcibly sent to live in a monastery, the Abbaye Domève-sur-Vezouse. He lived in the abbaye for two years, where, according to Gigante, he further refined his palate and also learned to cook with the monks, who were known for “mak[ing] the most of their grounds, flowing with fresh fish and produce” (Gusto, 2). He then moved to Lyon, the culinary capital of southern France, where he established himself as a commercial food trader. When he returned to Paris in 1794, at the height of the Reign of Terror, he was able to employ his professional credentials, combined with the baptismal papers that attested to his ignoble origins,
in order to regain control of his family’s residence. (His father had died earlier that year.) It was at the Hôtel de la Reynière that Grimod rode out the revolution, and when Napoleon seized power in November 1799 he began to write.

In the *Almanach des gourmands*, which appeared several years later, Grimod was able to convey his knowledge of the aristocratic eating practices that he acquired in his youth, and that he further refined at the monastery, to a larger reading public. And this public was indeed large; the first volume of the *Almanach* went through four editions, totaling twenty thousand copies and securing Grimod’s reputation as “unquestionably, the single most famous eater in First-Empire France” (Spang, 152). In the preface to that volume, Grimod seemingly excoriates the uneducated class of nouveaux riches for turning “toward purely animal pleasures” (29). Their “hearts have suddenly transformed into gullets; their emotions are no longer more than sensations; and their desires only appetites,” he writes (29). With the chain of oppositions that he establishes between “heart” and “gullet,” “emotion” and “sensation,” and “desire” and “appetite,” Grimod’s project would seem to closely align with the central aims and language of the discourse of taste. However, in the same way that Grimod levied his indictment of tasteful behavior at both sides in his infamous funeral dinner, here, in the *Almanach*, he also issues a double critique: on the one hand, of the “animal” appetites that those uninitiated in the art of eating might exhibit, and, on the other, of those whose tastes are so refined that they fail to experience the pleasures of the palate to their full effect.

In the *Almanach*, Grimod thus seeks to model a new form of enlightened appetite. This form of appetite draws its conceptual language from the dominant discourse of taste, even as it is deliberately distanced from that same discourse. He articulates its key features most clearly in the essay “On Gourmands and Gourmandise,” which appears in the *Almanach*’s third volume (1806). In that essay, he writes:

The Gourmand is more than just a creature whom Nature has graced with an excellent stomach and vast appetite; all vigorous men of sound constitution enjoy the same privilege; rather, he also possesses an enlightened sense of taste, the first principle of which lies in an exceptionally delicate palate developed through extensive experience. All his senses must work in constant concert with
that of taste, for he must contemplate his food before it even nears his lips. Suffice to say that his gaze must be penetrating, his ear alert, his sense of touch keen, and his tongue able. Thus the Gourmand, whom the Academy depicts as a course creature, is characterized instead by extreme delicacy; only his health need be robust. (Qtd. in Gigante, *Gusto*, 12)

Unlike contemporaneous writings that seek to characterize the sense of taste, Grimod both begins and ends with the body. He specifies that “an excellent stomach” and a “vast appetite” are just as important as an “enlightened sense of taste.” But this sense of taste is not one that is employed in the interest of aesthetic or moral judgment, or of political decision making. Rather, it is focused on the body and its pleasures alone.31 All of the senses “must work in constant concert with that of taste,” he explains, specifying what each sense can contribute to the pleasures of the palate. Ending his account with the same themes he emphasizes at the outset, he confirms that the “health” of the body is the most important attribute for the gourmand to maintain.

Grimod’s emphasis on embodied pleasure over and above the pleasures that derive from behaving with virtue or benevolence, or from appreciating a work of art, is illustrated most visibly in the series of frontispieces that begin each volume of the *Almanach*. The engraving that accompanies the first volume, titled “The Library of the Nineteenth-Century Gourmand,” depicts “a study decorated in the most modern taste.” (Each frontispiece is accompanied by several paragraphs of textual description.) In the foreground is “a table laden with refined fare, enough for fifteen people,” yet the table is set for only two. There is also a serving table and two sideboards, each laden with food. Hanging from the ceiling in the place of a chandelier is a “monstrous Bayonne ham.” The perspective of the image, coupled with the relative sparseness of the side walls, draws the viewer’s gaze toward the bookcase that spans the full length of the back wall: the library named in the engraving’s title. But there are no books on the shelves. Instead, the shelves are laden with “all manner of foodstuffs, among which one can see a suckling pig, various sorts of patés, enormous saveloys, and other such delicacies, along with a good number of bottles of wine and liquor, jars of fruit either crystalized or preserved, etc.” (qtd. in Gigante, *Gusto*, 283). Here, then, is a literal depiction of Grimod’s central aim: to replace the more rarefied arts, namely,
literature, with eating alone. The books that to the taste philosophers signaled the highest degree of aesthetic discernment are exchanged for the foods that to Grimod signal the highest degree of embodied pleasure.32

Another frontispiece, which announces the third volume of the Almanach, depicts a scene more anchored in reality. Titled “A Jury of Gourmand Tasters in Session,” the engraving depicts eight men in jackets and wigs seated around a dining table. These men are “professors in the art of Gourmandise,” we are told, and together they constitute the “Tasting Jury.” The Tasting Jury was the brainchild of Grimod, in which a group of men—no fewer than five but no more than twelve—gathered each Tuesday, not unlike the Judges’ Table on the reality television series Top Chef,
to debate the relative merits of the foodstuffs under consideration for potential inclusion in future editions of the *Almanach*. In the scene depicted in the frontispiece, the men “are tasting the Paté that was seen in volume two’s print; on their faces one can observe the depth of reflection that is the hallmark of a Gourmand carrying out his duties,” Grimod explains (qtd. in Gigante, *Gusto*, 294). By his use of the phrase “depth of reflection,” Grimod emphasizes how the opinions of the Tasting Jury are informed by the discourse of taste—think of Jefferson’s various invocations of the concept, as discussed in chapter 1. Grimod further emphasizes how the judges “deliberate without distinction and with complete independence” (294). While each member casts his own vote, the final verdicts are pronounced collectively, Grimod explains. In these ways, the Tasting Jury seems to lay “a claim to objectivity and universality, asking to be taken as the aesthetic standard of a group of ideal critics: the fantasy of Enlightenment taste theory come true,” as Gigante has observed (xxiv).

Yet Grimod remains insistent that his project is one of cultivating appetite and not one of cultivating taste. As he admits in an essay on the Tasting Jury, published in the fifth volume of the *Almanach*, he was prompted to assemble the jury primarily because of the physical limitations of his appetite. “We,” Grimod explains, speaking of himself in the plural, “felt that our abilities and our methods were insufficient to evaluate so many objects, and that in spite of our zeal, our love for art, and our vast appetite, we could not proceed alone; the best stomach has its limits” (554). It is thus additional men with stomachs that he requires as much as men who possess a cultivated sense of taste. In assembling his additional jury members, Grimod continues to emphasize the need for men who possess robust physical capabilities such as “jaws which had been exercised for many years” (554). He seeks participants who are each distinguished by his “palate, by his tact, his delicacy, and his sensitivity” (554). Insisting that “the Almanac and the Tasting Jury have become inseparable, [that] one promulgates the decisions of the other; [that] they lend each other mutual aid, and are, in a sense, a community of God,” Grimod refuses to allow any untethering of the sense of taste from the bodies that experience its pleasures (555).

Grimod’s emphasis on embodied pleasure, and on the appetites that produce it, is confirmed by his decision to explicitly excise politics from his table. Citing an essay in the eighth and final volume of the *Almanach*, Spang explains Grimod’s rationale: “When confronted with an elaborate
pheasant pâté or a truffled roast turkey, the true connoisseur often could not control his own eating—how could he attempt, Grimod asked, to govern others?” (158). Here, Grimod openly admits the futility of attempting to subject appetite to reason in ways that Franklin, for one, was unwilling to fully acknowledge. In Grimod’s emphatic rejection of politics at the table resides his most valuable critique as it applies to the notion of republican taste. One’s taste cannot be trusted to weigh in on decisions disconnected from the body because the body, in the end, is the sense of taste’s most trusted guide. This is an opinion that Franklin likely shared, but could not allow to overshadow his public persona, dedicated as he was to continuing to cultivate—if not always to exhibit—tasteful
behavior. But Grimod, who through a combination of choice and circumstance remained primarily accountable to himself, could mount his critique of the discourse of taste with clarity, conviction, and gusto.

**Enslavement and Refinement as Figure and Fact**

Grimod does not mention the issue of slavery even once in the more than one thousand pages that constitute the *Almanach*’s eight volumes. This fact is not unsurprising, given the political censorship to which the *Almanach* was subjected, as well as the fact that France had abolished the practice nearly a decade earlier—right around the time that James Hemings began his culinary apprenticeship in Paris. But a fact that has proven more surprising, at least to some, was that Franklin similarly avoided addressing the issue of slavery head-on. While he occasionally opined on the negative impact of slavery in his writing, he took until three weeks before his death, in 1790, to adopt an explicitly antislavery stance. Here, it is equally important to acknowledge Franklin himself enslaved several people over the course of his life and “never systematically divested of them” (Waldstreicher, “Benjamin Franklin,” para. 8). He took two of these enslaved men, Peter and King, with him to London when he traveled there for the third time, in 1764, in order to serve as a representative of Pennsylvania before King George III. And in the summer of 1773, as he was nearing the end of this particular stay, Franklin took time to visit Phillis Wheatley, “the black Poetess,” as he described her in a letter to his nephew-in-law, and “offer’d her any Services I could do her” (*Papers*, 20:291).

There exists no additional information about the conversation that transpired, save for Franklin’s mention, later in the letter, that Nathaniel Wheatley, Phillis Wheatley’s enslaver, “was not pleased with the Visit” and that perhaps for that reason Franklin “heard nothing since of her.” Wheatley, however, was sufficiently affected by the encounter that she planned to dedicate her second volume of poetry, unfortunately never published, to Franklin himself. But this trace of a connection between Wheatley and Franklin has nevertheless continued to resonate for scholars, most notably Henry Louis Gates Jr., who included this account in the Jefferson Lecture he delivered to the National Endowment for the Humanities in 2002, in large part because it remains powerfully incomplete. For Wheatley and Franklin held much in common: they were both separated
Figure 7. The letter at top, written from Benjamin Franklin to his nephew-in-law, Jonathan Williams Sr., on July 7, 1773, provides the only extant documentation of Franklin’s meeting with Phillis Wheatley. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Benjamin Franklin Papers.
from their parents at a young age; they were both primarily self-taught; and they both read prolifically, including key texts associated with the discourse of taste. Had Wheatley’s enslaved status not precluded her from engaging with Franklin on an equal plane, this encounter in London would perhaps have been the first of many meetings of minds. But it was not, and for this reason, the silence that Franklin registers, and that he commits to the archive in his remark to his nephew that he had “heard nothing since,” expands with significance. More specifically, it punctuates the moral and political limits of the tasteful subject, swayed as he was—as Franklin and Grimod both suggest—by the forces of appetite.

A simple comparison between Wheatley, an enslaved black woman, and Franklin, a free white man, attests to the basic truth of this claim. But a reading of Wheatley that foregrounds her racialized subject position over her body of work is “too simple and ignores an obvious fact,” as Tara Bynum asserts. “Eighteenth-century African-American authors rarely discuss what it means to be part of a cohesive racialized community,” she writes, and Wheatley, in particular, “does not write about race as a collective and embodied experience” (para. 9). What Wheatley does write about, however, is aesthetic theory; more specifically, she writes about the embodied aspects of sensory experience that prompt her own imaginative pleasure as well as others’ far less cerebral desires. Indeed, it is in her poetry that her strongest engagement with and critique of the discourse of taste resides.

Wheatley’s engagement with contemporaneous aesthetic theory is illustrated most clearly in the poem “On Imagination,” which was published in her Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773), the volume that her trip to London helped to secure. An extended apostrophe to the imagination, the poem begins with a direct address to its eponymous subject: “THY various works, imperial queen, we see, / How bright their forms! how deck’d with pomp by thee! / Thy wond’rous acts in beauteous order stand, / And all attest how potent is thine hand” (ll. 1–4). Here, Wheatley personifies the imagination as an “imperial queen,” whom she credits as the source of a range of “wond’rous acts” of creation. In his reading of these lines, Edward Cahill emphasizes how Wheatley seems to figure several key concepts associated with eighteenth-century aesthetic theory: “The ‘various’ range of its ‘works’ and the brightness of their ‘forms’ describe the infinite diversity of sensible impressions and elaborate trains of association that await the perceiver. Likewise, the alignment
of ‘wond’rous acts’ and ‘beauteous order’ suggests a reconciliation of the contending forces of sublimity and beauty, a world of antagonistic images and perceptions brought under despotic control by the imagination’s queenly power” (58–59).

As Cahill also suggests, there is also a complex set of power dynamics embedded within the poem. At first, Wheatley appears to defer to the queen of the imagination. But in her demands, as voiced in the next quatrain, that the personified imagination “befriend” her own “attempts” at creative expression and further “triumph in my song,” Wheatley asserts her own position of dominance over the imagination (ll. 6, 8). This dominance is additionally complicated by the third quatrain, which reads: “Now here, now there, the roving Fancy flies,/Till some lov’d object strikes her wand’ring eyes,/Whose silken fetters all the senses bind,/And soft captivity involves the mind” (ll. 9–12). Here, Wheatley’s use of the term “fancy” serves as an assertion of her ability to engage in philosophical debate as well as imaginative creation. As explained by Joseph Addison in his essay “Pleasures of the Imagination,” which was published in the Spectator in 1712 and was canonical even then, the term “fancy” is employed “promiscuously,” carrying a broader and less formal range of connotations than the term “imagination” (qtd. in Gigante, Great Age, 79). In her poem, Wheatley thus draws upon this connotation of promiscuity in order to underscore the far-ranging nature of the imagination’s “roving” as well as its “wand’ring eyes.”

In this philosophical context, Wheatley’s subsequent evocation of the “silken fetters” of fancy, those that “all the senses bind,” and of the “soft captivity” that “involves the mind” acquires an additional layer of meaning. Then, as now, one could not read these phrases without considering Wheatley’s own “captivity.” But Wheatley does not explicitly reference her own enslavement in this poem. Brad Pasanek suggests that she might have borrowed the phrase “silken fetters” from how Mark Akenside, the British poet and physician, “influentially” described “the pleasures of aesthetic reverie” in the 1774 edition of his two-book poem, The Pleasures of Imagination (131). (As the title suggests, Akenside’s poem was directly inspired by Addison’s essay.) In his analysis of these lines, Cahill focuses on a more direct allusion to Addison: his 1713 play, Cato: A Tragedy—“the most quoted Whig literary work in America at the time”—in which the phrase “soft captivity” first appears (59). By choosing to engage with common cultural reference points rather than invoke her own experience,
Wheatley additionally underscores her ability to participate in the “bracketing of selfhood demanded by republican virtue,” Cahill asserts (60). With this claim, Cahill points to how Wheatley exhibits republican taste of the highest degree. She is able to set aside her own desire for physical freedom—the satisfaction of which, one might assume, would take precedence over all others—as she considers how she might satisfy the broader desire, on the part of the public, for further investigation into the workings of the imagination.

In this way, “On Imagination” points to how Wheatley seemingly seeks to contribute to the development of the discourse of taste rather than invite its undoing. And in this regard, she diverges from both Franklin and Grimod in meaningful ways. Consider how Franklin’s intervention into the discourse of taste, if it could be described as such, centers on appetite and its role in destabilizing the rational order imposed by the sense of taste, even as he continues to uphold the cultivation of good taste as a goal. Grimod’s intervention into that discourse also centers on appetite, but his goal is to elevate appetite from its base status such that the embodied aspects of pleasure remain. Wheatley’s contribution, in contrast to both, seems in this case primarily constructive. If it performs a critique, it is through the figure of Wheatley herself as she models her ability to adhere to the highest standards of taste—and to participate in lofty philosophical conversations about same—with the subtext of her race, her gender, and her enslaved status deliberately, even tastefully, unnamed.

In point of fact, Wheatley does not employ the word “taste” in her work, choosing instead to focus on the related concepts of imagination and reason, as she does not only in “On Imagination” but in many of her other works. She was assuredly familiar with the discourse of taste, however, and not only from her engagement with Addison and perhaps Akenside, as described above. The first advertisement for the volume that would become Poems on Various Subjects, which appeared in the Boston Censor in 1772, and which, Julian Mason believes, Wheatley herself helped to craft, positioned her “Genius” as exceptional in view of her “uncultivated” African origins (Wheatley, 165). This axis of cultivated genius against uncultivated barbarism (Wheatley is described in the advertisement as being until recently a “Barbarian”) was another key concept in the discourse of taste. It underscores how issues of cultivation,
and in particular, their racialized dimensions, were almost certainly never far from Wheatley’s mind.

Wheatley engages with ideas about cultivation and race most directly in her famous (and infamous) poem “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Also included in Poems on Various Subjects, the poem consists in its entirety of four rhyming couplets, and centers on Wheatley’s seemingly positive assessment the impact of her capture and conscripted transport to New England. Nevertheless, the poem also contains several more subtle critiques—of the perversions of Christianity, of racial prejudice, and of the slave trade, among others. In issuing these critiques, “On Being Brought” exemplifies what Rafia Zafar has described as the “veritable tightrope walk” that Wheatley was required to perform as an enslaved black woman offering an opinion at all (Mask, 25). Placed in the context of Wheatley’s deep engagement with aesthetic theory, as well as of her awareness of the cultivated taste that defined the republican citizenship that she was denied, the poem acquires an additional critical valence that has not yet been fully explored; namely, how Wheatley asserts the ability of black people, considered as a group, to participate in the project of cultivating good taste.

The poem reads as follows:

’Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their colour is a diabolic die.”
Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,
May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train.

It is in the final couplet, “Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,/ May be refin’d, and join th’ angelic train,” that this assertion comes into focus (ll. 7–8). Indeed, these are the lines that are most often explicated—by Gates, Zafar, Vincent Carretta, and others—in the interest of illuminating the subversive elements of this ostensibly concessionist poem. By issuing her reprimand as one Christian to another, it is said, Wheatley mitigates the effect of a fundamentally radical act: an enslaved
black woman admonishing her white reading audience for its racist beliefs. Wheatley’s use of apposition introduces additional semantic instability, and potential subversion, in that she may also intend to imply that the (white) “Christians” are morally “black as Cain,” and therefore in most need of refinement; this is an interpretation that is often put forth in the Wheatley scholarship.

But it is around the word “refin’d” itself that the significance of the poem for an argument about taste and its cultivation begins to coalesce. After all, the idea of refinement, and the term itself, was central to the discourse of taste at the time. Lord Shaftesbury, for example, describes how the “Justness of Thought and Style, Refinement in Manners, good Breeding, and Politeness of every kind, can come only from the Trial and Experience of what is best” (10). Later theorists, including many of the moral sense philosophers, would take up the term in more detail, although it is unknown as to whether Wheatley was familiar with their works. Regardless, Wheatley’s use of the term acquires additional significance for the discourse of taste when considering its resonance with several other words that she employs in the poem. In the third couplet, for example, Wheatley comments that “some view” the “colour” of her “sable race” as “a diabolical die” (ll. 5–6). Here, it has been suggested, her invocation of “a diabolical die” references the indigo dye that constituted one of the primary items trafficked through the slave trade. It further suggests that we might read her use of the word “refin’d” as an allusion to refined sugar, another principal commodity associated with the slave trade. Wheatley’s couplet thus recalls Franklin’s characterization of sugar as being “thoroughly dyed scarlet in grain,” the language he employs when explaining his decision to abstain from eating sugar. More broadly, Timothy Morton has theorized this connection as the “‘blood sugar’ topos,” a phrase he uses to describe the “powerful and ambiguous metaphor” widely pervasive in British Romantic texts “in which sugar stands for the blood of the slaves” (88). Here, Wheatley would seem to similarly implicate the institution of slavery, and in particular, those who sustain the slave trade through their emphatically unrefined taste for sugar, among other commercial goods.

But one additional word choice, also associated with the slave trade, complicates this satisfying reading. With the line “Remember, Christians, Negros, black as Cain,” Wheatley may also be punning aurally on sugar cane. In this interpretation, it is either white “Christians” or unconverted
“Negroes” or both who, prior to moral or religious conversation, exist in an unrefined state akin to “black” cane syrup. The complications introduced by this intimation are twofold, and split apart the double meaning that inheres in the sense of taste. At the level of gustatory taste, there is the implication (and, for most, the reality) that unrefined cane syrup does not taste as good as refined sugar. But at the level of aesthetic taste, or refinement, to express good taste would be to express a preference for refined sugar, and, implicitly, to retain a dependence on the slave trade that enables its production. Lending additional complexity to this interpretive valence, Wheatley does not figure a taste for refined sugar as the end product of the process of refinement. Rather, it is the people themselves who become refined into white sugar, all the more delicious to consume.45

Considered in this way, Wheatley levies a critique at the discourse of taste in ways that do not diverge from but rather sharpen and extend those of Franklin and Grimod. With Franklin’s emphasis on unrestrained appetite, which he illustrates through his characterization of Keimer as a person who both eats pig and looks like one; and with Grimod’s emphasis on gustatory pleasure, which he dramatizes at his funeral dinner with an actual pig seated at his table, or perhaps simply a decadent course of all pork, Wheatley’s figuration of people as sugar becomes illuminated as the most striking instantiation of how the pleasure of appetite—even when cultivated, and perhaps especially when cultivated—can very quickly transform into cannibalistic desire. She issues no direct indictment of the sense of taste. By all accounts, she attempted to express her own cultivated taste to the highest degree. But the excess of meaning imparted by “On Being Brought” opens up the discourse of taste to additional questioning. This questioning would be further pursued in the decades to come, as discussed in chapters 3 and 4, as the hypocrisies brought about by the persistence of slavery continued to mount.

Eating Bodies and Bodies of Work

In spite of her publisher’s claim that he sought to submit the “striking” contents of Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects to the “unabashed candor of the impartial public,” as he wrote in an advertisement that appeared in a London newspaper the day before the book’s release, Wheatley was strongly encouraged by her benefactor, Selina Hastings, countess of Huntingdon, to include a portrait of herself as the frontispiece to the
book. Robert Calef, who authored the letter that registers this request in the archive, wrote: “I do imagine it can be Easily done, and think would contribute greatly to the Sale of the Book” (qtd. in Carretta, 93). Whether this was also the rationale underlying the countess’s initial request remains unknown. But in the context of the various advertisements for the volume that emphasize Wheatley’s race, coupled with the authenticating documents that precede her poems in the book, scholars have come to understand the inclusion of the portrait to be motivated by curiosity at best, and suspicion at worst. The irony of the racism that imposed this burden of proof is that the frontispiece—which depicts Wheatley at her writing table, her quill pen poised on the page—is now recognized as the first portrait in the history of the United States to depict a woman, of any race, in the act of writing.

It is generally assumed that there exists no analogous portrait of Grimod, a further testament to the divergent social and cultural demands made on the two writers. But upon inspecting the frontispiece to the third volume of the Almanach, the one that depicts the Tasting Jury in session, a small detail suggests that this might not be the case. The detail involves the jury member who is depicted with his back toward the viewer, his face rendered only partially visible as he turns toward the jury’s scribe. He is identified in the description of the frontispiece as the “Secretary of the Society” (qtd. in Gigante, Gusto, 284). Because we know Grimod to have appointed himself as the Tasting Jury’s secretary for life, we can begin to wonder: Could this man be Grimod?

The detail that offers the most confirmation of this claim relates to one of the man’s hands. It is accentuated by the lower half of the sleeve of the jacket that he wears, which is drawn in what seems to be deliberate shadow. (The half shadow cast over the rest of the engraving, which originates from the left of the frame, is less opaque than the dark etching employed to color the jacket sleeve.) The hand is drawn in this way, we might speculate, because it is a prosthesis. Perhaps the artist wishes us to know that it is Grimod’s hand, and only Grimod’s, that is responsible for translating the judgments of the Tasting Jury to the printed page. As pictured, the hand rests against the desk of the scribe, tracing the edge of the pages of notes. It serves as the link—visual, physical, and symbolic—between eating and the archive.

Much has been written on the symbolic valences of the prosthesis. In keeping with this line of inquiry, it is tempting to interpret Grimod’s
Figure 8. The frontispiece to Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (London, 1773), attributed to Scipio Moorhead, is believed to be the first portrait of an American woman of any race depicted in the act of writing. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division.
prosthetic hands, as pictured in the frontispiece and as employed in his life, as an uncannily apt emblem of how Cary Wolfe understands the project of posthumanist critique of naming and explaining “the embodiment and the embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture)” (xv). In the image, we can clearly see how Grimod is presented as embodied and embedded in both biological and technical worlds, just as we can clearly see the “prosthetic coevolution” of the Tasting Jury and the “archival mechanisms” that record it. But against this strain of scholarship, as disability studies scholar Michael Davidson reminds us, “there are cases in which a prosthesis is still a prosthesis” (137). By this, Davidson suggests, and rightly so, that any analysis of a prosthesis should also entail attention to the lived experience of the person who employs it, as well as to the social, political, and technological conditions that determine its everyday use.

At Davidson’s behest, we might return to what we know of how Grimod experienced his disability in his life, and how he employed that experience as the starting point for his critique of the dominant discourse of taste. His was one that sought to release the restrictions placed on sensory pleasure, over and above the restrictions placed on his participation in that discourse. Wheatley, similarly, did not address the question of her participation in that discourse directly. Rather, she took active steps to ensure that her ideas were heard. She sent copies of her poems to George Washington, who, in 1776, wrote to compliment her on her “elegant Lines” (qtd. in Carretta, 176). It is possible that even the king to whom she addressed “To the King’s Most Excellent Majesty. 1768” was another of her readers. 49 Thomas Jefferson’s dismissive opinion of her work, as documented in the Notes on the State of Virginia and as discussed in chapter 1, nevertheless confirms her role as an important interlocutor in that debate. But for Franklin, the limits of the discourse of taste remained, at most, an inconvenience. His status as a prototypal Enlightenment subject meant that he was rarely prompted to consider who else might have been excluded from consideration as a tasteful subject, or who might experience the most deleterious effects of those subjects’ failures to regulate their own sense of taste. They remained errors of judgment that, like the “errata” of his life, could be corrected after the fact.
It seems fitting, then, that Franklin chose to figure his body as a book, in marked contrast to how Wheatley and Grimod, in different ways, could not avoid others choosing to interpret their bodies as such. In his famous fictitious epitaph, composed at the age of twenty-two—when he was not more than a year or two older than Wheatley was when she published *Poems on Various Subjects*—Franklin famously describes his own dead body “Like the Cover of an Old Book / Its Contents torn Out,” buried in the ground as “Food for Worms” (*Papers*, 1:109). This collapse of the distinction between body and book has offered evidence to many scholars, including Michael Warner, of the “perfect reciprocity” that Franklin shared with the printed page (71). Not only in the pages that Franklin himself composed, but also in the archive that documents his life, there is ample evidence of his every inclination—a privilege not accorded to either Wheatley or Grimod.

But by centering the idea of eating in the archive we are prompted to consider what cannot ever be recorded: the embodied pleasures that Grimod sought to elevate to the status of taste, and the instinctual appetites that Franklin sought to acknowledge, if never fully address. That Franklin’s body, in the end, becomes “Food for Worms” further underscores how even the textual record offers insufficient evidence of eating, as the record itself—the book of Franklin’s body—is consumed. In this chapter, I have sought to demonstrate how the act of eating, and the “visceral” aspects of human experience, serve as a valuable point of entry into discussions of taste precisely because they resist being recorded in the archive—indeed resist being controlled in any way. For us as scholars in the present, tasked with identifying and unraveling the legacies of Enlightenment humanism in our own cultures, as for those who experienced the exclusions of that regime firsthand, the act of eating serves as an accessible and therefore powerful example of the flaws in that view. While none of the figures discussed in this chapter fully broke from the dominant discourse, their experiences of eating, and the pleasures that resulted, perform the important work of weakening the strictures of taste so that alternatives to that theory can emerge.