Imagination

Food, Fiction, and the Limits of Taste

In the second chapter of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs introduces the malevolent physician, Dr. Flint, who will serve as the primary source of misery for Linda Brent, the eponymous “slave girl.” By marrying the sister of Brent’s mistress, Flint is able to take legal possession of Brent and remove her from the (relative) comfort of her grandmother’s house. In a series of episodes that gather emotional impact as they accrue—a narrative technique often noted by scholars who seek to emphasize the literary dimensions of Jacobs’s otherwise autobiographical account—Jacobs documents the multiple forms of violence that Dr. Flint inflicts on the enslaved members of his household and plantation staff. One of the earliest of these episodes centers on the household kitchen. Jacobs describes how the cook and her children, in spite of preparing every meal for the Flint family, “could get nothing to eat except what [Mrs. Flint] chose to give them” (12). As a result, they often went hungry. By contrast, Dr. and Mrs. Flint were not only well provisioned; we are told that Dr. Flint “was an epicure” (12). Evidently, in spite of his inhuman treatment of the very people who prepared his food, this most vile of enslavers possessed a cultivated sense of taste.

Unlike the qualities associated with good taste outlined by figures such as Jefferson and Madison, and explored—and challenged—by figures including Franklin, Grimod, Wheatley, and Russell, Jacobs associates an entirely different set of qualities with her exemplary epicure. Following her initial assessment of Dr. Flint’s sense of taste, Jacobs elaborates the rationale for her incriminating indictment: “The cook never sent a dinner to [Flint’s] table without fear and trembling; for if there happened to be a dish not to his liking, he would either order her to be whipped, or compel her to eat every mouthful of it in his presence” (12). Jacobs, speaking as Brent, goes on to recall the most extreme example of this particular
form of abuse, one prompted by the family’s pet dog, who had long been a “nuisance in the house”: “The cook was ordered to make some Indian mush for [the dog]. He refused to eat, and when his head was held over it, the froth flowed from his mouth into the basin. He died a few minutes after. When Dr. Flint came in, he said the mush had not been well cooked, and that was the reason the animal would not eat it. He sent for the cook, and compelled her to eat it. He thought that the woman’s stomach was stronger than the dog’s; but her sufferings afterwards proved that he was mistaken” (12). Here is evidence that is literally revolting: the cook is forced to consume the mixture of Indian mush and canine froth that is, as evinced by the woman’s subsequent “sufferings,” not only psychologically distressing but physically toxic.  

The epicure, in this context, is revealed as a person defined not, pace Grimod, by his cultivated appetite, and certainly not, pace Jefferson, by any claim to virtue, but instead as the complete reverse: as an individual who, because of his status as a man of taste, feels the need to violently enforce the distinction between himself and those he perceives as beneath him, those who, either through the preparation of food, or through other expressions of their own personal preferences, might challenge the basis of his culinary (or corporeal) authority. Jacobs’s characterization of Flint as a man of taste is evident throughout the book, as she similarly indicts his sensibility and his morals. In so doing, Jacobs suggests that the end result of a cultivated sense of taste, as expressed in one’s choices in what to eat and how to behave, is an erasure of humanity. As we have seen in various ways throughout this book, the persistence of slavery severely compromises all of the claims, not infrequent in the late colonial era and the early United States, that link the cultivation of good taste to the expression of virtuous citizenship. As an increasing number of formerly enslaved people, such as Jacobs, began to tell their stories—and did so in a narrative style intended to activate the sympathies of their readers—the act of eating emerged as an even more robust example of the failings of a philosophy that linked good taste to good citizenship.  

In this chapter, I will examine how abolitionist writers, Jacobs among them, employed narrative techniques to challenge an ideology of taste that was by then all-pervasive. In their ability to imagine new registers for the sense of taste, these abolitionist writers both contribute to and critique the dominant sense of taste of the antebellum United States. I further contend that these contributions and critiques, manifested in the imaginative worlds evoked by abolitionist fiction and slave narra-
tives, rejected the premise that personal taste, if left unexamined, could ever propel U.S. citizens toward abolishing slavery at a national level. I unpack the assumptions embedded in a philosophy that insisted upon the close relation between imagination and taste. In doing so, I show how the authors of slave narratives, as well as of abolitionist fiction, employ literary techniques in order to interrogate the circumstances—both personal and political—that contribute to the fundamental disjunction between imagination and taste.

I will explore this disjunction through a series of close readings from key abolitionist texts, each of which prominently features food and eating. This exploration, like all those in this book, is informed by the discourse of taste. Here, I also consider more recent insights into the complex role of the imagination in the literature of the antebellum United States. For example, Christopher Castiglia, in *Interior States*, posits that the fictional works of that era, in contrast to the nation’s actual political institutions, serve as the basis for “socially possible” but not yet realized political configurations (12). Such works, which are “centered in their understandings and deployments of imagination,” express an understanding of fiction as invested with the capacity to call into being future possible worlds, he later explains (“Revolution,” 404). This compelling argument must nevertheless be set against the important body of work that challenges the presumption that possible futures can be imagined at all. In the years since Saidiya Hartman called attention to the ethical considerations of engaging with a contemporaneous archive—the archive of slavery—that by definition conscribes its subjects to social death, scholars of that archive, as well as the contemporary writers who seek to engage with it, have sought to develop new interpretive strategies independent of assumptions about either knowledge or futurity. I have previously discussed Hartman’s technique of “critical fabulation,” as well as additional approaches such as the one demonstrated by Marisa Fuentes, which stretches archival fragments “along the bias grain.” To these scholarly approaches, we might add Madhu Dubey’s theorization of how, in the realm of fiction, authors of neo-slave narratives seek to “situate themselves against history, suggesting that we can best comprehend the truth of slavery by abandoning historical modes of knowing” altogether (780).

Connecting these current methodologies to the strategies employed by two nineteenth-century writers—Jacobs, who, as a result of the constraints of the slave narrative as a genre perhaps best exemplifies
the deliberate deployment of fictional techniques; and the editor of her narrative, Lydia Maria Child, who, as a white woman, could more explicitly engage in imaginative fiction—I show how each understood her writing as expressing an attitude toward the future and its transformative possibilities (or lack thereof). I further argue that, in their contrasting approaches, Jacobs and Child each elaborate a theory of the imagination and its relation to taste: Jacobs of how, as a result of the fundamentally incommunicable aspects of the experience of enslavement, the imagination is fundamentally severed from both sympathy and taste; and Child of how the imagination can at times shape personal taste, thereby prompting sympathy across divergent contexts and circumstances.

As should now be clear, I read the works of these women alongside each other not to gain insight into the power structures that governed their relationship, as the majority of scholarship on the subject seeks to do; nor do I seek to further refine the politics of the slave narrative as a genre, as another dominant strain of literary scholarship might be described. Rather, I take Jacobs and Child’s shared attention to—and awareness of—the significance of cooking and eating as the grounds for a comparative analysis of their views, both suspicious and hopeful, about the transformative capabilities of taste. More specifically, I undertake an analysis of Child’s deliberately staged scenes of eating in her first novel, *Hobomok, a Tale of Early Times* (1824), in order to establish her lifelong view of the close relation between the experience of eating and the sense of taste, and of the significance of both for the archive of the early United States. I then turn to a later, less considered work, the short story “Willie Wharton” (1863), in order to demonstrate her strategic deployment of the imagination in order to encourage individual citizens to reassess their personal standards of taste. Returning to Jacobs’s *Incidents*, and, in particular, to her contrasting portrayals of her own and her grandmother’s worldviews, I illustrate Jacobs’s refusal to accept imaginative sympathy as sufficient grounds for shared understanding between those who have endured enslavement and those who have always lived in freedom. For Jacobs, the notion that a narrative of slavery could ever prompt sympathetic response is a falsehood. I argue that Jacobs, instead, understands and deploys the techniques of fiction within the context of a narrative of her life in order to underscore the fundamental disconnection between sympathy, imagination, and taste. Considering their works together, we begin to arrive at a more expansive conception of the uses of fiction both
as a technique to imagine futures that do not depend on presuppositions of possibility and as a tool to excavate pasts that do not depend on an archive that is static or fixed. The sense of taste, as both a metaphor for subjective judgment and as a model of encountering the world, here offers an undertraveled entry point into both imagined pleasures and unrecorded pasts.

The Fiction of Early American Taste

Lydia Maria Child was already deeply attuned to the impact of eating when she published her cookbook *The Frugal Housewife* in 1829 to immediate and widespread acclaim. The daughter of a baker whose “Medford crackers” could be purchased throughout New England and were, for a time, even exported to England, Child identified herself, throughout her life, with the class of farmers and mechanics who proudly “work with their hands” (qtd. in Karcher, 127). She saw little distinction between the work of her writing and the labor of her cooking; both pursuits expressed aspects of the sense of taste, inspired by figures including Benjamin Franklin, that she sought to instill in her readers. Her family’s Thanksgiving tradition further reflects this tasteful citizenship: “All the humble friends of the Francis household—[the teacher] ‘Ma’am Betty,’ the washerwoman, the wood-sawyer, and the journeymen . . . some twenty or thirty in all—were summoned to a preliminary entertainment,” in which they “partook of an immense chicken pie, pumpkin pies (made in milk-pans), and heaps of donuts” and “went away loaded with [her father’s] crackers and bread” (Higginson, 41). The scene struck Thomas Wentworth Higginson, himself an arbiter of national taste, as “such plain application” of Child’s magnanimous beliefs that he included this anecdote, alongside his account of her literary and political accomplishments, in his profile of the author that appeared in *Eminent Women of the Age* (41).

Child was one the many “eminent women” of the age who helped to usher in a new era of literary production in the United States. After decades of relying on England, among other nations, for the majority of its reading material; and after decades of experimentation on the part of U.S. authors with respect to genre, subject matter, style, and tone, U.S. citizens could, by the 1820s, begin to point to novels and short stories, poems and essays, that reflected a variety of national cultural concerns. Child’s own oeuvre was exceptionally vast and wide-ranging, and reflected
her experimentation with many of these same genres, subjects, and styles. In addition to *The Frugal Housewife* and *Hobomok*, Child published a widely circulated children’s magazine, *The Juvenile Miscellany* (1826–36), a radical (for its time) antislavery text, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans* (1833), and a weekly newspaper column, “Letters from New York” (1842–43), among an abundance of other works. But exceptionally important for the argument of this book is that it is Child, perhaps more than any other person involved in establishing this new American literary culture, who engages with the sense of taste across its gustatory and aesthetic registers. Not only through her cookbook, but also through her novels and short stories, which often featured scenes of food and eating, Child illustrates her adherence to a view of taste as both gustatory and aesthetic, and imbued with cultural, moral, and political significance.

In the opening scene of *Hobomok*, for example, the principal narrator, an Englishman from the Isle of Wight, descends from the ship that had served as his home for the past several months, hoping to find a “second Canaan” (7). Instead, he found the “six miserable hovels” that together “constituted the whole settlement of Naumkeak,” the Puritan colony that he would soon make his home (7). Shortly thereafter, the narrator is invited to a breakfast with his colonial compatriots. The meal “consisted only of roasted pumpkin, a plentiful supply of clams, and coarse cakes made of pounded maize,” the narrator recalls. “But unpalatable as it proved, even to me, it was cheerfully partaken by the noble inmates of that miserable hut” (9). Here, Child explicitly contrasts the narrator’s refined British palate, which prevents him from deriving pleasure from the “plentiful” breakfast, with the delight experienced by the “noble inmates” of Naumkeak. Child, with her characteristic ability to infuse ideology into engaging narrative description, clearly stages this scene in order to emphasize how adapting to the environment of New England is fundamentally premised upon a change in personal taste. Through this example of eating, Child also affirms her adherence to the discourse of taste, as described in the Introduction, as formulated by the Scottish philosophers and then filtered through their nineteenth-century inheritors in Europe and in the United States, as both a specific register of sensory experience and a metaphorical model for one’s encounter with the world.

In addition, by specifying the particular components of the meal—pumpkin, clams, and maize—Child deliberately inscribes the regional
ingredients of the Northeastern seaboard into a national cultural memory. That emerging memory was almost certainly at odds with historical reality: English colonists did not uniformly embrace indigenous foodstuffs at that time, nor were they readily able to cultivate them.\textsuperscript{10} Historical accounts, which Child most likely read, emphasize the widespread aversion to indigenous foods and methods of preparation.\textsuperscript{11} Culinary historian Trudy Eden references an account by John Smith, recorded in 1608, of the Jamestown settlers refusing to eat “this savage trash” (3). Even with twenty years and six hundred miles separating the establishment of Jamestown from the Naumkeak settlement—Child’s novel begins in 1629—Anglo-American eating habits were far from stable. (One might also cite Mary Rowlandson’s 1682 account of her reluctant culinary conversion, which also included a similar description of the “filthy trash” consumed by her Nargansett, Wampanoag, and Nashaway/Nipmuc captors [147].) By imagining a meal of native foodstuffs as the first scene of her novel, Child supplements factual accounts of the nation’s origin story to include references to the specific foods that, she believed, best reflected the simplicity and abundance of early colonial life. Whether those foodstuffs were actually valued by the early colonists for those reasons was less important, from her perspective, than their ideological valences in her own time. In other words, Child sought to apply the virtuous tenets that, in the 1820s, were increasingly accepted as constitutive of a distinctly republican sense of taste, backward two centuries to one of the nation’s most pivotal origin stories.\textsuperscript{12}

In \textit{Hobomok}, as in her later writings, Child employs imagined epicurean tableaux in order to assert not only that the sense of taste is central to the cultivation of a unitary national cultural identity, but that it can—and in fact should—be purposefully refined. For instance, in the second significant scene of eating that appears in the book, the meal that welcomes Lady Arabella Johnson, a symbol of old world aristocracy, to the Naumkeak settlement, Mary Conant, the novel’s protagonist, leads Arabella to a “pine table” covered with a “damask” cloth (97). Once seated at the table, Mary professes, “I have honored you more than we ever did any guests in America” (97). In their subsequent conversation, Mary discloses her concern that the meal may prove as unpalatable to Arabella as that first breakfast did to the narrator. And if Child’s nineteenth-century readers fail to immediately interpret the cultural significance of the meal, Arabella’s response makes its meaning explicit: “I have come into the
wilderness too,” she states, “and I must learn to eat hominy and milk, and forget the substantial plum puddings of England” (97). Both in her words and through her actions, Arabella affirms her commitment to bravely adapting her sense of taste to the realities of daily life in New England.

The version of taste that Arabella seeks to acquire, built upon the plain flavors of “hominy and milk” and the simple living symbolized by the “pine table,” hinges on the notion of virtue implicit in republican taste. This notion was developed in the late colonial era and into the early republic through the likes of Jefferson and Madison, as we have learned, even as Child sets the novel over a century before that time. In doing so, Child here invests the preference for simple New England ingredients with additional national cultural import (and thus perhaps anticipates how she would frame her cookbook, published a short five years later, as a treatise on the virtues, both moral and political, of economical eating). Lady Arabella, when subsequently entreated to “taste” some venison, a luxurious dish prepared especially for her, declines the offer (97). “No, thank you,” she responds, “I am going to try some of Mary’s pumpkin and milk” (98). This example of the rejection of British luxury in favor of American simplicity is among the many instances that, as Mark McWilliams has argued, establish Child as a crucial voice in constructing the “myth” of the origins of what he understands as “republican simplicity,” one that coalesced in the literary works of the early nineteenth century (365). Considered in a philosophical as well a cultural context, Arabella’s decision to acquire a taste for “pumpkin and milk” also underscores Child’s belief in the deliberateness with which her version of republican taste must be acquired.

Child further reinforces her belief in the intention required for the proper acquisition of taste, as well as its New England features, through a range of forms of culture not limited to food. For instance, Mary recognizes in her first lover, Charles Brown, a man with whom she can exult in the natural beauty of the New England landscape. When Brown is then banished from Naumkeak as a result of his Episcopalian faith, Mary despairs at her Puritan brethren who cannot contemplate the “latent treasures of the mind or the rich sympathies of taste” that she and Brown could uniquely perceive (91). For Child, then, it is not simply personal taste but sympathy with others that creates the grounds for common understanding. After Brown’s banishment, Mary turns to the Indian, Hobomok, “whose language was brief, figurative, and poetic,” and with
whom she might once again share the “sympathies of taste,” the same phrase previously employed to describe her connection with Brown (121). By restaging the relation with Brown, built on a shared aesthetic sensibility and sympathetic communion, Child does more than assert the equal status of Anglo-American and indigenous peoples—the focal point for most of the book’s readers, now as then. She also begins to assert that taste and sympathy go hand in hand, and that the latter can, like the former, be cultivated. Child thus extends the Scottish Enlightenment argument about the relationship between personal taste and civic virtue, updating it to account for the power of sympathy that would occupy increasing intellectual attention as the nineteenth century unfolded.

In this regard, the novel’s final scene is quite revealing: when Brown returns to Naumkeak in search of Mary, after it is revealed that he has not perished at sea as previously believed, Hobomok informs Brown of his own marriage to Mary. His language is characteristically poetic: “The handsome English bird hath for three years lain in my bosom; and her milk hath nourished the son of Hobomok” (139). Thus the “son of Hobomok,” an embodiment of the literal consummation of Anglo- and Native American cultures, is “nourished” by Mary’s “milk” to develop appropriately (white) American taste. The fact that the child is later sent away to boarding school in Cambridge, and then sent to England to continue his studies, where his Indian identity is all but lost, underscores how Child’s version of national taste was strongly biased against indigenous influences. But Hobomok’s final vision of his son, a scene of “Mary feeding her Indian boy from his little wooden bowl,” which he observes from a hidden vantage point before he disappears into the wilderness—another damaging trope—offers an unequivocal message about Child’s view of the value of taste: that the act of eating, enhanced by sympathetic bonds, would play a pivotal role in the development, cultivation, and consolidation of a national culture (141).

**Sympathetic Taste and National Wholeness**

William Lloyd Garrison, the fiery abolitionist, had yet to meet Child in person when, in an 1829 editorial column, he declared her to be the “first woman in the republic” (85). Citing her ability to “impart useful hints to the government as well as to the family circle,” Garrison urged Child to pursue a broader audience for her writing, which by that point included,
in addition to *Hobomok* and a follow-up novel, dozens of stories directed at children, most with an emphasis on social and political change (85). Just over a decade later, in 1841, Garrison would give Child the opportunity to do just that when he offered her the editorship of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, the official newspaper of the American Anti-Slavery Society. Child consented, and in May of that year began to implement her editorial strategy: a deliberate attempt to include a “large proportion of literary and miscellaneous matter” so that she might bring additional U.S. citizens, primarily women and children, to “look candidly at antislavery principles, by drawing them in with the garland of imagination and taste” (191). In these lines, Child reasserts her belief in the capacity of personal taste, as activated by a sympathetic imagination, to guide her readers toward justice. The “garland” that unites those two concepts further reflects Child’s own technique—visible in the *Standard* as in her other work—of employing artful yet precise presentation in order to ensure (to the best of her abilities) that her readers would absorb her intended lesson.

Child’s tenure as editor of the *Standard* proved short-lived, however. In an example characteristic of the gender-inflected criticism that she sustained throughout her time at the paper’s helm and that pushed her to resign her editorship after less than two years, Maria Weston Chapman, one of the more radical voices of the American Anti-Slavery Society, accused Child of “substituting ‘flapdoodle’ for the ‘roast Beef’ the *Standard* needed” (qtd. in Karcher, 268). After stepping down, Child continued to maintain an active political agenda. From that point on, however, she viewed her chief vocation as a writer of fiction. “Formed as my character now is,” she explained in an 1844 letter to Francis Shaw, “I cannot do otherwise than make literature the honest agent of my conscience and my heart” (qtd. in Karcher, 301). This realization marked the start of a distinct second half of her long and prolific life, where she focused almost exclusively on literature, and on fiction in particular. For it was through fiction that Child identified her most powerful method of instilling the “sympathies of taste” in others. In this work, Child remained bound to the antislavery cause while recommitting herself to the cause of Indian rights that had defined her earliest literary interventions, such as *Hobomok*. In the case of both displaced Native peoples and enslaved African Americans, Child identified the sense of taste as the mechanism that would prompt the collective action that, she continued to believe, would bring about necessary social and political change.
In “Willie Wharton,” a short story that appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in 1863, Child consolidates the national sense of taste that she began to formulate in Hobomok. This was one that, while inclusive in its conception of citizenship and premised on admirable political ideals, remained limited by her narrow sense of what American culture should properly entail. For the most part, the plot of “Willie Wharton” follows a traditional trajectory of captivity and restoration: the eponymous protagonist, lost in the woods as a child, is carried away by Indians; twenty years later, he returns to his family—with his Indian wife, A-lee-lah. Child’s story becomes an important exploration of the cultivation of taste as she depicts the Wharton family’s embrace of A-lee-lah and their thoughtful (if, from a twenty-first-century vantage point, fundamentally misguided) attempts at cultural conversion. Child confirms her own colonialist biases at the same time that she mounts a critique of those less progressive than herself, as she demonstrates both how readily A-lee-lah adapts her instinctual affinities in order to conform to white standards of taste and how stubbornly certain other characters, bound by their cultural and racial prejudices, resist accepting A-lee-lah’s full membership in their society.

As opposed to the New England setting of Hobomok, Child locates this story about the cultural and philosophical dimensions of the development of a national sense of taste in “one of our Western States” (Hobomok, 253). She also chooses a contemporary time frame. Indicating an awareness of the rapidity of U.S. colonial expansion, the narrator of “Willie Wharton” notes how the “landscape had greatly changed” during the two decades that Willie had been away from his family (271). But Child also presents Willie’s absence from his family in terms of his absence from the table. During his time away, the narrator reports that Willie’s “chair retained its place at the table” even as “out of the family he was nearly forgotten” (271). Underscoring a point that her dedicated readers would already have intuited, Child insists that the dining table serves as the foundation, both material and metaphoric, from which national taste extends.

Child further emphasizes the extended significance of the table, and of the particular foods it holds, as she stages Willie’s return to his family on Thanksgiving Day. Recalling Child’s own family tradition, the narrator relates how “wild turkeys were prepared for roasting, and the kitchen was redolent of pies and plum-pudding” and how the entire extended family, “Father, Emma, Uncle George, Aunt Mary, Bessie and her young
Squire, Charles’s wife, baby, and all,” were there to welcome Willie to his familial—and implied cultural—home (Hobomok, 275). Although it would not be until six months after the publication of this story that Thanksgiving Day would be declared a national holiday, Child’s readers would have nevertheless understood the cultural implications of this festive scene. By the 1860s, foods native to New England such as wild turkey and pumpkin pie had become bound to a national origin story, in large part owing to Child’s literary pursuits. Child’s readers would therefore have easily interpreted the bounty of the Wharton Thanksgiving table as symbolizing the nation, as well as the family, as a cultural whole.13

Child further accentuates the consolidating function of food and eating as she describes how the Wharton family “guide[s]” the newly arrived couple “into increasing conformity with civilized habits” (Hobomok, 285). As in the scene of Mary Conant feeding the “son of Hobomok” described above, Child again emphasizes the experience of eating, as much as the particular foods consumed, as important to the process of individual acculturation. Significantly, at the dinner Willie’s brother Charles takes “every precaution to have his brother appear as little as possible like a savage,” including supervising the preparation of the food to be served: “Without mentioning that [Willie] would like raw meat better than all their dainties, [his brother] went to the kitchen to superintend the cooking of some Indian succotash, and buffalo-steak very slightly broiled” (Hobomok, 277). This subtle shift toward the Anglo-American style of preparing meat instead of indulging the (presumed) Indian preference for serving meat raw, establishes the Wharton family’s approach—consistent with Child’s own view—of gradually exposing Willie and A-lee- lah to more culturally sanctioned principles of manners and taste.

In her analysis of another short story of Child’s, a tale involving a white girl, Mary French, and her black friend, Susan Easton, who are kidnaped and sold into slavery, Brigitte Fielder underscores how Child crafts each character so as to represent a specific attitude toward anti-black racism.14 Here, Child’s deliberate depiction of a range of responses to Willie and A-lee-lah’s relationship appears to be deployed with a similar intent: encouraging readers to evaluate, for themselves, the appropriateness of each character’s response. The members of Willie’s immediate family, for example, act on their conviction that both Willie and his Indian wife are capable of internalizing appropriately “American” stan-
dards of taste. As they gently acclimate Willie and A-lee-lah to the family’s cultural preferences, Willie demonstrates immediate acuity. The narrator describes how Willie regains his use of the English language “with arapidity that might have seemed miraculous, were it not a well-known fact that one’s native tongue forgotten is always easily restored” (Hobomok, 277). The Whartons devote additional attention to A-lee-lah, who, it is implied, has much more to learn, but they employ the same method as with Willie. Just as “everything was done to attract William to [the American] mode of life, but still no remark was made when he gave a preference to Indian customs,” so, too, with regard to A-lee-lah, the family “agree[s] not to manifest any distaste for Indian fashions” (280, 282). Under this regime, A-lee-lah becomes “almost as skillful at her needle as she [once] was weaving baskets and wampum” (287). In addition, “her taste for music improved” and “her taste in dress changed also” (287). In this way, Child conveys to her readers her own belief in the natural affinities of indigenous peoples for white American culture, affinities that, according to the overall message of “Willie Wharton,” need only to be cultivated and refined. To be clear: Child does nothing to overturn the insidious view of indigenous cultures as easily displaced; this is the same sentiment she expresses by plotting Hobomok’s silent disappearance into the wilderness in Hobomok. With that said, Child nonetheless frames A-lee-lah’s ability to be “guided” into “conformity” with the conventions of white society as a positive trait.

In a manner that again recalls Hobomok, and in what would become a recurrent theme of her fiction, Child concludes “Willie Wharton” with a short account of the child of Willie and A-lee-lah. However, Child’s description of the girl, Jenny, offers a subtle evolution from her portrayal of the son of Hobomok and Mary Conant. The son of Hobomok, whose “Indian appellation” is “silently omitted” only “by degrees,” is sent away to England; colonial America cannot yet embrace him or the mixture of cultures that he represents (Hobomok, 150). Jenny, on the other hand, whose name does not disclose her multiracial background, flourishes in the United States of the 1860s. The narrator relates that she is “universally admitted to be the prettiest and brightest child in the village” (287). Mr. Wharton reports that “her busy little mind makes him think of his Willie, at her age,” and her Uncle Charles “says he has no fault to find with her, for she has her mother’s beautiful eyes and wears her hair ‘like folks’” (287). Taken together, these comments suggest that
Jenny’s cultivated intellect derives from Willie, as part of her white inheritance. And with the mention that she “has her mother’s beautiful eyes,” she appears to transform her Indian beauty so as to adhere to white standards of taste.

With the cultural (and gender) hierarchy encoded in this description of Jenny, it is difficult not to view the overall message of “Willie Wharton” in terms of the “imperial process of civilizing” that Amy Kaplan identifies in her influential essay on one of Child’s contemporaries, and occasional contributor to the *Juvenile Miscellany,* Sarah Josepha Hale (184). It is nevertheless worth considering that in contrast to Hale’s exclusionary conception of the “American” home—which, according to Kaplan, “makes race central to woman’s sphere not only by excluding nonwhites from domestic nationalism but also by seeing the capacity for domesticity as an innate, defining characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon race”—Child’s story of Willie and A-lee-lah Wharton suggests a more inclusive conception of the nation (198). Still, it remains difficult to overlook Child’s inclination to subsume indigenous cultural influences within an already dominant Anglo-American national identity. What I will suggest is not that we disregard these significant contradictions. Rather, following Fielder, I believe that we can understand Child most effectively when we closely examine the responses of individual characters to evaluate the more specific views that each represents. Child’s divergent characterizations of the Whartons’ extended family, friends, and neighbors, and their varied difficulties in accepting A-lee-lah, thus become a localized critique of the negative effects of prejudice—if not white cultural supremacy—on that era’s sense of taste. By incorporating these negative responses into her narrative, Child reinforces her own position on the value of the sense of taste. Because the sense of taste is instilled and assessed from within, it is less susceptible to the damaging social pressures that can interfere with personal judgments made by other means.

In fact, “Willie Wharton” offers a direct indictment of standards of taste that are adopted without regard to inner principle. Shortly after Willie’s return, for example, his cousin Bessie remarks to her father: “I feel as if I ought to invite William and his wife to dine with us, but if any of my husband’s family should come in, I should feel so mortified to have them see a woman with a blanket over her shoulders sitting at my table!” (*Hobomok,* 283). “Besides,” she adds, “they like raw meat, and that is
dreadful!” (283). From this account, it is clear that although Bessie “feel[s]” that she should welcome Willie and his wife with an invitation to a family dinner, she cannot reconcile her instinctual kindness with her concern for others’ judgments of A-lee-lah and, perhaps more significantly, their judgments of her.

In keeping with Child’s view, it is ultimately Bessie’s behavior, and not A-lee-lah’s, that is cast as being worthy of further scrutiny. Bessie’s father, offering a “philosophical way of viewing the subject,” suggests that the issue is, both literally and figuratively, a matter of taste (Hobomok, 283). “Certainly it is not pleasant,” he states, “but I once dined in Boston, at a house of high civilization, where the odor of venison and of Stilton cheese produced much more internal disturbance than I have ever experienced from any of their Indian messes” (283). This example of a meal at a “house of high civilization” that nonetheless smelled worse and “produced much more internal disturbance” than “any of their Indian messes” exposes the difference between a thoughtless adherence to social standards and the cultivation of taste from within. The father’s “philosophical way of viewing the subject” reveals to his daughter, and to Child’s readers, the deeper significance that is present, even if not always acknowledged, in many matters of taste. It reveals, moreover, how Child understood her readers’ ability to inhabit her characters’ subject positions—in other words, to activate their sympathetic imagination—as the process that would lead to the cultivation of their own, socially aware sense of taste.

In the most generous of interpretations, it could be said that the hegemony of white culture is challenged by the events described in “Willie Wharton” (Hobomok, 260). After all, Willie and A-lee-lah are first identified as “representatives of races widely separated by moral and intellectual culture” (260). Upon their return, however, the “more enlightened portion of the community” responds in a positive manner to the couple, while others who are “not distinguished either for moral or intellectual culture”—the same phrase first used to distinguish Anglo-American from Indian—“sneer” at the Wharton family’s decision to embrace them (285). Child contrasts these undistinguished citizens with Willie’s parents, who “had been so long in the habit of regulating their actions by their own principles”; not surprisingly, his parents make the more tolerant choice in welcoming A-lee-lah into their home and family (284). By adopting the language of self-regulation—the same language employed by Jefferson, Madison, and Franklin in their discussions of the transformation
of appetite into taste, as discussed in previous chapters—Child suggests that personal taste can and should guide each U.S. citizen in his or her interactions with others, and ideally in his or her political action as well.

The Limits of Fiction, the Limits of Taste

It would be nearly seven years between the winter of 1853/54, when Harriet Jacobs began to set aside her “evenings to write,” and the fall of 1860, when she at last secured a publisher for her book (qtd. in Jacobs, xviii). After turning down her first publishing opportunity, which would have required that her narrative be introduced by Harriet Beecher Stowe, whom Jacobs had cause to distrust, she accepted the suggestion of another publisher, Thayer and Eldridge, that she enlist Lydia Maria Child to write the preface. Jacobs had yet to meet Child in person and “past experience made [her] tremble at the thought of approaching another Sattellite [sic] of so great magnitude,” as Jacobs wrote to her friend and confidant Amy Post (qtd. in Jacobs, 247). But upon meeting Child, Jacobs discovered her to be a “whole souled Woman—we soon found the way to each others heart” (qtd. in Jacobs, 247). Child took a month to edit Jacobs’s manuscript, with her work primarily consisting of condensing and rearranging certain sections of the original document. And after a several-month delay, largely owing to financial difficulties on behalf of the press, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was published in an edition of three thousand copies in the final weeks of December 1861.

Unlike Child and her explicit embrace of fiction—which, in addition to Indian rights, she employed to shed light on the injustices of slavery as well as on the prejudice faced by formerly enslaved people—Jacobs, a person who herself was formerly enslaved and who sought to narrate her own life story, was required to reject fiction as a matter of course. The “Preface by the Author” begins with a direct address that makes this constraint clear: “Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction” (1). Because of the “incredible” life events described in the volume, and because of the immensity of the “wrongs inflicted by Slavery,” Jacobs could not afford to have her narrative interpreted as anything less than the truth (1). But the truth, Jacobs goes on to explain, is not equivalent to complete knowledge, nor is it enough to lead to true understanding. Anticipating the remarks made by Toni Morrison, in “The Site of Memory,” about the distinctions
among fiction, fact, and truth, Jacobs similarly understands how the “crucial distinction . . . is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth” (93). Here, I seek to focus this broad conceptual inquiry by centering on Jacobs’s understanding of the sense of taste. I am interested in how Jacobs, in starkly different ways from Child, frames the uses and limits of taste in relation both to the hopeful imaginativeness of fiction and to the sympathetic imaginativeness of fact.

Although many circumstances separated the lives of Jacobs and Child, they shared an awareness of the function of food and eating as a catalyst for more philosophical thinking about the outward expression and social and political impact of the sense of taste. Like Child’s father, Convers Francis, Jacobs’s grandmother, whose name we now know to be Molly Horniblow, was a baker who was “much praised for her cooking” (6). Grandmother Horniblow’s “nice crackers,” like Francis’s northern version of same, “became so famous in the neighborhood that many people were desirous of obtaining them,” as Jacobs writes in the first pages of *Incidents* (6). It need hardly be observed that the life circumstances of Francis and Horniblow, like those of their literary progeny, sharply differed. Whereas Francis, a white man from New England, could pursue any entrepreneurial opportunity as he so pleased, Horniblow, who would only gain her freedom at the age of fifty, was required to “ask permission of her mistress to bake crackers at night, after all the household work was done” (6). One need only consider the contrast between the festive atmosphere of Thanksgiving Eve in the Francis household, as documented by Thomas Higginson, in which Francis freely dispensed his crackers to his departing guests; and the fatigue that likely greeted Molly Horniblow each night as, instead of retiring to bed at the end of a full day of enforced labor, was required to draw from untold personal reserves in order to pursue her “midnight bakings” (6). More sharply than even Malinda Russell, whose own baking business facilitated a form of economic agency, as discussed in chapter 3, Molly Horniblow recognized this rare ability to monetize her confectionery skill as the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that would lead to her own, and her family’s, liberation (6).

At the same time, Jacobs’s grandmother’s baking business, like Child’s father’s and also like Russell’s, offered her a certain similarity of exposure to the extended implications of the pleasures of the palate for herself and for others. In *Incidents*—and here I return to the fictional names
employed in the narrative—Brent explains how her grandmother’s business allowed her to “receive[] portions of the crackers, cakes, and preserves, she made to sell,” providing Brent with essential sustenance when her slave rations proved insufficient (6). As she subsequently explains, “Little attention was paid to the slaves’ meals in Dr. Flint’s house” (10). But, she continues: “I gave myself no trouble on that score, for on my various errands I passed my grandmother’s house, where there was always something to spare for me. I was frequently threatened with punishment if I stopped there; and my grandmother, to avoid detaining me, often stood at the gate with something for my breakfast or dinner. I was indebted to her for all my comforts, spiritual or temporal” (10–11). As the narrator indicates, it is her grandmother’s baking, enhanced by the mobility accorded by her status as a freewoman, that enables her to support Brent during her time in bondage. From that single action—standing by the gate with food ready to go—in which is encoded a depth of foresight and compassion along with the liberty to enact both, Brent derives “comforts” far more significant than the comfort of food alone.

As Incidents unfolds, Brent elaborates on the “comforts” that extend from her grandmother’s baking business. She explains how after she and her brother “ceased to be children,” they became “indebted to [their grandmother] for many more important services” than baking alone (6). Those “services” ranged from the emotional support that Aunt Martha, as Brent refers to her grandmother, offered upon the failed pursuit of Brent’s first lover; the constant vigilance that she provided during the time when Brent’s brother and children were jailed; and her largest and most significant “service,” the emotional endurance required to protect Brent while she hid, for seven years, in the garret above her Aunt Martha’s home. While Brent experiences the effects of these services at far remove from her grandmother’s baking, they remain linked to that original activity. For Aunt Martha is only able to secure her own freedom as a result of the relationships she had forged through her baking business; because she “had for a long time supplied many families with crackers and preserves,” Brent narrates, “every body who knew her respected her intelligence and good character” (21). Thus when Dr. Flint reneges on his promise to free Aunt Martha, the families who had for so long purchased her food schemed instead to purchase her freedom. The material affordances and concomitant mental reserves that Aunt Martha is able to accumulate as a free woman, those that equip her to endure the anguish
of her granddaughter trapped in her “loophole of retreat,” derive directly from the benefits of her baking.

These benefits, both financial and emotional, affect the long-term prospects represented by Brent and her grandmother. In a poignant passage, Jacobs employs the “charms of the old oven” synecdochically for Aunt Martha’s (relatively) charmed life (17). She contrasts Aunt Martha’s “hopefulness” with Brent and her brother’s justified pessimism: “We longed for a home like hers. There we always found sweet balsam for our troubles. She was so loving, so sympathizing! She always met us with a smile, and listened with patience to all our sorrows. She spoke so hopefully, that unconsciously the clouds gave place to sunshine. There was a grand big oven there, too, that baked bread and nice things for the town, and we knew there was always a choice bit in store for us” (17). Here, Brent reveals how her grandmother’s optimistic view of the future relates to her access to her “grand big oven.” For in addition to, or perhaps because of, Aunt Martha’s financial security, her emotional reserves, and, of course, her physical freedom, she is able to maintain her “loving” and “sympathizing” qualities and speak “hopefully” about the future. Her ability to look ahead to a place and time when her family will be free, even after enduring fifty years of enslavement herself, reflects a view that is not shared by her granddaughter. Brent explains that, for herself and her brother, “even the charms of the old oven failed to reconcile us to our hard lot” (17). The difference in circumstances between Brent and her grandmother, Jacobs suggests, affects their divergent abilities to envision (or a failure to envision) future possible worlds.

In contrast to Jacobs’s own view, Child identified Aunt Martha’s hopeful outlook as the more valuable of the two. Not only did she suggest that Jacobs conclude Incidents with an account of the death of her “good old grandmother,” advice that Jacobs evidently took to heart, but she also identified, in the transformative power of hopefulness, a lesson that might be extracted and applied to the education of others (201). In the immediate aftermath of emancipation, Child compiled The Freedmen’s Book (1865), an anthology of biographies and vignettes about prominent black cultural figures that was intended to educate newly free black citizens about their own possible futures. In it, she included Jacobs’s account of Aunt Martha to “illustrate the power of character over circumstances” (218). For Child, the hopefulness of the “good grandmother,” as Child titled the excerpt, aligned beautifully with her personal views. Not surprisingly, in the excerpt, all mention of Brent’s struggle was excluded.
For Jacobs, however, hopefulness about the future remained ill-advised, and, as she demonstrates throughout *Incidents*, at times impossible even to contemplate. Brent consistently finds her hopes vanquished and her desires suppressed. When Dr. Flint denies her “love-dream” to marry her childhood friend, a freeborn carpenter who lived in the neighborhood, Brent reflects that her “lamp of hope had gone out” (38, 42). That “lamp of hope” remains extinguished through the end of *Incidents*, which concludes with Brent’s melancholy observation that the “dream of my life is not yet realized” (201). Reminiscent of her childhood “long[ing]” for a home like her grandmother’s, a longing that is connected to her grandmother’s oven, Brent informs the reader that she does “not sit with my children in a home of my own” (201). Ceding the final lines to Brent’s “tender memories” of her “good old grandmother,” which she describes as “light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea,” Jacobs concludes *Incidents* by underscoring the distinction between Aunt Martha’s ethereal hope and Brent’s more pragmatic, albeit world-weary view (201).

Throughout *Incidents*, Jacobs deftly translates her own hesitancy about hope for the future into a series of lessons about both the psychological traumas of slavery, and the practical limits of literature. Scholars have long sought to unpack the implications of the slave narrative as a genre, at times explicitly referring to Jacobs’s text as an exemplar of how the impossibility of describing—and therefore imagining—the horrors of slavery becomes a defining feature of the form. One of the most frequently examined passages in the book, unsurprisingly, is Jacobs’s indictment of her white readers’ ability to ever truly imagine themselves as enslaved, an indictment that follows Brent’s revelation of her decision to begin a relationship with another enslaver, Mr. Sands: “Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice” (55). Here, Brent seeks to defend her actions that, if judged by white moral standards, would be deemed sinful and beyond repair. In reminding readers that they “never knew” and could never know “what it is like to be a slave,” Jacobs underscores the fundamental impossibility of white readers imagining the conditions of enslavement.
What is less immediately evident is how this failure of imagination is linked to a failure of taste. The theory of the imagination that is promoted by Child—of a sympathetic impulse that is directed and sustained by personal taste—is, Jacobs seems to suggest, incompatible with her condition of enslavement. At the most basic level, one does not have the freedom to exercise personal taste when “entirely subject to the will of another.” The anticipatory terror that Brent describes—“shudder[ing] at the sound of his footsteps” that signal the approach of her abuser, “trembl[ing]” at the sound of his voice—are indeed a form of imagination, but one that is categorically different from the sympathetic imagination that Child hopes to encourage in the readers of her own work and presumably Jacobs’s as well. This imaginative terror is neither guided nor assessed by personal taste; it is elicited by the actions of a powerful other, and evaluated only in terms of survival.22

For Jacobs, the fundamental limitations of the sense of taste as both a method of governing personal behavior and as a means of eliciting sympathetic response are evident from among her earliest life experiences. She incorporates this view into Incidents as she describes, early in the narrative, how Brent is required to “spen[d] the day gathering flowers and weaving them into festoons” for an “evening party” at her mistress’s house, rather than being granted permission to attend her father’s funeral (10). This striking contrast between the indulgence of carefree pleasures over the most profound experience of compassion sets the stage for a lifetime of incompatibilities between white taste and black suffering. Returning to the episode that began this chapter concerning Dr. Flint’s perverted sense of taste, it becomes more understandable as to why Jacobs ties the failure of taste to the failure of sympathy. Both in the case of Dr. Flint, who exhibits good taste in eating while simultaneously revealing the most repugnant moral views, and in the case of her readers, who assume that their personal taste offers sufficient grounds for understanding, Jacobs emphasizes the privileged assumptions that underlie each view.

Jacobs’s aim, in recording her narrative, is to lead her readers to a sense of sympathetic obligation toward—but, crucially, not shared sympathy with—those who remain in bondage. As Franny Nudelman helpfully summarizes, “Sentimental narration assumes that emotional experience can be directly embodied, and thus perfectly communicated, in written language” (944). Because of her firsthand knowledge of how certain experiences cannot be communicated, especially across such divergent social
roles, Jacobs justifiably rejects this assumption out of hand. From the first lines of the preface, she is explicit about her desire not “to excite sympathy for [her] own sufferings,” but instead to “arouse the women of the North to realizing a sense of the condition of the two millions of women in the South, still in bondage, suffering what [she] suffered, and most of them far worse” (1). The “sense” of the condition of the women who remain enslaved is far different from the sense of sympathetic taste that, Child insists, will impel northern white women to action. This “sense” may elicit emotional response, which in turn may prompt action, but it cannot guarantee perfect understanding; nor does Jacob believe it should do so. A different form of imagination, disconnected from taste, is characteristic of Jacobs’s experience of enslavement.

**Imagination, (Im)Possibility, and the Archive of Slavery**

Halfway through *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead’s 2016 award-winning novel that reimagines the abolitionist network as an actual system of tunnels and track, the novel’s protagonist, Cora, a fugitive from a Georgia plantation, arrives in North Carolina. Initially unsure as to what to expect, Cora quickly discovers that she has entered a “sort of hell,” with mutilated corpses strung up on trees marking the path into town (153). Her personal hell reveals itself more slowly, however, as, upon her arrival at the home of the train station agent, Martin Wells, she is quickly secreted up to the attic, where she is hurried into a “cramped nook” that “came to a point three feet from the floor and ran fifteen feet in length” (154). In the nook, Cora cannot stand upright, and the “only source of light and air [is] a hole in the wall that faced the street” (154). She remains “imprisoned” in the attic for months until, betrayed by the Wells family housekeeper, she is recaptured by the malevolent slave catcher, Ridgeway, who had been pursuing her since her initial flight from Georgia (161). Martin and his wife are summarily hanged, presumably to join the line of corpses that had augured their demise those many months ago. Cora, meanwhile, back in the possession of Ridgeway, is carried west to Tennessee, where she will continue her quest for freedom.

Whitehead, a contemporary novelist, must imagine the events that set his plot in motion. But the conditions that Cora endures during her imprisonment in the “nook” have a strong basis in fact and recall the “garret” of identical dimensions and constraints in which Harriet Jacobs
hid, above her grandmother’s house (also in North Carolina) for the seven years that it took to enact her escape (114). Whitehead is explicit about his indebtedness to Jacobs, naming her along with Frederick Douglass in the book’s acknowledgments section. But in reimagining Jacobs’s narrative in a fictional context, Whitehead introduces his own view of the role of the imagination—and, interestingly, of the role of the sense of taste—with respect to the archive of slavery. It is not insignificant that each station stop on his underground railroad, while diverging in design and level of completeness, always contains a table (or a picnic basket) resplendent with food; nor is it inconsequential that the first exchange that Cora has with the wagon driver who will at last convey her away from the South is about Cora’s hunger. Cora’s hunger, for both food and for freedom, serves as a continual reminder of her humanity within a set of conditions that derives its ideological power, in large part, by insisting on the inhumanity of the enslaved.23

From his own vantage point in the twenty-first century, Whitehead is highly attuned to both the material and the ideological distortions effected by the institution of slavery. Through a combination of his use of an omniscient narrator, who reveals Cora’s inner life to the reader, and his emphasis on the daily needs of his characters—including and especially eating—Whitehead takes the opportunity to himself reimagine, if not to redress, those distortions. For example, it is Cora’s plot of land, which she employs to grow the yams and okra that, as culinary historians have shown, often supplemented the meager rations on plantations in the Deep South, that animates the opening of the novel. As we have learned throughout this book, however, few detailed accounts of such farming practices exist in the literature of that era. In order to evoke Cora’s plot, Whitehead most likely synthesized information drawn from his own archival research with an array of narrative techniques, allowing the plot of land to accumulate symbolic significance first as a material manifestation of Cora’s severed bond with her mother, then as an example of the powers of ownership to which she was otherwise unequivocally subject, and, finally, as a symbol of America itself, that “shadow of something that lived elsewhere,” that “ghost in the darkness, like her” (180). In so doing, Whitehead offers evidence of the imaginative capacities of his enslaved characters, just as he contests the racialized nature of the nineteenth-century imagination itself.24

In Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination, Salamishah Tillet considers how, in neo-slave narratives
like *The Underground Railroad*, historical flashpoints, such as Jefferson’s relationship with Sally Hemings, as well as physical places, such as Gorée Island, through which Phillis Wheatley might have passed, are reconfigured “in order to accommodate the constitutive sites of American history that the national memory has forgotten or excised” (26). Crucially for Tillet, “contemporary black writers and artists do not disaggregate slavery from the narrative of American democracy. Instead of representing slavery as the foil to American democracy, contemporary African Americans foreground slavery as the mnemonic property of the entire nation” (32). Although Tillet does not consider Whitehead’s novel, which was published after her own book, his physical reimagining of the original underground railroad, as well as his elaboration of the symbolic significance of Cora’s plot of land, would seem to strongly support Tillet’s thesis about the desire of contemporary black authors to elaborate a “democratic aesthetic” that “privilege[s] the idea and ideal of democracy, yet all the while remaining skeptical of its materialization” (34). In *The Underground Railroad*, both Cora’s land and the railroad itself are explicitly figured as emblems of the United States. In the novel’s denouement, Elijah Lander—the charismatic leader of the utopian farm that shelters Cora upon her escape from Ridgeway and that would soon be set ablaze in a violent attack—names three fundamental “delusions” that shape the lives of formerly enslaved people: the existence of the farm; the belief that its inhabitants can ever psychologically “escape” slavery; and the United States itself, the delusion he calls the “grandest of all” (285). Lander’s “delusion” that links the shadow of slavery to the nation as a whole is the same “mnemonic property” that characterizes Tillet’s “democratic aesthetic”: the belief that, in spite of conditions that impede its full materialization, there exist examples of democracy’s promise. Lander’s farm, Cora’s land, and the Underground Railroad all serve as sites for imagining otherwise, even as they also serve as reminders of imagination’s limits.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how examples of food and eating, both real and fictional, enable the writers who record them to contemplate their extended significance for the cultivation of taste, for the experience of sympathy, and for the expression of the imagination. I have also attempted to call attention to the crucial distinction between imagination and possibility, concepts that, without the interventions of enslaved writers like Jacobs, we might unreflexively assume to be aligned.
These writers, because of their circumscribed social and political agency, were only authorized to present accountings of their own lives. But their work also hints at the separation of imagination from possibility, and deliberately so. For the authors of neo-slave narratives who have learned from this original work, and, ideally, for the scholars who also seek to understand it, this separation, in turn, becomes the site of fictional imaginings of imperfect futures. Both the imagined potential—and fundamental impossibility—of fully witnessing these futures is what an attention to eating in the nineteenth century allows us as scholars in the present to see.
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