An Archive of Taste
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There are no extant recipes directly attributed to Hercules, the man whose “elegant” cookery elevated the kitchen at Mount Vernon—and later, the President’s House in Philadelphia—to the highest level of haute cuisine. But there does exist one artifact that has been employed by scholars over the past several decades to conjure an image of the man who was once described as “one of the most finished and renowned dandies of the age,” and whose physical appearance “entitle[d] him to be compared with his namesake of fabulous history” (Conkling, 151; Custis, 422). It is a painting long known as Portrait of George Washington’s Cook, part of the permanent collection of the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, an art museum housed in a former palace in Madrid. Through at least the summer of 2017, it was installed in a gilded frame at one end of a long rectangular hall, one of two rooms in the museum dedicated to North American painting.¹ The wall text attributed the painting to Gilbert Stuart, the Rhode Island–born, British-trained painter most famous for the portrait of Washington that appears on the one-dollar bill. On the wall text, the date range given for the painting was 1795–97, a span that corresponds to the final years that Hercules spent cooking at the President’s House.² In the painting, the sitter is depicted against a muted brown background in a style that was typical for the time. He is dressed in a white coat, white necktie, and in what appears to be white chef’s toque; his hands are at his sides. His body is drawn at bust length, turned slightly to the side. His eyes probe the viewer; his facial expression hints at a smile.

I was never able to travel to the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, but I was able to determine these details about the painting because the museum decided to create a digital archive of high-resolution images of all of the artifacts in its permanent collection, made accessible to the public through a link on its website. In the summer of 2017, as I was completing the first full draft of this book, I went to the website, followed the
link to the archive, searched for the painting, and downloaded an image of *Portrait of George Washington’s Cook*. Seeking more information about how the painting was actually installed, I wrote to a colleague who was then living in Madrid, asking if he would not mind paying a visit to the museum and letting me know what he saw. He agreed, and several weeks later, he wrote back with detailed notes, a panoramic image of the gallery in which the painting was displayed, and scans of the various maps and guides provided to in-person visitors to the museum. I drafted the above description, corroborated the details with the materials that my colleague had compiled, and sent my book manuscript off for review.

In early 2019, in the process of securing permission to include an image of *Portrait of George Washington’s Cook* in this Epilogue, I returned to the museum’s website. I went through the same process that I had employed two years earlier. I clicked the link to the archive, typed in the name of the painting, and clicked “search.” This time, however, the search yielded no results. It was not just that the image was unavailable; there was no record of the painting—nor of Washington, nor Hercules, nor even of Gilbert Stuart—in the catalog at all.

I had some idea as to what had happened. In the several years prior, art historians had begun to disagree as to whether the man shown in the portrait was Hercules, as well as to whether the portrait was in fact painted by Stuart. Proponents of the argument in favor of the sitter being Hercules cited his penchant for fashion as a possible reason for his trendsetting toque. (Culinary historians generally agree that it was not until the 1820s that the chef’s toque was popularized, by one of Grimod de la Reynière’s French inheritors, the chef Marie-Antoine Carême.)³ They also cited the fact that Stuart was working on several portraits of Washington during the time when Hercules served in the President’s House, and in all likelihood sampled his cooking.⁴ But others, citing inconsistencies such as the style of the chef’s hat, as well as the fact that the painting is excluded from all major studies of Stuart, advised caution when attributing much historical significance to the piece.⁵

Unbeknownst to me, however, that caution had already been converted into curatorial action on the part of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum. As a result of a two-year-long study, which began shortly after my colleague visited the museum, it was conclusively determined that the portrait was not painted by Stuart; nor was the subject of the painting even a chef. Analysis revealed that the brushstrokes used in the
painting, its method of conveying light and shadow, and the level of detail involved in the sitter’s clothing, were not consistent with Stuart’s style. An ultraviolet light analysis of the lead content of the paint revealed that the painting did indeed date to the late 1700s, but that finding served only to confirm that the painting could not be of Hercules. Because the chef’s toque would have needed to have been added to the painting in the nineteenth century—a retroactive insertion intended to better signal to contemporaneous viewers that the sitter was a chef—that area would have needed to show evidence of having been painted over. While the ultraviolet light analysis found some evidence of overpainting, there was none in the area of the hat. The “tantalizing possibilities” that the portrait once offered for learning more about Hercules’s life, as Craig LaBan, a restaurant critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* who has devoted significant coverage to the portrait, once described them, were transformed into “disappointment” (“Shock,” n.p.; “Disappears,” n.p.). The traces of Hercules in the archive had become, once again, scant.

But this disappointment, and even the study that served as its source, also serve to confirm just how much we hunger for eating in the archive. In this book, I have attempted to show how we might begin to access such instances of eating and invest them with philosophical significance. From the meals prepared by chefs like Hercules and James Hemings for the first commanders in chief, to the dining room service (among other forms of assistance) proffered by personal valets like Paul Jennings, I have argued for the preparation, presentation, and consumption of food as sites of embodied philosophical thinking. I have further argued that the bodies that prepare, present, and consume—along with others involved in acts of aesthetic expression—serve as additional sites through which the dominant discourse of taste can be tested, contested, and transformed. As the bodies of Benjamin Franklin, Grimod de la Reynière, and Phillis Wheatley help to show, the judgments of taste that are alternately invited (as in the case of Franklin and, at times, Grimod) or imposed upon them (as in the case of Wheatley and, at other times, Grimod) further strengthen an argument about how “aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body,” as Terry Eagleton once memorably wrote, and how it finds expression in a range of embodied and sensory acts (328). And yet, the realm of eating—among the most sensory and immediate aspects of aesthetic experience, and the very “root” of aesthetic thought, to borrow another of Eagleton’s phrasings—is precisely what is left
Figure 19. In 2019, an ultraviolet light analysis of the painting known as Portrait of George Washington's Cook, which had been attributed to Gilbert Stuart, revealed insufficient overpainting for it to be of Hercules. A related analysis rejected the claim that the artist was Stuart. Photo by Craig LaBan. Courtesy of Craig LaBan/The Philadelphia Inquirer.
unrecorded in the archive, if it was ever recordable at all (328). In contrast to the tradition of formal aesthetic philosophy, which is not only easily archived, but also easily circulated in print and today even online, these embodied expressions and speculative theories continue to resist preservation and circulation, even in the advent of digital technologies.

By calling attention to the significance of these expressions and theories of taste, as well as to what they leave unexplained, this book has attempted to correct any assumption that we can consider matters of taste without the body, or without the archive. Indeed, the challenge of recovering accounts of eating in the archive—or, alternatively, the challenge of reimagining what, like the portrait of Hercules, no longer exists—reveals how certain philosophical abstractions are in fact quite preservable, even as the physical objects that they imbue with significance are highly perishable. Here, we might consider the example of Malinda Russell’s cookbook and the theory of satisfaction that it sets forth, which only recently entered an institutional archive (even as it had been preserved in a private collection for years). While Russell herself ceased preparing her delectable dishes more than a century ago, her recipes remain as records of how her food once functioned as a means of furthering her liberatory aims. At the same time, for every portion of the past that is preserved, there are many more that are not. We know nothing beyond the name of Fannie Steward, the “colored cook of Virginia” whom Russell credits with teaching her her “trade” (5). We know even less about the women whom Mary Randolph enslaved, whose names remain unknown, even as they directly contributed to her own method of culinary and corporeal control. Their ephemeral acts of aesthetic production perished with the dishes that they prepared—those they prepared both according to and, perhaps even more deliciously, against Randolph’s methodical plan.

In this way, the archive of eating and its particular methodological and theoretical challenges open up to engage other sites of archival silence relating to enslaved peoples, paid servants, farm laborers, and women—the subjects whose knowledge and labor built the cultural and actual foundation of the United States. Our archives typically record the contributions of these laborers in documents that attest to the work that they performed. These documents are often dry, and are at times actively dehumanizing, as the example of Jefferson’s Farm-book makes plain. Among the results of such acts of inscriptive violence is that the inner lives and personal philosophies of these men and women are most often
relegated to the shadows of archives, if they appear at all. What is needed in order to expand the significance of these archival traces is an array of methods, both critical and creative.

Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* offers one such example of methodological synthesis. Whitehead employs historical fiction as a means of infusing additional interiority into the otherwise fragmentary accounts of inner life that emerge from the personal narratives of the antebellum era, such as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. We might also consider how digital techniques, such as those explored in this book’s final chapter, can help to augment the significance of archival fragments in other ways. By employing the techniques of social network analysis and data visualization, combined with an informed historical account, we can hold open the space to acknowledge what resists interpretation, and what will forever remain unknown.

Our ability to expand upon our knowledge of the past, and to infuse fragmentary artifacts—as well as their absence—with new meaning, is not limited to text alone. Consider now a second portrait, *Scipio Moorhead, Portrait of Himself, 1776* (2007) by the contemporary artist Kerry James Marshall. Scipio Moorhead was the enslaved black artist who is credited with creating the frontispiece for Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, as discussed in chapter 2. A black painter himself, Marshall is most interested in giving visual form to Moorhead, about whom little is known. He depicts Moorhead in the act of art making in the same way that Moorhead once depicted Wheatley. The artist is shown standing in front of an easel, his brush poised in mid-stroke. His left hand holds the canvas to the easel, securing it as he paints. The title of Marshall’s portrait, *Scipio Moorhead, Portrait of Himself, 1776*, offers the work to Moorhead as his own. That gesture is perhaps an acknowledgment that Moorhead’s status as an enslaved man virtually ensured that any self-portraits he might have painted, should they ever have existed, would not have been preserved. In fact, it is primarily because one of the poems in Wheatley’s volume—“To S.M. a Young African Painter, on seeing his Works”—is thought to describe an earlier experience of seeing Moorhead’s paintings, that Moorhead is able to be identified as the artist of Wheatley’s portrait at all.

There is much more to be said about the portrait of Moorhead and its significance for Marshall, especially as he positions this work as first in a series that moves on from this historical figure, albeit one shrouded in
uncertainty, to six additional portraits of black painters, all fictional, who are perhaps intended to stand for those who have been wholly lost to the historical record. (Each subsequent work is titled *Untitled [Painter]*.) But there is an additional portrait within this body of work, one that has gone largely unremarked upon. It is a portrait of Phillis Wheatley, which Marshall places on the ground, in the background of the scene of Moorhead at work. The portrait occupies the lower left corner of the Marshall’s canvas,
although only the top half is visible to the viewer. This portrait, also a work on canvas, is presumably a study for the painting of Moorhead’s that we cannot see. The portrait of Wheatley borrows from Moorhead’s original; Wheatley wears the same bonnet, and her hand is similarly cupping her chin. But there is one crucial difference: in this portrait, unlike the original, Wheatley is painted facing forward. Her contemplative gaze connects the viewer’s place in the present to her own position in the past.

This is the contribution of Marshall as he imagines what Wheatley saw in her own time—the full gamut of life as an enslaved and then free black woman in the period surrounding the nation’s founding—that was not captured by Moorhead’s original work. We might further extend Marshall’s line of inquiry to ask what Wheatley could see that her white contemporaries, like Franklin, could not see, not to mention ever hope to understand. We might additionally inquire as to what kind of kinship, real or imagined, she found with Moorhead, and with the “breathing figures” that, as she wrote to Moorhead in her poem, “learnt from thee to live” (l. 4). The answers to each of these questions remain outside the archive, even as we—like Wheatley, Moorhead, and Marshall all—attempt to animate their absence from the fragments that remain.

In closing, we might linger on the central subject of Marshall’s painting: the “breathing figure” of Moorhead whom Marshall conjures to life. He looks directly at the viewer, probing us as much as we might probe him. His penetrating gaze is at once accentuated by the whites of his eyes, and diffused by the bluish-gray marks above them—a signature styling of Marshall’s, who often employs this combination of starbursts and lines to convey the luminosity of the dark skin of his subjects, as well as, one could speculate, an anointed status bestowed by the artist, or by the divine. Moorhead wears a stiff white smock; the uniform of the artist at work. Its deep folds are what point to the fact that Moorhead has been captured in the act of painting—in the act of creating his art.

It is here that we might return to the portrait once believed to be of Hercules, and interpret it for what its viewers hoped to see: a portrait of an artist at work. Like Marshall’s portrait of Moorhead, the man in the painting wears a white coat—a sign, to those hopeful viewers, of his participation in a process of not simply cooking but of art making. For it was Hercules’s food, as much as Moorhead’s original painting or Wheatley’s artful poetry, that directly contributed to shaping the tastes of the new
nation. We may never be able to perceive Hercules’s face, or Moorhead’s; and we will certainly not be able to meet Wheatley’s direct gaze. But it is my hope that by placing their range of forms of aesthetic expression alongside each other, as I have done throughout this book, we can expand our sense in the present of the richness of the aesthetic experiences of the past. Indeed, each of the artifacts discussed in this book carries with it a theory of taste: of how lived experience enters into cultural production, and how both shape and are shaped by political constraints. For the enslaved figures in this study, in particular, this expanded conception of taste opens up additional space for their contributions to aesthetic philosophy to be recognized as such. At the same time, this opening should not be viewed as any form of redress. Rather, it should be viewed as a call to action for us, as readers and scholars today, to continue to push against the boundaries of our knowledge, and to continue to push ourselves to find new meaning from the fragments of the past.
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