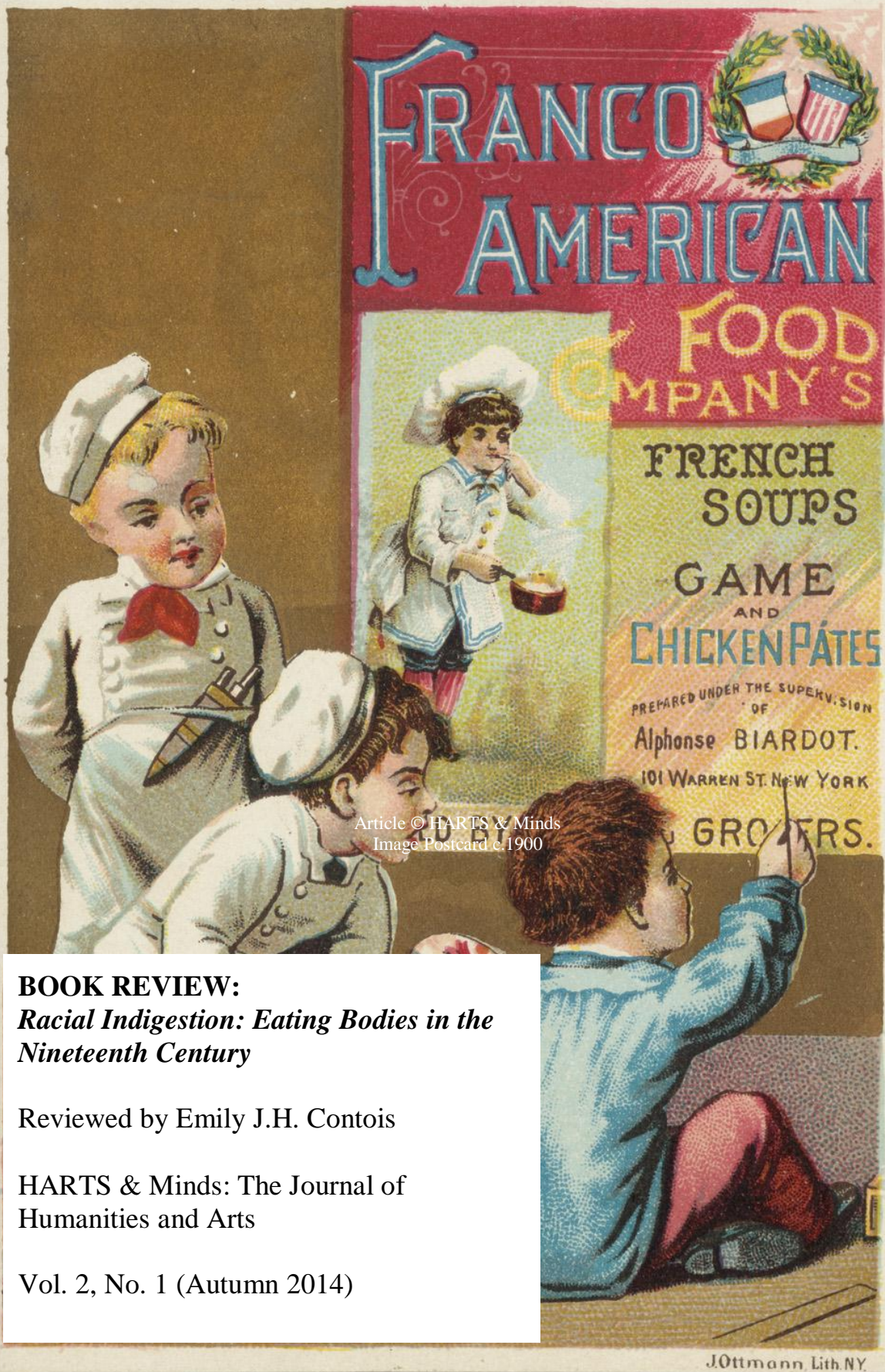


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BOOK REVIEW:

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Reviewed by Emily J.H. Contois

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***Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* by Kyla Wazana Tompkins**

America and the Long Nineteenth Century: General Editors David Kazanjian, Elizabeth McHenry, and Priscilla Wald (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 275 pp.

Pushing the study of food in an inventive direction, Kyla Wazana Tompkins' first monograph, the theoretically ambitious *Racial Indigestion*, is an important addition to the food studies canon. As she draws connections between past and present, Tompkins, a professor of English and gender and women's studies, constructs a 'literary history of eating culture.'¹ This history articulates the myriad ways that eating influenced conceptions of race and gender in the nineteenth-century United States, as well as shaped structures of power. A thematic cousin to Robin Bernstein's well-received *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011), Tompkins serves up a quintet of chronological case studies that in successive chapters assertively fuses food studies with body theory and critical race theory; theatre history and performance studies; and feminist, queer, and gender studies.

Racial Indigestion incorporates a variety of literary, material, and visual culture forms. Tompkins draws from novels, children's chapbooks, stories, poetry, domestic manuals, cookbooks, and advertising trade cards, viewing oft-cited historical evidence, such as *Graham's Treatise on Bread and Breadmaking* (1837) and Catherine Beecher's *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), with fresh eyes. In every case, she demonstrates how food, eating, and dietary reform espoused ideals of not only citizenship and selfhood, but also nation building, imperial expansion, and race relations.

Giving a work grounded in literary analysis a tangible sense of physicality, Tompkins orients her study upon and through the mouth—literally, figuratively, architecturally, and socio-culturally. Chapter one begins with the mouth of the home, the hearth. Through literary and visual representations of this space, Tompkins demonstrates the role of the kitchen in establishing and performing gendered domestic responsibilities, class hierarchies, and perceived racial differences—between men and women, masters and workers, white and black bodies. The colonial fireplace, and later the stove, proved a likely location for these concerns to resonate, as it served as the literal, metaphorical, and later, nostalgic, centre of the home, providing a source of heat, light, sustenance, and social connectedness.

Shifting from metaphorical to literal mouths, chapter three most explicitly presents the connection between race and orality, as it explores the trope of edible black bodies in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of Seven Gables*, and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*. Linked by the theme of the black body as food, as well as the figures and settings of cooks, kitchens, and domestic spaces, Tompkins argues that these texts express American racial politics and the precarious position of black bodies, subjects, and citizens in the nation's future.

Moving on from domestic arrangements, Tompkins' second, fourth, and fifth chapters would have formed a more natural narrative arc if grouped together, as they trace the development of a dietary consumer ethic. In chapter two, she addresses the national and imperial aims of dietary reformer Sylvester Graham, combining the approaches of food studies scholars and historians of sexuality as she gives equal treatment to Graham's wheaten bread edicts and anti-masturbation views. Tompkins argues that both admonishments were rooted in his beliefs of white superiority. Drawing historical connections, Tompkins further argues that Graham's dietary strictures served to produce a moral and virtuous consumer-citizen, much like today's food conscious dieter. Chapter four, which is noticeably shorter than others in the text, continues this exploration of Graham's work by analysing how Louisa

May Alcott depicts his reformist dietetics within her lesser read Rose Campbell novels, *Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom*. Tompkins argues that Alcott knew of Graham's work based upon her experience at Fruitlands as a child, but rather than promoting adherence to an ascetic lifestyle, Alcott's novels reveal the construction of a moralized consumerism that bears a likeness to today's global marketplace.

The theme of consumerism continues through to the final chapter, which features an enthusiastic analysis of thirty-eight food-related advertising trade cards, many from Tompkins' personal collection, which are printed in full colour in the text. Produced during the early days of advertising, these chromolithographic cards reflect the complexity of nineteenth-century society and its changing gender ideals, racial tensions, increasingly industrialized food system, and growing consumer economy. Tompkins brings these disparate trends into conversation, demonstrating how the trade cards embody not only white racial anxiety, but also the commercial opportunities for cross-racial consumerism.

Throughout her five case studies, Tompkins shines a spotlight upon the mouth, as she coins the concept of "queer alimentarity" to articulate 'a form of nonnormative sensuality that centres on orality and the mouth.'² She uses this concept to interrogate the tensions between race, gender, class, and the nation as they are ingested and digested—and as they eventually work their way out of the body, though not without moments of resistance and subversion. Tompkins reads the black, and sometimes Asian, bodies configured as edible in these nineteenth-century sources not only as objects to be eaten, but also as bodies able to exert agency. In this way, she demonstrates how what passed through the lips of nineteenth-century eaters was of particular ideological importance. Eating culture was (and may still be) believed to form not only the moral and self-restrained American citizen, but also the success, dominance, and expansion of the United States, which had gendered, racial, and social implications.

Tompkins also seeks to redirect current academic attention in this area, suggesting new avenues that scholarship ought to take. For example, she lays down a challenge for the field of food studies in particular, demonstrating plainly how "foodie" culture—and its passions for consuming the "exotic," the "local," and the "organic"—reinforces the political structures of the white, bourgeois, and cosmopolitan at the expense of those without the privilege to have their voices heard. She pushes the field beyond 'single-commodity histories and ideologically worrisome localist politics [and] toward a critique of the political beliefs and structures that underlie eating as a social practice,' proposing a new framework of "critical eating studies."⁴ By exploring human appetite as it manifests in both food and flesh, Tompkins also expands the scope of body and race studies beyond what she describes as 'the intellectually limited inheritance of the epidermal ontology of race.'⁵ By examining not just bodily surfaces, but also the 'flexible and circular' relationship between self and other, she convincingly argues that an 'orificial' perspective more pointedly reveals the vulnerability and connectedness between citizens with varying bodies, sexualities, races, and social classes.⁶ Such a state of being was at the heart of the reactionary anxieties that burned deeply in the nineteenth-century, a time when Tompkins argues American culture, politics, and ideology were being forged.

Taken together, Tompkins' five case studies read somewhat like Sylvester Graham's "coarse wheaten bread," as the layered theoretical perspectives and multitude of evidence render sections of the text challenging, albeit satisfying, to digest. The text's density extends to the copious footnotes, which are worthy of the reader's close attention, as they explain Tompkins' theoretical perspective in greater detail and delineate a robust foodways historiography. With high theoretical stakes, *Racial Indigestion* is an intensely visceral work that makes a powerful contribution to the study of nineteenth-century history and literature, as well as studies of food and eating, race and whiteness, and gender and sexuality. As such, it is

sure to incite critical discussion in a variety of academic circles, which in the spirit of interdisciplinarity, has the potential to bring many scholars closer together in new and exciting ways. Overall, *Racial Indigestion* is most assuredly a text that is “good for you”—to think with, to return to, and to aspire to emulate.

Notes

¹ Kyla Wazana Tompkins. *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), p. 9.

² Tompkins, p. 68.

³ Tompkins, p. 2.

⁴ Tompkins, p. 2.

⁵ Tompkins, p. 3.

⁶ Tompkins, p. 3

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Tompkins, Kyla Wazana. *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

Biography

Emily J.H. Contois is currently an American Studies PhD student at Brown University. Her research unites the sciences and the humanities as she explores the intersection of food, nutrition, and public health in the everyday American experience and popular culture. She blogs at emilycontois.com, and tweets [@emilycontois](https://twitter.com/emilycontois).