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RECKONING WITH APPETITE

Racialized Appetites in Four Girls at Cottage City, Malinda Russell's Domestic Cook Book, and Southern Soufflé

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Racialized Appetites in *Four Girls at Cottage City*, Malinda Russell's *Domestic Cook Book*, and *Southern Soufflé*

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Abstract

Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins' novel *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1898), Malinda Russell's *Domestic Cook Book: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen* (1866), and Erika Council's food blog *Southern Soufflé* (2012-present) are texts that differ in form, genre, purpose, and period. Read together, these works, all three of which have received relatively little critical attention, however, help piece together a historical and cultural framework for contemporary views of Black women, food and professionalized labor, a subject which itself has received less attention, critically, than white women and the professionalism of their domestic labors. The three exemplary works that are the focus of this essay all resist an embodied racial logic that would categorize and value various forms of women's domestic labor according to the bodies that perform it. Through their writing, Kelley-Hawkins, Russell, and Council engage questions of who consumes and who is consumed within the context of U.S. cultural history and its long-held, violently deployed misunderstanding of race.

KEYWORDS: race, food studies, cooking, consumption

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“She thinks of her little ‘stummick’ the first thing.”

– Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins,
from *Four Girls at a Cottage City*

Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins' novel *Four Girls at Cottage City* (1898), Malinda Russell's *Domestic Cook Book: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen* (1866), and Erika Council's food blog *Southern Soufflé* (2012-present) are texts that differ in form, genre, purpose, and period. Read together, these works, all three of which have received relatively little critical attention, however, help piece together a historical and cultural framework for contemporary views of Black women, food and professionalized labor, a subject which itself has received less attention, critically, than white women and the professionalism of their domestic labors. By reading works that are historically and generically different, and that therefore fall outside traditional literary studies of canonical works and discrete time periods, we can begin to understand the works that have always fallen outside of those categories, and that, indeed, defy category altogether. Russell's cookbook, the first attributed to an African-American woman in the United States, and Council's food blog belong to genres that are just coming into critical attention within the fields of archival studies and media studies. I situate my readings of these more overtly food-related texts in relationship to a literary work to show that literary culture and domestic-culinary culture of the U.S. from the nineteenth century to our current moment shares concerns about bodies, their differences, what they consume, and what kinds of spaces they occupy. In this essay, I find these three exemplary texts centrally concerned with questions of how to resist an embodied racial logic that seeks to categorize and value various

forms of women's domestic labor according to the bodies that perform it. Kelley-Hawkins, Russell, and Council all address, in their works, questions of who consumes and who is consumed within the context of U.S. cultural history and its long-held, violently deployed misunderstanding of race.

There is, of course, far more to understanding the history of race, and of Black women's labor particularly, in the U.S. I do not intend this essay as a comprehensive study of these issues, but rather as the result of a Foucauldian archival view, one that brings into focus concerns that occur both within and beyond the traditional field of literary studies. I combine methodologies of distant and close reading in order to identify conversations of race, gender, and labor that are ongoing in the U.S., and then to understand the various forms and positionalities these conversations take.

In contrast to other works by African-American women published in the 1890s, including Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Ida B. Wells's *Southern Horrors*, Kelley-Hawkins's *Four Girls at Cottage City* has received far less critical attention. What scholarship does exist about this novel focuses primarily on the race of the author herself, with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. leading the charge for accepting Kelley-Hawkins as a Black woman writer and Holly Jackson countering that Kelley-Hawkins was, in fact, white. In her novel, as in the scholarship about her, I argue that Kelley-Hawkins works to defy racial categorization altogether, and indeed to show that these categories are not only inherently unstable but also deployed to deepen divisions among women of all race and class positions. *Four Girls at Cottage City* follows four young women – Vera, Allie, and sisters Jessie and Garnet – as they holiday in a Massachusetts resort town. Their newfound freedom to indulge in sweets and novels ostensibly gives way to an evangelical quest for salvation and commitment to Christian service, a narrative arc that follows genre conventions for so-called “sentimental” novels of the late nineteenth century. However, Kelley-Hawkins consistently subverts this genre by undermining binaries between Christian morality and physical pleasure, as well as distinctions of race, gender, and class.

The first cookbook attributed to an African-American woman in the U.S., Malinda Russell's *A Domestic Cook Book: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen* was published in 1866, just one year after the end of the Civil War. This 39-page volume containing 265 recipes was discovered in 2001 by Janice Bluestein Longone, curator of American culinary history at the University of Michigan's William L. Clements Library. Due to a dearth of historical documents providing any biographical information about Russell, all we know about her comes from the cookbook's preface, in which she provides a harrowing account of her journey as a free Black woman from house servant to pastry shop owner to cookbook author. Writing at a time when Russell's race and gender were both disqualifying of professionalism, her cookbook evinces self-fashioning as a professional and economically independent woman. Russell's inclusion of elements like sugar, Graham cakes, home remedies, and an emphasis on cleanliness all speak directly to food-related

racial anxieties in the postbellum U.S., underscoring how Russell transcends these obstacles to publish her work.

Erika Council, a software engineer and author of the recipe blog, *Southern Soufflé*, is a Black woman who has achieved power and influence in the realm of food writing that Russell, writing after the Civil War, would never have imagined. Council's work occurs in the context of a digital media economy that allows for democratic access to online publishing but is nevertheless heavily governed by wealth and privilege. In her blog, Council writes about what it means to cook and eat as a Black woman in the Southern U.S., combining traditional Black Southern foodways with contemporary tastes. I draw upon Minh-Ha T. Pham's theory of "racial aftertastes," to show how Council consistently and consciously confronts the tacit gender and racial boundaries of digital media and its demands for knowledge work. Consequently, she produces a food blog that recovers and reifies Black women's food labor as intellectual work central to U.S. cultural identity and history.

Four Girls at Cottage City, Malinda Russell's *Domestic Cook Book*, and Erika Council's *Southern Soufflé*, while historically and generically different, help form an intersectional narrative of women and labor in the U.S., and particularly Black women's role in that narrative. Kelley-Hawkins, under the guise of a sentimental novel, argues against the deployment of embodied racial logic to divide women by their orientation to consumption and labor. Russell's cookbook shows how that division manifests in real women's lives, in the work of a Black woman cooking and publishing recipes for white men and women to consume. Council, with a twenty-first century perspective and working within a digital knowledge economy that purports to transcend these divisions but nevertheless remains inscribed within them, establishes her own relationship to culinary labor that consciously and deliberately works against the "racial aftertastes" of both our past and present moment.

Embodied Racial Logic and *Four Girls at Cottage City*

Four Girls at Cottage City follows four young women who venture on holiday to a Massachusetts resort town. Alone and unchaperoned for the first time in their lives, Vera, Allie, and sisters Jessie and Garnet gleefully indulge in sweet treats and enjoy their freedom before their encounters in Cottage City ultimately lead to an evangelical quest for salvation and commitment to Christian service. Instrumental to this conversion is the girls' newfound friendship with Charlotte Hood, a mother-savior figure who cares for her ailing son, Robin, while recounting her own experiences of sin and repentance to Vera, Allie, Jessie, and Garnet.

Four Girls's narrative arc is characteristic of the "spiritual feminism" found in sentimental novels and domestic fiction of its time. According to Deborah E. McDowell, women in the late nineteenth century were believed morally superior to men precisely because they were excluded from male spaces. In a spirit akin to the Victorian "angel of the house," postbellum U.S. women wielded this very

specifically Christian morality as their primary source of social influence. Kelley-Hawkins' novel is therefore a coming-of-age story in which the four "girls" begin to understand their power as women and how to capture it effectively. The novel also follows marriage plot conventions for domestic novels, yet I argue that within these genre characteristics, Kelley-Hawkins subverts of the idea that women's power rests predominantly in domestic and spiritual affairs through her sensual descriptions of women, together, taking pleasure in the act of eating. Repeatedly, Kelley-Hawkins uses food to represent the relationship between external body and inner character and consistently complicates any neat understanding of that dynamic. In *Four Girls*, she also actively resists an embodied racial logic that would naturalize race as a physical quality rather than a cultural construct, a resistance at odds with our contemporary turn toward recovering "Black" writers.

Much of the scholarship on *Four Girls at Cottage City* orients itself around Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s recently contested claim that Kelley wrote as an African-American woman. In 2007, 19 years after Gates recovered Kelley's work among the "Black women writers [who] dominated the final decade of the nineteenth century," Holly Jackson published persuasive counter-research showing that Kelley and her family members were recorded as white in census data (Gates xii). Also in contrast to Gates' earlier claims, Jackson asserts that the novel's setting in Cottage City, a resort area in Cape Cod, MA, would not have been hospitable to women of color at the time the novel was published, providing strong evidence that in order for the main characters to move as freely as they do, they must be white. In Jackson's article, "Identifying Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins: Rethinking Race and Authorship," she re-interprets *Four Girls at Cottage City* as a novel of racial passing and comes to understand Gates' racial analysis of Kelley's photograph as of a piece with the novel's rejection of reading race onto the body. Jackson focuses especially on the scenes in *Four Girls* in which sisters Jessie and Garnet, both of whom Kelley's narrator describes as having darker skin than the other characters, recoil from phrenology, which Jackson identifies as a pseudo "racial science" during the nineteenth century. Phrenologists claimed to be able to reveal inner truths about a person that became legible on the body, thereby reifying essentialist ideas of racialized difference (Jackson 735). Indeed, *Four Girls at Cottage City* constitutes a narrative study of how bodies, especially women's bodies, can resist a logic that would reveal naturalized internal states through their appearance and consumption. Under the guise of an evangelical and domestic novel, *Four Girls* moves the literary understanding in the late nineteenth century toward a theory of race as construction.

Because Kelley-Hawkins never directly names racial categories in *Four Girls at Cottage City*, the character descriptions have left scholars puzzled over how to understand race within the context of the novel. Allie's face is "pale" and Vera has a "white face" and "golden hair" (Kelley-Hawkins 47). But sisters Jessie and Garnet have "rich complexions and dark eyes" (47). Repeatedly, the sisters' skin is described as "richly colored" in contrast to the "white" bodies of

their friends (47). These details all seem to support a reading of Jessie and Garnet as belonging to a different racial category than their friends, and yet the information from Jackson's article troubles this more straightforward understanding of how race functions in the novel.

The four main characters' interactions with food and appetite similarly complicate an understanding of race and its interpretation from bodily states within *Four Girls at Cottage City*. Jessie, Garnet, Vera, and Allie all eat indulgently, decadently, and obsessively. When they are described in the act of eating, they are in pursuit of food, or discussing what they will eat next. They tease each other about thinking of their "little 'stummick' the first thing," are often described as "hungry" and make elaborate preparations for informal meals in their shared room, and find that taking pleasure in food will only "make you long for more" (115; 51; 111). In "Radical Tea: Racial Misrecognition and the Politics of Consumption in Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins' *Four Girls at Cottage City*," Cherene Sherrard-Johnson identifies these moments of consumption in the text as "radical assertions of female agency and pleasure" (226). She argues that, in contrast to contemporaneous slave narratives and other stories of "racial uplift," Kelley-Hawkins advocates a self-emancipation through pleasure and, specifically, bodily pleasure (Sherrard-Johnson 227). In contrast to McDowell's reading of *Four Girls* as a straightforward example of spiritual feminism, Sherrard-Johnson identifies the novel's homosocial gatherings of "radical tea" as advocating for a new kind of racialized female power, one that finds its source in pleasure rather than morality (227). I also see Kelley-Hawkins' esteem for pleasure—and specifically the kind of corporal pleasure that comes from delicious food and sexual attraction—but understand her novel as a disruption of binaries, including sexual and racial binaries as well as pleasure/morality.

At the same time that Kelley-Hawkins ends *Four Girls* with multiple heterosexual marriages to adhere to genre conventions, she also queers this marriage plot both by privileging the girls' friendships with each other over their relationships to men and through Vera's unmistakable attraction to Charlotte Hood. Vera first encounters her in church:

Vera's gray eyes, roving carelessly around, fell upon a pale face lifted to Heaven, and she stopped her singing to gaze in wonder. The blue eyes, that looked as though they knew well what it was to be filled with bitter tears, were full a soft, radiant light now. The pale lips were slightly parted and quivering a little. (Kelley-Hawkins 53)

Although Vera's desire is here encoded as a search for salvation in a Marian figure, it becomes more explicit as the novel unfolds. She asks Erfort Richards, one of the young men the girls encounter in Cottage City, to locate her mystery woman, and he leads her to a poor laundress named Charlotte Hood who is caring for her ailing son. In Charlotte's cottage, the language Kelley-Hawkins uses to describe Vera's attraction to the laundress—which is primarily physical

in nature and occurs before the two women ever speak, takes on a more erotic tone:

Vera could not keep her eyes off the pale face. There was something about it that completely fascinated her.... As they were about to leave the cottage, Mrs. Hood caught the longing look in Vera's gray eyes. What made her guess at the desire that was in the girl's heart, and that she longed to express but did not dare? She could not tell; Vera could not tell; no one can tell – only God knew why. (Kelley-Hawkins 124)

Vera's desire, embodied in Charlotte Hood, is one that dare not speak. Yet, it is not separate, but rather encoded within, the overtly Christian and evangelical narrative of *Four Girls*, dissolving the binary between pleasure/morality, religious ecstasy and queer desire.

Charlotte's version of domesticity, one in which labor is never-ending and motherhood is "agony," contrasts sharply with the care-free and homosocial enjoyment of sweets the girls experience on their holiday (Kelley-Hawkins 119). With Kelley-Hawkins' clear privileging of homosocial relationships among women, and even queer desire between women, *Four Girls* suggests the need for an alternative to domestic arrangements that rely primarily on women's labor as housekeepers and caretakers and instead values them as partners in both labor and leisure. Among themselves, the four women negotiate who will be responsible for preparing the food they all love to eat so much. One morning, after waking up together and enjoying a playful pillow fight in their room, Garnet asks her friends:

"Are we going to have any breakfast this morning?"

"You might know Net had struck upon her feet," cried Jessie, in smothered tones, for Vera was burying her in pillows. "She thinks of her little 'stummick' the first thing...Well, you and Vera go out and buy the stuff, and Al and I – *won't* cook it..."

"That's true enough," said Vera. "We don't want you to. You and Al clear up the room and Net and I will get the breakfast." (Kelley-Hawkins 115)

Despite the ease and frivolity of this arrangement in the private space of their rented room, Vera experiences shame when their domestic relations come to light in the store:

As Garnet took out her pocket-book to pay him, the clerk asked with a smile: "Are you cashier?"

"Yes," answered Garnet.

"And you," he added, turning to Vera, "are you the teller?"

Quick as a flash came the answer. "Yes, I tell (h)er what to do."

Poor Vera! The next instant her face flushed crimson at what she had done. Made a pun before an entire stranger! She felt as though she would like for the floor to open and swallow her. (Kelley-Hawkins 116-117)

The girls' playful dominance and submission during their pillow fight, as well as their shared domestic relationships that are divorced from traditional gender roles, embarrass Vera when they are revealed in public as incongruent with expectations for friendships among women.

Vera, Allie, Jessie, and Garnet develop friendships with two young men: Erfort Richards and Fred Travers. Fred is Jessie's cousin and they meet by chance encounter in Cottage City; Erfort is his friend. Although these friendships result in marriages at the end of the novel (Fred to Vera and Erfort to Jessie), the possibility of marriage is never the primary motivator for the four women, a remarkable departure from genre conventions by Kelley-Hawkins. The women entertain their male companions, but reluctantly, and Jessie voices frustrations at the men's interference in their holiday:

...I'm tired to death of having those two fellows tied to our apron strings everywhere we go. We can't move but what "the *gen-tle-men* will *call* for us at such and *such* a time." I'm tired to death of it. When we came down here I thought we four girls were going around together and have a good time. There's no fun when there's a parcel of men around. I wont [sic] go out with them again – see if I do. I'll stay cooped up in this room all the time I'm here, first. (Kelley-Hawkins 129)

Jessie's declaration causes the other girls to erupt in laughter, thereby realigning them with the novel's marriage plot. But the overall narrative of *Four Girls* includes scenes of women enjoying pleasure in the company of other women, with interactions with male characters as mere punctuation to this homosocial and, in the case of Charlotte Hood, homoerotic gatherings. Domestic space – the room in which Jessie would rather stay "cooped up" – is a retreat from male interference. Yet where a straightforwardly spiritual feminist novel would treat this space as a source of female power through labor – the arduous labor of endless laundry and nursing that Charlotte Hood experiences – Kelley-Hawkins includes domestic pleasure – in food and in relationships among women – as a complementary and alternative source of power, dismantling a late nineteenth century belief that women were moral beings and men were creatures of appetite.

Kelley-Hawkins's treatment of gender in *Four Girls* is as complicated as the racialized readings that have been projected onto the novel since its re-discovery in 1988. A discussion of how eating and appetite—including which bodies are portrayed as consumers and which are consumers—offers readers a greater understanding of how the constructs of race and gender also function

within the novel. In her study of race and food in the visual and literary culture of the nineteenth century U.S., Kyla Wazana Tompkins reveals a “libidinal logic of American racism” that interprets “the Black body itself as food” (90). According to Tompkins, eating’s dissolution of the boundary between self and other takes on increased significance during debates over slavery that question the nature and regulation of embodiment (4). Tompkins also identifies the mouth as a central site of concern in both the dietetic and sexual reform movements during the late nineteenth century, both of which exhibit gendered and racialized anxieties about the consequences of unregulated desires and appetites (4). With food and eating culture as a “metalanguage” for embodiment and materiality in the postbellum U.S., Tompkins locates pervasive imagery of the Black body as edible object thereby reinscribing embodied Blackness within the “capitalist logic of racism and slavery” (4). Blackness therefore operates through nineteenth century literary and visual culture as an object for white consumption, one that is especially linked to white female embodiment because this rhetoric converges, according to Tompkins, in domestic novels that feature traditionally female spaces of home and hearth (4). Within the context of Tompkins’ argument, *Four Girls* appears to actively resist and overtly racialized reading of its four main characters by portraying these young women as repeatedly and enthusiastically engaging in the pleasurable and sensual act of eating. Where postbellum racialized anxiety intensifies the importance placed on policing the boundaries between Blackness as capitalist object and whiteness as consuming subject, for dark-skinned Garnet to “[think] of her little ‘stummick’ the first thing” is to push back against this binary construction (Kelley-Hawkins 115). Throughout Kelley-Hawkins’s novel, emphasis on moments and sensations of bodily consumption consistently and subversively embraces the disruption of nineteenth century racial categories.

Where eating represents a crossing of racial boundaries, the mouth serves as the site of transracial encounter, and Tompkins places the mouth within “a symbolic order in which ingestion is metonymic of an active relationship with commodity consumption, politics, and citizenship” (163). The economy of bodily consumption in *Four Girls*, then, is one in which pleasure is taken into the body through the mouth and what is egested or eliminated is the nineteenth century logic of racial interpretation that attempts to locate itself on the body, in skin color and hair texture, for example (the same logic Gates’ follows by inferring Hawkins’ Blackness from her photograph). Along with the political stance of eating and enjoying food while inhabiting dark skin that is historically marked by race, Jessie and Garnet also reject the naturalization of embodied race in a scene where the girls visit a phrenologist. Prior to the visit, the girls struggle to “braid [Jessie’s] heavy hair smoothly, but it will wrap and twist itself around the small fingers,” establishing her hair texture as another historical marker of racial difference (Kelley-Hawkins 323). Then, Fred and Erfort take the girls to see Professor Wild, a phrenologist who will “enlighten” them about their “various virtues, qualifications, etc” (328). Without naming the cause for

Jessie's fear directly, Kelley-Hawkins writes tension into the scene and repeats the description of Jessie as having "big Black eyes:"

[Professor Wild] rises from his chair, as he speaks, and approaches Jessie in her rocker. Garnet gives a little gasp, but does not speak. She knows it will do no good. Vera's white hands clasp each other tightly. She tries to laugh, but cannot. Allie says, faintly: "Oh, Jess!" but Jessie herself sits up straight in her chair and looks up steadily into the professor's eyes. He stands before her, tall and gaunt looking. Vera cannot bear the looks of his face; it is pale, and it seems to her, cruel looking. She wishes Jessie had not said anything. "The child is as nervous as a little witch," she thought. "But she has too much spirit to let him see it."

"Look steadily into my eyes," the professor says gravely, and the big Black eyes look into his.

Then his great hand begins to move slowly to and fro before the little, brilliant face. Slowly, but surely the brilliancy dies out – drawn out by something in the man's gaze. The big Black eyes look up just as steadily into his, but there is a startled, frightened look in them now, and the little face is as pale as death.

Garnet cannot bear it. She rushes forward and seizes the professor's arm, just as Jessie, with a little gasp, throws up both hands and bursts into a violent fit of sobbing. (Kelley-Hawkins 328-329)

Something in the interaction between Jessie and Professor Wild, during which he palpates her face in the typical practice of phrenologists, who study the size and shape of a person's head as a purported indication of their character and mental abilities, alarms her to the degree that she bursts into sobs and Garnet intervenes. It may be, as Holly Jackson argues, that she fears Professor Wild will discover she is passing as white upon closer examination of her skin color, hair texture, and other physical features that are historically marked by race (735). However, I read the girls' outrage against phrenology as rather a political stance in resistance to nineteenth century embodied racial logic that seeks to naturalize racial constructs as physical qualities.

Elsewhere in the novel, Kelley-Hawkins similarly rejects an ontology of inward and outward characteristics. In a conversation with the other girls while they are getting ready for bed, Vera observes that their landlady, whom they call "Mother," has a character incongruous with her bodily frame:

"Who would imagine such a will-power in a delicate body like her. Truly it is a 'velvet hand in an iron *glove*.'"

... "Speaking of delicate bodies with 'iron wills,'" said Allie. "Don't you think that in nine cases out of ten you will find they go together?"

“Yes, I do,” said Vera, decidedly. “You can never judge by appearances. Those who look as though they were born to rule are generally the ones who *are* ruled. You will very often find the spirit of a mouse concealed in the frame of a large woman, while your little, slender, wiry one is as courageous as a lion.” (Kelley-Hawkins 43)

Tompkins identifies embodiment and materiality as a central concern of the nineteenth century U.S. and here, Kelley-Hawkins not only acknowledges this concern, but rejects any relationship between bodies and the characters of their inhabitants. In another passage, shortly after the phrenologist scene, Kelley-Hawkins writes, “the light, falling on Garnet’s face, betrayed none of the girl’s inward thoughts” (47). Not only is Garnet’s facial expression inscrutable, but within the context of the novel’s consistent resistance to breezy conclusions about race or character according to physical indicators, I also read this statement as a declaration of defiance against a system of racialized logic in which outward characteristics represent categories of identity. Rather, *Four Girls* reveals the ways in which these categories are inherently unstable.

Moments of eating in *Four Girls* align “spiritual feminism” to the novel’s resistance of racial categorization. According to McDowell, a turn toward “spiritual” or “domestic feminism” during the late nineteenth century advanced spiritual and moral elevation as the only effective remedy for racial discord (xxix). With women positioned as arbiters of the home and moral guides, this meant that the power to heal racial divides in the U.S. became a concern for women rather than men. Women began to wield domestic culture as a salve to heal the wounds of a divided nation. Throughout the nineteenth century, writers like Sarah Josepha Hale, Lydia Maria Child, and Catharine Esther Beecher connected domestic concerns with the public good, presenting household management as having political and economic impacts for the entire U.S. nation (Douglas). In *Four Girls*, women seem to be managed by their households rather than the other way around, and Kelley-Hawkins assumes a decidedly anti-capitalist stance Charlotte Hood – whose invalid son is pointedly named Robin Hood – suffers because she is widowed and working as a laundress. She performs domestic labor that is not her own, and has little to show for her efforts. Vera, Allie, Jessie, and Garnet, in contrast, indulge in the leisure of holiday and are able to spend their allowances on sweets. Although bearing witness to Charlotte’s suffering helps the girls better appreciate their own good fortune, Kelley-Hawkins constructs a world within *Four Girls* in which some women labor and another women enjoy the fruits of domestic labor. Within a narrative that is ostensibly part of a nineteenth-century spiritual feminism that celebrates women’s domestic labor as an inherent salve to the U.S.’s social injustices, Kelley-Hawkins reminds us that these injustices exist within this very space, and among women of different class positions. We see this most clearly in the novel’s dynamics of consumption, in the differences between women who work and women who eat.

In one particular scene, Kelley-Hawkins creates a contrast between the four girls' enjoyment of copious sweets and Tennyson's characterization of Guinevere who, like Charlotte Hood, "suffer[s] in silence" (60). The girls, who are clearly well-educated, avid readers, discuss Tennyson while reading and snacking on "fruit-crackers and chocolate creams," a moment blissfully free of adult and male scrutiny as they "munch, and read, and rock, and are happy" (59). Jessie, who is reading "The Lady of Shalott," remarks that the only fault with Tennyson is that "he makes his women too weak," by which she means physically rather than morally weak (60). Garnet responds that the "one rare qualification" of Tennyson's women characters is that they "knew how to suffer in silence," and Vera adds that this is the "fate of all true and pure women" (60-61). In Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, Guinevere is shunned for her infidelity to Arthur and takes refuge in a nunnery. The moral overtones of Tennyson's poem contrast here to Kelley-Hawkins's resistance of a straightforwardly moral or racialized reading of *Four Girls in Cottage City*, as does Guinevere's silent suffering with the girls' exuberant indulgence as they discuss her fate, "munch"-ing happily on "fruit-crackers and chocolate creams" (59). In this context, Guinevere is more akin to Charlotte Hood, an ostensibly Marian figure who also eludes a straightforwardly religious reading as Kelley-Hawkins dissolves the false boundary between spirituality and physicality. Racial categories are equally ineffective here. Jessie and Garnet are the darker-skinned consuming bodies, while the fair Charlotte Hood and Guinevere find their suffering consumed as lessons for the girls. In this scene, and in the character of Charlotte Hood, Kelley-Hawkins raises questions about which kinds of bodies are eligible to consume and which are more suited for the kinds of labor that are consumed. This was an ongoing debate in the postbellum U.S., and as Tompkins notes, the answers most often fell along racialized lines. Kelley-Hawkins however, by consistently eluding racialized and other binaries throughout *Four Girls in Cottage City* also disrupts the binaries of labor/leisure and pleasure/suffering, resisting a capitalist categorization of bodies.

On their first night in Cottage City, the girls share a cup of cocoa with such glee that it seems to have an intoxicating effect on them, especially Jessie, who spills it all over her nightdress, prompting Garnet to suggest that some of the alcohol used to heat the chocolate may have spilled into her drink (Kelley-Hawkins 45). After this initial revelry, the girls enjoy cocoa again for breakfast the following morning and, later, buy a "pound of candy" that includes nougats, caramels, and chocolate creams before retiring to the previously-discussed scene in which they read and enjoy these treats (40). In addition to the dynamics of eating and pleasure in this scene, Kelley-Hawkins' inclusion of chocolate both underscores the references to skin color in the novel and evokes chocolate's history as a product of colonialism and slavery. Sidney W. Mintz traces the origins of sugar production as a "slave crop" grown in Europe's tropical colonies, in conjunction with coffee, tea, and cacao, as well as sugar's transformation from a luxury item to a middle-class food staple. The act of consuming sugar and chocolate, both products of a racialized economic and

political history, establishes Jessie and Garnet as consumers despite having bodies that bear historical markers of race in their skin color and hair texture. Sherrard-Johnson refers to these moments of sugary indulgence as “radical assertions of female agency and pleasure,” and they are also moments of a radical disruption of the false binary between consuming and producing bodies (226). Through the characters of Jessie and Garnet, and especially through points in the text where they are actively consuming products of a colonial economy, Kelley-Hawkins actively resists the nineteenth century’s embodied racial logic.

Just as Kelley-Hawkins herself eludes the racial categorization Gates reads into her photograph, *Four Girls at Cottage City* resists an embodied racial logic that would align racial descriptors with appetite, according to Tompkins’ understanding of the Black body as a product for consumption, not itself an active consumer, in the nineteenth century. As Sherrard-Johnson argues, women’s collective pleasure in eating is subversive, and the enjoyment that the main characters of *Four Girls* take in food—especially sweets—is especially so. Under cover of an ostensibly evangelical, domestic novel, Kelley-Hawkins interrogates racial categorization, including the false binary between consuming and producing bodies that Tompkins identifies as racially significant during this period. As they consume sugar and sweets by the handful, the young women characters of *Four Girls* egest the late nineteenth century’s literary understanding of race, revealing it to be a construction rather than a naturalized physical state.

Malinda Russell’s “Graham Cakes” and “Magic Oil”

Malinda Russell’s *A Domestic Cook Book: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen* is the first cookbook known to have been published by an African-American woman in the United States (Longone vii-xiii). The publication date is 1866, just one year after the end of the Civil War. In contrast to the delight Kelley-Hawkins’ characters take in eating, Russell’s account of her relationship to food, from the preface to her cookbook, is one in which economic precarity eclipses pleasure. Russell’s cookbook more closely follows Tompkins’ oral economy of Black bodies—and Black lives—as food for white consumption. However, Russell resists an embodied racial logic by establishing herself as a professional woman in the food industry, combatting what Toni Tipton-Martin identifies as the “Mammy” stereotype of Black women performing food-related labor, one that locates Black women’s food knowledge within the body rather than the mind.

The characters in *Four Girls at Cottage City* might well have enjoyed Russell’s company; a skilled pastry chef, Russell would have satisfied the girls’ sweet tooth with her recipes for cakes, cookies, and other treats. Not much information is available about Russell except for what she herself writes in the preface to her cookbook, a 39-page volume containing 265 recipes. It was discovered in 2001 by Janice Bluestein Longone, curator of American culinary

history at the University of Michigan's William L. Clements Library, but Longone's research into Russell's biography was limited by a lack of documentation of free Black women like Russell at the time of the cookbook's publication. Where Kelley-Hawkins eludes an easy classification according to race, a dearth of biographical materials about Russell similarly obscures complete knowledge of her life and work.

Whereas the characters in *Four Girls* delight in plentiful sweets, Russell's preface to her cookbook speaks more of economic precarity than enjoyment of the dishes she has prepared. In her "A Short History of the Author," Russell writes that she was born to a free Black woman in Tennessee, and that her mother, also named Malinda Russell, died when the author was 19. Russell then set out for Liberia but was robbed by a fellow traveler and was forced to remain in Lynchburg, VA, where she began working as a cook and ladies' nurse. She married a man named Anderson Vaughan, but he died after only four years and Russell resumed the use of her maiden name. She mentions "a son, who is crippled; he has the use of but one hand" (Russell 3). After running a wash house in Virginia and a boarding house back in Tennessee to support her son, Russell opened a pastry shop and, after saving "a considerable sum of money...by hard labor and economy," was robbed again by "a guerrilla party, who threatened my life if I revealed who they were" (4). During that attack, she and her son were forced to flee their home (and the pastry shop) "following a flag of truce out of the Southern borders, being attacked several times by the enemy" (4). They ran to Michigan "until peace is restored" with the hopes of returning to Tennessee "to try to recover at least a part of my property" (4). Russell cites this precarious situation as the main reason for self-publishing her cookbook, "hoping to receive enough from the sale of it to enable me to return home" (4). No historical evidence exists to show whether she ever did return to Tennessee after the cookbook's publication.

The harrowing details of Russell's narrative provide a primary textual example of Tompkins' oral economy of Black and white bodies in the nineteenth century. Where Tompkins argues that nineteenth century novels position the "Black body itself as food," Russell explicitly inhabits a Black body that must produce food for white people to survive (Tompkins 90). Her book is clearly aimed toward white readers; Russell writes that she trusts her work will "sell well where I have cooked" (in white homes and for white patrons), and she includes a testimony from a white man, Doctor More, to "certify that she is a girl of fine disposition and business-doing habits. Her moral deportment, of late, has been respectable" (Russell 3). In stark contrast to the girls in *Four Girls at Cottage City*, who are primarily concerned with their own bodies' nourishment and pleasure in food, Russell creates recipes that are not meant for herself to enjoy, but rather to feed white people. Russell's cookbook supports Tompkins' identification of the mouth as a site of interracial encounter, where Blackness and Black labor are positioned as commodities for white consumers.

This oral economy asserts itself within Russell's recipes. She includes a recipe for "Graham Cakes" with a bracketed note that "a great many ladies have

wished to know how I have such good success in making my cakes so light” (Russell 15). Tompkins has written at length about Sylvester Graham and his reification of the “chaste, white body” as the project of nineteenth century efforts toward health. Graham’s dietary reforms focused on a vegetarian diet, whole grain breads baked at home, temperance in alcohol, and avoidance of spicy food as a way to curb sexual appetites and especially masturbation. Modern-day “Graham crackers” are named after Graham, although the current sweetened version bears little resemblance to the course, whole-grain crackers developed by nineteenth-century Grahamites. Graham, who also supported the Eugenics movement, bound sex, race, and food together and understood the body as a microcosm of a U.S. social order that would similarly fall apart without discipline. According to Tompkins, Graham enfolds the interior spaces of the body into the political future of the nation (88). Tompkins calls Graham’s device of using the language associated with venery and sensuality to talk about diet a “queer alimentarity” that aligns both food and sexual appetites along a spectrum of potential bodily disruption that also includes the body politic (68). Using Graham’s prohibition against spice as an example, Tompkins identifies the racial encoding of spicy food as “dangerous or luxurious,” a stigma that attaches itself to bodies and people from areas of the world where spice is a cuisine staple (86). By including Graham flour in her cookbook and describing her Graham Cakes as “light,” therefore, Russell engages a Grahamite rhetoric that privileges white Anglo aesthetics and encodes anything earthy, spicy, and foreign as culturally and racially othered. Yet she does so in a self-published cookbook, establishing her own professional and economic agency even within the racialized food culture of the nineteenth century.

Probably because she owned and ran a pastry shop, most of the recipes Russell includes in *A Domestic Cook Book* are for desserts. As in *Four Girls at Cottage City*, Russell’s emphasis on sweets exists within the context of sugar’s role in the history of New World slavery. According to Mintz, by 1800, sugar had become a necessity for white Europeans and North Americans and by 1900, it supplied a fifth of the calories in the Anglo-American diet (6). Sugar cane is a labor-intensive crop and this exponential increase depended upon Caribbean slaves to support it (26). Clare Midgley traces the history of women’s abstention from slave-grown produce, including sugar, in eighteenth-century Britain, where slavery was abolished thirty years before the U.S. Through the British abstention movement, sugar formed a link between the domestic and colonial spheres, therefore making visible the connection between the sweetener and the Black bodies who produced it (Midgley 144). According to Midgley, the domestic imagery of Black bodies – including depictions on china patterns – shifted in focus from Black slaves serving white masters to Black women, especially, flogged or otherwise abused by white masters (144). The focus on Black bodies “moved from commodity to victim” (143). Although Midgley’s work focuses on the earlier, British move to abolish slavery, Russell’s pastry recipes, prefaced by her own accounts of struggling for survival as a free Black woman during the Civil War, evoke the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and its deep

entanglements with sugar. For Russell, sugar – through pastry work and recipe writing – is a means of economic survival, yet her dependence on white customers and the white Doctor More to attest to her character underscores the bloody and oppressive history of this colonial product. Midgley’s investigation into the British abstention movement and its domestic imagery reveals the long-standing and intimate connection between sugar and the Black female body in pain. A similar connection exists in Russell’s cookbook, woven deeply between the preface about the author’s life and her pasty recipes, which speak back to a legacy of trauma and a need for survival. Later in this chapter, I will explore how Erika Council’s *Southern Soufflé* blog similarly engages Black women’s trauma in relationship to food.

Alongside her pastry recipes, Russell provides a range of home remedies, including: “Toothache;” “Restoring the Hair to its Original Color;” “Cure for Rheumatism;” and “To Cure Corns” (Russell 38). A mysterious recipe for “Magic Oil” includes a list of potent ingredients:

Magic Oil

One ounce laudanum, one ounce chloroform, half ounce oil of sassafras, one ounce oil of hemlock, half ounce Cayenne pepper, one ounce oil cedar, half ounce camphor gum; add two quarts alcohol. (Russell 38)

Another, for “Elixir Paregoric,” recommends steeping “Opium three drachms” with licorice (39). Modern readers are left to conjecture how these two mixtures might be applied and for what purpose. And while not overtly racial in nature, the inclusion of these home remedies establishes Russell along a continuum of Black women in the U.S. who have provided homemade medicine to their white masters. Kelley Fanto Deetz, whose work recovers the archives of enslaved Virginia cooks, notes that enslaved cooks were often tasked with preparing tonics and remedies for their masters (92). Consequently, cooks gained a reputation as “notorious poisoners” and were feared as much as they were prized for their elixir-preparing skills (Deetz 92). In Virginia, between 1748 and 1865, it was a felony for any “negroe or other slave” to “prepare, exhibit, or administer any medicine,” and yet this law was broken frequently in plantation kitchens, where enslaved cooks had special access to poisons like deadly nightshade and belladonna so they could prepare medicines as needed (Deetz 92). Russell, who spent time in Virginia, would have been subject to this law and yet developed the knowledge and skills to develop remedies that were of interest to white families.

Laudanum and opium, in particular, were popular nineteenth century remedies for cough and pain, as well as emetic and anti-diarrheal drugs (Hodgson). As drugs that affect digestion and appetite, laudanum and opium draw attention to the body’s porosity at the site of the mouth. Amid recipes meant to be ingested, the “Magic Oil,” “Elixir Paregoric,” and other treatments underscore the abject nature of eating. According to feminist philosopher Julia

Kristeva, abjection is a human reaction to a threatened loss of distinction between subject and object, or between self and other. Tompkins applies Kristeva's theory to transracial oral encounters. An embodied racial logic requires a clear distinction between self and racial other, and the mouth's porosity—its ability to turn other (food) into self, and self into other (through digestion and egestion)—troubles that distinction, destabilizing the logical structures through which race can be easily understood as a discrete quality of the body. Russell's cookbook, which contains recipes meant to be eaten alongside preparations for the body's more abject processes, makes the body's porosity visible and, in so doing, resists an embodied racial logic by destabilizing the boundary between self and other.

Russell begins her "Rules and Regulations of the Kitchen," which precedes the recipes in *A Domestic Cook Book*, with a directive that "The Kitchen should always be Neat and Clean. The Table, Pastry Boards, Pans, and everything pertaining to Cookery should be well Cleansed" (5). Russell's dedication to cleanliness may be a personal preference, but it also engages the nineteenth century discourse surrounding eugenics, or the idea that protecting oneself from environmental contaminants would also protect bodily purity for generations. Cleanliness – both of the body and its surroundings – rose to prominence as a concern in the postbellum U.S. alongside the emergent germ theory of disease, which showed a causative relationship between microorganisms and illness. The close relationship between an emphasis on cleanliness and postbellum racial anxiety is most evident in Ellen Richards' founding eugenics treatise *Eugenics: The Science of Controllable Environment* (1910). Echoing a concern for racial purity in breeding from its related "science," eugenics, eugenics understands race at the molecular level as a communicable disease carried by foreigners and racial others that threatens to disrupt the white U.S. body politic (Egan 77). Richards' work shows how closely the language of disease and contamination absorbs racial anxieties in the nineteenth century United States (Egan 77). Conscious of the body's porosity and therefore its vulnerability to disease, Richards presents domestic hygiene as a primary protective shield between the exterior environment—full of contaminants of all sorts—and an interior environment where women, by keeping their homes clean, protect their families from the inside out (Egan 79). Richards' book was published in 1910, but her theory builds on scientific principles of germs and disease that developed through the latter half of the nineteenth century. Her work understands race as a threatening force that is as intangible and invisible to the naked eye as bacteria. She writes: "Our enemies are no longer Indians, and wild animals. Those were the days of big things. Today is the day of the infinitely little. To see our cruelest enemies, we must use the microscope" (Richards 19). Though Russell doesn't explain her insistence on a clean kitchen, she is engaging this idea of sanitation and cleanliness as a protector against disease and moral squalor that was coming to the surface in the nineteenth century. As a Black woman, someone Richards would have associated with dirt and disease, Russell's encomium to keep the kitchen "Neat and Clean" allows her to align herself with a white readership in

wanting to keep the home—and the kitchen at its alimentary core—free from corrupting influences.

In her study of African American cookbooks, Toni Tipton-Martin cites Russell as an example who challenges the “mammy stereotype” perpetuated by white Reconstruction-era women who wrote recipes, especially those writing in the South (Tipton-Martin 7). According to Tipton-Martin, these white Southern women promoted a mythology that Black women cooked by a “mysterious voodoo magic” in order to establish white women’s role in the domestic sphere as one of transcription (7). “Transcribability,” Tipton-Martin identifies, becomes a valued and necessary part of professionalization in the late nineteenth century (7). Russell engages this dynamic by recording in her preface that she studied “under the tutelage” of Fanny Steward, another knowledgeable Black woman cook (qtd. in Tipton-Martin 7). With this rhetorical move, Russell stresses the transcribability of her culinary knowledge; it is the result of hard work, education, and the cultural history of Black women in the U.S. rather than “voodoo magic” (7). She also disrupts a constructed binary between Black and white women’s domestic roles, one that parallels a body/mind division and bars Black women from access to relationships with culinary labor that are perceived to be intellectual and professional.¹ Tipton-Martin enumerates the skill set Russell would have needed to run her successful business and self-publish her cookbook: persuasive speaking; a good sales pitch; careful attention to customers’ buying signals; effective eye contact; authority in speech and writing; charismatic marketing; inventory management; and pricing of goods (13). Though her extensive skill set, especially for preparing home remedies, would have been threatening to some white readers unless couched and contained within a mammy-like image, Russell presents herself as trained professional working within a tradition of Black women cooks in the U.S.

In her *Domestic Cook Book*, the first such text attributed to an African-American woman in the U.S., Malinda Russell resists the nineteenth century’s dominant embodied racial logic by establishing herself as a professional cook and author. During a time when professionalism was antithetical to both Blackness and womanhood, Russell acknowledges a long and rich tradition of Black women’s food knowledge and labor, while also situating herself within it.

“Racial Aftertastes” and *Southern Soufflé*

Whereas Russell was limited to the printed page and the publishing opportunities available to her as a Black woman food writer, the dawn of the internet age ostensibly provides more opportunities for democratic access to recipe publishing. However, the reach of current-day food recipe blogs is also limited by power and influence, and the path to economic independence through recipe writing is far less linear than it was for Russell. Like Russell, Erika Council thinks and writes about what it means to cook professionally as a Black woman in the U.S. Council, in the context of the digital knowledge economy’s emphasis on the invisibility of work and a blurring of the boundary between

waged and unwaged labor, inhabits a labor subjectivity that is complicated in different ways to Russell, but that nevertheless speaks into their shared tradition of Black women cooks. Minh-Ha T. Pham's study of elite Asian fashion bloggers shows how lifestyle blogging – a genre that includes food as well as fashion blogs – is both gendered and racialized taste work, a form of labor that repeatedly confronts what Pham calls “racial aftertastes,” aesthetic values that reveal the limits of racial tolerance (19). Council's blog consistently and consciously confronts these gender and racial boundaries, leveraging the food blog genre as a platform to reify Southern foodways as the product of Black women's intellectual labor.

Council is a software engineer who cooks and writes as a side project. She posts sporadically to her blog, *Southern Soufflé*, which features recipes that blend ingredients like cane syrup and grits with a contemporary perspective on Black Southern food traditions. Posts are narrative in form, incorporating recipes within Council's personal history of living and eating in the South as a Black woman. For example, a post for “Potato Leek Soup with Pancetta ‘Croutons’” begins:

My first place “as an adult” on my own, was a small studio apartment in a duplexish house. I say duplexish because the owner did a terrible job at trying to turn an old house into 4 apartments....Anyway, the house was in what people would call a “sketchy” part of town. I use that word reluctantly, because so often the “sketchiness” of an area is determined by the ethnicity of its inhabitants. The people that lived around me were colorful, in both personality and life. (Council, “Potato Leek Soup with Pancetta Croutons”)

Council then describes colliding with one of these “colorful” neighbors, Ms. Kat, who replied, “Girl, I'm good like salt pork in a pot of potatoes” (“Potato Leek Soup”). In this passage, Council captures her own personal memories of her former neighborhood, but also the cultural landscape of the Black South she has experienced. “Salt pork” is common enough in traditional Southern foodways to be idiomatic in this expression, and Council recalls those traditions in her post, but she also includes “salt pork” in her recipe as “pancetta,” a term that translates to a readership outside of the South. Like her blog title, *Southern Soufflé*, this recipe speaks to staples and traditions of Black Southern cooking, with an eye to updating and remixing these foods, while also making them accessible to readers of various racial and class backgrounds.

Council's paternal grandmother is Southern food icon Mildred “Mama Dip” Cotton Council, herself the granddaughter of a slave. Mama Dip owned a self-titled and celebrated restaurant in Chapel Hill, North Carolina from 1976 to her death in 2018. Said Council of learning to cook under Mama Dip's mentorship:

A lot of my summers were spent in the back of that kitchen [at Mama Dip's], not always happily, but you learned how to make things like

biscuits and fried chicken. She owned what we call a Southern style meat and three, and that's where you get the meat and three vegetables and side of cornbread or biscuits. (qtd. in Soh)

Though Council may not have been happy during all of those summers, the result is that she “can make fried chicken with my eyes closed” (qtd. in Soh). Her maternal grandmother, whom she affectionately calls “Dinnie,” was active in the civil rights movement and taught history:

My grandmother on my maternal side was very much into the civil rights movement. Growing up as a child, every lesson in food tends to stem around liberation and Black joy. She taught me a lot of her story through food. She had an opportunity to go to Columbia University to get an advanced degree in education and she took it. Back in the days of segregation Black educators wanted to get advanced degrees, they wanted to be able to advance their careers and take the knowledge back to our communities. But there weren't a lot of schools offering that. So, to placate them Columbia said it would provide this program that allowed African Americans from the South to go and get advanced degrees – probably thinking that no one would be able to get enough money to go up there and take part. But I think a good 400 to 500 African Americans ended up taking part in that program.

She was in New York and would go into some restaurant and was so amazed at how white folks would just come up and talk to her as though it wasn't an issue – you know, because she came from the Jim Crow South. She's ordered these meals that came with a basket of what she called biscuit rolls. She said there was another couple that sat next to them and just started asking them all these questions, and they started eating together. For some reason that story stuck with me, and I think she could tell how much it affected me. That lesson triggered so many other memories around food. Like cakes she made to raise money to go hear Martin Luther King, Jr. speak, or booths they set up to talk about voter rights and would serve pimento cheese sandwiches.

The biscuit is powerful on both sides. Even now with a lot of the events that I'll have, if I'm able to raise money, it goes towards this program that I do where I teach underrepresented kids computer programming skills and ways of expanding your knowledge in case college isn't the route that you go or you're unable to get to this certain stage. It's about how you can take the technical route to get where you need to be. I use my food and these opportunities to liberate people as much as possible. (qtd. in Lam)

Council, in writing about food and especially Black Southern food traditions, is cognizant of both the level of skill and hard labor embedded within those traditions, as well as their ability to manifest “liberation and Black joy.” Her blog, which catalogs her own experience as a Black woman in the U.S. through food, writes into both of these aspects of that experience. Where Russell worked to establish herself as a professional cook and writer at a time when Blackness and professionalism were antithetical to one another, Council consciously inhabits both spaces and engages women before her who have done the same.

Her blog – which Council began in 2012 – and her writing has a wide reach. Council’s work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Food and Wine*, *Food 52*, *Design Sponge*, *The Kitchn*, *Essence*, and *The Huffington Post*, among other high-profile media outlets (Council “About”). In 2016, *The New York Times* included Council in a feature piece, *An American Thanksgiving* (Council “About”). *Saveur* nominated *Southern Soufflé* among the 2016 Best of the Food Blog awards for writing (Council “About”). That same year, Council was guest chef for the James Beard Foundation’s “Sunday Supper South,” an annual event highlighting the South’s best up-and-coming chefs (Council “About”). She has contributed to several cookbooks, including Julia Turshen’s *Feed the Resistance*, Todd Richards’s *Soul*, Cynthia Graubart’s *Sunday Suppers*, and *Beyond the Plate* (Council “About”). Outside of writing and her job as a software engineer, Council has developed recipes for major brands, including KitchenAid, Reynolds Wrap, and Nutella (Council “About”). She has become an active speaker on the topics of African-American foodways, social justice, and community (Council “About”).

Despite her blog’s high profile, Council maintains that this is a side project, and one that she describes as having humble beginnings. Council calls her younger self “hell on a hot plate” and tells readers that she got her start in the food industry by serving meals out of her room in her college dormitory (Council “About”). In a previous version of the “About” section on her blog, she writes that “this little place started as a blog to tell you folks about the food I like to cook and sometimes feed to people cause I’m nice like that” (Council “About”). Council’s repackaging of labor as fun is characteristic of blogging work, but it takes on a new significance for Black women food bloggers, who write within a long tradition of underpaid, underappreciated domestic labor by women of color.

Minh-Ha T. Pham observes how much of bloggers’ construction of their labor subjectivities as artists rests on the idea that they blog for passion rather than for money (16). Whereas the most popular food and lifestyle bloggers earn money through affiliate advertising revenue and sponsored content, this income is indirect and blogging itself is unwaged labor. Like cooking, blogging requires an often-overlooked technical skill set that includes writing, photography, and varying levels of code work. Also, like domestic labor, blogging work is unceasing. To maintain an active blog, which is necessary to build and retain a robust readership, bloggers must work at all hours of the day to generate at least several posts per week. Pham, who writes specifically about fashion bloggers,

articulates the intersection between blogging labor and what is traditionally understood to be “women’s work,” a category that also includes cooking and other forms of domestic labor: “The technological, aesthetic, and ideological construction of bloggers’ real style serves at once to reinforce the naturalization of feminine skills and knowledge and to rationalize their devaluation” (186). Writing within a digital knowledge culture that requires work to masquerade as passion, women food bloggers, whose domestic skills and knowledge have already been naturalized and devalued, find their labor doubly negated and made invisible. Women food bloggers, like Council, trouble the distinction between immaterial and physical labor (10). Consequently, their labor is often devalued and unseen.

Council writes within an even more complicated work dynamic as a Black woman managing a food blog. Angela Davis, blogger behind *The Kitchenista Diaries*, explains the underrepresentation of people of color in food blogging because of a “stigma surrounding service jobs:” “...a problem of perception exists – after all, we fought for decades to get jobs outside of domestic work – it may be seen as ‘beneath’ a talented young Black student to pursue a career in the food industry. This is a shame really, because food is a field with just as many opportunities for us” (“The Kitchenista”). Russell’s autobiographical writing in her cookbook reveals how much cooking was an economic necessity for her; faced with a situation in which she had to support herself and her son on her own, she had few other options for making money. For Council, a career in the food industry and in food writing is much more of a free choice, yet her decision to share “the foods I like to cook” is bound up in the digital invisibility of knowledge work and minimized into a “little place” (Council “About”). Because it has been constructed, historically, as women’s work and especially Black women’s work, food-related labor struggles to become visible, especially within a digital knowledge culture. Though blogging provides an accessible platform for food writing, the economic and labor dynamics of digital capitalism continue to devalue both food labor and blogging labor and render its compensation less direct.

Council’s blog pushes against boundaries of gendered and racialized labor constructions, what Pham calls “racial aftertastes.” Racial aftertastes follow from seemingly progressive tastes for racial difference and emerge as anxieties and apprehensions that exceed the limits of racial tolerance (Pham 64; 19). Unlike Russell, Council writes into a media landscape where Black voices and experience are, ostensibly, welcomed, and yet what Tompkins identifies as nineteenth-century white consumers’ taste for the Black body in pain persists as a twenty-first century racial aftertaste. Due to the real, historical, and overwhelming numbers of Black bodies who have experienced trauma throughout U.S. history, as well as what Tompkins observes to be the fetishizing of Black pain by white people anxious to reify their own racial dominance in the nineteenth century, our contemporary cultural moment understands Black bodies primarily in their relationship to trauma (“‘Everything ‘Cept Eat Us’”). Artists – including Kara Walker and Roxane Gay – who consciously engage this

relationship do so in a way that acknowledges injustice while also asserting their own voice and agency as Black women. Council similarly voices her own relationship to trauma in her writing, specifically in a post for “Hot Cabbage & Collards” that begins with a poem by Warsan Shire:

no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark.
you only run for the border when you see the whole city running as
well. (Shire qtd. in Council)

Shire’s poem forms the epigraph for a post that is only ostensibly about a recipe for cabbage and collard greens; the post recounts a night when Council fled an abusive relationship, her daughter in tow, to the home of a stranger who prepared this meal for her. This story of survival within a food narrative recalls Russell’s account of opening a pastry shop because she, widowed, had to support her son and had already been robbed once. Council, in this post, aligns herself with others who must fight for their survival through the Shire poem and in the lines:

I’ll leave with a pray [sic] for peace going forward. For protection of my refugee and muslim brothers and sisters. For protection for my Black and brown brothers and sisters. For the woman who’s rights are being [sic] determined by others. For my LGBT brothers and sisters who deserve to be who they are and love who they love. (Council “Hot Cabbage & Collards”)

Council, thanks to civil rights advances of the twentieth century, has more options available to her for earning her living than Russell did in 1866. Because of online media, she has additional outlets for her writing than Russell did. Yet in “Hot Cabbage & Collards,” Council’s experience of feeling marginalized and having to flee from abuse in the middle of the night engages racial aftertastes and what Tompkins identifies as a fetish for Black bodies in pain. Yet, because Council, like Russell, writes her own experience of trauma, she writes with an agency that confronts the boundaries surrounding the visibility of bodies of color in media, which Pham calls racial aftertastes.

Like Russell and the main characters of *Four Girls at Cottage City*, Council articulates a taste for sugar, also a racial (after)taste due to its racialized history. Council alerts readers that “you will find plenty of cooking with cane syrup,” a product of boiling sugar cane for long periods of time, in her blog (Council “About”). Cane syrup is Louisiana’s answer to northern U.S. maple syrup, and attests to Louisiana’s long history as a sugar cane producing territory. It also recalls Louisiana’s racialized history around this labor-intensive crop. In the contemporary context in which Council writes about being “raised to cherish the greatness of Cane Syrup which is basically raw sugar cane stalks that have been boiled down until thickened,” Black women’s relationship to sugar has also been

scrutinized by the media and the medical establishment (Council “Cane Syrup Mint Julep”). From Aunt Jemima as the marketing persona for pancake syrup to multiple medical studies identifying a frequency of type II diabetes among African-American women, our cultural associations between Black women and sugar are overwhelmingly negative. In our current discourse, the idea of the inactive, sugar-consuming Black woman has replaced Reagan’s “welfare Queen” in terms of an image of Black women consuming public resources, another form of embodied racial logic that focuses on health and disease (Witt). In *Blood Sugar: Racial Pharmacology and Food Justice in Black America*, Anthony Ryan Hatch identifies the “colorblind scientific racism” within the medical establishment’s ongoing association of Black bodies with metabolic disorders like diabetes so that race itself is presented as a health risk for the disorder (Hatch). The consequences of institutional racism stick to Black bodies under the name sugar – both the substance itself and the metabolic disorder to which it colloquially refers. Council, by including cane sugar as both a traditionally Black Southern ingredient and part of the expression of “liberation and Black joy” she advances in her blog, reclaims what sugar signifies in the context of Black women cooking and eating (Council qtd. in Lam).

Within a gendered and racialized labor topography of food blogging, Council engages a long, rich, and complex history of Black women cooking Southern food while also incorporating her own perspective and experience of those foods. Her blog engages and challenges the “racial aftertastes” for Black bodies in relationship to trauma, as well as the association between Black bodies and sugar as itself inherently traumatic and deleterious. Council, who has achieved the professional status Russell strives for in her own cookbook, situates herself within a digital knowledge economy in which the most valued labor subjectivity is one that makes work invisible. Yet, conscious of the ways in which Black women before her have fought to make their food labor visible as professional work, Council deftly reimagines and reasserts what it means to be a Black woman food writer in the U.S.

Conclusion

Emma Dunham Kelley-Hawkins’ *Four Girls at Cottage City*, Malinda Russell’s *Domestic Cook Book: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen*, and Erika Council’s *Southern Soufflé*, despite their historical and generic differences, serve as exemplary texts that respond to and reveal a narrative of Black women’s relationship to food in the U.S. Kelley-Hawkins, Russell, and Council all resist, through their writing, an embodied racial logic that constructs race and appetite as inseparable from each other and that seeks to attach racial identity to bodies of color through food, appetite, and pleasure.

Both Kelley-Hawkins and her characters in *Four Girls at Cottage City* elude racial categorization and a naturalization of race as a physical quality rather than a cultural construct. Through their hearty appetites, the novel’s four

young women characters take a collective and subversive pleasure in eating, and especially sweets, working against what Tompkins identifies as the nineteenth century's oral economy in which Black bodies are consumed, not consumers. By resisting racial embodiment throughout the novel, Kelley-Hawkins' characters complicate a cultural understanding of bodies and appetites as representative of stable racial categories.

Russell's *A Domestic Cook Book: Containing a Careful Selection of Useful Receipts for the Kitchen* contrasts with *Four Girls at Cottage City* in its orientation to alimentary pleasure. For Russell, economic precarity eclipses embodied enjoyment of food. Despite the cookbook's oral economy that situates a Black woman as the creator of dishes for white readers and eaters, Russell troubles the "mammy" stereotype and establishes herself as a professional woman in the food industry, resisting a cultural logic that would classify her food knowledge as primarily embodied rather than intellectual or professional, according to a binary of Black versus white women's relationships to domestic work. Russell includes recipes for emetics and anti-diarrheal drugs, engaging and refuting this binary through nineteenth century fears of Black servants poisoning their masters. She also, through her pastry and dessert recipes, writes into sugar's racialized history and its association with Black bodies in pain, asserting her own voice in this narrative and thereby destabilizing an embodied racial logic and the racial categories it requires to function.

Council writes within both the complex labor scheme of food blogging and the long, rich history of Black women cooks in the U.S. Her blog engages and challenges "racial aftertastes" for Black bodies in pain, as well as sugar's stickiness – carrying with it the effects of centuries of institutionalized racism – to Black bodies. Council writes according to the demands of a digital knowledge economy that seeks to render creative work invisible, similar to the ways women's domestic work – especially Black women's domestic work – have been and remain invisible. Yet, recognizing the Black women before her, like Russell, who have fought to make their food labor visible as professional work, Council performs a continuous reinterpretation and resignification of what it means to write and cook as a Black woman in the U.S.

Though they may appear to have very little in common at first glance, these three texts by Kelley-Hawkins, Russell, and Council, share a resistance to an embodied racial logic that attempts to predicate stable racial categories upon the body and its appetites. All three works, when read critically together, offer an understanding of how racialized logic operates within U.S. food culture and how historically constructed narratives of racial identity attach themselves to bodies of color through food, appetite, and pleasure.

Notes

¹ See Williams-Forsen for more about the cultural history of Black woman's culinary expertise in the U.S.

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