Sylvester Graham’s Imperial Dietetics

AUNT BETSEY, there’s going to be a new Declaration of Independence.

When she utters the first line of Louisa May Alcott’s 1873 novel Work, Christie Devon is baking bread. Working alongside her aunt in a rather twee kitchen scene that might have been lifted from the most sentimental of antebellum novels, Christie announces that she will be leaving her Aunt’s and Uncle’s home in order to make her own living. Though the novel was written over 130 years ago, its setting—an “old-fashioned” kitchen—and the initial act—kneading bread in a bread-trough—signals to readers, both nineteenth-century and contemporary, that this will be a woman’s novel. In baking bread, Christie is performing an act that, across two centuries, has come to represent the most domestic of women’s labors. The passage continues:

“I don’t see why you can’t be contented…” And Aunt Betsey looked perplexed by the new idea. “You and I are very different ma’am. There was more yeast put into my composition, I guess; and, after standing quiet in a warm corner so long, I begin to ferment, and ought to be kneaded up in time, so that I may turn out a wholesome loaf…” (p.6)

In contrast to later feminist configurations of the kitchen as a female prison, for this radical nineteenth-century woman writer, domesticity and its elaborate skills are the conditions that foster female independence.

Although bread was closely enough intertwined with the national identity of the United States by the 1870s that Louisa May Alcott could casually link it to the Declaration of Independence, the groundwork for that connection was laid in the agricultural and culinary history of the colonies and early republic. This article examines the cultural history of bread as a foodstuff specifically linked to gender, race, and national formation through a close reading of the writings of food reformer and anti-masturbation campaigner Sylvester Graham. An important health reformer during the 1830s, Graham became famous for the theory that a bread-centered diet would cure what he saw as an epidemic of masturbation among antebellum youth. In the Treatise on Bread and Breadmaking (1837, hereafter Treatise) and A Lecture to Young Men on Chastity (1839, hereafter Lecture) Graham produced one of the most influential articulations of the connection between diet and moral well-being in nineteenth-century America. Although his career saw only a decade in the public eye, his influence reached across the century. The influence of the Graham diet on Louisa May Alcott is apparent in many of her novels, even though she wrote them almost forty years later; Graham similarly influenced Louisa May’s second cousin, the prolific (and under-researched) health reformer and vegetarian William Alcott.

Graham was not alone in his focus on bread as a central dietary staple. But while contributors to early American newspapers and the authors of antebellum domestic manuals...
spilled a fair amount of ink talking about the importance of wheat and bread, Graham’s writings on diet crystallize, in delightfully perverse passages, many of the meanings circulating around this everyday food. Bread, for Graham, signified domestic order, civic health, and moral well-being; ingesting more bread, he promised, would produce healthy bodies and homes and guarantee the United States’ place in the pantheon of civilized nations. A close reading of the dietetic program in these two Graham texts, including two appendices to the Lecture that have been hitherto ignored, uncovers slippery relationships among eating, domesticity, race, and national formation, relationships that hinge on situating the intimate workings of republican bodily technologies within the postcolonial and transnational spaces of the antebellum period. In this context, bread becomes far more than a staple carbohydrate: it is a symbol of the close relationships between technologies of the self and a burgeoning national mythology.

**Graham’s Bread Treatise**

Initially trained as an evangelical minister, Graham first emerged into public view in 1830, when he accepted a post with the Pennsylvania Temperance Society. Over the next
By 1837 Graham had decided to promote wheat as a food that would create and sustain American bodies, preventing masturbation, in particular, and digestive or sexual overexcitement, generally. Graham’s clearest explanation of the importance of bread to the American diet is found in his 1837 *Treatise*. As in many popular writings, in the *Treatise* bread is a foodstuff pregnant with biblical importance and heavily laden with the ideology of early nationalist racism.

Graham’s anxious detailing of bread preparation hinges on the close relationships among civic health, American consumer habits, and “farinaceous foods.” For Graham, proper bread consumption is a mark of a certain kind of civilization: “In all civilized nations, and particularly in civic life, bread, as I have already stated, is far the most important article of food which is artificially prepared; and in our country and climate, it is the most important article that enters into the diet of man…” (p.26).

For the most part, Graham focused on using diet to help cure what he saw as an epidemic of masturbatory behavior among young men. He proposed several methods by which young men and their families could ensure a chaste lifestyle and thus preserve the virile energies and moral well-being of the nation’s youth (usually assumed to be male), including hard beds, cold-water bathing, and purity of thought. By 1837 Graham had decided to promote wheat as a food that would create and sustain American bodies, preventing masturbation, in particular, and digestive or sexual overexcitement, generally. Graham’s clearest explanation of the importance of bread to the American diet is found in his 1837 *Treatise*. As in many popular writings, in the *Treatise* bread is a foodstuff pregnant with biblical importance and heavily laden with the ideology of early nationalist racism. Graham’s anxious detailing of bread preparation hinges on the close relationships among civic health, American consumer habits, and “farinaceous foods.” For Graham, proper bread consumption is a mark of a certain kind of civilization: “In all civilized nations, and particularly in civic life, bread, as I have already stated, is far the most important article of food which is artificially prepared; and in our country and climate, it is the most important article that enters into the diet of man…” (p.26).

On another level, however, bread is linked to Graham’s hostility against female entry into the public sphere, and an argument for the central place of women in the home. Graham writes: “Who that can look back thirty or forty...
years to those blessed days of New England’s prosperity and happiness, when our good mothers used to make the family bread, but can well remember how long and how patiently those excellent matrons stood over their bread troughs, kneading and moulding their dough?” (pp.92–93). Concentrated within this single food item is a host of complex and meaningful cultural values. Bread signifies proper domestic order; it signifies an affective regime in which the “bodily and intellectual and moral” well-being of the husbands and children of the nation lie in the hands of the wife and mother. Domestic well-being is thus signified by “perfect” bread and by the containment of female labor within the domestic space.

Bread and wheat can take on this metaphoric weight because the history of wheat in the Americas is inextricable from the history of European settlement. Wheat was first planted in 1607 at Jamestown; one economic historian of the wheat industry has written that “it was traditional for the early colonists to take wheat seed with them to the new country.” Initially, wheat did not flourish as successfully as corn, an indigenous plant; by the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, the middle colonies, in particular New York and Pennsylvania, became known as the “bread colonies,” since they produced most of the wheat and flour for their northern and southern neighbors, who were more involved with the tobacco and maritime industries. Later, the colonial market for wheat expanded to include the West Indies. By the middle of the eighteenth century soil depletion as a result of monoculture (single-crop farming, particularly of tobacco) led more southern colonies, including Maryland and Virginia, to begin farming wheat as well.

By the 1830s wheat production had begun to spread to the prairies following western migration; aided by technological and transportation advances, wheat production doubled between the late 1830s and the late 1850s. Thus it is clear that wheat was a central player in western expansion during the first half-century of the American republic. By the first decades of the nineteenth century wheat had become an important crop, and American domestic writers increasingly advocated Graham’s agenda by writing about wheat as the perfect food. To buy and use a food that was so central to the westward expansion of the United States was to work within an economic model in which reliance on other nations was kept to a minimum; the home in which bread was produced was a nationally identified home that similarly maintained a certain model of economic self-sufficiency.

Wheat also took on meaning in relation to other commodities. As a vegetarian, Graham advocated for wheat as a full replacement for meat. He wrote: “…while the people of our country are so entirely given up as they are at present, to gross and promiscuous feeding on the dead carcasses of animals, and to the untiring pursuits of wealth, it is perhaps wholly in vain for a single individual to raise his voice on a subject of this kind.” From another perspective, however, part of Graham’s agenda was to propose wheat and not corn. As the single most important indigenous North American grain, corn had long played an important role in Native American cuisines, and thus in the early European settler cuisine. Amelia Simmons’s American Cookery lists recipes such as “Indian Pudding” (p.38) and “Indian Slapjack” (p.49). However, while Graham certainly concedes that corn is a healthy food, in his writings wheat is a far more important symbol of the success of the revolutionary and imperial American project.

Most of the Treatise is taken up with detailed instructions about farming and grinding wheat and preparing bread. Much like the contemporary domestic manuals it is in conversation with, the Treatise sets up a metonymy among the body, the house, and the nation; in this symbolic system each of these sites can fully represent the other, and the regulation of one comes to seem impossible without regulating the others.

Inherent to this metonymy is what Amy Kaplan identifies as the “paradox of…imperial domesticity” in which the home “becomes the engine of national expansion.” What Kaplan also calls “manifest domesticity” operates through a contradictory logic that both absorbs and defines the foreign: the foreign exists both within and beyond the boundaries of the domestic, as the domestic—here, the nation—expands as part of an imperial project. This close relationship between the home and the nation renders women’s civilized and colonizing work invaluable to the building of Empire.

Graham’s work enacts this imperial and civilizing agenda and ties it to the intimate and quotidian functioning of American bodies. When Graham writes that “They who have never eaten bread made of wheat, recently produced by a pure virgin soil, have but a very imperfect notion of the deliciousness of good bread; such as is often to be met with in the comfortable log houses in our western country,” he puts the imperial imagery of virgin soil waiting to be ravished, and the fantasy of an expanding western domestic as represented by the “comfortable log houses,” behind a commodity that will enter into the very mouths of an audience he invokes as “us, as a nation.” In this way, the bodies of the citizenry—right down to the everyday act of eating bread—are implicated in the rapid expansion of American territories into the apparently empty, untouched spaces of the West.
The philosopher Judith Butler has argued that in considering the body, we understand “…the notion of matter, not as site or surface, but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter. That matter is always materialized…has to be thought in relation to the productive and, indeed, materializing effects of regulatory power in the Foucaultian sense.” In Butler’s work, the body is an entirely social product, and is thus constantly in the process of being made and remade, rewritten and redefined. Turning this model toward eating—in which, in the framework of nineteenth-century science, the matter of the flesh emerges directly and essentially from the matter that is food—illuminates the contribution that food studies has to make not only to the history of the body but to the continuing discussion of empire in the field of American studies. If, in eating, the act of fleshly materialization is rendered visible as material culture, the materials of food culture take on new importance as objects of study through which historically specific attempts to regulate embodiment may be read. Nationalist foodways, in turn, become allegories through which imperialism and its attendant anxieties are managed and rendered inevitable. What we see in Graham’s dietetic proposal is the antebellum imperial agenda distilled down to the intimate and quotidian functioning of the body: in this way the continuing materialization of the body, through the performative and physiological functions of eating, is metonymic of the continually expanding material borders of the United States. If we extend Amy Kaplan’s theory of domestic spatiality into the vulnerable and intimate spaces of daily life, we find that the citizen’s body is a key missing concept in her work.

The Lecture to Young Men on Chastity

While most work on Graham has focused on his writings about male sexuality, two stories contained in the first appendix to the Graham’s 1839 Lecture further expose the motile and contradictory strategies by which foreignness and domesticity are defined through diet. In the Lecture, Graham continues to be interested in “farinaceous foods,” but he expands on his work in the Treatise to associate the term farinaceous with rawness and coolness; properly farinaceous foods in this text counter the effects of luxury and civility by returning the body to a primitive but morally refined state. In this sense, farinaceous no longer means wheat alone, but rather, any indigenous foods that provide the digestive system with enough roughage to keep it both cool and fit, preventing overheating and enervation.

The first story in the appendix describes a highly respectable family “of considerable distinction for their wealth, refinement and piety.” Graham makes particular note of the eldest daughter:

Long before this child could speak with sufficient distinctness to be understood by any but the mother, she was taught to repeat, morning and evening, and on various occasions, little prayers and hymns, adapted to her age…. all that a pious and devoted mother could do, by way of religious instruction, was done, to train her up in the nurture and admonition of the lord.

Sixteen years later, Graham visits the family again and finds the children unruly and ill-behaved. Once again he turns his attention to the eldest daughter:

…what surprised me most was her excessive lasciviousness. Wantonness manifested itself in all her conduct, when in the company of males; and I ascertained that when she was alone with a gentleman, she would not only freely allow him to take improper liberties with her, without the least restraint, but would even court his dalliance by her lascivious conduct. Being consulted in regard to her health, I found that she was addicted to the practice of self-pollution and had greatly injured herself by it.

The central question that Graham poses is how such a child, raised under the piety and purview of her religious mother and teachers, could come to this licentious state. The young woman’s injuries are temperamental and moral ones: her excessive masturbation has eroded her self-control, transporting her outside of socially appropriate behavior. At the same time, the child’s crime seems to lie in its visibility, even exhibitionism: that sexual sin—self-pollution, or masturbation—most closely associated with isolation here solves the problem of its own invisibility by displaying itself in public. For Graham, fault lay with the mother, who had wholly disregarded the relations between the bodies and souls of her children—between their dietetic habits and their moral character. She truly “made the table a snare to them,” and they literally “fared sumptuously every day.” Indeed, she prided herself on setting the best table in town. Highly seasoned flesh-meat, rich pastry, and every other kind of rich and savory food, and condiments in abundance, together with strong coffee and tea, and perhaps occasionally a glass of wine, were set before these children for their ordinary fare. The result was just what was reasonably to be expected; and sorrow and tears were the reward of the afflicted mother. (p.169)

In this parable Graham lays out the consuming sins of the female-dominated domestic sphere. There is a rich
and evocative nexus of connections between the mother’s conspicuous consumption and her domestic production, the sensual pleasures of the table, and the “self-polluting” practices of the masturbatory daughter. Graham seems particularly pleased to linger, as in the sensuous details above, on the spectacularly carnal pleasures of the table, making clear the relationship among female domestic pride and skill, this eroticized diet, and the young woman’s licentiousness.

While this story organizes itself around the masturbatory daughter, in fact it is the mother’s unchaste consumption that occupies the causal center of this story, and which must ultimately be reigned in. Food is simultaneously invoked as a sensual and erotic experience and as the metonymic and displaced enactment of the mother’s otherwise unseen sexuality. The mother’s seductive table, that sign of her spending and shopping pleasure, results, for Graham, in an unruly daughter addicted to sexual pleasure; female spending, eating, and masturbation are constituted as related behaviors.

As we know from historian Jeanne Boydston and others, at the same time that new forms of gendered domesticity were being produced in the early republic and antebellum period, domestic shopping duties were increasingly transferred from men to women. Graham’s domestic parable is located at the moment of this shift, and the social and moral threat that female spending must have initially seemed to be is revealed in the metaphors of both illicit eating and masturbation. The threat of the spending female is the threat of physical and moral degeneracy, not least because it perversely elaborates on the metaphor between unwise spending and the illicit spending of sperm. At the same time, as middle-class women ventured forth with financial power into the public sphere, they breached the sanctity of the domestic sphere. New social and “medical” problems physiologically performed the drama of that threat.

Most of the foods that constitute a threat to the body in this story are marked as “foreign” and “exotic” to the United States (spices, coffee, sugar, tea, and wine), whereas most, if not all, of the cures for the problem of excessive masturbation and the degeneracy of the body lie in local and domestic produce (milk and bread, for instance). The problem is not only that of misbehaving bodies but of, literally, “spiced” (p.168) bodies. Graham writes: “I found that this lasciviousness was not confined to the oldest child: all the children were more or less spiced with it, according to their age...” (p.168).

Here, then, is the threat that middle-class women’s financial power and foreign luxury pose to the integrity of the middle-class home, a threat of bodily dissolution and infection through the inappropriate eating of foreign goods.

For white women to leave the home in the nineteenth century was to breach the boundaries of that home and allow for the possibility of the domestic sphere’s infection, just as the opening up of borders to trade with other countries meant exposing the national body to the possibility of social change, imagined as the threatening and catalytic presence of the other and his commodities. However, congress with foreign bodies is not always a matter of uncomplicated relations of inequality. Rather, it involves ambivalent forms of identification and rejection, desire and disgust, intimacy and alienation. In this first story, the foreign object threatens to become the totality of the consumer, concretizing diet as a central term in the imperial metonymy among body, home, and nation. The first story imagines that all three bodies can be kept safe through the total rejection of the foreign. By the second story in the appendix, however, quite the opposite dynamic takes place.

Set in the South Pacific, the second story recounts the mutiny on the British ship Bounty. Contrary to the first story’s representation of a sealed domestic sphere, Graham’s second narrative reveals the transnational and hemispheric identifications that the early Unites States had with other British colonies, as well as the importance of reading ante-bellum food culture through the history of U.S. imperial expansion and thus in relation to colonial and postcolonial economies. In this story, food and sex emerge as central themes in the fantasy of imperial expansion, in which commodity consumption and the desire for land serve as catalytic desires for interactions across national, regional, and ethnic differences, despite the threat to racial unity that this desire would otherwise seem to take. In this story, more than any other, the metaphorical qualities of “farinaceous” foods are stretched to include foods not indigenous to North America but that nonetheless evoke the “raw” qualities of Grahamite bread.

The story begins with the mutiny on the ship. After escaping the Bounty, some of the mutineers take native wives and settle on Pitcairn Island with their wives and other native males. However, a disagreement among the men results in the death of all adult males except for one: an Englishman, who rather edenically renames himself “John Adams,” perhaps not coincidentally the name of the second president of the United States. Adams oversees the upbringing of the surviving nineteen children and there, with all of the remaining wives, he raises a race of children “in uniform good health”: “Infants were generally bathed three times a day in cold water, and were sometimes not
weaned for three or four years; and when that did take place, they were fed upon food made of ripe plantains and boiled taro root, rubbed into a paste…they have no bowel complaints, and are exempt from those contagious diseases which affect children in large communities.”

The narrative follows the children into adulthood:

Their beds were mattresses composed of palm leaves, and covered with native cloth, made of the paper mulberry tree. Yams constitute their principal food, boiled, baked, or mixed with cocoa-nut, made into cakes, and eaten with molasses extracted from the tee root. Taro root is no bad substitute for bread; and bananas, plantains and appoi are wholesome and nutritious fruits. They but seldom kill a pig, living mostly on fruit and vegetables…they are subject to few diseases…they are certainly a finer and more athletic race than is usually found among the families of mankind.

A number of representations merge into one another here. First, we see that the model of the noble savage so prevalent in Enlightenment discourses emerges in the ideal of the Pacific Islander raised without the taint or temptation of modern life. Second, we see the parallel that Graham has set up between the idea of the noble savage and the white child. There is an implicit comparison between the young men that Graham is lecturing to and the allegory of the growing nation that he writes into the story of Pitcairn Island. Because Graham is using the example of mixed-race Tahitian children to make a point about American bodies, it becomes clear that a paradoxical racial politic is at play. On the one hand, as in the previous story, white American bodies have to remain untainted by contact with the foreign—they need to remain “unspiced”—an image that gestures to the need to shore up the boundaries of the white body. On the other hand, we see that white American bodies can profit by comparison with the foreign, though only when foreigners are appropriately located in their own bioregional spaces.

These politics of comparison reveal what Ann Stoler has called “[colonial] circuits of knowledge production and racialized forms of governance [that] spanned a global field.” In this story, United States bodies are like Tahitian bodies, a likeness that is underlined by the mixed British-Tahitian heritage of the subjects. These bodies are not, however, of equal standing: Graham ends the story by informing the reader that the Tahitians will one day become an important race—but are not one yet. However, the importance of the comparison lies in the cultural value assigned to these two sets of subjects, both of whose lineages are simultaneously expatriate and, as the argument seems to go, indigenous. Mixed-race Tahitian subjects can lay claim both to British origins and to the land they live on. What is at stake in Graham’s dietetic program is the American body’s similar claim. As in the American Revolution, in Graham’s narrative the sailors revolt against British tyranny and establish their own state, literally becoming the founding fathers of a new race; the imperial fantasy is rendered complete because both the threat of native insurgency and the possibility of any cultural or political carryover from the British soldiers are eliminated when all adult males are killed off.

It is clear that the narrative of the mutiny on the Bounty enacts, to a certain degree, and by analogy, the problem of creating, curing, and defining American bodies located on American soil. The story thus becomes, for Graham, a perfect case study for the elaboration of his own domestic dietetic argument. The inhabitants of Pitcairn Island are both shining examples of the ideal of human health and, as primitive peoples, sign and symbol of the physical possibilities that Americans have abandoned in their commitment to industrial progress. Eight years before Melville published the titillating travel memoir Typee, also set in the South Pacific, Graham’s recounting of a story that takes place at the edges of the colonial world—in the South Pacific—demonstrates that the region was already associated with sexual permissiveness, offering the readership the promise of erotic freedom in a distant tropical Paradise. That distance also allows Graham to maintain his investment in domestic sexual mores while denying the narrative’s investment in miscegenation.

By the 1830s the United States was already well established in the South Pacific, though it had yet to lay official claim to any lands. Alongside France, Britain, and Russia, by the late eighteenth century the United States was involved in a race to claim Pacific Islands as commercial stopping points on the way to China and Japan. The imperialist desire to consume these lands is readily apparent: beyond the identification with indigeneity, the narrative of Pitcairn Island recuperates South Pacific bodies into a Euro-American schema, domesticking and suppressing difference. In Graham’s writing, bread took on an important role in this process not only because of its association with the home, but also because of an overdetermined imperial logic that worked overtime to connect immigrant European bodies to the geopolitical and ecological spaces to which their newly formed national identities laid claim. Within the schema of nineteenth-century science, bodies in this argument were best maintained and cured by local produce—a long-standing, nationalist formulation that we can trace back.
through, for instance, the cultural geography of British medical botanists and other scientists of early nation-states. This logic, however, posed a particular problem for settler nations—a problem that Graham solved with his formulation of a paradoxical Euro-American indigeneity organized around wheat, that most important European grain that the Jamestown settlers had worked so hard to cultivate.

The term “paradoxical Euro-American indigeneity” here refers to the ways in which the United States, as a settler nation, both co-opted and erased the bodies of native peoples in order to naturalize the European claim to the land. The problem is that as immigrants they bump up against the strictures of nineteenth-century science, in which bodies are best maintained by the land to which their national identities lay claim. For Sylvester Graham, wheat and bread, which lay at the heart of the European diet and the growing American agricultural empire, became the cure-all for bodily woes, but it had to do so by laying claim to an indigenous identity.

However, it was transnational relations, economic and otherwise, that set up the very terms on which Graham laid his claims; in his writings, Americans are simultaneously transplanted and rooted, indigenous and immigrant, both like and not-like other hybrid postcolonial subjects. Thus, if Graham is, on the one hand, claiming that we are what we eat, he is also demonstrating that what we are, like what we eat, is always dislocated and relational, reiterated and reconstructed by our quotidian acts. In this construction, eating becomes a performative act of national identification: in eating as national subjects, flesh is called into social being.

Again, I take my cue here from Ann Stoler’s work, in which she reinserts race as a central issue in Foucault, arguing that the policing of the body and the body politic in Europe and its colonies was enacted through a “hierarchy of moralities, prescriptions for conduct and bourgeois civilities [that kept] a racial politics of exclusion at its core.” Stoler argues that in neglecting the comparative possibilities of empire and imperial outposts, Foucault’s history of European sexuality “misses key sites in the production of that discourse, discount[ing] the practices that racialized bodies, and thus elid[ing] a field of knowledge that provided the contrasts for what a healthy vigorous body was all about.” In the narrative of Pitcairn Island, Graham

Above: George A. Crofutt, American Progress (1873).
produces a discourse based on exactly that sort of comparative framework, a transnational framework that nonetheless produces implications for the intimacies of daily life in the metropole. Intertwined with sexuality, one of the state’s “dense transfer points of power” into the body politic, eating in the antebellum period became an additional disciplinary intervention into the “anatomo-politics of the human body,” one that worked to produce a peculiarly configured but nonetheless distinctive United States body.

Alongside these comparative frameworks, what we see in the context of the United States is the importance of the idea of indigeneity in a settler nation that is, from its inception, always and already an imperial (indeed, a genocidal) space. In Graham’s domestic-dietetic proposal, North American indigenous peoples are almost entirely erased from nationalist discourse; at the same time, only a few years before the consolidation of the official policy of manifest destiny, in Graham’s work we find the national gaze already turning westward toward the Pacific. Far more than a simple contrast of bourgeois white cosmopolitanism against an exotic colonial other, in Graham’s discussion of the South Pacific we find both negation and identification alongside nascent hints of an argument for annexation.

The projection of social hierarchies and social identities onto food, the rendering dangerous of foods from the tropics, and the projection of concepts of “healthiness” onto “indigenous” American foods—whether or not those items were in fact native to the Americas, and often because they were not—reveal an effort in that period to contain the threats that improper consumption could make to the boundaries of the body and the body politic. At the same time, this managing of racial and other anxieties through an over-determined food system demonstrates an effort to shore up the imaginary contiguities among nation, home, and body, and among social and political identities and the spaces to which those bodies lay claim.

Graham’s program allows us to explore the body politics that lurk behind the highly socialized, but insistently naturalized, act of eating in the antebellum period and beyond. The ingestion of foreign objects through an aperture in the body, eating, uncovers the fragile fiction of the social groups and nation-states that use the body as a metaphor to describe their geopolitical boundedness. Eating becomes even more difficult to unpack as a social act when it is insistently conflated with sexuality, that other body discourse that reveals the “uncertainties and porous boundaries that surround [bourgeois bodies].” In Graham’s writings, sexuality and masturbation, in particular, come to be represented through food discourses and vice versa, because the sheer corporeality of each of these acts—the seemingly irrational demands of the body and of embodied existence—carries the analogous threats of social, corporeal, and often national dissolution. To consume wheat bread, in Graham’s formulation, was to hold all of these threats at bay.

By 1873 and the publication of Alcott’s Work, baking bread was firmly constituted as a metonym for women’s domestic labor, and wheat was well on its way to easily signifying the vast inner spaces—the belly, perhaps—of the United States. Only twenty years later, in the lyrics to “America the Beautiful,” Katharine Lee Bates would write:

O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain,
For purple mountain majesties
Above the fruited plain!
America! America!
God shed his grace on thee
And crown thy good with brotherhood
From sea to shining sea!

While the nationalism of the “amber waves of grain” hovers over Christie Devon’s most American of declarations, independence for Alcott meant departure from the family home to labor in the public sphere; by the time Alcott wrote most of her books, she had achieved enough distance from her early childhood exposure to food reformers to return to their ideas with more than a little ambivalence and irony. By the 1870s those amber waves were entirely contained within the domestic borders of a still-hungry empire: there was no need to push bread when the lands “from sea to shining sea” had been fully consumed.

NOTES
3. A number of historians and theorists have taken up Graham’s writing; to my surprise, however, few have seriously considered the appendices to the end of his treatise, in which he lays out his case studies. Instead, most critics have focused on Graham’s ideas about masturbation. See Ben Barker-Benfield, “The Spermatie Economy: A Nineteenth-Century View of Sexuality,” Feminist Studies 1 (Summer 1972): 45–74 and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, Rereading Sex: Battles over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).
4. One example is the Battle Creek Sanatorium, founded and run on Grahamite principles by Harvey Kellogg. The modern analogy to the use of the Graham name would be the use of the word Atkins to describe any high-protein, low-carbohydrate meal, or the nineteenth-century usage of the word Banting to describe dieting, after William Banting’s Letter on Corpulence. See William Banting, Letter on Corpulence, Addressed to the Public, 3rd ed. (London: Harrison, 1864).
5. One can be certain, however, that the genius who invented that perfect dessert, the s’more, made up of melted chocolate, Graham crackers, and marshmallows, was not a Graham.

6. Graham’s writings are in dialogue with the continental European discourses on masturbation written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Helen Leffkowitz Horowitz and Stephen Nissenbaum have written, Graham’s first lectures on the links among alcohol, sexual indulgence, and the cholera epidemic, drew on the writings of French physiologists Xavier Bichat and François J. Broussais, as well as those of the revolutionary-era American doctor Benjamin Rush, to develop “an understanding of alcohol and all stimulants as irritants of the natural system.” From Bichat, Graham borrowed the idea that all life was involved in a “continuous struggle for survival against the inorganic forces that surrounded them. Life was a constant battle between the principles of vitality and those of physics and chemistry, and death was simply the victory of the latter over the former.” See Stephen Nissenbaum, Sex, Diet, and Dehility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986). From Broussais, however, Graham lifted the idea that the principal threat to human life was food and drink, “upon which living organisms depended for their survival but which literally invaded them from without.” See Horowitz, Rethinking Sex, 20.


9. In her 1844 recipe book, under the category of “Nourishing and Unstimulating Foods,” Catharine Beecher writes: “The first and most important of these are the fatuous substances. Of these, wheat stands at the head as the most nutritious, safe and acceptable diet to all classes and circumstances. This can be used in the form of bread, every day, through a whole life, without cloying the appetite, and to an extent which can be said of no other food” (Catharine E. Beecher, Miss Beecher’s Domestic Receipt Book: Designed as a Supplement to her Treatise on Domestic Economy [New York: Harper, 1850], 5). As we shall see, wheat’s “unstimulating” qualities were central to its importance.

10. As Sidney Mintz writes, advances in industrialization throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries resulted in a shift in Western diets from a diet based in a “core” of carbohydrates, with “fringe” foods made of fat and proteins, to one in which meat increasingly became a central food. See Sidney Mintz, “Eating American,” in Food in the USA: A Reader (New York: Routledge, 2002), 146. By the 1840s domestic writers were already in disagreement with Graham about vegetarianism, even as they continued to advocate for bread as a central component of a healthy American diet. In 1844 Sarah Josepha Hale wrote: “There has been, of late years, much said and written respecting the benefits of adhering to a strict vegetable diet, and many excellent people are sadly perplexed about their duty in this matter, and whether they ought to give up animal food entirely. As I profess to make my book a manual for those who wish to preserve their health, as well as prepare their food in the most judicious manner, I will here give a sketch of the reasons which induce me to recommend a mixed diet, bread, meat, vegetables and fruits, as the best, the only right regimen for the healthy.” Sarah Josepha Hale, The Good Housekeeper, or The Way to Live Well and to Be Well While We Live (Boston: Weeks, Jordan & Company, 1839), 19. Italics in the original.


12. The replacement of corn by wheat was a strategy with a long and illustrious history in the Americas. Discussing her work on foodways in the Latin American conquest, Clara Olaya writes: “To convert the American Indians to the Catholic faith, the Spaniards had to talk to the Indians in food metaphors. For example, the Passion fruit and its flower were the metaphors used to explain the Passion of Christ to save the world. The American Indians had in high esteem their fruits: they marked the passage of time to celebrate the rites of passage from birth to death. In the meantime they were the sustenance and enjoyment of life. The chronicles of the Spanish conquest are filled with descriptions of how thousands of fruit trees were cut and cultivated plots turned by the Indians to their knees and join the European economy of wheat and grapes, the blood and body of the European man.” Clara Olaya, posting to afroLatino (Association for the Study of Food and Society), 1999. Olaya is the author of Frutas de America: tropical y subtropical: historia y usos (Barcelona: Grupo Editorial Norma, 1999).

13. Amelia Simmons, an American Orphan, American Cookery or, The Art of Dressing VIANDS, FISH, POULTRY & VEGETABLES and the best Modes of Making PASTES, PUDDING, PRES, TARINS, PUDDINGS, CUSTARDS & PRESERVES, and all kinds of CAKES, from the imperial plumb to plain Cake (Hartford: Printed for Simon Butler, 1798).

14. For Graham, wheat is the solution to the body politic’s ills; although he considers corn healthful, it is not a panacea like wheat. If one were to read Graham’s 1839 document in light of recent discussions about corn and the contemporary American body, such as Michael Pollan’s In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto (New York: Penguin, 2008), then it is clear that Graham’s project failed: wheat, and whole-grain wheat products, have receded from the American diet in favor of corn. From this failure one might indeed argue that corn and not wheat has come to define the American body. However, this paper presents an argument about the early nineteenth century, not the early twenty-first century.

Still, it is interesting to note where the writings of Graham and Pollan converge. Pollan points the consumer toward “real” foods: whole grains, more vegetables, fewer processed meats—as, in a sense, does Graham. But where Pollan calls refined flour “the first fast food,” dating it to the introduction of highly refined white flour during the 1870s (In Defense of Food, p.506), Graham would disagree. Not only does Graham rail against processed flours as early as 1857, he also critiques chemical leavening, popular in the early nineteenth century but reviled by Graham for making bread “sour” and non-nutritious. Technically, chemically leavened bread might be considered the first fast food.

Here I should also note that my analysis goes against the traditional historical distinction between the years 1850 and 1914 as one of high empire. Rather, I take a long view and see the entire project of New World colonization, beginning with Columbian contact, as imperial. This includes the Louisiana Purchase, the War of 1812, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, and other less juridical, but no less aggressive, forms of expansion into the West and the South Pacific.


16. Ibid.

17. Graham, Treatise, 54.

18. Ibid., 35.


20. See, for example, Aaron Bowborn-Strain’s wonderful article on bread fear, “Kills A Body Twelve Ways: Bread Fear and the Politics of ‘What to Eat?’” Gastronomics 7.3 (August 2007), 45-52.

21. Kaplan examines maternal illness as an issue in women’s fiction, I am building on her work here to examine “domestic” diets as part of the conversation about national bodily constitution in general.

22. See Horowitz’s Rethinking Sex, Nissenbaum’s Sex, Diet and Dehility, and, most important, Ben Barker-Beckfield’s “Sex and Cuisine: An Eater’s Manifesto.”


24. Ibid., 168.

25. In her work on cannibalism Maggie Kilgour writes: “...one of the most important characteristics of eating is its ambivalence: it is the most material need yet is invested with a great deal of significance, an act that involves both desire and aggression, as it creates a total identity between inside and outside, eater and eaten while insisting on the total control—the literal consumption—of the latter by the former. Like all acts of incorporation, it assumes an absolute distinction between inside and outside, eater and eaten, which, however, breaks down, as the law ‘you are what you eat’ obscures identity and makes it impossible to say who’s who...” See Maggie Kilgour, From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 7.


27. Ibid., 172.

29. In fact, in his recent biography of Melville, Andrew Delbanco notes that Graham’s *A Lecture to Young Men on Chastity* was one of the few books on the ship that Melville sailed on to Tahiti. Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 44–45.

30. The first official U.S. expedition to the South Pacific occurred in 1788.


34. Ibid.


36. A familiar example is the old chestnut “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.” As Harvey Levenstein notes in *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet*, by the middle of the nineteenth century it was popularly believed that apples were curative; this idea is inseparable from the story of Johnny Appleseed sowing apples across America in a popular allegory of domesticating the national space. See Harvey Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).