America Eats: Taste and Race in the New Deal Sensory Economy

Camille Bégin

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Graduate Department of History
University of Toronto

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Abstract

Recent developments in sensory history highlight the rewards of a sensory approach to the topic of racial formation in twentieth century U.S. Yet, few explicitly focus on the sense of taste. This dissertation looks at sensory interaction over food as a site for the making of the interwar American racial landscape. The narrative focuses on the cornerstone period of the late 1930s-early 1940s and considers, through the notion of sensory economy, the extent to which the senses are part of modern circuits of economic and cultural exchanges. The argument builds on the Federal Writers’ Project (FWP) archive, especially the America Eats project; the FWP was one of the art programs of the New Deal Works Progress Administration (WPA) and an important part of the liberal state cultural apparatus. Considering the sense of taste as a cultural and economic currency circulating throughout the American social fabric and the FWP archive allows highlighting taste as a medium for the negotiation of racial, gendered, ethnic, and regional identities in the interwar period. I examine how the FWP’s nostalgic and patriotic endeavour to record a national cuisine in the midst of the Great Depression contributed to the production and archiving of a prescriptive sensory and culinary knowledge about what was American food and who American eaters were. This dissertation documents how sensory interaction participated in the policing of the colour line but also in the creation of new hybrid tastes and, ultimately, to the
birth of a commodified culinary plurality. The narrative highlights how the encroachment of the food industry on American taste and the coming of World War Two led to the upholding of conservative gender roles and stereotyped racial imagery. Finally, this dissertation examines the notion of region in the U.S. and looks at how the search for regional cuisine led FWP workers to use racialized and commodified tastes as signals of regional authenticity. Overall, I suggest that a combined analysis of taste and race not only further our historical understanding of twentieth century American food culture but also enhances our comprehension of the role of sensory interaction in race making.
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“Say, Bigger,” asked Jan “where can we get a good meal on the South Side?”
“Well,” Bigger said, reflectively.
“We want to go to a real place,” Mary said, turning to him gaily.
“You want to go to a night club?” Bigger asked in a tone that indicated that he was simply mentioning names and not recommending places to go.
“No; we want to eat.”
“Look, Bigger. We want one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places.”
What did these people want? When he answered his voice was neutral and toneless.
“Well, there’s Ernie’s Kitchen Shack…”

Richard Wright, *Native Son*, 1940.

“‘D’ye like chawklit cake? W’at’s ‘is name?’
‘David. David-er-David himself’
‘D’ye like chawklit cake, I ast ye?’
‘No-no’, fearfully.
‘W-a-a-t? he growled, his eyes narrowing incredulously. ‘yuh-don’-like chawklit-cake? Owoo!’

…”
“That’s an handsome cake!” She smiled down at him. ‘An American one. I couldn’t bake it myself.’

Henry Roth, *Call it Sleep*, 1934.

The above epigraphs are fictional accounts of urban life in interwar America and both depict sensory encounters fraught with bewilderment, misconceptions, and apprehension. The stakes are high throughout these two dialogues. These seemingly mundane conversations translate the feeling of fright and the power relationships woven through race relations in the interwar U.S.; they carry the fear of the unknown and the threat of the unpredictable. In both these dialogues, sensory misunderstandings provoke alarm. In both novels none of the characters share the same taste: six-year-old David senses the supposedly familiar and comforting taste of “American” chocolate cake as a menace; Bigger cannot understand the sensory experience Mary and her date are looking for.
The first epigraph is a prelude to an interracial sensory encounter in interwar Chicago. A classic fictional account of the Great Migration of black southerners to the northern metropolis, African American writer Richard Wright’s *Native Son* sheds light on the psychological impact of migration and segregation (whether dictated by Jim Crow laws or de facto) on black Americans. In this excerpt, the central character, Bigger, a 20-year-old migrant, drives a liberal white couple through town when they ask him to stop by a “*real*” black eating place. As his confused, perplexed, and fearful reaction shows (“what *did* these people want?”), it probably never occurred to him before that such a thing as “black food” existed. Food was not a vehicle for taste novelty and culinary tourism for Bigger but an everyday need for survival. The sensory interaction sketched out by Wright indicates how the construction of blackness in interwar northern cities depended on a series of bodily performances, whether it be dancing and singing in night clubs or cooking and eating “*real*” black foods. Mary’s desire to taste authentic black food shows how blackness was displayed and commodified as an entertaining and familiar sensory difference available to whites on demand. Breaching the sensory racial boundary could then become a way to reaffirm white superiority.

The immigrant world of interwar New York is the setting of the second epigraph. David, a Russian-born child, wandered outside of the Lower East Side and got lost in unknown parts of the city before being picked up by the police. The policeman, himself of foreign extraction as his strong accent points out, tries to reassure the child by offering him a piece of “American” chocolate cake, a “handsome” sugary confection that, in his mind, all immigrants are supposed to

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long for. The child’s mother, who, in other parts of the book, is celebrated for her Russian cooking, later recognizes the cake as a cherished symbol of American identity. Her remark expresses her frustration at her inability to “integrate” into the American way of life and cooking; despite her efforts (and the efforts of health reformers and experts to change her cooking ways) she will never be able to reproduce the intrinsically American taste of the chocolate cake. Having lived most of his life in the immigrant enclave of Manhattan, David has not yet been fully exposed to the sensory world of his new country and, instead of the expected comfort, can only taste strangeness when eating the chocolate cake.

Sensory Economy

Bigger’s and David’s stories provide two avenues into the 1930s construction of taste and race and indicate how the fluid character of taste mirrors the shifting construction of race and ethnicity in the U.S. They also point to how perceptions are determined by the historical and spatial context in which they take place. Over time, the taste of chocolate cake will become familiar to the young U.S.-raised David; Bigger’s schooling in northern race relations will make him aware of what “real” black food means for white liberals, and how it is supposed to taste. This dissertation considers taste as a cultural and social construct influenced by the situation in which the act of eating and tasting takes place. This framework highlights the need to historicize the intimate feeling of tasting food in order to determine to what extent an individual’s perception can also be the repository of collective experience. Depending on who eats it, where, when, and with whom, a dish tastes differently, signifies disparately, and can invoke a variegated

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and contrasting set of cultural representations. The sense of taste therefore needs to be considered as part of a larger set of cultural and social exchanges that I label “sensory economy.”

The notion of sensory economy points to the ways in which perceptions are part of modern circuits of economic and cultural exchange. The term “economy” as used in this dissertation signals a plurality of modes of exchange and, to use Marxist terms, values. First of all, food in the past as now has a use value; it is the product of human labour and has a very obvious utility realized in the process of consumption: survival. Food also possesses an exchange value, most strikingly represented by the institution of the restaurant and by the supermarket shelves stocked with packaged and commodified food products. In the context of a restaurant, a meal becomes a “congelation of undifferentiated human labour” possessing an abstract exchange-value, a price.³ This classic Marxist theory of value insists, on the one hand, on the heterogeneity of use values of commodities and, on the other, on the homogeneity and abstract character of their exchange value.⁴ Yet, if restaurants are sites of economic flow, they also are sites of sensory circulation; a restaurant owner can alter the taste and price of a dish according to his or her will but also according to patrons’ demand. Taste re-materializes the commodity and modifies both its use and exchange values.

My critical appraisal of the Marxist theory of economy is indebted to David Howes’ account of Marx’s “incomplete” theory of value in Sensual Relations: Introducing the Senses in Culture and Social Theory. Howes highlights Marx’s reductionist views of objects and material

³ Karl Marx, quoted in David Howes, Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 222.

⁴ Howes, Sensual Relations, 225.
culture and proposes the notion of the “sign value” of objects as a necessary complement to the Marxist theory of value. His appraisal of “commodities as bundles of sensory and social relations” allows him to think of the “sense appeal” of commodities in the “hypersensorial contemporary marketplace.” Howes insightfully remarks that “Marx never compares the cut of two coats,” and therefore does not fully conceive of the added value offered to the commodity by fashion, cultural codes, and group distinction along class, race, gender, and generational lines. 

Marx himself notes the impediment of considering the use value in and of itself and, in an early text, illustrates his point with a revealing sensory instance, stating that, “from the taste of wheat it is not possible to tell who produced it, a Russian serf, a French peasant or an English capitalist.” He concludes from this practical observation that, “although use-values serve social needs and therefore exist within the social framework, they do not express the social relations of production.”

Today’s locavores might contend with the first part of this observation; following Howes’ remark that “it is by virtue of their material, sensuous characteristics that goods are able to express social relations,” I challenge the last part. The concept of sensory economy highlights how culturally and socially coded sensory perceptions (here taste) participate in the determination of the use and the exchange values of the commodity.

Howes’ critique helps to highlight the process of class and race making through food consumption and sensory interaction. The prospective conspicuous consumption of “black food” by Mary in Native Son is a potent instance of the role of “sign value” and sense appeal in food

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5 Howes, Sensual Relations, 224.
6 Ibid, 225.
7 Karl Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (Chicago: C.H. Kerr, 1904), 20.
8 Howes, Sensual Relations, 224.
consumption. For a liberal-oriented woman in the early 1940s, showing an interest in black culture was “in good taste” and a trip to Bronzeville with a white date socially acceptable.  

Not only was the fried chicken she ordered - a juicy and greasy piece of chicken thighs - delectable, but the racial power relations that underlay the sensory encounter in Native Son also imbued the taste of fried chicken with a new racialized sign-value. The taste of fried chicken is here put to use as an instrument of race making and, in this context, food commodities are indeed, “not just utilitarian articles or supreasensible items of exchange…but rather potent bundles of sensory symbolism and social relations.”

Building on this remark this dissertation unravels the role of racialized food commodities in the making of modern U.S. taste. The argument looks at how, within the New Deal sensory economy, taste acted as an economic and sensory currency whose sign, use, and exchange values informed, and were informed by, the evolving contemporary racial taxonomy and the socio-cultural life of the New Deal era.

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9 The word taste has acquired multiple meanings over the course of the modern era. Philosophers and Classics scholars have traditionally considered taste as one of the “lower senses” alongside smell and touch; yet, the rise of the field of the aesthetic in the eighteenth century arguably remade the sense of taste. In the words of historian Pricilla Parkhurst Ferguson: “by dissociating taste from bodily functions and associating it instead with reason and refinement, the eighteenth century shifted the site of taste from the body to the mind.” She continues by noting that “aesthetic sublimation canceled out the appetites…from the least of the senses, taste became the arbiter of all of them. It became an arbiter, too, in the social hierarchy. For, whether innate or acquired, taste—which could signify only “good taste”—was taken to mark the superiority of the individual and of the relevant group or “taste public,” that is, cultural consumers joined by their common preference for a given cultural product.” This last remark builds on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the function of taste as “cultural capital” essential to the process of class formation and class reproduction. The multiple meanings of taste in the contemporary period deeply inform its culinary occurrence and its function as “cultural capital” in social and racial distinction. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, “The Senses of Taste,” The American Historical Review, Vol. 116, No. 2 (April 2011), 376; 380; See also, Rebecca Spang, The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 5; Fitzgerald, G. J. and G. M. Petrick, “In Good Taste: Rethinking American History with Our Palates,” Journal of American History 95(2) 2008, 393-398; Allan S. Weiss, “Paradigms of Taste,” in Taste, Nostalgia, A. S. Weiss, ed., (New York: Lusitania Press, 1997), 7-10, and Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

10 Howes, Sensual Relations, 227.
Considering perceptions as cultural, social, and economic currency, I place taste at the center of the narrative in order to sketch out a sensory account of New Deal America.\footnote{As cultural critic and historian Michael Denning remarks, the expression “New Deal” is “at once” the name of “[Franklin D.] Roosevelt’s successful political alliance and the common term for the US in the 1930s and 1940s,” Michael Denning, \textit{Culture in the Age of Three Worlds}, (New York: Verso, 2004), 159.} Considering the senses as not only natural endowments but also as cultural and social constructs, sensory historians conduct analyses that go beyond vision in order to account for the full human sensorium in the past and present. In his extended review of the field of sensory history, historian Mark Smith underlines scholars’ role in not only establishing narratives about each specific sense but also understanding “how the senses are combined in a given society, how they work together, [and] how the senses articulate.”\footnote{Mark M Smith, \textit{Sensing the Past: Seeing, hearing, tasting, and Touching in History} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 12.} The sense of taste is, at any given historical period, part of larger sensory environments also defined by specific visual cultures, soundscapes, smellsapes, and models of hapticity. The notion of sensory economy allows us to take into account the “intersensoriel” and synesthetic character of human perception. For instance, when the character of Mary in \textit{Native Son} finally ate “real” black food her white-trained ear might also have heard the “noises” of the black migrants’ neighbourhood, while Bigger, waiting for her to finish, listened to the black modern public sphere in the making.\footnote{On African Americans as “sonic beings” and the role of sound in the making of black modernity, see Clare Corbould, “Streets, Sound and Identity in interwar Harlem,” \textit{Journal of Social History} 40, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 859-894; Karl Hagstrom Miller, \textit{Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). On the birth of the modern Black public sphere, see Clare Corbourne, \textit{Becoming African American: Black Public Life in Harlem, 1919-1939} (Cambridge: Harvard University press, 2009) and Davarian Baldwin, \textit{Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration and Black Urban Life} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).} Sensory interaction meant that she was not only tasting the fried chicken but also fully engaging with sensory and ideological stereotypes woven around existing notions of race, gender, and class.
A new taxonomy of race emerged in the interwar period and was enacted by immigration and citizenship laws, as well as New Deal policies and popular understanding of racial difference. Over the past fifteen years, scholars of U.S. history have highlighted how the mid-1920s immigration quota laws, coupled with the 1930 census, “disaggregated and realigned in new and uneven ways” notions of race and nationality.\(^\text{14}\) Though the new quota system can be considered as the high point of nativism, it also produced a new “racial alchemy” that progressively whitened Southern and Eastern European “new immigrants.”\(^\text{15}\) Historians have demonstrated how, during the 1930s, several groups were incorporated into definitions of whiteness (Southern and Eastern Europeans, some Near Eastern groups), while others became or were reinforced in their role as racial ‘others’ (Mexicans, African Americans, Asians), thus changing each group’s strategies for integration into the fabric of American life—whether on cultural or political levels.\(^\text{16}\) The scholarship of David Roediger and Lizabeth Cohen in particular analyzes how federal policies, union mobilization, and the development of a national mass-market of consumer and cultural goods converged to redraw the boundaries of race and class during the Depression decade.\(^\text{17}\) While the category of whiteness expanded through working-class solidarity and the emergence of the concept of ethnicity as “a new brand of difference


whose basis was cultural,” the racial lines between blacks and whites hardened, for instance in terms of residential segregation. New immigrants quickly “invested in whiteness,” thus accelerating the reorganization of the American racial system toward a strengthening of the colour line and the spatial re-mapping and cultural re-imagination of the country in black and white. The new “syntax of nationality and belonging” kept evolving in the 20th century but the 1930s marked the entrance into a decades-long period of relative stability in the American black and white “bifurcated racial climate.” Yet, the conceptualisation of two separate notions of (colored) race and (white) ethnicity only clearly occurred in the postwar era, and the student of the 1930s is left observing the “messy” process of their differentiation.

One of the most effective – and “visceral”- ways for European new immigrants to establish their place in the American racial taxonomy was to differentiate themselves from racialized groups such as African Americans and Mexicans Americans by learning the enduring ways Americans have devised through history to establish racial difference through bodily and

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19 The metaphor was developed by George Lipsitz in The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998).


21 Roediger, David R., and James R Barrett, “Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and The "New Immigrant" Working Class,” Journal of American Ethnic History 16, no. 3 (1997), 12. Only through World War Two did European immigrants secure their belonging to American whiteness. The interwar years were an active period of race making in the United States and in-between categories of “color,” “complexion” and “nationality” that were part of the racial vernacular of the time need to be contextually understood and analyzed. For most of the period, new immigrants belonged to an “in-between” category whose racial identity was not fixed. On the distinction between race and color see, Thomas A. Guglielmo, White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1943 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7-9.
sensual performances of race. As chapter three on the taste of southern food details, the result of this process could be a reinforcement of racial sensory segregation; Mary’s character in *Native Son* clearly voices that for her fried chicken, literally, tastes black. But the analysis of ethnic food in chapter five also shows how the intense race-making process of 1930s U.S. could trigger a sensory mélange that can be identified as the dawn of Americans’ taste for hybrid ethnic food. Growing up, the hero of *Call it Sleep* will learn to navigate between “American” and “Russian” foods and to integrate them relatively easily into his white ethnic identity. The simultaneously prosaic and symbolic character of food, its ability to conjure up the past through sensory reenactment, and its malleability makes it an effective tool of analysis to study the everyday making of race and ethnicity in 1930s U.S.

The notion of sensory economy therefore works to highlight how sensory circulation and exchange woven around food participated in the interwar process of identity formation. Scholars of history, folklore, and anthropology all point to the role of food and foodways as symbols capable of enacting individual and group identity—both chosen and imposed. Regular re-

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22 Analyzing how the senses participate in the process of racial formation and differentiation then unveils, in Smith words, “how unthinkingly race is made, how racism is learned, and how the ideology of race and racism have arisen historically.” Karl Miller’s work on southern folk and pop music studies the progressive compartmentalization of music via racial categories between 1880s and 1920s. He highlights the role of a broad range of people in the establishment of this sensory segregation, from scholars and artists, to industrialists and consumers. This sound-centred analysis allows for a refinement of Smith’s argument about “how unthinkingly race is made.” Miller shows how specific actors had different stakes in this process of segregation, whether scientific, financial or aesthetic and, very consciously, made race. Once racial difference had been established and naturalized by the 1930s, then one could hear a blues song and, “unthinkingly,” hear blackness. Race had been learned and became a belief system grounded in a historically conditioned perception system. Smith, *How Race Is Made*, 3; Miller, *Segregating Sound*; Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past*; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Brown, *Babylon Girls*; Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: the Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

23 See Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 93-121.

enactment of mythologized meals provides a sensory template of national identity, biting into the past becomes a sensory performance of citizenship. In the case of a chosen identity, eating becomes an act of pride, a way to perform- and really, embody- cultural and political claims. This mnemonic and celebratory character of food and taste is also at play in the case of immigrant groups for which foodways are symbolic means to bond with the old country while simultaneously embodying their journeys in the new. David’s mother might not be able to bake an American chocolate cake but she might have started buying her bread at the “modern” bakery. But if food and foodways are central elements in racial and national identity construction they can also be used as a way to lampoon, when the food of a group is seized as a negative symbol in order to delineate a group from the outside by condemning it as a sensory deviation. Such a process is wrought with moral judgement since it uses ideals of purity and taboos in order to create an ‘other’ that ultimately helps define the majority by difference. To invoke the familiar adage, Bigger and David might not have been aware that they were what they ate but the

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26 Gabaccia, We are What We Eat, Diner, Hungering for America, Jane Ziegelman, 97 Orchard : An Edible History of Five Immigrant Families in one New York Tenement (New York: Smithsonian Books, 2010).

immigrant mother showed awareness of the abnormality of her taste within the interwar U.S.
sensory economy.

Food is a potent way to bind an imagined community of eaters defined by national, ethnic, or racial belonging, but tasting food is also a way to perceive place and constructing regional taste a potent way to represent national unity. In the construction of national as well as ethnic identity, foodways and taste are strongly attached to the notion of place, whether real or nostalgically remembered. Regional food and taste are then often mobilized in nation building projects that hold diversity as a proof of strength and unity. The 1930s in America was indeed an age of regionalism that can be best understood in light of Edward Ayers and Peter Onuf’s remark that, “what makes any region seem distinctive are differences that only make sense in a common text.” The geography of race in the U.S. and the concentration of racialized groups in specific regions, notably Mexicans in the Southwest and blacks in the South, intimately linked the taste of place with the taste of race. Chapter three and four highlight how regional tastes of race played out in the national sensory economy. Southern food, following the millions of

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African American interwar migrants, lost some of its regional anchoring and was increasingly perceived as black food. The fried chicken available at Ernie’s Kitchen Shack in Native Son is an example of such a shift. While the South’s long-established regional sensory economy had relied on a degree of sensory intimacy, increasing national media attention forced the region to adjust to the modern national construction of segregated taste. In the South, the role of race in the making of the region’s food taste was progressively obliterated. In contrast, in the Southwest, tasting place was tasting race. Tasting Mexican food offered the opportunity to perceive the race of a conquered people and the construction of Mexican food as southwestern heritage food in the 1930s dialectically participated in anchoring the region within the country. A potent gender dynamic also animated the sensory construction of this domestic yet exotic taste. Daring to eat the spicy dishes prepared by Mexican women was a central experience of white male culinary tourism. Exploring the interplay of taste, place, race, and gender allows for a deep and contextualized understanding of how the senses contributed to the making of race.

Sensory interaction, exchange, and trade characterized the New Deal sensory economy. A binary understanding of the symbolical relationship between foodways and identity as either positive or disparaging therefore needs to be complicated. Cultural history scholarship on the role of domestic spaces and intimate contact in the process of race making highlights how, to be fully established, racialized lines need to be crossed, twisted, tested.  

segregation for instance, Mark Smith’s work shows that “the sensory justifications of segregation, in fact, would have lost legitimacy if there had been complete segregation of the races … it was only through day-to-day familiarity with the sensory dimensions of blackness, as whites invented and styled them, that they could maintain the fiction of sensory inferiority.”

One then needs to be attentive to instances when food provides opportunities for sensory borrowing, adaptation, and integration. Indeed, Wrights aptly shows how eating the other’s food can work to reinforce the class status and racial identity of the eater while generating comforting feelings. Crossing racialized sensory lines is an act filled with gender and racial meaning. The narrative of this dissertation tracks the ways in which the senses were recruited as agents in the making of the modern American racial taxonomy. The argument highlights how eating and tasting the food of racial or ethnic others could be a way to create, reinforce, resist, blur, negotiate, and ultimately undermine difference. I propose the notion of sensory economy as a research tool to enlarge our understanding of the historical processes that influence human perception and as a device to comprehend how the senses, and in particular taste, are constitutive elements of the modern notions of gender and race.

New Deal Food Writing.

Food was a topic central to the Great Depression decade. The soup kitchen line-ups of the early 1930s, though they disappeared rapidly, stayed anchored in the nation’s memory. Hunger


33 Bigger’s story reminds us of cultural critic bell hooks’ remark in her insightful article “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” that the line between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation is a fine one— one that the historian should endeavour to, if not determine, question, bell hooks, Black Looks : Race and Representation (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 39.
for instance appeared as a leitmotiv of a number of Depression-era novels. As Paula Rabinowitz explains, “the devastating image of hunger in Depression-ravaged America gave intellectuals a structuring ground on which to figure their narratives.” Yet, overall, Americans’ health and diet did not suffer from the Great Depression. As Harvey Levenstein justly remarked, those who lacked food throughout the Depression were the “long-term poor, the marginal groups of the pre-Depression era who were a permanent fixture of American life,” most notably white and black southern sharecroppers. The lack of food embodied, however symbolically, broader interrogations about the viability of the capitalist market economy. This is best seen in the reaction to the New Deal Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933 that aimed at raising the price of agricultural commodities by inducing farmers to destroy their surplus. What was the logic that would entice a country no longer able to feed large parts of its population to kill six millions piglets and pour milk into the gutter? Ultimately, some of the farm surpluses led to the creation of the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation (FSRC) and the establishment of the New Deal school lunch program that would become the most enduring federal food policy initiative

34 Significantly, women writers took on food as a central practical and metaphorical issue. Rabinowitz’s study of women’s revolutionary literature in the decade has shown how these writers, taking their cue from Meribel Le Sueur, situated “the differentials between male and female bodies […] in the belly.” While the male body and the masculine text was a “hungry, an empty space once filled by its labor;” the female body was “pregnant for desire, for “children,” for “butterfat” to feed them, and most significantly for “history” to change the world for them.” Paula Rabinowitz, Labor & Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 36; 3.


with its establishment as a permanently funded program in 1946. But, if food was at the time an economic and policy issue, discussion of food predominately occupied the socio-cultural realm.

The New Deal decade witnessed a marked increase in food writing. The fast developing food industries distributed numerous pamphlet cookbooks; publishers expanded their cookbook catalogue; scientific research on nutrition and vitamins proliferated and was relayed in magazine and radio advertisements. ‘Make-do’ Depression-era cooking, home processing, and thriftiness were some of the themes these publications evoked, but the impact of the Depression on American eating habits was only a peripheral matter to cookbook authors. The rise of the food industries and the development of new food shopping spaces such as the chain store and the “price-shaving, free-for-all” supermarkets accentuated the role of scientific discourse in food retailing and established women as the most important food consumers. New retailing practices spurred the growth of trade journals and, ultimately, the re-birth of the consumers’ movement. Scholars have started to explore the variety of themes and styles of the 1930s food writing, highlighting their proclaimed “modernism” and their profound gender conservatism.


40 Tracey Deutsch has shown in her recent study of the rise of large retail spaces and chain distribution how the depression at first sustained the growth of supermarkets known not so much for their large size as for their “air of festive chaos.” This first wave of stores was curtailed by the early 1940s and replaced by standardized and overly feminized stores. Tracey. Deutsch, *Building a Housewife’s Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 133;148; see also, Richard W. Longstreth, *The Drive-in, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 1914-1941* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

Gender conservatism and comforting feelings often went hand in hand in New Deal food writing. The increasing share of industrial processed food in the American diet during the 1930s indeed participated in the reorganization of American taste around the two contrasting poles of “modernity” and “authenticity” and triggered feelings of sensory nostalgia integral to the gendered and racialized workings of the New Deal sensory economy. As chapter two argues, sensory nostalgia for unadulterated pre-industrial food was a comforting feeling for 1930s American eaters who increasingly encountered standardized food at the (super)market, the restaurant, and at home. The study of the role of the taste of Mexican food in the Southwestern tourist economy in chapter four further illustrates how the constructed sensory experience of racial authenticity intertwined with modern economic exchanges. The commodification of the taste of Mexican food as the region’s culinary heritage spurred the development of practices of sensory sightseeing that paradoxically participated in the making of the modern identity and wealth of the region. Culinary tourism in the southwest was part of a larger wave of sensory nostalgia that constructed the taste of pre-industrial and homemade food as a realm of sensory memory. Culinary nostalgia upheld conservative gender and racial roles as central elements of sensory modernity.42

Sensory nostalgia and gender conservatism were upheld in state-sponsored photographic and arts projects that regularly placed agricultural production at the centre of the nation’s identity. A variety of New Deal agencies employed photographers to document the federal

42Besides, the two often participated in the same process. As historian Micki McElya nicely put it in her study of the cultural history and legacy of Aunt Jemima, “the trademark told a story of the post-Reconstruction reunification of North and South brought about through the loving labors of a black woman and made available to all through modern capitalism.” Micki McElya, Clinging to Mammy: the Faithful Slave in Twentieth-century America (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 16.
government’s relief effort and life in New Deal America, resulting in the production of iconic “official images.” These photographs covered a vast visual semantic field and ranged from the celebration of American pastoralism to the praising of scientific agriculture all the while ratifying racial segregation and inequality. Photographs of proud motherly women in front of full shelves of home-canned vegetables became a central motif of the 1930s documentary aesthetic, creating some of the most enduring, if not the most accurate, images of the role of women during the Depression. The murals produced by the New Deal art project relayed this gendered agrarian vision through what Barbara Melosh calls the “comradely ideal” that depicted males as dependable comrades and females as obedient partners in ordered agricultural landscapes. The state-sponsored murals conveyed an aesthetic of “strident masculinism” designed, in Gary Gerstle’s view, to “compensate visually for what [men] lacked in fact,” food and jobs. Looking at the massive venture of the post-office murals initiated by the Public Arts Project, historians have for instance shown how its pictorial agenda consistently represented “a brand of fairy tale Americana”; the murals represented a stable past and a hopeful future that,

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43 New Deal Agencies that left important photographic records are the AAA but also the Farm Security Administration (FSA), the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Work Progress Administration (WPA) art programs, or the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Pete Daniel, ed., Official Images: New Deal Photography (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987).

44 See the analysis of the FSA photographs taken by John Collier at the Graig Field Southeastern Air training Center in Selma, Alabama and representing black males processing chicken in Psyche A. Williams-Forson, Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). See also, Melosh, Engendering Culture, 73.


46 Melosh, Engendering Culture, 5; 33-81.

47 Gary Gerstle, American Crucible, 178.
according to Karal Ann Marling, eradicated its missing center: the calamitous present.\footnote{Marling, \textit{Wall-to-Wall America}, 20.} Pantry pictures and mural paintings both aimed at spurring nationalist feelings; using an agrarian imagery deeply rooted in U.S. political culture, they showcased a land of plenty in which men’s work and women’s homemaking tempered the uproar of capitalist modernity.

Central to the state-sponsored New Deal food writing was the Federal Writers’ Project’s (FWP) culinary output, especially the \textit{America Eats} book project. The FWP was one of the mid-1930s New Deal art programs mapped out in the 1935 Federal Project Number One. \footnote{Other projects parts of Federal One were the Federal Art Project, the Federal Theater Project, the Federal Music Project and the Historical Records Survey. On the Federal Art Project, see Victoria Grieve, \textit{The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009); Jonathan Harris, \textit{Federal Art and National Culture: the Politics of Identity in New Deal America} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Marlene Park, and Gerald E. Markowitz, \textit{Democratic Vistas: Post Offices and Public Art in the New Deal} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Karal Ann Marling, \textit{Wall-to-wall America: a Cultural History of Post-office Murals in the Great Depression} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). On the Federal Theater Project, see Paul Sporn, \textit{Against Itself: The Federal Theater and Writers’ Project in the Midwest} (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), Barry Witham, \textit{The Federal Theatre Project: a Case Study} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). On both programs, see Melosh, \textit{Engendering Culture}.} Federal editors and field workers in the FWP’s decentralized state bureaus collaborated to “describe America to Americans” through local guidebooks (American Guide Series), folklore recordings, and studies focused on population group, occupational activities or broadly defined themes, such as \textit{America Eats}.\footnote{On the FWP’s American Guide Series (AGS), see, Christine Bold, \textit{The WPA Guides: Mapping America} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999); Shaffer, \textit{See America first}, 170–220; Jerrold Hirsch, \textit{Portrait of America: a Cultural History of the Federal Writers’ Project} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).} This last book project was not to be a cookbook, but rather a series of five overarching regional essays entertainingly introducing readers to the taste of each region. FWP workers produced comforting “snapshot” pictures aimed at providing cultural confidence to America in the midst of the Great Depression and at giving legitimacy to the new political,
social, and economic order of the liberal New Deal State. The project ended with the active involvement of the U.S. in World War Two, and as chapter two highlights, the America Eats archive also provides insight into the role of the senses on the wartime home front and the symbolical importance of “virile” and invigorating taste to the military mobilization of the citizenry. Researching and documenting their search for American food, FWP’s workers left behind a large corpus of sources on food and taste, which serves as a window into the cultural and sensual worlds of the 1930s and early 1940s.

The inclusive definition of “writers” adopted by the FWP breached traditional class and cultural lines by including literature in the world of labour. The FWP was a relief program for white collar workers, from journalists to clerks; but what such inclusiveness also meant was that the FWP writers had, to put it as nicely as Christine Bold, “diverse degrees of cultural confidence” and competence. Indeed, the definition of a writer had been necessarily vague from the beginning in order for the FWP to achieve its relief vocation. Assessing the meaning of the term in her book on the Massachusetts office - a book aptly entitled Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists- Bold writes that, “for some employees, being labeled a writer was a familiar experience, for some a long sought-dream, for some simply a means of surviving the Depression.”

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52 Christine Bold, Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists: the WPA Writers' Project in Massachusetts (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 99.

53 Bold, Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists, 67.

54 Christine Bold, Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists, 25. An editorial note on a Maine copy written by a FWP federal editor thus reads: “this group of "essays" is utterly hopeless. The style is so crude, the construction so uncouth, and the diction so faulty, that it is impossible to shape them unto anything resembling good literary usage.
Hurston, most of the six thousand FWP workers remain unknown, especially because few cared to publicize their involvement in the FWP relief work after the War. The occasional mention of names provides clues as to their identities, notably racial and ethnic; but the major trait that unified the members of the FWP “bureaucracy” was their experience of the breadlines and their need for relief work.

Under the leadership of liberal federal staff such as folklorist Benjamin Botkin, administrator Henry G. Alsberg, and African American poet Sterling Brown, one of the unabashed goals of the FWP was to reconcile cultural pluralism and romantic nationalism to present “America as a culture still in the process of becoming.” Yet, federal editors and field workers in each locale had quite diverse understandings of the FWP mandate and the FWP’s archive document their disparate visions of the nation. Bold, in her detailed study of the making of the American Guide Series, provides an insightful look at “the tensions between federal

or even ordinary clarity without a complete rewrite by a qualified writer. At present they read as though prepared by illiterate morons.” “Maine, editorial report on state copy,” 1936-1940, Correspondence relating to Folklore Studies, 1936-1940, Alabama to Mississippi,” National Archive and Record Administration, Record Group 69, P157.22, box 1. Most of the FWP employees should thus be considered as workers who wrote rather than writers per se. For this reason I designate them in my study as “FWP’s workers” rather than as “writers.” See Christine Bold, Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists, especially, 11-30 and 99-126.

This number is an imprecise and high estimate. For a discussion of the difficult task of estimating how many writers were involved, on a short or long-term basis, in the FWP, see, Andrew S. Gross, “The American Guide Series: Patriotism as Brand-name Identification,” The Arizona Quarterly 62, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 85; 104–105.

Responding to the FWP’s America Eats book proposal, a publisher ironically remarked that “one of the men in his office raised the question of why these WPA fellows should know anything about eating,” indeed, “he thought they were always supposed to be hungry.” Unknowingly, this publisher pointed to one of the main assets of the FWP in its quest for American food. More than their capacity as writers, the common experiences of the FWP worker as impoverished white-collar workers in the Depression rendered their culinary and sensory notation invaluable. Edward Dood to JD Newsom, September 12, 1941, Correspondence, November to December 1941, Federal Writers’ Project, America Eats, Library of Congress- A 830.

Hirsch, Portrait of America, 30.
bureaucracy and regional difference; the competing claims of “specialized” versus “local”
knowledge; the effect of “official” sponsorship on the setting of cultural norms and the jostling
of local groups and narratives for recognition within the national framework.”

Close attention to regional difference unveils how the New Deal’s inclusive civic ideal often took on racially exclusive overtones. Scholars of the FWP have shown in local monographs and national studies how the competing and “conflicting” definitions of America that coexisted within the project ultimately led to the direct intervention of the U.S. Congress in the FWP’s affairs, and, in Jerrold Hirsh’s words, the transformation of a “liberal and reformist view of American culture” into “the basis of a new and ultimately conservative national consensus.” Internal tensions coupled with the intense scrutiny on the part of the Congress’s Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) maimed the FWP in its last years. Yet, under the guidance and stewardship of committed liberal intellectuals, the FWP was an essential part of the New Deal State’s cultural apparatus.

59 On this topic see Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 128-186.
60 Hirsh, *Portrait of America*, 212.
61 In his 1998 book, Denning analyses how the 1930s American cultural life was reshuffled —“laboured”- by the Popular Front strategy of the communist party. Its wide intellectual and ideological cast reconciled, for a short decade, leftist views with mainstream America, famously holding communism as twentieth century Americanism. Denning’s argument considers how a wide array of left-leaning organizations and cultural participants allied to bend the national mood toward a social-democratic ethos. The alliance of the Cultural Front and the Popular Front social movement contributed to a radical reorientation of American public discourse as well as political and cultural life, thus almost amounting to a “second American renaissance,” even if, from his own account, it held singularly conservative views on gender. The WPA art projects were an important organ of the state cultural apparatus and Michael Denning identified them as an important creative source for the leftist “Cultural Front.” According to Denning, it represented a crucial hope for the advent of a “cultural democracy” in the U.S., that is, “a bureaucracy that would provide ‘culture’ for the people.” Though this hope faltered in the face of the capitalist power of the “Advertisement Front,” it left an “indelible imprint on the modern cultural apparatus.” Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, xvi; 45.
My interpretation of the FWP culinary collection considers the archive as both a source and a subject. As an important piece of New Deal food writing, the FWP papers and published works provide an unparalleled window into the sensory economy of 1930s U.S. and, in Mark Smith’s words, “through careful and considered engagement with printed evidence, we can readily grasp what particular sensory events or stimuli meant to particular individuals and groups in particular contexts.” As a sensory archive, it holds a repertoire of perceptions and embodied knowledge, a record of sensory meaning and consumption intrinsically linked to the context of its interwar collection. Considered as a subject, as an archive in the making, the FWP material opens a window on the production of sensory knowledge and nation making in the New Deal period.

The Latin root of the word “economy” relates to the proper management of the domestic finances and workforce. I use this primary meaning of the word “economy” in order to explore how the America Eats archive was collected, managed, and created by the federal editors in interaction with local field workers. The notion of sensory economy therefore allows us to look at how the documentation and archiving process produced and arranged sensory and culinary knowledge about the nation’s regions and their inhabitants. Looking at the production and


64 Raymond. Williams, Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society (London: Fontana, 1976), 110. Nils Lindahl Elliot uses this meaning in his analyzes of the multisensuality of zoos. He writes: “Here I refer not so much to the modern notion of “economy”- though certainly many zoos attempt to commodify their most explicit multisensualities- but to two older meanings of the word: economy as a certain arrangement of something, and, in the archaic sense of the word, as the management of household affairs. Derived from ménage, meaning “household” in the original French, and also household management n English, the older name for zoos is, of course, “menagerie.” The notion of an economy of multisensuality might thereby be described as the sensual equivalent of a collection of animals: the different senses themselves appear to be “collected” and “managed,” if not “domesticated.” Nils Lindahl Elliot, “See It, Sense It, Save It: Economies of Multisensuality in Contemporary Zoos.” The Senses and Society 1 (2006): 205.
management of sensory knowledge in the FWP archive highlights an overlooked aspect of nation building in the New Deal era by taking into consideration the role of perceptions, feelings, and memories in the making of the national imagined community. As chapter one highlights, the archive documents the FWP’s efforts at affective nation building and the New Deal state’s endeavour to renew the nation’s “emotional contract.”

Alan Trachtenberg remarked that “more than ideological politics the keynote of the 1930s was the idea of culture, a search in everyday life and memories of “the people” for what was distinctively American.” As the title of the FWP’s main culinary project, *America Eats*, clearly states, the FWP did attempt to answer the decade’s interrogation about “what is American?” Chapter one and two detail how FWP workers and editors regularly pointed to a codified pool of culinary traditions and national sensory memories available as cultural catharsis in the face of the reality of industrialized and standardized taste. Yet, the FWP provided a far from straightforward answer; what American food consisted of was an unresolved matter of debate woven around issues of race, ethnicity, and region. One can speculate that this lack of consensus among the FWP, alongside the entry of the U.S. into World War Two, was ultimately one of the reasons why the *America Eats* project never made it into print. The FWP culinary archive documents the intricate workings of the U.S. sensory economy in the midst of the Great Depression.

Considering sensory perceptions as national binding and the archive as a subject allows us to


look at the imagined community of eaters as acted out in the archive. Analyzing the circulation of taste throughout the archive shapes a dynamic narrative that sheds light on the role of the senses in the making of racial, ethnic, and gender identities in the 1930s U.S.
Chapter One

*America Eats*: Editing the Borders of the National Sensory Economy.

The Federal Writers’ Project’s (FWP) *America Eats* book project was an effort to search and celebrate ‘American’ food. The diverse interpretations of what the term ‘American’ meant in the late 1930s was one of the most problematic parts of the FWP’s culinary search. The *America Eats* book proposal avoided this question as the editors outlined their goal of documenting national traditions relating to food as well as “group eating as an important American social institution, its part in development of American cookery as an authentic art and in the preservation of that art.”¹ The FWP federal editors conceived *America Eats* as a retrospective, and nationally introspective, book that would not concern itself with “food and eating in general”; rather, they established that, the “theme of the book is cookery in the best tradition.”² The FWP’s editors aimed at providing a “detailed picture of the eating habits of the Americans throughout the 48 states in as lively and as amusing [a way] as possible.”³ The enterprise was a multisensory one. In the minds of the editors, the “descriptions of food should mention color, odour, and texture, since food appeals to the four senses- sight, sound, taste and smell”; they carefully underlined that, “the appeal is primarily to the sense of smell for taste can distinguish only between sweet, sour, salty and bitter.”⁴ The *America Eats* editors envisioned the book as a comforting script for authentic American taste pageantry.

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¹ “Brief Description of Proposed Book,” 1, Administrative Material, LOC-AE, A 829.
⁴ “General Note to Regional Editors of *America Eats*,” 1, Administrative Material, LOC-AE, A 829.
The FWP’s culinary narrative reached for an emotional and sensory past able to soothe the nation in the midst of economic depression and, in the last incarnation of the book project, strengthen the citizenry in wartime. The mnemonic and symbolic quality of taste and food provided an emotional avenue to the nation’s past and present fate. Svetlana Boym remarks in her study of the modern historical emotion of nostalgia that “the nation-state at best is based on the social contract that is also an emotional contract, stamped by the charisma of the past.” An in-depth study of the America Eats archive allows us to look at how the New Deal state and its cultural apparatus renewed the national “emotional contract” through the documentation of what the FWP federal editors, problematically, labelled traditional ‘American’ food. Not only a transcript of ritualized traditions, the America Eats project also established the fleeting act of tasting traditional regional dishes as a comforting performance of national identity. The America Eats project considered regional cuisines as contributors to a nationally cohesive culinary narrative. Food was an apparently apolitical issue that could be used to transcend partisanship at a time of renewed attacks against the New Deal State. Once recorded and archived, culinary regional histories and food preferences would be reproducible and consumable on demand, providing a common sensory ground in a time of domestic and international political strife.

However, the two components of the America Eats title require further investigation in order to unpack both its intended meaning and unplanned outcomes. Indeed, offering a taste of the past, the sensory narrative emerging from the America Eats archive contributed to defining and policing the contemporary borders of American sensory identity. Further, one needs to

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analyse what cultural and sensory meaning the association of “America” and “food” in this concise title produced, and how. What was American food? Who were the American eaters? Was every food eaten in the U.S. deemed ‘American’? How did the line between ‘American’ and ‘foreign’ food get established in the FWP archive? Who was to have the authority to determine a dish’s traditional standing and authenticity? How was the archive of American food and taste created and organized? How were history and memory recruited in the goal of writing a national culinary narrative? In other words, whose cuisine did the FWP deem worthy of inclusion in the American sensory past and how were their tastes integrated into the America Eats archive?

This chapter uses the notion of sensory economy in order to analyze how the federal editors of the FWP America Eats project policed the sensory borders of the nation. The Latin root of the word “economy” relates to the proper management of domestic finances and the workforce.8 I build on this meaning to look at how the archival process produced and arranged sensory and culinary knowledge about the nation’s regions and their people. This interpretation of the archive as the subject of historical inquiry builds on Ann Laura Stoler’s call to consider archives as “both a corpus of statement and a depot of documents, both sites of the imaginary and institutions that fashioned histories as they concealed, revealed and contradicted the investments of the state.”9 Yet, I will also interrogate the relevance of the notion of archive for sensory historians and suggest Diane Taylor’s idea of the repertoire as a “non-archival system of transfer” as a necessary complement.10

8 Raymond. Williams, Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society (London: Fontana, 1976), 110.
Situated at the interstices between the federal editors’ top-down instructions and FWP workers bottom-up interpretations of editorial guidelines, this chapter analyzes how misunderstandings of the editors’ goals and internal sensory dissensions about what ‘American’ food was contributed to the creation of a 1930s sensory archive. The FWP’s pyramidal power hierarchy and administrative setup provoked a dynamic dialogue between, on the one hand, educated liberal Washington editors and, on the other, local FWP workers working in state-based offices. At its best the FWP was a site of productive compromise between a liberal elite and local white-collar workers on relief. Yet, freehanded interpretation of the federal editors’ instructions remained the norm in the state offices. Especially when it came to the America Eats project, most FWP workers were, “not sure about how to approach this subject exactly,” and unclear about, “what form the [federal editors] wanted [their] material to take.” The FWP archive housed at the Library of Congress documents the plurality of tastes along regional, racial, and gender lines in 1930s America, but it also records the federal FWP office efforts to draw a consensual map of American taste.

Focusing on the correspondence and administrative material for the America Eats project, this first chapter analyses the process of sensory editing of the nation operated by the FWP federal staff. The successive directors of the FWP, Henry G. Alsberg and then John D. Newsom, and the editors of the America Eats project, the most identifiable ones being Katherine Kellocks, Lyle Saxon, and Florence Kerr, adhered to a liberal and racially inclusive view of the nation.

11 The complex bureaucratic organization of the FWP led to occasional cacophony, as can be inferred from Henry G. Alsberg, director of the FWP until 1939, reassuring letter to Lyle Saxon, the Louisiana FWP state director: “You will be glad to learn that the National staff is so organized now that such calamities need not be anticipated…and the delightful possibility that half a dozen persons will issue conflicting instructions no longer exists.” Henry Alsberg to Lyle Saxon (Louisiana), August 26, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830.

12 Tupper (Georgia) to J.D. Newsom, October 8, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830.
based on cultural pluralism. The completion of the *America Eats* project, however, challenged the editors’ professed liberal understanding of what ‘America’ meant. The hunger and massive breadlines of the early Depression—both experienced by FWP workers before their employment by the relief agency—as well as the collective sense of endangerment of and interrogation about the ‘American way of life’ dictated the need for a comforting and reassuring sensory account of “traditional cookery [kept] alive.” The completion of the *America Eats* project and the editors’ nostalgic visions of America’s regional cuisines unveiled the limits of their liberal ethos. Overall, and despite their cultural relativism, the FWP’s federal editors attempted to write the menu and to put the participants in their proper place around the national table while watching over the kitchen work.

**Production of Culinary Knowledge in the Archive**

Started in 1936, the *America Eats* book project lingered for a few years before taking full bloom in the fall of 1941, only to be interrupted by Pearl Harbour and the entry into World War Two. The files conserved at the Library of Congress are the complete records of the *America Eats* book project; the collection consists of four main kinds of material. First, it contains the book proposal and memos sent by the federal editors to the FWP state offices in order to explain the anticipated content of the book. These instructions were further explained and detailed in the correspondence between the Washington office and the states’ FWP branches, a correspondence

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13 Lyle Saxon, the director of the Louisiana FWP, was to be the national coordinator of the project because of the culinary fame of his state as well as a personal interest. He had agreed to do so and though his name appeared on some early documents and correspondence, the speeding up of the project in late 1941 sidelined him and Katherine Kellocks and J.D. Newsom, then director of the FWP, had taken charge of the project by the fall. J.D. Newsom to Lyle Saxon, August 26, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830. For a profile of the FWP federal staff, see Bold, *Mapping America*, 23-28, and more specifically on Katherine Kellocks’s intellectual education and her work in the FWP, see Bold, *Mapping America*, 64-91.

14 “Brief Description of Proposed Book,” 2.
that documents the misunderstanding between the two components of the FWP and on which the
analysis of this chapter relies heavily. Third, the bulk of the collection consists of essays on local
cuisine and traditions written by FWP workers in each state. The editors considered the local
input as data for the completion of the regional essays and ultimately, the overarching national
culinary narrative they set out to publish. These local essays are filed under “notes, essays,
reports” and organized by state. The size of the state files varies greatly, from empty in the case
of seven states (Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, Washington D.C., and West Virginia)
to hundreds of pages in the case of Virginia or Texas. Lastly, there are five “section essays” at
various stages of completion but all resting on the same literary device that consisted of blending
the fragmented local reports into master regional culinary narratives. The editors actually
envisioned the book as five regional essays on the Northeast, the South, the Southwest, the
Middle West, the North West and the Far West, published under the homogenizing title America
Eats.

The focus of the America Eats project was on public “group eating” rather than private
cooking. The editors conceived of the book not as a cookbook, but as a series of five overarching
regional essays introducing the reader to the taste of each region. The editors’ attention to the
role of food as locus of identity formation rather than provider of nutrition, or as the housebound
work of women, was atypical for the time and the Washington editors justly perceived that, “the

15 For a detailed listing of the America Eats essays, see the dissertation of folklorist Charles Camp, “America Eats, toward a social definition of American Foodways,” (University of Pennsylvania, 1978) especially the checklist, 119-163. Parts of the America Eats archive have also been published. See Mark Kurlansky, The Food of a Younger Land: a Portrait of American food before the National Highway System, before Chain Restaurants, and before Frozen Food, when the Nation's food was Seasonal, Regional, and Traditional: from the lost WPA Files (New York, Riverhead Books, 2009), Pat Willard, America Eats : On the Road with the WPA: the Fish Fries, Box Supper Socials, and Chitlin Feasts that Define Real American Food (New York, Bloomsbury, 2008).

16 Succinct notes accompanied some of the empty files. In the case of West Virginia the note read: “nothing from West Virginia except what the Louisiana Writers’ project has been able to dig up,” West Virginia: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832.
book will be a pioneer in a neglected field." The editors’ oft-repeated aim was not to produce a manual of American cookery to be used by an audience of homemakers but to produce an educational, entertaining, titillating, and patriotic read accessible to every citizen. Much like turn of the century travel literature, the FWP conceived of their readers as a pool of armchair travellers and potential tourists. The America Eats project’s effort to search for and celebrate American food and foodways was influenced by the evolution of the field of folklore. A number of the local workers and federal editors on the America Eats project were indeed also part of the FWP Folklore Project that recorded and published folksongs, folktales, as well as “life histories,” most notably of ex-slaves. The America Eats project benefited from the field of folklore’s new emphasis on American folklore rather than folklore in the Americas. B.A. Botkin, editor of the FWP folklore project, was instrumental in this shift as he did not envision folklore as, to put it bluntly, the study of quaint little islands of European traditions in the modern U.S., but as the study of a creative process of peoples grounded in ethnic traditions and coming together as one American people. The study of Spanish American traditions in the Southwest for instance became a subfield of American folklore scholarship at the turn of the century. Admittedly, folklorists still

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17 J.D Newsome to Crutcher (Louisiana FWP), December 6, 1941, Correspondence, November-December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830.
18 On travel literature and tourist guidebooks, see, Marguerite S. Shaffer, See America First: Tourism and National identity, 1880-1940 (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 172; Hoganson, Consumers’ Imperium, 153–208.
22 Chris Wilson, The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition (University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 150–155.
conceived of folklore as remnants of the past needing to be rescued. The appreciation of Spanish American culture was for instance framed by a broader discussion and interrogation about tradition and authenticity in the midst of so-called American ‘modernity’ and ‘progress.’ But FWP folklorists also increasingly highlighted folklore as lore in the making in industrial and urban contexts. Though most folklorists ignored their work for a long time, the FWP’s Folklore project was instrumental in the reorientation of the field of folklore and, ultimately, in the transformation of folklore into a professional and academic field in the postwar period.24

With its Folklore Project as well as with America Eats, the FWP took part in a wider “emotional discovery of America” that, since the 1910s, had “produced a vulgate of American exceptionalism never before known.”25 Scholars in the field of history and folklore have aptly demonstrated the extent to which this “discovery” was shaped as a response to the ever-increasing reach of consumer culture and, in the words of Jane Becker, “expresse[d] an accommodation to rather than criticism of the structures and values of an industrializing nation.” Becker considers that the “fascination” with “the folk” was a constant feature of a nation struggling “to define national culture and identity” and “to sustain notions of community” in the midst of “rapid and disruptive change.”26 The definition of folklore thus kept shifting throughout American history in accordance to prevailing notions of cultural nationhood. The Depression

decade marked a crucial point for the incorporation of the “folk” into mainstream America as this constructed ideal created the potential for a home-grown renaissance that advertisers, cultural producers, and the cultural state apparatus could lay claim to.\(^{27}\)

Food was not a traditional field of folklore study and the FWP culinary project was a precursor to the study of foodways.\(^{28}\) If most rejoiced in the fact that Fourth of July “square dancing and fiddling contests” were still the “bug in the hill country,” they expressed little alarm about the fact that it was accompanied by the consumption of “hotdogs, hamburgers, and soda pop from dusty stands”; quite the contrary, they judged that it “len[t] variety to the enormous lunches unpacked from cars and wagons.”\(^{29}\) The FWP attempt at inventorying—almost salvaging—traditional American food, taste, and group foodways was therefore a unique endeavour and, as will be developed in the second chapter, a cathartic means of acknowledging the fact that development in the food processing industries over the past fifty years had contributed to a streamlined reconstruction of Americans’ food tastes.

The *America Eats* project was also influenced by the renewed understanding of the concept of culture developed by anthropologists in the interwar period. The differentiation of the anthropological meaning of culture as a way of life from the concept of “high” culture that

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invoked “claims to superior knowledge” was central to the interwar anthropological debate.\textsuperscript{30} This differentiation also distanced culture from the ideal of “civilization” and “progress.”\textsuperscript{31} As highlighted by historian Warren Sussman, the latter concept became highly problematic during the Depression since it encompassed both the “material achievement (and the failures) of the American industrial civilization.”\textsuperscript{32} The FWP culinary project was then inscribed in the 1930s anthropological “discovery of the concept of culture,” understood as patterns of life, behaviours and, in the FWP’s vernacular, “social institutions” coming together to constitute an American culture and folklore supposedly independent from not only Europe, but economic conditions. The federal editors aimed to adopt what they tagged a “popular approach” to food, putting a new emphasis on food as part of broader cultural patterns and insisting on the role of food as a “social amalgam.”\textsuperscript{33} The editors explicitly inscribed themselves in Margaret Mead’s developing food scholarship when they stipulated that the local field workers should pay attention to the “social anthropological aspects” of food sharing events.\textsuperscript{34} About a southern barbecue for instance they inquired: “Who hands out the food? Is the meat eaten from a plate or is it first placed in a sandwich? Are there any conventions about who eats first, any differences between what men


\textsuperscript{31} Raymond Williams, \textit{Keywords: a Vocabulary of Culture and Society} (London: Fontana, 1976), 58–59; 244–245.

\textsuperscript{32} Warren Susman, \textit{Culture as History}, 156.

\textsuperscript{33} “Memorandum,” November 24, 1941, 4, Correspondence, November-December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830.

\textsuperscript{34} “Memorandum,” November 24, 1941; J.D. Newsom to Charles P Casey (Illinois), November 4, 1941, Correspondence, November-December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830. On the rise of the anthropology of food in the 1930s and the role of Margaret Mead in this trend, see Helen M. Macbeth and Jeremy MacClancy, \textit{Researching Food Habits: Methods and Problems} (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 2.
and women do at the meal?” The federal editors also looked for potential disputes over the authentic way to prepare traditional dishes and for local variations.

The FWP’s editors favored the use of a precise and descriptive style that “must evoke an image.” Following the instructions produced for the American Guide Series, most of the gastronomic accounts in the America Eats archive are authorless, aiming at being the “complete, standard authoritative work on the United States as a whole and of every part of it.” Interestingly though, one learns more about the federal editors’ vision for the book content and style in their written complaints about inaccurate state contributions than by analysing the book proposal and outlines. A long editorial memo on a piece from Colorado thus criticized the use of “generalization and trite phrases” instead of “concrete details,” as well as the use of “colloquialism and coy-allusions instead of human interest” in order to “give an impression of liveliness.” The federal editor continued by explaining that, the “addition of such abstract adjectives as ‘tantalizing’ and ‘beautiful’” to a list of dishes “will not suffice” to fulfill the editorial goal of providing “an account of cookery and group eating as reflecting American social life, attitudes, and customs.” The editor then provided appetizing sentences as models, such as: “watermelon pickles still pale-greenish-white and crisp as when raw and so transparent it was possible to read print through them,” or, “the eggnog- a fluffy, saffron beverage, delicate in fragrance and pungently persuasive.” Only when local FWP workers managed to overcome

35 J.D. Newsom to Edward Gatlin (Mississippi), November 21, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830.
36 “Colorado Contribution to America Eats,” December 2, 1941, Correspondence, November-December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830.
38 “Colorado Contribution to America Eats.”
their temptation to use clichés did their essays achieve a level of sensory awareness and social accuracy acceptable to the editors.

Though the federal editors first articulated the *America Eats* project in the first years of the FWP, the archive is also representative of the cultural mood of the late New Deal and early war period. The *America Eats* project started in 1936 as an endeavour to reassure hungry Americans by imagining a nation of hospitable community meals, then became a means of celebrating American exceptionalism in the face of rising European fascist movements, and finally spurred in the first month of World War Two as an attempt to “be a cultural contribution … important in deepening the content of patriotism.” 39 Yet, starting in 1939, the continuation of the FWP became more and more uncertain as accusations of “boondogling” and anti-American activities put the project under the scrutiny of the Dies committee, precursor of the red-scare famous House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), and led Congress to mandate “drastic changes” in the administration of the WPA’s art units. The FWP switched its name to the Writers’ Program and a new director, J.D. Newsom, who was more inclined toward administrative duties than creative ones, replaced Henry Alsberg. 40 This name change was indicative of an important ideological evolution. According to scholar Jerrold Hirsch, it transformed “a liberal and reformist view of American culture … into the basis of a new and ultimately conservative national consensus.” 41 The romantic nationalism of the early FWP was replaced by a prideful patriotic affirmation. Now overtly “designed to deepen the content of American patriotism by increasing appreciation of the country and its culture,” the new

39 J.D. Newsom to Robert Allan (New Jersey), January 2 1942, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830


41 On the revamping of the Federal Writers’ project into the Writers’ Project see Jerrold Hirsch *Portrait of America*, 197-228, the quote is on page 212.
incarnation of the FWP reflected the national concern with overseas events and the European War.\textsuperscript{42}

The America Eats project was a late New Deal attempt at cultural and emotional nation-building that set the tone for the later patriotic mobilization of American arms, hearts, and senses for the war effort.\textsuperscript{43} The entrance of the United States into World War Two accelerated the America Eats project, as the editors felt that its documentary style would appropriately highlight “the rich abundance of … native foodstuffs, as well as a neglected aspect of … national culture.”\textsuperscript{44} If the romantic nationalism and cultural pluralism of the early FWP was not repudiated, it was replaced by a prideful patriotic affirmation that held regions as the keepers of a loosely defined American spirit. But, as the Writers’ Project was recast as the Office of War Information (OWI) after Pearl Harbour, the America Eats project was terminated in order to “clear the way for work on Army Camp guides, which [each] State [was] asked to prepare for a national series.”\textsuperscript{45} However, as further detailed in chapter two, wartime mobilization left its imprint on the America Eats archive and reinforced its already present patriotic goals. Despite the recurrent misunderstandings between FWP field workers and editors, the taste memorialisation taking place in the America Eats archive propelled the advent of a patriotic

\textsuperscript{42} J.D. Newsom to Wilbur E. Harkness (Florida), December 5, 1941; “Idaho,” 3, December 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830.

\textsuperscript{43} On food in wartime, see Amy Bentley, Eating for Victory: Food Rationing and the Politics of Domesticity (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998).

\textsuperscript{44} Memorandum, November 24, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830.

\textsuperscript{45} In a September 25, 1941 letter sent to a series of states, J.D. Newsom shows his awareness of the war preparation and writes: “as the book will be short and all states will contribute, the amount of material needed from any one State is small and can be prepared in two to three weeks…it is advisable that the assignment be made quickly, if possible, in order to clean the way for work on Army Camp guides, which the State will be asked to prepare for a national series that has been approved by the Chief of the Moral branch of the US Army.” September 25, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830.
culinary narrative. Comforting, traditional food was an apt vehicle for national cultural and sensory relief.

Historians working in different parts of the world have demonstrated how the codification of national cuisines is one of the devices available to the modern state to prove its legitimacy and define its citizenry. Their work builds on historical scholarship on the use of codified traditions in the construction of national identities. This scholarship has shown how attempts at recording traditions often rest on selective and prescriptive archiving—sometimes amounting to wholesome “invention.” Eric Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger’s influential book on modern nationalism and the “invention of tradition” needed for nation-states to ground their existence in a shared “realm of memories” has been fertile ground for the discussion of food and cooking. Benedict Anderson’s intervention in the field demonstrated that the modern nation can be thought of as an “imagined community, … imagined because the members…will never know most of their fellow citizens…yet in the mind of each lives the image of their communion.” As the religious meaning of this last word hints, communion implies the sharing of food—codified and symbolic meals to be regularly partaken of simultaneously across the national space.

More than just nutrition, food becomes a cultural performance woven into rituals of citizenship, uniting national imagined communities of eaters. Jeffrey Pilcher, in his study of the role of cuisine in the construction of modern Mexican identity, affirms that, “the supreme test for

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any expression of national cuisine is neither beauty nor sophistication, but authenticity. A ‘genuine’ work of art, however humble, demonstrates a nation’s cultural autonomy, and this distinctiveness in turns justifies its claims to political sovereignty.⁴⁹ An important finding of the food studies historiography is indeed that national cuisines are more than a shared set of recipes; they are political artefacts that can be “understood as having a textual reality as opposed to a concrete reality -something people talk about, imagine but do not eat.”⁵⁰ The FWP’s editors cared about ‘good’ food, but, ultimately, the quality of a dish as a trace, a remnant of the past, could overcome its taste quality so that, for example, Wyoming ranch “puddings,” “which bore rather incongruous names [such as]: Lumpy Dick, Spotted Pup, on-of-a-gun in a Sack, Homogenous Mass,” became cherished and symbolic archival items and sensory morsels.⁵¹

The America Eats project extended the scope of the 1930s search for and indexing and archiving of American culture to the senses. In the mind of the federal editors, if folklore recording and sensory archiving was needed, it was because the living memories and traditional tastes were disappearing.⁵² How average Americans felt about the increasing encroachment of processed foods on their taste is one of the main topics studied in the second chapter; suffice it to say for now that it was in part because the tastes it aimed to document were passing that the FWP strived to incorporate them into the archive. French historian Pierre Nora expressed a parallel

⁴⁹ Pilcher, Que Vivan Los Tamales!, 156.
⁵² Ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax’s recordings of folk songs for the Library of Congress’ newly created American Folklife Center were another example of this sensory archiving, Lomax considered that a distinctive American folklore existed but was destroyed by modern life and was in need of rescue. In the words of Jerrold Hirsch, “there was no relationship between folklore studies as Lomax defined them and modern American life.” See Jerrold Hirsch, “Cultural Pluralism and Applied Folklore: The New Deal Precedent,” in The Conservation of Culture, Buch Feintuch, ed. (Lexington: Publication of the American Folklore Society, 1988), 54.
idea in his introduction to *Les Lieux de Mémoires (Realms of Memory)*, a series of collective volumes on the making of a usable collective memory for the contemporary French nation. He writes: “the less memory is experienced from within, the greater the need for external props and tangible reminders of that which no longer exists except *qua* memory.\(^5^3\) The visceral, mnemonic, and symbolic qualities inherent in food and the sense of taste make food a uniquely potent vehicle for a memory project. Behind the FWP’s project was the unstated hope that the archive would conserve the past and make it possible for it to spring back to life in all its sensory details, enabling taste to be re-enacted in the present and re-experienced in the future, providing the national imagined community of eaters with opportunities to perform its identity in a sensory mode.

However, taste also challenges the modern regime of memory, considered by Nora as obsessed with the archive as well as with “the specificity of the trace, the materiality of the vestige, the concreteness of the recording, the visibility of the image.”\(^5^4\) Taste is a fleeting perception, and, as the notion of sensory economy outlined in the introduction to this dissertation argues, a dish tastes differently depending on who eats it, where, and when. Archiving and preserving taste in the archive for future consumption is therefore a somewhat doomed endeavour. How to record taste and where to find relevant sensory sources has been an issue highlighted by several sensory scholars. Is a “light” tone “with emphasis on human interest and the pleasurable aspects of eating,” as was envisioned by the FWP editors, sufficient? \(^5^5\) The


\(^{5^4}\) Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 7-8.

\(^{5^5}\) J.D. Newsom to Henry Armory (Southern California FWP), September 4’ 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 829.
challenge faced by the FWP editors in the 1930s echoes the one faced by the historian of taste. Historian Kristin Hoganson explains the challenge in these terms: “how can we erase our own palates to understand how a particular dish tasted to any person, much less a range of people, a century ago? How can we get at the thoughts of these who twirled their spaghetti round their forks, Italian fashion? …Where are the remembrances of what it meant to eat “foreign” foods?”\(^{56}\)

In order to perform a sensory reading of the archive, the historian therefore needs to simultaneously read the archive, along, across and in-between the grain in order to “exercise historical imagination while attending to how people described past flavor experiences [to] help us approximate the nature of taste historically.”\(^{57}\)

More than an archiving of American food, the FWP editors’ culinary project intended to archive what Diane Taylor has labelled a “repertoire” of taste. Taylor theorized the difference between two modes of learning and transmitting knowledge: one consists of “the archive of supposedly enduring materials (i.e. text, documents, buildings, bones)”; the other consists of “the ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice and knowledge (i.e. spoken language, dance, sports, ritual).”\(^{58}\) She argues that focusing on the latter enhances our study of the past. Yet, this distinction should not be considered as an opposition and a fruitful sensory and culinary archive is one that, consciously or not, archives the repertoire of taste, smell, touch, sound, and sight

\(^{56}\) Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium*, 136.


linked to food in a specific period. To that extent, the *America Eats* archive constitutes a fortuitous recording of the 1930s taste repertoire that calls for a careful historical reading.

The “realms of memory” under scrutiny here are not only the food events, the rituals of citizenship sought after by the FWP editors, but also the archive itself as a site of production of national culinary knowledge and taste memorialisation. The FWP culinary archive provides a way for the historian to get at, in the words of Ann Laura Stoler, the period’s “common sense,” i.e., “those habits of heart, mind, and comportment that derive from unstated understandings of how things work in the world, the categories to which people belong, and the kind of knowledge one needs to hold unarticulated but well-rehearsed convictions and credulities.”

To be specific, the *America Eats* archive constitutes a rich corpus to examine the “unstated” ways in which racial and gender categories interacted with taste perception in 1930s U.S. The editors’ careful editing and management of the archived American sensory repertoire determined who would integrate the archive of American taste, and how.

A theoretically racially inclusive and democratic vision of cultural nationalism animated the FWP. Hirsh estimates that the FWP forged a vision of the U.S. steeped in a “picturesque pluralism” that viewed “national identity [as] not fixed and static but, like anthropological views of culture, a product of dynamic interaction between past and present.” Yet, analyzing the FWP American Guide Series, literary scholar Christine Bold further highlights the FWP’s ambiguous take on the various paradigms for American belonging and identity when she explains that the convention of the guidebook genre allowed for “the disruptions of difference [to be] contained -


or at least camouflaged-by the larger scheme of orderly diversity." If cosmopolitanism was de rigueur, the FWP’s claim to national inclusiveness was based on a series of local exclusions, literary segregation, and, as in the case of African Americans in the South Carolina guidebook, “named absences.” The *America Eats* editors’ approach to “American cookery” fits into this ambiguous record as they demanded that field workers’ attention be, “divided between the food and the people” with a focus on the preservation of, “not only traditional dishes but also traditional attitudes and customs,” customs that were often judged traditional according to race and gender roles. The determination of which and whose tastes were to be judged ‘American’ enough to be part of the *America Eats* book project, and ultimately its archive, was therefore a political act of sensory discrimination.

The process of sensory archiving in which the FWP engaged with its *America Eats* project interrogated the professed racial pluralism of the federal editors. If they recognized the plurality of the American sensory present, they also finely policed the sensory borders of its past. The FWP editors did not come up with a consistent yardstick for authentic culinary ‘Americaness’ and FWP workers dealt with each case on a pragmatic and local basis. In the Southwest, “Spanish-Mexican” tastes were celebrated as the trace of an exotic past surviving in the midst of so-called American progress. The tourism industry grew out of the exploitation of Mexican food taste as an authentic domestic exoticism and a multisensory background. In the South, the national scope of the FWP caused white FWP workers to veil the African American’s influence on regional cuisine, rhetorically reinforcing taste segregation. In contrast, metropolitan

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62 Ibid, 141.
63 “General Note to the Regional Editors of *America Eats*,” 1, Administrative Material, LOC-AE, A 829.
areas like New York or San Francisco publicized the racial and ethnic sensory diversity offered by the cities’ restaurant scenes. Still, the ethnic food tastes of first and second generation European immigrants posed a multifaceted problem to the federal editors as these populations’ whiteness was not soundly established and varied across the country. Italian American food did not taste the same in New York’s lower East Side and Birmingham, Alabama.

The archival mode of sensory memorialisation tends to reify racial and ethnic identities by defining their supposedly ‘authentic taste.’ Now, ethnic and racial belonging did have an influence on food preferences (if only because of the class affiliation that often accompanied belonging to these categories) and all were not eating the same food. But sensory cross-over, mixing, and even “slumming” were essential to the formation of racial, ethnic, regional, and ultimately national identities. Archival recording of taste tended to delineate a specious line between so-called “native cookery” and “food of recent foreign origins.”64 The federal editors’ recommendation to not “give much emphasis to the food and customs of unusual or isolated groups” legitimized the exclusion from the America Eats culinary narrative of a large segment of the American population.65 No focused debate on the meaning of “foreign” in matters of food and taste occurred during the span of the America Eats project; federal editors and local workers assumed different positions on the matter. Liberal cultural pluralism, official racial classification, and local prejudices converged to form a kaleidoscopic archive of taste.

FWP editors sought to overcome the sensory challenge presented by the composite population of the interwar United States through temporal and geographical tools. The

64 J.D. Newsom to Robert W. Allan (New Jersey), September 29, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 829.
65 “General note to Regional editors of America Eats,” “Miscellaneous Notes,” 4, Administrative Material, LOC-AE, A829.
systematic search for the perpetuation of traditional taste in the midst of the contemporary “mass-production of food-stuffs” led the FWP editors to draw spatial and chronological sensory borders as to who would be part of the American sensory past. To develop a national culinary narrative, the editors thus went searching for the remnants of regional cooking style. The making of the FWP culinary archive relied on the conceptualisation of a systemic relationship between American regional spaces and aimed at defining - one could even say reifying - diverse ‘tastes of place’ before unifying them under a national banner.

Sensing and Consuming American Regions

Colonial American historian David Hackett Fisher defines the idea of a region as both “a physical entity formed by terrain, soil, climate, resources and system of production” as well as “a cultural phenomenon, common customs and experiences.” This dual definition is crucial to understanding regional cuisines in the U.S. since local ingredients and foodstuffs as well as the origins, social status, ingrained habits, and acquired tastes of regional cooks and consumers determined local cooking styles. Food historians have highlighted the fundamental role of local foodstuffs and local constructions of taste in the diet of the “regional Creoles” of the colonial and early republican periods. New World environments and agricultural resources were used differently by specific sets of migrants who had to modify their Old World habits, resulting in

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67 Ayers et al., All Over the Map, vii.
69 James E. McWilliams, A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, esp. 10-34.
localized cuisines and food cultures, such as the Pennsylvania Dutch cuisine. Yet, regional diets lost some of their ground in the post-civil war era as development in food processing and scientific advances in the field of nutrition triggered a “revolution at the table.”

Food production was a leading industry of Gilded Age and Progressive Era economic expansion and drove the maturation of the capitalist political economy that crashed in 1929. The second industrial revolution triggered the emergence of new foodstuffs and eating habits, such as the consumption of canned foods, breakfast cereals, prepared meat, as well as mass-produced and frozen vegetables. Development in transportation, the emergence of a mass-market of advertised and standardized consumer goods, scientific management, the employment of skilled and unskilled migrant workers, and massive urbanization were deciding factors in the gradual streamlining and industrialization of American taste in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. This rapid process of change in food production, distribution, and

70 “America Eats, prefinal, December 3, 1941,” Pennsylvania: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832
71 See Harvey Levenstein, Revolution at the Table: the Transformation of the American Diet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 210-211.
74 See, Strasser, Satisfaction Guaranteed; William Cronon, Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 97-167, 207-259. Historian of technology Gabriella Petrick highlights the importance of
preparation prompted a nation-wide standardization of taste preference and caused the physical definition of region to lose some of its relevance while the cultural, social, and racial determinants stayed in the foreground of American cultural and culinary regional politics.

The industrialization of food and standardization of taste severed the traditional link between the food on the plate and the food in the fields. The loss of knowledge about where their food came from triggered deep anxieties among American eaters. Despite advertising and benevolent efforts, the lack of quality control and sanitary regulation earned the food industry numerous detractors. The Progressive era’s interest in dietetic reform and nutrition was accompanied by the rise of the modern consumer movement, which campaigned for the creation and enforcement of stricter regulations of the food industries by the state. Consumer advocates, Progressive politicians, and public intellectuals denounced the danger of industrial processing of foodstuffs, especially the use of additives, unhygienic and unsafe labor conditions, as well as the secretive ways of the industry. A new food vocabulary entered American speech around the two poles of adulteration and wholesomeness. The efforts of this budding consumer movement culminated in 1906 with the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act. Still, the food and

the interaction between food producers and food consumers in the progressive shaping of the industrialized American diet over the first half of the twentieth century. She writes that “industrial foods never tasted as good as freshly made food because of technological limitations. Given the tension between technology and palatability, producers continually sought to make foods that tasted good enough for consumers to purchase again and again. For their part, consumers were willing to accept food that may not have tasted as good as homemade, but they would not eat just anything. While canned corn, peas, and peaches sold well, no one has ever heard of canned lettuce because it does not fit into the American model for palatable lettuce.” Gabriella M Petrick “The Arbiters of Taste: Producers, Consumers and the Industrialization of Taste in America, 1900--1960” (Ph.D., University of Delaware, 2007), 2-3.

The most well-known of these critics is Upton Sinclair, who exposed the unsafe and unhygienic working conditions in Chicago’s slaughterhouse in his 1906 novel The Jungle.

Harvey A. Levenstein, Revolution at the Table: the Transformation of the American Diet (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Laura Shapiro, Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century (University of California Press, 2008).
advertisement industries were swift in adapting the rhetoric of purity and reliability promoted by the consumer movement into a selling argument. The FWP workers and editors of the America Eats project were the heirs of these debates on hygiene and nutrition; they proficiently used the vocabulary forged in the early twentieth century as an argument for the need for reverting to a more traditional way of cooking. As a New York FWP worker cheerfully, and ironically, put it, “bologna is better now than in your grandmother’s day. The law no longer permits manufacturers to use undesirable organs of cattle as filler for this popular edible.” The 1930s celebration of regional cuisines can be interpreted as a veiled demand for a decrease in the food industry’s encroachment on American taste.

In this ambivalent industrial nutritional context, regional histories and cooking styles provided an image of preserved wholesomeness in the face of nameless commercial standardization, class division, racial strife, and modern urban individualism. The 1930s was an age of regionalisms. Regionalism had multiple incarnations; Michael Denning for instance signals that it included, among other meanings, “the white supremacist nostalgia of the southern Agrarians, the remarkable historical murals of Thomas Hart Benton, and the new social science of “regions,” developed by figures like Lewis Mumford and Howard Odum.” Yet, the post-Reconstruction period witnessed a cultural reunion that made regional pasts into American mythologies and cast them as distinctions, “that only make sense in a common text, in competition for relative advantage and influence,” rather than divisions. Despite its parcelled

77 Shapiro, Perfection Salad, 192, 214.
78 “Processed Meats, the Sausage,” Various Commodities and Products, Feeding the City, WPA Federal Writers’ Project, New York City Unit, 1936-1943, NYC department of Records, Municipal Archive’s Collection, hereafter: FWP-NYC, roll 137.
79 Denning, The Cultural Front, 133.
80 Ayers et al., “Preface,” in All over the Map, vii. See also chapter three of this dissertation.
vision, 1930s regionalist thinking offered hopes “for restoration and preservation, for reconstruction, [...] of the fragmented culture of modern America.” The 1929 crash and the lingering economic depression reinforced the cultural value of regional foods as comforting and soothing tastes; the tastes of regional foods offered a hope for cultural regeneration. As is often the case in the creation of so-called traditional national cuisines, the FWP editors envisioned the existence of regional diversity as proof of unity, a vehicle of centralization, a way “to put together the pieces of a national culture” and history. In order to write a national culinary narrative, the FWP editors therefore decided to search for usable regional pasts: remnants of regional cuisine in the midst of American modernity, tastes in which to root the rebuilding of the American citizenry’s morale, during the economic depression and later in the midst of wartime patriotic mobilization.

The editors’ instructions to local FWP workers clearly stated the stakes: recollecting the regional food of the past would provide a direct link with glorious pioneering and homesteading days, a loosely defined, and implicitly Anglo Saxon, American spirit, a “fine tradition of freedom and a noble cuisine to back it up.” In this narrative, American “native” cookery was grounded in the “inventive genius of settlers,” spurred on by the “lack of the limited traditional foodstuffs and abundance of new ones.” The new dishes broke free from European influence; they did not


need “spices and sauces to make them appetizing,” but rather required slow cooking in open fireplaces and Dutch ovens. The FWP narrative voluntarily put aside the second half of the nineteenth century, a time when “cooking stoves and frying pans,” with their higher temperatures and faster cooking times, allegedly “almost wrecked America.”

The culinary recovery undertaken by the FWP went back to the first forty years of the nation and, implicitly, to an original Anglo Saxon cuisine to look for meaning and original taste.

From the outset, the federal editors of the America Eats project divided their prospective material in five main regions: the Northeast, the South, the Middle West, the Southwest and the Far West. They did so before actually launching field research and despite the standardization of American foodways under the influence of the food industries over the previous decades. This type of call for documentation of regional habits and folklore was not new to the FWP field workers. The America Eats project was staffed by editors and writers who had previously worked on the Folklore Program as well as participated in the American Guide Series volumes. Both programs had used a regional and/or state framework. Christine Bold estimates that the American Guide Series “created evidence of regional diversity, then pulled it together into a national, unified- “balanced”- expression” therefore “producing a major icon of American unity in these fractured years.”

Most representative of this process was the guidebook US One: from Maine to Florida whose road-trip structure allowed motorized Americans to drive through the country’s regional diversity and taste its local foods. U.S One incorporated a five-paged list of

84 “Outline Indicating Approach to Subject,” Administrative Material, LOC-AE, A 829; White, “Beef Tour.”
85 Bold, The WPA Guides, 10-11.
“food specialties of the area through which US 1 runs.” Here the road and the modern automobile united the diverse culinary regions.

The five regions mapped out for the America Eats project differed from the ones used on previous FWP projects. The initial motive for the rearranging of American regions rose from a rather sound sensory argument. If the America Eats project did “not follow the lines of the WPA administrative regions,” it was because the editors aspired to organize their material into loosely defined areas of “cultural continuity and historical development and relationship,” akin to sensory spheres of influence. The federal editors anchored the legitimacy of their spatial decoupage in the view that states’ borders did not dictate tastes. They also “recognize[d] certain objections to this grouping— the varying size of the regions, the mixed character of the food pattern within certain states as well as within some of the regions”; a state like Texas, where elements of the South and Mexico overlapped with “range influences” was a case in point. For similar reasons, California was split between the “Southwest” (South California) and the “Far West” (North California). Yet, the rationale behind the regional grouping remained evasive as the FWP editors’ views on how to apprehend regional customs varied over the course of the project. Ideally, the sensory mapping of the nation would emerge from field work but as the editors became pressed by time they also imposed it from the top down.

The federal editors, exercising their centralizing powers, were comfortable with spatial and rhetorical correction in order to generate regional sensory regulation, unification, and

87 Florence Kerr, letter sent to seven states, July 18, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 829
reification. As the FWP entered the 1940s, and despite the editors’ professed cultural relativist approach, Washington acknowledged the local FWP workers’ empirical mapping and sensory knowledge less and less. This shift in priorities was reflected in the editors’ increasing involvement in the elaboration of the book’s table of contents. The first draft of the *America Eats* project’s guidelines that was sent to the state offices built on the experience of the Folklore Project and American Guide Series, and was an open-ended call for relevant regional documentation. However, the memos sent to the states in order to revive the project in 1939 and in the later years of the FWP, established a de facto list of regional meals for the field workers to document. Three to four “traditional gatherings” were assigned to each state; one state per region would then serve as a regional edition unit and pick and choose among these in order to write a blended regional narrative. The federal editors considered themselves the ultimate judges of the accuracy and literary value of these regional essays. The Northeast states were asked to cover a clambake, a Grange dinner, and a baked bean dinner; the South, political barbecues, family reunions, and a cemetery cleaning picnic; the Middle West, school picnic and, after much debate about whether the meal was ‘American’ enough, a Scandinavian lutefisk dinner; the Southwest, a cowboy dinner, and a “pipeline meal;” finally, the Far West was requested to document a round-up barbecue, a Mormon Ward reunion, and a game dinner. Editors favoured a clear-cut grouping, even if this required “shift[ing] some material from one section to the other” in the final manuscript. A South Dakota article, “the Herder and his Muttons,” deemed to “so clearly belong” to the Far West section rather than the Middle West was for instance “cut” from the state’s contribution and “reworked into the regional essay” on the cattle country.\(^8^9\) The federal editors did not hesitate to foster regional culinary and sensory differences.

\(^{8^9}\) J.D. Newsom to James Crutcher (Louisiana), September, 4\(^{th}\) 1941; “Editorial Report on State Copy, Montana: The
The logic behind the regional organization of the *America Eats* project henceforth involved not only the recording of culinary traditions, but also their production. At times, regional differences had to be inculcated from above in order to create a national pattern. The demiurgic tendencies of the federal editors in their search for the authentic tastes of American regions can be documented through the analysis of the correspondence related to the *America Eats* project. To a federal editor inquiring about “whether buckwheat cakes and buffalo meat barbecue would be representative recipes for Nebraska,” a field worker answered that “ordinary pancakes, served with sausage, are much more representative.”\(^{90}\) Apparently this answer did not assuage the national office or was overlooked and the Nebraska FWP director wrote back a few days later in order to reiterate and “make it clear… that buffalo meat [was] not common food” in the state. A second letter, sent five days later, unveils the fine line walked by the federal office: “if in planning your book you are interested in unusual recipes or foods which are unique to a given state, then buffalo barbecue would be appropriate. On the other hand if you are interested in “typical” recipes for the various states, then it’s the writer’s opinion that buffalo meat should not qualify.” Instead, the letter disappointingly recommended the inclusion of “pork or some fried food, as […] a great deal of fried food is consumed in Nebraska.”\(^{91}\) This controversy highlights one of the shortcomings of the federal editorial guidelines: the FWP editors never clearly stated whether they were looking to document everyday food or picturesque practices.

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\(^{90}\) Rudolph Umland to J.D. Newsom, December 1, 1941, Correspondence, November-December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830.

\(^{91}\) Pearl Gimple to Florence Kerr, December 10, 1941, Correspondence, November-December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830.
The FWP editors’ goal to locate food in regional history was regularly defeated by the contemporary dislocation of taste triggered by the industrialisation of the American food system. From New Hampshire to North Dakota, field workers opened their report noting that they did “not consider that any particular dish could be singled out” as peculiar to their state and that “the super-market type of grocery store is the most important factor in … eating today.”92 The debates between local field workers and federal editors highlight the extent to which regional foods and their distinctive tastes had become market commodities rather than lived experience by the late 1930s. Wisconsin cheese is another instance of a foodstuff that became the object of a heated debate between federal editors and local workers, the latter reporting being “puzzled about what [the federal editor] want[s] concerning the Monroe Cheese festival and Wisconsin cheese-eating in general.” Though a 1935 two-year law destined to revive the local economy made it “mandatory for all Wisconsin restaurants to serve a certain amount of Wisconsin cheese and butter,” local workers highlighted that there was “nothing about the consumption of cheese as being in any way an idiosyncrasy of local diet.” Yet, given the national image of the state as “America’s dairyland,” as well as the increasing importance of local automobile tourism in the regional economy, the editors seemed ready to “strain the point.”93 A number of FWP state directors resisted the federal takeover of regional authenticity, to the extent that one can wonder whether their efforts at setting a truthful record of 1930s eating habits and at avoiding romanticizing their regional food culture might have been one of the causes of the non-completion of the book.

92 “New Hampshire,” 2, New Hampshire: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831; Donald McCormick, “personal information on Maine Food,” 1, December 1, 19421, Maine: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831; the first sentence of the main essay concerning North Dakota reads: “North Dakota eats but few foods if any that she can call her own,” “North Dakota, America Eats,” 1, North Dakota: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831.

93 The motto first appeared on the state’s license plate in 1940. Mark Mutt to Florence Kerr, redirected to Kellock, December 1941, Correspondence, November-December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830.
These debates underline the extent to which regional tastes became commodities in the nation’s memory and the tourism marketplace in the interwar U.S. Turn-of-the-century and early-twentieth-century American tourism lay in the idea that Americans should “See America First”; a possibility opened up by Americans’ increased mobility due to expansion of the railroad, and starting in the 1910s, the development of the soon-to-be ubiquitous automobile.\(^{94}\) This newfound mobility and the marketing of American regions as tourist destinations were crucial to the making of regional identity in the 1930s. Putting regions in competition for tourists’ attention and money, the development of tourism forced regional boosters to insist on their specificities and differences. As chapter four elaborates, culinary tourism and sensory sightseeing was one of the ways regional boosters differentiated their regions. In the Southwest this mechanism was grounded in race and the taste of Mexican food, promoted as a domestic exoticism, became the taste of place. Eating Mexican food became a way for the white tourist to feel the region’s romantic past and the American conquest. In other regions, specific foods progressively became recognized tastes of place, such as cheese in Wisconsin or buckwheat in Nebraska.

The late 1930s was a watershed moment for the redefinition of American citizenship as consumption practices and one could argue that the America Eats project offered both an alternative to this materialist view by offering a sensory portrait of the nation, and participated in this shift by commodifying regional foods.\(^ {95}\) Historian Lizabeth Cohen shows how, starting in the 1930s and at an increasing pace in the postwar period, a variety of political and social actors

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came to understand active participation in consumer society and mass culture as the bedrock of American citizenship. She labeled this new triangular relationship between citizens, the state, and the marketplace, the “Consumers’ Republic.” When reporting on “pitch-in picnics,” charity and fundraising dinners, or small-scale entrepreneurial ventures, FWP workers variously referred to the men, women, and children eating the meals as “the people,” “the crowd,” the diners,” “the community,” “patrons” and, on occasion, “customers.” Cultural critic Raymond Williams blurs the line between culinary taste and taste as an agent of artistic judgment and of social distinction when he states that the two modern ideas of taste and consumption “have developed together, and responses to art and literature have been profoundly affected by the assumption that the viewer, spectator or reader is a consumer, exercising and subsequently showing his taste.” He links this evolution to culinary taste by pointing to “a popular sub-critical vocabulary associated with food-feast, on the menu, goodies, etc [that] continually supports this assumption.” In the America Eats project, regional sensory “goodies” were central to the new political and social order of the early “Consumers’ Republic.”

The delineation of authentic regional tastes in the America Eats archive enabled the consumption of regional foods as a ritual of modern American citizenship. English studies scholar Andrew Gross, in his interpretation of the representational strategy sustained by the America Guide Series, holds that the FWP shifted the definition of a region from a “locus of identity” to “a locus of consumption.” By reading the guidebooks, the New Deal citizenry, “refashioned as white consumers,” were encouraged to “consume the cultural diversity as tourist

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96 Cohen, A Consumer’s Republic.
98 Raymond Williams, “Taste” in Keywords, 312-315.
attractions in order to catalyze the national circulation of goods.” His analysis highlights the circular relationship between white tourists as “paradigmatic consumers, consumers [as] the new patriots, and patriotism [as] a form of brand-name identification.” 99 The final goal of the America Eats project was indeed a commercial one, along with the unspoken idea that a regulated folklore needed to be re-inculcated- and sold- to ‘the people.’ Henry Alsberg, first director of the FWP, expressed this paradoxical version of a commercialized folklore in 1938 when he estimated that a book on Idaho folklore “w[ould] make the sort of book that "the folks" will buy and pass around.” 100 The double-entendre meaning of the word “folks” illustrates the encroachment of the marketplace on American regional identity and the role of the creation of “folk” personas in the development of consumer capitalism in the 1930s. 101

At first, FWP editors considered ostensible signs of commercialization as a cultural and sensory threat. But, faced with the omnipresence of commercial food in the American diet, they finally gave in and pragmatically adapted their definition of “traditional” food. The FWP editors regularly mentioned and deplored in their correspondence how some state offices “became fascinated with the commercial festivals supposed to give publicity to some local foodstuff,” and asked that, if ever written about, “little space … be wasted on the routine events, such as the crowning of a queen, characteristic of similar celebrations everywhere.” 102 Yet, local workers’

100 Alsberg to Vardis Fisher (Idaho), March 21, 1938, Correspondence relating to Folklore Studies, 1936-1940, RG 69: Record of the Work progress Administration, National Archive, College Park, MD, hereafter, “RG 69,” P157 22, box 1.
102 J.D Newsom to Newsom to A.E. Michel, (Iowa), November 3, 1941, Correspondence, November-December 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830.
resistance to the federal agenda led editors to admit that “a commercially promoted festival” may assume “the character of a harvest festival” in its social and sensory role. They then deemed such a festival worthy of attention on the condition that “the commercial features” would be “subordinated” to elements deemed more traditional. Similarly, the editors softened up to the idea of including “incidental eating, or munching” in the America Eats project. They noted that, in some parts of the country, the new “folk custom” of “equip[ing] oneself” with “pop corn, peanuts, candy bars, ice cream cones, Good Humor ice cream bars and the like… before setting out for a football game, baseball game or visit to the Zoo” was too ingrained in people’s habits and taste to be ignored.

Ultimately, the federal editors, recognizing that regional foods proved difficult to document, reversed their quest and enabled local workers to record the local appropriation of mass-consumer items. By 1941, they admitted the need to cover “meals served in drugstores, dining cars, etc,” since “it is the commonest public meal of the industrial sections of the country and is now assuming traditional aspects with some people regularly eating in small groups.”

The federal editors broadened the meaning of tradition and authenticity and therefore the reach of their culinary archiving. The enlarged focus of America Eats now included the ways in which ordinary Americans integrated industrial tastes into their local food cultures. Changing their

Interesting instances of such celebration are Southwestern “fiestas,” described in the essay on the Far West region as “frequently overlaid with artificiality, and thus have become largely commercialized.” “Far West” Section Essay, 35, LOC-AE, A 833. See chapter four of this dissertation for a closer analysis of the cultural and sensory role of the Fiesta.


104 Ibid.

105 J.D Newsom to Crutcher, September 11, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 829.
criterion for regional authenticity, the federal editors somewhat reconciled their archival quest with 1930s regional food cultures. If they were interested in Georgia’s “coca-cola parties, a “simple, inexpensive form of entertainment… particularly popular with the young matrons and young girls… that has recently become very popular,” they also wanted to know how the Atlanta drink was used for the making of “strange concoctions… throughout the country.” Regional sensory differences did exist in the New Deal era- though not the ones first anticipated by the FWP editors.

Regional differences often resided in differential adoption of national brands and trends and they were often shaped by the demands and offers of industrial production. This was especially true in the matter of meat cuts and cooking technique. Reflecting on “some entertaining questions on sectional preferences in cuts of beef,” a Washington editor “suspect[ed]” that “the regions favoring T-Bone steaks may have had so many inferior cuts passed off as sirloins and porterhouses that they cling to the one good cut most readily identified,” and he proposed to “ask [the FWP office in] Illinois to question officials of some big Chicago packinghouse on regional preferences as indicated by sales.” But the common sense of any Indiana FWP workers would have been enough research since all knew that “the true Hoosier pounds his beefsteak with a cleaver or the edge of a plate, dips it in flour, fries it considerably longer than necessary- probably because the tender beef all goes to Chicago to be

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107 J.D. Newsom to Crutcher (Louisiana), September 11, 1941.
shipped east, and only the inferior variety remains to be eaten at home.”\textsuperscript{108} In this case the national meat market was the central element determining local food taste.

Overall, the largest, and unforeseen, issue encountered by federal editors was the extent to which race and ethnic identities were enmeshed in America’s regional cuisines. Not only romanticized views of local history, but also the diverse construction of race and racial difference across the country informed the taste of commodified regional foods. For the FWP, assessing the taste of American regions meant taking into account regional food cultures determined by specific demographic composition, pattern of settlement and migration, as well as local construction of racial and ethnic differences. Digging into the country’s sensory past, “the spontaneous rather than the commercial,” the FWP created a selective sensory index that painted regional food cultures with a national brush, and that, by the same token, contributed to delineate and reify the racialized borders of ‘American’ food, in the past and present. To adequately pursue a sensory reading of the \textit{America Eats} archive an additional set of questions remains to be answered: Who were the regional and folksy American eaters imagined by the federal editors? Did the editors and local workers consider every food eaten in the U.S. ‘American’? How did they establish the line between ‘American’ and ‘foreign’ food?

\textquote{“There is little room for what is merely exotic”}: Race and Ethnicity in the \textit{America Eats} Archive.

The FWP’s conceptualisation of a national culinary narrative grounded in regional food cultures and its efforts at archiving American taste revolved around categories of time and space as well as unsettled and unresolved notions of race and ethnicity. Defining how much textual and

\textsuperscript{108} “Notations,” 1, Indiana: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831. On the relationship between American taste in meat and the transformation of the industry, see Horowitz, \textit{Putting Meat on the American Table}. 
archival space should be devoted to “national group eating”- i.e., immigrants’ customs- was a running theme in the America Eats correspondence and administrative material. A pragmatic editor pointed out that “the amount of space that can be devoted to each region is so small that there is little room for what is merely exotic if one purpose of the book is to be fulfilled; this purpose is to increase appreciation of American traditions, and traditions brought to this country and welded into the national life.” One example of traditions “welded into national life” explicitly mentioned in the America Eats book proposal was Pennsylvania Dutch cookery which was deemed “quite as American as it is German” and was hardly a recent addition to the American diet. If the America Eats project dealt “primarily with the present [and] current gatherings and the dishes they celebrate,” the editors were interested in documenting contemporary eating events only to the extent that they were remnants of the past in the present.

With some exceptions, the rule tended to favour the inclusion of Anglo-Saxon “settler” cookeries into the fold of American cuisine, rather than the “contribution of national groups” that arrived later in the course of American history. Given the massive immigration wave of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this historical regulation had widespread racial consequences. The editors never fully explained who the category “national group” referred to and it was generally understood by FWP workers as Southern and Eastern European immigrants who had arrived since the 1880s, but Scandinavians’ and Northern Europeans’ inclusion in the America Eats project was not without debate as well. Similarly, the FWP assessment of regional

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110 Ibid.
111 “Brief Description of Proposed Book,” 8.
112 Ibid.
food grossly underestimated the role of African Americans in American culinary history and left blacks in an archival limbo.

How to assess the fine line between the “merely exotic” and the regionally authentic was a conundrum never fully resolved by the editors. Making the cut into the national culinary past and sensory present as outlined by the federal editors was a confused process. The FWP’s attempt at describing “meals and dishes […] ‘American’ in tradition” was fraught with ambiguity since the editors did not clearly define what ‘American’ meant in this culinary context. They drew often arbitrary lines between the authentically traditional, the “mongrel” taste of modernity, and “foreign” contributions.113 In an October 1941 memo, Katherine Kellock, one of the main liberal-minded editors of the FWP, got caught in such vocabulary convolution as she recommended that the Northeast section provide “an account of a Jewish group meal, preferably a traditional celebration” and went on to note that “this is an exception to the rule against non-American material but is justified by the number of Jews in the U.S. and the ancient character of the feasts.” Apparently her wording did not sit well with the local understanding of race, ethnicity, and Americanism in the north-eastern FWP offices, as she felt obliged to correct her memo two days later. She explained that, “in referring to Jewish feasts as ‘non-American’ we merely meant that they did not originate in the U.S.” and added that “they are of course as American, in the broader sense, as any other feasts held in the U.S. by natives of the country.”114 Kellock did not explicitly resolve the ideological discrepancy between the “broader” and the narrower understanding of Americanism and her inconclusive remark left most in a gray racial area, on the threshold of American sensory memory and archive.

114 Kellock, October 16, 1941, Correction made on October 18, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830.
The FWP editors’ difficulties in clearly voicing whose cuisine should, or should not, be part of the *America Eats* book can be understood when looking at the evolving definition of race and ethnicity in the late 1930s as well as the contemporary tension between a racial and civic ideal of citizenship.¹¹⁵ The 1930s American racial and ethnic taxonomy was increasingly binary; its main fault-line was the difference between black and white. The previous period had used the in-between categories of “color,” “complexion,” and “nationality” on top of the black and white binary to categorize first and second generation migrants.¹¹⁶ But, through the Depression and the World War Two years, whiteness was reconstructed and reconsolidated and internal differences recognized through the new concept of ethnicity. The dearth of new arrivals after the anti-immigrant quotas law of the 1920s ironically launched what historian Matthew Jacobson neatly dubs the “manufacture of Caucasian,” that is the creation of the white-ethnic category as a new social currency and legal epistemology which, in the long run, triggered the consolidation of the black and white color line.¹¹⁷ David Roediger finely analyzes how the simultaneity of the class-formation process and of the rise of the liberal welfare state in the 1930s implied that becoming white not only provided immigrants with a renewed and affirmative ethnic identity, but also with a sense of civic entitlement in the “white security state.”¹¹⁸ Despite the culturally pluralist ideals of the liberal state, the period was marked by the persistence of a race-based nationalism that rejected blacks’ participation in the citizenry. Historians have shown how the implementation of

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¹¹⁵ For a study of this tension throughout the span of American history, see, Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible.*


New Deal policies and reforms reinforced racial discrimination- creating what historian George Lipsitz considers a “racialized social-democracy.”

In accordance with the prevailing interwar racial dichotomy, the chief racial line taken into account by the FWP was coloured in black and white and a segregated “Negro Study Program” was established in a number of states. This all-black program was mirrored by the “Social-Ethnic Studies Project” that discussed Southern and Eastern Europeans, but also Asian Americans, Mexican Americans as well as Scandinavians and “New England Yankees.” This program eluded the vocabulary of whiteness and its archives are organized alongside ethnic, but also occupational and class lines. The Social-Ethnic Studies Project for instance documented Italian stone carvers and Portuguese fishermen in New England as well as Southern Greek restaurateurs. This bureaucratic organization and archival filing validates the historical scholarship’s findings according to which working-class and ethnic identities became joined at the hip in the 1930s.


120 The goals, staff, work, and archival material of the Negro Study Program is further analyzed in chapter 3 of the dissertation.

121 The main outcome of this research material was the anticipated but never achieved publication of a series of books whose eloquent titles, such as “Hands that Built America,” transmitted the cosmopolitan ideal of the New Deal Era and the “labouring” of American Culture over the course of the decade identified by Michael Denning in The Cultural Front. For archival material, see for instance “The Portuguese of Rhode Island,” A 759, “Vermont ‘Living Lore’: The Portuguese Fisherman,” A 817; “Greek Life Histories,” North Carolina, A 753, Federal Writers Project of the Work Progress Administration, “Social-Ethnic Studies Project,” Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, hereafter “LOC-SES.” See also the interviews for the project “Men Against granite,” Vermont Life Histories, ALH online, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html, (accessed on November 12, 2009)

Yet, the theoretical and bureaucratic division between race and ethnicity imperfectly reflects the racial vernacular used on an everyday basis in the FWP’s offices. The divergence of the two categories of race and ethnicity was a slow and “messy” process. Reading the FWP correspondence, it is often impossible to determine whether the FWP’s workers and editors considered group belonging as the result of essential difference or as socially determined identities.\(^{123}\) Reading the back and forth correspondence between the different bureaucratic levels of the FWP allows us to document the shifting racial ground on which both federal editors and local FWP workers lived and sensed. A case in point was the heading used in the correspondence of the so-called “Social-Ethnic Studies Project,” which regularly dropped the “social” dimension and read, for comprehension’s sake, “Ethnic (Racial) Studies.”\(^{124}\) Similarly, as chapter four and five demonstrate, that Asian and Mexican Americans were included in the “Social-Ethnic Studies Project” did not testify to a potential whitening of these populations but to their racialization as groups separated from both white and black Americans.

The FWP’s culinary narrative and its blending of discussions of time, taste, place, and demographics embodied the contradiction in liberal race thinking. If ethnic and racial minorities were offered a tentative place in the present, they were regularly excluded from the assessment of national memory and traditions. The case of African Americans is telling. Some black FWP workers attempted to correct the accepted American culinary narrative that celebrated the ingenuity of Anglo Saxon settlers and pioneers. They argued, quite rightfully, that “Negro cooking is on the whole American cooking” and that “the Negro's distinctive contribution to the


\(^{124}\) An example of this can be found in the “Memorandum on the Albanians of Massachusetts,” May 2, 1938, LOC-SEP, A 747.
art of cooking… now finds itself part of the general stream of American culture,” even though “the origins of many standard dishes …have been lost in the shuffle of most facts concerning the Negro generally.” This demand for historical accuracy came from black FWP workers in the South and, most prominently, from black FWP workers living in northern metropolises. Free of legal segregation, black FWP workers sometimes worked alongside white workers or in all-black programs such as the Harlem branch of the Negro Study Program. But despite their cultural, and political, claim on American taste, as well as the backing of some federal editors, their voices are seldom heard through the FWP’s archive.

If the black side of the color line was relatively easy to delineate, the category of whiteness was far from self explanatory in the late 1930s. In their attempt to define the historical contours of the nation’s taste, the FWP editors encountered “difficult[ies]” as they explained to field workers the need to maintain “a balance between material on customs and traditions of early American origin and those moulded or contributed by more recent immigrants.” Their soft pluralism was guarded by chronological exclusion and a rule-of-thumb evaluation of the regional popularity of “national” cuisines (read Southern, Eastern and at times Northern Europeans who had arrived since the 1880s). The problem of whose food to include in an anthology of American food was especially acute in the Midwestern states, where “some dishes of European origin have been locally adopted” since these states have been “settled fairly late and [have] received large numbers of northern Europeans with fully developed cookery


126 The analysis of the taste of southern food in the New Deal sensory economy is further developed in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

127 Kellock, October 16, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 830.
traditions.” The rule for integration within the American culinary and sensory archive was flexible and aimed at reflecting sensory interracial relationships on the ground. “Foreign dishes or customs” could thus be reported on “when they have been adopted by large numbers of people outside the foreign born community.” This deceptively flexible line in fact created clear divisions. The Middle West section could then “include an account of a lutefisk dinner” since it had been adopted by the entire ‘American’ population, but the racial sensory integration into the national past stopped there and the Middle West essay would not be allowed to “contain an account of a Chinese Christening party.” The tension between a civic and a racial understanding of nationalism was at the heart of the America Eats project as the editor struggled to define and then explain what they meant by ‘American’—both in the narrower and “broader sense.” Peoples such as Italian, Greek, or Polish Americans had no definite place inside or outside of the project.

Overall, the FWP’s prescriptive sensory narrative tightened the threshold of American traditions. That racial and ethnic communities central to the New Deal sensory economy, such as African Americans or Italian Americans, should not be represented was thus collateral damage integral to the America Eats project. A 1941 exchange of letters and photographs between E.B. Moulton, from the Arkansas state office, and the newly appointed federal director of the Writers’ Project, J.D. Newsom, reveals ethnic Americans’ ambiguous sensory identity. The field worker wrote about the Tontitown’s Italian community Grape Festival Spaghetti Dinner, which “ha[d] been an annual event for the past forty years,” and attached pictures of the gathering to his letter.

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128 “Outline Indicating Approach to the Subject,” 8.
129 Ibid., 8.
130 “General Notes to the Regional Editors of the America Eats, Miscellaneous Notes,” 4, Administrative Material, LOC-AE, A 829.
He added that, even though this event might be irrelevant to the project and was “of course not characteristic of Arkansas, since there [were] only a few scattered Italian communities in the State,” he thought that the pictures “might conceivably be of some use.”\textsuperscript{131} Clearly, forty years of sensory presence in the southern state did not give the Italian community sensory legitimacy in the region.

But, if Moulton judged the photographic record inadmissible as part of the \textit{America Eats} project, his pictures are an incomparable point of entry into the sensory world of the Italian community in the southern states. The photographs present an ethnic community integrated into American industrial and sensory modernity \textit{and} familiar with the taste of southern food. Integral to the menu for the “spaghetti dinner” were mushy looking slices of buttered white processed bread and, as the caption of figure 1 reveals, fried chicken.\textsuperscript{132} Neither exotic nor authentic, these modern southern consumers of Italian descent found themselves in the sensory limbo of the \textit{America Eats} project.

\textsuperscript{131} EB Moulton (Arkansas) to J.D. Newsom, October 20, 1941, Correspondence, LOC-AE, A 829.

\textsuperscript{132} The slices of industrial white bread are visible on the picture entitled “Spaghetti Supper at Grape Festival, Tontitown, Arkansas,” Federal Writers’ Project photographs for the \textit{America Eats} project, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LOT 13328 (F), no. 25.
Figure 1. Cooking Spaghetti and Frying Chicken for a Spaghetti Supper at Grape Festival,
Tontitown, Arkansas, 1941.¹³³

¹³³ Federal Writers' Project photographs for the America Eats project, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LOT 13328 (F), no. 24.
Despite being edited out of the sensory past as defined in the proposal for the *America Eats* book, the Italian Tontitown festival is part of its archives. The community holds a liminal space in the process of sensory memorialisation the FWP embarked upon. Analyzing this archival margin leads to a series of interrelated conclusions. First, that the Italian community was ruled out of the sensory past reflected long-standing prejudice against a racialized, or at least ‘colorized,’ group. Yet, the fact that the local field worker *did* send a report on the festival, mentioning that it was a four decades old local custom, also reflects their ‘in-between’ status and their labouring toward whiteness in the Depression decade. The shifting racial status of the Italian community was embodied in their food taste - not quite southern, not quite Italian, and not quite modern; in a nutshell, it was ethnic. Their presence in the archive is not the one of a clearly identifiable sensory other; they are depicted neither as “merely exotic,” or “foreign,” nor as authentic. The absence of a marked taste difference paradoxically complicated their insertion in the national sensory past and present.

**Conclusion**

The FWP’s editors efforts to edit the nation’s taste and organize its sensory archive was a profoundly novel endeavour for its time as it used recent developments in the field of anthropology and folklore to ground its research on American food culture. Yet, the ambiguous meaning attached to the adjective ‘American,’ and the editors’ unwillingness to clearly address the question of its meaning, also profoundly flawed their project. Their somewhat confused stand can be explained by the shifting meaning of race and ethnicity in the 1930s. The culinary and taste archive they left behind is an example of how the senses participate in the elaboration of such categories. While the topic of food and taste seemed at first fitted to the production of a somewhat patriotic and eminently entertaining book, the editors stumbled upon unexpected
issues, such as the weight of industrial food and the influence of ethnic food on American regional diets. This forced them to both broaden the scope of their project, for instance including more contemporary habits in their assessment of traditions, and to tighten their editorial control, establishing clear lines as to who would enter the archive.

The FWP editors grounded their national sensory narrative in a systemic relationship between distinct regions whose identities became usable, purchasable, and eatable commodities for a nation-wide audience of potential tourists, armchair travelers, and consumers. But ethnic and racial groups straddling racial, regional, and class affiliations presented historically-minded FWP editors with a sensory challenge to their liberal ethos. The FWP’s troubles with delineating the racial borders of the nation’s sensory archive attested to the process of nationalization and industrialization of American taste that hindered regional cooking style but also established the cultural construction of race as a central determinant of regional sensory identity. As chapter three and four highlight, the local character of race in the U.S. challenged the federal editors’ will to record regional food and taste. In the South, the connections between race and place were purposely severed by white local FWP workers in an attempt to uphold racial segregation and white sensory supremacy. But describing and archiving racialized tastes could also become expedient in the construction of regional sensory identity. In the Southwest, the taste of race became the taste of place as FWP workers presented the taste of so-called “Mexican” food as a domestic sensory exoticism available for the modern nation to bite into. Regional constructions of racial hierarchies were central not only to the local construction of identity, but also to the regions’ commodified identities on the national marketplace of foodstuffs and ideas.

The FWP culinary and sensory work took place at a turning point in the making and acceptance of industrial foods as, indeed, ‘American’ food. FWP editors themselves proved
flexible on this point as they integrated national brands, such as coca-cola, and widespread habits, such as “munching” at the ball game, into their narrative. Yet, for 1930s eaters, looking for the taste of the past had a definite therapeutic effect as it allowed them to voice ambivalent feelings of nostalgia and anxiety. The sensory economy organized throughout the FWP archives grounded its appeal in restorative, comforting, and familiar tastes. The America Eats project was not only an arena for the sensory prescriptive imagination of the nation from the top down, but also a space for local workers to document “from the bottom up” the evolution of how food tasted and what food meant during the late years of the Depression.
Chapter Two
“Foods to Satisfy the Hunger of a Virile People”: Sensory Nostalgia, Gender, and Race on the Eve of World War Two.

In the interwar period, the town of Bowers Beach, Delaware, was the annual host of an oyster festival known as “Big Thursday.” The August celebration was a joyful day that centred on a massive picnic and was “given over to the enjoyment of food, games on the beach, and to renewing acquaintances… - all forms of sociability that add zest and savor to the fest.”\(^1\) Indeed, the day was an occasion for farmers to “take a breathing spell” from the “hot fields” and for housewives to get away from their even “hotter kitchens.”\(^2\) The 1941 festival was the topic of a detailed America Eats essay focused on two contrasting feminine portraits.\(^3\) First, was the lengthy description of a talkative women who, “seated before an improvised table in a farm truck… slice[d] fresh, crusty homemade loaves with a large carving knife, spread butter with the same knife, carve[d] tender slices from home baked ham, and, according to tastes of individuals in her family and with the same knife, add[ed] jam, mustard or pickles to complete the sandwich, select[ed] from a heaped pan a large piece of chicken with her fingers, and hand[ed] sandwich and chicken to the ‘next in turn’. “\(^4\) On the other side of the parking lot was her “sister” who, “sitting in a new and handsome motor car open[ed] for her family improved modern food

\(^1\) “Big Thursday,” 1, Delaware: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 830.
\(^2\) Ibid.
\(^4\) “Big Thursday,” 2.
hampers, filled with daintily made and wrapped sandwiches and fried chicken in paper holders, and thermos jars of hot and iced drinks.”

The two descriptions upheld a conservative gender ideal of women as mothers and homemakers, but the essay also set up a strong sensory binary that presented two opposed, yet coexisting, sensory formations. While one valued home cooking, local food, taste satisfaction, and sensory intimacy, the other prized modern scientific nutrition, sanitation, and mass retailing. These sisters represented two sides of the same coin; whether excluded and resisting the inroads of the food industry or adapting to and adopting it, they both became enmeshed in the narrative of modernity and nostalgia central to the Great Depression decade’s culinary narrative.

The description of the Big Thursday picnic provides insight into the anxieties provoked in American eaters by the accelerating industrialisation and standardization of food and the subsequent reshuffling of U.S. taste. Awareness of, and uneasiness with, the inroads of industrial foodstuffs, “factory breads,” and other “food a la concentrate” in the shaping of contemporary American taste was a meeting point for FWP’s federal editors and local workers. As the essay on the Big Thursday picnic illustrates, both groups often guided their readers towards siding with tasty traditional dishes rather than bland industrial foods. The warmth emanating from the farmwoman gave an ironic twist to the ideal vision represented by the up-to-date homemaker and questioned the sensory, social, and moral legitimacy of modern foods. The reader’s gaze and taste was presented with the two options and encouraged to consider whether economic progress was worth the sensory cost. Yet, if the portrait of the second woman reads like a science-fiction

5 Ibid., 2.
satire in which a perfect and disembodied homemaker feeds her family with generic sandwiches, she also represented a persuasive ideal of efficiency and success for her less fortunate sister who still had to rely on Depression-era ‘make-do’ home cooking.

If the description of the Big Thursday picnic was heavily gender coded, and embodied contemporary anxieties about industrial food products, it was also racially inflected. In the state of Delaware, segregation was strictly enforced and the “Big Thursday” picnic therefore exclusively white. “Black Saturday,” a parallel African American celebration traditionally took place a couple of days after the white event. As the state’s FWP guide book explained, on this occasion, “the white community cheerfully gave the celebrants the freedom of the beach and respects their privilege to enjoy their traditional frolic at the shore.” Yet, if eating and “courting” occurred in a similar manners as it did at the white event, the guidebook’s description adopted a disparaging tone when noting that Black Saturday sometimes resulted in, “affrays of fist-fighting, cutting, or shooting,” making the presence of State troopers necessary. The guidebook provided little detail about the food eaten on Black Saturday, though one can infer that the local “concessionaires” who supplied whites with fried fish, wiener, soft drinks, and ice cream also coveted the black clientele. As will be detailed in chapter three, taste segregation did not necessarily mirror social segregation in the South. But, in the midst of fast economic and sensory changes, the upholding of racial segregation and racial stereotypes offered a reassuring element of stability and continuity.

Through the celebration of traditional cookery, America Eats was a cultural site for the cathartic acceptation of industrial and standardized food as part of the racialized and gendered

7 FWP, Delaware, 403.
8 On the “racial contradictions” of southern consumption, see Hale, Making Whiteness, 168-197.
national sensory economy. By the end of the Depression decade, processed foods had acquired widespread currency as well as specific social and cultural meanings that led FWP workers, and ultimately FWP editors, to include them in their construction of the modern imagined community of American eaters. The industrialization of food and taste was the result of economic development and infrastructure building in the making since the late nineteenth century, but the sensory ascendancy of standardized foods on American taste was only achieved in the last years of the Depression, stabilized through wartime, and normalized in the postwar era. A sensory nostalgia for “old timer’s” dishes is noticeable throughout the *America Eats* archive which became a cultural and sensory tool for FWP workers to talk about, and ultimately come to terms with, the remaking of their taste over the first half of the century. Food historian Mark Swislocki defines culinary nostalgia as “the recollection or purposive evocation of another time and place through food.” The notion of sensory nostalgia developed in this chapter builds on his work on the role played by the longing for regional food in the construction of national identity, an aspect of the *America Eats* archive studied in chapter one. But the notion of sensory nostalgia developed in the following pages also goes beyond this definition and considers how sensory craving and yearning was a tool in the making of gender and racial categories in the interwar period.

The FWP’s sensory nostalgia was not so much a yearning for the past as a blueprint for the future. The imagined culinary past was one of the sensory currencies active in shaping the New Deal sensory economy. The notion of sensory economy offers a tool for the analysis of how perceptions and taste shaped the social, cultural, and emotional life of New Deal America; it also

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offers a novel way to look at the uses of the past in nation-building efforts. The imagined sensory past emerging from the America Eats archive served as a point of reference in a time of accelerated food standardization, social instability and, at the end of the period, wartime mobilization. The perception of recently introduced industrial foods shaped the recollection and celebration of the nation’s wholesome culinary past and conditioned the cultural and sensory cravings expressed by various FWP workers and editors. The sensory knowledge produced in the archive became a prescriptive standard the FWP federal and local staff used to legitimize conservative gender ideals, racial segregation, and the reproduction of racial stereotypes. The widespread 1930s populist rhetoric strengthened this prescriptive construction of the American sensory past and located its heart in white middle class kitchens. FWP workers grounded the America Eats’ nostalgic outlook in the celebration of “the people” and articulated their longing in the abiding American populist style.

The impending U.S. participation in World War Two accelerated the documentation of the America Eats project and the making of the FWP’s culinary and sensory archive, the impending conflict also infused the archive with definite gender and racial limits. FWP editors revived the America Eats project in the fall of 1941 and a number of state’s essays and reports tend to document not so much the food culture of the Depression but the early mobilization of

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American senses and psyche for the war effort. Wartime mobilization reinforced the importance of national sensory coherence. Donna Gabaccia has noted that, “the confusion about what constituted regional American, as opposed to ethnic, corporate or invented foods in the *America Eats* project resolved itself in the face of wartime national emergency.” Yet, this resolution was not without gendered and racial limits. The military mobilization put masculine values at the centre of the wartime food culture and sensory economy. The conservative ideal of the home front housewife described by historian Amy Bentley had deep roots in the gender politics of the Depression that restricted women’s economic opportunities and placed masculine value at the centre of the country’s aesthetic, political, and cultural life. The nostalgic tone of the *America Eats* archive and the longing for homemade food in the face of food industrialization reinforced the conservative vision of women as mothers and safeguards of the nation’s emotional health and sensory vigour. Traditional feminine cooking skills signaled authenticity and timelessness in the midst of modernization. The argument could backfire though, and FWP workers also painted women as irresponsible consumers seduced by advertisement copies and endangering their families. The contrasting portraits that open this chapter did not go as far but indicated the two possibilities.

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12 Gabaccia, *We are What we Eat*, 144.


14 On the 1930s as the crucial decade for the “craft[ing] of a series of nationalist visions of the “American Way of Life” that placed consumption and private enterprise squarely at the heart of citizenship and social identity,” see
The nostalgic culinary narrative produced in the *America Eats* archive put men’s taste and desire at its centre, kept white women in their kitchen, and subjugated black Americans to stereotyped roles as either auxiliaries to white cooking or sources of invigorating primitive sensory experiences. FWP workers framed black culinary preferences as the result of a coarse and unrefined “savage” sensory apparatus, but also as a pool of revitalizing sensory experiences in which civilized individuals could occasionally tap.  

The mobilized citizenry of the early 1940s thus occasionally found its sensory vigor in stereotyped black foods, such as chitterlings. Psychological and gustatory comfort was spurred not only by a longing for the imagined homemade food of the past, but also by the embodied sensation of racial and gendered dominance. The foods of racial others were considered a source of regeneration for white men whose endangered breadwinner status during the Depression was promptly remedied by the coming of World War Two.

“*The Jolt*” of the Depression: Sensory Populism in the FWP Archive.

The sensory recording facilitated by the *America Eats* project offered a dynamic and populist model of taste as FWP workers began “telling the story of what people have eaten because they liked it, not what they ought to eat, or what poor selection of food has done to

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them.”16 The “people” were to provide the sensory cues, an editorial memo for instance insisted on the fact that recipes should be collected from “a politician, the cook of a man or a woman known for the food he provides at his table, a restaurant-keeper, a cattlemen, a prominent horse-owner, a miner, a store-keeper, or a hobo” and specified that, “only teachers of cooking and writers of cookbooks should be barred.”17 This vision of the American people at the table relates to historian Michael Kazin’s definition of populism as a conception of the citizenry as a “noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class,” but by its reverence to a mythic national founding creed. Though the content of this creed was an object of political contention between the right and left of the political spectrum, it provided a stylistic framework to 1930s writers.18 As Kazan argues, the populist mode was “a grand form of rhetorical optimism” that posed that, “once mobilized, there is nothing ordinary Americans cannot accomplish.” The founding creed that animated the America Eats archive’s sensory populism was the belief in the moral superiority of so-called traditional foods compared to industrial foodstuffs.19 Good eating did not necessary comes from haute cuisine kitchens or professional cooks but rather from the vernacular knowledge of local cooks.

The populist and sensory outlook of the FWP’s culinary project purposely clashed with the Progressive era nutritional order that gave authority to nutritional experts, home economics, and cookbook authors.20 Turn of the century and early twentieth century understanding of food

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17 “General note to Regional Editors of America Eats,” 3, Administrative Material, LOC-AE, box A 829.


20 The term “Progressive Era” is used to describe the period from the 1890s to the 1920s in U.S. cultural, social and political life. The period was a time of social activism and political reforms aiming at curtailing the excesses of
often implied that food choices should not be made out of taste preferences and appetite but should obey the newly established nutritional scientific knowledge relayed by food companies and endorsed by professional cooks and experts. As Laura Shapiro states, “it was in the well-regulated functioning of protein, carbohydrate and fat and in the marvelous mechanisms of the digestive process, that scientific cooks found their culinary romance,” rather than in the celebration of regional or ethnic traditions. Progressive era food reformers were not so much concerned with how food tasted - quite the contrary blandness and virginal white sauces had a definite appeal to them. Rather, they were preoccupied by the potential for degeneracy, neurasthenia, and physical illness caused by urban life and the diet it entailed. The Progressive view was reinforced in the 1920s by dietetic reformers and advocates of the “New Nutrition” movement whose research and reform advocacy centered on nutrients, vitamins, and calories. The growing food industries built on scientific and professional discourses and shrewdly marketed their food as healthy alternative to traditional and/or ethnic foods. Development in nutritional science and sanitized standardization were then used as tools for moralizing and racial discourses aiming at rejuvenating the (Anglo-Saxon) American race, taming the urban working-

capitalism. The movement cut across political lines and was marked by a rise of what historian Daniel Rogers has dubbed the “interventionist state” and of the role of professional experts in American life. According to Rogers, “the reconstruction of American social politics was of a part with movements of politics and ideas throughout the North Atlantic world that trade and capitalism had tied together,” and marked a time when “American politics was peculiarly open to foreign models and imported ideas.” He stretches the chronological limits of the Progressive Era from the 1870s to the New Deal, a chronology that the culinary and sensory focus of this dissertation tends to downplay. Daniel T. Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), I-6.

21 Laura Shapiro, Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century (New York: Holt, 1987), 73, see also 91-95.

22 Levenstein, Revolution at the Table, 147–160; Levenstein, Paradox of Plenty, 9–23.
class crowd and assimilating the migrant masses.\textsuperscript{23} Progressive Era concerns about food were part of a larger “therapeutic” worldview that, when associated with the growing concern over the scientific backing of racial discourse, contributed to the process of putting bodies—healthy, deviant, reformed, and foreign—at the centre of the American public discourse. Food, as the stuff of life and source of nourishment for American bodies, underlined Progressive era discourses about the fear of degeneration and the “betterment of the races.”\textsuperscript{24}

The Progressive scientific model of nutrition carried over into the interwar period and animated the 1930s’ debates over malnutrition and the health consequences of the Depression. For instance, while states of undernourishment and starvation had traditionally been linked to the feeling of hunger and the vision of deprived bodies, the growth of scientific nutrition and the discovery of new vitamins and nutrients resulted in the definition of starvation shifting away from the feeling of hunger and towards the idea that bodily deprivation could not be felt by the eaters but only diagnosed by doctors.\textsuperscript{25} The updating of the Food and Drug Act in 1938 encouraged food companies to further research and to further advertise the ways in which vitamins could be, tastelessly and innocuously, reinserted back into industrial products.\textsuperscript{26} This new definition of starvation was symptomatic of a larger shift in American understanding of nutrition and diet as science, an understanding that the FWP sought to contest. FWP workers regularly lamented the sensory loss caused by the rise of scientific nutrition and complained

\textsuperscript{23} Shapiro, \textit{Perfection Salad}; Levenstein, \textit{Revolution at the Table}, 98–108.


\textsuperscript{25} Levenstein, \textit{Paradox of Plenty}, 23.

\textsuperscript{26} Levenstein, \textit{Paradox of Plenty}, 9-24; 60-62.
about “the all pervasiveness of modern etiquette book and the equally pervasive educational propaganda toward an adequate and balanced diet” that had turned “the fine art of eating” in a “pseudo-scientific search for a lost vitality hidden in the juice of a raw carrot.”27

The breadlines of the early 1930s staggered the legitimacy of the industrial and scientific Progressive nutritional order. The lack of food symbolically embodied broader interrogations about the viability of the capitalist market economy. The America Eats project outlined by the FWP editors provided local workers with an arena to express concerns about food industrialization and taste standardization. They voiced their unease with the sensory consequences of the powerful American creed of “Progress,” a creed unhinged by the Great Depression. Assessing the defiant mood of American politics in the mid thirties, Alan Brinkley estimates that, “before the Depression, many of the economic changes had occurred almost unnoticed – small incidental alteration in surroundings to which most people could easily adapt and unthinkingly adjust. In the absence of a sudden, cataclysmic jolt, few had connected this halting evolution with any broader sense of process or structure. The Great Depression provided that jolt.”28 His analysis transfers adequately to the discussion of taste in the decade. The America Eats archive eloquently documents how the Great Depression heightened FWP workers’ feelings of sensory deprivation and alienation from their food.

The links between the food industry, perceived sensory depravation, and the economic crisis became increasingly apparent to the American public in the aftermath of the economic crash. The Depression in fact tightened the food industry’s grip on American taste. Most food

27 Delaware Eats, October 1941, Delaware: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 830. Dolan, “Food a la Concentrate.”
28 Alan Brinkley, Voices of Protest, 156.
processors and brands managed to maintain relatively low prices by drastically and single
handedly cutting their suppliers’ prices. By the same token, the Depression launched the
creation of a new type of retail space, namely: the supermarket. Businessmen came to appreciate
the savings to be made in mass buying and mass retailing of foodstuffs in interchangeable
spaces. They realized that, “when people had little money they were willing to forgo the
conveniences of time, location, and service to reap substantial savings on food purchases.”
New consumption habits contributed to the standardization of American taste not only by
making processed food available for a low price throughout the country but also because the
reorganization of the commercial structure of food distribution enticed Americans to shift their
allegiance away from local, and often ethnic, grocers.

The FWP intentionally displaced the focus of its study of 1930s food culture away from
the raging debate of experts about the health consequences of the Depression and scientific
nutrition. In reaction, the culinary knowledge produced by the FWP aimed at re-centering taste
and at reorganizing the sensory hierarchy of modernity by claiming back smell and touch as part
of the modern sensorium. The evolution of the American model of nutrition since the late
nineteenth century increasingly called on the visual and, through radio advertising, listening
capacities of the U.S. public. However, at the same time, modern nutrition science gradually
disjointed food from the senses of taste and smell. Progressive scientific nutrition cast taste and
smell as lower, untruthful, and threatening senses. The America Eats project purposely offered

29 Levenstein, Paradox of Plenty, 25.
30 On the changes in food retailing during the Depression see, Deutsch, Building a Housewife’s Paradise, 73–154; for a focused discussion of the rise of the supermarket, see, 144–149.
31 Longstreth, The Drive-in, the Supermarket, and the Transformation of Commercial Space in Los Angeles, 112.
32 Deutsch, Building a Housewife’s Paradise, 52; Cohen, Making a New Deal, 235–238.
an alternative narrative to the scientific and disembodied understanding of food prominent at the turn of the century. By contrast, the FWP culinary project aimed at describing an incarnated and sensual imagined nation of eaters.

Though they balked at applying “a technical tag” to their approach, federal editors clearly favoured the methods of the “social anthropologist,” as opposed to those practiced by home economists. Similarly, they did not wish to prescribe what kind of food people should be eating for proper nourishment but aimed at describing how Americans ate and what they liked. The federal editors insisted in several missives on the “light” tone of the book, they required local workers to put the “emphasis on human interest and the pleasurable aspect of eating” and to write in “as lively and amusing manner as possible.”33 The editors clearly indicated that they were not interested in documenting either “the story of what has happened to diet during catastrophes” or “commercialized feasts,” but rather “social meals attended by friendly groups.”34 Glancing through the America Eats material, New Deal America appears to be a country of abundance, neighborly outings, and tasty foods.

The FWP federal editors did not wish to study the effect of the Great Depression on American eating habits or how scientific cookery could ameliorate the American diet during the economic slump but aimed instead at recording so-called “traditions” surviving despite the rise of modern consumerism. From a quick perusal, one of the striking features of the America Eats archive is the relative rareness of direct references to the Great Depression and its effect on

33 The FWP editors explicitly referred to the “light” tone of the book in three documents: “Brief Description of the proposed Book”; “General note to Regional Editors of America Eats,” 3, Administrative Material, LOC-AE, A 829; JD Newsom to Henry Armory (Southern California FWP), September 4th, 1941, Correspondence, August-October 1941, A 829.

34 “Memorandum, November 24, 1941,” Correspondence, November to December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830.
American food habits and taste. Out of the forty-eight state files of the America Eats archive, the word “Depression” appears less than ten times, and often in newspaper clipping from the early years of the decade collected for research. FWP workers most often wrote about the Great Depression in the past tense; indeed, by the early 1940s, the rapid development of the military industrial complex accelerated the end of the economic crisis. Only one recipe, for egg-less “Depression cake,” referred to want and the need for housewives to adapt their cooking skills.35 Thriftiness and ‘make-do’ recipes, though key words of the 1930s decade and the war period, were not qualities put forward in the America Eats project. The main discussion of thrift appeared in a New Hampshire essay and did not discuss the Depression but aimed at debunking stereotype about “Yankee penny pinchers.”36 FWP workers underlined abundance and liberal use of rich ingredients rather than thriftiness. Traditional foods and their taste, because of their nurturing, symbolic, and mnemonic character, provided a sense of stability amid economic and social disruption as well as an adequate sensory vehicle for a broader cultural search and longing for America.

Describing community dinners organized by church and benevolent associations in church basements or community halls was the closest the FWP ever got to directly evoking the Great Depression. The promise of homemade food, most typically chicken pie, mashed potatoes, and apple pie was the primary sensory appeal of these events and explains their predominant place in the America Eats archive.37 All were welcomed though the fund-raising character of

35 “Far West,” Section Essay, 57-59.
36 The essay on Yankee “penny-pinchers” explains that, “to be thrifty is to avoid unnecessary waste, and in cooking to be ingenious is to device ways and means of being thrifty with wholesome and tasty results. Thrift, born of necessity, has become a Yankee tradition which, unfortunately, has given rise to the idea among the uninitiated that the Yankees are penny-pinchers.” Untitled essay, New Hampshire: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A831.
such meals required the purchase of a low-priced ticket; 15 to 35 cents would buy a filling “family style” dinner.\(^{38}\) The occurrence rate of such dinners clearly increased in the 1930s. Courting customers, the church ladies advertised the fund-raising community dinner as one who would provide not only tasty old-style meals but also an entertaining evening. These diners were twice charity events: they brought money to the organizers and helped to provide good food and fun to participants on a restricted budget. The “silver that tinkle[d] into the church’s cash box” went “to pay the church debts” or to finance the local ‘Ladies’ Aid’ and church relief associations.\(^{39}\) The “Penny Supper” was an evocative variation on the community supper in which the entire meal was donated by church members and served “cafeteria style” in the church basement. “Every helping, whether it is a cube of butter or a small square of meat loaf [sold] for one penny” so that, “a hungry person [could] acquire enough to satisfy a hungry man for about 35 cent.”\(^{40}\) The cause of hunger in this excerpt can only be inferred: was this the healthy hunger of a hard-working folk or the looming hunger of a malnourished unemployed labourer? The America Eats archive recurrent downplaying of the impact of the Depression on American eating habits leaves this question unanswered.

The narrative federal editors wished for was timeless - or at least not directly referential. America Eats was to be a textbook in American social and culinary life rather than a document on Depression cooking and eating habits. Scorning the alienating and pseudo-scientific discourse of the food industries’ advertisement pitch, the FWP went looking for the sensory vitality and

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\(^{38}\) “Chicken Pie Supper,” Vermont: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832.

\(^{39}\) “Church Fellowship Supper,” 2.

common sense of the folks who “forget diets and waistlines.” The food related events described in the America Eats archive all offer variations on a common theme of commensality, community, and the sharing of meals. Subsequently, the America Eats project codified a set list of traditional recipes as the backdrop against which to consider, weigh, and judge contemporary industrial foods and tastes. The America Eats archive is filled with quilting-bees, hog-killing parties, sugar pulling, family reunion, Harvest Home dinner, Grange supper, barbecues, rodeos, pie contest, church-dinners, and box-suppers that all conjured an ideal hospitality. The narrative composed by the aggregated America Eats essays represented the nation as an imagined community of gluttons, experts at “dramatizing food” and looking for any “plausible reason and social gathering” to “ma[ke] stuffed pigs of themselves and laid up nightmares for the coming evening.”

“The ‘Home Style’ After the Chicken Pie Has a World of Meaning”: Sensory Nostalgia in the FWP archive.

The feeling of sensory loss and the populist rhetoric present throughout the America Eats archive resulted in an aesthetic of sensory nostalgia. The goal of the America Eats project was to document contemporary eating events only to the extent that these would purposely be “those of the nostalgic variety” in which “the art of cooking” was preserved, “since preparation of fine

41 “Church Supper,” 2, Delaware: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 830.

42 A box-dinner was a popular social event in the early 1900s and into the 1930s. Each participating girl brought a boxed meal for one or two, the boxes were auctioned off to the participating men who would then eat their meal in the company of the girl who prepared it. See, “Box-supper,” Georgia: Notes, Essay, Reports, LOC- AE, A 831; “Box Social,” “School Box Supper,” Nebraska: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831; “Box and Pie Dinner,” Texas: Food, Celebrations, LOC-FP, A 681.

food remains a creative activity that cannot be duplicated by factory methods.”

Nostalgia is at the center of a number of recent historical and anthropological inquiries. Svetlana Boym, in her study of nostalgia as “a historical emotion,” shows the codependency of nostalgic feelings with modernity and progress as well as the importance of nostalgia in establishing “national awareness.”

FWP workers and editors were part of a broader ideological reaction to the displacements of modernity that build “on the sense of loss of community and cohesion and offer[ed] a comforting collective script for individual longing.”

The archiving of culinary traditions and remembered tastes, as well as the selective view of the past that accompanied it, became crucial to the making of national collective identity.

The FWP’s sensory nostalgia also shared key feature with the “imperialist nostalgia” theorized by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo and the “culinary nostalgia” studied by Mark Swilocki. In line with Boym’s assessment of nostalgia as a “a sentiment of loss and displacement,” Swilocki’s study of the culinary nostalgia for Chinese regional food in Shanghais considers regional cuisines as “discursive constructs,” rather than “category of analysis,” for “constructing a sense of home and imagining an ideal society.”

As chapter one highlights, Swilocki’s focus of regional foods in the making of national identity is a helpful framework to think about the FWP’s culinary archive and its regional organization of taste. The FWP’s nostalgic effort at documenting American food on the eve of World War Two conceived of the nation as the symbiotic relation between diverse sensory regions. Idealized and nostalgically remembered visions of regional pasts were held as a prescriptive model for the national present.

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44 Brief Description of Proposed Book,” 8, Administrative Material, LOC-AE, A 829.
45 Boym, The Future of Nostalgia, 12.
46 Ibid., 42.
47 Ibid., xiii; Swislocki, Culinary Nostalgia, 1–11.
Food allowed for this nostalgically remembered ideal society not only to be imagined but potentially realized and embodied in a newly prepared dish.

The FWP’s sensory nostalgia was a vehicle for nation building but is also reminiscent of anthropologist Renato Rosaldo’s notion of “imperialist nostalgia.” Rosaldo crafted this notion in order to analyze the feeling of longing that agents of colonialism often expressed for the more “natural” or “primitive” states of the colonized society that they were in the process of changing. 48  Like agents of colonialism that mourned the traditional cultures that they were contributing to disrupt, FWP workers “valorize[d] innovation and then yearn[ed] for more stable worlds.” The nostalgic undertone of their writings worked as a “particularly appropriate emotion to invoke in attempting to establish one’s innocence and at the same time talk about what one has destroyed.” 49  Longing for tastes of the past FWP editors and local workers alike established themselves as passive and powerless onlookers in the face of the “devastating effects of labor-saving devices and mass production” and the industrial streamlining of their food taste. 50  The nostalgic tone the America Eats project called for provided FWP workers with a cathartic mean for expressing their anxieties about the industrial food system and for accepting the ascending grip of the modern industrial diet on American taste. Those who partook in the industrial diet on a daily basis remembered a mythic and wholesome “golden age of eating” during which the method of “cooking and flavoring” relied on “liberality in the use of eggs” and “home-tried lard and home-made butter” rather than “baking powders, soda and cream of tartar [as well as]

48 Rosaldo notes that “Imperialist nostalgia occurs along a peculiar sense of mission, the white man’s burden, where civilized nations stand duty-bound to uplift so-called savaged ones.” Renato Rosaldo, “Imperialist Nostalgia” Representation 26 (Spring 1989), 108.

49 Ibid.

inexpensive shortenings.” 51 Feelings of sensory deprivation and loss, coupled with disdainful mention of “store-bought” food and “confectionaries” were a leitmotiv of the field workers’ reports. 52 Indeed, pointing to a “golden age of eating” only made sense by comparison with a later sensory fall caused by the “commercialization” of food. 53

More importantly then, the FWP archive’s nostalgic tone shared key features with the feeling food anthropologist David Sutton has labeled “nostalgia for the real.” Sutton crafted this notion in order to interpret the late twentieth century industry of heritage cookbooks and their celebration of “authentic” tastes perceived as more “real” than the products of the food industry. 54 This nostalgia and longing for the “taste of the homemade” in face of the mass production of food was however already noticeable in the late 1930s; tastes that had slowly complied with the dictates of the food industries and their “commercial imitation of good cooking” rebelled and now longed for “real” and home-cooked meals. 55 FWP workers rebelled against bland industrial hams, “decorated with elaborate scorings or cloves, or pineapples, or any artificial doodads” and reminisced “the real thing born and bred in the peanut section of Virginia,” its meat, “the color of a Cuban mahogany, not anemic pink, and the fat the deep gold transparency of amber beads.” 56 They rebelled against the regulatory rhetoric of nutrition relayed

53 Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 35, Section Essay, LOC-AE, A 833
54 David E. Sutton, Remembrance of Repasts: an Anthropology of Food and Memory (New York: Berg, 2001), 125–156.
56 The comments on ham are respectively from “Cypress Ridge Singing Convention,” Arkansas: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 830 and “Virginia (food along US 1),” 2, Virginia: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832.
by “home economist’s college dietetics training” and, most often, by the “dulcet-voiced radio broadcasters and jokester [who] advertise[d] dishes made of pastel hued Jell-O and [were] paid in figures that resemble the United States public debt.”

As an answer to the bland foods provided by the food industry, both federal editors and local workers wished to document “taste sensations that have withstood the test of time.” The FWP’s narrative was a romance of the homemade. Beyond taste, it was a way of life, a sense of etiquette, a communal insularity and stability that they imagined, missed, and remembered. As a Vermont writer succinctly put it, they longed for the “world of meaning” that comes with the “home style” after the chicken pie.

The *America Eats* project provided FWP workers with a forum in which to voice their ambiguous feeling about modern, processed, and reproducible foods. In this cathartic moment, 1930s eaters acquired what one might call a double taste consciousness: they longed for the flavor of homemade foods while acclimatizing their taste to the products of the food industry. Though they might still be able to “differentiate between the genuine honest-to-goodness Johnny Cakes and the palate-insulting commercial substitutes,” FWP workers were resigned. They related an accomplished reshuffling of the “national gastronomic economy” rather than witness a change; thus when looking for the American national dish a field worker arbitrated in favor of the hotdog, an “unfortunate…gastronomic delight [that] you've either got to take or leave alone.” When reporting of the effects of the “hefty swings of that inevitable leveller, Progress” and how it “toppled [hallowed traditions] from [their] throne,” field workers often adopted an

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58 Far West,” Section Essay, 73, LOC-AE, A 833.
60 “Rhodes Island Johnny Cakes,” Rhodes Island: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A832.
ironical tone that allowed them to voice their uneasiness with their own streamlined tastes and regretted that the accumulated changes had “relieved [them] from the pleasant past time of digging [their] graves with [their] teeth.”

The nostalgic sensory rummage for American eating traditions ascribed prescriptive taste borders to the nation and could be used as a justification for the omission, even exclusion, of contemporary eaters from the pool of national traditions. However, the nostalgic ethos perceptible throughout the archive also led FWP workers to celebrate select ethnic meals. In regions occupied by large, cohesive, and securely white ethnic groups, community dinners encouraged cross-ethnic eating. The best documentation of this type of ethnic meal in the America Eats archive can be found in the essays describing lutefisk and smorgasbord dinners organized by Scandinavian churches in the Midwest. These dinners were a popular sensory feature of midwestern states, drawing large multi-ethnic crowds of eaters to church basements.

The habit of having a public lutefisk dinner was considered by FWP workers a “comparatively recent innovation” in the late 1930s, suggesting that the increased taste appeal of ethnic food went hand in hand with the nostalgic sensory longing of the American eating public. Indeed, ethnic food offered enhanced taste sensations and slowly became the most evident reservoir of sensory authenticity in the U.S.

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63 Lutefisk is a dish of “codfish soaked first in lye, then in water, then cooked, then served with melted butter or cream sauce,” See Donna Gabaccia’s discussion of Lutefisk in the America Eats archive in, Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 142-143. Lutefisk dinners are documented in a series of essay in the America Eats archive, see, “The Lutefisk Dinner,” Wisconsin: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832; Ethel Bristol, “Church Smorgasbord,” 2, Nebraska: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 830; “Racial Traditions and Customs,” 17, Idaho: Notes, Essays, Reports, AE-LOC, A 831; “Lutefisk Dinner,” North Dakota, Notes, Essays, Reports, AE-LOC, A 830; “Far West,” Section Essay.

64 “Lutefisk Dinner,” 1.

65 On this point, see also, Hoganson, Consumers’ Imperium, 10, 121.
embrace ethnic food as exotic but, above all, as authentic and uncorrupted by modern nutrition and the food industries.  

Despite their willingness to introduce select ethnic cuisines in their narrative, the sensory past imagined and nostalgically remembered by FWP workers and editors was normative and possessed precise gender limits and racial boundaries that the coming of World War Two reinforced. The sensory nostalgia of the FWP workers, then, was also a means for the reiteration of conservative gender roles and the restatement of the black and white colour line.

**Tasting Virile Food, Making the Feminine Home Front.**

The anticipated U.S. involvement in World War Two made the resolution of the sensory anxieties of Depression America even more pressing. The last archival entries take the *America Eats* project into the first months of direct involvement in World War Two, a time period that reoriented the project toward overtly nationalist goals. As one editor put it a few days before Pearl Harbor, “if we can make Americans realize that they have the best table in the world we shall have helped to deepen national patriotism.” National wartime mobilization directly recruited Americans’ senses. In the FWP editors’ mind, the “gusto” and the verve of the *America Eats* project would not only provide readers with comforting sensory feelings by re-invigorating American interest in “traditional dishes” as opposed to industrial foods, but also provoke an emotional and patriotic investment in the nation.

66 The Scandinavian ethnic group recognized this potential and used it as a money making device during the Depression, indeed, “the ladies of the Norwegian churches are glad to have the strangers come, for the receipts from the suppers go to pay the church debts.” “Lutefisk Dinner,” 2.

67 On World War Two and gender norms, see, Bentley, *Eating for Victory*; On World War Two, race, and food, see, Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs*, 71–79.

68 “Memorandum,” November 24, 1941, Correspondence: November to December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830.
An important way in which FWP workers on the *America Eats* project relayed the patriotic mood of the early 1940s was by using sensory nostalgia to affirm conservative gender roles. For all its inconsistencies, contradictions, and sheer oddities, the *America Eats* material proved systematic on one point: a clear gender line runs throughout the archive separating white women’s private cooking and baking from men’s public barbecuing. To temper the sensory and social disruption brought by the Depression, FWP workers nostalgic and conservative gender rhetoric valorized perceived virile foods and tastes. The federal editors explicitly instructed the field workers to adopt a “light tone, but not tea shoppe [sic], masculine rather than feminine.”

The coming of World War Two reinforced this tendency since, by 1941, the disdain for industrial food was not so much a nostalgic matter anymore but a concrete challenge for the mobilized nation since, “no race will spring to man the barricades with its stomach stuffed with Waldorf salad nestles in a leaf of lettuce plus a dab of store-bought mayonnaise on top.” The need for sensory vigour and bodily fitness provided a fitting argument against bland industrial food.

FWP workers linked the nation’s culinary and sensory deterioration to the food industries increasing role in determining American diet, but they also held women responsible for indulging in these new foods and serving them to their families. The implied meaning of their nostalgic and conservative narrative was that the feminine surrender to standardized food had corrupted their family’s diet and taste and thus weakened the nation’s force. When explaining the contemporary “decline in food standards,” many pointed to members of the “weaker sex” who, “have seldom had as great an interest in food as men have had,” but who, “when housekeeping

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69 “General Note to Regional Editors of *America Eats*,” 1.
70 White, “Beef Tour,” 5.
was the only career open to them and compliments on satisfying meals were the chief rewards for service...spent much of their time in shopping for choice foodstuffs, mixing, beating, paring, boiling, and baking.” Yet, “when new careers were opened to women,” they abandoned their kitchen and relied on industrial foodstuffs leading the “eating public” to be, “gradually accustomed to the ready made meal” and to loose “appreciation of the finer product.”71 Such arguments worked to accuse working women of threatening their families by feeding them feminizing processed foods instead of solid homemade foods.72 Women’s failure to properly feed their families was a continuing theme of the America Eats narrative.

Celebration and blame were two sides of the feminine ideal that was promoted in the America Eats archive. While FWP workers recurrently underlined women’s failure to properly feed their families, they also celebrated white women’s culinary knowledge, cooking skills, and canning abilities. Yet, they seldom mentioned their labour, choosing instead to describe them as “kitchen magician[s]” whose “chocolate cakes, with the creamy, milk-full fillings that cover all the golden layers” were “praised by hundreds of preachers and laymen alike.”73 But with their homemade food, women also flattered men’s senses to the point of bringing out childish behaviours as men were “hard put to choose between apple pie and devil’s food cake with

72 This supports but also shifts the chronology of Tracey Deutsch’s narrative about women’s food shopping. She holds that “gender and women’s history of food work are necessary to fully understand the widely held belief that women’s food shopping is both the cause of enormous social problems and the key to fixing them. This belief originates in Cold War narratives of women’s embrace of processed foods, the consequent decline in work around food provisioning, and the (welcome) divisions between the realms of politics and consumption.” The Cold War Era was a catalyst for such reproach but they had been subjacent for several decades already. Tracey. Deutsch, “Memories of Mothers in the Kitchen: Local Foods, History, and Women’s Work,” Radical History Review 2011, no. 110 (Spring 2011): 170; See also, Deutsch, Building a Housewife’s Paradise.
cocoanut icing,” they became animal-like eaters “straining at the leach” before the meal.74 The America Eats’ rhetoric often played on the image of Eve in the Garden of Eden and described women as tempting men with the products of their kitchen and encouraging a dangerous gluttony. But more often, the feminine original sin took on a modern twist as FWP workers held women accountable for the contemporary sensory loss as they weakly gave in to the “corrupting inroads of the dainty recipes of the ladies’ magazines.”75 Even the “pleasantly-faced” Pennsylvania Dutch girls included “little mints, salted nuts, stuffed olives, and hard candies” as part of their “country style meals.”76

This culinary and sensory narrative built on cultural anxieties over the effect of the Depression on gender relations and family life due to women’s newfound economic opportunities and increased autonomy. Looking at the visual arts and theatre programs of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), cultural historian Barbara Melosh explains the “containment of feminism” over the decade as a reaction to a “sense of manhood in crisis” caused by widespread unemployment and the masculine incapacity to fulfill the role of exclusive family providers. The Depression increased women’s presence on the job market to the extent that “female independence threatened an embattled masculinity.”77 FWP workers indeed put the blame for the depreciation of taste on women who, “in taking their rightful place in the world affairs… have, to a large extent, deserted their pots and pans, and turned over their culinary responsibilities to the manufacturers of prepared foods.” Fortunately, “there still [was] the

75 White, “Beef Tour,” 5.
76 Untitled, 3, Pennsylvania: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832.
77 Melosh, Engendering Culture, 1; 30.
occasional male chef, usually an artists in his line, and well able to maintain the traditions off the past.”  

In reaction to women’s increasing role in public and economic life, the conservative ideals of the female homemaker and the male breadwinner were central in the framing of the American welfare state and liberalism, both legally and culturally. Legislation passed in the late years of the New Deal, and consolidated by the postwar liberal order, relied on “traditional gender constraints” that ingrained these ideals in American society. Women, especially married women, working outside the home were stigmatized as taking over men’s jobs, and ultimately barred from working in relief agencies. Social historian Alice Kessler Harris goes further than Melosh when she posits that New Deal legislators, “drew on a deeply gendered, racialized, and sometimes nostalgic vision of the past that was ultimately rooted in Lockean perceptions of individual freedom and economic opportunity, untrammeled by government intervention.” Kessler-Harris demonstrates how New Deal reforms such as Social Security, “reconstructed and perpetuated notions of individualism by protecting male independence and autonomy in the labor market, reinforcing traditional notions that rights are defined by position in the family, and affirming women's status as dependent.” Defining independence as the primary condition for full citizenship, the New Deal reforms had widespread gendered and racial consequences since they established “a concept of dignity and of rights in which most women (black or white) and

78 “Culinary Goodies, Cape Cod Style,” 2, Massachusetts: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831.


81 Ibid. 1256.
many African American males were expected to have no part.” The rationale that blamed women for the encroachment of industrial foods on Americans’ diet and taste played upon the fears created by female employment and increased autonomy during the Depression. Though it acknowledged women’s new role and their newly acquired “rightful place in the world,” it also symbolically aimed at restricting them to the kitchen sphere and clearly stated the “gendered limits” of the possible. The coming of the war and the making of the home front reinforced this view.

Situated at a turning point between the Depression and the economic recovery induced by the wartime industrial mobilization, the FWP culinary archive announces the “Wartime Homemaker” at the center of Amy Bentley’s analysis of wartime food rationing. Bentley’s analysis of how the governmental and corporate food campaigns, “perpetuated stereotypical notions of gender by maintaining segregated “gendered spaces” and portraying women as subordinates whose primary duty was to cook and serve food” neatly fits the America Eats material. But, though the gendered experience of cooking and eating in the late 1930s was an essential step toward the wartime food propaganda, Bentley has little to say about the Depression decade. That, “images of women and food were used to portray American society as ordered, calm, and stable, particularly with regard to established hierarchies of race and gender” in wartime nutritional propaganda was grounded in the gendered rhetoric of the late 1930s and was not novel to the wartime era. Moreover, the America Eats archive’s upholding of restrictive gender roles prefigured the postwar “domestic containment” of women, especially when

82 Ibid., 1264.
83 Bentley, Eating for Victory, 5
understanding containment not only in terms of spatial and cultural limitations but also sensory confinement.  

The *America Eats* archive not only considered gender difference as a social distinction, but also contributed to naturalize gender difference as an essential sensory disparity. The social distinction blended with a more essentialist argument that held women’s taste as fundamentally different from, and inferior to, men’s preferences. The *America Eats* essays illustrated this trend and recurrently scorn “dainty” food prepared by women under the influence of food manufacturers and instead praised “lusty and vigorous” foods. Future soldiers could not conceivably be fed on, “elaborate, gaudily colored cuts of a variety of puddings and pastries and cakes made from especially prepared flour.” Spatial segregation accompanied the alleged taste difference, clearly demarcating the two sides of the embattled contemporary gender front on which “expert amateur chefs, men with years of experience” had a “firm scorn for mere woman ‘cooks’.”

However, if the continuity between the late Depression and the war and postwar periods needs to be highlighted, crucial differences also need to be analyzed. While wartime food propaganda and the postwar “domestic containment” of women both hold the white private sphere as an “island of serenity” in need of sensory and social safeguarding, the *America Eats* editors choose to emphasize the public sphere and public group eating as sites of sensory

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85 “Far West,” Section Essay.


87 “Barbecue, Fourth of July,” 1, Indiana: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831.
stability and authenticity.\textsuperscript{88} Indeed, according to them, if the private life of American families had been unhinged throughout the decade and their taste remade by the encroachment of industrial food on American households, public eating still upheld conservative and reassuring gender roles, promising “authentic” taste experiences. The FWP editors justified their focus on group meals by explaining that women, “even though they…feed their families on canned foods and factory breads at home…revert to traditional cooking methods when preparing their contributions” to public meals.\textsuperscript{89} The rational was a sensory one but also slid into a moral and patriarchal argument. To the satisfaction of the editors, “women who contribute to the family income by working in the cotton mill do not expect men to share in the preparation of the group meal or in the washing of the dishes, even if they do at home.”\textsuperscript{90} Reverting to traditional methods during public eating events circumscribed women to their proper place in the kitchen.

“Pitch-in picnics” and potluck dinners formed reassuring islands of sensory stability and comfort, quasi-utopian community events taking place in an apparently Depression-free white America. During community picnics, church picnics, Fourth of July picnics, school box-dinners, and religious all-day singing, “infinite” assortments of pies, cakes, custards, fried chicken, and potato salads that “would literally tempt an epicure” were “drawn” from trunks, “baskets, boxes and large dishpans, and spread with a lavish hand” as if by enchantment.\textsuperscript{91} When describing these, field workers constantly underlined the abundance, tastiness, and steady quality of the home-cooked fare. Men set up the boards as tables for the women to cover with hearty salads, home made pickles, cold cuts, fried chicken, pies, and cakes. Dinner was then “eaten very

\textsuperscript{88} Bentley, \textit{Eating for Victory}, 59–84.
\textsuperscript{89} “Brief Description of Proposed Book,” 8.
\textsuperscript{90}\textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{91}“All-day singing and dinner-on-the-ground,” 2, Alabama: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 830.
leisurely, as necessary with a meal of such variety and volume, people move[d] from table to table, sampling a dish here, another there, and all the time being urged to ‘eat something.’”

Potluck gatherings were gender-coded occasions for housewives to pool their resources, they triggered culinary competition resulting in the offering of “almost barbarian” amounts of food. Such food events were not inevitably unchanging, but they were sensory suspicious and conservative. Cypress Ridge, Arkansas, may have adopted “what seemed good” from the twentieth century (radio, automobile, university education), but certainly retained “what pleased it” from older times: potato salad made with home-grown spuds and homemade cucumber pickles, home-cured hams, ambrosis, all-spice pickled peaches, “shiny” and “deep green” “poke salad,” “ginger bread made with sorghum molasses pressed from home-grown sugar cane.”

The community of eaters imagined by Norman Rockwell in his iconic 1943 Freedom from Want illustration was already apparent in many of the America Eats essays. But while the 1943 illustration considered the white middle class family as a metonymic representation of the nation, the populist aesthetic of the America Eats archive held public eating as the prevalent image of the nation’s democratic ideal. The America Eats archive strove to imagine the white domestic sphere as a non-problematic space, a comforting buffer of tradition in the midst of economic and sensory changes; yet, domestic life was not part of the sensory landscape the federal editors wished to document. The FWP grounded its culinary narrative in the idea that,

92 A North Carolina Camp meeting list the following dishes available to the eaters: “fried chicken, roast beef, roast pork, boiled ham, biscuits, sweet potato custard, pumpkin custards, apple pie, lemon pies, chocolate pies, cocoanut pies, chocolate cakes, pound cake, cocoanut cakes, lemon cake, ham sandwiches, tomato sandwiches, pimento-cheese sandwiches, pineapple sandwiches, chicken salad sandwiched, relishes, boxes and baskets,” “North Carolina Camp meeting Dinner,” North Carolina: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831. “All Day Preaching and Dinner-on-the-ground,” 2, Alabama: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 830.
94 Ambrosis is a dessert that consists of layers of oranges, coconut, and sugar left aside overnight to “juice itself.” “Cypress Ridge Singing Convention,” 2-6, Alabama: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 830.
only when eaten in public, did the comfort foods baked in the white home become a sensory axiom in the description of the U.S. as a strong and united family around the dinner table. To increase the patriotic and emotional investment in the nation, the America Eats project attempted to disjoint food and cooking from its strong association with women’s work and in doing so inscribed it within a masculine narrative.

Importantly then, focusing on public eating also allowed for the inflation of men’s presence in the archive as it encouraged FWP workers to focus on public performances of masculinity through cooking. Cooking was traditionally associated with femininity and safely documenting men’s cooking required that FWP workers establish a secure gender separation.\(^9^5\) They depicted masculine food preparation as a clear opposite to female’s cooking both in terms of space and taste. The gendering of ingredients and the establishment of meat, and especially barbecued meat, at the top of a symbolic food hierarchy ruled by manly appetites was crucial in this enterprise. Analyzing the management of meat rationing during World War Two, Bentley concludes that, “men’s preferences- and the symbolic importance of men’s desires were accorded higher status by the entire culture, including the government, during the war.”\(^9^6\) This trend was not entirely novel to the war period and was already detectable in the America Eats archive of the late 1930s and early 1940s. Masculine food preparation was public and traditional, indeed, a barbecue cook “spurs any modern method of cookery,” and it could feed a crowd,

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\(^9^5\) A representative case is the one of the Minnesota Booya picnic during which, though “women folk [were] not excluded from a share in the cook’s savory creation,” their participation in the cooking process, “so much as peel[ing] a potato,” was deemed “unthinkable.” “Booya” is “neither soup nor stew, but something of both” it is composed of “oxtails, a meaty soup bone, veal and chicken, vegetables, spices, beans” but “when…ready to be eaten, the separate ingredients have lost their identity.” “Booya Picnic,” 1, Minnesota: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A831.

since, “your real barbecuer is unable to think in terms of less than a hundred guests and from that into the thousands.” Even more than the taste of processed foods, FWP workers resented their loss of agency in food choices and the alienating and feminizing character of modern cooking devices. The masculine character of the meat feasts was therefore reasserted in the momentary but compulsory abandonment of table manners, indeed, “tableware [was] considered definitely effeminate” and “greasy fingers, greasy chins” were the sure signs of a successful roast- “if the fingers get too greasy suck them or use paper napkin.” The entertaining and masculine tone of a number of America Eats essays celebrated men such as Buck Lee of Utah, the “best damned artist” in the San Juan,” whose steak was “no dainty mignon.”

Masculine public cooking in the 1930s worked to affirm the virile image of the soon-to-be GIs and became a favorite site for symbolic and sensory performances of citizenship. Field workers from western states played on this masculine cultural and sensory mood when they presented their regional food culture as “robust” using “few condiments… pastries, whipped or fluffed desserts and delicate dishes.” As chapter four further details, FWP workers offered the range and outdoor cookeries of the mythified cowboys as an alternative to feminine, urban, and modern foods; the West was the land of “foods to satisfy the hunger of a virile people, adventurous, and hardy.” In a tirade of local boosterism and nationalism combined, a Kansas field worker reminded his reader that “the Old West’ ha[d] a fine tradition of freedom and a

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100 “Far West,” Section Essay, 1-2
101 Ibid.
noble cuisine to back it up” and on which American values could rely in wartime. The active involvement of the U.S. in World War Two reinforced the *America Eats* project’s focus on documenting “virile” foods, thus reiterating the gender limits integral to the New Deal reforms.

The federal editors had wished to avoid documenting cooking in hard times during the Depression, but direct involvement in the war provoked a swift lift of the ban. In a letter sent to all states offices a few days after Pearl Harbour, the editors indicated that, “as the role of the Writers’ Project in the national emergency had not yet been determined, no change had been made in plans for the book. We believe, however, that it may be desirable to increase emphasis on the way settlers and also people in later periods managed to provide themselves with very palatable meals even though they lacked the foods and cooking facilities now considered necessities.” Materialist goals now dominated over the sensory and emotional nation-building effort of the Depression; federal editor J.D. Newsom deemed that “material of this kind, as well as account of local gatherings of the simpler sort, may have a stimulating effect as food supply and distribution difficulties develop.” This new stance retained taste at the centre of the project but also integrated a practical standpoint as it aimed at increasing consumption of selected products. The new orientation of the project adopted relatively flexible rules for inclusion in the *America Eats* project. If Anglo-Saxons “settlers” were squarely situated at the center of the imagined and remembered sensory past the relative open-ended meaning of “people in later periods” gestured towards the inclusion of German, Scandinavian, as well as Southern and

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103 J.D Newsom to State Directors, December 12, 1941, Correspondence, November-December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830.
Eastern Europeans in the archive. Yet, the project still functioned according to rigid black and white racial boundaries.

Cooking up Race and Gender

The New Deal’s gendered “boundaries of the possible” were also racialized ones and a close attention to the entangled culinary and sensory relationships between the two categories of race and gender on the eve of the U.S. entry in World War Two sheds a renewed light on their reciprocal making. The reassertion of conservative gender roles was orchestrated along race lines, depicting black cooks of both sexes as sensory and cooking auxiliaries to white performances of gender. The America Eats archive sensory nostalgia conveyed a feeling of sensory comfort and culinary stability that counteracted anxieties about the impact of industrial food and the economic downturn on American life; it also answered concerns about changing gender and racial roles on the eve of Word War Two. Yet, despite the conservative gender and race rhetoric omnipresent in the archive, the America Eats archive also provides an occasional glimpse at how African Americans used food and cooking as means of economic survival in the Depression.

Few African Americans worked on the America Eats project and the black food events described in the archive served to delineate a racialized sensory line delineated by supposedly innate distinctive tastes. The classed origins of black food preferences were not a main concern for the FWP and African Americans’ food taste were described as an unproblematic racial attribute. References to smell, whether the “unmistakable” and “obnoxious” scent of the chitterlings that “most of the country Negro of the South relish,” or the odor of the cook’s

“perspiration,” regularly reinforced the construction of African Americans’ taste as intrinsic difference. Audition and touch reinforced taste and smell - FWP workers seemed more interested in describing the singing, drinking, dancing, and “all-night dice game” that followed black communal meals than the meals themselves.  

The nostalgia that contributed to the depiction of white women as either kitchen magician turning out tasty homemade food or neglecting cooks feeding their families industrial foodstuffs also encompassed African American women, though not for the same reasons. Black women cooking for wages were ubiquitous in America’s kitchens, whether in person or by mythical figures such as the Aunt Jemima trademark. Amy Bentley contends that the ideal “Wartime Homemaker” was a white middle class symbol of domesticity that, “worked to elevate white women above their black and working-class counterparts.” Bentley further explores how the reassertion of the Mammy stereotype, despite the decrease in black domestic labor starting in the early 1940s, insured the “psychic security” of the country. As detailed in chapter three, the America Eats archive and the American Guide Series books depicted black women as nurturing and comforting images inscribed in the white domestic sphere. Black women cooked for the white family, but rarely with the white housewife.

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106 The crass stereotypes of some FWP field workers are difficult to overlook, such as the description of a woman named “Mehitable” who hosted a lucrative “chittlin struts” in her “cabin,” “perspiration cover[ing] her coffee-colored face… her heavy, shapeless body… encased in a grey gingham dress; her large spreading feet slid[ing] along within broken carpet slippers.” The all encompassing racial sensory difference naturalized by FWP workers led them to writing grossly offensive pieces. Katherine Palmer, “Chitlin’ Struts,” 4, North Carolina: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832; “Fish Fry On the Levee,” 1-2, Mississippi: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831.

107 On black women cooks, see Rebecca Sharpless, Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); On the "mammy" stereotype, see, Manring, Slave in a Box: McElya, Clinging to Mammy: Hale, Making Whiteness, 85-119.

108 Bentley, Eating for Victory, 63; 78-80.

109 One of the few exception is the description of an Old Fashioned Sunday Dinner in Mobile Alabama, in which the FWP worker Bennett Marshall mentioned that, “immediately after early Mass, the mistress of the family retires to what is probably a modern kitchen, and with a Negro servant or servants begins the slow process of making ready
But if the white kitchens in which black women toiled were part of a private, non-commercial sphere infrequently documented in the America Eats archive, black women’s domestic spaces were regularly infringed upon by eaters turned customers. The America Eats archive offers a quick glimpse at African American women entrepreneurs’ ‘make-do’ strategies in hard times. The most important of these strategies was to turn their homes into public and commercial spaces by regularly transforming them into provisional restaurants. Harlem “rent parties” and southern “chitlin’ strut” were all, “given for the same purpose as the well-known fish fries of most southern towns- to collect money for any reason, for paying someone’s funeral expenses to buying a winter coat.” When reporting on African Americans’ meals the FWP field workers put less emphasis on commensality and openly evoked poverty and the community’s dire need for cash, whether endemic or triggered by the Depression. The America Eats archive systematically portrayed African Americans cooking “purely and solely for profit,” whether as domestic workers in white households or as community entrepreneurs. Given the meager wages that the former activity provided them with, they often did both. In the South, African American cooks regularly “supplement[ed]” their salary by “pitching frequent Saturday

110 “The South,” Section Essay, LOC-AE, A 833. This formulation became idiomatic for the FWP workers, in North Carolina, the menu for a “Chitlin Struts” reads: “the Struts are held in the home of the Negro for the purpose of making money to be used for anything from paying church to buying a winter coat;” “Menu for Chitlin Struts (a North Carolina Negro Celebration), ” North Carolina: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832. In Indiana, they were given “for the purpose of raising money for church affairs, promoting clubs and societies, or providing funds for charity,” “Chitlin’ Super,” Indiana: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A831.

111 “Fish Fry on the Levee,” 1.
night fish suppers, as they are elegantly termed along the [Mississippi] levee."\textsuperscript{112} Depicting black women’s entrepreneurial relationship to food in the Depression, the \textit{America Eats} archive also presents them, although unintentionally, as agents in their own lives.\textsuperscript{113}

Yet, it is crucial to note that specific public meals breached the racial and gender sensory segregation upheld in most of the \textit{America Eats} essays. Gender segregation did not always follow race lines and FWP workers commonly described black men as white women’s cooking help. The pattern is especially noticeable in the stewed dishes requiring long preparation and peeling time such as Brunswick stew, a southern specialty, and chicken pileau, a Floridian tradition. The cooking process of the latter required picking the chicken meat from the bones before adding it to a mixture of rice, tomatoes, and salted pork. Similarly, in the case of Brunswick stew, FWP workers relayed the widespread opinion that: “getting ready [was] the hardest part of stew doings.”\textsuperscript{114} The tedious preparation and cutting up the meat and vegetable can explain the classification of these dishes as female, but the differentiation was mostly symbolic and rhetorical.\textsuperscript{115} White South Carolinian men for instance prepared “Chicken Bog,” a dish that “might be called the masculine version of chicken pilau.”\textsuperscript{116} The very name of the dishes embodied the gender segregation of cooking activities among whites, yet this separation

\textsuperscript{112} “Fish Fry on the Levee.” For a in depth discussion of African American food and taste in the 1930s, see chapter 3 of this dissertation. On the role of small scale enterprise in the sustaining of African American communities and its role of black women life, see chapter 1, “We Called Ourselves Waiter Carriers,” in Williams-Forson’s \textit{Building Chicken Out of Chicken Legs}, 2-37.

\textsuperscript{113} Psyche Williams-Forson, in her insightful \textit{Building Houses out of Chicken Legs}, presents black women as community entrepreneurs who, “while [their] lives were being caricatured using food…. were learning valuable skills in cooking and catering.” Williams-Forson highlights how “the trading and selling of theses foods for commerce also provided relative autonomy, social power, and economic freedom” to black women. Williams-Forson, \textit{Building Houses out of Chicken Legs}, 65, 35.

\textsuperscript{114} Palmer, “Tobacco Barn Brunswick Stew,” 4.

\textsuperscript{115} Recipes for Brunswick stew traditionally asked for squirrel, see, J.B Cook, “Sergeant Saunder’s Brunswick Stew,” 2, Virginia, LOC-AE, A 832.

\textsuperscript{116} Louise J Dubose, “Chicken Bog,” South Carolina: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832.
did not encompass black men. When white women cooked Brunswick stew and chicken pileau, black men watched the fire, stirred the pot, made the coffee, and fetched the diverse ingredients necessary to complete the meal. The description of black men’s work in the FWP essay often relied on, in Williams-Forson’s words, the “image of the happy-go-lucky black man… needed to reassure both northerners and southerners that the South remained ‘in control’. “\textsuperscript{117} At the end of the day the black cooks were recompensed by either a small wage or a heaping serving of food and a slice of watermelon, “black face peering happily above a crimson slice.”\textsuperscript{118}

Analyzing the role of black men as cooking auxiliaries to white women helps understand the making of both white femininity and masculinity and unveils the interrelated construction of racial and gender categories over cooking activities. In a 1941 essay entitled “A Ton of Rice and Three Red Roosters,” FWP worker Stetson Kennedy described a Peanut Festival in Florida as “typically American and Southern,” by which he sarcastically meant that, “in spite of the area’s large Negro population, the only ones in attendance were those who assisted in the preparation of the chicken pilau.” He explained that, when he arrived, “preparation for the dinner had been under way since early morning, by a group of towns women who had volunteered their services. About 29 three-legged iron kettles were assembled in the park and two Negro men kindled fires under them and got them boiling,” then, “when the rice was done, the chicken meat was mixed with it, and stirred by a Negro man with a board. A woman with a spoon and boxes of salt and pepper went from kettle to kettle” while, “nearby, a Negro man boiled coffee in large metal drum.”\textsuperscript{119} Kennedy also documented his visit to the festival with a photographic reportage. These

\textsuperscript{117} Williams-Forson, \textit{Building Houses out of Chicken Legs}, 45.
\textsuperscript{118} Palmer, “Tobacco Barn Brunswick Stew,” 24.
photographs show and, as can be inferred from Kennedy’s framing description, denounced the white economic and racial power that allowed the ordering of black bodies.

Figure 2. The Rice and Chicken is Boiled Together in Iron Kettles,” 1941 Peanut Festival, written and photographed by Stetson Kennedy, Florida.  

120 Federal Writers’ Project photographs for the America Eats project, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LOT 13328 (F), no. 8.
The iconographic message of Kennedy’s photograph unveils a world of racialized gender relations usually considered uncritically throughout the America Eats material. The photograph reproduced here (see Figure 2), entitled “The rice and chicken is boiled together in iron kettles,” initially looks inappropriate for illustrating an assignment aimed at glorifying American foodways. None of the characters are looking at the camera; the food is evidently present but not in sight. Yet, it is a telling visual snapshot of the interaction of race and gender in shaping the New Deal sensory economy. The white woman, with her back to the viewer, represents a generic housewife ideal; dressed in a humble and proper flowery cotton dress, her maternal and stout body wears the apron as an essential accessory. She is too absorbed in her cooking duties, and in giving orders to the two black men, to have time to face the camera, smile, or pose. She occupies the exact centre of the scene and, with the tip of her spoon, directs the action of the two black men. One of them is vigorously stirring a pot, the other holding a heavy tub of food. She is clearly positioned as the master of operations in the middle of the open-air kitchen. Moreover, wood fences, creating two distinct spaces, enclose the cooking area. It is a public yet privatized space, a secretive sphere that white men -on the right corner- can only peek into. Compelled to accomplished menial tasks, bending over the cooking pot, the two black men in this picture are symbolically emasculated since they are allowed into the feminine white sphere. The mixing of the hierarchies of gender and race made the assertion of white supremacy even more pronounced since several black men are made obedient to the will of one white woman.

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121 The slightly ironical yet down to earth tone of the description as well as Kennedy’s later career as an advocate against segregation and racial hatred in the 1950s and 1960s however suggest that the shot was not taken by chance but aimed at conveying the contemporary state of race relation to the audience. Stetson Kennedy became well-known after World War Two for infiltrating the Klu Klux Klan in the 1950s and writing a series of book about his experience (Southern Exposure in 1946, I Rode with the Klan in 1954 and The Jim Crow Guide: The Way It Was Before the Overcoming in 1956).
Yet, black men were paradoxical figures in the gendered set-up of America’s public meals on the eve of World War Two as widespread American stereotypes also held them as symbols of a primitive and untamed masculinity. Williams-Forsom in her analysis of black men’s relationship with food in American visual culture posits how the stereotype of the harmless and obedient ex-slave existed in conjunction with an “over-sexualized image of black men whose presence was a threat to white womanhood.” The element of threat to white womanhood was not overly apparent in the America Eats archive but FWP workers often implicitly called upon black men’s alleged barbarism. If black men could be subjugated by white women, they also were major actors in the extensive homosocial 1930s barbecue culture. According to literature scholar Andrew Warnes in his book Savage Barbecue: Race, Culture, and the Invention of America’s First Food, the continued practice of barbecue in the U.S. rested on a deep-seated American “mythology of savagery and freedom, of pleasure, masculinity and strength.” Warnes shows how barbecue, as a literary and cultural trope, was historically associated in American life with the perceived savagery and innocence of indigenous people, with the idea of republican freedom on the frontier and in the agrarian West, and, ultimately, with the craft of black men.

FWP workers regularly celebrated black men’s craft and ability at barbecuing meat, implicitly arguing that their sensory apparatus was somehow more fitted at this task. FWP workers framed black men’s perception as inherently different from the white sensory apparatus

123 Williams-Forsom, Building Houses out of Chicken Legs, 45-48.
124 Andrew Warnes, Savage Barbecue: Race, Culture, and the Invention of America’s First Food (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 6.
125 Ibid., 103.
by casting their taste, but also smell and touch, as primitive and almost animalistic natural abilities. Association of black men with primitivism and savage masculinity were not new features of American culture by the 1930s and FWP workers used a series of powerful yet commonplace racial and sensory stereotypes. The Alabama essay on “Rodeo with Barbecue” offers a multi-sensorial description that weaved together the diverse interwar clichés about black men. The description of the cooking area invoked a mysterious and almost infernal vision of “long rows of half-hidden fires glowed in the humid summer night.” Yet, the soundtrack of the evening was one of brutish innocence as “a happy murmur of Negro voices formed a deep toned accompaniment to the thrills of insects and the occasional drowsy call of some bird.” The scene stirred appetites as “an aroma, indescribable but most pleasing, weighted the gentle stirring air.” The author further celebrated the “black men with big buckets of barbecue sauce” who, “watch[ed] with trained eyes each spitted portion of meat and pick[ed] just the right moment to swab it with the sauce and turn it to a new position.” The powerful ‘b’ alliteration in the first part of the sentence (“black men with big buckets of barbecue sauce”) cast an apprehensive light on the army of “flitting shadows” getting the barbecue ready; their toil appears as an occult labor. The enticing and strange smell seemed to have cast a culinary spell on the FWP worker. The description situated black men in the natural realm rather than in the fold of civilization.

The “black men with buckets of barbecue sauce” were not held as a direct threat to white masculinity (or femininity) in the America Eats archive but as hopes for the sensory reinvigoration of the white race. This reinvigoration would not happen through miscegenation

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126 Smith, How Race is Made, 88–89; Williams-Forson, Building Houses out of Chicken Legs, 50.
127 “Rodeo with Barbecue,” 1.
128 Ibid., 1.
but because of black men’s sharing of their innate cooking ability and secret with white men and/or through their preparation of meat for white consumption. Black men, less ‘perverted’ by industrial foods than white women and less ‘civilized’ than white men, were presented as retainers of tradition, sensory knowledge and, ultimately, American vigor. Their employment as barbecue cooks can thus be seen as an effort on the part of white America to feed itself on allegedly unadulterated carnivore cookery and to sap into a raw black sensory power. At a Mississippi political rally, Bluebill Yancy, “a blue-gum Negro [that may be called] blood brother to the ugly man,” was for instance described as “dab[ing] on more hot stuff” in synchronization with the speech, dressing the meat with his secret “mopping sauce” as to invigorate the assembled democratic crowd of white eaters.\footnote{129} When controlled and tamed by the gendered power structure of white America the black sensory force could reverberate and reinvigorate the mobilized white citizenry, especially the militarizing masculine population.

One last dish stands out as a symbol of this racial sensory exploitation: chitterlings, a dish consisting of “hog inwards chopped, well condimented and boiled.”\footnote{130} Originating from the South and, according to a Kentucky FWP worker, “peculiar to the old-time Negro ‘mammy’” the dish had long been associated with African Americans.\footnote{131} A low-cost source of animal protein, it was one of the main dishes prepared by black women to raise money; throughout the country “chitllin’ struts” and “Saturday night suppers, featuring the delicacy known as chitterlings,
[were] among the most popular forms of entertainment” for “Negroes.”132 As a response to this strong association of chitterlings with blackness, the dish also became a taboo in a number of white communities where it caused “dismay to some, hilarity to others, and satisfaction to a few.”133 But some of the America Eats essays on chitterlings were more racially ambivalent and mentioned that even though, “‘chittlin’ suppers [were] an important event in almost any Negro settlement during hog killing time, fondness for the chitterlings [was] not confined to Negroes.”

The same essay goes on to mention that, “one Kentucky Congressman annually made a special trip from Washington to his home state for a good ‘mess of chittlin’s’.” This expression brought up not only sexual connotation but also suggested untidiness as well as a fearless and manly appetite. Indeed, chitterlings were allegedly only “enjoyed by white men and Negroes.”134 Symbolically and practically weakened in their breadwinner status, eating the savage other was an efficient sensory path for white men to soldier up on the eve of World War Two and to taste a “traditional” and unprocessed dish.


Conclusion

The late years of the Depression served as a cathartic moment for Americans to come to terms with the encroachment of industrial foodstuffs on their tastes—by the late 1930s processed foods dominated the U.S. sensory economy. Reacting to this evolution, and paying little attention to the nutritional consequences of the Depression, FWP workers yearned for the taste of remembered and imagined “real” food, they longed for the sensory comfort of homemade dishes. This late New Deal sensory nostalgia was expressed in a populist tone and focused on public performances of eating rather than private family meals. Yet, the FWP sensory nostalgia rested on conservative gender ideals and racial stereotypes further encouraged by the looming involvement of the country in World War Two. The new wartime sensory economy taking shape in the *America Eats* archive retained conservative gender and racial norms able to mitigate the contemporary sensory shift toward the industrialization of taste. The imminent U.S. involvement in the European conflict and the expanding wartime rhetoric of the early 1940s redirected American cultural energies away from the 1930s search for American folklore and toward military and home front mobilization. FWP workers assuaged national anxieties about the industrial future through the nostalgic description of an imagined sensory past but also through the celebration of the American citizenry’s renewed vigor after a decade of economic Depression. This simultaneity highlights the importance of the categories of race and gender in the functioning of the U.S. sensory economy on the eve of World War Two.

The militarization of American society in the last years of the New Deal worked to reaffirm an empowered white masculine ideal. The ideal manliness determined by political independence and breadwinning ability fostered by the New Deal reforms and cultural programs found its sensory apogee in the *America Eats* project’s essays in barbecue. The ideal manliness
mapped out in the archive was not only gendered but racialized, for a brief moment in the months preceding the war, and in a characteristically American move of racial “love and theft,” white men constructed black men’s sensory apparatus as not only primitive but most importantly as a source of sensory revitalization.\textsuperscript{135} Tapping into this source of raw sensory power, they turned barbecuing into a symbol of white American manliness.\textsuperscript{136}

The \textit{America Eats} project’s nostalgic aesthetic was a means towards the restatement of prescriptive gender roles. The two feminine portraits that opened this chapter presented a strong sensory and culinary contrast; yet, in both cases, the women were still at the center of the distribution of food. Although the requirement for home cooked food lessened during the war, indeed, the “modern” sister is the opening essay is not the object of a direct blame; women, especially white women, remained circumscribed to their kitchen and to their role of providing mothers. While most food historians have considered World War Two and the postwar advances in food processing as the key causes of change in American taste, this reading of the \textit{America Eats} archive invites us to shift back the origins of the postwar nutritional order slightly and place them in the last years of the Depression. This chronological shift allows us to shed light on the origins of the postwar gendered domestic ideology.

The nostalgic aesthetic of the \textit{America Eats} archive and the longing of a number of FWP workers for the “real” taste of homemade food instead of the blandness of industrial products led them to perceive the cuisine of ethnic and racial others as a repository of sensory “authenticity” that could be tapped into for diverse reasons. The lutefisk diners of the Midwestern Norwegian

\textsuperscript{135} On the “love and theft” relationship of white culture with black culture see Eric Lott, \textit{Love and Theft} as well as Chad Heap \textit{Slumming}.

\textsuperscript{136} Neuhaus, \textit{Manly Meals and Mom’s Home Cooking}. 

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community became regional comfort food while food cooked by African American men became emblems of masculinity uncorrupted by the modern food industry. The three remaining chapters of this dissertation further analyze the centrality of racial and ethnic categories in the workings of the U.S. sensory economy in the late 1930s, beginning with a study of how the evolving racial landscape of the interwar period contributed to the shift of the taste of southern food away from its regional roots and towards being perceived as the taste of race.
Chapter Three
“To partake of Choice Poultry Cooked a la Southern Style”: The Taste of Southern Food in the New Deal Sensory Economy.

At noon, on January 31, 1939, a South Carolina superintendent on a Works Progress Administration (WPA) building project yielded to fifty or so relief workers under his command: “All right, boys, Knock off for lunch.” Working side by side since the morning to dig a roadside ditch, thirty-nine “Negroes” and a dozen “white men” put down their shovels and walked toward the tin buckets “dress[ed] off” by their wives the night before. From there, they parted. The white men “assemble[d] at a fire of their own” to partake in “cheese sandwiches and coffee.” The “Negroes,” in quantitative advantage, claimed the main fire. There, “in quick motion,” they “stuck” their table spoons into “masses of hominy grits soaked with bacon grease” and “produc[ed] fried fish, butts meat fried to a turn or fat pork,” all of which “disappear[ed] into wide open mouths.” They “smacked their lips” and “licked their spoons” while scorning cups and drinking coffee from the bottle. ¹

This description of segregated eating habits in the American South was a rather unoriginal work as it used pervasive clichés about African Americans. All details, their lack of eating manners and the underscored greasiness, heaviness, and lack of refinement of their food appealed to the stereotype about the bestial quality of black appetite. Yet, around the other fire, the menu was not exactly enticing, and, though a peck of roasted oysters brought by the

timekeeper provided a much-needed “treat,” the white men lunches’ stood out for their
blandness. What matters in this description then, is that the color line is neatly reproduced in
matters of food, sensibility, and taste. An undated and anonymous scrap note addressed to Lyle
Saxon, the director of the Louisiana FWP program, clearly spelt out the sensory stereotypes
dissimulated behind the often paternalist FWP descriptions of blacks’ eating habits. The note
reads: “several people have raised the question of why Negroes have a special talent for
cooking. Might the answer lie in the keenness of sense of perception among more primitive
people: cookery makes it appeal to sight, touch taste, and smell- above all the sense of smell, the
sense of taste distinguishing only between sweet, sour, salt, and bitter.”2 This anonymous FWP
worker naturalized black and white southerners’ taste difference as a matter of racial difference
and racial hierarchy and then used this sensory difference as an explanation and justification for
segregation.

To understand the cultural, social, and sensory significance of the southern WPA
workers’ segregated lunch, one thus needs to historically make sense of this diverging taste. If, as
W.E.B. Dubois famously argued, the colour line was the problem of the twentieth century then
one has to analyse how Americans used their senses to position themselves along this line.3
Doing so allows us to shed light on the “historically conditioned, visceral, emotional aspect of
racial construction and racism” and on the sensual and lived experience of race in interwar
America.4 Despite the inclusive civic ideal promoted by the New Deal state, a deep current of
racial exclusion remained strong throughout the Great Depression and the decade was a time of

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2 “Miscellaneous Notes for Mr. Saxon,” Administrative Material, LOC-AE, A 829.
4 Smith How Race Is Made, 4,
colour-based community and identity construction. This was particularly the case for African Americans part of the first wave of the “Great Migration” of southerners to the northern cities and for newly-arrived Eastern and Southern Europeans working to affirm their whiteness.

Historians have documented the gradual differentiation of the categories of “race” and “ethnicity,” and how the use of the latter to designate European new immigrants strengthened the U.S. color line. In the Jim Crow South the judicial system forcefully backed this racial, social and cultural line, while in other parts of the nation race making rested on spatial, visual, and “visceral” means as primary segregating agents.

This chapter considers how the national gaze promoted by the FWP prompted a reappraisal of the taste of southern food by following this regional cuisine through its spatial, social, cultural, racial, and sensual journey in 1930s America. Southern food and its taste, moving with millions of African American migrants to the northern metropolis, slipped from being mainly associated with region to being linked to race, allowing for its later political and cultural reconceptualization as “soul food.” Following the evolution of the taste of Southern food through the Great Migration, this chapter highlights how the taste of a regional cuisine

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became the national taste of race. Tasting southern food could, depending on where the eating took place, be a way to resist, blur, undermine, create, and reinforce racial difference. This argument explores the decreased importance of the regional construction of taste in the making of a national, and racialized, sensory economy in the 1930s U.S. Yet, the analysis also accounts for the consequences of this interwar sensory reshuffling on the southern construction of taste, the way the senses were recruited to justify and explain legal segregation, and the shaping of the Depression-era image of the region. Analyzing how FWP workers nationwide talked and felt about southern food enables us to better understand how its renewed and de-regionalized taste took part in the establishment of a national definition of race and of racial sensory difference.

The FWP culinary narrative tended to reify American regions, making them internally homogeneous and legitimizing their local social orders by describing them as natural and a-temporal states. In the case of the U.S. South, food customs and eating habits were significant themes available to local FWP workers in order to express local pride and reach out to the rest of the nation. FWP workers considered the “velvety gentleness” with which southern foods “caress the palate” as not only tasty but also nurturing and soothing; it seemed innocuous enough to provide a canvas for the expression of regional identity on the national stage. The richness of southern food provided a convenient contrast to Yankee puritanism and alleged blandness. Moreover, because of its loose definition, southern cooking could simultaneously be cast as a homely alternative to industrial foods or the sumptuous feasts of the planter elite.

Yet, taste also complicated how southerners would come to promote their local customs to the nation as it represented a regional cultural terrain not only shared by black and whites but

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also shaped by interracial interactions in southern kitchens and on southern soil. The traditional southern diet was paradigmatic of the American pre-industrial “regional Creole” style described by food historians. Rooted in a deep sense of place, the southern diet was determined by the local demographic imbalance and the relationship between cultural, social, and racial groups living and working in ecosystems shaped by the Columbian Exchange. The term “southern cooking” thus points to a repertoire of regional dishes and techniques, a theme with variations defined not only by race but above all by class, environment, and the passing of seasonal as well as historical time. This is not to say that race was absent from southerners’ minds when it came to food: questions of etiquette, taboo about certain parts of animals, and sometimes ingredients were favorite topics in the New South’s rhetorical justification of segregation. But, rather than using the sense of taste as evidence of racial difference, southerners more often used food as proof of social and racial power. The omnipresence of black cooks — usually named “mammies” in the FWP sources — in white kitchens, whether in fiction or reality, is a key indicator of this classed nature of southern taste.

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Given the importance of race in determining the taste of southern food in the 1930s, it seems important not to rely exclusively on white sources such as the one that opened this chapter but to also access black sources. The ethnic and racial composition of the FWP staff varied greatly in each state, and, if it was mainly white and American-born, some of the northern FWP state offices were integrated and some set up segregated “Negro Units.” African American poet Sterling Brown, acting as national Negro Affairs editor had, if not a veto, at least a say on a number of FWP projects. He also acted as the director of the sporadic “Negro Study Program,” staffed by African Americans and studying African Americans’ role in American history, culture, and contemporary society. Yet, overall, historian Lauren Sklarrof deems the inclusion of African Americans in the WPA art programs “ambivalent,” noting that if “creativity, ambition, and unprecedented possibilities” marked the history of programs such as the FWP, it was also “a history of limitations, bigotry and political machinations.” In this chapter I draw elements of my argument on sources from the Negro Study Program as it provides a record of African American resistance, agency, and perseverance in framing their experience within the broader scheme of the American national culinary narrative.

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14 Sterling Brown’s driving project was the redaction of a book entitled “The Portrait of the Negro As American,” which he described in January 1940 as “the composite portrait of the American Negro, set squarely against the background of America,” with the precision that it “will be an essay in social history and biography, not an exercise in race glorification.” Sterling Brown to Mr Muson, “Description of Writers’ Project activity concerning the Negro,” January 20, 1940, RG 69, “Reports and Miscellaneous Records Pertaining to Negro Studies, 1936-40,” P1 57 entry 27, box 2.

15 On the role of the WPA’s art programs in shaping black culture and politics in the 20th century, see, Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff, Black Culture and the New Deal: the Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 2; on the ambivalent role of African American in the WPA art programs, see 15-32; on the FWP and Sterling Brown’s work, see, 83–122.

16 This program is well known to historians for its interviews of ex-slaves, but African Americans writers also worked on local monographs and folklore recordings. Only a couple of these studies have been published during the mandate of the FWP but a number of later works can be traced back to the FWP Negro Study Program. Moreover, the Negro Study Program left a fascinating archival trail- especially extensive in urban areas such as Chicago and New York City. Georgia Writers' Project (Savannah Unit), Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986) Laurence Admiral Glasco, and Federal
“A Colored ‘Mammy’ in Bright Plantation Garb”: Racial Comfort Food for the Nation

The history of racial segregation in the South, and the importance of segregation in public spaces, has been well documented. The FWP, as would be expected, recorded the enforcement of Jim Crow laws, in texts and in images. The FWP southern staff, mainly composed of low-paid (white) white-collar workers, set a rather undiscriminating eye on their region and described segregation as the traditional, natural, and peaceful relationship between the races. Read with historical distance, these notations are not without irony as the internal logic of segregation often breaks down. At a dinner given by an Alabamian black congregation but open to whites, blacks and whites were served the same food: “Fried chicken, baked beef, stewed rice with dumplings, light bread, cakes, pies, potato salad, and home made pickles.” Yet, the white supremacist ideal took a wry turn, since, “as a general rule, the white people are given a plate and can go sit in their cars to eat of their desire.” The northern liberal pressure for equal treatment was however often noticeable in the southern America Eats essays, for instance in the careful mention, in an Alabama essay on barbecue, that “the Negroes are served immediately after the white families, [and] enjoy an exact duplicate of the feast set before their employers.”

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19 “Alabama Barbecue,” Alabama: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A830. As James Cobb and Michael Namaroto explain, “the New Deal helped to make the U.S. into a nation where the South’s most appalling excesses and
In theory at least, the internal logic of southern segregation did not proscribe that black and white partake of the same food.

Space and time rather than taste were markers of racial difference in matters of food in the Jim Crow South. As can be observed in the following picture of a 1936 Alabama barbecue, the purity of the whites’ food was determined not by the content of the meal but rather by the use of different utensils and the observance of a precise racial etiquette that underlined spatial and social distance (see figure 3). At first, this photograph looks like a typical if spectacular instance of racial segregation; yet, a second gaze at this picture unveils the deceptive character of a sight-centered analysis. Though the characters in this picture are neatly segregated, they are getting ready to taste the same food. Segregation here is a spatial rather than sensory issue.


20 Sharpless, Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens, 144; Smith, How Race is Made, 88.

21 That the food served appeared to be industrial bread gives an additional twist to this picture, as it debunks southerners’ mythification of their “traditional” lifestyle and shows the inroad of the commercial marketplace in the region.
Figure 3. FM Granger’s Annual Barbecue, Given on his Plantation Every Year, Alabama, 1936.²²

²² Federal Writers' Project photographs for the America Eats project, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LOT 13328 (F), no.11.
To understand how taste functioned as a marker of racial difference in the South during the interwar period, one must include both public and private spaces in the analysis. Indeed, if black and white did not eat together, white households and kitchens were sites of largely black labor, to the extent that black cooking often appears as a precondition to white eating. In his powerful *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation and the Senses*, Mark Smith notes that the U.S. racial hierarchy under segregation rested on the fact that, “white tongues tasted food prepared by black hands; white noses smelled black maids who washed white clothes and tidied white houses.” Daily intimate contacts with black domesticity, far from being in contradiction with the principles of segregation, were needed by whites in order to affirm sensory difference, to “maintain the fiction of sensory inferiority,” and assert that they were “powerful enough to suspend their own protocol.” Smith concludes by noting that, “the point about segregation is not that it was a system of complete separation, the point is that whites derived their authority by defining when and where sensory intimacy was permitted.” Black women cooking the daily fare of the white households and black men barbecuing for white social events such as religious dinners and political meetings were thus quintessential to the workings of the southern sensory economy.

Black participation in the preparation of meals was central to making certain foods and social events not only “white” but also southern. A Virginian thus thoughtfully warned the

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24 *Ibid.*, 50. On the “separation or ritual ‘break’ between black food preparation and white food consumption,” see Mary Titus, “‘Groaning Tables’ and ‘Spit in the kettles’: Food and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South,” *Southern Quarterly* 44 (Spring 1992): 16. Grace Hale describes the southern white home as an “island of racial mixing in a sea of separation,” and explores its role in the enforcement of racial segregation in, Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 85-119, the quote is on page 87. See also, Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchen*, 135, 143. For a similar argument about black men cooking in the army in the 1940s, see Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs*, 71 – 79.
potential tourist: “To the northerners, inexperienced in so much, and especially in the preparation of delicacies. Don’t try to hold a real oyster roast unless you have a son of old Virginia to supervise the work and at least one burly Negro to tell you how things should be run.”

The necessary involvement of black labor in the making of culturally defined “white” southern food is a striking instance of the joint making of the categories of race and class in the South, and the country at large. Analyzing the national cultural consequences of this regional economic and domestic reality offers an insight into how regional taste was utilized in order to provide a nationalized definition of racial difference in the midst of the Great Depression.

Scholars working on the cultural history of the post-Reconstruction “New South” have shown how an idealized version of the “Old South” in which race relations were depicted as serene and unproblematic could work as a national meeting ground for (white) national reunion. Southern cooking offered an opportunity to literally bite into this accepted version of the past and the gender and racial roles it prescribed. The taste of a mint julep was not only “refreshing” but, above all, “carri[ed] with it all the charm of the Old South when life was less strenuous that it is today, when brave men and beautiful women loved and laughed and danced the hours away.”

During the Depression years, beaten biscuits, Brunswick stew, and sweet potato pies offered a heightened sensory comfort rooted in the region’s racial and gendered past. Recollecting and mythologizing of dinner at the plantation’s Big House were cathartic means to


27 “A mimeographed pamphlet prepared by Eudora Welty for the Mississippi Advertising Commission and distributed by them,” Mississippi: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831.
express contemporary anxieties about the alienation of modern eaters from standardized food in a depressed industrial capitalist economy.

FWP workers repeated the legitimacy and centrality of southern customs in the set of traditions constitutive of the national imagined community of eaters. They depicted southern regional cuisine as comfort foods and realms of memory for a nation of modern eaters. The rise of the food industries in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the subsequent development of a national system of distribution, the advent of modern advertisement campaigns, and the standardization in packaging hindered regional differences in diet. Yet, the economic crash forced a reappraisal of the legitimacy of the unchecked capitalist system that led to the rise of industrial foodstuffs. If the New Deal state upheld capitalism, the state’s cultural apparatus also proposed a regionalist vision of agrarian democracy that renewed the symbolic virtue of subsistence farming. The FWP circumscribed the anxiety of Depression-era eaters by focusing on the superiority of homemade dishes and preserves, as well as on the importance of food sharing in traditional “group eating” events such as religious dinners-on-the-ground, plantation barbecues, and family reunions. In this fast evolving food culture, southern FWP workers highlighted the role of their region in maintaining tradition, as one of them noted, “if the tourist does not find the Virginian foods along the highway, he should knock at some farmhouse door, register his complaint against U.S. standardization, and be served after a manner conforming to the ancient rules of hospitality.”

28 Strasser, Satisfaction Guaranteed; Levenstein, Revolution at the Table; Cronon, Nature’s Metropolis, 97–147, 207–259.
29 On the agrarian ideal of the WPA art projects, see Melosh, Engendering Culture, 53 – 67.
Regional culinary nostalgia offered a privileged path for the assertion of modern whiteness along the cross-country highways. The role of black domesticity in establishing the “ancient rules of hospitality” and the modern myth of the “Old South” was crucial; “smiling white-aproned, high-turbaned mammies” and “stooped and grey-bearded” uncles offered direct links to a romanticized plantation life. By the 1930s, the image of the southern black mammy was a long-running national stereotype. The racist cliché offered a comforting and stable trope in the midst of economic depression, the mammy was a reassuring and nostalgic sensory figure given the increasing encroachment of industrial foods on U.S. tables and tastes.\(^{31}\) The image of the faithful slave, developed since the late nineteenth century, had acquired a broad national currency and become a cliché whose ideological content actively shaped U.S. society and racial construction.\(^{32}\) The FWP’s texts are for that matter akin to palimpsests rather than original pieces, one radio jingle covering up a regional cliché and conjuring a stereotyped representation of race. The coming together of half a century of white supremacist propaganda, mass-media national circulation, and the state apparatus in the southern branches of the FWP facilitated the elaboration of a definitively white, though at times alienating, version of modernity.\(^{33}\)

White southerners grounded their modern identities in traditions passed down generations through black domestic workers. While recognizing black cooks’ role in shaping southern cooking, the plantation-school-inspired rhetoric of the FWP kept them firmly anchored in the past. FWP workers described “mammies and uncles” as, “betraying a little weariness under the weight of years, but very proud in a quiet dignity of their roles in keeping burning this light of


The taste of southern food and the sensory satisfaction of southerners depended on the preparation of “old fashioned southern meals” by “colored cooks” in white “up-to-date” kitchens. The temporal paradox that pointed to blacks’ contemporary labor yet denied them agency in the southern sensory past and present was constitutive of an empowered white modernity.

The historical culinary narrative developed by the southern FWP writers implied that if slave cooks “invented” southern cooking, they did so in a non-deliberate manner, following their unrefined senses rather than using their intellect. Black cooks, “good old-timers (and newtimers, too, for that matter)” cooked “by ears” and “taught by word of mouth” the recipes they carried “in their crinkly old heads.” The argument built on the Enlightenment promotion of rationality, intellect, and sight over the allegedly “lower” senses of smell, touch, and culinary taste. FWP workers justified segregation by not only establishing a sensory difference between whites and blacks but also anchoring black bodies in a stage of naïve nature.

The role of white women’s stewardship in directing black cooks was therefore a leitmotiv of the FWP’s copies. Feminist scholars have highlighted the role of recipes and cooking in the creation of networks of female solidarity and resistance, as well as intergenerational binding. In the case of southern cooking, the interracial relationship potentially created by domestic intimacy

34 Kytle, “Alabama Eggnog.”
37 Mark M. Smith, Sensing the Past, 8–11; On the changing meaning of taste in the modern period, see, Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, “The Senses of Taste,” The American Historical Review 116, no. 2 (April 1, 2011), 376–381.
endangered the social and racial order. The repeated assertion of the white mistresses’
intellectual superiority over black cooks’ sensory apparatus lessened this tension. The rational
was rather self-explanatory: if the South “developed many excellent slave cooks among the slave
population” it was because, “the Negro girl that showed an aptitude for domestic work was
trained by her mistress, and then spent the rest of her days preparing the family’s food under the
direction of the same mistress.”39 The construction of a racialized and gendered sensory/intellect
divide between white and black women worked to reassure the reader about the potentially
threatening feminine intimacy in the kitchen. The development of home economics programs in
the late nineteenth century and the privileged access to scientific cookery given to white women
of lower-and middle-class backgrounds facilitated the portrayal of black cooks as anachronistic
yet cherished remains of the past in the middle of U.S. modernity.40 White women now had
access to modern domestic science programs and normative measurements, and thus no longer
depended on black women’s traditional and sensory know-how. White women had the “knack of
interpreting” Negro recipes that ask for a “handful,” “pinch,” and “dash” of an ingredient, while
the Negro cooks didn’t “know nuthin’ ‘bout dis messin’ science.”41 Southern historian Anthony
Stanonis, among others, demonstrates that in fact, “black's reluctance to write down their recipes
suggested that they understood the power of their cooking skills under Jim Crow” and that their
evasive explanations were daily acts of resistance against white supremacy in the kitchen.42

39 “Kentucky’s Table,” Kentucky: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A831.
40 On the rise of domestic science and home economics programs, see Shapiro, Perfection Salad. She highlights how
food was seen by reformers as a tool for the moral and aesthetic betterment of the lower and migrant classes.
Though she does not focus on race, her scholarly silence makes it obvious that black women would usually not be
included in these programs. If they were, it was not as future homemakers but as domestics in training.
41 “Eating and Drinking,” in FWP, North Carolina: A Guide to the Old North State (Chapel Hill: University of
42 Anthony J. Stanonis, Dixie Emporium: Tourism, Foodways, and Consumer Culture in the American South
(Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 212; Sharpless, Cooking in Other Women’s Kitchens, xxi.
Consequently, if white males’ tongues could be pleased by food prepared by black hands, it was only because the feminine white mind had served as a mediator for the dish. Widespread misrepresentation of the past, in association with a racialized gendered rhetoric, efficiently denied black cooks agency in their own culinary creation and distanced them from their past and present labor. Yet, this argument also put their labor at the center of the southern construction of taste as the food preferences of white southerners were not only shaped by the food cooked by black domestics but their sensory satisfaction depended on the perpetuation of this racialized domestic sphere. It also unveils the inner workings of the southern sensory economy and the tangled relationship between racial segregation and sensory intimacy.

“Partaking of Choice Poultry Cooked a la Southern Style”: Tasting Southern Food in the North.

Southerners were able to bypass the contradiction of black and white taste intimacy because legal segregation upheld the sight of orderly segregated dinner tables. But in the North, the comparative lack of legal segregation rendered this “suspension of the protocol” of racial segregation problematic. Extending Mark Smith’s insights on the role of the senses in the culture of segregation in the South, it is likely that in the rest of the country the very absence of legal segregation and the relative lack of white control over everyday interracial sensory contacts (e.g., in public transportation, on the shop floor) reinforced the role of the senses as markers of racial difference. In the absence of a legal protocol to be momentarily suspended, the senses

43 As historian Micky McElya shows, this “racialization of the domestic sphere as the appropriate place for black labor and white women’s authority” also offered, “tremendous potential for white women to recast their own citizenship” and to demonstrate their crucial role in the nurturing of the nation while respecting the established gender roles of female housewives and male breadwinners. McElya, Clinging to Mammy, 144. On the role of the white middle class home in the culture of racial segregation, see Hale, Making Whiteness, 85-98. On gender in the 1930s, see Melosh, Engendering Culture; Alice Kessler-Harris, “In the Nation’s Image.”

44 Smith, How Race is Made, 6.
themselves became the protocol, thus shaping even more prominently and efficiently the process of race making.

The Great Migration of millions of blacks out of the South between the World Wars gave southern cooking a national scope, propelling it from a mostly rural region ruled by Jim Crow laws to an urban and theoretically non-segregated environment. Leaving the South, African Americans took with them their recipes and dishes, causing a recasting of the diet of the majority of black and white southern rural folks into “down home” dishes. In the North, the increased association of southern food with African Americans dissociated the taste of this distinct cooking style from its regional grounding and reframed it as black food. In the new racial surroundings and sensory economy of the northern metropolis, the taste of southern food slipped from a sense of place to a taste of race. The delineation of a racialized taste line accelerated in the interwar period as an answer to the challenge of industrial modernity, economic depression, and changes in the U.S. taxonomy of race and ethnicity.

The evolution of the taste of southern food from a sense of place to a taste of race is best seen at the borderlands between North and South. Midwestern states were transitional spaces symptomatic of the gradual redefinition of gustatory taste along a racialized line. In Missouri, for instance, a FWP worker considered southern influences evident in the counties “closer to Dixieland” which were “endowed with more of the glories thereof, even in culinary matters.” If we follow the culinary sketch of this worker, southern culinary glory was rooted in interracial taste, since “Negro cooks and white ones, too, […] go in for succotash, cracklin’ bread, and drop

45 “Cuisine Peculiar to the State, Southeast Missouri, Sikeston District,” February 17, 1936, Missouri: Foods, LOC-FP, A628.
dumplings in a big way.” However, the appending of the qualification “too” provides an interesting clue on the state of sensory racial relation in this southern borderland. The FWP worker who penned this remark proved knowledgeable of the specificity of the racialized construction of taste both in the Jim Crow era and outside of it; he served as a cultural interpreter informing his northern readership on quaint southern ways that differed from theirs, and whose interracial nature might surprise them. Doing so, the Missourian FWP worker involuntarily exposed the South’s sensory contradictions. He depicted the region as a society where race served as the primary element of personal and group identity, thus determining its social and political economy; but he also portrayed the South as a culture that had managed to paternalistically cultivate an interracial sensory intimacy that potentially weakened the whole structure. A mere adverb then unveils the “intellectual hiccupping and contradictions” and exposes the “awkward, perverse compromises” at the core of the southern sensory economy.

FWP workers notably recorded fewer mentions of interracial eating habits outside of the South. Fish provides a prime example. In Mississippi, mullet was described as “not usually prized as food” for the simple reason that it is “commonly eaten by Negroes”; yet, a basic linguistic change was enough to reclassify it as “in the coast region . . . many white people eat it and have come to call it Biloxi bacon.” In Indiana, however, “the average local white fisherman would not for a moment consider eating a dogfish he had caught,” as it was “eaten only by the colored people who have come into this region as the result of industrial development.” The FWP worker then concluded his remarks on “dogfish” by noting that, “presently [he] would go

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46 Ibid.
47 Smith, How Race Is Made, 6.
hungry before [he] would eat one.”\textsuperscript{50} In the context of the Depression, during which time a number of U.S. citizens indeed went hungry, this was no inconsequential remark. In the new spatial and social context of the northern metropolis and industry towns, the social proximity between African Americans, impoverished whites, and recently arrived immigrants was too close to be satisfied with a verbal affirmation of racial difference. Since segregation had no legal backing, the incorporation (or non-incorporation) of food demarcated racial difference; sensory performances fleshed out the color line.

The redefinition of southern food as black food occurred through a series of sensory reactions and interactions on the color line and in interplay with the national myth of the “Old South.” The romanticized southern ideal of untouched and idle white femininity was not only a regional myth but also had a powerful influence on the national sensory economy through the newly developed mass market of standardized foodstuffs. The figure of the southern “mammy,” from Aunt Jemima to \textit{Gone with the Wind}, was one of the central characters of this national narrative. As historians Micki McElya, Maurice Manring, and Grace Hale have demonstrated, one was not supposed to attempt to “be” Aunt Jemima, but to “have” her and her food, in order to perform whiteness in the national marketplace of tastes and ideas.\textsuperscript{51} The pancake-making mammy was an efficient racial stereotype both in the realm of symbolism and as a money maker. Even in New York, an adventurous eater could find “small holes-in-the-wall, neat and shiningly clean, where hot griddle cakes are fried, in full view of the window, by a colored ‘mammy’ in

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} Manring, \textit{Slave in a Box}, 140-141; McElya, \textit{Clinging to Mammy}, 72; Grace Hale notes that the popularity of Aunt Jemima rag doll assured that, “not every child could have a servant but all but the poorest could have her very own pancake mammy,” Hale, \textit{Making Whiteness}, 161.
bright plantation garb.” This New York-based entrepreneurial venture shows the cultural grip of the mythic southern domesticity on the national mind through the commodification of blackness. While millions of black men and women were moving out of the South and its kitchen and into the northern industrial economy as part of the first waves of the Great Migration, the Aunt Jemima pancake mix guaranteed to middle class white consumers nationally that they would taste the cooking of a faithful and maternal southern black mammy respectful of traditions. As historian Micki McElya nicely put it in her study of the cultural history and legacy of Aunt Jemima, “The trademark told a story of the post-Reconstruction reunification of North and South brought about through the loving labors of a black woman and made available to all through modern capitalism.” The psychologically and physically comforting taste of the Aunt Jemima pancake mix participated in the making of the modern and increasingly national U.S. sensory economy.

Northern white consumption of fried chicken invoked the ideal world of the Old South and its nurturing faithful black mammies. The mythical figure informed how FWP workers in the North considered African American women migrants and their food. Many African American migrant women, considering cooking as a respectable activity, opened up eating places. During the Depression, some came to use their racial credentials and their southern origins as a selling


53 McElya, Clinging to Mammy, 16; As Grace Hale explains: “Serving up a white-figured blackness on her broad, black body and a soothing nostalgia with her pancakes, Aunt Jemima mammied the nation,” Hale, Making Whiteness, 161-164.

A well-known figure of the Harlem restaurant scene was an “ample Floridian woman” named Tillie, who owned a famed fried chicken eatery. Tillie was described by a probably non-African American FWP worker as the “embodiment of motherhood in its utmost simplicity. Her soft southern voice, brimming with emotion, the lines of the face revealing years of struggle; her smile so full of warmth and plump arms that seemed capable of drawing the whole world within their scope.” Out of the hands of southern writers this plantation-school rhetoric lost its regional grounding and became one oriented toward the description of racial bodily and sensory difference.

Cultural and economic exchange on the color line destabilized the taste of a regional cuisine by imbuing it with blackness. If national clichés about the Old South animated the ways in which northern FWP workers tasted southern foods, they increasingly considered them as first and foremost black. In New York, FWP writers noted that “southern-style cooking [was] featured in the cosier tea-rooms specializing in fried chicken” but clearly focused their research on the black ghetto of Harlem, “the home of many southern restaurants, catering to both white and Negro patrons.” This biracial clientele partook in fried chicken, but the entertainment also came from watching celebrated Harlem restaurateurs “cook the dish and the yams, turnip greens, biscuits, and cornbread, and lowly but tasty black-eyed- peas and pig’s tails.” The white gaze tended to unify the black community as a monolithic cultural and sensory entity. The inner workings of the northern and urban sensory economy contributed to circumscribe blackness to a familiar, recognizable, and commodified taste. Overlooking geographical and social differences,

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55 For an assessment of Harlem’s economic, political, and cultural life during the Depression, see Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode? Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

56 Sarah Chavez, “Feeding the City: Eating Out,” “Harlem Restaurants,” October 1, 1940, FWP-NYC, roll 144.

only seeing and tasting a uniform blackness, northern whites made southern food just plain “Negro” food. Moving north, a number of southern dishes were shored up to blackness and a menu of identifiable race food emerged in the interwar period, such as greens, chitterlings, and fried chicken.

Tasting commodified southern food in black urban neighborhoods was a means for northern urbanites to prove that their palates were able to recognize and navigate the taste line. This sensory demarcation was all the more important in industrial cities where the “Great” Migration encountered the “new” immigration composed of Southern and Eastern Europeans arriving en masse from the 1880s to 1924. Historians highlight new immigrants’ ambiguous racial status during the interwar period as American cultural perception of and racial vernacular about new immigrants navigated between the categories of color, complexion, nationality, ethnicity, and race. This research also shows the importance of the post-quotas laws period and the New Deal era in accelerating the whitenization of Europeans. New immigrants “invested in whiteness” — and were encouraged to do so by many New Deal policies — thus accelerating the reorganization of the U.S. racial system toward a strengthening of the spatial, cultural, political, and sensory color line. An effective way for in-between European migrants to establish their place in the U.S. racial taxonomy was to differentiate themselves from African Americans by learning the enduring means U.S. citizens have devised through history to establish racial difference through vision, sound, smell, touch, and taste. Migrant ethnics demarcated themselves


59 Matthew Frye Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color; Mae M. Ngai, Impossible Subjects.

from black taste in order to “viscerally” anchor the legitimacy of their claim to whiteness. Eating southern food and identifying it as black was a sensory way to circumscribe blackness, therefore to perform whiteness.\textsuperscript{61}

Bestowing the taste of blackness to dishes such as fried chicken did not mean that whites were not consuming it. Rather, when they ate the dish they did not taste a regional cuisine but deliberately crossed the color line and did so not simply as armchair travelers but as blackface actors. White sensory satisfaction was grounded in the knowledge that one was crossing the line and indulging in a racial pleasure. Taste followed and reinforced the color line in ways similar to the more oft-studied racialized black-face stage performance and urban slumming.\textsuperscript{62} Tillie’s restaurant for instance became something of a racial battleground in the late thirties when the place “went high brow” trying to attract an “ofay” clientele looking for “authentic” entertainment and grew reluctant to serve black patrons.\textsuperscript{63} An African American worker in the New York office of the FWP recorded the accomplishment of this relocation of taste from region to race in an ironic advertisement-like advice to readers interested in “partaking of choice poultry cooked a la southern style.” He describes the well-known Harlem fried chicken “joint” in these terms: “If you like to go to a place where no one will ever think of finding you, and at the same time you

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Heap, \textit{Slumming}, 223.
\item A classic study of the role of blackface performance in the construction of white identity in the United States is Lott, \textit{Love and Theft}. See also, McElya, \textit{Clinging to Mammy}, 63-66. On the racial and sexual politics of slumming and the role of this popular activity in redefining and reinscribing racial difference, see Heap, \textit{Slumming}.
\item Franck Byrd, “The Ofay Problem in Harlem,” 3, Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, “Negro Studies Project,” Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (hereafter “LOC-NSP”), box A885. Ofay was black slang for white. The full citation reads: “Tillie, who used to stand in her kitchen sweating but good-naturally cracking jokes with her Negro comrades surrounded by her luscious fried chicken and sweet potatoes, suddenly went high-brown, had mural painted on the basement walls, got herself a couple of assistant, assumed the sorts of great lady in reduced circumstances and played hostess to her ofay followers who had practically taken over the place.”
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can tackle your vittles with your fingers, drop in at Tillies!" The implied audience was a white middle-class one, looking for a way to spice up its diet and safely prove its cosmopolitanism while reenacting racial difference. By the same token, this remark evokes a feeling of social shame on the part of the white culinary slummers and illustrates a changing sensory economy in which whites with a taste for fried chicken increasingly did not make sense anymore: being out of place they would also be out of their senses. The snobbish tone also hints at the author’s amusement at seeing whites guiltily relishing fried chicken. The making of a national definition of sensory racial difference allowed for sensory performances on the color line but also increasingly hampered interracial sensory exchange.

“Got Any Greens Left?”: Culinary Racial Pride in the Pre-Soul Food Era.

The reconstruction of the taste of southern foods as race food took place in the northern and Midwestern black metropolis, themselves crucial sites of cultural and sensory identity building of the modern and urban black identity. African Americans also participated in the remaking of the taste of southern food as black food. In the crowded black metropolises southern rural migrants and their foods entered in contact, and often opposition with, both an estranged white world and an earlier black urban culture. From the onset of the Great Migration, food had been a subject of heated debate within the black community between southern migrants longing for their familiar diet and the older, and often wealthier, northern black communities and their leaders’ advocacy of the “politics of respectability” as a strategy to “uplift” the race. The image


65 On the importance of urban black neighborhoods in the creation of modern black identity, see the introduction to Baldwin, Chicago’s New Negroes, 9–12; Clare Corbould, Becoming African Americans: Black public life in Harlem, 1919-1939 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); Gregory, The Southern Diaspora, 113–152.
of the Southern migrants “gnawing on the chicken bone” became a derogatory stereotype shared by the native black middle-class and white urbanites.\textsuperscript{66}

The meaning of southern cooking within the African American community evolved rapidly in the interwar period as the entire community increasingly and proudly claimed its taste as its own. The economic hardship of the Depression hit northern black communities across class and regional lines, paradoxically giving more leverage to working-class southern blacks than they previously had had, leading to a politicization of the community that historians have identified as the seeds of the postwar Civil Rights Movement.\textsuperscript{67} Moreover, the homogenizing white gaze precipitated an internal cultural unification of the black community, which needed to offer a united front to the white world and to find a nexus of identity formation for a community new to all.\textsuperscript{68} Iconic southern dishes became part of the urban black diasporic identity and, ultimately, source of culinary race pride.\textsuperscript{69} In this context, southern food became a means for sensory and cultural unity.


\textsuperscript{67} The economic hardship of the Depression hit northern black communities across class and regional lines, paradoxically giving more leverage to working-class southern blacks than they had previously held. Historians have identified the 1930s politicization of the community as the seeds of the postwar civil rights movement. This historical interpretation was first voiced in 1978. See Harvard Sitkoff, \textit{A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For an assessment of the New Deal as a “preface to the Civil Rights Movement,” see Robin D. G. Kelley, \textit{Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 212. Tracy Poe in her article “The Origins of Soul Food” argues that “the gradual adaptation of migrant foodways by the mainstream African American community demonstrates the integration of rural southern culture into urban African American consciousness and the acceptance of migrants not as backwards, unclean, and in need of modernization, but as brothers and sisters with common traditions and heritage.” Poe, “Origins of Soul Food,” 26.

\textsuperscript{68} Gregory, \textit{The Southern Diaspora}, 113–152.

\textsuperscript{69} On black urban food in the interwar period and the mutual influence between southern and Caribbean style, see Opie, \textit{Hog and Hominy}, chap. 4; Poe, “The Origins of Soul Food,”4 – 33; Damian Mosley, “Cooking Up Heritage in Harlem,” in \textit{Gastropolis: Food and New York City}.

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The ongoing reappraisal of southern food can be seen in many of the essays and life histories recorded by the FWP’s Harlem “Negro Program.” Remembering a cocktail party in the Harlem “crème de la crème” society, the Boston-born African American writer Dorothy West reported her exchange with an inebriated southern man and his wife. West depicted a complex relationship between the notions of race and region, but ultimately equated one with the other. Made hungry by the drinks and surveying “with distaste” the “dainty sandwiches” and “box of crackers and bottle of olives” served by the northern hostess, the man asked his wife, “Got any greens left?” He then nostalgically reminisced the black-eyed peas and hogsheads his mother cooked for New Year “down South.” The qualitative opposition between northern and southern food as usually played out in the African American community since the onset of the Great Migration was consciously reversed by the man; he derogatorily cast northern ways while celebrating southern foodways as comforting for the soul and body. Fortunately, his wife recalled having some green and spareribs leftover, and offered Dorothy West to share it with them. A polite refusal fired up a “belligerent” look from the man and this inquiry: “You don't like colored folks cooking?” To which Dorothy West, quickly and apologetically answered that she “love[d] greens and spare ribs” before naming “all the other southern dishes” she could think of and affirming that “[she] love[d] them, too.”

In this casual exchange, Dorothy West effectively interpreted “southern” as the sensory equivalent of “colored” in order to prove racial solidarity. Not doing so would have put her own racial belonging at risk: Could she be an African American woman if she did not like southern dishes? By the end of the Depression this possibility seemed to have vanished. Both participants

to the scene were aware of the past meaning of southern food in the urban North and of its new prideful cultural and political status as race food. Historian Nancy Poe, working on Chicago, indeed estimates that the slow yet steady acceptance of southern foodways as representative of the foods of the community showed “the integration of rural southern culture into urban African American consciousness and the acceptance of migrants not as backwards, unclean, and in need of modernization, but as brothers and sisters with common traditions and heritage.”\(^{71}\)

By the end of the 1930s, politically conscious African American FWP workers reclaimed racially denigrated foods and deployed them as sources and vehicles of black urban identity in order to present a united sensory front. Roy Ottley, a worker in the FWP’s Harlem unit and later an acclaimed author of books on black life in the North, described Harlem’s wealthy neighborhoods in sensory terms: “Rents are high and only the more prosperous can afford to reside here without lodgers; nevertheless, the odors of barbecuing ribs, frying pork chops, boiling greens, and chitterlings are as characteristic of the Hill as they are of the poorer sections of the community down in what is called the valley, which lies at the foot of Sugar Hill.”\(^{72}\) For Ottley, neither social division nor geographic origins ought to determine African Americans’ food preference; instead he proudly considered their race as the primary factor in establishing their taste.

But if politicized black urbanites and FWP workers celebrated southern food as the taste of the race, they also aimed at setting the historical record straight. In an essay entitled


“Cooking,” Ottley continued to debunk white stereotypes about black food and its taste. He wrote: “The Negro’s distinctive contribution to the art of cooking which now finds itself part of the general stream of American culture comes out of those economic and social forces which affect and determine his status. The origins of many standard dishes, however, have been lost in the shuffle of most facts concerning the Negro generally … Conspicuous among the dishes common to the white South, the Negro South, and the country at large is chicken. In fact, the Negro’s supposed fancy for chicken has become proverbial. In fact, it was a standard joke for the old minstrel shows. But in actual fact, his white brother has probably outstripped him in all but story telling.” These efforts at unveiling the class origins of African American foods and the hypocrisy behind the racialization of certain foods, such as fried chicken, were ultimately unsuccessful. The workings of the northern urban sensory economy remade the taste of southern dishes into the taste of race. When partaking in southern food, northerners on both sides of the color line not only tasted place but also felt and performed race.

The interwar period witnessed the dissolution of regional constructions of taste as the modern circuits of economic and cultural exchanges that determined the shape of the U.S. sensory economy increasingly took on a national scope. The black migration to the northern metropolis contributed to shift the taste of southern food in the interwar period, but also influential was the national reach of mass media such as radio shows, magazines, and, in the 1930s, FWP publications. On the national stage, the sensory inconsistencies of the southern regime of racial segregation became even more striking, and, by the end of the 1930s, untenable. How then did southerners react to the new racial reorganization of taste in black and white in the urban centers of the North? Partly, they engaged in the cultural construction of southern food as

a psychologically and physically soothing heritage taste for a white modernity endangered by the Great Depression. But the national scope of the FWP readership, the national imagined community of eaters, asked southern writers to account for taste intimacy across race lines and to reform their taste so as to conform to the ideal of sensory segregation they themselves participated in constructing.

“They Have their Own Preferences When They Cook for Themselves”: The Reconstruction of Southern Taste in Black and White

The southern construction of taste, oscillating between racial segregation and sensory intimacy, was ambiguous. Even if soothed out by the white supremacist ideology of many southerners, a core issue remained at the heart of southern domesticity: if the main outcome of blacks’ sensory-driven past culinary creation was to be the contemporary sensual pleasing and psychological ease of white tongues, then, could it also be pleasing to black tongues? What happened when black hands cooked for black tongues? Could black and whites tongues relish the same tastes? Southern interracial taste somewhat hindered the ideological efficacy of the construction of southern cuisine as nostalgic comfort food for the national white mind as it highlighted the sensory inconsistency of the southern regime of racial segregation.

The southern sensory ambiguity was in increasing tension with the northern racially segregated sensory economy. To defuse northern unease with the sensory intimacy tolerated by, and indeed, essential to the southern regime of legal segregation, and to fall in line with the national construction of taste, FWP guidebooks offered a straightforward explanation: black

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74 Mark Smith defines segregation as a system in “need [of] day-to-day contact to maintain the fiction of [black] sensory inferiority” in which “whites tongues tastes food prepared by black hands; white noses smelled black maids who washed white clothes and tidied white houses” Smith, How Race is Made, 6.
cooks simply did not prepare the same dishes at work and at home. As the Louisiana guidebook essay on cooking explains, “Although Negroes contribute much to the excellency of Louisiana food, acting as cooks in many restaurants and in private families, they have their own preferences when they cook for themselves.” 75 Indeed, the content of the black family meal was closely related to its economic purchase power and consisted of cheaper cuts of meat and stronger flavorings. 76 The importance of class distinction in the determination of taste and consumptive practices, as famously highlighted by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, is evident here, though not acknowledged by FWP workers. 77

When looking at blacks’ food preferences, Southern FWP workers subsumed the role of class under their analysis of racial difference. Their writings presented black cooks as living embodiments of the color line’s path in matters of taste. To better ground their ideological and rhetorical construction of a racially bifurcated taste, FWP writers recognized African Americans’ full sensorial agency in their food choices. One author of an essay on “Negro Restaurant in Charleston” reproachfully noted that “with all the knowledge of balanced diet and proper preparation of food, it is practiced by these employees only in the kitchen of the employers — not even in their own restaurants.” 78 Black cooks incarnated the supposed reality of sensory difference; southerners held their alleged taste preferences as, in Smith’s words, “authenticator of

76 Opie, Hog and Hominy, 95.
truth and generator of reliable knowledge” about racial difference.79 FWP texts described southern taste as the coexistence of two layered racialized modes of tasting, linked by the liminal figure of the black cook. These texts not only metonymically reified black bodies through the tongue organ but also presented the result of food choices made of economic necessity as a timeless natural truth.

Southern FWP workers constructed taste differences as proof of innate racial difference and justification for segregation and consequently attached a race character to specific foods and provided readers with a menu of black foods. Enumerations were a recurrent and crucial feature of the ‘bifurcated cook’ rhetoric. FWP’s state guidebooks provided detailed lists of the dishes prepared in African American communities. We learn that in Louisiana, “their principal foods are sweet potatoes, fried, boiled, or baked; chitterlings, boiled, stewed, or in salads; cabbage, collards, mustard greens, and turnip greens smothered in lard with salt meat or pig tails, and eaten with corn dumplings (meal, water, and salt) cooked in the greens; pork in all forms, the year round; ‘possum baked with sweet potatoes; fish; and corn bread and sweet bread (a large flat biscuit with sugar added).”80 In South Carolina, “the Negroes like more fat in their cookery and hog meat is popular with them okra and tomato pilaus, catfish stews, ‘possum and taters’ (yam).”81 These enumerations often adopted a judgmental tone; the closing remark of the South Carolina guidebook literary segregated essay on “cookery” for instance noted that “even ‘coon are rated as great delicacies.”82 The use of the adverb “even” proved an efficient instrument of

79 Smith, Sensing History, 90.
82 Ibid.
distancing and blaming. Overall, these inventories delineated the foods eaten by African Americans, establishing a clear line between “we” and “them” and implying a detrimental judgment about “their food.”

The recurrent listing of black foods in the southern FWP guidebooks also defined white foods in contrast and pointed out to whites what foods not to eat. Indeed, given the almost impossible task of separating blacks’ and poor whites’ foodways, it might have been the primary motivation for the composition of these lists. At the intersection of race and class stood the “poor whites,” “white trash,” “hillbillies,” and other “crackers” who toiled as sharecroppers beside African Americans. The two groups shared not only a similar kind of destitute housing but also a daily life made of regional beliefs and folklore as well as diet and food preferences. When Floridians talked about “good old cracker eating” they meant “chitterlings, grits, sow belly, sidemeat, corn bread, hog howl, turnip greens, and cane syrup — all washed down with pot likker — the savoury liquid created by the stewing together of greens and pork.” The similarity of such foodways with black southerners’ diet was striking, so much so that the South Carolina guidebook had to concede that “a definite line [could] hardly be drawn between Negro cookery and white cookery.”

A more subdued dialogue, then, accompanied these enumerations of the foods supposedly eaten only by African Americans, one determined by class relationships within white southern society. Indeed, if the New South rooted its cultural identity in race difference and its public order in segregation, underlying class divisions were as crucial to the social and sensory making

83 All these terms are repeatedly used throughout the FWP research papers, typescripts, and books.
85 FWP, South Carolina: A Guide to the Palmetto State, 155.
of the region. Attempts at reforming poor whites’ foods according to prevailing ideas about class, race, and gender recurred in the region since the late 1890s. They remained a feature of “for whites only” southern Progressivism up until the 1920s and were later reflected in New Deal programs. Reforming culinary taste was part of a larger moral, social, and cultural betterment program aimed at uplifting lower-class whites. Such programs, emanating from both benevolent and government organizations, aimed at severing the link between sensory taste and class habitus and at reinforcing the relationship between food taste, aesthetic appreciation, racial identity, and moral values.

The implementation of New Deal reforms in the South did not depart from this tradition, especially because domestic tensions and confusions around racial, social, and sensory issues were ironically reinforced by the out-migration of black southerners in the 1920s. This massive exodus caused a perceivable whitening of the plantation districts and exposed the colorless basis of the southern class system and diet. The pressure on poor whites to amend their taste strengthened in the 1930s, especially because the documentary aesthetic developed within and around New Deal programs by photographers and writers elevated poor white southerners as

86 On the “New South,” see C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South; on the culture of segregation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, see Grace Elizabeth Hale, Making Whiteness.

87 On Progressivism in the South, see Woodward, Origins of the New South, 369 – 95.

88 In an essay on maternalist discourse and the different types of bread baked in the Appalachians, Elizabeth Engelhardt for instance demonstrates how biscuits — demanding more time, appliances, and economic as well as geographic access to white flour — were depicted as morally and racially superior to the humble, quick-to-rise, traditional corn bread. Biscuit baking was linked to a gender and economic system in which women would not need to work outside the home and could focus on homemaking. Reformed dieting habits would purportedly contribute to preserving the moral standing and refining the aesthetic taste of the white family. Cornbread, however, was attached to a negative image of black and white female sharecroppers toiling in the field and unable to take care of their houses and families. Elizabeth Engelhardt, “‘Beating the Biscuits in Appalachia’: Race, Class, and Gender Politics of Women Baking Bread,” in Cooking Lessons: The Politics of Gender and Food, ed. Sherrie Inness (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 151 – 68. See also, Elizabeth Engelhardt. A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011).

89 This point about the whitenization of the plantation discourse is made by Jack Temple Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920 – 1960 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 235.
paradigmatic victims of the Depression and put them at the center of the (white) national consciousness. As a Florida “cracker” woman explained in 1938, “when we was on the Relief a lady came out here and talked with me about food and the vegetables ‘specially and she got me to promise to try carrots and beans and other things besides collards and turnip greens.” However, such efforts frequently failed and made cracker families “mighty mad”: “How did that woman know what we wanted to eat? Jus give us plenty grease, salt pork, a little cabbage, stewed apples, and flour dough fried bread and we is satisfied.”

A survey of the “life histories” and interviews conducted by the FWP among white southern families shows the importance of dietary issues as sites of power and class relations within white society. The resistance offered by poor whites to attempts to distinguish their diet from that of African Americans was grounded in economic constraints that preceded the Great Depression, “I ain’t got the money to cook thata way . . . we kanit afford no milk tho, only canned milk.” But economic limitation and gustatory pleasures did not contradict, and interviewees most often voiced their alimentary choices as matters of taste preference. As a “squatter farmer,” mother of thirteen children, put it, “collard greens cooked up done with lots of

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side meat is best though, I don’t care what anybody says about it.” The resentment expressed by poor whites in their interviews shows a deep tension within white society around issues of food; a sensory tension whose social, moral, and racial implication correlated culinary taste to aesthetic choices and moral values.

Despite reform attempts and the repeated rhetorical affirmation of sensory segregation, the intimacy of taste between “Negroes and trashy whites” remained a regional reality that proved increasingly challenging for southerners as the region’s social, economic, and racial systems were put at the center of national media attention. The documentary style of the Depression era adopted the South as one of its major themes and produced literary and photographic exposés on the region’s poverty and race relations. This created, according to historian Jack Kirby, “a weird bifurcation of Dixies, with the Old mellowing and becoming even more entrenched in legend, the New wallowing in misery and Yankee pity.” Southerners adeptly journeyed back and forth between this dual image of the region, between two different constructions of taste. The taste of the “old mellowing,” white supremacist, and patriarchal South rooted its sensual and ideological legitimacy in the work, knowledge, and bodies of women such

95 The comment about the cohabitation between white and black is from FWP, Cincinnati: A Guide to the Queen City and Its Neighbors (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Historical Society, 1943), 191.
97 Kirby, Media-Made Dixie, 64.
as “Aunt Mary,” who knew how to “knead,” “pat,” and “flatten” her buttermilk and hog lard biscuits dough “just right.”

But while southerners promoted the ideological taste of white supremacy and racial intimacy, they also understood its incompatibility with the modern and increasingly nationalized U.S. sensory economy. Reacting to “Yankee pity,” southern FWP workers acknowledged the national definition of the racial taste line and endeavored to downplay its entanglement with southern foods, southern race relations, and southern class construction. Leading a fictional tourist (“Mr. Smith”) through a plantation barbecue, a Georgian FWP worker showed his awareness of the incongruity of his white supremacist southern taste in a New Deal sensory economy increasingly being defined in racialized, northern, and urban sensory environments. He paternalistically introduced the visitor to the all-black cooking staff — in particular Sam, “whose fat, ebony-colored face breaks into a wide smile when [he gave] him a cigar” before reportedly exclaiming, “Yes suh Boss! Dese are chickens. . . . See how brown and shiny dey are? Sho’ make good eatin’ too, Boss. Hopes you like ‘em!” Yet the writer concluded with a remark that exposed “Mr. Smith’s” differing interest as he asked, “It’s noon my boy, are you ready for dinner? After walking over that ploughed ground and miles of dirt roads you should be ready to eat. I can’t for the life of me see why you Yankees want to see Tobacco Road.”

The life and taste of poor whites, described by Erskine Caldwell in his 1932 novel on poor white sharecroppers Tobacco Road, was not for the nation to witness.

The southern awareness of the national gaze and taste did not launch a direct and evident change in diet. Given the economic constraints of the Depression, the ingrained habit of poor

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98 “Cotton Row ‘Cue’,” 3, Georgia: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A831.
99 Ibid., 3.
whites and their sensory inclination for the foods deemed to be preferred by blacks, such large-scale change was highly improbable. But the national partaking in southern food did alter how their food tasted on southerners’ palate. The national definition of racial sensory difference layered upon the previous time and space segregation a clear-cut and naturalized taste difference that increasingly functioned as a marker of racial difference both inside and outside the Jim Crow South.

Reconsidering the lunch scene that opened our discussion, one more remark is needed: we will never know whether this description is truthful to what actually was on the menu around the two fires on that January day. What we do know is that the sensory racial assumptions of the nation, which the FWP worker was addressing, made it impossible for whites to partake in tasty southern cornbread and salt pork. The modification of the taste of southern food within the northern urban sensory economy, carried south by means of the New Deal cultural policies embodied by the FWP, had cornered the taste of white southerners and left them with the rather insipid alternative of “cheese sandwiches.”

Conclusion

The imposition of legal segregation in the South, and the domestic ironies of this social order, downplayed the ambiguity of sensory intimacy between blacks and whites. The hierarchical, gendered, and racialized southern private sphere, and its culinary outcomes, served to boost and sell an idealized image of the region’s past in a time of economic depression and search for national culinary traditions. But, following African Americans in their spatial relocation across the country, the taste of southern cooking also lost its regional grounding and sided on the black side of the color line. This reconstruction of taste obliged southerners to resolve, at least rhetorically, their sensory paradoxes and attune their regional construction of
taste with the national sensory economy. The FWP framed the nation as a united community of regional eaters, mystifying as well as legitimizing the South’s culinary past while using this regional ‘tradition’ as grounds for a modern, and racially polarized, national sensory economy.

Indeed, the taste of southern food was one of the cultural sites of production of a national mode of sensory experience that constructed the senses as a potent way to establish a modernized, industrialized, and urbanized color line. Southern cuisine was at the forefront of the reshaping of the U.S. racial and ethnic taxonomy, and the evolution of its taste in the interwar period shows the increasing importance of sensory methods of establishing racial difference in the first half of the twentieth century. The national racial taste line emerged via a creative process of interaction on the color line in different cultural, regional, and legal environments. Looking at the spatial and social circulation of southern food in the interwar period allows us to document both the emergence of the modern meaning of race and the making of black diasporic and urban identity.

This historical moment also opened the path for the 1960s reconceptualization of black urban food as “soul food.” As food scholars Frederick Opie points out, “it was during the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s that the survival food of black southern became the revolutionary high cuisine of bourgeoisie African Americans.” This prideful claim of a racial taste originated in the experience of the Depression and opened up a new range of debate about the relationship between food, taste, and race. At the center of this debate lies the sensitive question of determining whether people become “soulful” by eating soul food or if foods become

100 For a study of the making of the musical color line at the same period, see Miller, Segregating Sound.
101 Soul Food is best defined as a melting pot of southern dishes, Caribbean flavors, and industrial processed food, see, Mosley, “Cooking up Heritage in Harlem.”
102 Opie, Hog and Hominy, 132
“soulful” when eaten by “soul people.” In other words, if a white person eats soul food, can this person ever taste it? Interestingly, if soul food takes its roots in southern cookery, the culinary discourse around its status as race food is an often deterritorialized and somewhat a-temporal one that infrequently interrogates the assumption of racially differentiated taste. On the contrary, this debate focuses on a biased discussion around “tradition,” “authenticity,” and “heritage making” and takes for granted food tastes that are relatively recent social constructs.

103 On this vast debate and the variegated position taken within the African American community, see Witt, Black Hunger, 7 – 17.

104 On the issue of the “historical accuracy” of soul food and its problematic status an “iconic cuisine,” see Mosley, “Cooking Up Heritage in Harlem,” 274 – 91.
Chapter Four
The “Slap Slap Motion” of the Tortilla: Race, Gender, and the Sensory Economy of Tourism in the 1930s Southwest.

In January 1942, Arthur J. Brooks advised potential tourists visiting San Antonio that they “would do well to become acquainted with the chili stands on Haymarket Plaza and the nightlife that it symbolizes.” The trip from the American downtown to the Mexican quarter was indeed short and with little risk of getting lost since, “one may literally follow his nose, itself beckoned by an aroma which, once sniffed, is never forgotten- the indescribable fragrance of burning mesquite, tangy as the desert air and a conjuration that evokes association with the archaic.”  

The sensory discovery would continue as the visitor would become acquainted with the “redolence” of the “pungent” Mexican foods, in this case chili-con-carne. Cooked into a “mixture to assail the nostrils of the gourmet” the dish’s unique “heat” would be “best relieved by frijoles and tortillas.” While savoring the chili, the sensory tourist would softly let himself be “infected” by the “unhurried” atmosphere enhanced by the cooks’ “rhythmic lilt” and the serenade-singing “Mexican minstrels,” “the exquisite cadence of their voices rippling softly upon the night.” Brook then described how the hypothetical white male tourist on a visit to San Antonio’s Chili Queens would confidently point to the food and order “some of that…and that—and that” while “his womenfolk look at him with the admiration that is due the brave.”

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1 Arthur J. Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” January 1942, 11-12, LOC-AE, A 833. The description is an edited version of the Texas essay entitled “Mexican Quarter Chili Stands,” Texas: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832. Similar narratives can be found in the American Guide Series files of the FWP, see for instance, “Chile Stands, Salinas,” Hispano Lore, Texas: Folklore, LOC-AGF, A 444.

2 “Chile Stands, Salinas,”4. On the “Chili Queens” of San Antonio, as women chili-con-carne street vendor were nicknamed, see Jeffrey M Pilcher, "Who Chased Out the "Chili Queens"? Gender, Race, and Urban Reform in San Antonio, Texas, 1880-1943." Food & Foodways 16(3): 173-200.
his way through the Mexican market, the tourist was sent on a sensory, spatial, and temporal journey. Brook utilized the evocative sensory power of food to establish a link between tasting race and tasting place, between performing gender and daring to partake of fiery chili con carne. Race and gender interacted in this description to construct the taste and smell of Mexican food as a domestic exoticism.

When required to document the foods of their region, southwestern FWP workers first referred to what they labeled “Mexican food.” Indeed, such foods provided a historical, folkloric, and sensory template unique to the region. The quantitative importance of the documentation on Mexican food in the FWP’s archive is a first hint of the centrality of its taste in the southwest’s sensory economy. This is not to say that all inhabitants of the region ate and enjoyed Mexican food daily, but rather that FWP workers recognized its taste as the most original sensory feature of the region and highlighted it as an authentic taste of place. If the white male tourist did not recognize the tasty offers of the Mexican women, southwestern FWP workers showed a familiarity with Mexican food and could decode that, “some of that and that and that [would turn] out to be two tacos, two enchiladas, and two tamales on each plate, the whole buried under chopped salad greens.”  

If in the South the FWP archive worked to sever the connection between race and place, in the Southwest, the link was central to the region’s sensory economy. This chapter explores why and how in the southwest, the taste of race was constitutive of the taste of place. It follows the effects of this association on the region’s sensory economy, cultural identity, and tourism industry during the 1930s.

3 Mexican Quarter Chili Stands,” 3-4, Texas: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832.
By the 1930s the category “Mexican” was used rather indiscriminately to designate different groups of Spanish speakers, from native Californios and Tejanos to more recently arrived Mexican migrants. The term was filled with semantic ambiguities and, since the mid-nineteenth century, oscillated between a national and a racial category. Yet, historian Mae Ngai highlights the interwar years as a crucial period for the remaking of the “U.S.-Mexico border as a cultural and racial boundary.”\(^4\) This chapter does not aim to conduct a dietary survey of the southwestern Spanish-speaking communities; rather its goal is to understand how the sensory appraisal of their food by Anglo Americans helped to construct the Mexican racial category. Scholars have highlighted the shifting ground on which identities rested in the Southwest and have shown the ways in which the construction of racial categories and identities differed in the region from the rest of the U.S. Whether in Texas or California, racialization processes throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth did not operate in terms of binary opposition between blacks and whites, but involved a series of actors: European migrants, Mexican immigrants, Spanish-speaking Americans, Native Indians, Asian immigrants, and blacks. Some scholars draw analogies between this kaleidoscopic racial landscape and language; Linda Gordon in her analysis of Arizona for instance states that “race is like a language, structured out of irregularities as well as rules, the inconsistencies as numerous as those of English grammar.”\(^5\) Others compare it to tectonic plates; for instance, in his study of central Texas’ racial hierarchy, Neil Foley considers how whiteness and “Mexicaness…shifted over

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time, slipping over and under one another and creating new ethnoracial terrain.” In his thorough study of California’s process of racial formation, Tomas Almaguer further illuminates this mutability of race in the Southwest by underlining that “it was the simultaneous interaction of both structural and ideological factors that ultimately shaped the trajectory” of racial formation. The relationship between categories of class and race in “historically contingent and regionally specific” contexts then assured the constant evolution of the regional racial orders. Each city, town, and county possessed a specific racial history, leading Gordon to qualify southwestern racial orders as “microsystems.”

The local character of race formations in the Southwest was downplayed by one interregional characteristic: that the principal racial fault line was between Europeans and non-Europeans. Notably different from southern and northeastern whiteness, Southwestern whiteness at the turn of the century and into the interwar period can only be defined by what it was not. The term “Anglo” subsumed ethnic and religious affiliations under the supremacy of whiteness. By the 1930s, the term “Anglo” enclosed Southern and Eastern Europeans and was increasingly synonymous with “white” and “American.” Therefore, defining who was Mexican, whether

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8 FWP workers occasionally used the word “Mexican American” but under their pen, the epithet “Mexican-American” did not point to an ethnic group or a hyphenated identity; rather, they used this term to talk about people of the Mexican race who happened to have American citizenship because of regional history or naturalization. As Linda Gordon explains: “race had another peculiarity in the West, one that rewrote history: here “white” usually meant “American,” and “America” came to mean “white.” At that time “Mexican American” would have seemed an oxymoron to Anglos.” Gordon, The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction, 105.
legally through the introduction of such a category in the 1930 census or sensually in the pages of the FWP, was of foremost importance to defining whiteness and ‘Americanness’ in the region. The sensory making of the Mexican racial category then dialectically participated in the making of the American identity of the region.

Not only was race neither a monolithic nor polarized category in the Southwest, but vastly different food cultures cohabitated in the region. Each state had particular natural environments as well as political and demographic histories that informed local taste. FWP workers recorded – and even insisted on - regional differences. However, the national scope of the America Eats project only took into account five regions and promoted regional sensory unification. In the case of the Southwest this taste reification and commodification promoted the region as a coherent sensory unit on the American sensory map. Regional differences were intrinsic elements of the America Eats project since it aimed at portraying the nation as a pluralist mosaic of sensory experiences, but too much variety would dissolve the book’s patriotic goal and represent the country as a fragmented amalgam of eaters. Regional sensory unification was dictated by editorial choices about both content and form. Paradoxically, in the Southwest, this unification was achieved through a hyper-localization of taste; snapshots of one particular New Mexican kitchen, of a Californian restaurant, or a fiesta in Arizona were presented as representative of the entire region. In the edited section essay proposed for publication, the

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author scanned the sensory span of the region on a random pattern, and unscrupulously blended essays coming from different states.¹¹

Mexican foods stood at a crossroads in the interwar period: they were entrenched in a local creolized sensory identity but were also part of a tourism sensory economy that required and constructed an ‘authentic’ sensory other. Contradictions between these two sensory formations, one experienced and one projected, were numerous but they were temporarily resolved in the FWP archive through the interplay of taste, place, race, and gender. The taste of Mexican food was central to the region’s budding tourism industry and the southwestern FWP workers’ culinary narrative was a paradoxical and deeply gendered account that held Mexican women as figures of authenticity and embodied racial knowledge that contrasted with industrial American food.¹² Romanticized Mexican women and their spicy dishes occupied a central role in the regional culinary narrative; tasting their food became a crucible of white masculinity. As FWP worker Arthur J. Brooks put it in the description that opened this chapter, by eating Mexican foods, white males would become “brave.” Mexican cookery evoked a strange foreignness, a familiar exoticism of tastes, sounds, and smells apt to convince tourists to visit and

¹¹ Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section).” Analyzing the process of regional sensory commodification and unification is at the core of the project of this chapter, therefore geographical indications will be mentioned but local specificities only addressed if necessary to the understanding of the FWP records. The America Eats project divided the “West,” generally considered by historians as the landmass west of the Mississippi, into three regions: the Southwest, the Far West and the Middle West. Though the focus is on the first one, I occasionally use primary sources from the latter two. When I talk about the “Southwest,” I follow the geographical filing system of the FWP. For the FWP, the “Southwest” was composed of the states of Texas, Southern California, New Mexico, Arizona, and Oklahoma.

come back to the region. Constructed as a domestic exoticism, the taste of Mexican food was sold to visitors as part of the southwestern experience. If, as Ann Farrar Hyde argues, by the beginning of the twentieth century tourists looked at the regional landscape in hope of finding America, and not just a replica of European sights, then the taste of Mexican food supplemented this search. Tasting Mexican food offered the possibility to sense the racial otherness of a conquered people while giving the region an original and gendered sensory identity within the American nation.

The construction of Mexican food as the region’s racialized and gendered heritage taste worked to reinforce the patriotic aim of the FWP as it provided a sensory contrast to American modernity. If the FWP was to describe “America to Americans,” then southwestern FWP staff worked to clearly inscribe themselves within the American national narrative of expansion and conquest while distinguishing themselves from the rest of the country and affirming regional identity through the endorsement of Mexican food as their authentic and marketable sensory heritage. The sensory exploration and exploitation of Mexican food was not only a way to mobilize tourist dollars but also a gendered means for the performance of regional identity in the American nation.

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The Taste of Place, the Taste of Race in 1930s Southwest

Scholars have shown how the encounter between the fauna and flora of the New and the Old World changed diets worldwide and gave rise to the Americas’ regional Creole cuisines.\(^{14}\) The Southwest’s Spanish-speaking population planted its roots in the discovery and conquest periods, and remained a decisive feature of the borderland region from the sixteenth century onwards. An important Spanish-speaking population had lived in the region before the American capture of Mexico’s northern territories in 1848. Throughout the region, the Hispanic and American frontiers “interlocked” in a North/South dynamic that fostered distinct regional cultures.\(^{15}\) Four historical food cultures can be defined in the U.S.-Mexican borderland region: Texas and northeastern Mexico, New Mexico, Sonora, and California.\(^{16}\) Southwestern regional diets in the 1930s were the heirs of these traditional food cultures; as a FWP worker remarked, diets still depended “largely” upon “what is grown locally;” the “climate, soil, [and] moisture” determined the taste of the food.\(^{17}\) Native ingredients such as chile peppers, maize, frijoles, prickly pears, pecan and *pinones* nuts—“roasted for eating much as Americans eat roasted peanuts”—left a long-lasting sensory impact on southwestern cuisines.\(^{18}\)

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\(^{14}\) James E. McWilliams *A Revolution in Eating: How the Quest for Food Shaped America.* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2005); See also Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 10-35.


\(^{16}\) Pilcher, “Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New Mex, or Whose Mex?,” 659. The French concept of *terroir* is useful to think of the link between place and taste in the Southwest. A *terroir* is a geographic unit in which human and environmental elements contribute to the sustained existence of a taste of place that shapes the development of local cuisine. On the notion of *terroir*, see, Amy Trubek, *The Taste of Place: a Cultural Journey into Terroir* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), xiii-xviii.

\(^{17}\) Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” version 1.

The climatic and natural environments of the southwestern borderlands influenced the taste of southwestern regional cuisines. A number of FWP workers documenting the America Eats and folklore projects were aware of this geographical element of taste determination, even if they lacked the Tex-Mex culinary paradigm to name it. An anonymous Texan FWP worker expressed a corresponding idea when explaining that, “the foods served… in almost any Mexican restaurant… are not entirely of Mexican origin, but are rather peculiar to the Rio Grande border.” This everyday fusion gave rise to Mexican foodways unique to the Southwest, leading historian Jeffrey Pilcher to suggest that “Mexican regional cuisines also took shape north of the border.” Neither Mexican nor American per se, the foods of the southwest were the result of human and cultural interaction with and on specific environments, resulting in the construction of local food cultures and tastes.

The study of Spanish American traditions and local foodways constituted a subfield of American folklore scholarship at the turn of the century and into the 1930s. Americans of

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20 “Chile Stands,” 2, Hispano lore, Salinas, Texas: Folklore, LOC-AGF, A 444.

21 Pilcher, “Inventing the Mexican American Taco,” manuscript, 212-213.
Spanish descent were a privileged case study for American folklorists who endeavored to reorient their field from a search for the remnants of European folklore in the Americas to a study of the “creative response of diverse group to their new world experience.”\(^{22}\) The acknowledged existence of “native Spanish speaking” populations and cookery provided the region with a local folklore: “culture, social life, foods, and dress” inspired by Spain and adapted to their American setting.\(^{23}\) Antifascist politics in the 1930s in part launched this shift toward greater inclusion of ethnic groups in the national narrative. Yet, this folklore scholarship tended to circumvent the influence of the Mexican period on Spanish American tradition and foodways; in New Mexico for instance, a FWP worker deemed that the encounter between the human and natural elements gave birth to a local cuisine using Spanish tradition as its “source” but which “more strongly identify[ed] with materiel and ingredients easily procurable or indigenous to New Mexico.”\(^{24}\) Still, in the context of anti-fascist politics at the dawn of World War Two, native Spanish American folklore provided a vehicle for the patriotic affirmation of American cultural pluralism and was considered as a folkloric national asset.

Folklore scholarship framed the appreciation of Spanish American culture through a broader discussion and interrogation about tradition and authenticity in the midst of American modernity and progress. In the second half of the 1930s, the New Deal State and its art programs embodied the search for American folklore in the face of industrial modernity, a modernity

\(^{22}\) Hirsch, *Portrait of America*, 24


\(^{24}\) “New Mexico Cookery,” in *New Mexico: Notes, Essays, Reports*, LOC-AE, A 831.
“fixed upon the Concrete and the Physical” and spelling “the doom of folklore.” Spanish Americans were widely considered in the FWP writings as holders of comforting traditions and foods, as a more primitive yet “soul-satisfying” society that contrasted with the American “tempo.” The southwest FWP workers reporting on food habits and regional taste were part of a broader regional agenda to restore “almost-vanished” arts such as rug weaving or wood carving. Spanish American food then offered a reservoir of sensory experiences that could revitalize the American capitalist civilization in the midst of the Great Depression. It was a living realm of sensory memory for twentieth century Americans weary of the blandness of industrial life and standardized taste. The FWP workers’ task was one of rescue since, according to a FWP worker in New Mexico, under the influence of American expansion, the “Old type Kitchen” went “missing” forcing the amateurs of “genuine native cooking and romance of its simple peasant life” to, “go back into the hill towns and mountain villages” where, “cooking [was] still done in pots and on flat stones in the corner mud fireplace.” Depression-era sensory nostalgia for unadulterated home-cooking made the taste of Mexican pre-industrial foodways an object of carnal and ideological desire. But despite their acknowledgment as part of American folklore, Spanish Americans’ status within the nation remained ambiguous and the FWP celebration of

26 In her work on the cultural relations between the United States and Mexico in the interwar period, historian Helen Delpar studied the appeal of depictions of Mexico as a primitive society and “soul-satisfying” society for Americans in the mid-1930s. A similar argument can be made concerning the depiction of Spanish Americans in the FWP sources. This cultural trend was active in the region since the late 1910s as artists, anthropologists, and archeologists “discovered” the Indian and Spanish pasts and launched a revival embodied in the promotion of a romantic architectural style mimicking the Pueblo adobes. Helen Delpar, The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992) 62, 90.
“flat stones heating for the baking of tortilla” paralleled the efforts of health reformers to modernize Spanish American diet.\(^{29}\)

The FWP’s archiving of the region’s taste and foods was therefore a task of national interest, yet was laden with ideological and sensory ambiguities. Two writers on the Arizona America Eats project for instance described a heritage “cookery” that possessed “centuries of tradition with a background of patient Mexican women who placed a high value on their cocinas” and added that, “some still refuse to use commercial meal for their tamales, tortillas, and enchiladas.”\(^{30}\) Yet, whether the last sentence praised the female cooks for retaining their traditional methods or belittled them for refusing to adapt to the American industrial modernity was open to interpretation. To start unpacking these opposing archival trends, it is interesting to note the use of the adjective “Mexican” to describe Spanish speaking American women in this essay on Arizona’s cuisine. The two authors of this essay further classified Arizona’s cuisine into three broad categories: “Indian,” “Mexican” and “Modern.” The first one mostly dealt with traditional meat hunting and the Americanization of Indian children’s tastes in boarding school.\(^{31}\) The last promoted the recent irrigation system that enabled the production of fruits and vegetables on an industrial scale in the Arizona fields. That “modern” meant “American” was so evident for the authors that the use of both adjectives would have been redundant. Finally, the...

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\(^{31}\) Unfortunately, though “Indian” food is regularly mentioned in the FWP documents, there is not enough detailed material to accurately analyze the taste and symbolic meaning of “Indian food” in the 1930s southwest sensory economy.
middle category collapsed the cooking and taste of two communities, the “native Spanish-Americans” and the more recent Mexican migrants. The recent migratory patterns of Mexican nationals into the U.S. affected the assessment of the taste of regional food cultures in the FWP archive.

The increasing size of the Mexican population in the interwar Southwest had important repercussions on the region’s sensory economy and racial taxonomy. Starting after the 1910 Mexican revolution and accelerating in the 1920s due to the need for a cheap workforce in the industrialized southwestern agricultural sector, a large wave of migrants moved ‘al norte.’

Studied in detail by scholars in Chicano and Latin/o studies, the interwar generation of economic migrants was a transient one, following the agricultural seasons and the labor demands. This new layer of the Spanish-speaking population was massive; historians estimate that over one million migrants arrived in the years 1910-1930, quickly outnumbering the existing Spanish-speaking population by two to one. 32 Though Mexican migrants as inhabitants of the Western hemisphere were exempt from the mid-1920s quotas laws, they were often perceived as a threat to the region’s economy and racial makeup. 33 The early twentieth century Mexican migration to the


33 Neil Foley justly highlights the importance of class difference in the white consideration of Mexican migrants. He writes: “White tenants and sharecroppers in Texas resented competition from Mexicans, who had been immigrating in large numbers since 1910. The immigration debates of the 1920s highlighted the division between growers, who opposed immigration restrictions, and white tenants and day laborers, who favored immigration restriction. The great Depression once again focuses attention on Mexicans, for they continued to pick the cotton for low wages and became wage laborers on farms previously operated by white tenants.” Foley, The White Scourge, 173.
U.S. heightened the debate about Mexican racial identity and classification that culminated in their classification as a distinct “Mexican” racial group in the 1930s census.\(^{34}\)

The 1929 market crash and the following decade of economic depression consolidated the interwar racial order in the southwest and deeply affected the Mexican migrant community—not only did workers lose their jobs but their importance in the agricultural and industrial labor force made them easy scapegoats for unemployment and the lack of a sufficient relief fund. The anti-Mexican campaign culminated in the official “repatriation” and deportation of up to a million people by the federal and state governments in the early 1930s.\(^{35}\) The FWP sources rarely mentioned these often forced departures, as a San Francisco FWP worker euphemistically put it, “there were more Mexicans…before the depression than at the present time, during the hard years many of them returned to their country.”\(^{36}\) Indeed, the New Deal state put an end to the repatriation and deportation programs and promoted a more racially inclusive relief plan— but the legacy of the early Depression loomed large on the racial landscape of the late 1930s in the Southwest.\(^{37}\)

When migrants cooked in the U.S. they did not create a novel hyphenated cuisine but were pursuing a centuries-old culinary evolution anchored in the Southwest’s natural environment and history. They did so in a constant dialogue with the home country: they

\(^{34}\) On this debate Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 56–90.

\(^{35}\) On the deportation of Mexicans in the early 1930s, see Balderrama and Rodriguez, *Decade of Betrayal*.


\(^{37}\) On average, historians agree that the incentive to leave deployed by the American government and relayed by Mexican officials led to the repatriation of approximately one million people, while 50 000 were deported by force in the first years of the Great Depression. See, Balderrama, *Decades of Betrayal*, 82; George Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican-American: Ethnicity, Culture, and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 11.
“continued to live as they had known it, or imagined that it had been or could be.” As historian George Sanchez states in *Becoming Mexican American*, migrants north of the border invented new traditions, discarded and radically transformed older customs, “at the same time that Mexicans in Mexico were creating “traditions” to cement national identity.” This had important culinary consequences; indeed, Jeffrey Pilcher has shown in his book on food and the making of Mexican identity that the decisive turn toward a cohesive Mexican gastronomic discourse only took place in the immediate postwar era under the direction of cookbook author Josefina Velazquez de Leon. Velazquez de Leon was instrumental in creating the “modern form of Mexico’s national cuisine” by “unifying regional traditions that had formerly been divided by geography, ethnicity, and class under a national coating.” The interwar period was therefore a crucial period for Mexican culinary culture and taste on both sides of the border. New tastes emerged in the 1930s southwestern food cultures, such as the “newer addition” of tacos, considered by an anonymous FWP worker as “another combination of the original tortilla and meat” popular among many.

Mexican cuisine in the United States was determined by tradition but also interaction with American consumers and food industries. Transformed and manufactured on the northern

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38 Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 199), 1
39 Sanchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 10
40 Pilcher, *Que Viva Los Tamales!* 123
41 “Chile Stands, Salinas,” 2; “Mexican restaurant, El Puerto de Veracruz, observation by Elizabeth Drury,” Chicago: Cuisine, Restaurants, LOC-AGF, A 499. See also, Jeffrey M. Pilcher, “Was the Taco Invented in Southern California?” *Gastronomica* 8, no. 1 (winter 2008).
42 Mass-produced American food products contributed to Mexican taste north of the border. Like many ethnics during the 1930s, Mexican migrants’ hybrid diet blended the traditional foodways of the homeland with American habits, dishes, and ingredients. They shopped at both “modern drugstores” and at “old Mexican herbs stands.” At the drugstore Mexican Americans purchased such items as refined sugar, soft drinks, canned tomatoes and industrial
side of the border “tortillas, chorizos, salsas, bread, chocolate and Mexican sweets, and Mexican candy” took on a peculiar taste that reflected Mexican Americans’ position in the southwestern racial hierarchy and economic life. Juanita Hernandez Garcia, a cook on a Texas ranch, for instance, explained to a FWP worker how she made do in the Depression by “put[ting] up little business, make hot tamales, enchilada and pecan candy. Pecans all time free, we make wholesale, retail and peddle Mexican foods.” The processing of the native southwestern nut was not only a home-based activity; pecan-shelling plants were an important source of employment for the New Mexican and Texan Mexican communities. Economic factors influenced the popularity of food items; the relatively cheap cost of refined sugar in the U.S. before the war rationing for instance explains the abundance of candies and “pan dulce” on the Mexican American menu. Some taste preferences disappeared in the adaptation to the U.S. economic and sensory conditions, such as the use of brown sugar cones, “piloncillo,” a sweet deemed by a New Mexican FWP worker to be “rapidly giving way to the more easily acquired cheese. “Puestos (booth)” at a 1936 New Mexican “Spanish Fiesta” might have sold tacos and burritos, but the street food that really attracted the ethnic visitors was the array of “candy, ice-cream, hamburgers, peanuts, popcorns.” Aurora Lucero White, “Spanish Fiestas in New Mexico,” July 10, 1936, New Mexico: Folklore, LOC-AGF., A 286; “Chile Stands, Salinas,” 3.


45 Food writer Robert Walsh highlights candied pecans as an instance of a southwestern “Mexican Sweet” unknown south of the border. Locally-grown nuts gained significance during the Depression both as a food item and an economic resource since the raw nuts were cheap, sometimes even free, and processing them required tedious labor but “no more capital than a pot and some sugar.” Robb Walsh, “Pralines and Pushcarts,” <http://www.houstonpress.com/2000-07-27/dining/pralines-and-pushcarts/full/> (accessed November 2, 2010.) See also the description and illustration of “little Mexicos” in FWP, Texas: A Guide to the Lone Star State, 246-247, 339. On pecan shellers see Ruiz, From Out of the Shadows 79-80, see also, Ruiz Cannery Women, Cannery Lives.
As chapter five highlights, this type of sensory hybridization was crucial to the making of ethnic cuisines in the interwar period.

FWP workers incidentally noted the evolution of Mexican ethnic food taste; yet, they more often did not bother establishing a difference and used the Mexican racial category as an inclusive tool. Describing the fiesta held on September 16th for the celebration of Mexican independence from Spain in Austin, a Texas FWP worker on the Folklore Project for instance established a difference between the “Mexican citizens” group and the “Texas-Mexican,” but when it came to describing the foods served during the fiesta they were simply “Mexican.” We learn that, in Austin the “main Mexican foods … [were], tortillas, tamales, enchiladas, tacos, chili and, to a lesser degree, mole.” FWP workers tended to consider all Spanish speakers as a unified Mexican race with specific cultural traits and food tastes. The repeated use of the adjective “Spanish-Mexican” is an indicator of how FWP workers compounded racial and national categories in their sensory assessment of Mexican food. In many cases, they glossed over detailed historical and demographic explanations and established an accepted menu of characteristic “Mexican” foods. Food and taste were instrumental categories for the making of the Mexican racial category in the FWP archive.

46 “Chile Stands, Salinas,” 2
47 “Spanish American Folk Customs,” 16, Texas: Food, Celebrations. LOC-FP, A 681. That the epithet “Spanish American” used in the title did not re-appear in the body of the essay is another indication of the racialization of all Spanish-speaking populations as simply “Mexican.”
48 “Local Cuisine” by Don Dolan, 1936, Drafts pertaining to the AGS, Newspaper writers’ project, and related research activities prepared but the LA district office, 1935-1938, box 34; “New Mexico Cookery,” 1; Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” version 1, 9; Federal Writers’ Project, Santa Barbara: a Guide to the Channel City and its Environs (New York: Hastings house, 1941), 53.
Studying the rise of the taco in California, Jeffrey Pilcher considers culinary borderlands as “fertile sites of innovation” but also as spaces of heightened sensory ethnic and racial conflicts, especially “when the vague threat of an outsider suddenly assumes the physical force of food poisoning.”

Indeed, Mary Douglas showed in her groundbreaking 1966 study how culturally determined ideas of adulterated foods can be perceived as endangering society. Reducing such risk implies the elaboration of food taboos and food rules. But in the southwestern United States, Mexican foods and their distinctive tastes were not prohibited; quite the contrary, they were omnipresent and upheld as symbols of the region. Part of reducing the sensory threat resided in absorbing and appropriating these foods. Making the consumption of Mexican food safe for whites to taste and eat required bestowing Mexican food with “recognizable” and codified tastes. Folklorist Lucy Long has theorized the different “strategies of negotiation” at work when a cookery style gets staged as an “authentic” element of culture. She cites five: framing, translation (or naming), explanation, menu selection, recipes adaptation. All of these techniques were employed at some point by FWP workers. Their use of these rhetorical tools simultaneously made Mexican food ordinary and singular, familiar yet exotic. They provided translation, simplified recipes, and detailed explanations on how to realize them. Most prominently, they established an unvarying menu of Mexican food, in order of importance: tortilla, frijoles, tamales, enchiladas, tacos. Chili-con-carne was of course regularly evoked as well but, as will be analyzed in the last section of this chapter, its ambiguous racial

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50 Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.
and spatial belonging complicated its classification. One characteristic however united all these dishes: spiciness, “the hotter the better.”

The liberal use of chile peppers by Mexican cooks demarcated the region on multisensory grounds. Regional sensory identity was highlighted by olfactory, visual, and aural notations. FWP workers rarely failed to mention the decorative element of the strings of chile pods hanging “like scarlet icicles” on the sides of houses in their description of Mexican houses, “no matter how humble the hut.” Description of hanging *ristras* (a garland of dry or drying chile peppers) and “typically Mexican” restaurant settings with “sombreros,” “cluster of chile peppers” and “colorful parrots” hanging “here and there on the wall” provided a quick and efficient introductory description to many of the FWP reports on Mexican food.

Dried, fresh, red or green, FWP workers considered peppers indispensable to Mexican food’s “peculiar piquancy” considered “as pleasing as it [is] hard to reproduce.” The seasoning was considered “illusive” because the authentic “tang” could not be provided by the “pulverized” chili powder marketed to Americans but required the use of home-crushed chile and access to a racial knowledge inherited by Mexican cooks from their ancestors in New Spain.

Aware of the inroads made by mass-produced chile flakes in American kitchens, FWP workers used the Folklore Project and *America Eats* as opportunities to set the record straight. Though proud of the industrial development of the region and its capacity to export “typical”

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52 “New Mexico Cookery,” 3.
54 “Point of interests, Mr. Gomez’ Cafe, Mexican Foods,” Nov 16, 1936, New Mexico: Cuisine, LOC-AGF, A 286.
55 “Cuisine Peculiar to the State,” 2; “New Mexico Cookery,” 3.
foodstuffs, FWP workers strived to highlight the traditional, authentic, and unchanging use of chili peppers by Mexican women as feature unique to the region. They established a difference between American economic development and “Mexican” cultural retention, thus excluding the latter from the former. Therefore an anonymous FWP worker judged that, “though ground and powdered chile can be bought … the native New Mexican would rather buy the strings of chile pods and prepare his own.”

Home processing offered a broader variety of taste since chile peppers of different sorts could be used; explanations about “Spanish Mexican” cookery took care to explain the different uses one could make of red and green chile peppers, dried or fresh.

FWP workers linked the fiery taste of Mexican dishes not only to the use of native pepper plants but also to the work and embodied knowledge of Mexican women. Only they knew how to wash and dry the pods and how to toast them on top of the stove, “turning them as they begin to blister” and until “the skin puffed way from the pulp.” Once the cooking process finished, they were experts at steaming the pods between two damp cloths before pulling the skin off and removing the veins and seeds. This labor-intensive and guarded process produced the “stinging hotness of chili sauce.”

This celebration of sensory authenticity and racial knowledge occasionally led FWP workers to write grossly offending pieces, such as this warning against industrial chile powder allegedly uttered by a “Mexican-American housewife”: “I got no use for these kind of chile, she will say, Ees very bad for the e-stomach! Thoos pipples they grinf up

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56 “Native” in this context referred to Spanish speaking population installed in New Mexico before the American conquest. In the 1930s census, and increasingly in the region’s racial vernacular, most would have been considered “Mexican.”

57 See for instance, “Cuisine Peculiar to the State,” 2; “New Mexico Cookery,” 2.

58 “Arizona Cuisine,” 5.

everytheeng those e-skeens, everytheeng they grind. Eet mack more chile to sell. Ees not so mooch tro’ble … Thoos e-skeems on the chile, they ees only gud for thoos burros (donkeys). NO. I got no use for that ground chile een the e-store. I mack my chile heem. Ees gude chile, ees gude for the e-stomach.” As this diatribe makes evident, the alleged food preferences of Mexicans were an integral part of a culinary narrative that constructed Mexicans as sensory others on synesththetic grounds and heavily recruited sound, smell, and vision as supporting elements.

Gradations of spiciness provided sensory borders to the region. The “redolent” cookery of the Southwest, “breathing Old Spain and Mexico,” was considered to be captured in the local pride for and enjoyment of barbecue sauce recipes that, “with some omissions and remissions,” usually integrated a seasoning of “salt, black pepper, dried red chili powder, garlic, oregano, cumin seed, cayenne pepper” while “tomatoes, green chili peppers, onions and olive oil ma[de] up the sauce.”⁶⁰ A Kansas FWP worker carefully filed a 1939 newspaper article by William Lindsay White that clarified the connection between current taste preferences and historical events. White explained that the spicy barbecue sauce was “as much part of the Latin heritage of the Southwest as are the crumbling Spanish missions.” He pursued his sensory mapping of the Southwest by noting that “as you come north the chili peppers weaken and finally disappear, until near the Canadian border they offer you nothing stronger than a watery scarlet store of catsup.”⁶¹ Boosting a taste for spiciness became a way to perform a regional identity based on a mythologized territorial conquest grounded in the incorporation of an exotic other within national bounds.

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⁶⁰ Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 9 -11.
FWP workers identified spiciness as a signal of racial culinary authenticity and regional sensory identity but they also linked spiciness to a specific historical narrative, namely, the narrative of American conquest. Emphasizing spiciness was part of a broader discourse on civilization and progress. FWP workers’ sensory mapping of the Southwest is reminiscent of the racially inflected theory of climate developed by American scientists in their exploration of the overseas territories of the American Empire at the turn of the century. Daniel Bender in his recent *American Abyss* describes how American imperial science “defined a geography of energy and lethargy, progress and degeneration” that divided “the globe into climatic regions that corresponded with racial, not national, divisions.”62 In the context of the southwestern search for a sensory and culinary identity, this climatic theory took an original twist. FWP workers deemed the tastes of the Southwest Spanish-speaking inhabitants responsible for their “unhurried” lifestyle, the “leisurely pace” of their trade, their “drowsy” ways, and their allegedly historically-proven inefficiency at developing agriculture and industry in the region.63 The difference in rhythm and temporality was systematically mentioned by FWP workers who insisted on comparing the agro-pastoral economy of the Spanish era with the deeds of the “last modern interlopers, the Yankees [who] leveled the mountains for their copper, laced the dace of the land with ribbons on concrete, damned rivers to make deserts bloom and in less than a century worked changes vaster than their predecessors had wrought in thousand years.”64


64 FWP, *Arizona, The Grand Canyon State*, 1; Linda Gordon in her study of the town of Clifton, Arizona rightly points out a fact that can be extended to the region. In her words: “In Clifton everyone was an immigrant, but only
this narrative, the American race, strengthened by centuries of adaptation to the tempered climate and pioneer frontier settlement in the New World possessed a vigorous hunger, “welled from the lusty appetite of the hard work that settled the untameness.” Though “nordically inhibited stomachs” might quarrel with “hot-tempered” Mexican foods, they conquered and incorporated them with the land. American pioneers fed on the primitive tang of Mexican cookery and turned its spiciness into an asset for progress; two races and two stages of civilization cohabited under the same climate. As the Southwest essay section of the *America Eats* project explained, “Yankees” may have “assimilated many of the delights that attend the eating of the Mexican”; yet, “siesta” still seemed “a waste of time for the energy of Americans who live on the fringe of Mexico.”

Tasting Mexican food was therefore part of the American experience in the Southwest, and what was American about the Southwest precisely was the Mexican flavor of its food. Spicy corn enchiladas were regional sensory landmarks that signaled originality on the racial American landscape, but FWP workers also depicted the taste of Mexican food as a codified sensory heritage of a past and romanticized way of life now replaced with American progress. Tasting Mexican food then became part of the American experience of manly pioneering and conquest in the Southwest. If, as Pablo Mitchell states, “to claim whiteness … Anglos … could not simply

some counted as pioneers, as the authors of progress…Anglo pioneer narrators sometimes registered the presence of Mexican residents when they arrived, but they did not consider those residents pioneers, Indians were present as obstacles to the pioneering, never as pioneers themselves… Indeed, a substantial part of what pioneering meant was racial: that which had to be braved, endured, and transformed was the low civilization of the earlier inhabitant.” Gordon, *The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction*, 165.

65 Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 26.

66 “Some things the Spanish Americans Eat,” 10; Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 12, 25.
racialize Indians and Hispanos as nonwhite” but “would have to assert their own whiteness as well, in effect racialize themselves as white,” then eating Mexican food provided white males with a way to affirm their whiteness.\textsuperscript{67} Eating spicy Mexican food did not endanger one’s white identity; quite the contrary, it reinforced and policed sensory and racial borders by showing the American ability to appropriate the land and incorporate its peppy food. Crossing racialized sensory lines in effect consolidated identities on both sides. Though anchored in the past, the codified taste of Mexican food was at the core of the contemporary sensory economy and the recognizable and codified tastes of Mexican food were a privileged realm of sensory memory marketed by the burgeoning tourism industry.

Mexican foods were a sensory tool in a larger heritage-making project grounded in what historian Phoebe Kropp calls “Anglo traffic of Spanish pasts.” In her study of the making of cultural memory in California at the turn of the century and into the 1930s, Kropp explains that “the region’s diverse, intriguing and sometimes brutal history…became the raw material from which Anglo Californians fashioned new memories.” FWP workers participated in the codification of heritage tastes that portrayed of the region’s Spanish and Mexican past as a “romantic backdrop.”\textsuperscript{68} She considers the Anglo “imperialist nostalgia” for all things Spanish as not only “therapeutic escapism” from an anxious modernity but also as part of the regional commodity culture and corporate identity. Asserting a Spanish legacy symbolized in the American present by Mexican-inspired taste and built environment was a means to join the


\textsuperscript{68} Kropp, \textit{California Vieja}, 2; see also Wilson, \textit{The Myth of Santa Fe}, 8.
American strategy of “fusing race and division with regional and national identity.”

The taste of Mexican food was a realm of sensory memory that could simultaneously project into the present a fantasy “Spanish-Mexican” past and embody the American stronghold on the region’s present. That race was constitutive of the taste of place in the Southwest was not in contradiction to the categorization of Spanish speakers and foreign nationals as a mistrusted “Mexican” race. As Laura Hernández-Ehrisman states in her study of the making of heritage in San Antonio, the Spanish-speaking population, was “both socially displaced and symbolically centralized.”

Mexicans’ tastes were part of the region’s sensory décor and constitutive of the sense of place sold to tourists.

The Tourism Sensory Economy in the 1930s Southwest

The development of tourism in the Southwest was closely linked to the advent of the railroad in the region since the late nineteen century and further increased with the birth of automobile tourism. The taste of Mexican food, framed as a domestic exoticism, was an integral part of the experience sold to tourists and helped turn the region from a place into a

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69 Kropp, *California Vieja*, 4-5, 10. Renato Rosaldo, who coined the term “imperialist nostalgia, defines it as a “mourning” or “yearning” for what one has destroyed and explains that, “Imperialist nostalgia occurs alongside a peculiar sense of mission, the white man’s burden…“ We” valorize innovation and then yearn for more stable worlds, whether these reside in our own past, in other cultures or in the conflation of the two. Such forms of longing appear closely related to secular notions of progress. When the so-called civilization process destabilizes forms of life, the agents of change experience transformations of other cultures as they were personal losses.” Renato Rosaldo, “Imperialist Nostalgia.” *Representation* 26 (Spring 1989), 108. See also, Renato Rosaldo, *Culture & Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993). 48-87. See also chapter 2 of this dissertation.

70 Laura Hernández-Ehrisman, *Inventing the Fiesta City*, 12.

destination. Culinary tourism, defined by Lucy Long as “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of another,” was a central tool for the region’s affirmation of its sensory identity and an important feature of its attraction for tourists. The codified ‘authentic’ Mexican cuisine defined the region in the national sensory economy by recounting its distinctive history. This sensory appeal rooted itself in the construction of Mexican food as a familiar exoticness, as an exotic yet familiar taste made ideologically safe for sensory sightseeing. Long’s definition of culinary tourism is an efficient theoretical tool especially because she highlights the dynamic and fluid quality of tourism, how the familiar can be exotic, and the exotic familiar and she stresses that food is both a destination and a vehicle for tourism. Culinary tourism is not only the realm of the traveler to another land; it is also an everyday practice at home that uses food and foodways as a vehicle for traveling, experiencing otherness, and identity formation. Culinary tourism seizes food as both the subject and the medium of exploration. Practices of culinary tourism kept the taste of Mexican food at the center of the Southwest sensory economy even as it grew progressively divorced from the actual presence of Mexicans. All that was needed to play up and sense the taste of place were a couple of codified sensory markers of ‘Mexicanness’: spiciness, tortillas, frijoles.

The taste of Mexican food was a tourist attraction part of local performances of race and gender. These performances established the sensory identity of the region on the national stage but also served as internal devices to negotiate the gender tensions of the Depression era as well

72 On heritage making as a mode of cultural production, see Barbara Kirschenblatt- Gimblett, Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998), 7.
as the changes brought about by the imminence of the war. The late years of the Depression and the early 1940s represented an economic and demographic turning point for the Southwest.

The sensory exploration and exploitation of Mexican food was not only a way to mobilize tourist dollars but also a gendered means for the performance of regional identity in the American nation. Race and gender combined in the FWP sources to provide the sensory motif of the region’s heritage tastes.

Mexican local traditions, entrenched in the region’s history and sense of place, provided a cultural backdrop for the advent of American modernity and the development of tourism in the Southwest. The contrast between the Mexican past and the American present was integral to the Southwest’s sensory appeal. This symbolic, temporal, and sensory dialectic was at the center of the regional taste FWP workers presented and promoted in the national sensory economy. An interpretative reading of the pictorial agenda of the Los Angeles America Guide Series volume unveils how the FWP’s twofold temporality constructed an artificially bifurcated regional taste. An upbeat and progressive patriotic mood ran throughout the guidebook which recorded the first impact of the increased federal investments in the defense industry; the volume included multiple pictures of airplane factories and oil reservoirs. The guide also included a number of photographs depicting the Spanish-speaking population, yet mention of this large segment of the population was relegated to the pages on “picturesque” Mexican quarters rather than integrated in the

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74 On gender during the depression, see Melosh, Engendering Culture, especially her analysis of the “manhood in crisis,” 103, as well as chapter 2 of this dissertation.

This separation simultaneously reinforced and undetermined the modernist ethos of this guide. The contrast boosted the ideological charge of the industrial pictures, yet also questioned the human and cultural repercussions of industrial progress. This sensory and ideological dialectic is perceptible when comparing and contrasting the following full-page photographs illustrating the guidebook (see Figure 4 and 5). The two pictures are oddly similar; both represent women dealing with food, their bodies in similar position, standing up with their arms extended in front of them. Yet, the two photographs are also bluntly different. This duality ripples throughout the guidebook.

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76 FWP (California), Los Angeles: A Guide to the City and Its Environs (New York: Hastings House, 1941). On textual racial segregation in the FWP guidebooks, see Christine Bold, The WPA Guides, 141.
Figure 4. Tortilla Maker, Olvera Street, Los Angeles, in *Los Angeles: A Guide to the City and Its Environs*, circa 1940, courtesy of Hastings House Publishing.
Figure 5. Inspecting Peaches at Cannery, in *Los Angeles: a Guide to the City and its Environs*, circa 1940, courtesy of Hastings House Publishing.
The picture of the Olvera Street tortilla maker represents an orderly and idealized racial landscape. The picture orients our gaze toward the past, describing cooking as a tradition embodied in the immemorial gesture, the flattening of the nixtamal dough on the metate. She embodies the region’s heritage; her bonnet is, for instance, more a traditional costume than protective hairnet. The woman’s gaze acknowledges the presence of the photographer and seems to invite the viewer into the frame. The picture conveys a nostalgic sense of familiarity and comfort. Yet, the tortilla maker is also seen smoking directly over her dough, her apron is dirty, a garbage bin is under the table. There is an explicit condemnation in this picture, correlated by other FWP sources that regularly compared the expert rolling and folding of corn shucks into tamales by any “Mexican housewife” with how she would roll a cigarette. The pictorial ambiguity, associated with the frank gaze of the women toward the camera provokes a series of interrogations: Was she disturbed in her work or was she performing for the camera? Was she used to this gaze? Was she showing pride in her cooking ability and physical strength? Was the photographer familiar with the cook and the food she was preparing or was the photographer more akin to a tourist, trying to capture an ‘authentic’ shot? Such questions are constitutive of the state of the early 1940s southwestern sensory economy and can only be resolved by contrasting this representation of Mexican cooking to an oddly similar photograph published in the same guidebook. The pictorial and ideological echoes between the two pictures construct their respective meaning within the guidebook’s ideological proposition.

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A FWP worker defined nixtamal as, “shelled corn which has been boiled in lime water until the hulls can be removed, then dried to be ground and made into masa (meal),” “Some things the Spanish Americans Eat,” 12. On the tortilla-making process, see Pilcher, Que Vivan Los Tamales!, 101.

Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 14; FWP, Texas, A Guide to the Lone Star State, 341.
Contrasting with the bodily sensory encounter with the Mexican tortilla maker, the second picture presents an anonymous young, presumably white, worker in a fruit canning plant. The photograph is part of a section entitled “Industry, Commerce, Transportation” in which pictures of a steel cargo, a plane assembly line, and oil wells are also provided to the reader. The focus here is not on traditional cooking and daily life, but on the modern national economy symbolized by the glaze of the steel and of the peaches that will feed the embattled nation proper vitamins. The caption does not mention the woman as an individual; she is denied any agency in her task. Contrary to the tortilla maker, she is not living; rather, she is working in a sanitized environment symbolized by her rubber gloves, pristine plastic apron, and protective hat. The presence of the photographer is not acknowledged; there is no agency on either side of the camera. The modernist composition of the shot - straight, almost cubist lines- can be viewed as a celebration of progress, yet it also compresses the woman. This photograph combines the New Deal aesthetic modernist drive and the FWP’s repeated insistence on the alienation induced by the modern world- a world where one eats foods denied of history and tradition. The pictorial dialogue between the two photographs establishes the Mexican women as a sensory repository of tradition while excluding her from the region’s industrial development. The sensory nostalgia is expressed on an imperialist mode that elevates racial others as wholesome yet vanishing models. Yet, while the work of the peach inspector is hidden behind the factory’s walls, the tortilla maker’s supposedly domestic activity takes place in a public place, blurring the boundaries between the female private and public spheres. Overall, the visual similarity and the ideological discrepancy between the two pictures unveil the FWP’s ambiguous attitude toward an industrial modernity achieved at the cost of substantial sensory loss.
Yet, one more piece of information is necessary to the full understanding of these pictures. The caption locates the tortilla maker on Olvera Street, described in the Los Angeles guidebook as “a narrow, block-long alley designed to give tourists a taste [sic] of Mexico,” the “70-odd stores operated and owned by Mexicans ha[d] gay decorations and displays of Mexican foods, pottery and trinkets.” Indeed, the “alley of mud” was “reclaimed” and “restored in the manner of an old Mexican street” in 1929.79 The ultimate instance of “theme park style” production of Mexican authenticity, Los Angeles’ Olvera Street served as a symbolical urban landmark, evoking the “streets of yesterday” in the midst of the “city of today.”80 In Phoebe Kropp’s view, the chronological disjunction at the heart of the revitalization project heightened spatial segregation thus “convey[ing] a sense of ethnic control” despite the contemporary image of the Mexican population as an economic and racial peril.81 The forged Mexican market street framed the community as a “quiescent labor force that remains content in picturesque poverty, singing instead of striking,” making tortillas instead of participating in American modernity and economic recovery.82 The pictorial opposition of the two women in the Los Angeles guidebook was an ideological and sensory ‘set-up.’ As part of the Olvera Street’s pageantry, the tortilla maker in the first photograph fully engaged in the contemporary regional tourist economy, as a worker and as a symbol. She was an integral part of the region’s sensory modernity.83

81 Kropp dedicates an entire chapter to Olvera Street, entitled “The Market: Olvera Street and Urban Space,” Kropp, California Vieja, 207-260, the quote is on page 233.
82 Ibid, 239.
83 The FWP archive present Mexican women as heads of the local households, ubiquitous nurturing and caring mothers and symbols of the region’s past. Though many were employed as cooks in white households in the 1930s,
Tortillas were a central object of culinary tourism. The FWP archive recurrently presented “tor-TEE-yas” as Mexican “daily bread” and constantly celebrated their versatility. Mexican women prepared the nixtamal before cooking it into “thin pancakes” served as an accompaniment to every meal, especially “frijoles.” The coupling of the corn pancakes and the beans indeed was the basic element of the southwestern Spanish speakers’ diet. 84 In the word of a FWP worker, frijoles were “to Bernardo what potatoes are to Paddy.” 85 But the tortillas were also easily transformable into “other delectable dishes,” most notably in the late 1930s enchiladas and tacos. 86 FWP workers framed these selected items as delectable foods that Mexicans, born on both side of the borders, and, on occasion, local Americans, enjoyed.

occupying a similar role as the black southern mammies, their contemporary source of employment and social role is never mentioned. Rather, the FWP source elevated them as cultural and folkloric images of the region’s history and, by contrast, established them as living proof of American progress.

84 This coupling is repeatedly highlighted in the FWP sources, see, “Some things the Spanish Americans Eat,” 12, 14; “New Mexico Cookery,” 3-5; “Chile Stands, Salinas,” 1; “Mexican Quarter Chile Stands,” 1; :Mexican Food Recipes,” Texas,: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832; Audrey S Buck, “Mexican Customs in the Adobe Colony at Billings, Montana, October 1936, Montana: Celebration, LOC-FP, A 632; Lucille Hogas, “Caldwell Country,”” Texas: foods, celebration, LOC-FP, A 631.

85 “Arizona Cuisine,” 5.

861930s enchiladas are described as “blue cornmeal pancakes spread with chopped raw onions and melted cheese, the steak swamped in chile sauce and two fried eggs on top staring out like drowning yellow eyes” but, for those who preferred their enchiladas rolled the dish could be “done up jelly-roll style.” Tacos, themselves a relatively recent addition to Mexican cuisine, were fried tortillas “folded in the center and filled with various items, boiled ground beef, diced potatoes seasoned in the Spanish way…mashed beans to chicken, cheese, and shredded lettuce,” served with chile sauce. “Some things the Spanish Americas Eat,” 17-18; “New Mexico Cookery,” 4-5; Burritos and quesadillas are only mentioned once in the FWP archive. The first one as a sandwich, in a Californian article that illustrates how the “Mexican influence pervades California sandwiches” by listing them: “tortilla, tacos, chalupa, burrito.” “Sandwiches,” by Don Dolan, California: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 830. Quesadillas were “delicacy made from either cows' or goats' milk junket or rennet tablets added to the lukewarm milk [then] when firmly set, curds and whey are separated. For quesadillas, a cheese twenty-four hours old is the best; it is sliced in quarter-inch thicknesses, sprinkled with sugar and cinnamon, and melted in a moderate oven. It is then served with the sauce which gathers in the pan while baking,” New Mexico Cookery,” 16-17.
To make tortillas palatable to a national audience, FWP workers went into lengthy explanation on how to prepare tortillas, and how to eat them. Introducing tortillas to a nationwide audience, the first move of the FWP workers was to translate them into known food items; tortillas, for instance, became “enormous thin pancakes…cooked directly on tope of the stove until crisp like soda crackers.” Despite such attempts to demystify tortillas, their taste was intrinsically linked to the work and embodied knowledge of Mexican women. The bulk of written and visual descriptions of tortillas in the FWP archive are at their core depictions of the skill and labor of the women who prepared them. Part of the “quite interesting” entertainment of going to the Mexican quarters resided in “watch[ing]” these women in the process of making tortillas.” The show was a multisensory one that involved a kinesthetic pleasure reinforced by sound effects when the “right amount of corn meal mixture is placed in one hand, and then is transferred from one hand to the other with a slap, slap motion.” Most of the bakers stopped using this technique by the 1930s and thinned the dough using “dampened, cloth-covered pressing boards” but cooking tortillas was still a powerful representation of authentic ‘Mexicanness’ and used as a symbol of exoticness by FWP workers and editors. Mexican women, bent over their metate and rolling tortillas, were regional sensory symbols. The “homey sound” of their “cooking preparation” was a comforting marker of regional identity at the tail end of a decade of demographic and economic change and at the beginning of a new period of industrial expansion.

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88 “Caldwell Country.”
89 “New Mexico, Cookery,” 4.
90 “Mexican Food Recipes”; “Mexican Quarter Chili Stands”; Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 1.
Some FWP workers encouraged American housewives “anywhere” to try cooking tortilla and to engage in practices of culinary tourism at home; they highlighted that tortillas “can be made about as well in Maine as in Mexico, and without the laborious grinding of grain.”91 This appeal to northeastern cooks might have been a bit preposterous since this would involve a trip to a Mexican shop to find the *nixtamal* flour. However, the advice seems more reasonable for local white housewives since in most southwestern cities ready-to-eat tortillas produced in midsized factories were available for purchase. Southwestern Anglo homemakers indeed used these “surviving influences” to establish their regional legitimacy and localize their household. They decorated their houses with strings of red peppers and pomegranate, which could both be used as the main ingredient for “salad and ices,” and served Mexican dishes as “occasional” delicacies for “luncheon.”92 Historian Kristín Hoganson in her study of the global production of American domesticity at the turn of the century shows how such “acts of imperial buy-in” helped, “turn the foreign into the harmless stuff of pleasure that posed no significant threat to their sense of class, racial, national and civilisational privileges.”93 White housewives’ temporary and playful position at a sensory racial threshold participated in the reinforcement of racial boundaries. Such imperialist modes of consumption and culinary exploration used a staged exoticism as a claim to regional authenticity and legitimacy.

Getting a “taste of the exotic” within national borders became a trademark of the region. FWP workers voiced the American identity of the Southwest through a culinary boosterism founded on the claim to exoticism. Eating Mexican food provided a sensory time travel into the

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91 “Mexican Food Recipes.”
93 Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium*, 12,134.
days of the Spanish Empire, before “Progress,” and its consequences, arrived. This sensory identity built on the acknowledgment of Spanish speakers as regional racial others and used their sensory difference to create a regional culinary and sensory heritage. The region was depicted as an island of sensory authenticity and heritage, a potential refuge from the alienation of modern life, and yet also a budding American region.

But if the making of the taste of Mexican food into a regional heritage resided in Spanish-speaking women’s work and embodied knowledge, its valorization was anchored in the American masculine sphere. The codification of “genuine” Mexican dishes in the Southwest provided the region with an original sensory heritage in need of preservation in the midst of American modernity. The complex gendering of the taste of Mexican foods constructed the preservation of “authentic” Mexican food as a sensory chivalric safeguarding, a proof of conquest, and an acknowledgment of sensory seduction. FWP workers described their region as the pinnacle of progress- the land where American male pioneers absorbed Mexican women’s spicy “concoction” and, reenergized by this primitive offer, conquered the land. Daring to eat spicy and strange Mexican food constituted a sensory way to perform gender for male culinary tourists.94

The historical narrative deployed in the pages of the American Guide Series and the America Eats project coupled Mexican “mamacita” and virile cowboys, offering both for the

94 As Jeffrey Pilcher explains, “A peculiar gender dynamic emerged in which Anglo newcomers feminized the male inhabitants -think of stereotypes of passive Mexican men in dress-like serapes and big, gaudy sombreros -and sexualized the women as "hot tamales" and "chili queens." In this contentious environment, the women's work of cooking and the traditionally male task of grilling meat became sites of cultural conflict and accommodation. Simultaneously attracted to and repelled by the piquant stews of Hispanic women in San Antonio, Anglo males ultimately appropriated chili by taming the hot peppers into a mass-produced and easily regulated powder.” Pilcher, “Tex-Mex, Cal-Mex, New Mex, or Whose Mex?,” 660.
consumption of visitors. A strong opposition runs through the Southwest FWP archive, one defined along lines of both gender and race. The imagery associated with the region’s conquest was laden with sexual connotation; the female fictional character of Ramona and the figure of the Chili Queens cohabitated with the no-less mythic outdoor lifestyle of the cowboy inhabiting the interwar popular culture.95 The “West” in the American imaginary and mass-entertainment industry was a land of masculine regeneration where men living a strenuous life could acquire barbarian virtues without losing their civility.96 The myth of the Frontier and of the West as symbolical crucibles for American manhood has been highlighted by many scholars.97 As studied in chapter two, the symbolic connection between the Southwest and American virility was reinforced by the early 1940s search for sensory regeneration of its militarizing citizenry.98 Under the clear influence of the mass-media culture and the entertainment industry, two stereotypical culinary paradigms emerged from the FWP copy. On the one hand were the spicy preparations of Mexican housewives; on the other the sturdy food of the cowboys. The latter was described as, if not treasures of haute cuisine, indubitably American. Still cow boy food was disappearing due to the advent of modern transportation, the reach of the food industry, and the decline of herding. The America Eats archive strongly highlighted the masculine character of the pioneer community, white women being singularly absent from the sources on the Southwest. Cowboys’ foods, prepared by the “belly-cheater” on the “chuck wagon” that followed the men in

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98 See also, Melosh, *Engendering Culture*, 33–43.
their herding and branding activities, became part of the folklore of the “Old West.” The typical and monotonous cowboy diet consisted of sourdough biscuit, meat, coffee and canned vegetable, all of it preferably “plain but well-cooked.” The dullness of the cowboys’ food was however spiced up by occasional barbecues and their introduction to Mexican food.

According to the FWP culinary narrative, new foods and new tastes resulted from the coexistence of white male pioneers and the Spanish-speaking population on the land. The spiciness of Mexican food was integrated by ranch hands and cowboys as a proof of their virility, so much that even an untrained cook would try to “suit the local taste” by “mak[ing] feeble efforts at the peppery Spanish methods.” As an “Old-timer” explained to a FWP interviewer in 1936, newly arrived Americans “didn’t take […] long to learn” how to “take [their] frijoles, tortillas and chilli straight.” Speciality dishes emerging from the outdoor range activities had similar connotations of audacity, rejection, and appropriation, for instance the “son-of-a-gun” stew (an euphemism for its original name: “son-of-a-bitch”). No definite recipe was provided for this dish; indeed, the mystery around its exact composition was part of its taste appeal in the 1930s. The origin of the stew was a source of debate; several plausible versions of its creation, however, involved a “ranch cook with a fearful hangover and no meat on hand.” The improvident cook had noticed that, while the ranchers usually threw the “head, liver, tail and


stomach or paunch ... over the corral fence to rot away in the sun or be eaten by the coyotes at night,” the “Mexican along the border utilized these parts.” The cook breached the racial and taste “prejudice” of the cowboys by making these taboo parts into a stew. Though at first outraged and furious at the cook, hence the stew name, the ranch hands surrendered to its tastiness and adopted it as a beloved sensory proof of their virility. Once the glorious and fabled period of the cowboy was “over,” the stew, made of beef entrails and vegetable, became a sensory symbol of the rugged masculinity and strenuous life of the cow hands. By the 1930s, “son-of-a-gun” stew was an obligatory culinary feature of dude ranches and local entertainments such as rodeos and barbecues given by “the Stockmen’s Association, the Range Riders Association, or some cow town […] putting on a roundup revival of the old days or rodeo.”

Eating “son-of-a-gun” stew in the 1930s was a means to get at the heart of the region’s strength.

The revival of Southwestern fiestas and rodeos by the tourism industry in the 1930s played into the romantic and nostalgic sensory appeal of both cowboys’ culinary specialties and Mexican dishes. Tourist entrepreneurs in Tucson or Phoenix cast their states as “truly a land of pageantry—a land of sunsets, tradition, legendry, and romantic history.” They strived to highlight the local historical and sensory distinctiveness through the organization of fiestas, “combin[ing] the Spanish, Indian and cowboy motifs” and featuring “streets fairs, parades, music


102 “Far West,” 72, Section Essay, LOC-AE, A 833.

103 “Revival of Arizona Traditions,” 3.
and dancing.” In an essay on the “revival of Arizona tradition,” a FWP worker marveled at the new interest in local lore developed during the decade, “for both cultural and commercial motives.” Cities in search of a marketable folkloric past highlighted “certain aspects of their frontier heritage.” The FWP workers were no dupes and underlined the artificiality of these events, poking fun at the ways in which the cities “[went] ‘Western’” for the occasion and how “almost everyone, locals and visitors alike, don Western garb in three days of revelry.” Yet, Fiestas and Rodeos reenacting the “flavor” of the “Sunburn West of Yesterday” took centre stage in the Depression-era Southwest’s sociability and sensory economy.

These staged events not only provided a distinctive cultural and sensory identity to the region but also a cathartic means to express Depression-era gender anxieties by staging overtly confident performances of masculinity. A prime instance of this manipulation of Mexican taste is the 1941 Los Angeles Sheriff’s barbecue. The yearly charitable event led thousands to flock to the Santa Anita race tracks and was recorded in both pictures and text by the FWP’s Southern California office. The foods prepared for the event purposely reflected the region’s

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104 Ibid. The invented western tradition took the form of pageants that were performed during revived events, such as the fiesta de Los vaqueros in Tucson, or completely invented festivals such as Fiesta del Valle de Sol of Phoenix.

105 Ibid., 1-3.


107 “The Sunburnt West of Yesterday” is the title of a section of Part One of the state Guide entitled “Arizona’s Background,” FWP, Arizona: The Grand Canyon State, 56. A typical romantic commemoration and reenactment took place in New Mexico for the 400th anniversary of the entrada of Don Francisco Vasquez de Coronado in the region. The statewide series of fiestas were intended to debunk Northeastern historical preponderance by showcasing a land “already rich in tradition when the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock.” The 1940 edition of the Guidebook provided a folding map summarizing all the events of the season of the “Fiestas of Golden Romance.” “Fiesta of Golden Romance,” folded map in New Mexico: A Guide to the Colorful State.

108 On the masculine aesthetic of the New Deal Art Program, see Melosh, Engendering Culture, 92.

109 Two narratives of the Barbecue are available in the FWP archive. First, the state essay written by Thomas L. Thienes, “Sheriff’s Barbecue,” California: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 830. The Southwest Essay section contains an altered version of this essay, Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 7-9.
Spanish heritage; the barbecued beef was served with a side dish of “Mexican beans steeped in a piquant sauce” and was supplemented by “warm, crisp rolls” and “gallons of steaming coffee.” The menu used codified Mexican taste as a symbol of an idyllic and chivalric way of life, “carne de vaca con frijoles” (beef and beans) was served “alfresco” to “senoras,” “senoritas,” and “mounted caballeros.” The culinary nod to Spanish California was underlined by a carefully orchestrated pageant. Each sheriff entered the barbecue ground “mounted on a horse with trappings of tooled leather and silver” and wearing an “ornately Spanish costume.” Their performance aimed at recapturing the “provincial” atmosphere of Spanish California, its “incomparable gaiety” and idealized “camaraderie.” Unfortunately, the only trace left of the pageant aspect of the barbecue in the visual record is the oversized sombrero of the Mexican cook in the background of a shot in the accompanying photographic reportage (see Figure 6). The oversized sombrero signals that the Sheriff’s barbecue was a sensory recollection of the region’s past set in a nostalgic yet derisive mode. The hat legitimized and authenticated the barbecue as the setting for a sensory performance of race. The meal was a cathartic moment that used the taste of Mexican food as the sensory signifier of a comforting past. The satisfaction was sensorial, ideological- and, indeed, economic: the barbecue raised 23,000 dollars in 1941.

Tellingly, the set of pictures that accompanies the written source of the America Eats archive exclusively registered the male public sphere; the photographer in charge of documenting the event for the America Eats project concentrated on taking snapshots of the impressive amount of meat and the men proudly preparing and providing it to the hungry crowd. This iconographic program corroborates the strong triangular relationship between meat, 

110 Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 7-9.
masculinity and territorial conquest evoked earlier. Moreover, the pictures unveil a visible generational difference, suggesting the initiation of younger males into the local gendered sensory economy through their participation in the barbecue preparation. This process simultaneously made them the symbolical culinary heirs of the “Spanish-Mexican” and of the later American conquerors. The 1941 edition of the Sheriff’s Barbecue also added patriotic mobilization to the cathartic function of eating “carne de vaca con frijoles.” In the regional pageant of the nation at war, California contributed defense plants and a romantic gendered past of conquest.
Figure 6. Prepared Beef, Ready for the Barbecue Pits, Los Angeles’ Sheriff Barbecue, 1941.\textsuperscript{111}

\textsuperscript{111} Federal Writers’ Project photographs for the America Eats project, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LOT 13328 (F), no.20.
Figure 7. Wrapping the Beef in Cheesecloth, Los Angeles’ Sheriff Barbecue, 1941.\textsuperscript{112}

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\textsuperscript{112} Federal Writers’ Project photographs for the \textit{America Eats} project, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LOT 13328 (F), no.19.
The Commodification of Mexican Food and Regional Authenticity, or ‘the Great Chili Controversy’.

The taste of so-called Mexican food was also the result of a long-lasting, ubiquitous, and ongoing regional fusion cooking. Racial discrimination and the portrayal of Mexican food as an exotic part of the region’s tourism sensory economy regularly masked the southwestern fusion cooking style in the FWP archive. Yet, Anglo Americans in search of sensory pleasure all over the Southwest had “gone strong” for [tamales and chili con carne]…and these delicacies [could] be had at numerous places.”¹¹³ In Arizona as in Texas, “most restaurants… serve[d] one or more Mexican dishes.” The FWP archive documents the existence of a regional fusion cuisine with both past and present incarnations. FWP workers themselves occasionally wrote about their own taste and their enjoyment of “chicharones…sizzling hot wrapped in a hot tortillas, sandwich fashion, plentiful salted with a good glass of wine to wash them down.”¹¹⁴

A thorough understanding of the FWP material also needs to take into account the dynamic web of sensory interactions, culinary borrowings, and cultural relationships that animated the FWP regional archive. Southwestern foods, building on both Mexican and American traditions, were the result of constant sensory exchange and gave the region a specific taste identity to project onto the national sensory marketplace. Starting in the late nineteenth century, processed and canned “Mexican” food gained popularity outside of the region. Yet, the increasing sensory presence of southwestern food in the national sensory economy spurred local

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¹¹³ “Mexican Food Recipes,” 1, Texas: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 832.
¹¹⁴ Lorin Brown, “Noche Buena (Christmas Eve),” 3, New Mexico, Folklore, LOC- FP, A 286.
concerns about the lack of authenticity of the commodified, so-called “Mexican food,” and about the dilution of regional identity in the standardized American diet.

The most popular southwestern foods were tamales and chili con carne. The “steaming edibles” were a staple of street pushcarts throughout the West, the Midwest and into the South by the late nineteenth century, although they started to disappear in the interwar period. The popularity of tamales, as well as the dexterity required to prepare them, explain why the stuffed corn husks were one of the earliest ethnic foods to be canned and mass-produced in the United States. As one FWP worker advised readers, “strangers to the art of making tamales are advised to buy them in cans or take some time to practice.” According to several FWP workers, within the span of a few years, tamales became “popular dishes in the homes of many …not of Spanish or Mexican descent.” Another “favorite” among Arizona’s “American” population was tamale pie, consisting of a masa mix on top of “cut-up chicken or beef, onions, tomatoes, fat, chili and olives.” But for those desiring to avoid the trip to the Mexican store, hominy grits could be substituted in the making of the “mixture.” Food entrepreneurs, restaurant

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115 Tamales were the first Mexican item to be popularized among a non-Mexican population. They were adopted and adapted by African Americans whose culinary contact with the Mexican migratory workforce in the Mississippi Delta gave birth to a well-documented regional fusion food. See for instance the oral history project of the Southern Foodways Alliance [http://www.tamaletrail.com/](http://www.tamaletrail.com/), accessed on December, 6th, 2010. As a Texas worker put it, “[the main Mexican foods known in Austin are] tortillas, tamales, enchiladas, tacos, chili and, to a lesser degree, mole. The preparation of these foods belongs specifically to the Mexican folkways, and for a time they were used almost exclusively in this country by the Mexican population, except for tamales sold to some extent.” “Spanish American Fold Customs,” Texas: food, celebrations, LOC-FP, A 681. The reference to the “Anglicized” tamales is in the Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 14; “Hot Tamales,” 1938, Ohio: food, celebration, LOC-FP, A 661; Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 106.

116 As the Southwest section essay explained: “Tamales, [like chili-con-carne], have become Anglicized, but without suffering as much in the transition. For strangers to the art of making tamales, the use of the canned products will avoid wear and tear on their patience, for considerable practice is necessary in order to make them properly.” Brooks, “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 14. See also, Pilcher, “The Rise and Fall of the Chili Queen,” 186-188.

117 “Mexican Food Recipes,” 3.
owners and industrialists seized some of the Mexican tastes most enjoyed by local whites, tamed them down and branded them as pieces of regional authenticity. Sensory sightseeing did not require one to actually visit the region. These commercial foods, toying with the local racialized sensory economy and tourist practices, were successful in both the regional and national sensory economy.

The line between commodified food products and the food eaten by the Mexican population was purposely blurred by the marketing strategies of food brands. FWP workers were aware of this commodification of Mexican taste and, despite their anthropological goal, participated in it. One of them for instance preceded his report on Mexican recipes in Texas with a note to the editor that stipulated that, “these recipes, not being credited to any particular host, cook, or authority (but in fact based upon the use of chili powder, which is a commercial product) are not in accord with editorial suggestions as to the handling of such material.” Still, he listed simplified recipes for tortillas, tacos, enchiladas, chili con carne, tamales, and chili sauce that called for a maximum of two teaspoons of the spice mix in the case of the “well seasoned tamales.” Despite the FWP workers’ celebration of Mexican women’s innate traditional cooking skills (for instance in the use of different kinds of chile peppers) they did not hesitate to straightforwardly copy the recipes provided in booklets produced by commercial brands of chile powder in their essays. They plagiarized the Gebhardt chili powder company’s slogan (“That Real Mexican Tang”) and provided “some delicious recipes with that real Mexican tang,” from

118 The marketing of ethnic food was disconnected from ethnic entrepreneurs. The Gebhardt Company and its Eagle Brand Chili powder, one of the most successful brands of “Mexican” food and products in the first half of the century, was for instance founded by a German immigrant. Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 159-160.
“scrambled eggs con chile” to “meat balls- Mexican style.”

Readily available cornmeal and chili powder provided a sensory template for the nation to taste “genuine” Mexican food.

Quick-lunch stands and fast food joints were the favorite sites for the making of an everyday fusion cuisine. If “hot dogs and hamburgers” were the food of choice for Midwesterners, then Southwesterners singularized and prided themselves in consuming “the spicy Mexican dishes” as easily and as frequently. The informal context of street foods consumption offered an opportunity for culinary experimentation and fusion; they were however not free from the requirement of taste authenticity. Comments over the authenticity, or not, of the Mexican food offered in public eating places were a central trope of the southwestern culinary debate in the FWP sources. The handling of the case of the most iconic of southwestern dishes, chili con carne, heightened the issue of the “genuine” taste and content of Mexican food. By the same token, the debate over chili con carne contributed to change the region’s sensory perception of itself from a land of racially differentiated taste to an intermingled regional food culture.

Chili was the only dish clearly identified in the FWP archive as not only Mexican but above all regional. Many of the Southwestern FWP writers in the Southwest took it upon themselves to protect the “fiery Texas-Mexican border dish.” As Jeffrey Pilcher states, conflict

119 Carrie L. Hodges, “Cuisine Peculiar to the State,” 8-10.
121 As Donna Gabaccia and Jeffrey Pilcher remarked, “Anglos preferred to sample Mexican food in the streets, as a picturesque form of culinary tourism. Mexican restaurants gained cross over clientele only when they were marketed to Anglos.” Donna R. Gabaccia and Jeffrey M. Pilcher, “‘Chili Queens’ and Checkered Tablecloths: Public Dining Cultures of Italians in New York City and Mexicans in San Antonio, Texas, 1870s–1940s,” Radical History Review 2011, no. 110: 118.
122 FWP, Arizona: the Grand Canyon State, 159.
over gender, hygiene, and public space animated the debate about the existence of the Chili Queens’ chili stands at the turn of the century and into the early 1930s, but the fear and fantasy of cross-racial sexuality was deflated in the early 1940s through the celebration of their regional authenticity and culinary abilities.\textsuperscript{124}

Yet, by the late 1930s, chili was falling victim to its own sensory success and becoming a contested sensory icon. Put simply, the problem was that “most cheap restaurants throughout the country [now served chili con carne] which consist[ed] of a mixture of cheap ground beef and beans, seasoned with chile powder and cooked into a thick soup.”\textsuperscript{125} This “poor imitation” of the authentic southwestern recipe became a staple street food in the Midwest.\textsuperscript{126} Midwestern “chili joints” attracted eaters because of the low price of their food; wholesomeness rather than exoticism was the main sensory appeal. A lengthy and precious description of chili con carne in Kansas noted that despite its Spanish name and despite being “probably the only native dish” adopted in the state, “it [was] difficult to state with authority that its popularity is due entirely to the influence of Mexicans residents.”\textsuperscript{127} The essay indeed mentioned that the “few” Mexican restaurants who put the dish on their menu used “much more pepper than the American cooks.” The latter could be sophisticated amateurs who “pride[d] themselves on their skills in preparing a

\textsuperscript{124} On the figure of the Chili Queens and the controversy about their stands, see Jeffrey Pilcher, “Who Chased Out the ‘Chili Queens’?” 173-200.
\textsuperscript{125} Reyes, Martinez, “Foods of the Southwest,” 3, New Mexico: Cuisine, LOC-AGS, A 286.
\textsuperscript{126} For a good overview of the “Chili migrations” across the United States, see Pilcher, “the Rise and Fall of the Chili Queens,” manuscript, 182-190.
\textsuperscript{127} “Mexican Chili,” in “Influence of Nationality Groups,” Kansas: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831. The meaning of “native” in this sentence is problematic since it was meant to designate Mexicans born south of the border and, using a colonial vocabulary, denoted an uncivilized society. The remark was (intentionally) deceptive since the dish was actually native of the southwest rather than of Mexico and had been introduced and popularized in the Midwest by American food corporations and restaurateurs rather than Mexican migrants. Gabaccia, \textit{We Are What We Eat}, 159, 109; Robb Walsh, \textit{The Tex-Mex Cookbook}, 40-47.
steaming kettle of chili con carne with frijoles” and proved their cosmopolitanism by serving chili “with dill pickles on the side or perhaps a lettuce and tomato salad with French dressing, coffee, and no dessert.” But chili cooks were more often operating at “chili parlors” where they offered a watered down version of the dish accompanied by vinegar (“to cut the grease”), soda cracker, and tomato ketchup for a five-cent supplement. Of course, the Kansan “chili devotee” also had the possibility of ordering the “mongrel dish” of chili and spaghetti, known as “spaghetti red.”  

If some prepared it for its exotic entertainment value most cooked and ate chili “because it [was] cheap” and warming during the winter months. The Kansas FWP worker therefore did not fail to mention the popularity of the dish among “Negroes” in Topeka, who allegedly even had a song about chili, the chorus of which went: “‘if yo’ can’t git po’k chops chili will do.”  

The Americanized chili was a comfort food of the Depression across race and class lines. 

The Americanized version of chili con carne however stirred up the scorn of southwestern FWP workers who made clear that “real chili-con-carne should not be confused with the food now served as such in most cheap restaurants throughout the country.” If well known by name to most Americans, they ignored its genuine taste. FWP workers felt that the dishes becoming known as “Mexican” food in the rest of the U.S. were despicable versions of their region’s food and denounced it. For instance, chili recipes considered authentic by New Mexican FWP workers did not usually include beans or tomatoes and required relatively high

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128 “Mexican Chili.”  
129 Ibid., 2.  
130 Reyes Martinez, “Foods of the Southwest,” 3.
cooking skills. FWP workers’ safeguarding of the authenticity of southwestern Mexican foods can be explained for several reasons. The few Spanish-speaking FWP workers aimed at truthfully describing the taste of their food. But for the majority of FWP workers this defense of regional sensory authenticity in the face of industrialization and taste standardization could also be a way to re-affirm their regional sensory and racial expertise. In the late 1930s early 1940s, the passing of the taste of chili con carne into national food preferences would, according to most FWP workers, deprive the region of a valuable sensory attraction and of a means to demonstrate American control over the region. The creation of the “Tex-Mex” culinary category in the postwar period would eventually reduce the threat of sensory dilution simultaneously allowing the national and international growth of Mexican-inspired fast food and frozen dinners as well as inscribing Mexican taste within an American regional culinary narrative. This later development shows how taste can be delocalized while still infused with exotic sensory significance and informed by practices of culinary tourism originating from a specific historical and geographical region.

In light of this view, further interpretation of the essay that opened this chapter is needed. The author, alongside the blatant stereotyping of the Mexican community as a peaceful and backward American exotic, also placed himself as a regional insider. First, he provided a recipe

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131 One of the recipes instructed cooks to use “a quantity of lean pork, cut into one-inch cubes [that] should be boiled in twice the amount of water until tender, adding a small quantity of sage and a little crushed garlic and salt to suit the taste. Take the meat out of the liquid and fry it in pure lard, adding to it the required quantity of chile powder, gauged to taste experience, and two or three table-spoonful of browned flour. Place this mixture back into the liquid to boil down to the consistency of a medium thick soup.” Martinez, “Foods of the Southwest.” New Mexico: Cuisine, LOC-AGF, A 286.

132 On the national marketing of Mexican food in packaged and frozen form, see Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 165-167; See also Jeffrey Pilcher’s discussion of “segregated diversity” in relation to the development of Tacos in 1950s Southern California, Pilcher, “Was the Taco Invented in Southern California?” 31-35.
which, though more flexible in its list of ingredients, agrees with the general regional understanding of what “genuine” Mexican food should look and taste like. The recipe read: “properly made chili-con-carne is a delectable combination of ex-tongue or tender beef, this is boiled, this, the liquor and the meat stock, with onions and chili sauce identifies a dish whose heat is best relieve by frijoles and tortillas, variants may be prepared with chicken, called mole poblano, or with mutton, beef or pork, with ripe tomatoes and various condiments cooked into the mixture to assail the nostrils of the gourmet.” As narrator of the story, he also removed himself from the staged encounter between the female Mexican cook and the male “Yanki” tourist. He poked fun at the latter and highlighted the snobbishness of most tourists, who, thinking they knew everything about chili-con-carne could be heard saying to the vendors: “Anything but chili-con-carne, please. I tasted that in Kansas City.” This scornful remark was followed by a typical complaint about the “counterfeit” and “spurious” “gravy” that passed for chili outside of the region. The FWP worker managed in this excerpt to simultaneously romanticize the sensory (and sensual) appeal of the Chili Queens as part of a gendered and racialized tourism sensory economy and to side with the Mexican women by implicitly inscribing himself in a shared regional food culture. Mexican food constituted the heritage taste of the Southwest; a taste that was economically and culturally exploited by the tourism industry but whose authenticity also needed protection against overt commodification and delocalization.

133 “America Eats (Southwest Section),” 14.
134 Ibid.
Conclusion

The 1936 description of a “quick lunch” stands in Los Angeles by Don Dolan, a southern Californian FWP worker, aptly illustrates the multiple meanings attributed to the taste of Mexican food in the New Deal era. He noted that, “in general, these recipes partake of the early Spanish-Mexican-Indian influences, with the virile sauces and the exotic fruits and vegetables common to semi-tropical climates.” The conveniently imprecise racial vocabulary served to designate an all-encompassing racial other, with no concern for historical accuracy. Yet, the FWP worker who wrote this piece also aimed for sensory precision and detailed what the foods in question consisted of and what their tastes were. Doing so, he summed up the preponderant ideological threads of the FWP documents on southwestern foods: the construction of Mexican food as “exotic,” the masculine connotations attached to eating spicy Mexican-influenced foods, and the importance given to climate theory in the explanation of its taste characteristics. Indeed, this remark highlights the importance of the cultural and environmental relationship between the region’s agricultural production, its inhabitants, and the taste of its food. It also portrays the taste of Mexican food as ubiquitous and familiar, elevating it to the status of regional fast-food.

The sensory, culinary, and cultural meaning woven around Mexican food in the Southwest made the taste of tamales, tortillas, and chili-con-carne, valuable currency in the region’s budding tourism industry. It provided multisensory embodiments of domestic exoticism; the smell of the chili-con-carne preceded its taste and was reinforced by the staged performances of Mexican cooks. The codification of “genuine” Mexican dishes in the Southwest provided the

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135 Don Dolan, “Local Cuisine,” August, 5th, 1936, Drafts pertaining to the AGS, Newspaper writers’ project, and related research activities prepared by the Los Angeles district office, 1935-1938, Box 34, RG 69.
region with an original sensory heritage in need of preservation in the midst of American modernity. This imperialist nostalgia for the food of a conquered people and the construction of the taste of Mexican food as the taste of place played into the FWP’s sensory nostalgia for “real” and authentic food. The protective tone of some FWP workers, as well as their defense of the “real” taste of Mexican food in the face of its commodification by the food processing industry, was also heavily gender-coded. This culinary narrative put female Mexican cooks under the guardianship of white males. That the common tourist depicted in the FWP sources was male was part of the making of the racialized and gendered regional sensory economy. Eating Mexican food was not a taboo; rather, crossing the boundary of taste was a way for the white tourist to experience sensory otherness and, by contrast, to perform whiteness. The sensory exploration and exploitation of Mexican food was not only a way to mobilize tourist dollars but also a gendered means for the performance of white regional identity in the American nation.

Getting a “taste of the exotic” within national borders became a trademark of the region. Analysing the taste of Mexican food shows the cultural and sensory centrality of the Spanish-speaking population in the construction of an American southwestern identity, despite the increasing racial discrimination against that same population. FWP workers articulated the American identity of the Southwest through a culinary boosterism founded on the claim to sensory exoticism. Their sensory narrative built on the acknowledgment of Spanish speakers as regional racial others and used their sensory difference to create a regional culinary and sensory heritage. Eating Mexican food was a means to feel, and really embody, the region’s history of conquest. This web of sensory and cultural meanings help explain how, during the interwar period, and at an accelerated pace during the Great Depression, the taste of race became the taste of place in the Southwest.
Chapter Five
Ethnic Food and Hybrid Tastes in the New Deal Sensory Economy.

In June 1938, Robert Gaurino of the Connecticut FWP interviewed Charles Fusco, a forty one year old Italian American worker who emigrated at the age of three months. Fusco recalled his employment in munitions plants during World War One and his time as a Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) worker in the mid 1930s. In answering the FWP worker’s standardized questions, Fusco mentioned his views on U.S. politics and the New Deal, European fascisms, the evolution of gender roles, the Catholic church and, more broadly, the changes brought by “new inventions like the radio and a lot of other things.” At the end of this informative interview, Gaurino asked Fusco about his eating habits. Although they were systematically relegated to the end of the life histories interviews conducted by the FWP, questions about food habits were a standard parts of the interview process. ¹

Fusco’s answer highlights key elements in understanding the role of ethnic food in the circuits of economic and cultural exchanges that shaped the New Deal sensory economy. His answer also provides a glimpse into ethnic Americans’ culinary preferences during the late years of the Depression. Fusco established a somewhat clear difference between so-called “American” and “Italian” food but reported partaking in both, therefore signaling the incorporation of the latter into the former. He did not elaborate on what exactly was “American” food and left its meaning unstated though he probably had in mind classic dishes such as apple pies, steak, and mashed potatoes as well as more recently introduced food and drinks such as hamburgers, hot


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dogs, and soft drinks. He explained to Gaurino: “well, the kind of food I like is plain enough although some of our dishes are very rich. I like American food but not to eat everyday.” Fusco reported enjoying spaghetti “now and then,” though he noticed that some families had it up to four times a week, a frequency he judged excessive and potentially unhealthy.\(^2\) Indeed, others in the Italian American community put more emphasize on “Italian” food since, despite the economic hardships of the Great Depression, they could still regularly afford dishes that had been reserved for festive occasions in Europe.\(^3\) Fusco was also concerned with the American-born immigrant generation’s endangered physical strength. He blamed what he viewed as the bodily weakness of the Italian American youth as a result of new eating habits and the substitution of “soft sweet desert and coffee” in place of “good old wine.”\(^4\)

This first generation Italian migrant’s culinary observations highlight sensory circulation as a key feature of ethnic taste in the 1930s; Fusco’s interview illustrates the interwar process of taste hybridization and sensory interaction with American food culture that animated the making of ethnic cuisines in the interwar period. Scholars have studied how immigrants did not ‘Americanize’ and let go of their food, but rather ‘ethnicized’ and created new hybrid sensory identities that used specific food as symbol of ethnic identity while acquiring more specifically American tastes, most notably for sweets and rich desserts.\(^5\) The process of sensory hybridization

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\(^3\) Diner, \textit{Hungering For America}, 51-53.

\(^4\) Gaurino, “Italian Munitions Worker.”

\(^5\) See Donna R. Gabaccia, “Race, Nation, Hyphen: Italian-Americans and American Multiculturalism in Comparative Perspective,” in \textit{Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America}, Guglielmo, Jennifer and Salerno, Salvatore, ed., (New York: Routledge, 2003); Kathleen Neils Conzen, David A. Gerber, Ewa Morawska, George E. Pozzetta and Rudolph J. Vecoli, :The Invention of Ethnicity,” \textit{Journal of American Ethnic History}, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Fall, 1992), pp. 3-41. Throughout this chapter the case of Italian Americans is often used as an example of this trend, the abundance of documentation in the FWP archive indeed allows for a thorough analysis of this group.
underwent by ethnic migrants was reflected in a generational sensory shift. Ethnic tastes had their roots in the turn of the century migration and the ghettoslation of immigrants, yet these tastes were also forged through interaction with American food culture. And while ethnics adopted American ingredients to prepare foods reminiscent of their homeland for bodily and psychological comfort, America developed a taste for the hybrid dishes. Fusco also spoke of the influence of ethnic food on determining mainstream American taste and noted that, “more American people [were] eating Italian food … than anybody else” by 1938, a fact that astonished him. This American taste for Italian food was a newly acquired one and Fusco highlighted that while “everybody used to make fun of our food…today these same people invite themselves in- especially when it comes to spaghetti.”

The timeline provided by Fusco underlines how the economic downturn of the 1930s accelerated the rate of culinary exchange between migrant communities and American food culture. Taste proved a potent currency during the Great Depression, one that explain the attraction of customers of all backgrounds to ethnic restaurants and prompted the hybridization of American food culture.

This chapter explores how hybrid ethnic tastes came to occupy a central place within the New Deal sensory economy. Sensory interactions accelerated and deepened during the 1930s making it necessary to simultaneously study the evolution of ethnic taste during this decade and also to analyze the increasing role played by ethnic food in the U.S. sensory economy. This chapter explores the significance of the senses, especially the sense of taste, in the making of ethnic identities. How, where, and why the sensory exchange and interaction between American food culture and ethnic taste took place is therefore one of the topics of this final chapter. Taste is part of modern circuits of cultural, social, and economic exchange, and, throughout the

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6 Gaurino, “Italian Munitions Worker.”
interwar period, participated in anchoring the notions of racial and ethnic identity and difference in the U.S. This chapter also looks at how sites of culinary exchange such as restaurants, supermarkets and workplaces emerged as catalysis for the culinary and sensory mixing of various ethnic groups. Economic relations promoted heightened sensory circulation and contributed to giving ethnic food an increasingly central place in the American sensory economy.

This chapter examines the role of immigrants in the New Deal sensory economy. These immigrants came from many countries and arrived “at America’s gates” between the late 1880s and the mid 1920s. Most important among these newly arrived populations were Southern and Eastern Europeans, known as ‘new immigrants.’ Only through the Great Depression decade did these populations secure the category of “ethnic” for themselves. Mae Ngai, Matthew Frye Jacobson, and David Roediger, among others, show in their meticulous legal and social histories of race and ethnicity in the twentieth century, how Southern and Eastern Europeans increasingly came to be considered, and considered themselves, as a “white ethnic” group (in the FWP’s words, “foreign born whites”). Groups like Asians, Mexicans, and Filipinos, on the other hand, were cast as members of foreign races. Despite this categorization, this chapter also takes into account Chinese and Japanese Americans’ tastes and cuisines. Although the Chinese exclusion act of 1882 and the restriction put on Japanese immigration in 1907 curtailed new arrivals, Asian

7 In her study of the “invention of the Restaurant” in revolutionary France, Rebecca Spang highlights that, from the start, “the generosity implicit in a restaurateur’s willingness to provide what an eater desired was based in relationships of the marketplace.” Rebecca Spang, The Invention of the Restaurant: Paris and Modern Gastronomic Culture, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 138.

8 On Asians, Mexicans and Filipinos see, Ngai, Impossible Subjects, 91-224; On white ethnics see, Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color; Jacobson, Roots Too.
American communities grew in size in the early twentieth century. By the 1930s the dish of chop suey, created by Chinese cooks in the U.S., was a customary taste.\(^9\)

Integrating Asian Americans in the ethnic food narrative follows the FWP’s categorization since the main racial difference taken into account throughout the FWP’s existence was the black and white divide. Asian American communities were documented as part of the “Social-Ethnic Studies Project” that also covered Southern and Eastern Europeans. If the FWP bureaucratic classification used “ethnic” to designate any group apart from blacks, their treatment of “foreign born whites” and Asians however regularly diverged. If new immigrants were increasingly considered as whites and therefore Americans, Asians remained “impossible subjects.”\(^10\) For example, in a 1941 letter a FWP worker from Idaho discussed the Chinese as part of the country’s “ethnic elements” but quickly added, in brackets, “(non-American).”\(^11\) Yet, this chapter does not establish an explicit racial differentiation where the FWP filing system did not put one, if only as to not underestimate the black and white divide reflected in both the FWP published work and archive. The comparative analysis of Southern and Eastern European groups and Asian communities developed in this chapter traces the ways in which American life shaped immigrants’ taste and food along generational, regional, and commercial lines and how these tastes functioned within the U.S. sensory economy.


\(^10\) Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*.

\(^11\) Allen B. Eaton (State Supervisor, Historical Records Survey) to Eva Bourgeois (State Director), December 27, 1941, 3, Correspondence: November-December 1941, LOC-AE, A 830.
Though the federal editors of the *America Eats* project had in theory excluded nineteenth and early-twentieth century immigrants’ food from their culinary study, documentation on ethnic food in the *America Eats* archive and the FWP material in general is abundant. Many FWP workers described ethnic food using well-known keywords such as “the melting pot” or “cosmopolitanism,” keywords that had become slightly obsolete and were lacking precise meaning by the mid 1930s.\(^{12}\) FWP food writing updated the paradigmatic metaphors. FWP workers described a sensory cosmopolitanism where culinary encounters and working-class solidarities combined to create a cultural pluralist version of the melting pot. Influenced by the social struggle of the early Depression and the Popular Front rhetoric of the late 1930s, a number of FWP workers took it upon themselves to describe the foods of the American industrial democracy inhabited by the masses of new immigrants.

“A Well-Filled Melting Pot”: The FWP Archive and the Documentation of Ethnic Taste.

FWP employees, both federal editors and local workers, were struggling to find an appropriate model to describe ethnic life in the 1930s. In the interwar period, the academic discipline of folklore popularized the idea of cultural retention and defined cultural (and sensory) authenticity along racial and ethnic lines.\(^ {13}\) The FWP inherited this legacy and at first favored the idea of cultural retention, as evidenced in the “Pockets in America” project which sought to present “samples of odd, strange, or unusual national groups, religious sects, festivals and fiestas, fisherfold and hillbillies, idealistic communities, and survivals of early cultures.”\(^ {14}\) Referring to

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\(^{12}\) A good history of the intellectual history of the idea of the “melting pot” and how, despite diverse interpretations, it “structured the social imagination of a number of early twentieth century U.S. intellectuals, see, Sarah Wilson, *Melting Pot Modernism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). The quote is on page 17.

\(^{13}\) Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 3, 9, 85–120.

\(^{14}\) Pockets in America, Administrative Material, LOC-SSP, A 853
this model, FWP workers at times described contemporary urban ethnic neighborhoods and rural settlement as gustatory and sensory “colonies” foreign to the U.S. sensory economy.\(^\text{15}\)

By 1938, however, the FWP was promoting a more inclusive and pluralistic narrative in projects such as “Cosmopolite America” and “Hands that built America.”\(^\text{16}\) One of the editors of the project “The Greek in America” for instance warned state offices not to “overstress the separateness and peculiarities of the group.” Rather they encouraged local workers to consider the “community as...a living entity in which all elements, including immigrant elements, are in a state of flux and fusion” and to understand that, “even in semi-segregated colonies of the large cities it is not true that immigrants have little contact with the larger community life—such immigrants are really in constant contact at work, on the streets, in shops, movies, etc. They are inevitably, being molded by the community, while, at the same time, producing cultural changes in the community itself.”\(^\text{17}\) This liberal viewpoint explains the subsequent willingness of the FWP to consider sensory perceptions, such as taste, as categories evolving through exchange and interaction.

Yet, the *America Eats* project put the liberal editors’ cultural pluralism to the test. The constrictive temporal and demographic guidelines of the *America Eats* project exposed the FWP’s inner ideological and sensory discordances. The *America Eats* project did not attempt to be a comprehensive survey of the food cooked and eaten in the U.S. in the late 1930s, but rather


\(^{16}\) Christine Bold, *Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists*, 43-45; 143-152.

a celebration of “traditional cookery [kept] alive” and of indisputably ‘American’ food, such as clambake, fried chicken, apple pie, and a large variety of flapjacks and other griddle cakes.\footnote{18} This nostalgic overtone disqualified “national group eating” (what we would today describe as ethnic) from being part of the FWP culinary project. The chronological and spatial framing of the America Eats project created sensory exclusions that left many ethnic foods on the threshold of the project and tended to produce a skewed sensory portrayal of the nation.\footnote{19}

The federal editors’ inconsistent guidelines partially explain the convoluted wording of the America Eats essays. For instance, the FWP worker in charge of assessing the influence of “nationality groups” on Indiana’s food specified that, “where Italians have settled in the mining district of the southwest … excellent Italian spaghetti and red wine are to be found” and that, “in the industrial Calumet area centering in Gary, with its vast population of foreign born from every part of the world, are an abundance of foreign dishes, of course.” Yet, the paragraph concluded with a rather arbitrary judgment, possibly aimed at reassuring the reader as well as at demonstrating compliance with the federal editors’ guidelines, “but these have exerted little influence on the balance of the State, and almost none at all upon its eating habits.”\footnote{20} The anonymous FWP worker who signed this description simultaneously included immigrants’ cuisine in his enumeration of Indiana’s food while considering them as foreign to the state’s food culture. FWP workers often resorted to such ambiguous statements when writing about ethnic food, thus the acknowledgment of ethnic taste neared its sensory confinement.

\footnote{18}{“Brief Description of Proposed Book,” 2}
\footnote{19}{See chapter one of this dissertation.}
\footnote{20}{“Nationality Groups,” in “Notations,” 2, Indiana: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831.}
The use of the “melting pot” metaphor allowed FWP workers to avoid in depth discussions of the place of immigrants in American food culture. This metaphor was extremely seductive given the topic that FWP workers had to research, in addition to the need for quick overturn of essays, and the lack of literary experience of most workers. Yet, the metaphor lacked precise meaning. FWP workers inherited an unstable concept, explaining why their recurrent use of it lacked consistency. Progressive era thinkers shaped the melting pot metaphor and ideology in the wake of the massive arrival of Southern and Eastern European migrants at the turn of the century. The term was originally coined by playwright Israel Zangwill and conceived of as a model for “an all around give and take” between American and immigrants cultures.21 According to literary scholar Sarah Wilson, the melting pot became a third way to think about the effect of mass migration on American society, avoiding the extremes of xenophobia and cultural pluralism. Contrary to the latter ideal which considered the nation as a “collection of culturally different communities united by political bonds,” the melting pot trope offered a “version of assimilation imagined as cultural fusion.”22 If for some the melting pot metaphor could be interpreted as an admonition to assimilate and Americanize, as in what Wilson calls the “repressive melting pot,” for others it represented “a process through whose action both individuals and cultures would be made flexible, multiple, and continually changing.”23 However, the former understanding had general prevalence in the 1920s public and political understanding of the trope. Up to the mid 1930s, ubiquitous nativism led to the obliteration of the role of cultural circulation and exchange as central elements of the melting pot. The melting pot metaphor arose in a time of “cacophony” about the consequence of immigration on American

21 Zangwill quoted in, Wilson, Melting Pot Modernism, 3.
22 Ibid., 2-3.
23 Ibid., 15 -16.
cultural, social, and political life, and never lost its ambiguity.\textsuperscript{24} Both the “repressive” and the “flexible” versions of the melting pot metaphors appeared in the FWP writing.

Detangling the diverse stereotypes used by the FWP workers and mapping out the varying intellectual frameworks from which they borrowed is a complex yet necessary task to understand the FWP archive to its full potential. Under the influence of the rhetoric developed by the “repressive melting pot” school of thought, what historian Kristin Hoganson also dubs “the melting-pot school of Americanizers,” FWP workers often coupled references to ethnic cuisines with the two keywords of “assimilation” and “Americanization.”\textsuperscript{25} They situated the “pronounced” and “odd” cuisines of immigrants at the margins of American food culture. Yet, the fact that “some races continue[d] to cook in foreign style” was not as strong a blame or threatening a danger as it had been during the nativist decades of the 1910s and 1920s.\textsuperscript{26} Rather, 1930s FWP workers considered ethnic foodways as quaint habits ultimately doomed to disappear as the ethnic communities slowly Americanized.\textsuperscript{27} Serbian picnics in the Midwest might still feature Balkan style barbecue lamb, but the roasted meat was “waging a loosing fight” with the “American hot dog.” The Darwinian “fight for survival” was “not over” in the interwar period but taste evolution dictated the increased “attachment to cold sodas and hot dogs eaten together”

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 1.

\textsuperscript{25} Hoganson, \textit{Consumers’ Imperium}, 232.

\textsuperscript{26} On culinary reform in the early twentieth century and interwar period, see Hoganson, \textit{Consumers’ Imperium}, 211-212; Gabaccia, \textit{We Are What We Eat}, 123-136; Shapiro, \textit{Perfection Salad}.

\textsuperscript{27} The entire quote reads: “Except for the predilections of French appetites in upper Southeast Missouri and those of German palates in lower southeast Missouri, this section does not go on record as possessing definitely pronounced or odd cuisine. On the whole, the diet of this part of the State includes the common run of food consumed throughout the nation, beans, bacon and potatoes.” “Cuisine peculiar to the State, Southeast Missouri, Sikeston District,” February, 17, 1936, see also “Cuisine peculiar to the state, Northeast,” 2, Missouri: Foods, LOC-AGF, A 628.
of the American-born generation. FWP workers often considered that, though ethnic communities still prepared traditional dishes on holidays, they were, as a general rule, on the way to complete culinary Americanization.

According to a number of FWP essays, most Europeans ethnic communities had achieved sensory assimilation by the turn of the century. Though “romanticists” may be tempted to still see, smell, hear, and taste foreign enclaves, the modern American tourist could now travel across the country and “pass through [places which were once colonies of foreign born whites] without seeing any distinguishing marks to set it apart from any hundred villages similar in size and location.” FWP workers recognized the game changing role of the mid-1920s quota laws and their role in speeding up the integration of European immigrants into American life. As a FWP worker from San Francisco explained, “with the cessation of immigration from most countries, the polyglot character of [the city’s] people as a whole is diminishing. The children of most immigrants find it more convenient to fuse themselves into the American pattern.” The absence of massive new arrivals after the passing of the quotas laws in 1921 and 1924 stabilized the symbolical meaning of new immigrants’ food as a familiar rather than an exotic experience. FWP workers nostalgically deplored the perceived abrasion of sensory difference between ethnic enclaves and mainstream America yet also hold it as a sign of modernity and as an attestation of the country’s ability at assimilating immigrants.

The FWP’s paradoxical coupling of nostalgia for a lost exoticism with the celebration of immigrants’ Americanization was less present in the essays about Asian Americans since, to

FWP workers, the exotic character of America’s Chinatowns and Little Osakas was never lost. In San Francisco, where the largest Asian population resided during the Great Depression, the FWP guidebook explained that Chinatown despite being, “Americanised to a degree still embodies the color, the romance, the fascination of the Orient,” meaning that, “distinctive sounds and odors give Chinatown its atmosphere of the unchanging East.” Sensory arguments were primordial in this depiction of Asian Americans as denizens of unchanging sensory enclaves. But, while only a decade earlier Asian food would have been commonly considered as filthy or dangerous, FWP workers often compared Asian food to artistic creations. A Chicago FWP worker for instance provided a full sensory account of Chinese cuisine detailing how Chinese food felt on the tongue and how it crackled to the ear. The author explained that “the Chinese eat food for its texture, the elastic or crisp effect it has on the teeth is very important, as well as the fragrance, flavor and color. The idea of texture may be hard to understand, but to the Chinese the great popularity of Bamboo shots is due to the fine resistance that bamboo shoots give to their teeth.” Numerous descriptions and photographs of mysterious Chinese ingredients and picturesque vegetable stands reinforced the culinary and sensory otherness of Asian Americans. Paradoxically, then, in their praising of the art of Chinese cooking, FWP workers effectively excluded this cuisine from American food culture.

The casting of Chinese, and Asian Americans in general, as sensory others interchangeably conjured the “repressive” and the “flexible” melting pot ideal. An anonymous New York FWP worker used the “repressive” paradigm to authoritatively state the impossibility

32 On the depiction of Chinese food as unfit for consumption at the turn of the century and early twentieth century, see, Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 103.
of Asian integration within the American population, “The Chinese in New York City, as in every other metropolis of the Western hemisphere, constitute an indestructible and distinct colony, one which is impervious to melting pot ideas.”34 His colleague, Strong, adopted a more affirmative version of the melting pot in which the Chinese contributed to the city’s sensory mosaic, providing a “picture of a colorful and different bit of New York which has more than done its part in contributing to the city's well-filled ‘melting pot’.”35 But even this more pluralistic appreciation of Asian contributions to American food, Chinese cuisine remained apart and “different.” In both representations of the melting pot trope, FWP workers considered the taste of Chinese food to be intrinsically foreign to American food culture, yet it was one of the commodified tastes contributing to the New Deal sensory economy.

However, when focusing on European immigrants, the FWP’s culinary narrative also rejoined the original meaning of the melting pot trope as cultural and sensory fusion leading to the advent of a hybrid food culture. As one worker explicitly stated about New York State in the 1930s, “the pot pourri of peoples” had a “chance to simmer down to an even consistency.”36 FWP workers described American food culture as the result of a blending of tastes rather than a melting into an American mold. Representative of this trend is a verdict from an Oregon FWP worker, according to whom, “seasoned with a variety of cultures the pot stewed, brewed and simmered, and from it emerged, for better or for worse, something a little different than the world had yet seen. From it emerged the American.”37 In her survey on the role of ethnic food in American cuisine from the colonial period to the mid to late twentieth century, Donna Gabaccia

37 “Racial Elements,” 1-2, Oregon, LOC-AGF, A 756
shows how the period 1900-1940 was both a time of increased cultural (and sensory) cross-borrowings, leading to the advent of a multi-ethnic culinary cosmopolitanism, as well as a period of increased “food fights” and confusion “over what it meant not only to be, but to eat, American.”

The FWP culinary project was at the crossroads of this debate, since, in Donna Gabaccia’s words, “what [they] found was universal interethnic mingling.” Gabaccia also points out the extent to which “ethnicity had … become a dimension of multi-ethnic cross-over exchanges” by the interwar period, for instance highlighting the importance of snack foods in the “cross-over buying and selling” that reshaped the creolized regional cuisines prevalent since the colonial period. Ethnic foods indeed gradually gained sensory legitimacy in the interwar period. Descriptions of local hybrid food cultures determined by inter-ethnic taste exchange in sensory interaction with ‘American’ food punctuate the FWP writings.

Yet, adding a class dimension to Gabaccia’s culinary scholarship is necessary to enable us to fully appreciate the FWP archive. Descriptions of working-class pan-ethnic food cultures born out of the result of the addition and acceptation of differences regularly appear in the archive. The metaphor of sensory “blending” and culinary fusion was preeminent in America Eats essays from the “West” and the “Far West,” where a left-wing “radical regionalism” flourished in the 1930s. Michael Denning in his authoritative survey of 1930s leftist culture defines this strand of regionalism by noting that, “whereas conservative regionalists

38 Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 120-121.
39 Ibid., 139.
40 Ibid., 120; 110.
41 The Far West section essay for instance reads: “Today the eating and drinking habits of the West, like the people themselves, are a blend of Europe and America, the Old West and older East: pioneer…then came a blending of the older stock, northern Europeans and American homespun with the later homesteaders and sheep herders, the merchants and professional people, the dry-land and irrigation farmers, construction crews, fisher-folk, industrialists and their laborers. Into all this came the habits of newer immigrants, the Ellis Island, Italians and Russians, Serbs and Syrians, Basque, Czech, and Bohunk.” “Far West,” 93-94, Section Essay, LOC-AE, A 832.
nostalgically evoked past ways of life, radical regionalists paradoxically pointed to the absence of culture, the lack of roots” and attempted at imagining a multi-ethnic and multi-racial “new culture, a new way of life, a revolution.” One such example in the culinary realm was barbecue sauce prepared by “Whithey,” a second generation Yugoslavian immigrant from Wallace, Idaho. The young man’s will to conform to a loosely defined American ideal and his eagerness “to prove that he belongs” went hand in hand with his hybrid taste. His secret barbecue seasoning exemplified this sensory “mixture.” While the author deemed his garlicky sauce was “definitely Old country,” he depicted his methods as “western,” meaning “picked up from Western story magazines, books and conversation with cowboys.” This unconventional version of culinary nationalism equated ethnic influence, mass culture, and local traditions. In this version of the American culinary narrative, ‘American’ food was the result of a series of sensory interactions adopting unforeseen shapes, it was born during a multi-ethnic “hilarious party…drinking and wisecracking in the American summer,” that took on, “segments of this culture, portions of that, all put together in a new and original way.” In depicting this local multi-ethnic taste the FWP worker rejoined the original intentions of the melting pot as an ideal of cultural fusion.

FWP workers did not simply register inter-ethnic sensory mingling; they also tried to make sense of it by drawing upon the prevalent political discussions of the period. In their endeavor at describing hybrid and multi-ethnic food cultures, FWP workers may have been influenced by the development of multi-ethnic working-class organizations such as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), a powerful new industrial union fostered by New Deal

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policies. According to Lizabeth Cohen, these new unions sought “just the right balance between acknowledging ethnic difference and articulating worker unity” and their strategy was to “meet workers on their ethnic, or racial, ground and pull them into a self-consciously common culture that transcended those distinctions.”  

Historian Michael Denning goes even further in *The Cultural Front*, a sweeping study of the cultural politics of the 1930s left, characterizing the period as one of “pan-ethnic Americanism.” The respective influences of unionism and leftist political ideas on FWP’s state offices varied extensively, but leftist and liberal ideals undeniably left a significant imprint on the FWP production. FWP workers drifted away from the ambiguous “melting pot” trope and reclaimed the notion of culinary cosmopolitanism that was typically used to describe the middle-class and elite urban restaurant scene (discussed later in the chapter), proceeding to describe ‘American’ food as the result of widespread working-class cosmopolitanism.

From the Cultural Front’s culinary battleground emerged the description of local food cultures in which the tastes of each ethnic group stood as equally valuable sensory currencies. A forceful instance of such ideologically driven food writing is the depiction of miners having lunch in Butte, Montana. Their meals and lunch buckets made up a composite food culture united by their common allegiance to the progress and struggles of the American working-class.

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45 On the CIO’s “culture of unity,” see Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 323-360, the quote is on page 339. For a quick introduction to the CIO and the CIO culture, see Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 6-8, 21-38.


47 On the leftist influence in the FWP, see Bold, *Writers, Plumbers, and Anarchists*, 47-127.


49 On working-class culture in Butte, see Mary Murphy, *Mining Cultures: Men, Women, and Leisure in Butte, 1914-1941* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).
varied foods enjoyed by the miner’s on their underground lunch break, set up in a “cool, dry, place in the fresher air of the sills of the level, away from the dust and gases of the stopes and raises where they work[ed].” Native Americans faced “conventional sandwich and coffee,” a fare shared by Irish miners, with the addition of strong black tea fortified with “stirabout.” Tea filled “the thermos flask” of the Cornish miners as well, though augmented by cream and sugar and accompanied by pasties and “yellow saffroned bread.” Italians and Austrians enjoyed a similar meal of “homemade, red and white mottled salami sandwiches with their throat-burning seasonings, a button of garlic, and perhaps a whole Bermuda onion”- with the addition of the “inevitable” claret or “dago red” for the Italians, provided that “some other miner has not found his way to the wine before the lunch hour.” Finns ate “sharp-smelling dried fish” and “home-cured, smoky-tasting, leather-brown venison;” the Scotch, Welsh and Canadians were content to “crunch their solid oaten cakes” to complement “cold slices of haggis.” Mexicans packed “hot-tempered frijoles and tortillas.” Finally, the Serbs enjoyed “thick, greasy chunks of boiled brisket of beef of the cheapest quality, enormous half loaves of bread shaped like cigar, and garlic and onions in quantity.” The FWP worker listed these diverse dishes not by racial hierarchy, but according to a rough approximation of the quantitative presence of each group underground.

This working-class culinary romance reflected the contemporary ideal of integrative cultural pluralism promoted in CIO unions. The taste of this working-class cosmopolitanism depended on the blend of culture of each place. Cross-ethnic eating was highlighted at several points in the enumeration of the miners’ lunches, as Finns “pass[ed] around” their holiday sausage made of venison marrow, and “dago red,” despite its derogatory nomenclature, became a

50 “Far West,” Section Essay, 15.
51 Ibid., 16-18
much sought after drink. The culmination of the piece came in the judgment that, “it is undoubtedly through these lunch hours, and the interchange of food articles among the workers, that has made larger mining camps some of the most cosmopolitan cities on the food tastes.” Not only a masculine sensory exchange, the multi-ethnic tastes followed the miners home since the “average housewife” regularly “include[d] any of a dozen foreign foods in her weekly menu.”

This assessment of a woman’s place still relegated them mainly to a domestic role, yet it also shows the impact of the Great Depression labor struggles on the conceptualization of ethnic food as a central element in the working-class “culture of unity.” If they upheld the conservative partition of the feminine private sphere and male public life, the FWP portrayed workers and their families as part of interdependent and interactive sensory communities.

However, documenting the sensory exchanges that triggered the hybridization of U.S. taste proved a difficult task. Not only did the federal editors often consider “national group eating” not authentically regional enough to make the cut into the *America Eats* publication, but FWP workers also altered their contributions so that their culinary reporting could fit into preconceived rhetorical models. For instance, a cross-reading of different versions of the “Cuisine” section of the Minnesota Guide American Series volume by St Paul’s FWP worker Marjorie Ottaway, reveals how FWP workers integrated the widespread rhetoric of Americanization into their writings and tended to downplay the extent of sensory exchange on the ground.

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52 Reynolds, untitled, 35, 17-18. The adjective, “foreign,” is not a particularly well-chosen one at this point since it negates the very meaning of the sentence. These foods were not foreign to the “average housewives” any more; yet, their integration within the scope of “American food” was not yet complete.

53 On the role of women in CIO unions and their progressively marginalized role, see, Faue, *Community of Suffering and Struggle*. 
The first version of Ottaway’s essay on Minnesota cookery is crucial to our understanding of how the U.S. sensory economy absorbed select ethnic foods and how local inter-ethnic sensory exchange functioned.\textsuperscript{54} Ottaway asserted in the draft version of her essay on “Local and State Cuisine” that, “inhabitants of St Paul and vicinity comprise a great many nationalities, hence a conglomeration of foreign dishes, cosmopolitan taste in food prevails for the most part.”\textsuperscript{55} An important part of Minnesota’s ethnic foods were those of Scandinavian origins: “smoked dried fish, lutefisk, canned fish balls and fish puddings, goose liver, \textit{gaffelbitar}, Swedish blood puddings, lingon berries.” Ottaway happily noted that these items, thanks to ethnic entrepreneurs and because of the development of a taste for them by non Scandinavian inhabitants of the city, could “now be purchased as ordinary commodities of the everyday day menu.”\textsuperscript{56} She also referred to French, Russian, Italian, Greek, Syrian and Jewish cooking, specifying that, “Minnesota women not only excel in preparing dishes of their ancestors but because they have adopted many food customs of other nationalities who have settled in the same district, they have attained a cuisine which is unique and most palatable.”\textsuperscript{57} Sensory circulation thus drove the creation of a hybrid local food culture.

Restaurants catered to this local multi-ethnic taste. Ottaway for instance noted that, although most eating places “usually have a standardized café menu,” the “wise ones” had started to understand the appeal of ethnic foods and occasionally served them. These were not

\textsuperscript{54} Scholars have shown how ethnicity was, and still is, a constitutive part of any local American taste of place. On this topic, see Barbara G. Shortridge, and James R. Shortridge, \textit{The Taste of American Place: a Reader on Regional and Ethnic Foods} (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) as well as Linda K Brown, L. K. and Kay Mussell, \textit{Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: the Performance of Group Identity} (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1984).

\textsuperscript{55} Marjorie Ottaway, “Local and State Cuisine,” 1, March 18, 1936, Minnesota, St Paul: Cuisine, LOC-AGF, A 189.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.}, 2-3

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}, 2.
especially advertised and her culinary search proved strenuous since, “to find the expert cooks and the rare local [i.e., ethnic] dishes served up by them, one must have patience and a dash of effrontery, and in interviews, one must ask questions interminably.” The legacy of the Americanization paradigm can be felt in this last remark as cooks and consumers tended to hide their hybrid food taste. Yet, the use of the word “local” instead of “ethnic” also created a strong connection between taste and place, elevating ethnic dishes as regional sensory cushions against the standardization of American food since the turn of the century.

In the edited version of her essay, Ottaway opted for more neutral and conventional wording and the discrepancies between the two versions unveil how rhetorical, ideological, and sensory habits often interfered with FWP workers’ culinary reporting. Though she maintained the list of “nationalities” and their foods, Ottaway framed the second draft of her essay entirely differently. Indeed, the second version of the essay opened with the remark: “St Paul and Minnesota contains many races of the old world, each with their favorite food dishes from the homeland, American food prevail, however, except in certain localities where native modes of cookery remain.” Two key changes that occurred in the rewriting of the piece: “nationality” became “race,” and “cosmopolitan” morphed into “foreign.” Both imposed a sensory difference where the field work did not necessarily find one. The non-described category of “American food” framed the sensory assimilation of migrants and their offspring while crushing the possibility of sensory exchange by depicting ethnic food cultures as isolated taste “colonies” doomed to disappear. In the second version, the apparition of ethnic dishes on restaurant menus

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58 Ibid., 1
59 On food and nostalgia, see chapter two of this dissertation.
is not depicted as a bridge toward sensory pluralism but as the retention of difference. One can only speculate as to the reasons why Ottaway edited her essay to conform to the Americanizing injunction developed in the “repressive” melting pot rhetoric since the late nineteenth century. But her revisions cast a suspicious light on the numerous FWP materials that portrayed a cohesive food culture united along ‘American’ standards.

The “repressive” melting pot rhetoric was an easy fall-back for most FWP workers pressed to produce their culinary copy for the completion of the America Eats project. The constraining editorial guidelines tended to foster clichés. Yet, FWP workers also modified the formula and their essays highlighted the inadequacy of the old culinary paradigms to the evolving shape of the New Deal sensory economy. They slanted the accepted “Americanizing” version of the melting pot rhetoric by describing it not as a homogenizing device but as a collaborative process, and doing so recuperated an earlier trend that had conceived the melting pot as “a version of assimilation imagined as cultural fusion.”61 Especially in the trans-Appalachian region, FWP worker displayed the numerous influences that “molded” local “foodstuffs” and described “vigorous” eating habits “based in the tradition of a recent frontier past, softened by eastern U.S. and Old World refinements, tempered by modern dietetics, and blended by the many cosmopolitan influences of the immigrants.”62

Appreciating the inconsistencies and contradictions of the FWP archive is necessary in order to appreciate the role of ethnic food within the New Deal sensory economy. The content of the America Eats archive significantly exceeds the intent of the America Eats project. Some documental shortcomings, such as the lack of research on so-called “exotic” groups, are

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61 Wilson, Melting-Pot Modernism, 1.
constitutive of the America Eats project, but taking into account the entire FWP record allows alleviating some of the archival bias. Both local workers and federal editors had a difficult time defining what ‘American’ food was but, from our archival perspective, American taste can be considered ‘American’ only to the extent that it was the result of a blend of taste into local multi-ethnic combinations. The America Eats records are puzzling, yet key features of the U.S. sensory economy can be fleshed out of the culinary confusion of the FWP workers and editors. The FWP archive documents a sensory and culinary paradigm shift; ethnic food broke out of a circumscribed ethnic sphere to become a central currency in the American sensory economy.

“Drinking Soda Pop the American Way”: Ethnic Food Culture in the 1930s.

If the U.S. sensory economy described in the FWP files opened up to ethnic taste, the exchange was not unilateral and the tastes of second and third generation immigrants significantly evolved during the Great Depression. The FWP files can be successfully used to look at the evolving tastes of ethnic communities and their interaction with mainstream American food preferences. Recent scholarship has forcefully pointed out the ways in which the processes of Americanization and ‘ethnicization’ depended upon each other. This scholarship underscores that, “the invention of ethnicity as a status category within American society occurred in a complex dialogue between American imposition of ethnic categories and immigrant rallying of ethnic identities.”63 Both the Americanization and ‘ethnicization’ processes intensified for Southern and Eastern Europeans in the post quota laws era. The absence of new arrivals facilitated the acceptance of migrants within American society. The coming of

age of second and third generation ethnics, their participation to the New Deal era labor struggles as well as their inclusion in the liberal welfare state and its safety net accelerated the whitening of Southern and Eastern Europeans. And the absence of new arrivals encouraged the hybridization of culture and the emergence of a white ethnic culture “invented” in interactions with the American environment.

Asian Americans went through a similar process of cultural adaptation and identity formation in the interwar period, although they remained firmly outside of the category of whiteness. Nayan Shah, in her study of public health in San Francisco’s Chinatown, for instance analyses how the Chinese “journey from menace to model community followed a deep undercurrent of ideas about citizenship, conduct, and health.” She highlights the role of Chinese American men and women who came of age in the 1920s and 1930s and their perception of “the management of space and the care of the body [as] an index of American cultural citizenship and civic belonging” in promoting the renewed vision of the community. FWP sources describing life in San Francisco’s, New York’s and Chicago’s Chinatown indeed all insisted upon the generational gap within the Chinese community, describing the “younger generation” as “carefully neat in their appearance, so invariably well-groomed, so anxious, apparently, not to be mistaken for anything less than Chinese-Americans, with the accent on ‘American’.” According to the San Francisco guidebook, this careful sensory differentiation from their parents led American-born Chinese to adopt “the dress, the slang, and the commercial

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64 See, Roediger, Working Toward Whiteness, 157-234.
66 Ibid., 204, 226-235
methods of [their] American compatriots.” In San Francisco, they created a new Chinatown along Grant Avenue where educated ethnic youth of “both sexes” met at Fong-Fong’s, a “widely patronized ‘Joe-College’ hangout” that offered, “a soda fountain, lunchroom, and bakery.” Chinese American youth still partook in and enjoyed Chinese food, but they understood sensory conformity to mainstream American standards in speech, appearance, and taste as an important cultural tool for their political and cultural claims to American belonging.

“Drinking soda pop the American way” was part of the newly forged identities of ethnic Americans. Ethnic tastes evolved during the Depression as migrants and their children began to integrate an increasing amount of ‘American’ food in their daily diet. First, second, and third generation ethnics forged hyphenated identities, cultures, and diets adapted to the challenges of their new U.S. environment and lives. Ethnic tastes reflected the cuisines of the homelands, with the addition of American ingredients, habits, and tastes. Hybridization occurred at the macro level as the sons and daughters of migrants developed new tastes that had to be regularly satisfied, leading them to unite both taste preferences into the same meal. A FWP worker in Florida recorded this combination diet, when describing a “luncheon” in a Greek family. The host strived to present “something that is good to us,” and “fixed” traditional Greek-style barbecued chicken. Yet she also offered homemade strawberry shortcake and served iced Coca-Cola to her children throughout the meal. Irrespective of their origins, the most significant feature of the second generation immigrants’ taste in food was a craving for sweetness.

68 FWP, San Francisco: The Bay and its Cities, 221
69 Ibid, 222.
70“Ceceila Patrourtsa,” ALH Online, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/D?wpa:1:/temp/~ammem_xKMI::>(accessed on April, 12, 2011). FWP worker Johnson Fenton, notes that “the Italian pastry shop is a place where the customer can obtain a dish of ice cream or a glass of coca-cola (a favorite drink with Greeks and Italians) or purchase a giant cake for a wedding or birthday party,” Johnson Fenton, “Little Italy,” 2 October 13,1936, Chicago, 238
The Life Histories interviews conducted by the FWP’s Social-Ethnic Studies Project among Italian American families in New England provide a window into the making of ethnic tastes in the 1930s. These interviews allow us to document the generational sensory shift witnessed by most communities and to analyze the anxieties that the dual process of culinary ethnicization and Americanization spurred within these ethnic communities. A New Jersey Italian mother for instance explained to FWP worker Mari Tomasi in November 1938 that, though her late husband “laugh at pie an’ cakes an’ sof’ sweet food” and preferred “meat an’ potato, an’rice, an’ the spaghetti- everything to make him strong an’ make him muscle,” satisfying her son Johnnie was a different task. Indeed, “he like the strong food an’ he like he sof’, an’ everyday he want both.”71 The two poles of “strong” and “soft” were two recurrent qualifiers for, respectively, Italian and American food, translating in gendered terms the malaise immigrants parents sometimes encountered when facing their children’s taste for “fancy food.” The European-born parents’ unease was centered on the potentially harmful and feminizing consequences of soda drinks and confectionaries on their children, predicting that “the sweets would soften their bodies.”72

The American born generation coming of age in the 1930s acquired a sweet tooth that amazed and disconcerted their immigrant parents. These new tastes were, however, central to their new ethnic identities. Simone Cinotto, in his article on Italian food in East Harlem during

LOC-SES, A 739. See also, Laura Earley, "Italy in the Ozarks," November 1937, Arkansas, Pockets in America, FWP-LOC, A 53


72 On generational changes in diet among Italian Americans, see also, Tracy N. Poe, “The Labour and Leisure of Food Production as a Mode of Ethnic Identity Building Among Italians in Chicago, 1890-1940,” Rethinking History 5, no. 1 (2001): 142.
the 1930s, shows how young Italian Americans adopted a nutritional strategy of integration as they established a powerful connection between American foods, American identities, and American bodies. 73 While working-class fathers valued their wives’ cooking because it “makes the muscle for these hours of hard-work,” their sons’ defied their parents’ prediction and geared their bodies toward playing American sports by enjoying “pudding, cake and pie.” 74 One father, Giacomo Coletti, expressed his “amazement” at his sons’ vitality but “continue[d] to nurse a silent suspicion that if he lives to see grandchildren- or better still great- grandchildren, their bodies will prove this theory of his.” Mothers, on the other hand, attempted to satisfy everyone, baking dessert following, “the lessons from [their] American neighbors.” 75 Social workers and reformers, especially in New England, targeted housewives as the main agents of dietary change in migrant households since the late nineteen century. Through these reform attempts, migrant women became self-conscious of their sensory difference but also acquired knowledge of American cooking and ingredients that pleased their children’s tastes. 76

The rise of Italian American cuisine provides a paradigmatic example of how taste was recruited to support the “invention of ethnicity” in the U.S. In the case of Italian Americans, the process of ethnicization required forging a new cultural identity and food culture, but also inventing the geographic and national notions of ‘Italy’ and ‘Italianness.” 77 If FWP workers considered New York’s little Italy the “hottest melting pot” in the country, it was as much because migrants were learning American ways as it was because Italy itself had been a “melting

75 Ibid.
76 Shapiro, Perfection Salad; Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 123-131; Levenstein, Revolution at the Table, 98-108
77 Diner, Hungering for America, 60;
pot for 3,000 years.”⁷⁸ In this Italian American cradle, the difference between the northern “artist, adventurer and exile type of immigrant” and the “swarthy,” “picturesquely dressed peasant from the warm Italian southland” receded, especially given the demographic preponderance of the latter on the former in the early twentieth century migration wave to the U.S.⁷⁹ Still, a New Jersey FWP worker assigned to document Italian food as part of the Social-Ethnic Studies Project highlighted the “sectionalized” preferences of Northern and Southern Italians for, respectively, macaroni *con salsa* and polenta; ravioli and spaghetti.⁸⁰ But overall, Italian American foodways in the 1930s were, in the words of food historian Hasia Diner, “a fusion of some southern Italian staples with a hodgepodge of foodstuffs and dishes from other regions, mixed with American styles of consumption, particularly of eating meat, created a cuisine that combined old and new.”⁸¹

Simone Cinotto, along with Tracy Poe, considers that, from the early thirties on, the “widely varying regional foods of a fragmented Italy became representative of an overarching Italian American identity.”⁸² In her comparative study of Irish, Italian, and Jewish migrants’ foodways, Diner further states that in the interwar period Italian Americans “created new food and food practices but skilfully draped them with the mantle of tradition.”⁸³ As documented in the FWP archive, spaghetti, macaroni, ravioli, parmesan and spumoni increasingly qualified as “Italian American” dishes. As for pizza, its iconic status as an ethnic dish only emerged in the postwar era, once the allegedly “insurmountable gastronomic prejudice” between northern and

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 1
⁸¹ Diner, *Hungering for America*, 54.
⁸³ Diner, *Hungering for America*, 54.
southern Italians had been resolved through the maturing of Italian American ethnicity.  

Cinotto concludes that Italian Americans, despite some compromises with U.S. foodways and tastes, significantly resisted “nutritional assimilation.” Italian Americans used ethnic food as “powerful means of negotiation in a widespread generational controversy” by stressing the importance of traditional food in the domestic and private sphere of the Italian American family.

The Spaghetti diner held annually by the Italian community in Tontitown, Arkansas, is an example of the hybrid character of ethnic food culture and tastes in the 1930s. As detailed in the first chapter of this dissertation, the federal guidelines of the America Eats project contributed to bar this annual festival from publication on the grounds that this event was not “traditional” and “regional” enough, despite its forty years long history. Yet, in 1937 FWP worker Laura Earley remarked that, “they are Americans and proud of it,” although, “when it c[ame] to their feast days, they revert[ed] to the customs of the motherland.” On holidays, members of the “old families” met at the school house after mass; they filled the school basement with “laughter and babel” and enjoyed sodas “while their children consume[d] ice-cream cones.” Then, at mid-day the “enticing odor” of the plates “piled high with steaming Italian spaghetti” raised, participating

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84 The dish, “resembling pie-crust decorated with cheese and tomatoes,” was not on the menu of restaurants catering more openly to a white American clientele, therefore its mention in the FWP archive was always accompanied by a culinary explanation. 84 FWP workers described it alternatively as a “very thin crust, open and filled with aleches (anchovies), muzzarelle (cheese) or pomoddoro (tomatoes)...vary[ing] from the normal pie size to huge circles or rectangles,” or as “an unsweetened pastry filled with tomatoes and cheese, meat or fish;” but they always mentions its origin in the “Italian Southland.” A New York FWP worker even depicted it as “one of the pet aversion of the Northern Italians.” “Italians of Newark, stores,” 9, New Jersey, Italians of Newark, LOC-SES, A 794; FWP, New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis (New York, Random House, 1939), 118; Selma Culpepper, “Italian Amusement in New York,” 10, Italians of New York, FWP-NYC, roll 260; Harry Zahn, “Italian restaurants and foods in New York,” 3, “Italians of New York, FWP-NYC, roll 260.

85 Simone Cinotto, “Leonard Covello,” 512. See also Hasia R. Diner’s analysis of the “heavily centered on food” Italian American cultural system, in Diner, Hungering for America, 53

86 Laura Earley, "Italy in the Ozarks," November 1937, Arkansas, Pockets in America, FWP-LOC, A 53.
in the sensory buttressing of the ethnic identity. Indeed, spaghetti dishes had become the main taste markers of ‘Italianness’ in the US. Spaghetti and macaroni were at the center of the Italian ethnic food culture and held a symbolic place within community foodways. The dish had been an object of conspicuous consumption for the Italian elite in the old country; but by contrast, its affordability in their new home quickly made it a favorite of Italian migrants in the U.S.

The Great Depression had paradoxical consequences on ethnic cuisine and tastes. This period played an important role in the sensory resistance of ethnic cuisines. European cuisine offered tasty yet cheap meals. But, for the vast majority, the economic downturn also accelerated the evolution of migrant foods as working-class ethnics learned how to use the discounted products of the American food industry. The Depression quickened the entrance of ethnic consumers into mass culture and increased their consumption of industrialized foods. The hybridization of American ingredients, such as canned vegetables or refined sugar, with traditional cooking skills and recipes was at the hearts of the 1930s ethnic foodways.

By the end of the 1930s, ethnic grocers in ghettoized neighborhoods could not compete with the new food retail model implemented by supermarket and chain stores. Ethnic shoppers stayed somewhat faithful to local ethnic grocers through the 1920s despite the advent of the chain stores, and also because ethnic entrepreneurs started carrying brand-name products. Local grocery shops served as community gathering centers throughout the period of mass migration.

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87 Ibid.

88 Diner, *Hungering for America*, 55; Poe, “The Labour and Leisure of Food Production,” 140. The pasta dish was also enjoyed by non-ethnic therefore providing a sensory bridge exploited by ethnic entrepreneurs since the turn of the century; “Spaghetti dinners” became a mainstay of American life. Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 346; Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 138.
and, through credit, played an important financial buffer during hard times. Yet, ethnic grocers did not fare well during the Depression as self-serve supermarkets, launched for the first time during the 1930s, attracted ethnic consumers. They offered discounted produces as well as steady quality and, in Lizabeth Cohen’s words, “people who may have opposed the chain store in principle found economic realities [to change] their buying habits.” Throughout the decade, the American food retail industry gradually integrated ethnic Americans into its consumer base. Elita Lenz, from the New York FWP, summed up the diverse motivation for changing ethnic food purchasing patterns: “more and more chain-stores, with their made-in-America stocks are appearing in the once foreign neighborhood, to satisfy the newly acquired taste for things American. American fresh fruits and vegetables are bringing vitamins to the foreign races which they need for health; American canned foods are enriching the variety of their menus at prices they can afford to pay.” Notwithstanding her disparaging and paternalistic remarks on the “foreign races’” physical fitness, her analysis points out the main drive behind ethnic Americans’ food consumption choices in the mid 1930s - evolving tastes and economic concerns.

Canned and standardized produce remained at a consistently low price throughout the Depression and benefited from the development of new retail techniques based on bulk purchasing and self-service. Marie Fisher, of the Chicago FWP, noted after a visit to a “Russian

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90 On the loosing ground of ethnic stores during the Depression, see Cohen, Making a New Deal, 234-238.


store” that, “while the proprietor and clerks were evidently of that nationality, [she] saw little to distinguish this from the average corner grocery and meat market.”  

Fisher however concluded her essay on the “interesting communities [of] little Europe” by noting that although stores’ “stock of merchandise must appeal to people of all classes,” they sometimes offered ethnic specialties, “as in the case of the chain store at Walton and Western, managed by Sam Giglio, where spumoni and Italian sausages and other delicacies dear to the hearts of Italians,” were available amidst the regular offering of breakfast cereals and canned pineapple.  

Ethnic products had become an adornment rather than a central sensory feature in grocery stores.

In most cases, the adoption of American staples was not perceived as an imposition but as a negotiation and a choice. A Polish woman’s response to the question, “Do you cook Polish food?” during a Life History interview in New Hampshire hint at some of the reasons why immigrants longed for ‘American’ food, “No, we like every thing different, everything American.” “What no golumps?!” asked the FWP worker. “No, husband he say ‘no cabbage.’ He say, ‘cabbage, cabbage all-time cabbage in Poland; not here.’ Sometimes me buy cabbage in can. Not ver’ good; but cabbage in can’ (sour-kraut).”  

‘American’ food such as canned fruits and vegetables offered a change from a diet they often had endured because of poverty in the old country and sometimes provided relatively satisfying canned version of ethnic foods. For ethnic Americans such as this polish housewife, ‘American’ food, understood as the products of the


94 Ibid.

U.S. food industry, were not only inexpensive during the Depression, but also provided a means to legitimate their belonging to the nation and increased their social status.

The influence of processed products on ethnic cooking was not a one-way exchange; industrialized version of ethnic foods also found their way into the supermarket and the role of ethnic entrepreneurs in the food industry was central to the evolution of both ethnic and mainstream tastes.\textsuperscript{96} Ethnic entrepreneurs often were at the start of the industrialization of ethnic foods and contributed to the make-up of “supermarket shelves,” where, “near the cans of Boston baked beans and codfish cakes ...st[oo]d cans of spaghetti and chop suey.”\textsuperscript{97} Iconic ethnic dishes such as macaroni, spaghetti, and chili con carne were national staples of the Depression era, while others aspired to become staples. Food industrialists (from ethnic backgrounds or not) seized on some key ethnic ingredients and marketed them nationally. A New York FWP worker for instance estimated in the early 1940s that, “parmesan will soon be more widely known as it is now being sold and advertised by one of our leading cheese firm.”\textsuperscript{98} The late 1930s saw the first signs of the incorporation of ethnicity that flourished in the postwar period.\textsuperscript{99} Ethnic entrepreneurs also had an impact on non-readily identifiably ethnic products. The FWP publication entitled \textit{The Italians of New York} for instance noted that “two articles of the food

\textsuperscript{96} See, Gabaccia, \textit{We Are What We Eat,} 64-92.

\textsuperscript{97} “Northeast,” Section Essay, un-paginated, LOC-AE, A 832. Some ethnic entrepreneurs also marketed food of widely different origins than their own. A Chicago FWP worker for instance advised visitor to Chinese restaurant to ask the waiter for “Italian Chop suey or whatever brand he has for the day.” E. Drury, “Old Cathay,” December 14, 1936, Chicago: Restaurant, Cuisine, LOC-AGF, A 499.


\textsuperscript{99} Gabaccia, \textit{We Are What We Eat,} 147-174.
industry, the banana and the peanut, while practically unknown in Italy have been the means of enriching at least two Italian immigrants,” one of them the founder of Planter’s Nuts.100

Ethnic food cultures of the 1930s were combining taste formations simultaneously anchored in ethnic life and open to American food products from ice-cream to soda and hot dogs. A detailed New Jersey FWP essay on Italian Americans, for instance, concluded on the remark that, “Italians living here in America have adhered to Italian popular dishes but also have added many American dishes for their weekly menu.”101 Historians Lizabeth Cohen and Michael Denning both note that 1930s mass culture became a common ground for the establishment of a united working-class culture and the development of working–class “pan-ethnic Americanism,” defined by Denning as a “paradoxical synthesis of competing nationalism- pride in ethnic heritage and identity combined with an assertive Americanism.”102 This dual belonging was reflected in ethnic food preferences. For instance, a French-Irish waitress working in an Italian owned restaurant in Maine explained in August 1940 reported that in the case of Italians, though the migrant generation usually “stick[ed] to Italian food,” the second generation coming of age in the 1930s went “about fifty-fifty for Italian and American cooking.”103 Ethnic eaters in the 1930s comfortably resided within the paradox highlighted by Denning; they did not suppress ethnic sensory preferences but reframed them as part of the broader U.S. sensory economy.


102 Denning, The Cultural Front, 8-9; Cohen, Making a New Deal, 357.

This sensory construction of ethnic identity as part of U.S. patriotism paralleled a change in how ethnic food tasted for the majority of Americans. After commenting on Italian Americans’ food tastes, the French-Irish waitress added, “lots of people who come here like Italian food, even it they're not Italian themselves. Funny, isn't it? I go for spaghetti and meatballs, and macaroni, myself.” The increased sensory exchange spurred by the economic, political, and racial conditions of the 1930s contributed to a shift in the ways ethnic food tastes were perceived. While ethnic foods used to be regarded as foreign and exotic, they became familiar and comforting. Ethnic restaurants also played a leading role in this sensory evolution.

“Eating … Among Foreign Background”: Ethnic Restaurants in the 1930s

Restaurants were prime sites of taste interactions and exchanges in the 1930s. The interwar period witnessed unprecedented growth in the number and diversity of restaurants in the U.S., and ‘eating out’ became a habit rather than an occasional luxury. FWP workers documented a wide range of restaurants, from modern lunchrooms, cafeterias and automat, to tea-rooms, street stands, early drive-in and fast-food chains, as well as southern (and increasingly northern) barbecue joints. Local establishments offered regional fare from north-eastern clambakes to Creole jambalaya, while renowned establishments in New Orleans, San Francisco and New York offered international haute cuisine. Finally, one could visit “foreign restaurants.”


Especially numerous in cities, some “foreign restaurants” proposed haute cuisine of French or Italian origins but the name most often designated establishments serving immigrants’ food.\(^{106}\)

That the term “foreign” was still used to qualify these ethnic restaurants testifies to the immigrants’ continued racialized status, although not all FWP guidebooks used this term. The 1939 New York City guide and the New York based *Feeding the City* project employed the word “foreign.” But the Los Angeles and San Francisco guides published two years later adopted a spatial division when listing restaurants.\(^{107}\) This shift should however not be overstated since residential segregation along racial lines was still prevalent, if not for Europeans, then at least for Asian groups. San Francisco’s Chinatown was still clearly indicated and the use of brackets allowed for the ethnic categorization of restaurants. Yet, for Southern and Eastern Europeans this shift in nomenclature testified of their changing racial status and their greater inclusion into

\(^{106}\) Haute cuisine, especially of the French sort, will not be dwelled on in depth in this chapter since it represented an international style of elite restaurant cooking rather than the culinary expression of an American ethnic group. The literature on this topic is abundant, see for instance, Elliot Shore, “Dining Out: the Development of the Restaurant,” in *Food: The History of Taste*, Paul Freedman, ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), esp. 307-313. Andrew Haley in *Turning the Tables* shows the extent to which middle class Americans at the turn of the century rejected this elite cuisine, Haley, *Turning the Tables*, 192-221.

\(^{107}\) FWP, *New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis*. (New York: Random House, 1939), 25; FWP, *Los Angeles: A Guide to the City and Its Environs*. (New York: Hastings House, 1941), xliii; FWP, *San Francisco: The Bay and its Cities* (New York: Hasting Houses, 1940), 86. A study of “all phases of production, transportation, and marketing of all food commodities forming the yearly supply for the Metropolitan area of New York,” the *Feeding the City* project aimed at being comprehensive while highlighting, “the food tastes and needs of these twelve million people cannot be standardized….Racial and religious influence complicate the supply problem.” An exceptional source to document New York’s sensory economy, the *Feeding the City* archive also highlights the national reach of the city. As a FWP worker put it in a doomsday section of the draft entitled “if the City ceased eating,” “America needs a hungry New York. If the City stopped eating, one half million acres of land and three times as many farm hands would be idle. Railroads, steamships, and trucks would cease moving; their employees would join the unemployed. The City’s markets and storage warehouses would be filled with spoiled foods and milk. Retail stored and restaurants would close their doors, discharging thousands of employees. Wholesalers, jobbers, retailers, and trucking concerned would be forced into bankruptcy, along with the farmers. There would be another panic on Wall Street. The Government’s campaign to keep surplus food moving but filling the stomachs of all Americans is based in the truth that full stomachs mean national prosperity. So the Metropolis does its big bit for American prosperity by eating constantly.” Supported with the published and archived documents of the American Guide Series, the Social-Ethnic Studies and the Folklore program, New York’s *Feeding the City* project allows for a thick description of the ethnic dining scene in 1930s U.S. cities. “Introduction: The City,” 3-4, 11, *Feeding the City: Draft*, FWP-NYC, roll 153.
the national community as white citizens on the eve of World War Two. It was also a pragmatic rhetorical adaptation to the country’s sensory economy in which the taste of ethnic food was no longer valued for its exoticism, but for its familiarity.

By the 1920s, the majority of Americans including first, second, and third generation immigrants, called towns and cities homes. Urban areas are ideal sites to study sensory interaction in the 1930s, since the density of population and restaurants concentrated and enhanced taste exchanges between the so called ‘American’ and ‘foreign’ cuisines. From the turn-of-the-century and into the 1930s, the metropolises of New York, Chicago, and San Francisco promoted cosmopolitanism as their main tourist attraction. This tourism sensory economy seized ethnic and racial difference as potential purveyor of sensory thrill and objects of consumption.108 Ethnic restaurants had long been integral elements of the urban sensory marketplace, but the sensory slumming vogue receded in the interwar period. During the 1930s, ethnic restaurants rose to a central place on urban dining scenes as quintessentially American. Indeed, how else to qualify Los Angeles’ Perino’s menu of “scallopinis of veal, chicken curry, crepe suzette, and strawberry Italienne” except as ‘American’? 109

Ethnic restaurants are thus choice sites for understanding the workings of the New Deal sensory economy. They were places of encounters, cross-cultural exchange, and satisfaction of the senses. Restaurants are also sites for the expression of authority through claimed connoisseurship, straightforward economic power and the demands of patrons dictate, or at least

109 FWP, Los Angeles, xliiv.
Ethnic restaurateurs therefore often altered their bill of fare in order to cater to non-ethnic clients’ sensory expectations.

How and why clients’ senses were pleased and their appetite assuaged greatly varied and a quick preliminary typology of ethnic restaurants and their clients is necessary to understand their role in the New Deal sensory economy. For the general public, Italian, Mexican, or Russian food still presented some exotic appeal and cosmopolitan middle-class urban dwellers regularly enjoyed dinner and floor shows in exotic nightclubs. Ethnic restaurants of more modest ambition also attracted mainstream eaters in search of convenient alternatives to the increasingly standardized American food, as well as a cheap outing. The foreign “atmosphere” provided by ethnic restaurants was an important part of their appeal, but the food itself progressively took central stage. Finally, for ethnic patrons, the unassuming ethnic restaurants could offer sensory familiarity and comfort in the midst of the economic depression. Yet, the Depression also diverted ethnic customers away from these long-established eating places. All in all, surviving the Depression induced restaurateurs to further alter the sensory experience they offered to their patrons. Ethnic restaurants were thus a key feature of the invention of U.S. ethnic cuisines out of the sensory and economic circulation of food and taste between ethnic restaurateurs, ethnic consumers, and mainstream patrons.

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110 On the history of the restaurant as “a veritable icon of standardized payment and obligatory visible exchange,” see Spang, *The Invention of the Restaurant*, 137-138; 238; See also, Haley, *Turning the Tables*, 107-109.

111 On cosmopolitan diners and mainstream eaters attraction to ethnic restaurants as an alternative to the elite “French” restaurants at the turn of the century, see , Haley, *Turning the Tables*, 92–117.

112 A good case study of such relationship is Samantha Barbas’ article on chop suey in which she “examine[s] the history of this cross-cultural interaction, its effects on racial attitudes and food preferences, and ultimately, why restaurants were able to facilitate boundary crossing in a way that other institutions could not.” Samantha Barbas, ""I'll take chop suey": Restaurant as Agent of Culinary and Cultural Change," *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 36, issue 4, 2003, 670.
Cosmopolitanism, a popular alternative to the Americanizing or “repressive” melting pot model, emerged at the turn of the century to describe urban life and stayed in vogue through the first half of the twentieth century. Like the melting pot trope, cosmopolitanism was infused with a range of meanings. Cosmopolitanism was a loose concept forged along with the idea of cultural pluralism by Progressive era thinkers such as Randolph Bourne, John Dewey, and Horace Kallen in response to the “repressive” version of the melting pot. It was a democratic model for the articulation of “an ideal of American national identity capable of balancing the principles of individuality and cultural inclusiveness with a sense of civic solidarity.”113 This version of cosmopolitanism was therefore close to the “flexible” melting pot ideal identified by Sarah Wilson and somewhat revived by FWP workers in their description of working-class sensory cosmopolitanism analyzed earlier in this chapter. Yet, cosmopolitanism in its vernacular usage also came to characterize a middle class, often elitist, and urban standpoint.

The work of cultural historians shows how the “advanced pluralistic conceptions of citizenship” that animated the cosmopolitan ideal also participated in the reification of ethnic life “by appealing to consumerist valuation of novelty and difference.”114 Kristin Hoganson in her book *Consumers’ Imperium: the Global Production of American Domesticity* shows how cosmopolitanism empowered white middle-class women by encouraging their “boundless consumption” of foreign artifacts and exotic cuisines. In this case, professed cosmopolitanism was a way to ‘domesticate’ racial others in foreign countries and immigrants at home. Enjoying a


cosmopolitan lifestyle, or, rather, being part of an imagined community of cosmopolitan consumers, constituted a powerful tool for class distinction. Hoganson’s emphasise on the workings of cosmopolitanism as an appropriative “tourist mentality” corroborates Catherine Cocks’ study of turn of the century urban sightseeing and city slumming. Cocks considers cosmopolitanism as grounds for the commodification of ethnic and racial boundaries, depicting how the stabilization of a “set of aesthetic conventions and commercial transactions established and maintained the social distance between the tourist and the object of the tour.”

Cosmopolitanism in its turn of the century vernacular usage was then an appropriative mentality far from a multi-cultural ideal. Quite the contrary, it presupposed racial, ethnic, and class distinctions. The practice of slumming in urban ethnic neighborhoods established in the last decade of the nineteen century was a central feature of the cosmopolitan worldview because it offered a multisensory experience of racial others. Foreign languages, exotic food, traditional garments, and supposedly licentious sexual practices attracted white middle-class males and females who slummed around the Bowery in New York and the Levee in Chicago, later in Greenwich Village and Towertown. Historians Chad Heap and Catherine Cocks demonstrate how crossing spatial boundaries effectively worked to reinforce racial and ethnic differences. A similar argument can be made about sensory borders; as discussed in chapter two, going up to Harlem to enjoy fried chicken and collard greens was for instance a potential device available to

115 Ibid, 110-151
116 Hoganson defines the “tourist mentality” of cosmopolitan homemakers as “a tendency to see the rest of the world as service provider.” Hoganson, Consumers’ Imperium, 10
117 Cocks, Doing the Town, 190-191.
118 As Andrew Haley clearly puts it, “It is not possible to argue that the growing patronage of ethnic restaurants in the first two decades of the twentieth century was evidence that Americans were becoming more tolerant of ethnic or racial differences,” Haley, Turning the Tables, 116.
119 Cocks, Doing the Town, 186-187; Heap, Slumming, 7.
whites, and ‘off-whites’ immigrants, to perform and affirm their superior racial status. The world was at hand for the white middle-class visitor to consume and culinary aesthete to taste; being able to negotiate sensory borders and to situate oneself accordingly was a potent way of making and performing race. Archival documents from the *Feeding the City* project confirm this practice and show its extension into the 1930s. For instance, FWP worker Fitzgerald described the so-called “Spanish” restaurant El Chorrito, located at the end of the Brooklyn Bridge, as a “a rendez-vous of picturesque peasant type, frequently patronized by Americans who would see a bit of Spain in the rough and enjoy genuine Spanish fare at modest prices.”¹²⁰ Turn of the century notions of cosmopolitanism stretched into the interwar period and prompted the metaphoric depiction of urban dining scene as offering “the world on a plate,” each exotic bite providing a taste of cosmopolitan pleasure.¹²¹

Cities, first among them New York and San Francisco, Chicago and Los Angeles, claimed the mantel of the “appropriative” type of cosmopolitanism and developed a tourism sensory economy based upon the exploitation of the taste of ethnic food. As in the case of the Southwest’s tourist economy explored in chapter four, one of the main attractions was to feel and sense the domestic exoticism of American cities. In New York, ethnic enclaves became one of the many urban “sights” of the commodified city.¹²² Well into the 1930s, FWP workers invited

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¹²¹ As FWP worker Maryse Rutledge put it, “You can eat and drink your way around the world without leaving New York., for in this city all nations continue their culinary traditions. Transplanted generations cling to habits of cooking with familiar combinations of meats, vegetables, salads and their typical seasonings of herbs, wine, and old stand-bys of salt and pepper with a dash, perhaps of Worcestershire or chili sauce, This does not mean that, entering a restaurant, you are obliged to sample of native dishes, unless your appetite is inquisitive. The standard soups, roasts, vegetables, are ever at your command.” Maryse Rutledge, “Eating in New York among Foreign Background,” New York City Guide: Hotels, restaurants, FWP-NYC, roll 20.

visitors to enjoy “the Gotham phantasmagoria of exotic food.”¹²³ As Andrew Haley successfully demonstrates in his recent study of New York’s cosmopolitan dining scene, this trumpeting originated at the turn-of-the-century and held “worldliness” as a “proof of national superiority.”¹²⁴ Harry Weik, from the New York FWP office, exemplified this stance when he claimed that the “gourmet of genuinely cosmopolitan tastes” would not be disappointed by a visit to New York. He then encouraged potential visitors to “slum a bit” and aroused their appetite with an exhaustive list of the city’s offerings. Every fancy could be satisfied, as one could sample “shrimp-and-pineapple in a tiny Chinese restaurant, melting *apfel strudel* or spicy *brauenwusarten* in a real German brauhaus… *scallopine marsala*, huge bowls of *minestrone* and frosty *zabaglione* in a friendly Italian restaurant.”¹²⁵ Sensory experiences of race and ethnicity was a standard tenet of urban cosmopolitan entertainment and white middle class identity during this period.

Chinese entrepreneurs consciously provided exotic cosmopolitan experiences and used their sensory difference as a marketing strategy for the widely advertised chop suey, chow mein, and Egg Foo Yoo.¹²⁶ By the 1930s, chop suey in particular was a ubiquitous metropolitan dish

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¹²³ “Foreign restaurants, Spanish restaurants,” Feeding the City: Eating Out, FWP-NYC, roll 144.

¹²⁴ Haley, *Turning the Tables*, 8; 95.

¹²⁵ The complete list reads: “He [the tourist] can enjoy shrimp-and-pineapple in a tiny Chinese restaurant, washed down a heady glass of genuine Chinese rice wine. In a colorful little Mexican hacienda he can eat real native frijoles and hot *tamales*; he can revel in Swedish *smorgasbord*; eat melting *apfel strudel* or spicy *brauenwusarten* in a real German brauhaus… eat chicken paprika in a gay Czechoslovak cafe; tiny dried herring with a Scandinavian meal; feast on *scallopine marsala*, huge bowls of *minestrone* and frosty *zabaglione* in a friendly Italian restaurant, with an accordion and a guitar wagging spirited battle somewhere in the rear. In a Japanese restaurant he can gorge on *sukiyaki*, in a dim downstairs cafe have the hottest Indian curries served by a dignified *Parsee* and a glass of tamarind wine. A Russian restaurant owned by a former grand-duke will serve him borsch and *pirojok*, and a gentlemen’s portion of vodka. He will have excellent English sole in a cobwebby English chophouse, where the waiters’ accent will be as broad as the customer's appetite. The sweet water carp in a Rumanian restaurant will make him yearn for a trip abroad. In short, his horizon has no limits.” Harry Weik, “Introduction to New York Restaurants,” 2, New York City Guide, Hotels, Restaurants, Night Clubs, FWP-NYC, roll 19.

¹²⁶ Nayan Shah describes how, in the 1930s, Chinese businessmen in San Francisco, “intensively promot[ed] Chinatown as an exotic tourist playground” and inaugurated “the new business image of Chinatown’s sanitized
tasted and enjoyed by many. Sensory acquaintance decreased the sensory exoticism of the dishes as they became familiar, if not regular, items of the American urban food culture. This decrease in sensory foreignness was concomitant to a debunking of the Chinese origins of the dish and many FWP workers wrote about the alleged “trick” perpetrated by Chinese restaurant owners “upon gullible Americans in the matter of chop suey” and instead highlighted its American origins. Indeed, historians Samantha Barbas and Andrew Coe provide an account of the birth of chop suey as a pragmatic sensory adaptation and culinary invention of single Chinese male migrants’ in the nineteenth century, later widely spread by Chinese restaurateurs catering to the tastes of white slummers. By the late 1930s, the FWP San Francisco guidebook sharply explained to its readers that, “beneath the pagoda-like cornices, electric chop suey signs perpetuate the popular notion that this dish…is more exotic than its name-Chinese for hash-indicates.” In New York and San Francisco, home to the largest Chinese communities in the 1930s, FWP workers described chop suey as the symbol of the commercialization of Chinatowns at the expenses of white Americans. They depicted the Chinese neighbourhoods as “palpable fake[s]” perpetuated by “sigh-seeing companies” and “Chinese business men.” With the cultural and sensory foreignness of chop suey dissolved, its taste lost some of the exotic authenticity responsible for its success in the first place.

exoticism.” Shah, *Contagious Divides*, 233-235. See also, Barbas, “"I'll take chop suey,” 669; Cocks, *Doing the Town*, 200-201; Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 102-105.

Chop suey was a floating sensory signifier in the 1930s and the exoticism argument took an unexpected twist when the same FWP workers who debunked the Chinese origins of the dish attempted to convince readers that chop suey was still authentic and traditionally Chinese. Henry Zahn in New York reassured his readers by noting that, “the truth of the matter is that the name, chop suey, is unknown in China, but the substance, which is meat with mixed vegetable, is prepared everyday in millions of Chinese home.”\textsuperscript{130} Despite his will to demystify the alleged Chinese origins of the dish, Zahn maintained the connection between the dish and sensory exoticism. The question of its origins was only partly settled and Nathan Ausubel, a Jewish FWP worker in New York, “melancholic[ally]” regretted the lack of information on the origin of the dish.” Yet, he also affirmed that, “one thing is certain: the dish is a great favourite with New Yorkers and generally with the American people, it has helped made gourmets of those accustomed to unexciting home cooking.”\textsuperscript{131} Chop suey’s sensory attraction did not reside in its exoticism anymore, but rather in its tamed difference and familiar taste. The lessened exoticism of Chinese food endangered the cosmopolitan paradigm of “the world on a plate.”

The potential physical and sensory danger inherent in mixing with ethnic urban dwellers and eating their food decreased over the interwar period. The lure of slumming in ethnic neighborhoods of cosmopolitan cities steeply declined and experiencing sensory difference became less of an adventure and more overtly an act of consumption.\textsuperscript{132} Yet, the habit of consuming and purchasing exotic sensory experiences remained entrenched in FWP writings. In the essay “Eating in New York among Foreign Background,” Maryse Rutledge and Harry Weik

\textsuperscript{130} Zahn, “Chinese Restaurants: some aspects.”
\textsuperscript{132} Blake, \textit{How New York Became American, 1890-1924}, 12.
maintained the urban cosmopolitan claim, but they had to qualify and demonstrate their argument by explaining that, “in dress, speech, and thought, foreigners become American but each transplanted nation clings to habits of cooking with combinations of meat and vegetables, seasoning.” Visual and auditory differences decreased and exotic tastes were reduced to “seasoning” - not enough to attract tourists and onlookers to ethnic restaurants during the Depression. Capitalizing on American consumer desires to prove their cosmopolitanism and sense the domestic exoticism of American cities became less of a viable business model for ethnic restaurants in the 1930s.

The reduced cosmopolitan attraction of their restaurants posed a financial problem to ethnic entrepreneurs, a problem they resolved by relocating and restructuring their businesses. Chad Heap states that the Depression accelerated “the general progression of slumming from a place-oriented activity to an amusement that determined the character of the spaces upon which it converged.” In the 1910s and 1920s, working-class ethnic neighborhoods such as Greenwich Village in New York or Towertown in Chicago had been the destination of choice for restaurants goers in search of cosmopolitan dining, bohemian entertainment, and ethnic sensory exoticism. Ethnic entrepreneurs had capitalized on the “externally imposed authenticity” promoted by cosmopolitan slummers. But this business model proved untenable during the Depression as white middle class slummers were less thrilled about exploring the “foreign” parts of the city and

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133 Maryse Rutledge, “Eating in New York among Foreign Background,” 1, Miscellaneous, FWP-NYC, roll 294.
134 In doing so, they followed an evolution started in the 1910s-1920s, Haley, Turning the Tables, 107.
135 Heap, Slumming, 83
136 On the “Bohemian” experience marketed by ethnic entrepreneurs, especially Italian Americans, see Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 100-102; on the “externally imposed authenticity,” see Cocks, Doing the Town, 194-195. Cocks also insightfully notes that “The members of ethnic minorities found opportunities in the commodification of their cultures that often gave them ways to make a living and to retain some aspects of their own heritage,” Cocks, Doing the Town, 202.
as ethnic inhabitants themselves started to move out of the downtown enclaves. The most successful ethnic restaurateurs re-branded their businesses from offering an offbeat sensory experience to being part of the American entertainment industry. FWP sources repeatedly mention how “foreign” restaurants moved out of their original ethnic neighborhoods and reopened in midtown as full fledge night-clubs, offering dance shows, music, and food, “with a little racial flavor thrown in.”137

Scholarship on urban night life in the 1930s highlights the rebirth of night clubs after the repeal of prohibition. This literature correlates a New York City FWP worker’s statement, in the early 1940s that, “during the period 1920-1930, the “gyp” clubs flourished. Located in basement, poorly ventilated, over garage with cramp floors … today we have the Night Clubs proper, or de luxe … the atmosphere scale varies, settings all chromium or mirrors, or murals classical or modern, nudes or caricatures.”138 The literature on nightclubs has highlighted how these new sites played upon and reinforced racial lines. Scholarship on segregated clubs in the black neighborhoods of the northern metropolis abounds, showing how the move downtown of the most successful black and tan cabarets spots further reified racial difference and provided white audiences with “a glimpse of Harlem sans inconvenience.”139 Yet, few scholars have explained

the role of the creation of ethnic atmosphere in this night club revival of the late 1930s-early 1940s.

Looking at the role of ethnic décor and “flavor” in the nightlife of the 1930s further underlines the extent to which becoming “ethnic” was part of becoming “American,” and of a larger process of cultural whitening. The restaurants and nightclubs described by FWP workers provide a sensory ground to Matthew Fry Jacobson’s proposal that the 1924 immigration quotas stimulated the emergence of a “multi-ethnic pan-whiteness” under the “Caucasian race” heading that tolerated a soft cultural pluralism and light exotic thrill within its rank. The new establishments’ adoption of “foreign mise-en-scene, Russian, Spanish or Viennese,” was a key feature of the nightclub revival. Chinese entrepreneurs also participated in this trend, opening cafés and restaurants, “decorated in modernistic fashion with a sprinkling of Chinese motifs.” The replacement of the “gyp” restaurant of the 1920s with recognized nightclubs in effect institutionalized ethnicity as part of American entertainment and tamed ethnic cuisines as part of a ‘night out.’ The cosmopolitan paradigm survived the Depression but was reframed as incorporation rather than appropriation of ethnic taste into the U.S. sensory economy. The “smartly appointed establishments” in mid-towns across the country facilitated this shift as they simultaneously capitalized on and regulated their own sensory difference by choosing to offer entertaining floor shows and ethnic dishes “seasoned and served to American taste.”

140 The term Caucasian was still in its infancy in the late years of the New Deal and is absent of the FWP archive; yet one could argue that the prevalent notion of “foreign white stock” is a forerunner of the term and symbolizes the accelerated whitening of Southern and Eastern Europeans in the 1930s, see, Jacobson, Whiteness of a Different Color, Chapter 3, “Becoming Caucasian, 1924-1965,” 91-136.


Adaptation of ethnic foods to American tastes accelerated in the Depression. FWP’s workers explicitly made the connection between the “lean years” of the Depression and the active courting of a new clientele outside of ethnic neighborhoods. For ethnic entrepreneurs, extending their customers base involved relocating but also further altering the menu and markedly changing the taste of the “native dishes” they offered. Indeed, after moving out of the ethnic neighborhoods, an average Italian restaurant clientele would, “consists of approximately half Italian patrons, the half stage folks, singers, political figures, and ubiquitous tourists.”144 These new customers evidently influenced the taste of the food.

Ethnic restaurants adopted a series of sensory strategies in the re-writing of their menu during the Great Depression. Some offered “American” dishes alongside “native” fare. This was a well-established strategy by the 1930s, Andrew Haley in his study of the “colonization” of ethnic restaurants by middle class consumers at the turn of the century, identifies it as a common habit of German, French, or Italian restaurants.145 In the 1930s, this strategy was adopted mostly by restaurants offering more uncommon cuisines. The “Arabian” Pyramid, Mocca, and Haddad restaurants in New York and Brooklyn choose this option and offered “many dishes cooked in the American style” alongside, “a variety of Syrian dishes.”146 The FWP worker in charge of reviewing Mocca and Haddad, Leonard E. Strong, reported being “slightly hurt” when being offered a English menu thought to be more suited to his taste by the “Arabian waiter;” but this did not deter him from enjoying an exotic and cosmopolitan moment as he “easily pictured

144 FWP, The Italians of New York, 206.
145 Haley, Turning the Tables, 107.
[him]self being wined and dined by an Arabian sheik of the desert.” This compromising strategy, balancing exotic atmosphere with American taste, was also adopted by a number of Japanese restaurants offering “American dishes” alongside suki-yaki, tempura, soba and udon noodles, as well as roasted eel and rice. These dual menus reassured restaurant-goers who knew that the “the standard soups, roasts, vegetables” were also available, and at lower prices than in conventional establishments.

Other restaurants kept ethnic dishes on their menus but provided them with a glaze of internationalism and elite cosmopolitanism common in metropolitan hotel dinning rooms. At Dubonnet, a “French Hungarian” restaurant that opened in 1933, one could “order Hungarian food prepared by a chef from Budapest, French food prepared by a chef from Naples, and last but not least southern food prepared by a real southern chef.” The entertainment accompanying such a hybrid dinner would consist of a shrewdly marketed mix of racial authenticity and entertaining internationalism. At the popular Zimmerman’s, a Hungarian restaurant located in New York’s Times Square section, one could enjoy “real Hungarian entertainment” in the form of a “six piece gypsy band” that accompanied the “native songs” of

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150 A typical description of hotel’s fare in the 1930s reads: “The menus of the hotel restaurants are a happy blend of the best of European cuisines, with many foreign dishes such as Goulash, Borscht, Curry and others adapted to suit the American taste.” “Hotel restaurants,” 2, Feeding the city: Eating out,” FWP-NYC, roll 144. On hotel catering, see Elliot Shore, “Dining Out,” 323-326.
151 The race of the latter is not mentioned; yet, given the ways in which southern cooking had been reified through the discourse of racial authenticity and cultural retention popularized in the 1930s, it can be inferred that the “real southern chef” was African American. See chapter 2 of this dissertation. Elizabeth Smyth, “Typical Hungarian restaurants,” 3, New York City Guide: Racial Groups, FWP-NYC, roll 24.
an Hungarian Prima Donna while a soprano “kept up the cosmopolitan spirit with her German and Italian songs.” Depending on how familiar the American public was with their native cuisine, ethnic entrepreneurs adopted a different sensory niche: some offered “American” alternatives while others located themselves within the cosmopolitan world of international haute cuisine.

But, the most significant and ubiquitous sensory strategy was the one adopted by many Italian American restaurateurs, which consisted of altering the taste of the food they served. Ethnic restaurateurs often amended their fare to please their non-ethnic customers and meet their sensory expectations. This approach can best be documented through a number of FWP worker complaints about the lack of authenticity of the dishes on the menu of Italian restaurants, and their scorn for “those Americans who think they like Italian cooking.” Working on the draft for The Italians of New York FWP publication, Harry Zahn noted that, “practically all Italian dishes served in New York restaurants are doctored to accord with what is thought to be the American taste.” He adopted an expert persona and detailed his claim by eloquently stating that, “the Genoese dish, spaghetti al pastor, is not the spaghetti al pastor served in Italian restaurants. The real pastor contains such elements as cream cheese, basilic, oil, butter, garlic and parsley. When you order spaghetti alla Milanese your hopes that this is the real thing are doomed to be shattered. Ask an Italian from Milan if the sauce you get ever tasted like that in his home town, his reply will consist of an expletive and emotional, No.” Zahn’s professorial tone

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152 Elizabeth Smyth, “Typical Hungarian restaurants,” 2.
154 Ibid., 3.
simultaneously embodied the position of the white middle-class expert, the gourmet, and the restaurant critique. However, his remarks were not included in the final draft of the book that instead focused on the “friendliness and geniality” of the waiters, who “are not merely correct attendants, but warm-blooded, friendly fellows, ministering to one’s appetite with a verve and an enthusiasm that is like spice to the dish.”[^156] This last sentence illustrates how FWP workers sometimes reverted to culinary and racial clichés in their writings, an Italian waiter had to talk on an exclamatory tone.

Attempts at holding up racial authenticity and “atmosphere” for the sake of business coincided with a process of sensory adaptation, characteristic of the Depression era. By the late 1930s, it was not so much the thrilling promise of sensory slumming among authentic members of the Italian “race” that attracted customers to Italian American restaurants, but the anticipation of the comfort taste of “spaghetti and meatballs,” “macaroni,” and “salami sandwiches.”[^157] Yet, clients did expect racial “flavor,” if not on their plates, then at least in the service. Italian American entrepreneurs were willing to compromise with the new audience and capitalized on the fact that increasingly, non-Italians wanted to eat Italian American food.

The Life Histories recorded by the FWP as well as the America Eats archive, document another occasion for sensory exchange over Italian food typical of the Depression era - one that illustrates the pragmatic sensory adaptation of Italian cooks. Several Vermont interviews focused on the widespread practice among Italian stone carvers’ widows, of hosting “Italian feeds” in their homes. These single women used their cooking skills as a means of survival during the

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[^156]: FWP, *The Italians of New York*, 204-205.

Depression, they “had to do it” to take care of elderly parents and send children to school. Each private party consisted of an average of a dozen “Americans” and were more frequent (up to twice a week) in winter than in summer. In the latter season customers would indeed rather enjoy modern drive-in, as one of the cooks explained to her interviewer, “they like to get out … in their cars and stop at different places to eat.” Once the reservation was made, the menu was set in accordance with the customers’ desire. A fixture of the meals was a “mountain of white spaghetti, quivering under a dusky tomato sauce, and capped with grated Parmesan cheese” as well as “ravioli;” the “diminutive derbies of pastries, the crowns stuffed with a well-seasoned paste” were indeed the “most popular of Italian dishes.” Italian cooks might have judged it “foolish to have both at the same dinner,” and yet they complied with their customers’ taste and demand. The cooks would even use “packaged cheese already grated” even though they “scoff[ed]” at the dryness of the American parmesan whose “spirit” was, as one of them put it, “gone.” The interviewer also informed her reader that the cooks might “justifiably frown at dessert, but, if you wish… will serve you spumoni, an Italian ice cream.” These small scale Depression-era entrepreneurs plainly explained their reason for sensory compromise: “if that's what they want-- me, I don't care. It means more money for me.” In this case, economic exchange was straightforwardly driving sensory trade.


159 Tomasi, “Italian Feed,” ALH Online

160 Mary Tomasi, “Italian Feed,” Vermont: Notes, Essays, Reports, LOC-AE, A 831.

161 Tomasi, “Italian Feed,” ALH Online.

162 Ibid.
Despite the move to midtown of ethnic restaurants, their transformation into lavish ethnic nightclubs, and the willingness of Italian women turned food entrepreneurs to comply with the food preferences of their clientele, the cheapest ethnic eateries remained implanted in established ethnic neighborhoods - on the Bowery and in Greenwich Village in New York and in Chicago’s Towertown. Even if “family parties became infrequent as people found it economically expedient to eat at home,” an important number of establishments still catered to their ethnic clientele.\textsuperscript{163} Ethnic restaurants often evolved out of migrants’ boarding houses and served as meeting points for male migrants in the late nineteenth century. Patronized by ethnic families, restaurants and saloons were agents of cultural preservation and transmission throughout the interwar period.\textsuperscript{164} Reporting on Rumanian restaurants, a FWP worker noted that some “[went] for…good food and cabaret,” but that the majority still “[went] in for just good, simple food.”\textsuperscript{165} A clear dichotomy appears in the FWP sources dealing with ethnic restaurants, as FWP workers differentiated between downtown ethnic night clubs and working-class establishments.

Harder for the visitor and tourist to locate, the “obscure eating places” catering to specific “national groups” occupied a central place in ethnic life as meeting places where one could enjoy comforting foods at a modest price. Humble spots with their “sawdust floor, unwashed windows and crude decoration,” they provided favorite homeland dishes and in a number of cases even regional cooking, Southern Italians could for instance enjoy “genuine” \textit{pizzaiola}.\textsuperscript{166} Rarely accessible from the street, these restaurants were a “secluded retreat” for “serious minded

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\textsuperscript{163} FWP, \textit{The Italians of New York}, 206.
\textsuperscript{164} Diner, \textit{Hungering for America}, 75; Gabaccia, \textit{We Are What We Eat}, 83.
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Russian workers gather to discuss union affairs fraternal problems, political questions and other matters of interest,” and for Greek men “to sit long over sups of black coffee and discuss with acquaintances, political affairs of their homeland as well as of their adopted country.” Lack of sources makes the estimation of the gender distribution of the clientele problematic; yet, a couple of sources hint at the preponderance of men in these eating places. In New York, “if women [were] seen in… [Greek] restaurants, these [were] usually American-born.” More than simply eating places, ethnic restaurants were sites of community gathering that seem to have upheld conservative social values, serving as either male working-class clubs or family based institutions.

However, working-class ethnic restaurants occupied an endangered spot in the late 1930s. Although ethnic restaurants provided affordable sensory and psychological comfort, they had difficulties surviving the 1930s as the Depression contributed to diminishing the centrality of ethnic associations and, to a certain extent, ethnic identity in taste preference. A FWP worker in New York remarked that “poverty allow[ed] no color line,” and that the economic downturn had encouraged sensory mingling as well as “friendliness between the races, of which they are many.” In New York, the Bowery was the hub of these “minimum-priced restaurants” that served cheap cuts of meat made into “goulashes, stews, ragouts, hamburgers and meat loaves,” to

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169 On the decreasing importance of ethnic associations during the Depression, see Cohen, Making a New Deal, 218-238.

170 Krupp, “Restaurants for the Poor (third avenue and the Bowery),” Feeding the City: Eating Out, FWP-NYC, roll 144
approximately eight thousands people a day.\textsuperscript{171} “The commonest order in such places [was] doughnuts and a bowl of coffee for 5 cents, next [was] the hamburger “steak”, not too full of flour, with roll, coffee or tea, for a dime.”\textsuperscript{172} Poverty shrunk strong taste differences and regulated working-class senses to fit a standard and cheap urban diet with only a hint of ethnicity.

Moreover, second and third generation urban ethnics divided their loyalties between ethnic establishments and “modern” restaurants. They patronized luncheonettes, Automats, and dinners serving classic American fare such as hamburgers, but also cross-ethnic dishes such as the American versions of chili-con-carne and Spaghetti.\textsuperscript{173} “American ideas as to food” shaped American born immigrants’ tastes. One of them reportedly declared that she wished to, “have our Americans dishes, what we want and when we want them.”\textsuperscript{174} Many parents gave in and prepared food at home “in the American manner” with ingredients “commonly used by Americans.”\textsuperscript{175} A Greek father noted that his family now had “orange juice, toast and coffee in the morning” and added pensively, “to be sure we had oranges in Greece but never used it for breakfast in that manner.”\textsuperscript{176} Economic hard times accelerated the making of a multi-ethnic but also a standardized urban ethnic taste.

\textsuperscript{171} Ibid.; MacDougall, “Poor Men’s Fare”; Bardeleben, “The Bowery Restaurant,” Feeding the City: Eating Out, FWP-NYC, roll 144

\textsuperscript{172} "For the Very Poor," 10, Feeding the City: Draft, FWP-NYC, roll 153

\textsuperscript{173} On Chili-con-carne, see Chapter Four and, Gabaccia, \textit{We Are What We Eat}, 115-116.

\textsuperscript{174} Interview of Demosthenes P. Corsones, Leo Lazaros, in “Vermont, Greek, Life Histories,” LOC- SES, A 760.

\textsuperscript{175} Interview of Dalevoreis (Davis) James, Mrs. Christopher Braves, John Chilos (Tsilos), Charles Corodemas, Nicholas Stregos and Demosthenes P. Corsones, in “Vermont, Greek, Life Histories,” LOC- SES, A 760. See also, Poe, “The Labour and Leisure of Food Production as a Mode of Ethnic Identity Building Among Italians in Chicago, 1890-1940,” 142.

\textsuperscript{176} Interview of Demosthenes P. Corsones.
Conclusion

Hybrid tastes were at the heart of the 1930s U.S. sensory economy. The end of mass migration to the U.S. led to the inclusion of Southern and Eastern European ethnics into the fold of whiteness and to the acceptation of ethnic taste within the realm of “American” food. Moreover, interwar developments in food-processing and the industrialization and standardization of food prompted the hybridization of ethnic Americans’ taste as the sons and daughters of immigrants regularly asked for chocolate cakes and lemonade at the end of Italian, Polish, or Greek meals. A three-way distinction between blacks, whites (of “foreign stock” or not) and racialized groups such as Asian, Mexican and Arab Americans still animated the FWP archive. Yet, the case of Chinese cuisine illustrates how a taste framed as “exotic” came to occupy a central place in the U.S. sensory economy. Chinese entrepreneurs capitalized on the exotic attraction of their cuisine while FWP workers often kept its taste outside of their narrative on American taste despite its popularity with American consumers. The taste of Chinese food was an integral part of the New Deal sensory economy, but not recognized as ‘American’ per se. In contrast, ethnic cuisines and second and third generation immigrants’ hybrid tastes found increasing legitimacy within American food culture.

FWP workers, pressed for time and not always fully concerned by their task, used well-known and somewhat inappropriate models to describe the evolution of food taste in the U.S. Yet, if their use of keywords such as “the melting pot” or “cosmopolitanism” was rhetorically conservative it was also ideologically innovative. When FWP workers dotted their essays with references to the “melting pot,” they contributed to reviving an ideal based on cultural fusion rather than coercive Americanization. Similarly, reduced to seasoning, sensory exoticism and difference could hardly be considered the core element of cosmopolitanism anymore; rather, a
refurbished definition of cosmopolitanism grounded in sensory circulation and working-class identity emerged in the FWP copies. Restaurant patrons still yielded an important sensory and economic power; yet, the FWP research papers and published works offer a participative model and their writings document how ethnic cuisines were “invented” in a dynamic process of sensory interaction between different players representing specific aspirations. Restaurant goers looked for entertainment, sensory satisfaction and, increasingly, sensory authenticity. Restaurants owners, on the other hand, aimed to bring in a profit but also to satisfy the food preferences of clients, their own children among them, and to situate themselves within the realm of ‘American’ food. Pragmatic sensory and business adaptation to the conditions of the Depression decade launched a sensory exchange that anchored ethnic food within the U.S. sensory economy. This sensory interaction defused the classic urban cosmopolitan paradigm. Though 1930s ethnic restaurants still capitalized on sensory exoticism, they also increasingly circumscribed the taste of ethnic food to a repertoire of comforting dishes and proclaimed their legitimacy and value as part of the U.S. sensory economy.
Conclusion

This dissertation focuses on taste in the 1930s U.S. and highlights, through the notion of sensory economy, the extent to which the senses are part of modern circuits of economic and cultural exchanges. The argument builds on the Federal Writers’ Project archive, especially the *America Eats* project, to explore how the sense of taste participated in the making of American notions of race, ethnicity, gender, and region in the 1930s. Considering the sense of taste as a cultural and economic currency allows for a study of the negotiation and enforcement of racial, gendered, and ethnic identities through food in the late years of the Depression and first years of American economic involvement in World War Two. Overall, I suggest that a combined analysis of taste and race is crucial to the historical understanding of the twentieth-century U.S sensory economy. This framework underlines the extent to which the senses are agents in the making of identity and difference. Tasting ‘Mexican’ food in the American Southwest, for instance, became a means for the performance of masculine whiteness and for the redefinition of the category ‘Mexican’ away from a national category and towards a naturalized racial identity. Similarly, eating southern food in New York’s Harlem or Chicago’s South Side, and imbuing its taste with blackness, was a way for northern whites, of ethnic origins or not, to consolidate whiteness. By the same token, this process participated in the recasting of the diet of all poor southerners as ‘black food.’ Commodified racialized tastes were central to the workings of the New Deal sensory economy.

The notion of sensory economy also allows for the depiction of 1930s taste as the result of a series of sensory negotiations and a crucible of American identity in the twentieth century. FWP workers’ search for ‘American’ food illustrated a change in the national culinary paradigm
and the progressive acceptance of ethnic food as ‘American.’ Historian Donna Gabaccia describes this evolution as the result of an ideological ceasefire between, on one hand, intellectuals and food experts in search of ‘American’ culinary values and, on the other, ethnic foods.¹ This is certainly one aspect of the cultural history of food in twentieth century U.S., but a close reading of the FWP culinary archive also highlights the extent to which this hybridization of taste resulted from a dense popular-and market-driven-sensory interaction. FWP workers progressively moved away from considering ethnic foods as ‘foreign’ and presented their taste as legitimate contributors to the U.S. sensory economy. While mainstream America’s exposure to, and taste for, ethnic foods increased, second generation immigrants combined their ethnic culinary repertoire with American eating preferences, including the standardized products of the food industry. Sensory circulation prompted the hybridization of American taste.

The FWP did not so much record the rise of an American “culinary cultural pluralism” as the birth of a commodified plurality. The concept of sensory economy accounts for such commodification and considers the extent to which taste determines the value of the commodity called food and the ways in which taste itself can become a commodity. The commodification of food has most often been talked about in relation to the food-processing industry and the development of a national marketplace of standardized foodstuffs.² But, the FWP federal editors’ search for traditional regional cuisines also participated in the determination of the exchange value of food as they looked for emblematic regional tastes to be sold on the national

¹Gabaccia writes about the interwar period of “food fights” and considers America’s entrance into World War Two and the following food shortages as the trigger for the cultural reconciliation between ethnic food and American intellectuals resulting in the celebration of the country’s “culinary cultural pluralism.” Gabaccia, We Are What We Eat, 122-148.
²See for instance William Cronon’s masterful study of grain as food and grain as commodity in late-nineteenth century Chicago, Cronon, Nature’s Metropolis, 97–147.
marketplace of food, taste, and ideas. The FWP federal editors’ search for regional traditions related to food was complicated -and often defeated- by the omnipresence of the products of the food industry all over the country. As a result, ethnic foods and racialized tastes often became the most potent sensory signal of authenticity and tradition. The *America Eats* project in effect reified and commodified regional racialized tastes as sensory islands of unchanging authenticity. For instance, sensory sightseeing as it operated in the Southwest, and to a lesser extent in the South and in northern ethnic neighborhoods, depended on commodified racialized tastes offered to tourists. The racial sensory authenticity experienced by tourists was a purposefully staged one that simultaneously reinforced and silenced contemporary racial politics. Racialized and imagined regional sensory pasts became ideological and sensory commodities within the U.S. sensory economy.

While most food historians have considered World War Two and the postwar advances in food processing as the key factors in the making of modern industrialized U.S. taste, my reading of the FWP archive sheds light on the origins of the postwar nutritional order and highlights the last years of the Depression as a cornerstone period in the making of modern American taste.³ The chronological focus on the late 1930s-early 1940s stresses the role of race and ethnicity in the making of U.S. taste but also underlines the origins of the war and postwar gendered domestic ideology. This dissertation participates in a broader scholarly literature that seeks to unveil the ideological continuity between the interwar debate about women and their ability to provide proper nutrition to their families and the contemporary blaming of women for succumbing to the food industry’s advertisement campaigns and improperly feeding their

families.⁴ A close reading of the FWP culinary archive then provides us with a model to understand how the nostalgic longing for the foods of an imagined past work to inscribe racism and domesticity at the core of our contemporary sensory economy.⁵

A large part of this analysis of the New Deal sensory economy rests on the discrepancy between the FWP federal editors’ guidelines to local workers and the actual content of the archive. I offer a methodological reflection on the status of the archive as a repertoire of sensory experiences and examine how the interaction between the FWP federal editors and local workers produced sensory and culinary knowledge about the nation’s regions and peoples. Analyzing the constitution of the FWP sensory and culinary archive provides a novel look into the New Deal cultural apparatus and unveils some of the incoherence of the liberal views on race, ethnicity, and nation. The federal editors envisioned the book as the patriotic recording of regional, pre-industrial, and pre-mass migration foodways. The exclusion of ethnic communities central to the U.S. sensory economy, such as Southern and Eastern Europeans, from the America Eats book project was a limit inherent to the project’s guidelines with important ideological consequences. These guidelines left a large part of the American population in the archive’s limbo and on the threshold of American traditions. But local workers’ field documentation offered alternative views. They described and praised a pluralist and cosmopolitan food culture to which all contributed equally. Working on the America Eats project also allowed FWP workers to express concerns about the industrialization and standardization of American food culture and taste. Then, the celebration of gendered, and often staged, racial and ethnic sensory authenticity

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present throughout the *America Eats* archive was also the expression of interwar anxieties over the encroachment of industrial foods on American tastes. I argue that the *America Eats* archive should be seen as a cathartic moment for Americans to accept the standardized products of the food industries as central elements of their sensory economy. This reflection on the making of a sensory archive and on sensory historians’ methodology problematizes how people in the past understood their food as well as how societies remember and record taste.

Selected passages of the *America Eats* archive recently made it into print under the eloquent title, *The Food of a Younger Land: a Portrait of American Food Before the National Highway System, Before Chain Restaurants, and Before Frozen Food, When The Nation's Food was Seasonal, Regional, and Traditional, From the Lost WPA Files.* The editors of the *America Eats* project might have agreed with this title; indeed, they did search for “traditional” and “regional” dishes, promoting a sensory nostalgia for the food of an utopian past. Yet, they did not find “the foods of a younger land” (if these had ever existed) and a close reading of the not-so-lost archive underlines the national marketplace of foodstuffs, ideas, and sensory perceptions as the main determinant of American taste in the 1930s. The choice of this title uncritically appraises the words and goals of the federal editors. In doing so, this title betrays the *America Eats* archive, highlighting the need for a comprehensive grasp of the archival material if one wants to avoid anachronism. It was the very encroachment of mass produced industrial food on

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7 The *America Eats* archive was never “lost” but is part of the Library of Congress’s collection and has been used by several food historians in their research, see Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 139-144; Levenstein, *Paradox of Plenty*, 41-45.
American taste that triggered the *America Eats* project and its nostalgic search for American regional culinary traditions.

Yet, this misreading of the archive is also informative as it layers the 1930s sensory and ideological craving for ‘real’ foods with an early twenty-first century sensory nostalgia and moral judgment about the contemporary food system. The 1930s here becomes the golden age of American eating that the FWP editors situated in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Ironically, the Depression period, so often remembered in popular culture for its soup kitchens’ line-ups, becomes a celebrated time of untainted cooking and ‘good eating.’ Food studies scholars highlight the extent to which developments in food activism and food politics over the past twenty years have often been “hungering for authenticity” and steeped in nostalgia for a “romantic pastoralism.” The *America Eats* archive then provides us with a reminder that contemporary anxieties about the sensory, political, environmental, social, and moral consequences of the global industrial food system as well as the drive toward the celebration of local traditions and knowledge are not a late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century affair but part of a longer historical trend.

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8 The international Slow Food movement is such an example, see, Etta M. Madden and Martha L. Finch, *Eating in Eden: Food and American Utopias* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 2; Deutsch, “Memories of Mothers in the Kitchen,” 167, 174; see also, Amy B. Trubek, “Radical Taste: What Is Our Future?”.

9 On China, see, Swislocki, *Culinary Nostalgia*; On France, see Cergo, “The Emergence of Regional Cuisines.”
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