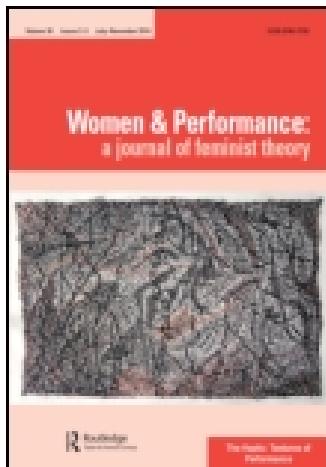


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## “Hearty and happy and with a lively, yeasty soul:” feeling right in Louisa May Alcott’s *The Candy Country*

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This article discusses a short story by Louisa May Alcott in which a young white girl is transported into three parallel worlds: Candy Land, Cake Land and Bread Land. This article argues that Alcott uses these three food nations to both portray the history of US imperial exceptionalism and also to trace out a biopolitical imperative through which whiteness is granted the right to live on, while blackness is instrumentalized in the service of white survival. More unusually, in this story, Alcott explores the fermentative qualities of yeast to depict the unequally distributed and yet biologically universal sensation of living “right” within an affective-biopolitical order.

**Keywords:** food; performance; science; affect; sensation; nineteenth century; sexuality; queer

In the spring of 2012 the Afro-Swedish artist Makode Aj Linde created and staged an art installation at Stockholm’s Moderna Museet that came to be known via its ensuing media storm as the Racist Swedish Cake scandal. As part of the course of that installation Linde, blackface-painted as a female pickaninny, thrust his head through an opening on a table upon which an enormous cake in the shape of a black woman’s body was laid out. As museum patrons, including the Swedish Minister of Culture Lena Adelsohn Liljeroth, cut into the cake at the crotch, Linde, his head in place of the cake’s head, screamed and cried enacting, as he later described, the pain of female genital mutilation.<sup>1</sup> Around him Liljeroth and other patrons laughed uneasily and ate their cake, participating in the event with no little nervousness.

Videos of the performance, and the resultant scandal, cascaded around the world in a flurry of images, commentary, and calls for Liljeroth to resign for participating in, and seeming to thoroughly enjoy, both cutting and eating the cake. While some of the response seemed to be focused on excavating the artist’s intent, the panicked global response perhaps more precisely indicated a sense that the western world saw and recognized itself in Liljeroth’s appetite for black cake, and wished to punish her for it.<sup>2</sup>

I want to keep this image of the screaming pickaninny cake in mind as I discuss a short story, Louisa May Alcott’s *The Candy Country*,<sup>3</sup> which takes up a similar image in the late

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nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> I am interested here in the atmospheric sensory and affective components of each of these scenes, as it is informed by and described using food and food texture. I want to know: do texture and sensation have histories? Does matter have a history? And then, given the quotidian nature of the textures and sensations I am exploring here, I am curious: does the everyday have a texture? Can we, in short, begin to tie the idea of affect to material history and then too, more ambitiously, biopolitical formation?

I am calling the texture that I am interested in here “yeasty aliveness” but I want to recognize that my use of this term, particularly as it ties my two central texts together – Linde’s performance and Alcott’s story – is provisional and not entirely sufficient. Certainly it does not take full account of the rich history and complicated behavior of the organism. Yeast interests me here as a lively organism whose chemical biography as it comes into relation with human beings in its industrial forms, seems to straddle the line between inert and lively matter. A relative of the mushroom, yeasts are single-celled fungi that, as Harold McGee has written “metabolize sugars for energy, and produce carbon dioxide gas and alcohol as by-products of that metabolism.” That carbon dioxide in turn acts as a leavening agent for surrounding proteins, creating the rise in bread, or having been converted from glucose gives beer its flavor and fizz (2004, 532). Kitchen yeast arrives in solid cakes (as it does in *The Candy Country*) or (in more contemporary terms) loose packets that contain sleeping or semi-sleepy living cells which come to life with the correct temperatures and carbohydrate fuels. As I will discuss later, yeast can reproduce both sexually (that is, two cells mate) and asexually (by budding, or breaking off into identical organisms called mothers and daughters).

Michel Serres has called the fermentation catalyzed by yeast a central agent in human history because fermentation turned water into wine or beer and thereby made water less likely to be putrid or illness-causing thereby increasing life chances (1982). Yeast has in fact never been so closely tied to the knowledge and understanding of human life as it is now: yeast is a eukaryotic cell (a cell with a nucleus and other structures enclosed within membranes) and is therefore of primary use in our new biotechnological age for studying human biology.

On a simple narrative level, yeast plays an important, even catalytic, role in the Alcott story because the protagonists – a little white girl named Lily who learns how to make yeast bread and a brown gingerbread boy whose embrace of yeast turns him into a white bread boy – are each changed when they encounter it. As we will see, however, this yeasty feeling is unevenly distributed; as unevenly distributed as the right to life itself, for indeed, to ruin the ending of the story right away, while Lily’s encounter with yeast brings meaning to her life when her mastery of bread baking allows her to assume a role as a “good Christian woman,” Ginger Snap becomes a “white bread boy,” and ultimately perishes, eaten by Lily (Alcott 1900, 54). Holding this political unevenness in one hand, I aim to use *The Candy Country* to think through – to experiment with, really – some of the social and material history of this form of microbial life. My final goal is to link what I see as the biopolitical impulse of Alcott’s story – her urge to raise good and useful children through storytelling – to the history of food, science, and social hygiene and in doing so query the relationship between race, new materialist theories, and biopolitical governmentality as it comes into view through Alcott’s imaginative relationship to yeast.

Yeast was of course particularly important to the reformer Sylvester Graham, who argued that a bread-based diet would curb illicit sexual desires, in particular masturbation.

In his *Treatise on Bread and Bread-Making* (1837), he laid out detailed notes on how to bake bread, bringing together his temperance and bread advocacy by forbidding “vicious” ingredients as sugar, spices, and alcohol, but also worrying that the overfermentation of yeast might turn bread sour or even alcoholic. Graham is particularly pertinent to Alcott – and as we will see, Graham’s bread makes a personal appearance in *The Candy Country* – because Alcott was a daughter of the reform movement: her father Bronson was an education reformer; his cousin William Alcott was a disciple and colleague of Sylvester Graham’s; the two Alcott families lived together during the 1830s, and along with her sisters and mother Louisa May was subjected to the extremes of the Graham diet during her father’s experiments with utopian community at Fruitlands, a formative experience she later wrote up in *Transcendental Wild Oats* (Alcott 1981). However Alcott took Graham’s stitching together of eating and erotics – in particular his idea that illicit eating produced sexually dissident behavior such as masturbation, and the idea that bread would cure that behavior – to something of a perverse and puzzling extreme in *The Candy Country*, published in 1885.

Contained in a collection of short stories for children called *Lulu’s Library*, *The Candy Country* tells the story of a little girl, Lily, who finds herself carried by the wind out of her everyday world and into a series of edible nationscapes called, respectively, the Candy Country, Cakeland, and Breadland. Lily is called into Candy Country by singing sugar birds:

Sweet! Sweet!  
Come, come and eat,  
Dear little girls  
With yellow curls;  
For here you’ll find  
Sweets to your mind.  
...  
Our lily and rose  
Are not for the nose;  
Our flowers we pluck  
To eat or suck.  
And, oh! What bliss  
When two friends kiss,  
For they honey sip  
From lip to lip!  
And all you meet,  
In house or street,  
At work or play,  
Sweethearts are they. (Alcott 1900, 39–50)

We do not need to read deeply to understand the eroticism of this passage, which plays on Lily’s name (and, perhaps also, the name of the protagonist of the Rose Campbell novels, published a decade earlier) to emphatically invite us to feed on lilies and roses, not only the flowers perhaps but the girls themselves: they are not for the nose, we are told, we instead pluck them to suck them. From there the song segues quickly to the Candy Country’s ambitiously polyamorous everyday life in which friends taste honey from each other’s lips: all

you meet, the song promises us, sweethearts are they. Not just all but everywhere and anywhere: “house or street, work or play”.<sup>5</sup>

Lily accepts the invitation and in her short stay in the Candy Country she eats her way through the population, promiscuously sampling from every demographic. Each group tastes differently, we find:

The young ladies were flavored with violet, rose, and orange; the gentlemen were apt to have cordials of some sort inside of them, as she found when she ate one now and then slyly, and got her tongue bitten by the hot, strong taste as a punishment. The old people tasted of peppermint, close and such comfortable things, good for pain; but the old maids had lemon, hoar-hound, fag-root, and all sorts of sour, bitter things in them and did not get eaten much. The dear babies melted in her mouth, and the delicately flavored young ladies she was very fond of . . . weddings were better still; for the lovely white brides were so sweet Lily longed to eat them. (Alcott 1900, 41–44)

Within this candy demographic, selfhood is understood as essence in a purely literal form: to be of a kind is to taste of that kind, to be infused with a flavor that is distilled and concentrated – a cordial. Lily’s polymorphously promiscuous tastes know no gender or age boundaries. But it is not really her perversity that is shocking about this passage so much as Alcott’s frank sexual innuendo, particularly as it relates to the eroticism of eating, or is it drinking, the male cordial, full as it seems to be of the vital spermatic liquids that Graham feared would leak away if the addicted masturbator and intemperate eater had his way with himself. Lily’s sampling of these essences and vital energies is not quite as murderous as they initially seem: after being bitten the candy people are rejuvenated by immersion in melted sugar. Yet her appetites here clearly mark her as a vicious, anti-social being: eating here is aggressive and amoral, erotic and perverse, innocent and promiscuous.

Within the Grahamite discourse, sugar is of course a vicious ingredient. Thus, in the throes of her vicious sugar high Lily disrupts weddings to eat sugar girls, attends funerals with relish and pleasure, catches dear sugar babies and eats them, attempting to erase what we might call heteronormative candy futurity, and breaks respectable old grandmas into bits when they dare chastise her. That is, the inevitable fallout of the production of *morality* – specifically organized, as we shall see as the story unfolds, around the policing of *orality* – is the production of *immorality*, expressed in Lily’s dissident appetites.

Although she follows her internal cravings for it, sugar poisons Lily, and she becomes peevish and bad-tempered, ultimately longing for “plain bread and butter” (Alcott 1900, 44). When the Candy population rises up against her after she eats too many babies, brides, and old women, and worst of all, she “calmly sits down on the biggest church, crushing it flat” Lily abandons Candyland – “fearing some one would put poison in her candy” (44–45). Before escaping, however, she enacts the Enlightenment’s classic revolutionary gesture and decapitates the king of the Candy Country, “[biting] his head off, crown and all” (45).

Lily escapes Candy Country and approaches the next fantasy nation-space, Cakeland, “over the mountains of Gibraltar Rock that divided the city of Saccharisa from the great desert of brown sugar that lay beyond.” As she approaches Cakeland, the reader is invited to imagine the new space as an amalgam of North African desert and Columbus’

never-reached Indies. Lily feels, “a hot wind blowing toward her. ‘I wonder if there are sugar savages here, roasting and eating some poor traveler like me,’ she said, thinking of Robinson Crusoe and other wanderers in strange lands” (45). The fear of cannibalism, so consistent to narratives of Caribbean and African exploration appears here as a fear of the other, but this projection of repressed guilt, as Lily herself has just been banished for her cannibalism, onto “sugar savages” also marks the beginning of Lily’s disavowal of her desires.<sup>6</sup>

Cakeland is described as a “very queer country”: “Lakes of eggs all beaten up, and hot springs of saleratus [bicarbonate of soda] foamed here and there ready for use ... every one cooked all the time and never failed and never seemed tired” (50). The first town she sees is a “settlement of little huts” (45). There, indeed, Lily meets Ginger Snap, a “Browny” and “queer fellow” (48). Cakeland is really an enormous industrial kitchen populated by brown cookie men and women who labor to send cakes, cookies (that is, aspects of their own bodies), and meals through to restaurants and bakeries in the world that Lily has come from, a labor relation that Ginger Snap sees as a joke, but that Alcott undermines with the joke’s bodily consequences. Says Ginger: “We cook for all the confectioners and people think the good things come out of the cellars under their saloons. Good joke, isn’t it? And Snap laughed till a crack came in his neck and made him cough” (51–52). Lily is fascinated with Ginger’s work and asks him about it:

“Don’t you get tired of doing this all the time?” “Yes, but I want to be promoted, and I never shall be till I’ve done my best and won the prize here ... the prize for best gingerbread is a cake of condensed yeast. That puts a soul into me, and I begin to rise till I am able to go over the hills yonder into the blessed land of bread, and be one of the happy creatures who are always wholesome, always needed ... I leave my ginger behind when I go, and get white and round and beautiful, as you will see (48–49).

Ginger Snap labors for a while sending food through to the “real world” and teaching Lily to make gingerbread until:

just then the clock began to strike and a chime of bells to ring, –  
Gingerbread,  
Go to the head.  
Your task is done;  
A soul is won.  
Take it and go  
Where muffins grow ...  
In the sea of flour  
Plunge this hour.  
Safe in your breast  
Let the yeast-cake rest,  
Till you rise in joy,  
A white bread boy! (54)

Ginger grabs the “silver-covered square that seemed to fall from heaven” and dives into an oceanic vat of white flour holding the yeast-cake to his breast. The sea of flour then bubbles

and roils and ferments “like a small earthquake” while the cake-folk and Lily watch until Ginger emerges as a “beautiful white figure on the other side of the sea” and takes off to Breadland, closely pursued by the voracious Lily (55).

The fairy-tale time and fantasy nation-spaces of *The Candy Country* offer a series of bizarre cultural formations that distil reform dietetics’ racial essentialisms into their barest terms while spatializing the Grahamite project as political geography and temporal and historical logic. In what emerges as the radically exceptionalist but also necropolitical eschatology of *The Candy Country*, Alcott collapses the historical progression between colonial “discovery narratives,” slavery, and the birth of industrial labor, a conjoining that makes sense when we consider that, as Sidney Mintz (1985) tells, they are historically linked as labor regimes.<sup>7</sup> Ginger is variously a feared cannibal and savage, a spicy brown edible body and slave-like figure or perhaps factory worker who toils as a baker with other cakes. Cakeland does not, of course leave Candyland behind; that there is, for Alcott, a common connection between the monarchic and aristocratic state of the Candy people and the working state of the savage Cake people is made manifest when Ginger tells Lily:

You’ll get on better here with us Brownies than with the lazy Bonbons, who never work and are all for show. They won’t own us, though we are all related through our grandparents Sugar and Molasses. We are busy folks; so they turn up their noses and won’t speak to us at parties. (Alcott 1900, 46–47)

Thus Brownies work endlessly and are spicy, primitive, and soulless until converted, or whitened, and made into bread; but both Bonbons and Brownies are unequal products of what we might identify as the imperial and slave-based trade in sugar and commodities. We begin to see the emergence of the post-emancipation state, however, when Snap is given a yeasty soul and departs for Breadland, “leaving his ginger behind” – he is renamed Muffin in Breadland – in order to become, in a sense, the right kind of whitened immigrant (49). Alcott thus conflates all signs of non-white personhood into one chemically mutable body, one destined to disappear into the mouth of a little girl.

But it is Breadland that really stands as Alcott’s projection of the reformist nation. There, “hearty and happy and [also] with a lively yeasty soul” Lily lives on oatmeal and Graham bread, goes to school with other white children to learn Grainology and how to use yeast, and stays until she makes the perfect loaf, departing only then to take the bread home to show to her mother (59). When she asks to go home she is told to “take the bread in your hands and wish three times, and you’ll be wherever you say . . .” But when she asks to say goodbye to Muffin he is nowhere to be found. Instead she is told that “He was ready to go and chose to pass into your bread . . . for he said he loved you and would be glad to help feed so good a little girl” (62). Ginger/Muffin in other words, having already abandoned his brownness, more or less commits suicide – gives up his life, Christ-like – in order to become the bread that will feed and physically constitute the moral and virtuous body of the white girl, who has herself abandoned the appetites that initially drove her to disrupt the heteronormative imperative. All racial difference is here ultimately negated as Ginger/Muffin’s fermenting material embodiment, which has absorbed and processed the problem of racial difference as it has shifted over US history, disappears into the white girl’s body, fueling her departure from fantasy and her

reabsorption back into futurity, or the “real time” of what Elizabeth Freeman has termed “chronobiopolitics,” which “link(s) properly temporalized bodies to narratives of movement and change … schemes of events or strategies for living such as marriage, accumulation of health and wealth for the future, childbearing, and death and its attendant rituals” (2010, 4).

What should we make of these bizarre and troubling images? In traversing the three food countries, Lily traverses the United States’ exceptionalist narrative of modernity from the monarchic Candyland, where as proxy for her nation she bites off the king’s head, to the New World-cum-Robinson Crusoe imagery of the laboring gingerbread people in Cakeland, and finally to the reformed, disciplined future of the Breadland. In doing so, Alcott’s story reveals the cross-investments between empire, sensuality, and the project of constructing the United States’ particular formations of majoritarian whiteness in and through the reform movements’ uneven biopolitical impulses. Within that logic, eating is coeval to sex and sexuality, as a disciplinary technology through which correct racial embodiment is ordered and politics is wedded to the biological life of the citizen; at the same time as undisciplined eating – eating in the name of pleasure – is recoded here as a mode of sensuality, what I have elsewhere called queer alimentarity, or non-normative sensuality experienced in and through the mouth. *The Candy Country* is a story that also allows itself such moments of dissident erotic glee, that lingers over the sideways pleasures of queer little white girls and their unrestrained appetites in order to fold those desires into the larger project of the biopolitical disciplining of erotic appetite, a disciplining closely aligned to the formation of racial supremacy.<sup>8</sup>

Here I would like to return to the idea that the soul can be described as a cake of commercial yeast because that image is a knot at the center of this story, one that extends the particular conflagration of almost alchemical materialism and highly racialized biopolitics that Alcott is working out beyond the simply appetitive and into a biochemical understanding of labor capacity. While Lily’s graduation to becoming a “fine, strong woman” and “a nice little housekeeper [who] made such good bread” is the somewhat normative telos of the story – normative in that it gives her a traditionally female future as a homemaker, only “somewhat” normative in that she is never spoken of as marrying or having children but rather returns home for the love of her mother – that telos is closely tied to yeast as a substance (Alcott 1900, 63). While saleratus is the key chemical leavening agent of the cake country, yeast is the catalytic agent that propels Ginger through the burbling primordial ooze of the white flour ocean and on to his later, whiter, incarnation as “Muffin,” as well as his ultimate fate as a sacrificial figure who, as Alcott says, “must not have died in vain.” Yeast, however, is also the substance used to describe all of the good children of Breadland, including Lily – they have “lively, yeasty souls” and go to school to experiment with yeast, learning to bake and to brew: “they danced and sang, and seemed as bright and gay as if acidity, heaviness, and mould were quite unknown” (59).

The Candy Country is, in many ways, the new materialist’s dream: the forms, beings and substances living there bubble with vitality and agency, extending the qualities of humanness beyond our biopolitical protagonist, Lily. And we might link the baldly Christian symbolism that circulates around food and food people in the story – the fact that the whole story hinges on the taking of a (laboring and newly en-souled black) body into another (white girl’s) mouth – to the more magical, or perhaps, spiritual thinking about

matter that influences certain strains of new materialist thought (here I am indebted to Dana Luciano's (2009) work on geology, rocks, and spiritualism in the nineteenth century). We are dealing, after all, with transubstantiation, with bodies and substances that, like the communion wafer, are changing into new substances. The idea that it is possible to attain, foster, and improve a soul is Christological, of course; the idea that improvement can be felt in that soul when the body is properly engaged in labor folds Christian materialism into an apparently secular-capitalist logic, without ever naming it as such.

These logics, however, are domesticated by Alcott within the language of kitchen alchemy, which as the nineteenth century closed was more and more infused with the language of science. When Alcott uses the idea of the yeast fermentation that makes bread rise as an image to describe energetic and material transformation she is engaging with an organism that had received quite a bit of scientific attention in the three decades preceding her story. Not only had Pasteur used his research into beer, wine, and vinegar fermentation to decipher the yeast organism's reproductive and fermentation cycles, he had used the evidence of those cycles to disprove the doctrine of spontaneous generation, thus affirming the germ theory of disease, which holds that there must be a catalytic organism in order for disease to occur (see Latour 1988; Tomes 1999). His findings about yeast showed that yeast reproduces both sexually, when two cells conjoin to produce a third, and asexually, when "mothers" bud to produce identical "daughter" buds. More than that, he showed that fermentation was the process by which the yeast organism metabolized glucose not only to produce the various gases that produce the leavening, flavor, and fizz that make alcohol and bread what we know them to be, but also to create the energy that yeast cells need to survive. Fermentation, in other words, is about the production, transfer, and release of energy.

In engaging yeast then, Alcott is thinking through alternate processes of birth, death, and rebirth and she is referencing reproductive processes – in particular budding – that manage to skirt the social structure that humans understand as heterosexuality. This is more than simply metaphor or analogy, however, for in linking the affective experience of being "hearty and happy" to having a "lively yeasty soul" she is also describing a structure of feeling linked to biopolitical belonging that is at least understood as joyful, creative and – most importantly – energetic. The agentic self – and I mean here Lily, the bread children and Muffin as well – is produced as an afterthought of the body's immersion in the material world: but, and this is key, the affective structure that marks the agentic self is fully recuperated within the social world. That is: the by-then widely known and understood theory of fermentation is engaged by Alcott as a way of talking about labor capacity, about the energy available for harvest in the service of "being useful."

The yeasty consciousness that Alcott strives for here is almost literally an ecstatic consciousness: Lily at one point feels as though "some sort of fine yeast had got into her, and was setting her brain to work with new thoughts." This is an ecstasy however not in the sense of being transported beyond the body but in fact of being more deeply in it – of making "healthy bodies and happy souls by eating good plain food" – but then in turn, of having one's body and self dissolved into the chemical and biological world (Alcott 1900, 60–61). We might characterize this ecstasy with one of Alcott's favorite words, one that Ginger uses to describe his destiny: "wholesome" – a kind of completeness of self in which you are good to, and good for, the world – "good" being another

keyword.<sup>9</sup> The attainment of this sensation of being yeastily alive enables both Ginger/Muffin and Lily to evolve, to attain a higher state of being, but of course, respectively, these are not the same states. For Ginger/Muffin of course, to attain a soul is to be martyred, his highest calling. Says Muffin, now a white bread boy:

I [will be] eaten by some wise, good, human being, and become a part of him or her. That is immortality and heaven; for I may nourish a poet and help him sing, or feed a good woman who makes the world better for being in it ... Isn't that ... an end worth working for? (61)

Ginger/Muffin, then, more than simply being martyred, is consumed: depleted of use he becomes energetic fodder for Lily's return to chrononormative time. She in turn, returns to the world to reunite with her mother, and becomes, following Muffin's cue, a good and wise woman.

But we might also align this “wholesomeness” with another of Alcott's favorite words: *usefulness*, or perhaps, borrowing a page from geographer Nigel Thrift: *rightness*. He writes,

I want to argue that, of late, as a result of the conjuring up of a particular sensory configuration of time and space in which commodities can unassumedly nestle [pause] a different kind of efficacy is gradually being foregrounded. It is a form of efficacy that I will call “rightness” in that it is an attempt to capture and work into successful moments, often described as an attunement or a sense of being at ease in a situation ... The search after a certain sense of rightness has always been an intrinsic feature of the operations of capitalism, of course ... It is a Latourian sense of the world made incarnate by a co-shaping which is neither an intrinsic property of the human being nor of the artifact. (2008, 50)

This sense of rightness as a relation to the material world that is harnessed by capitalism to its own ends ties a new materialist reading of Alcott to our forgotten and neglected friend *old materialism*. This is a reading that surely resonates in a genre of writing – children's fiction – so deeply dependent upon a magical relation with objects which come alive, not unlike, we should not forget, the famous passage in *Kapital* when Marx describes a chair coming alive to dance:

A commodity ... is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties ... as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness ... it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (1977, 163)

What then is the story that we might allow this substance to tell us about “rightness” in the late nineteenth century? If we take Marx at his word then the drive toward the telos of rightness and usefulness in Candy Country leans upon the logic of the commodity, even at the level of the biochemical interrelations between persons and things. The commodity itself does indeed come alive with its own cultural power, a power that echoes that of the religious or magical object, as Emily Apter's (1991) work on the fetish long ago demonstrated and as Marx was so keen to elaborate. However, what Alcott wishes to describe as “wholesomeness” and “goodness” must also be linked to the biochemical and affective production and utilization of human energy: more than that, Alcott's point, which she elaborates using the effervescence attached to yeast, is that they are the same thing.

Eerily, the other word that Alcott uses for this capacity for labor, is the soul.<sup>10</sup> In organizing the telos of the story around “ensoulment” for both Ginger/Muffin and Lily, Alcott allows this classically rhizomatic substance – yeast – to catalyze a vision of chemical interconnection between radically disparate bodies, bodies linked and separated by histories of racial formation that are reimagined here (and this is crucial) as lying outside of heteronormative logics but nonetheless contained within unsurprising and unimaginative racial regimes (and, further, reproducing once again the liberated queer white subject at the expense of non-white peoples). And indeed we might take up this children’s story via Jane Bennett’s idea that “eating [is] the formation of an assemblage of human and non-human elements, all of which bear some agentic capacity”, which she sees as an instantiation of Deleuze and Guattari’s idea of a “‘vagabond’ quality to materiality, a propensity for continuous variation that is elided by ‘all the stories of matter-form’” (Deleuze, 1979, quoted in Bennett, 2010, 49–50).

When I raise Bennett’s work, I am aware of her proposal that vital materialism might “set up a kind of safety net for those humans who are now … routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular … model of personhood” by “elevating the status of the shared materiality of all things” (13). Keeping Bennett’s important work in mind, it is crucial to ask: does vital materialism really offer us a means, even partial, to rethink the relations between those peoples whose history once designated them as commodities, as things and those whose bodies allowed them to claim status as human? I am not entirely sold on this optimistic reading, although I believe Alcott’s story allows us to experiment with its possibilities. That is, while we might wish to see in Alcott’s story a narrative about the fundamental biochemical (and therefore, in the case of yeasty aliveness, affective) similarities that link beings across difference, it cannot also be denied that the sense of rightness, of aliveness, in *The Candy Country* can never be separated from each character’s beginning and end points as variously, humans or objects, separated from each other by different relations to capitalism’s commodity chain: the one a consumer, the other destined to be consumed; the one to live, the other to labor and die.

Here we may return to Muffin’s own question about his desire to be eaten by a “good and wise” person, “Isn’t that … an end worth working for?” (Alcott 1900, 61). What, we must ask, *is* an end worth working for? If we allow this question to truly become, as it were, material, to really do its work as a question – isn’t death/suicide an end worth working for? – Muffin’s question, asks the reader to push back at the magical relations that infuse both children’s literature and new materialist thought, demanding that we not confuse energy and possibility with agency, or political power, or even politics, itself. Further, the different ends to which Muffin and Lily are put allow us to see that while it is true that matter *is* history, as emergentist and new scientific thought such as that of Manuel deLanda’s would have us know, it is also true that matter *has* history.

Thus, alongside reading the place of yeast in *The Candy Country* as being about a relationship between human and non-human objects and substances, we might better read it as occupying a particular place in the *history* of the relationship between human and non-human biological and chemical materials: and then in turn, read Alcott’s yeast imagery as a speculative image in the history of the disciplining of the various affects and bodily states seen to be produced by these vital materials, their status as threats to and agents for dominant modes and genres of bodily, psychic, and affective being. The sense of yeasty joy, of belonging, that Alcott attaches to Lily and Ginger/Muffin here occupies

a place in the history of science and the history of food, but, returning to Thrift's idea of "rightness," it also occupies a place in the history of affect: it tells a story about the texture of feeling alive in a particular moment in time, and therefore about life itself as it is engraved into and captured by the overlapping spheres of capitalism, politics, and culture.

It is here that I wish to return to Makode Aj Linde's work, and in particular to the historical registers present in that performance space – the past of slavery as it echoes through Linde's resurrection of the blackface mammy figure and the specter of the suffering caused by female genital mutilation – as well as the heightened affective registers that seemed to circulate around the performance space of the Swedish museum: Linde's screams, ventriloquized through the blackface cake, and the audience's nervous laughter as they cut into and ate slices of his/her body/the cake. Approaching this performance beyond the international media hysteria that followed upon it, we might use Linde's performance to reflect upon what might have happened if Ginger/Muffin were to have refused to be consumed so easily by Lily, if the loaf of bread she so blithely carries back to her home took us further than the energetic possibilities of yeast into the realm of affective and political presence: what would happen if Muffin could scream? This is the question and the problem posed by Linde's performance and answered, I think, by the media hysteria that surrounded the event.

It was not only the spectacle of the Culture Minister eating the cake that was ultimately shocking. On one level, it was the escalated affect of that room, as Linde's screams – his voice ventriloquizing the suffering, as he claimed, of African women who undergo genital mutilation – provoked nervous tittering on the part of the largely white female crowd that seemed to populate the room, nicely restaging and then undermining Lily's own oral pleasures and power, as the later calls for the Minister's resignation demonstrated. And yet it was also the uncanny movements of his head and mouth, sticking out of the top of the ganache-covered sculpture that was cut open to reveal blood-red cake-flesh: Linde's performance, in other words, gave the cake interiority, and animated its objecthood, forcing viewers to pay attention to insensate matter, to imagine that it had nerves, blood, lungs, vocal cords. Yet, too I want to argue that part of the performance's uncanny power lay in the density of the ganache, which stretched and remodeled itself with each cut, as well as the cake-flesh, itself a bodily interior: meaty, moist, and holding its form in the way that only a yeast-risen cake can: the cake gave into the knife, that is, but it also held its own, continuing to hold long past the moment when a human body, so tortured, would have bled out.

There is more to say here, not least about the implications of Makode Aj Linde's Inhabiting of a female body, his ventriloquizing performance of the pain caused by female genital mutilation, itself a historically loaded issue that has caused conflict between feminists of the Global North and South, and then the obscuring of African and African diasporic women and their organizing work around this issue from the ensuing media hysteria and conversation. What I do want to pay attention to here, however, is that while the image of the baked black subject continues to have cultural traction, Linde's not unproblematic performance allowed for a deeper texturing of blackness via not only the sonic discordance of his screams and by his rendering the redness of flesh interior and persistent but then too by trapping the representatives of state power into displaying their pleasure alongside that pain, implicating them in the performance, forcing white cannibalism onto display.

I also want to note that Linde's work joins in a tradition of feeling-provoking cakes, for example the horrible birthing and baby shower cakes collected at the Cake Wrecks blog.<sup>11</sup> Bad aesthetics here, the strategic deployment of discordance, of aesthetic failure and bad taste, of right things (icing, cake, jam) in wrong places, is here – wittingly in Linde's case, perhaps not so much in the baby cakes – deployed against the normalizing violence of the consumer everyday. In this constellation of wrongness we see how eating pleasure – here to be found in the pleasures of the mouth – can be so easily disrupted by a visual and textural aesthetics that makes good flavors into bad taste, in both cases named above by making the vagina the central visual trope of an object that might well end up in someone's belly. These disruptive aesthetics restage and disrupt the neat narrative flow of Lily's imperial perambulations, making of these ugly cakes something that will not so easily go down, that pushes back against easy absorption into biopolitical norms but that claims life for that which is otherwise naturalized as death.

### Notes on contributor

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### Notes

1. *Painful Cake*, by Makode Aj Linde, Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden, April 15, 2012.
2. I discuss this incident at more length in this short piece: Kyla Tompkins. "Eating Laid Bare." *From The Press: New York University Press's Blog*. April 30, 2012. <http://www.fromthesquare.org/?p=2536>.
3. *The Candy Country* was initially published in 1885, as the second story in a collection entitled *Lulu's Library*, drawn, as the introduction claims, from the bedtime stories that Alcott told her niece Louise, or Lulu. All references to Candy Country here are to the second edition of *Lulu's Library*, in 1900.
4. In previous work I have been more interested in producing a history of what I have elsewhere termed the erotic and political life of the white mouth, as it is energized and pleased when it consumes blackness. In *The Candy Country* the white mouth acts out an erotic drama, to be sure, indeed both Linde's performance and Alcott's story implicate white eating in ethical drama, but I wish to push this analysis into new places. That is, while I am departing here from a focus in eating, I am not entirely departing from an interest in food and food culture. Rather, in this essay I want to turn further away from the question of eating as representation and more toward the affective and material dimensions of food culture as they are embedded and/or performed in these texts.
5. A note here on the intersection of text, in particular children's fiction, and performance theory. While performance theory productively often justifiably places itself in opposition to textuality, I do want to argue that this opposition might be enriched by a better historical understanding of the reading technologies and practices through which text was consumed across different periods. In the nineteenth century people in fact read out loud to each other, in work circles for instance, far more often than we do now. Literature was often staged in domestic settings, in *tableaux vivants*, for instance, and of course, as is particularly relevant to this essay, children were even more often read to than adults, as they are now. The line, in short, between performance and text, certainly in the nineteenth century, is neither firm nor consistent. I am also thinking about performance here, however, on another level, that of the place of sensation and affect in everyday life. The consistency with which Alcott's central metaphor appears in her story speaks to me here not only of an important representation drawn from history, it gives a

sense of the haptic sensations circumscribing that moment. What we have here then, is a culture-nature intra-action, in Karen Barad's words, in which the emergence of a "new" species from the encounter between scientists and the natural world (see Latour 1999, 144) come to inform the affective shape and sensory economies which delineate the normative *and* dissident pleasures of child development in the period (see Barad 2007).

6. And I would just mark here that of course the cannibal of colonizing discourse is also, as scholars doing work at the intersections of queer theory and settler colonialism have pointed out, often the sodomite or non-binaristically gendered native.
7. Mintz shows that rather than exporting assembly line and other labor regimes from the metropolis to the plantations, the flow of information was in the other direction, from the Caribbean sugar plantations to the English factories. Further, these new labor orders were energetically fueled by the sugar and caffeine that laborers consumed in greater and greater degrees across the eighteenth century.
8. In using the term "sideways" I am of course citing Kathryn Bond Stockton's foundational text *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*, (2009) in which she points to the alternate temporalities that govern narratives of queer childhood development, but I am also thinking here of Lauren Berlant's understanding of the pleasure of eating as something of a small "sideways" pleasure (2011, 116). Stockton's point, building on Lee Edelman's work in *No Future* (2004) is that if we understand futurity as always ideologically geared toward heteronormativity, it becomes clear that the queer child grows sideways in time, pausing the button on development in order to shape or make space for alternative erotic modalities. This would seem to fit quite nicely with this story, in which time is taken out from Lily's "real" life. What then do we do with the separate temporalities meted out for the different characters?
9. As quoted earlier, Ginger tells Lily: "the prize for best gingerbread is a cake of condensed yeast. That puts a soul into me, and I begin to rise till I am able to go over the hills yonder into the blessed land of bread, and be one of the happy creatures who are always wholesome, always needed" (Alcott 1900, 48–49).
10. This is not a logic foreign to children's literature: as many critics of children's literature have shown, children's fiction has long had as its central project the indoctrination of children into commodity capitalism. This is particularly true of a book that, published 15 years later, uncannily echoes *The Candy Country*, L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, (1900) in which another young girl is blown by wind out of her home country, into a land where inanimate objects exhibit human agency. Like Lily, Dorothy also finds a golden road – in Lily's case it is made of cornmeal – and like Dorothy, Lily must wish to go home three times. And while each of Dorothy's companions desire an ineffable human quality – courage, wisdom, and a heart – both Dorothy and Ginger Snap/Muffin seek something simultaneously more ephemeral and – within the landscape of children's literature – more material: a soul.
11. <http://www.cakewrecks.com/home/2013/4/18/10-hilariously-inappropriate-baby-shower-cakes.html>.

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