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Of Fatherlands and Motherlands
Gender and Nation in the Americas

De Patrias y Matrias
Género y nación en las Américas

A joint project of Bielefeld University, the University of Leipzig, and the Colegio de México

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The Kitchen and the Nation: The Housekeeper as Arbiter of Nationhood in Antebellum US Cookbooks

KATJA KANZLER

To the women of America, in whose hands rest the real destinies of the republic, … this volume is affectionally inscribed.
—Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe

In our own country, the beneficial effects of a generous diet, in developing and sustaining the energies of a whole nation, are clearly evident. The severe and unremitting labors of every kind, which were requisite to subdue and obtain dominion of a wilderness world, could not have been done by a half-starved, suffering people.
—Sarah Josepha Hale, The Good Housekeeper

New Historicist scholarship has left a major impact on the study of mid-19th century notions of gender and nationhood. It has effectively challenged an all but consensual reliance on the paradigm of separate spheres as appropriate interpretive framework for this pivotal period in US history—a period in which the geographical as well as discursive boundaries of the nation were subject to intense debate and conflict.¹ Reliance on this paradigm has prompted scholars to look for negotiations of nationhood only in the public sphere, assuming that the private sphere of domesticity figures as a space outside ‘public’ discourses like ‘race’ or class. Accordingly, their inquiries tend to depict discourses of nationhood as conversations among men, in which women figure, if at all, only as passive victims. Pioneering scholarship by Laura Wexler, Lora Romero, and Amy Kaplan has exposed this critical practice as a fallacy, as in fact perpetuating “the antebellum period’s own dubious narrative about itself” (Romero 11). Their work, inspired by a New Historicist interest in confluences of seemingly disparate discursive registers, has encouraged us to explore the manifold ways in which the discourses of home and nation are not only interrelated but deeply implicated in each other. Amy Kaplan hence insists:

¹ At least three major developments mobilized discourses of nationhood in the first half of the 19th century: various projects of territorial expansion (see, e.g., the signing of the Louisiana Purchase or the annexation of Texas); the rising numbers of immigrants whose ethnic backgrounds set them off from native-born populations; and mounting tensions over the issue of slavery.
If domesticity plays a key role in imagining the nation as home, then women, positioned at the center of the home, play a major role in defining the contours of the nation and its shifting borders with the foreign. (582)

In the following, I take my cue from this scholarship when I approach the home elaborated in antebellum US culture as a laboratory of nationhood, as an “engine” not only of “national expansion” (Kaplan 586) but also of national cohesion and social order. Rather than the unified and coherent ‘sphere’ the separate-spheres-paradigm assumes the domestic to be, I see the antebellum home as a highly structured space whose internal distinctions—between kitchen, parlor, nursery—script complex negotiations of ethnic, class, and ultimately national identities. Narratives of the home thus collaborate with other discourses in elaborating a national fiction, generating stories about who is an American and who is not, about how individuals can be assimilated into the national community, and about how social hierarchies are supposed to work. The home does not serve as a gender-specific exclave that keeps women out of deliberations of nationhood, it rather figures as a site from whence women can authoritatively speak about the nation.

I want to explore their discursive interventions in antebellum negotiations of US nationhood in one specific genre engaged in writing the home—cookbooks. Cookbooks, as I will outline, are very much continuous with other forms of domestic writing in the period. In the context of the period’s sizable body of domestic literature, they are most directly concerned with elaborating the subject position of the middle-class housekeeper as a gender- and class-specific position of authority. To accomplish that, antebellum cookbooks specifically recruit the kitchen as a site for the production of nationhood, casting the middle-class housekeeper as its key arbiter. I will discuss two distinct discursive strategies I see at work to that end: One proceeds from an appreciation and valorization of the kitchen’s operations by moving from a concern for the well-being of the individual or the family to that of the nation. The other addresses the fault-lines that increasingly manifest themselves in the nation and fashions the kitchen into a space that can cushion and even heal these divisions. Thus contextualizing the kitchen’s operations within a variously accentuated national project provides a blueprint for narratives of the middle-class woman’s agency and selfhood.

This effort to claim the kitchen as a space for the articulation of bourgeois feminine selfhood entails discursive confrontations on two fronts, one of gender and one of class. As noted below, the very genre of the cookbook started out as a venue for ‘public’ cookery—its domestic scope and concomitant feminization were results rather than preconditions of the texts I am discussing. Male authors continued to stake their claim in food writing, and the growing health movement provided them with fertile grounds to do so: The emerging discourse of nutrition, whose self-fashioning as science made it a masculine prerogative, challenged feminine authority in the kitchen. Authors of domestic cookbooks, I will outline, confront this challenge by appropriating scientific concepts in ways that supported the subject position of the middle-class housekeeper, and discourses of nationhood play a major role in facilitating this appro-
The Kitchen and the Nation

The domestic figures as a major theme and setting in antebellum women’s writing, to such an extent that Nina Baym, in her pioneering study of women’s literature, uses the terms ‘domestic fiction’ and ‘woman’s fiction’ almost interchangeably (22-27). However, the scholarship Baym initiated has focused almost exclusively on domestic novels, disregarding the inflections of domesticity in other genres. I emphatically agree with Karen Kilcup who pleads for an inclusion of domestic advice writing into our discussions of 19th-century women’s literature. She conceives of this body of writing as a generic continuum that spans fictional as well as non-fictional formats (184-186). The continuities between these discreet formats manifest themselves on several levels: most mundanely, in terms of authors—many of the most successful antebellum cookbooks were written by women who also wrote in other genres—but also in terms of themes and discursive strategies. Even regarding genre-specific language, the boundary between advice and narrative fiction is quite permeable in the period’s writing: A cookbook like Sarah Josepha Hale’s The Good Housekeeper includes sketches of housekeeping anecdotes (141-144), and a novel like Caroline Kirkland’s A New Home, Who’ll Follow features a recipe for yeast (33-34). Hale’s cookbook recycles articles she had written for Godey’s Ladies’ Book, and Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s The American Woman’s Home liberally borrows from the sketches Stowe had published in her House and Home Papers. All these examples illustrate the degree to which exchanges between different forms and modes of writing characterize antebellum women’s literature.

The contours of the genre of the cookbook crystallized only gradually in the first half of the 19th century. The genre underwent a major transition in these years from a form primarily dedicated to extraordinary cookery by famous chefs or at royal courts to one focusing on domestic cookery. As such, cookbooks became one of antebellum print culture’s greatest success stories. A number of them sold phenomenally well and went through numerous editions. To give just two examples, Eliza Leslie’s Directions for Cookery was continuously reprinted throughout the century, seeing at least 60 editions and inspiring two sequels; Lydia Maria Child’s The American Frugal Housewife

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2 The tradition of the cookbook as a forum for extraordinary cookery is a European one; see Mennell 64-69 for a discussion of the cookbook’s non-domestic origins in Europe, and 200-204 for a discussion of the beginning domestication and feminization of culinary writing in 18th-century England. From an American point of view, the genre’s domestication in the first half of the 19th century coincided with its Americanization. The assertion of middle-class womanhood by way of national narratives that I argue in this chapter was thus promoted by this particular historical constellation.
was reprinted 35 times between its first publication in 1829 and 1850. The scope of these books tended to be quite broad: They not only listed recipes but included a wider range of domestic advice, covering anything from the selection of furniture over cleaning and caring for the sick to the management of servants. As historian Sarah Leavitt observes, it is not before the middle of the 19th century that this comprehensive type of advice writing begins to specialize into distinct forms of advice on cookery and on other housekeeping concerns (15). My readings will consider a number of books from this large and diverse corpus but primarily focus on the following: Lydia Maria Child’s *The American Frugal Housewife* (1829), Sarah Josepha Hale’s *The Good Housekeeper* (1839), Catharine Beecher’s *Miss Beecher’s Domestic Receipt Book* (1858), and Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The American Woman’s Home* (1869).

Antebellum cookbooks highlight the significance of the kitchen’s operations with the help of a variety of discourses whose points of reference oscillate between health and virtue. Early elements of what would evolve into the science of nutrition play a major role in outlining the value of the kitchen’s operations. Scientific discourse is of ambivalent value for the project of the antebellum cookbook: On the one hand, it effectively invests the kitchen’s operations with significance, opening up a whole new sphere of responsibility and authority for the domestic woman, in addition to the care for her family’s moral, religious, and affective well-being with which she has been charged. The use of scientific references also contributes to the intellectualization of housekeeping that I will discuss later as a strategy by which middle-class housekeeper-authors confront their own absence from the kitchen’s physical environment. On the other hand, scientific discourse is a male prerogative in the 19th century, and, in the context of food and cookery, it is conspicuously used by male authors to challenge female domestic authority: At the same time as the cookbook proves itself a most promising genre for female writers of domestic narratives, male (proto-)scientists are beginning to stake their claim for authority in a new field of knowledge called nutrition (cf. Alcott; Trall). Science thus lends itself both to the affirmation and the challenge of middle-class female authority in the kitchen, and, accordingly, cookbooks carefully navigate between aligning themselves with and distancing themselves from scientific authority.

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3 For these and other publication details, see the ‘Feeding America’-website, an online collection of US cookbooks from the late 18th through the early 20th century, hosted by the Michigan State University Library: http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/index.html.

4 Alcott’s book poignantly illustrates the gender-conventions in which a male cookbook-author intervened: While Alcott denigrates the way women currently run their homes, introducing his book “as a means of rendering house-keepers thinking beings, and not as they have hitherto often been, mere pieces of mechanism; or, what is little better, the mere creatures of habit or slaves of custom” (17), he concedes that his recipes originate from housekeepers “in the vicinity or elsewhere” (19).
Two of the most influential antebellum cookbooks, Sarah Josepha Hale’s The Good Housekeeper and Catharine Beecher’s Domestic Receipt Book, paradigmatically begin with a chapter on health. Placing scientific expertise at the beginning of their texts, they not only highlight its significance for their writing but also underscore their own work of translating medical findings for the domestic setting. Hale positions her book on the increasingly competitive market of domestic advice writing by emphasizing its integration of health-related considerations: While previous cookbooks, she contends, focused either on “good living” or on “cheap living,” “[m]y aim is to select and combine the excellences of these two systems, at the same time keeping in view the important object of preserving health, and thus teach how to live well, and to be well while we live” (11). In the following, she ostentatiously relies on scientific authority and takes considerable time to outline Dr. Andrew Combe’s findings about nutrition and digestion. However, Hale makes a point in emphasizing that she selects among Combe’s findings on the basis of “what my own experience has taught me [is] good and judicious. Indeed, in most cases, even when I may quote the language of Dr. Combe, I still write what I know to be true” (ibid.). While thus authorizing her own writing by aligning it with the work of a renowned scientist, Hale insists on her own experience in housekeeping as the ultimate point of authority. Similarly, Beecher begins her first chapter with an appeal to “the medical profession” (1), calling on a whole league of international experts to authorize her writing. The accomplishment of her book, Beecher notes, is that it “applies [scientific principles] practically to the subject of the proper selection of food” (ibid.). She, too, asserts the need to translate scientific findings into practical advice, a work that uniquely highlights the subject position of the middle-class housekeeper as it requires both a degree of scientific literacy and domestic experience.

If such emphasis on the housekeeper’s accomplishment of adapting medical knowledge figures as one strategy by which cookbooks negotiate their alignment with scientific discourse, another rests in their contextualization of science within other discourses. Many cookbooks by women authors address health less as an end in itself than as a springboard for other concerns. As scholars pursuing a wide variety of in-
queries about the US in the antebellum period observe, this cultural moment is greatly shaped by a distrust of the body, its needs and desires, and a concomitant valorization of its transcendence in moral, spiritual, and intellectual terms. Cookbooks participate in this culture by enlisting their often lengthy and meticulous discussions of nutrition in the service of more ephemeral ends. They appropriate the cultural prestige that comes with the new science and subordinate it to issues and values which are both more well-established and in which women could claim more immediate authority. Various defined notions of ‘virtue’ provide a potent touchstone for such contextualizations as they demarcate a set of values and behavioral codes consensually acknowledged as of national relevance and as a ‘private,’ feminine area of expertise.7 Virtue thus plays a key role in facilitating the antebellum cookbook’s characteristic shift from a concern for the individual to one for the nation.

Mary Tyler Peabody Mann’s book Christianity in the Kitchen, for instance, defines the maintenance of health as a religious duty. Mann’s writing focuses on casting ‘improper’ cookery as sin and on inculcating fear of the punishment that awaits such sin. Her book opens with the Old Testament injunction “Death is in the pot!” (qtd. in Taupin 86), a threat that succinctly outlines what Mann identifies as the stakes involved in the kitchen’s operations. Tellingly subtitled A Physiological Cookbook, the text frames the care of health as a divine mandate when the speaker insists that “we are to eat not to gratify our ignoble appetites, but to build up purely and devoutly those temples of the Holy Spirit which our bodies were designed to be” (ibid.). Mann introduces the trope of the “gospel of the body” (ibid.) to fashion the attention to one's physical well-being into a religious duty. In the following, she identifies a whole list of “criminal preparations” that emanate from American kitchens to violate the ‘gospel of the body.’ To add urgency to her distinction between acceptable and unacceptable food, Mann details the punishment that awaits gastronomic sinners, from the earthly ‘horrors of dyspepsia’ to sure punishment in the afterlife.

In Sarah Hale’s Good Housekeeper, physiological considerations are subsumed under a narrative of moral maturation. Evoking the well-established discourse of republican motherhood,8 her text holds the housekeeper accountable for the lessons in virtue her meals are supposed to convey: It frames the inculcation of food habits as the first and therefore critical moment of teaching future citizens to check their instincts and to subject them to an approved set of rules: “Only bear in mind that the first feeling of the infant is desire for food, the first pleasure in life, the gratification of appetite, and we shall see of what immense importance it is that the habit of regulating for food by the rules of reason and experience should be the first one formed in our chil-

7 Ruth Bloch traces the increasing feminization of virtue in early 19th-century US culture and discusses the impact of this development on republican discourses of nationhood that greatly emphasize virtuous citizenship.

8 Cf. Linda Kerber, who identifies as women’s civic role in the early republic their mothering of future citizens and, hence, the transmission of civic virtues from one generation to the next.
dren” (135). Here, as throughout the book, ‘appetite’ comes to metonymically stand for all physical desires in need of civilizational control, demarcating a key site for the exercise of virtue. To add further urgency to this point, Hale’s cookbook suggests a direct line of causality between the indulgence of appetite and intemperance, using very similar language to warn of their consequences. Other texts make this link even more explicit, including domestic novels like Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s *Live and Let Live*, which traces one character’s fatal alcoholism to “his parents’ foolish indulgence of the cravings of his appetite for whatever tasted good” (11). This narrative, recurring throughout domestic writing in the antebellum period, effectively joins the housekeeper’s concern about the food her family eats to the vocal and well-organized temperance movement, partaking in its cultural capital. Accordingly, one of the major premises in Hale’s recipes is to avoid exciting a “depraved appetite” (87): She warns the housekeeper not to tempt her family’s appetites and advises her to curtail the variety of food offered, to only moderately use spices, and to prefer simple, ‘plain’ dishes.

Such elaboration of virtue as the touchstone of housekeeping not only works on the basis of physiological considerations. Lydia Maria Child’s *The American Frugal Housewife* develops a model of virtuous housekeeping from an economic vantage point. Casting the kitchen as the home’s economic center, she not only highlights the money that is spent or saved there, but also the habits of frugality and the taste for simplicity that are or are not inculcated by way of a housekeeper’s choices. Her book advocates the ideals of industry and self-denial as the foundations for housekeeping among her poorer as well as her more affluent readers. When she insists that “[n]eatness, tastefulness, and good sense, may be shown in the management of a small household, and the arrangement of a little furniture, as well as upon a larger scale” (5), Child writes against the trajectory of domestic discourse in the antebellum decades which, as we have seen, increasingly foregrounds possession. Her book opposes conspicuous consumption in the service of domestic comfort and refinement, framing it as a morally weak, aristocratic, and hence un-American practice.

The argument Child weaves around her advocacy of frugality exemplifies the way in which antebellum cookbooks easily slide from a language of the individual or the family to a language of the nation. While she deems a culture of indulgence and display just “morally wrong … so far as the individual is concerned” (5), she castigates it as “injurious beyond calculation to the interests of our country” (5-6). Her text traces a dimly specified set of social ‘evils’ to “the extravagance of all classes of people” (6) and proceeds to charge the housekeeper with their reform: “We never shall be prosperous till we make pride and vanity yield to the dictates of honesty and prudence! We never shall be free from embarrassment until we cease to be ashamed of industry and economy! Let women do their share towards reformation” (6). This passage is exemplary for the way in which the book positions the nation’s well-being as the ultimate horizon of its advice, accentuating the ‘American’ in its title as not merely a ploy

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9 Some mid-century cookbooks reflect this already in their titles, e.g., Allen.
to distinguish the book from competing English volumes, but as announcing discourses and practices that allow its readers to fashion themselves as *American* housekeepers.

Published three decades later, Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The American Woman’s Home* bears witness to a marked inflation of such national signifiers in the discourse of housekeeping. Their book makes a point in addressing “the women of America, in whose hands rest the real destinies of the Republic” (5). The crisis in housekeeping that domestic advice manuals typically outline to lend urgency to their didactic projects has emphatically national repercussions (Beecher/Beecher Stowe). In a chapter entitled “Good Cookery,” their text compares American cookery with other national cuisines to unfold a long jeremiad about the degeneration of American food habits. Extending on the narrative of American exceptionalism, the text points to the country’s extraordinary bounty of natural resources—its “tantalizing abundance” (130) of foodstuffs—which present operations of the kitchen insult: “the American table, taken as a whole, is inferior to that of England or France. It presents a fine abundance of material, carelessly and poorly treated. The management of food is nowhere in the world, perhaps, more slovenly and wasteful” (ibid.). In Beecher and Beecher Stowe’s narrative, this failure to respect and maximize the nation’s alimentary resources registers primarily as an act of blasphemy that intervenes in God’s plan for the nation.

Elsewhere in the book, they sketch the contours of this divine plan. It is a plan of territorial expansion, which the text renders in the language of ‘Christian mission.’ The book’s opening and closing chapters highlight its positioning of the model home as a chief agent of this national mission: It begins with a discussion of “The Christian Family”—tellingly named ‘the family state’—and ends with advice how to combine ideal households into “Christian Neighbourhood[s]” that are capable of colonizing “heathen lands” (333). In so doing, the text illustrates with particular poignancy the tactic employed in much domestic writing at mid-century to link the discursive registers of home and nation: Appealing to what Amy Kaplan has termed “imperial domesticity” (586), the text invests housekeeping with national significance by casting the home as

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10 As Jan Longone notes in her introduction to the book’s 1999-reprint, Child introduced the ‘American’ in her title for the book’s 8th edition in 1832 in order to distinguish it from Susannah Carter’s *The Frugal Housewife*, an English volume that also circulated in the US (iii).

11 Their book marks both the boundary of the period I consider here—it was published in 1869—and of the genre of the cookbook—it features no recipes. Its thus indicates a new degree of specialization in the genre of domestic advice writing: as noted before, books in the first half of the 19th century typically combined recipes with broader advice on housekeeping, aspiring to encyclopedic reach. And although the book was published after my period of inquiry, it is significant for my purposes because it incorporates and adapts texts published earlier, such as Beecher’s *A Treatise on Domestic Economy* and Stowe’s *House and Home Papers*. 
“the site from which the nation reaches beyond itself through the emanation of woman’s moral influence” (ibid.).

The discursive strategies I have identified so far in antebellum cookbooks—their appropriation of scientific discourse and its subordination to broadly defined ‘virtue,’ their easy slippage from individual to nation—are singularly merged in Sarah Hale’s *The Good Housekeeper*. The book ostentatiously references physiological research and proceeds to challenge scientific interpretations of this research. It does so by charging scientists with too narrow and ‘private’ a perspective, which the text counters with an emphatically ‘public’ frame of reference. Paradoxically, then, Hale defends cookery as a domestic operation, and thus a middle-class woman’s business, by insisting on its significance for the nation, rather than the individual. Her argument takes its beginning in the observation that: “[i]n our own country, the beneficial effects of a generous diet, in developing and sustaining the energies of a whole nation, are clearly evident. The severe and unremitting labors of every kind, which were requisite to subdue and obtain dominion of a wilderness world, could not have been done by a half-starved, suffering people” (22). According to Hale, their food habits enabled (future) Americans to ‘take possession’ of the continent and build the nation. And although her vantage point in this passage is historical—she uses the past tense when talking about the nation’s foundational ‘errand’—she elsewhere defines this as an ongoing project and challenge.

To shed further light on that, I want to look in a bit more detail at an argument Hale develops concerning the significance of meat-eating because, there, she conspicuously uses a scenario of civilizational/national rivalry to assert the housekeeper’s authority. Her argument takes her from a comparison, in terms of diet and resulting vigor, between humans and monkeys to one between nations, from a concern about ‘civilization’ to one about imperial competitiveness. Hale begins:

> Some determined advocates of the vegetable system maintain, that the teeth and stomach of the monkey correspond, in structure, very closely with that of man, yet it lives of fruits—therefore, if man followed nature, he would live on fruits and vegetables. But though the anatomical likeness between man and monkey is striking, yet it is not complete; the difference may be and doubtless is precisely that which makes a difference of diet necessary to nourish and develop their dissimilar natures. Those who should live as the monkeys do would most closely resemble them. (19)

This passage identifies as Hale’s discursive opponents the “advocates of the vegetable system,” a rather vocal group of primarily male reformers who propagated the benefits of a vegetarian diet. Hale openly questions the authority of their writing and asserts her own in an effort to defend the kitchen as a feminine terrain. She does so by taking the question of dietary choices out of a medical into a civilizational context: The above

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12 The most prominent proponent of vegetarianism in the US in the 1830s and early 40s was Sylvester Graham. His argument for a vegetarian diet on the basis of anatomical similarities between humans and monkeys seems to be Hale’s point of reference. For a summary of Graham’s thoughts on ‘comparative anatomy,’ see lecture 14 in his *Lectures on the Science of Human Life* (324-363).
passage enlists the comparison between humans and monkeys for the elaboration of what seems to amount to a notion of ‘civilization’. Avoiding to clearly designate the difference she discerns between humans and monkeys, Hale further inflates its significance by implying that it exceeds any one name. Her language gets notably elusive when she suggests that their difference is so powerful because it is so small, and when she employs this difference as both the justification and objective of distinct diets. Rather than specifying what she is talking about, Hale ends this point in her argument with a threat—of degeneration from a ‘race’ destined to take possession of the continent to a state of primitive weakness.

Just a few passages later, Hale places this abstract threat of degeneration in a more immediate political context. The ‘naturalist’ hierarchy of humans and animals already resonates with notions of racial difference and, hence, colonial politics, which Hale proceeds to make more explicit:

In strict accordance with this theory, which makes a portion of animal food necessary to develop and sustain the human constitution, in its most perfect state of physical, intellectual and moral strength and beauty, we know that now in every country, where a mixed diet is habitually used, as in the temperate climates, there the greatest improvement of the race is to be found, and the greatest energy of character. It is that portion of the human family, who have the means of obtaining this food at least once a day, who now hold dominion over the earth. Forty thousand of the beef-fed British govern and control ninety millions of the rice-eating natives of India. (21)

Here, national signifiers in the discourse of housekeeping condense into a narrative of imperial expansion. The housekeeper’s choice about the food served in her family is contextualized within a quest for ‘racial’ and national supremacy: The decision between civilization and ‘monkeydom’ metamorphoses into one between colonizer and colonized. Hale’s tactic to enlist in a racial discourse the physical dimension of the kitchen’s operations, their significance for the sustenance of bodies and the maintenance of health, comes full circle here. What she dramatizes as at stake in the kitchen is not the health and vigor of individual bodies but of the composite, racialized body of the nation. So Hale de-authorizes medical writing about the kitchen by attacking its focus on the individual, ‘private’ body, which she counters with an emphatically ‘public,’ national understanding of the bodies that are a housekeeper’s charge. The national and the domestic support each other in her account—an imperial definition of the nation authorizes the housekeeper, and the housekeeper’s work sustains the nation.

The Good Housekeeper not only dramatizes, in remarkably condensed and urgent form, the antebellum cookbook’s signature narrative about the kitchen’s significance for the nation, it also employs the second discursive strategy I identified in the genre: To elaborate the kitchen as a site for the production of nationhood, the text fashions it into a place of unity where the nation’s divisions can be cushioned and even healed. The book addresses a series of factors that threaten the cohesion of the nation and, by integrating them into its ‘American’ narrative, attempts to performatively reconcile them. This reconciliation, however, does not so much result in a dissolution of differences as in their ordering and contextualization within cultural narratives. In so doing,
the text joins with Hale’s writing in other genres—her novels, her editorial work for *Godey’s*—in a broader effort to address and discursively undo the nation’s increasingly manifest fault-lines. All of this writing proceeds from the conviction—symptomatic for antebellum gender discourses—that women and ‘their’ domestic spaces are singularly able to affect this healing.13

First of all, the book makes an effort to address the regional diversity of the US, an issue that gains in prominence as the nation’s territory dramatically expands in the first half of the 19th century. But unlike several other cookbooks of the period that focus on specific regions,14 Hale dissolves the potentially dividing regional specificities in the more universal, culturally charged distinction between rural and urban. The acknowledgment and embrace of the rural and the urban find themselves throughout the book. For example, it offers advice both on how to select the best products on the market and on how to slaughter an animal. Also, some of the recipes are given in two versions, for those in the country who could draw on an ample supply of eggs and milk, and for those in cities whose supplies would be limited.

Thus acknowledging and providing for the differences between urban and rural households, the text makes an effort not to position these differences as a ground of confrontation but to enlist them in a narrative of commonality. Again, Hale extends a narrative of national identity to navigate difficult discursive terrain: She appeals to the—potent if somewhat old-fashioned— notion of the nation’s agrarian foundations by casting the farmer’s wife as the quintessential American housekeeper and hence model to be emulated by all her readers:

> Many of our farmers’ wives are among the best housekeepers in the land, possessing that good sense, vigor of mind, native delicacy of taste or tact, and firm conscientiousness, which gift the character with power to attempt every thing that duty demands. These are the ‘noble matronage’ which our republic should honor; for it is the sons of such mothers who have ever stood foremost to defend or serve their country. (131-132)

Recalling the celebration of the American farmer in much early national writing, Hale fashions the farmer’s wife into his equally ideal female counterpart, the model female citizen-of-sorts. And although the sentiment of the passage is certainly nostalgic, Hale makes this celebration of a waning identification productive for her own writing and for the narrative of nationhood that sustains it. She evokes rural housekeeping as authorization for her own domestic advice, suggesting that her book anthologizes the principles and rules that characterize the model housekeeping of the farmer’s wife, and invites American housekeepers to unite in the emulation of this national ideal. Time and again, Hale punctuates her advice with comparisons of rural, republican and ur-

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13 For example, Hale used her editorials in *Godey’s* to lobby for Thanksgiving as a day of national commemoration, meant to unify the nation in the face of mounting tensions between North and South in the decades before the Civil War (Pleck 775).

14 Cf. Randolph or Collins. Food historian Donna Gabaccia argues that, in the period, something like a national cuisine did not exist in the US: “The United States remained one nation divided into many eating communities” (35).
ban, decadent practices in ways that always endorse the former. Most noticeably, her book vents skepticism about the marketplace women in urban areas would have access to. Hale spends a lot of time to exhort her readers to bake their own bread and to churn their own butter rather than to purchase it. In fact, she singles out these two particular operations, bread-making and dairy-work, which increasingly distinguish rural from urban households, as chores that ought to be performed by the lady of the house rather than delegated to employed labor. By breaking down the mythically American housekeeping of the farmer’s wife to a limited set of domestic rituals, Hale fashions her model of domesticity into a performance, an ideal women throughout the nation can preserve and emulate by following the book’s advice.

But regional specificities may not be the most pressing issue that, in the US national imaginary, threatened the cohesion of the nation: The kitchen—as the paradigmatic place of the servant in bourgeois households—highlights many of the social distinctions that dramatically gained in political significance in the first half of the 19th century, distinctions based on a layering of class, ethnicity, and race. Again, Hale’s book makes an effort to acknowledge and harmonize these distinctions by evoking a shared project of ‘American’ housekeeping. Hale liberally uses the attribute ‘American’ to define a mode of housekeeping in which both employer and employee pursue a shared objective: Most conspicuously, Hale makes a point in discussing the title of her book. She insists that she uses the term ‘housekeeper” “in its American signification, the same as ‘Mistress of the family,’ or ‘Lady of the house’” (127), and she elaborates: “In our republican land, thanks to its rational institutions, which preserve in a high degree of purity in the moral relations of domestic life, it is rare to find a married woman who does not superintend personally, the economy of her own household” (ibid.). In yet another nostalgic gesture, Hale brackets the proliferating contractual logic behind domestic service by asserting that the housekeeper’s fundamental responsibility for the running of her household is not something to be dispensed with by hiring someone to perform them. Singling out operations that need to be performed by the lady of the house, such as baking the family’s bread, the text insists on the middle-class woman’s presence in the kitchen, her immediate involvement in housekeeping.

Just as the lady of the house, the book also admonishes domestic workers not to view their labor on a purely contractual basis, emphasizing the interests employer and employee have in common in their shared project of housekeeping. It is, first of all, noteworthy that Hale at all addresses domestic workers, in a separate chapter titled “Hints to Help.” She thereby apostrophizes cooks and maids as literate and rational beings, who literally share her book with their employers. The chapter places great incentives before the domestic worker: “American help … should be very particular in their good behavior, and be careful to do by their employers as they will want help to do by them, when their turn to keep domestics shall arrive” (122). This passage seeks to coax domestics into faithful service by promising them the role of the lady. The class distinction between lady and domestic is minimized by depicting it as temporary and permeable. This relativization of social difference is again folded into the national
signifier: Hale frames the supposed permeability of class boundaries as distinctly American, contrasting it with Europe, where domestic service encodes an inferior class position.

However, the democratic gesture Hale uses here to unite lady and domestic leaves her less than comfortable. She shows herself anxious to control the democratic picture of the kitchen she has drawn. Immediately after placing before domestics the prospect of ladyhood, she lectures them: “Do not think it degrades you to endeavor to please your employer” (122). Such advice effectively persuades workers to comply with a status of social inferiority, even if it invites them to understand such compliance as a performance.

The book employs a second, powerful strategy to contain its promise of upward mobility via the kitchen: Its diction changes noticeably when class differences are superimposed with ethnicity. To the Irish domestic, Hale does not promise ladyhood; neither does she include her in the implied audience of her chapter “Hints to Help.” Rather, Irish servants are the subject of a chapter titled “Hints to Housekeepers,” where Hale envisions biographies for immigrant workers quite different from the upward mobility she sees American domestics destined for:

I am aware that it is the fashion with many ladies to disparage Irish domestics, call them stupid, ignorant, impudent, ungrateful, the plagues of housekeeping. That they are ignorant, is true enough; it does require skill, patience, and judgment, to teach a raw Irish girl how to perform the work in a gentleman’s family; but they are neither stupid nor ungrateful, and if they are taught in the right manner, they prove very capable, and are most faithful and affectionate domestics. (133)

By picturing Irishness as a barely coded form of savagery, out of which domestic service rescues people by civilizing them, Hale draws on a logic that is widely used to justify the enslavement of Africans. Scholars like David Roediger and Amy Schrager Lang discuss the way in which 19th-century notions of American identity managed to transcend class-lines by invoking a shared ‘whiteness’ vis-à-vis ethnic Others. In Hale’s narrative of the American kitchen, the unification of white American women over a shared mode of housekeeping is predicated on the presence of ‘raw Irish girls’ whose ethnic difference—highlighted in many popular texts of the period—exempts them from the democratic promise of the American kitchen. The middle-class fantasy of a domesticity of the parlor needs recognizable Others to stay in the kitchen.

These narratives about the kitchen as a place to acknowledge and heal what many Americans at mid-century experienced as the wounds of the nation also characterize other cookbooks published in the period. Eliza Leslie, in her bestselling Directions for Cookery, articulates the “hope that her system of cookery may be consulted with equal advantage by families in town and in country, by those whose condition makes it expedient to practise economy, and by others whose circumstances authorize a liberal expenditure” (8). Child’s The American Frugal Housewife amends its recipes with a chapter titled “Hints to Persons of Moderate Fortune,” which emphasizes that all classes of Americans are vulnerable to economic losses and hence potential members of
the chapter’s audience (108-113). Beecher’s *Domestic Receipt Book* also includes chapters that directly address housekeepers and domestics, respectively. In addition, the book highlights its own role as an object that, quite literally, bridges across social differences. It features a chapter that lists directions for a variety of domestic servants the book’s owner is invited to pass along to her employees: “The mistress of this family arranges the work for each domestic, and writes it on a large card, which is suspended in the kitchen for guidance and reference” (247). The text there casts itself as an instrument of the housekeeper’s managerial obligations, not only providing ready-made language to meet these obligations but effectively taking the housekeeper’s station in the kitchen. Beecher already places this incentive before her readers in her preface when she announces as objective of her writing “to express every receipt in language which is short, simple, and perspicuous, and yet to give all directions so minutely that the book can be kept in the kitchen, and be used by any domestic who can read, as a guide in every one of her employments in the kitchen” (xi). Ultimately, then, Beecher’s as well as other cookbooks fashion themselves as major arbiters of national unity. By expressly addressing readers in a variety of contexts, the texts imagine women of different classes and in different places to unite over reading these books and following their advice. In so doing, the books do not serve national unity so much by dissolving differences as by organizing them: Mistress and servant may share the cookbook as material object, but they are meant to use it in different ways, and they figure as two distinct sets of readers.

This relationship between housekeepers and servants, between those who write and talk about the kitchen and those who work in it, is a major concern for cookbooks. When the texts outline the roles and obligations of these two sets of women, they effectively discuss their authority in and entitlement to the kitchen. And as the texts put so much effort into highlighting the kitchen’s significance, this authority and entitlement become a considerable ground of confrontation. Texts only rarely make the concern over the housekeeper’s authority in her kitchen as explicit as Beecher when she notes: “There is no domestic so good that she will not be injured by perceiving that, through dependence upon her, and a fear of losing her services, the mistress of the family gives up her proper authority and control” (270). Of course, housekeeper and servant enter into this contest on widely unequal terms. What keeps the confrontation going is not so much the servant’s resistance against her mistress’s authority as competing interests in the housekeeper’s definition of her own subject position: On the one hand, the lure of a middle-class domesticity of the parlor compels women to abandon the kitchen to employed laborers. On the other hand, the kitchen’s elaboration especially in cookbooks equips this room with a considerable pull of its own. Writing—again, especially of cookbooks—affords a privileged venue that allows middle-class women to stay in the parlor and take control of the kitchen. The most important strategy cookbooks employ to defend the housekeeper’s authority against kitchen-workers results from this broader re-definition of the housekeeper’s presence in the kitchen as discursive, a definition implied in the very project of the domestic cookbook: The texts
intellectualize the kitchen’s operations. They thereby outline a division of kitchen-
labor between management and execution, in which the former—which monopolizes
most of the kitchen’s cultural prestige—requires a class-specific degree of formal edu-
cation.

The narratives about a crisis in American kitchens that abound in domestic writ-
ing in the antebellum period place much fault at the alleged incompetence of servants,
thus creating a need for their instruction and supervision by more educated minds. In-
deed, the abundance of scenes that dramatize servants’ flaws,15 on the one hand, safely
installs the incompetent servant at the heart of a national problem and, on the other,
casts the housekeeper in the heroic role of problem solver. While some texts dwell on
the drama or humor of such incompetence, many cookbooks employ it to discredit the
cooks’ vernacular kitchen culture and write a clear hierarchy into the relationship be-
tween mistress and servant. A language of benevolence often helps affirm the authori-
ty of the former and the dependence of the latter: After dwelling on the proverbial
servant’s faults, Beecher, for example, advises “instead of allowing the mind to dwell
on the faults of those who minister to our comfort and convenience, cultivate a habit of
making every possible benevolent allowance and palliation. Say to yourself—‘Poor
girl! she has never been instructed, either by parents or employers. … Let me bear her
faults patiently, and kindly try to cure them’” (271). As the contributors to Bergman
and Bernardi’s critical anthology on 19th-century benevolence literature illustrate,
‘benevolence’ figures as a major code by which women writers, and their female char-
acters, negotiate their class positions. Their argument that performances of charity
serve to assert social distinctions sheds further light on the cookbook’s invitation to the
mistress to see herself as a benevolent teacher in the kitchen. Casting an employer’s
management of her employees as an act of benevolence serves to both signify their
social difference and to conceal these distinctions’ actual foundations in the realm of
economics—a contract of employment, in which each party bears clear connotations of
class.

In *The American Woman’s Home*, Beecher and Beecher Stowe notably de-em-
phasize the language of benevolence and its resonances of affective involvement and
care. Rather than proposing that a maternal instruction and supervision can eventually
correct the servant’s flaws, the book implies that the servant’s domestic skills neces-
sarily fall short of the demands of housekeeping. For example, it bemoans, “How few
cooks, *unassisted*, are competent to the simple process of boiling a beefsteak or mutton-chop?” (138), or, suggestively, “No cook will ever study these flavours; but per-
haps many cooks’ mistresses may” (141), and finally insists, “If such things are to be
done, it must be primarily through the educated brain of cultivated women who do not

15 Novels like Sarah Hale’s *Keeping House* or Alice Haven’s *The Coopers* work with a stock
repertoire of scenes and characters to dramatize servants’ incompetence, such as the igno-
rant Irish girl, the corrupt French nurse, or the wasteful hired housekeeper. The spectacu-
larly incompetent servant-figure that has received the most critical attention is, of course,
scorn to turn their culture and refinement upon domestic problems” (138). In all these passages, proper operations of the kitchen are cast as an intellectual endeavor, that contrasts with the (Irish) servant’s primitive, intuitive cookery. Detailed discussions, in this as well as other advice manuals, of nutrition and digestion further contribute to this intellectualization of cookery. And even beyond the immediate referencing of scientific authority, cookbooks tend to cast their own subject—housekeeping and cookery—in a terminology of science: They describe it as a subject to be studied, a project that requires a ‘method’ and a ‘systematic’ approach, that involves precise measures and procedures. In Beecher and Beecher Stowe even as a profession. Such intellectualization specifically de-authorizes vernacular kitchen culture and makes room for the subject position of the housekeeper by capitalizing on her class-specific access to education.

To conclude, then, domestic cookbooks gain cultural prominence in the antebellum decades as they authorize the subject position of the middle-class housekeeper by bridging the discursive terrains of home and nation. Cookbooks, I have been arguing, defend the kitchen and the position of its mistress against, on the one hand, intrusions by medical authority and, on the other, against the increasingly exclusive presence in kitchens of non-middle-class women. Confronting both sets of competitors serves as an important ground for the housekeeper’s self-fashioning, in terms of gender and of class, respectively. Most of the cookbooks’ discursive strategies proceed from an elaboration of the kitchen as site for production of nationhood: They iterate the significance of domestic operations for the national project, outlining the intellectual demands of housekeeping as well as its potential accomplishments in the service of national expansion and cohesion.

Works Cited


16 In fact, this reliance on measures is being introduced to culinary writing in the 19th century and only gradually becomes a convention. Among the books I looked at, some were very meticulous about weighing and measuring ingredients (cf. Leslie; Hale) and others were not (cf. Child; Beecher).

17 “Woman’s profession embraces the care and nursing of the body in the critical periods of infancy and sickness, the training of the human mind in the most impressionable period of childhood, the instruction and control of servants, and most of the government and economies of the family state. These duties of woman are as sacred and important as any ordained to man; and yet no such advantages for preparation have been accorded to her, nor is there any qualified body to certify the public that a woman is duly prepared to give proper instruction in her profession” (19).


