Have Your Cake: Constructing A Confectionery Vernacular in the Great Depression

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ABSTRACT

Sweets—cake, candy, cookies, ice cream, and any other sugary treat—are a favored component of the American diet. They are also a familiar motif in the American cultural landscape. From the Good Ship Lollipop to Candy Crush Saga, imagined and imagined confections suffuse media and amusements, where they serve as both site and subject for negotiating economic and social tensions in the collective imagination. The visual and material depiction of sweets in the cultural landscape composes what I call the “confectionery vernacular,” a hybrid graphic language composed of imaginaries rife with sweet motifs. Such imaginaries provide an interdisciplinary framework within which to consider the American experience. Whether illustrated, photographed, filmed, or fabricated, these inedible reproductions do not impart sugar’s neurochemical or gustatory pleasures, yet their prevalence affirms sweets’ power to satisfy more than hunger.

In the mass culture of the American 1930s, imagined scenarios of confectionery abundance probed anxieties related to widespread economic and social instability. This dissertation explores imaginaries of the confectionery vernacular constructed in four specific sites. The Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle, a Hamburg, New Jersey roadside attraction, was a three-story monument that used imaginary edibility to promote nutritious whole wheat snacks. A selection of short cartoons set in confectionery Cockaignes borrowed tropes from Medieval folklore to imagine worlds of redemptive abundance and leisure. A second set of narrative cartoons lampooned confectionery mass-production and probed the indignities of industrial alienation. Finally, at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, the Continental Baking Company’s Wonder Bakery used a beloved fairy tale, an urban wheat field, and a sexy scarecrow to mitigate consumer apprehension about mass-produced baked goods. From the Great Depression to the present, a confectionery vernacular has coalesced imagination, aesthetics, and social mores into a visual network, mapping how people construct meaning in hardship and in comfort.
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This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, who taught me how to bake.
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Introduction | Creating a Confectionery Vernacular in the Great Depression

In late 1934, Samuel Goldwyn Productions released the black-and-white feature *Kid Millions*, the studio’s latest in a series of madcap musical comedies starring the popular entertainer Eddie Cantor. Rising employment, a stabilized banking system, and focused federal relief efforts suggested that the worst of the Great Depression was past, but for millions of Americans, deprivation and insecurity remained both a fear and a threat.¹ *Kid Millions* offered audiences a two-hour respite from such anxieties with the story of Eddie Wilson, Jr., a hapless but good-natured Brooklynite whose humble life abruptly changes course with the news that he has inherited a $77 million fortune. In order to claim the windfall, Eddie must travel to Egypt, where New York gangsters, mistaken identities, and ancient curses threaten his success at every turn. In the end, of course, he secures his fortune and returns to New York, where newspaper headlines announce his future plans: *Boy Millionaire to Open Free Ice Cream Factory.*²

A seven-minute Technicolor finale depicting Eddie’s ice cream enterprise concludes the film with a musical fantasy of confectionery commerce. Samuel Goldwyn Productions’ stock dance company, the Goldwyn Girls, comprise the improbable labor pool at Eddie’s factory and feature prominently in the sequence. Dancers gracefully ascend a two-story ice cream churn while holding aloft outsized strawberries, chocolate bars, and bottles of vanilla; on figure skates, they work in teams to operate the churn’s

¹ Throughout this dissertation, “Americans” refers to any people living in the United States regardless of their citizenship status or country of origin. Historian David M. Kennedy documents that by 1932, the unemployment rate had neared 20 percent; independent banks across the nation—and particularly those in working-class and immigrant communities—had begun to fail; and malnourishment plagued as many as twenty thousand New York City schoolchildren in *The American People in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 86–87.
² *Kid Millions*, directed by Roy Del Ruth (1934; Los Angeles, CA: Warner Archive, 2013), DVD.
Figs. Intro.1 (left) and Intro.2 (right). Stills from *Kid Millions* (1934, dir. Roy Del Ruth).

Fig. Intro.3. Still from *Kid Millions* (1934, dir. Roy Del Ruth).
gargantuan cranks; further down the production line, they pose atop Neapolitan ice cream bars the size of foot lockers. Meanwhile, children mob the factory entrance chanting “We want ice cream! We want ice cream!” with musical urgency before breaking down the door and swarming the facility. Eddie cheerfully seats the clamoring youngsters at ten-foot-high ice cream sodas and at rows of tables between which he pilots an elaborate vehicle that discharges molded frozen desserts; after licking their plates clean, the children exit, clutching their now heavily-padded midsections in satisfaction and discomfort. Contentedly surveying the scene, the newly minted dessert titan serenades his girlfriend with a reprise of the film’s musical theme, singing “We’ve got our great big ice cream factory / and everything is as it ought to be / for I have you, and sweetheart, you have me / since my ship came in.” A simple man, Eddie needs only the woman he loves, $77 million dollars, and a great big ice cream factory in order to be happy.

Punctuating an amiable if formulaic film, the Kid Millions ice cream fantasy coda celebrated shameless gluttony, dressed proletarian labor in elegant whimsy, and imagined benevolent capitalist production systems as the common man’s dream-come-true. The sequence was exuberant and imaginative, but it was not unique. Throughout the 1930s there emerged in the cultural landscape a variety of texts and artifacts that presented abundant, elaborate, and outrageous sweets as both motif and subject through which to negotiate desire, need, labor, industrialization, and other imperatives of capitalism. In this landscape, imagined and imaginary sweets compose what I have

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3 “Sweets” is a broad term, but one that adequately captures the category of food with which this project is concerned: sweetened, processed products and dishes of incidental nutritional value. By “sweetened” I refer to any foodstuff whose ingredients include natural, refined, or artificial sweeteners that are employed to impart taste. “Processed,” for my purposes, refers to foodstuffs—whether commercially or domestically
termed the *confectionery vernacular*: a hybrid graphic imaginary that employs visual and material depictions of sweets to engage material realities of everyday life. In the American 1930s, such imaginaries engaged economic aspirations and anxieties that fomented during the Great Depression.

This dissertation investigates these confectionery imaginaries in a selection of Depression-era cultural artifacts, including animated cartoons that depicted imaginary systems of production and abundance, the Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle roadside amusement, and the Continental Baking Company’s Wonder Bakery pavilion at the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair. Each composed a discrete fantasy predicated on the presence of abundant sweets that were enormous in size or proliferate in quantity. Borrowed European folklore, vivid colors, carnivals and parades, and anthropomorphic confections enhanced the confectionery whimsy that saturated these exuberant imaginaries. But the same colorful reveries also interpreted and engaged many of the normative capitalist values inherent in the Depression’s real and threatened indignities. Across the decade, a visual dialogue between confections, commerce, and consumption organized animated and architectural amusements into a unified cultural category in which sweets engage conditions of capitalism and related anxieties during the Great Depression.

Three phenomena make the 1930s a rich period in which to investigate cultural depictions of sweets and desserts. First, and most obvious, is the economic and

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produced—that result from the deliberate physical and/or chemical manipulation of ingredients. By defining sweets within these parameters, I hope to mitigate the term’s ambiguities while maintaining its breadth. Sweets might include baked goods such as cake, cookies, and pastry; candy; ice cream and other frozen confections and novelties; sweet puddings, custards, and gelatin dishes; or any other sweet treat whose consumption imparts pleasure. “Confections” means the same thing.
structural instability that defined that decade. Years of economic depression and contraction, mass unemployment, and disastrous agricultural conditions disrupted security, diminished living standards, and dampened the spirits of millions of Americans. In a period when mere sustenance was a struggle for many, popular amusements built around fantasies of confectionery abundance demonstrate the diverse ways in which people contended with the fears and realities of austerity and indulgence. The role of food—and particularly of food not essential for nutrition or sustenance, a category that emphatically includes sweets in virtually any form—maps in interesting ways with a depression economy and culture because it similarly negotiates questions of deprivation and desire. When money is tight and luxuries are few, sweets offer a form of affordable indulgence for many.

Second, labor and industrialization uniquely influenced cultural content across the 1930s. In his comprehensive exploration of popular front cultural production, historian Michael Denning declares the period one in which “Both high culture and mass culture took on a distinctly plebeian accent” as the working classes enjoyed new agency in cultural production and labor ideology emerged as a popular theme in visual and performance art.⁴ Art historian Ericka Doss observes that, while images of labor were not absent from early-twentieth–century visual culture, they became more prominent during the Depression years; she attributes this proliferation to the Social Realism artistic movement’s documentary inclinations, and to New Deal recovery efforts that established the federal government as “the major patron of American art” in an attempt to “generate unity and restore confidence in American capitalism and democracy,” two

regimes that logically brought depictions of work and workers to the fore as subjects.⁵ As the texts in this dissertation reveal, sweets and desserts provided a distinctive visual language through which to explore familiar aspects of work, respite, and reward.

Third, the thirties represented a pivotal moment in cultural production, consumption, and content. Technology was perhaps the single greatest catalyst in this seismic shift toward a true mass culture. National broadcasting chains unified radio listeners into a national audience and shaped domestic tastes and trends at a speed and scale previously impossible.⁶ At the movies, refinements in sound and color technology facilitated increasingly sophisticated visual and narrative texts.⁷ Though the poor economy substantially reduced new car sales in the early years of the Depression, “car ownership proved to be remarkably ‘depression-proof’” according to historian Gijs Mom, and throughout the decade there appeared new developments in landscape, architecture, and amusements that reflected an emerging car culture and reliance on the automobile that would be entrenched by midcentury.⁸ Finally, large-scale international expositions attracted large numbers of Americans eager for distraction, with six such events cumulatively drawing nearly 100 million visitors across the decade.⁹

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Economic depression and individual hardship may have informed the tenor of the decade, but such woes could not restrain the country’s steady march toward modernity. Each of these phenomena—economic hardship, reconfigured relationships to labor and industry, and evolving forms of amusement—were relevant to the confectionery depictions that emerged in popular amusements of the 1930s, shaping both their form and their content. In some of these artifacts, sweets were a site and subject in which cultural consumers could imagine respite from the degradations of deprivation. In others, confectionery motifs redressed the frustrations that attended industrial labor by presenting large-scale production scenarios as fantasies of exuberant efficiency. Across this content, imaginary confections reflected, engaged, and mitigated some of the harsher realities that plagued millions.

At the same time, it is imperative to note that most of the confectionery imaginaries explored in this dissertation were corporate creations. Whether architectural attractions or films designed for theatrical release, each of these cultural products was produced for enjoyment by a diverse population during empirically troubling times. Consumers had license to interpret them in any number of ways, including ways that engaged one’s own experiences and understanding. But if it is possible to identify ways in which these entertainments reflected or resonated with the experiences of socially and economically disenfranchised consumers, the fact remains that they were products of established corporate outfits in baking and animation. The confectionery amusements explored in the following chapters suggest awareness of and sympathy for the material and economic anxieties that troubled a populace in search of diversion, but all of these amusements emerged from and reflected the interests of industry and capital.
The confectionery vernacular of the Great Depression was an industry-driven cultural phenomenon coalescing imagination, aesthetics, and social mores into a visual network that mapped how people imagined and constructed joy amid suffering and fear.

*America’s Culture of Sweets*

The sugary motifs on which this project focuses appeared in the cultural landscape throughout the 1930s, but confectionery imaginaries are neither a product of nor restricted to that decade. Illustrated, filmed, or fabricated iterations of sweets appeared in commercial and cultural content long before and after the interwar period. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, advertisements, trade cards, valentines, menus, and other ephemera depicted elaborate, whimsical, and sentimental scenes that appealed to the cultural imagination in order to advertise branded commodities.\(^1^0\) The board game Candy Land, developed to entertain children stricken with polio in the mid-1940s and first marketed by Milton Bradley in 1949, remains in production today and has sold more than forty million copies.\(^1^1\) In the 1980s, the Strawberry Shortcake line of dessert-them ed dolls became the first branded toys to helm a television series after the Federal Communications Commission dismantled restrictions on children’s advertising.\(^1^2\) For ten years in the twenty-first century, the *Washington Post* hosted the popular Peeps Diorama Competition, an annual contest in which contestants from

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\(^{10}\) William Woys Weaver, *Culinary Ephemera: An Illustrated History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).


around the country submitted dioramas “depicting scenes that reflected the country as they saw it, but with marshmallow bunnies and chicks.”

Over decades and centuries, imaginary iterations and material models of sweets have reflected and played roles in phenomena wholly unrelated to dessert.

The frequency with which confectionery themes and motifs augment children’s texts and artifacts is no coincidence. Children and marketing represent two spheres, frequently overlapping, in which confectionery vernaculars commonly operate. Confectionery depictions do not require corporate sponsorship or juvenile consumers, but when sweets appear in the cultural landscape, commerce and kids are often close at hand. Both biology and history support the supposition that children enjoy a particular affinity for sweets. Peer-reviewed study suggests that human beings exhibit a “universal” preference for sweet tastes in infancy and childhood. In the nineteenth century, industrial food processing helped to establish a juvenile consumer base for sweets by facilitating candy’s mass production and distribution, which in turn lowered prices and expanded access; according to historian Wendy Woloson, “penny candies counted among the first thing American children ever spent their own money on,” and this market proved particularly important for working-class children who enjoyed fewer consumer opportunities than their middle-class counterparts. Confectionery intervention in juvenile and ethnic class distinctions persisted in turn-of-the-century New

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York City, where the cheapness and variety of American candy permitted Italian immigrants to cheerfully indulge their children’s taste for it and progressive reformers histrionically blamed sweets for “widespread malnutrition” in immigrant communities. By the 1930s, children were established confectionery consumers, and it is reasonable to assume that savvy culture manufacturers employed confectionery motifs in an appeal to young audiences.

Neither juvenile fervor nor general appreciation among the adult population could protect sweets from attempts to police their consumption. The yen to connect pleasurable indulgence with hedonistic depravity and physical mortification aligned neatly with a largely mythologized American ethos traced to the country’s earliest European colonizers and the Reformed Christian theology they embraced. Two centuries after the first Puritans arrived in New World, established and would-be reformers excoriated sweets for wreaking physical havoc on body, mind, and spiritual well-being. Evangelical crusader Sylvester Graham, undoubtedly the best known member of this cohort, launched his dogmatic campaign against sugar—as well as meat, alcohol, coffee, and tea—in the 1830s, claiming that the “overstimulating” effects of sweeteners encouraged sexual depravity. Later in the century, physician John Harvey Kellogg adopted a comparably abstemious approach to diet, with particular

17 Historians have long determined that Puritans were not the sole arbiters of Colonial cultural modes. In a 1994 review of two contemporary histories on early American Puritan life, historian David M. Robinson notes that “Puritanism has been displaced from the central role once accorded it as the foundational movement of American culture and increasingly understood as one of many elements of a quite diverse colonial society,” an observation that challenges puritanical hegemony in American mores. David M. Robinson, “The Cultural Dynamics of American Puritanism,” American Literary History vol. 6 no. 4 (Winter 1994): 738; Marilyntyne Robinson, “Puritans and Prigs: An Anatomy of Zealotry,” Salmagundi no. 187 (Summer 2015).
emphasis on the exclusion of candy and spices that he, too, feared might incite sexual satisfaction.\textsuperscript{19} Various factions within the Temperance movement similarly eschewed sweets, albeit for a different set of reasons; these reformers feared that sugar—already a prominent ingredient in many liquors and cordials—might act as a gateway or supplement to alcohol consumption, and as such invited the likelihood of overindulgence, which was itself a form of abuse.\textsuperscript{20} For Graham and Kellogg, the pleasures of sweets were licentious; for temperance crusaders, they were gluttonous. Common across these prescriptions was the belief that even controlled indulgence in sweet treats signaled greater moral crisis for uncontrolled and uncontrollable bodies.

Moralistic reactionaries may have been sincere in their belief that the pleasure one derived from sugar reflected and portended spiritual ills, but the broader population did not share this didacticism. In the United States, as in most of the world, sweets engage a primarily positive response. Entrenched relationships with celebration and reward associate sweets with personal and collective pleasure. The use of sweets to commemorate particular events codes these foods as “special,” and rituals associated with production, procurement, and consumption reinforce the privileged status of these treats. These rituals comprise a set of commonly shared experiences that Americans, like all cultural groups, use to forge communal identity. Presiding over one’s birthday cake, baking Christmas cookies, and compensating children with candy are not uniquely American practices, but participation in these rituals contributes to our collective

\textsuperscript{19} Woloson, \textit{Refined Tastes}, 139.
\textsuperscript{20} Nancy N. Chen, \textit{Food, Medicine, and the Quest for Good Health} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 60.
understanding of ceremony and accomplishment, and facilitates the ways in which we authenticate experience.²¹

Rituals associated with sweets both require and demonstrate cultural literacy. When they bear special meaning, many foods require specific contextualization in order to delineate the significance. This is best evidenced by a variety of holidays with confectionary affiliations. To distribute candy corn on the Fourth of July or garnish Easter baskets with candy canes would reject arbitrary but entrenched agreement regarding the celebratory auspices under which certain treats are appropriate for consumption, and reveal those who violate these norms to be cultural transgressors. Conversely, appropriate appreciation for and contextualization of sweets and their consumption indicates cultural fluency. Cultural legitimacy is not only vested in the affiliation of specific foods with specific events, but also in foods that have been determined to reflect or reference a culture that embraces them.²² Relationships between food and culture do not always hold up to close scrutiny, as an expression like “as American as apple pie” reveals: the pastry’s origins in fact lie in European cuisine centuries before the formation of the United States. Despite the fallacy—and despite food writer Kathleen Smallzried’s suggestion that “as American as chocolate layer cake” could correct the metaphor’s accuracy without sacrificing its orientation around dessert—apple pie remains the prevailing culinary emblem of American sentimental nationalism.²³


Consuming sweets is a complex cultural exercise, and mastery of its rituals and meanings facilitates cultural inclusion. In the United States, sweets have long mapped relationships between want and need by marking evolving relationships of deprivation, sacrifice, indulgence, and pleasure. In doing so, sweets not only serve as symbols of satisfaction and joy, but mechanisms through which to judge the habits and pleasures of others. Other negotiations with sweets occur in more fundamental planes, beginning with the five senses.

*Sweets and the Senses*

There exists an obvious visceral impetus to eat sweets: they taste good. Of course, this preference is not universal—plenty of people don’t care for sweets, and few people indiscriminately like all sweets—but Sidney Mintz observes that there do not exist any societies that reject sweetness outright.\(^{24}\) Though infinite psychological, social, and cultural systems construct the pleasure that people experience when consuming sweet food and drink, the fundamental satisfaction that sweetness imparts is physiologically and neurochemically conditioned. Biochemical processes translate sugar on the tongue into pleasure in the brain by stimulating the production of dopamine, a neurotransmitter that produces euphoria and dulls discomfort. The same neurochemical combustion processes can trigger sugar cravings and dependence that some neuroscientists suggest mimic that seen in narcotic addiction.\(^{25}\) Sweets are not merely


tasty, but actively soothing, and consuming them overpowers and distracts from anxieties in the human body and mind.

Sensory engagement with confections neither begins nor ends with pleasant tastes and functional synaptic responses. Sweets taste good, but they often look good too, and the aesthetic gratification they provide augments their visceral satisfactions. Not all sweets are pretty, or even interesting to look at. More often than not, gingerbread, brownies, and caramels are little more than brown squares; numberless types of cookies are beige circles; and semisoft confections from rice pudding to vanilla ice cream are little more than off-white blobs. These natural and utilitarian forms do not compromise flavor, but their visual presentation rarely garners acclaim. However, sweets can also be eye-catching and whimsical in ways that other foodstuffs are rarely presented. Jewel-toned candies, decorated cakes, marzipan animals, and rainbow sherbet invite conscious and unconscious appreciation for their novel forms, vibrant colors, and evident artistic competence. Culinary cultures in Austria, France, Germany, and Italy have long embraced ornate and whimsical pastries for consumption and display, and the sugar sculpture, architectural cakes, and other fancy treats celebrated in European confectionery traditions would come to influence and inspire American pastry chefs and confectioners by the early twentieth century.\textsuperscript{26} Fanciful or elaborate articulation does not ensure pleasing flavors or textures, as anyone who has tasted a marshmallow circus peanut can attest, but sophisticated forms complicate a consumer’s engagement with the treats they consume and compound the pleasures of consumption.

The relative ease with which confections adopt inorganic form, color, detail, and decoration is due in large part to the chemical makeup of their essential ingredient, sugar. Sugar’s volatile chemical bonds cause its physical form to alter dramatically when subjected to heat, liquid, and other variables. Crystalline lollipops, sticky caramel, tender cakes, and snowy, spongy marshmallows all owe their distinctive textures to large proportions of sugar and specialized processing methods. The unique malleability that sugar can impart facilitates sculpting but also permits reworking to a degree that more fragile foodstuffs resist. Moreover, refined sugar’s white crystals accommodate coloring agents with a fidelity that darker and more robustly hued foods cannot duplicate. The sweetness of sugar may be relatively one-dimensional, but the plasticity it lends to confections make that category of food the most structurally, visually, and aesthetically interesting for confectioners with artistic inclinations.

Sweets are uniquely nuanced, broadly popular, historically important, and prevalent across centuries of American history. Industrial technology has facilitated their visual and material reproduction in mass culture—whether in nineteenth-century cookbook illustrations or the Candy Crush Saga gaming app on an iPhone—for nearly two centuries. If confections have always been complex cultural and aesthetic artifacts, and have long appeared in mediatized form, why do the confectionery imaginaries of the 1930s demand closer scrutiny?

*The American Great Depression*

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Defining the Decade

Throughout this work I refer interchangeably to “the 1930s,” “the Great Depression,” and “the Depression” or “Depression-era” events and phenomena. Though the temporal boundaries of this periodization are somewhat ambiguous, the economic phenomena that organized it into a cohesive cultural moment were not. Collapsed wages, mass unemployment, and decreased production impacted individuals, families and whole regions, and attuned the American populace to the threat and fear of poverty for the better part of a decade. October 28, 1929, known as “Black Monday” due to the U.S. stock market’s loss of $30 billion in value in a single day, marks the Great Depression’s starting point in popular memory. In reality, the Depression’s roots ran deeper than that single—albeit calamitous—economic event. Between the conclusion of World War I and Black Monday, haphazard monetary policy, rampant agricultural surplus, and growing income disparity catalyzed the stock market collapse and the pervasive consequences of the years-long contraction that followed. Despite this traumatic legacy, economist Alexander J. Field identifies the 1930s as “the most technologically progressive decade” of the American twentieth century, and declares that “invention and innovation in the 1930s was significant, in ways not well appreciated, both in facilitating the remarkable U.S. economic performance before and during World War II and in establishing foundations for the prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s.”29 Field’s contention runs counter to how Americans conceptualize insolvency in general

and the Great Depression in particular, but these competing narratives neatly illustrate the period’s deceptive complexity.

Directly and indirectly, the Great Depression’s economic and social upheaval shaped the development of a specifically American culture whose products ranged from swing to Shirley Temple and whose consumers sought distraction from and validation of prevalent anxieties. In their respective works “The Culture of the Thirties” and *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*, historians Warren Susman and Morris Dickstein detail the ways in which the period affected a shift in cultural creation and consumption. The transfer of cultural stewardship from the elite to the middle classes, new reliance on mediatized culture for both escapism and education, and evolving notions of the individual, society, stasis, and motion all helped to forge an American culture whose audience, aesthetic, and ideology were newly national. Mass media, and particularly film and radio, constructed audiences whose size and diversity expanded on a diet of shared cultural products; this consumption occurred in both public and domestic spheres as movie attendance grew and radios appeared in more homes. The convergence of the above phenomena supports Susman’s proposal that it was “during the Thirties that the idea of culture was domesticated, with important consequences. Americans then began thinking in terms of patterns of behavior and belief, values and life-styles, symbols and meanings.”

30 Economic and social pressures created adaptive opportunities and imperatives.

Both Susman and Dickstein identify the evolving characterization of the individual as a trope that directly reflected both historical and newly urgent anxieties related to the

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American success myth. In the harsh early years of the Depression, depictions of the individual ignored by or in conflict with society deviated from past lore that had celebrated the exceptionalism of cultural heroes from Benjamin Franklin to Horatio Alger. In the latter half of the decade, the stigma connecting individualism, isolation, and failure ebbed as economic and social conditions improved. At the same time, commitment to communal cultural participation proliferated in the stabilizing middle class and in the narratives they consumed. Movement and stasis formed another dichotomy central to Depression-era cultural ideology. Any form of advancement, suggested or simulated physically, aurally, and visually, stemmed fears of stagnation and defeat. Dickstein estimates that “not money and success, not even elegance and sophistication were the real dream of the expressive culture of the 1930s, but this dream of mobility, with its thrust toward the future.”

Locomotive big-band rhythms, frenetic animated cartoons, and industrial design predicated on the suggestion of movement and flow all allowed consumers to vicariously experience a dynamism that countermanded the economic and social paralyses that colored lived experience for many in the thirties.

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32 Historian Joel Dinerstein proposes that while “Jazz was the nation’s popular music in the Machine Age (1919–45) because its driving, syncopated rhythms reflected the speeded-up tempo of life produced by industrialization in the American workplace and the mechanization of urban life,” the unparalleled popularity of swing in the mid-thirties was “both a morale boost for a nation in depression and a reflection of the relative freedom African Americans felt in New York, Chicago,” and other urban destinations in the Great Migration. Joel Dinerstein, *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), 5–6.
Fraught Foodways of the 1930s

Few cultural artifacts more accurately distill Depression-era stagnation than photographs of breadlines that stretch for city blocks, which crystalize the scope of deprivation, the indignities it forced, and the snail's pace at which it was mitigated. These images, like legends of former titans selling apples on the street, reflect how deeply food and hunger shape popular conceptualization of the Great Depression in the popular imagination. In her 2012 article “Summoning the Food Ghosts: Food History as Public History,” historian Megan Elias identifies times of scarcity as valuable periods in which to study foodways because these periods necessarily “involve the compelling themes of tradition, loss, hunger, and ingenuity.” These themes pervade the Depression years, in which food insecurity became both hallmark and rallying point for Americans suffering the experience, threat, or fear of poverty. Inconsistent or incomplete access to appropriate nourishment, organized relief efforts, and creative provisioning at home shaped individual and collective experience in the 1930s, and underscore the decade’s intractable association with food insecurity.

Starvation, chronic hunger, and malnourishment were the most severe consequences of Depression-era food insecurity, and their prevalence is difficult to quantify. Relief records, first-person accounts, and journalistic coverage identify and document pervasive hunger as a reality for many Americans across the 1930s. For others, access to food that was nourishing, plentiful, and pleasing may have been compromised, but it was not defined by the trauma of food insecurity. For this relatively fortunate population, as well as those who did not suffer any reduction of circumstances

in the 1930s, the tension between need and want—not starvation and satiation—
informed relationships with food. The shifting roles of austerity and its antithesis,
abundance, inscribed foodways throughout the Great Depression.

Prior to the Great Depression, municipal and voluntary relief agencies were the
primary sources of food assistance for the poor. The celebrated prosperity of the
1920s had eluded many communities in a country marked by increasing class
polarization, and unsurprisingly, the least socially enfranchised were most vulnerable to
poverty and its existential challenges. In Chicago, which supported a strong industrial
economy and a large African-American population in the years leading up to the
Depression, the city’s Black working classes suffered high unemployment rates and
exploitation wages that complicated the ability to consistently secure food, housing, and
other fundamental needs. There and elsewhere, local charities could not adequately
support the numbers of those in need, and political and social attitudes that stigmatized
dependence on charity contributed to formal and *de facto* poor laws that further
compromised access to public assistance. Historian Alice O’Connor notes that “It was
the working class who fed the ranks of ‘the unable,’ who could not ‘secure the
necessary food, shelter, and care of health under the economic system’” in *Middletown,*
Robert and Helen Lynd’s seminal survey of American culture published in 1929.

Limited in size and by design before the 1930s, relief agencies in large cities and small

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towns alike lacked the resources and scope to accommodate surging numbers of needy Americans as the Depression got underway.

In the face of newly urgent and widespread need for food assistance there emerged a variety of imperfect provisioning systems, each designed to facilitate food access but vulnerable to the period’s economic constraints and social contestations. Widespread need quickly exhausted available funds for grocery allowances allotted to indigent families.\footnote{Poppendieck, \textit{Breadlines Knee-deep in Wheat}, 171–172.} Vouchers commonly limited users to a nutritious but monotonous diet heavy on beans, rice, and other staples that kept starvation at bay but generated resentment among those dependent on such humble repast.\footnote{Jane Ziegelman and Andrew Coe, \textit{A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression} (New York: Harper Collins, 2016), 134–136. According to historian Sharon McConnell-Sidorick, some organizations made a concerted effort to expand on bare-bones provisioning, as in one Philadelphia hosiery union that “always made a point of including candy as part of the food baskets” distributed to families with children in an effort to provide “some semblance of normalcy” to those households” in \textit{Silk Stockings and Socialism: Philadelphia’s Radical Hosiery Workers from the Jazz Age to the New Deal} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 140.} Federal Service Relief Corporation (FSRC) attempts to work with emergency commissaries—the precursor to modern food pantries—garnered outrage from a “national retail grocers organization” whose members criticized federal efforts for diverting business from local grocers.\footnote{Poppendieck, \textit{Breadlines Knee-deep in Wheat}, 164.} Relief agencies commonly limited such resources to families with children, a policy that left childless individuals and couples to contend with the breadlines and soup kitchens that proliferated in the early 1930s but still failed to meet need.\footnote{Poppendieck, \textit{Breadlines Knee-deep in Wheat}, 21–28.} The most desperate urban poor were reduced to begging, scavenging, and theft in an attempt to mitigate hunger.\footnote{Fred B. Glass, \textit{From Mission to Microchip: A History of the California Labor Movement} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 212–213; Poppendieck, \textit{Breadlines Knee-deep in Wheat}, 28.}
In agricultural regions, limited relief intervention, bankrupt communities, and geographical isolation compounded the likelihood of hunger and threat of starvation for many. Hunger relief efforts in rural regions tended to be even less effective than their urban counterparts, as “many rural areas had no relief apparatus other than a Red Cross chapter more oriented toward rescuing families trapped by floods or tornadoes than those stranded by economic upheaval.” Destructive weather catalyzed rural suffering with severe draughts in 1931, 1934, 1936, and 1939; these events devastated crops and created a crisis for farmers who, having lost their income and exhausted their credit, now faced foreclosure. For some, even subsistence farming proved unsustainable or impossible with single cash-crop farming and restrictive landlords; limited ability to produce one’s own food increased dependence on credit and left tenant farmers further in arrears. In the misplaced hope that the city offered more and better opportunities, many farming families migrated to urban regions. In the cities, however, few opportunities and long breadlines waited.

The foods we eat reflect the resources available in a given time and place, the events and processes that cultivated those resources, and the mores that shaped those processes. The natural environment, its inhabitants from microbes to mammals, and relationships among these elements all inform the ecosystems in which non-toxicity determines edibility at a fundamental level but cultivation shapes organic supplies to meet civilization’s demands. These demands are frequently cultural in prescription, with

roots in social, ethnic, and religious tradition. At the same time, economic operations govern the production, promotion, acquisition, and consumption of food, controlling consumer access to, affinity for, and affiliation with specific edibles. From the ingenuity with which people turn available resources into special treats, to the authority with which culinary tastes dictate cultural assimilation or segregation, food is an essential signifier across ecological, economic, and cultural systems. Inherently interdisciplinary and endlessly complex, foodways opens an invaluable course of study in the investigation of America’s economic and cultural history.

Review of the Literature

The vast catalog of scholarship investigating American foodways and broader culinary history continues to expand. From this wealth of information, a number of works have emerged as particularly useful to my own understanding and contextualization of Depression-era American foodways. Rachel Laudan’s Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History explores historical and cultural interventions that have shaped global foodways patterns throughout history, and though the scope of her work is extraordinarily broad, the markers she identifies have helped me to contextualize my own periodized research in a millennia-long history, and to understand how archaic and ancient practices inform contemporary ones. The seismic shift that Laudan sees represented in the rise of “middling cuisines” in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century United States offers a particularly valuable framework in which to consider the broader history and impact of dietary choice.\textsuperscript{46} Andrew Haley’s Turning the Tables:

\textsuperscript{46} Rachel Laudan, Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in Modern History (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).
Restaurants and the Rise of the American Middle Class, 1880–1920 positions Gilded Age restaurants as a site that established and embraced middle class authority.⁴⁷ In A Mess of Greens: Southern Gender and Southern Food, Elizbeth S.D. Englehardt considers shifting patterns in food production and consumption in the post-Reconstruction South, and argues that industrial labor was instrumental to trapping the working classes in detrimental culinary systems.⁴⁸ Katherine Leonard Turner’s How the Other Half Ate: A History of Working Class Meals at the Turn of the Century similarly contextualizes the relationship between industrial and manual labor shaped diet, arguing that particularly the diets of economically disenfranchised and socially marginalized workers reflected real and attempted agency beyond and in spite of the middling cuisines’ homogenizing authority.⁴⁹

Though works devoted to American foodways during the Great Depression are few in number, several have been foundational to my own scholarship. Janet Poppendieck’s Breadlines Knee-deep in Wheat: Food Assistance in the Great Depression provides a comprehensive overview of the political and social forces at work in Depression-era assistance programs that evolved from small-scale hunger-relief efforts in an attempt to address the politics and practical consequences of cyclical agricultural surplus. In Taste of the Nation: The New Deal Search for America’s Food, Camille Begin identifies “sensory economies” as an apparatus imperative to the construction of regional, national, and cultural tastes; her investigation ably analyzes

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WPA food writing to track this evolution. Finally, the popular history that Jane Coe and Andrew Ziegelman organize in *A Square Meal: A Culinary History of the Great Depression*, offers a broad analysis of how Depression’s economic and social conditions impacted dietary conventions, rituals, and practice.

Scholarship related to the political and economic history of sugar and other confectionery commodities has been more prolific. Much of this work builds on anthropologist Sidney Mintz’s 1985 book *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* which stands as a seminal text on cane sugar as an economic and social agent; this book remains foundational to more recent scholarship that investigates the ways that sugar has shaped colonization, capitalism, and global industrialization in the Western Hemisphere. Among this new scholarship, none has been more useful to my own work than April Merleaux’s *Sugar and Civilization: American Empire and the Cultural Politics of Sweetness*. Merleaux investigates sugar’s shifting commodity and cultural values across the first four decades of the twentieth century, and in processed confections identifies specifically American ideals and beliefs. In *Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World*, historian Marcy Norton contextualizes the global economy of chocolate and the colonizing exchange it fomented between South America, North America, and Europe. In comparison with these broader histories, Wendy Woloson’s *Refined Tastes: Sugar, Confectionery and Consumers in 19th-Century America* considers

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confectionery in the United States, proposing sweets as an evolving form of cultural capital from the Industrial Revolution through the Gilded Age.

Another growing category of food scholarship investigates ingredients and products used in baking, and is relevant to the study of desserts though plenty of baked goods are not sweet. Though the subject of Aaron Bobrow-Strain’s *White Bread: A Social History of the Storebought Loaf* is an American dietary staple rather than an indulgence, the book includes a valuable history of commercial baking’s industrialization in the United States, and it charts the changing social and cultural capital associated with baked goods in the early twentieth century.\(^5\) In *Baking Powder Wars: The Cutthroat Food Fight That Revolutionized Cooking*, Linda Civitello organizes the dynamic culinary and commercial history of a mundane chemical leavener and evidences the cultural value Americans invested in their home baking.\(^4\) Alysa Levene’s *Cake: A Slice of History* distills the sweetened baked good’s millennia of history into a concise overview of the ways ingredients, processes, and traditions have evolved around the globe.\(^5\) All of this literature contributes to a more thorough understanding of baking’s broader market systems.

A number of recent books and articles explore American food vending and purveyance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and help to contextualize where and how Americans procured retail food. Tracey Deutsch’s *Building a Housewife’s Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century*

explores the evolution of Chicago food shopping, which in the first decades of the twentieth century grew from local vendor-based markets to commercial supermarkets oriented in national chains; Deutsch’s analysis pivots on the political, social, and cultural labor that she identifies in the act of food purveyance.\footnote{Tracey Deutsch, \textit{Building a Housewife’s Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).} In \textit{Food Co-ops in America: Communities, Consumption and Economic Democracy}, Anne Meis Knupfer outlines the political and economic agency that cooperative production and markets established alongside and despite dominant models.\footnote{Anne Meis Knupfer, \textit{Food Co-ops in America: Communities, Consumption and Economic Democracy} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).} Ann McCleary’s article “Negotiating the Urban Marketplace: Farm Women’s Curb Markets in the 1930s” offers a concise analysis of how small urban street markets offered an income line to rural women with otherwise limited access to paid labor; equally valuable is McCleary’s illustration of the cultural capital that urban consumers identified in food procured outside of rising supermarket chains.\footnote{Ann McCleary, “Negotiating the Urban Marketplace: Farm Women’s Curb Markets in the 1930s,” Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture vol. 13 no. 1 (2006).} Finally, Kyla Wazana Tompkins has significantly influenced this dissertation and my own research with her groundbreaking book \textit{Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century}, which develops “critical eating studies” as an interdisciplinary framework through which she confronts the convergence of edibility, race, and the body.\footnote{Kyla Wazana Tompkins, \textit{Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century} (New York: NYU Press, 2012).} Each of these works helps to broaden both the definition and understanding of food studies, forging new ways to think about food, culture, and our consumption of both.
Plan of the Work

It has been my goal in this introduction to outline the broad significance of sweets in American diet and culture, and to define the unique socioeconomic conditions that shaped daily life in the 1930s. The chapters that follow will use this contextual knowledge as a foundation for close readings of cultural artifacts that used visual and material depictions of sweets to reflect, escape, or explore the lived experience during this period. In each of these texts and artifacts, depicted sweets exist in conjunction with ideology and infrastructure related to production and labor.

Chapter one looks at the Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle in Hamburg, New Jersey, and explores how this roadside attraction served as an unlikely convergence point for nutrition, sweets, and fantasy. Wheatsworth, Inc., a commercial baking outfit that made whole wheat cookies, crackers, and flour, was one of the first American companies to successfully develop a national market share for processed health foods. Eager to capitalize on one of the company’s real estate holdings and inspired by a Metropolitan Opera production of Hānsel und Gretel, Wheatsworth president Frederick H. Bennett commissioned a grand architectural novelty for the New Jersey property: a three-story castle designed to look as though it were constructed from candy, cookies, and cake. Metropolitan Opera production designer and seminal interwar architect and design authority Joseph Urban designed the Castle, which shared its site with an existing Wheatsworth flour mill and processing plant. A whimsical recreational space alongside modern production facilities, the Gingerbread Castle’s use of fabricated sweets to promote both imagination and industry predicted a confectionery vernacular that would appear repeatedly in the following decade’s cultural artifacts.
Cockaigne, an imaginary land of gastronomic abundance that suffused and inspired cultural texts throughout medieval Europe, contextualizes the confectionery themes explored in chapter two. This chapter examines five Depression-era animated films set in fantastic realms that teem with enormous, proliferate, or anthropomorphic confections. Produced between 1933 and 1937, these short cartoons reflect and reinterpret a number of conceits that underlie the notion of Cockaigne. The most fundamental of these is gastronomic in the broader category of Cockaigne, and confectionery in these American iterations. Across the imaginary worlds depicted in these cartoons, sweets organically compose the natural and built environments and the denizens who inhabit those spaces. Visitors may occupy and consume the edible landscape without guilt or shame, though not necessarily without consequence. And crucially, these realms and their provisioning require no labor of their colonizers. Freedom from work, inexhaustible resources, and proliferate indulgence posited true fantasy during a period in which joblessness was a crisis, surplus food an economic burden, and even simple luxuries were out of reach for many. With increasingly sophisticated technology and evolving mastery of technique, animation studios on both coasts conjured vibrant worlds whose imagined and imaginative confections coupled fantasies of abundance coupled with cautions of excess.

While Depression-era Cockaigne cartoons divorced confectionery cornucopia from the labor and operations that production typically demands, a different set of animated texts from the same period tackled these phenomena head-on. Chapter three continues to explore the confectionery motifs in animated films of the 1930s, but shifts the focus from Cockaigne’s magical provisioning to the industrial mass production of
confections and baked goods. Across the four cartoons examined here, non-human workers, disproportionate scale, outlandish machinery, and impossible procedures emerged as common elements, constructing tropes that cast confectionery labor as a fun and fantastic endeavor that is no longer legible as labor. At the same time, notes of discord and anxiety also infused these scenarios, and quietly acknowledged the physical and psychic concessions that industrial capitalism demands from its workers.

In a period of compromised indulgence and employment, confectionery production cartoons offered viewers a double fantasy predicated on abundant sweets and functional industry, but could not avoid visual reference to industrial labor’s psychic toll.

Industrialized confectionery production remains a central topic in chapter four, but the setting shifts from imaginary spaces on film to the real world of the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair and the Continental Baking Company exhibit mounted there. The Continental site merged industrial production, fantasy, agrarianism, and titillation in an exhibit designed to sell baked goods, and to sell customers on modern baked-goods production. The Wonder Bakery that anchored the site was a visually striking facility in which the latest industrial technology and processes created mass-produced bread and cake. However, the disparate motifs that decorated the modernist bakery and the exhibit’s affiliated attractions betrayed an assumption that modernism and efficiency could not sufficiently attract and sustain public engagement. Fantasy characters that served as corporate brand ambassadors, a field of wheat, and a provocatively outfitted and thoroughly personified high-fashion scarecrow loaned a visual and thematic novelty that piqued public interest despite minimal relevance to Continental’s Wonder Bread and Hostess Cakes lines. At an event designed to celebrate “the World of Tomorrow”
and a site that sold popular sweet treats, the Wonder Bakery’s chaotic pastiche illustrates corporate and consumer expectations of recognizable whimsy in confectionery marketing.

Finally, my conclusion queries the confectionery vernacular’s expression in the twenty-first-century United States, and explores how visual and material depictions of sweets during the Great Depression converse with similar imaginaries centered in cultural texts from the past decade. Consideration of the high-sugar American diet are central to this conversation, as are the serious health crises that overconsumption of sweets has fostered. No less relevant are the free market systems under which contemporary Americans face unprecedented economic exploitation in the form of income disparity, wage stagnation, and a predatory for-profit health care industry. In three recent texts, a culinary vernacular illuminates and probes these realities. In Whipped Cream, a 2016 American Ballet Theater adaption of Richard Strauss’s 1924 ballet Schlagobers, a sweets-laden celebration turns into a surrealist nightmare when a young child’s overconsumption of dessert leads him into a feverish world of anthropomorphized treats and punitive medical professionals. I then turn my lens to digital media to consider how a comical selfie featuring an international ice cream chain’s corporate mascot supported two viral memes highlighting worker exploitation in the summer of 2018 and again in the spring of 2020 as the United States faced the encroaching Covid-19 pandemic. At the ballet and in these popular memes, cultural producers harnessed the visual language of sweets to express social commentary.

Though the media and historical conditions that informed these texts differ from those at play in the artifacts explored in the interceding chapters, the confectionery vernacular
and the imaginaries it contains remain a vibrant and vital cultural language for articulating social and economic frustrations.

*Interventions in the Field*

Food is a biological necessity that nourishes and sustains life; a material commodity inseparable from ecological, economic, and political systems; and a cultural commodity whose associated rituals govern individual and collective identities. However, the food on our plates—and on the vine, at the supermarket, and in our stomachs—is not the only food that we consume. Depictions of food fill American visual art, the built environment, live performance, and digital media; sweets, in particular, have proved to be a popular subject and motif. Though imaged and imagined confections cannot impart the gustatory satisfactions that real sugary treats provide, thematic employment in the cultural landscape indicates that sweets are important and appealing signifiers. My research identifies some of the diverse confectionery depictions that emerged during the Great Depression and seeks to organize these mediatized and fabricated sweets into a unified vernacular that contends that moment’s lived experiences. In doing so, this dissertation makes interventions into two fields of scholarship: interwar cultural history and American foodways.

Historians of the Great Depression have written much about the period’s cultural output, the products of which cannot be disengaged from the tumultuous economic and social conditions under which they were created. Texts and artifacts ranging from screwball comedies and William Faulkner novels to Mickey Mouse watches and
Streamline Moderne have garnered investigation and critique as reflections of American virtues and values in a historically contentious moment. No existing scholarship identifies or investigates the confectionery motifs that appeared throughout mass culture of the American 1930s, however, despite the myriad ways that depictions of sweets engaged prevalent economic anxieties and aspirations. My research breaks new ground in the cultural history of the Depression by presenting confectionery depictions as a unified category and cultural subject that directly engaged capitalism.

This project intervenes in foodways scholarship first by encouraging a broader definition of food, one that is not defined by edibility. Though we cannot eat mediatized and fabricated confections, we still consume them through sensory channels. The cultural consumption of sweets codifies them as complex material, cultural, and economic signifiers. In my research I join a cadre of scholars for whom comprehensive foodways scholarship not only welcomes, but demands thorough consideration of food’s visual and material cultural context. Ultimately, this dissertation is a foodways project concerned with the surprising ways in which depictions of food infuse our lives, inform our understanding of cultural moments, and connect our lived experience to those of past and future generations.

Historian Kaitlin Murphy comments that, “When used strategically, old objects, whether overtly didactic or subtly evocative, are more than mere historical relics: they performatively embody lost stories and lives. These objects become tools through which to visibly and tangibly bring the past into the present, to vitalize and promulgate memory
narratives, and to render physically tangible the link between the past and present."\textsuperscript{60}

The amusement sites and animated films that constructed confectionery fantasies for public consumption in the American 1930s illustrate Murphy’s observation in the stories they tell and through the confectionery motifs they use to tell them.

March 16. Dear Ruby:— Have sent Mag. and papers to date will do my best about sending all I can. Times are dreadful here we have the Democratic party in power and they are composed of our worst kind of people—and we expect four years of very hard times we will be ruled entirely by Catholics as that is what the majority of that party are. The man who is President is no good for a President at all. I would not be surprised if we have Revolution here—he closed all the banks the minute he came in power and even now we cannot draw only a certain amount of our own money— love Betty 61

Written twelve days after Franklin Roosevelt’s first presidential inauguration in 1933, the above message unambiguously conveys its writer’s disgust for the new administration and frustration with its policies. Prejudice and histrionics color Betty’s sentiments, but cannot disguise her raw fear during a precipitous moment in which the American banking system threatened total collapse.62 The bank crisis compounded the pervasive socioeconomic trauma that gripped the country as the Depression slid into its fourth year, and under these deeply stressful conditions Betty’s rancorous anxiety was understandable, if ugly. Less congruous was the stationery that she used to express her discontent: a postcard depicting a black-and-white photograph of an ornate and strikingly lit castle fabricated to look as though it were constructed from candy and other

61 Betty, postcard to Ruby, March 16, 1933, author’s collection. Though the handwritten date does not include a year, the text’s lamentation that the president had “closed all the banks the minute he came in power” is surely a reference to the Emergency Banking Relief Act, passed at Franklin D. Roosevelt’s behest shortly after his first inauguration, allows us to confidently date the card to March 16, 1933. Roosevelt’s inauguration on March 4 marked the third week of a nationwide banking crisis during which thirty-two states were forced to declare bank holidays in the face of imminent collapse due to mass account closures. The new president promptly declared a national bank holiday and convened a special session of Congress to address the crisis. The session produced and passed the Emergency Banking Act, which among other things gave the federal government greater oversight of banks and facilitated currency issuance. The banks reopened on March 13. David M. Kennedy, *The American People in the Great Depression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 132-136
Fig. 1.1 Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle postcard. Author’s Collection.
sweets. On the reverse side, Betty had carefully written her note around a preprinted block of text that promised, “How the children thrill when they explore this magic Ginger Bread Castle designed by the great Joseph Urban! And grown ups, too, will enjoy this unique outdoor stage setting, and the historic Wheatsworth Mill of National Biscuit Company, ‘Uneeda Bakers,’ at Hamburg, N.J. The original mill was built there in 1808.”

The lineaments by which an anti-Roosevelt polemic might relate to a “unique outdoor stage setting” are nearly impossible to fathom, but the appearance of the Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle in a complex cultural text is fitting. Incongruity and contradiction defined the Castle, a lavish architectural endeavor that opened in 1930, a new moment of austerity in both economy and design, a monument to sugary excess that promoted the commercial output of a baking company’s nutritious product line, and a fairy tale fantasia built on an industrial production site. Across these complex affiliations, the structure’s confectionery motif emerged as an apparatus that deliberately and effectively distinguished its architectural design, heightened the thematic fantasy, and captured the public imagination.

The Gingerbread Castle provides a useful starting point in which to investigate Depression-era confectionery imaginaries. Most obviously, the Castle’s design embraces a visual and material motif predicated on imagined sweet edibility. However, the sugary aesthetic had little in common with the whole wheat snacks that Wheatsworth, Inc., produced, and this dissonance invites deeper consideration of the role of sugar and sweetness in nutritional commodification. The chronological moment in which the Castle emerged facilitates another useful study in contrasts: designed and constructed in the last heady years before recession set in, and with a grand opening
six months after Black Monday, the attraction straddled the economic turning point
initiating the Depression and a new decade. Above all, the Castle illustrates the
complex network of phenomena that influence the deployment and consumption of
confectionery motifs in the cultural landscape. Industrialization, European aesthetics,
car culture, and the mythologization of history all directly informed the development of
this confectionery fantasy space. The Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle and the
circumstances of its creation illustrate the pastiche at play in any confectionery vernacular.

**Nutrition and Industry**

**Industrial Origins**

In this chapter, as in the lived experience of many a frustrated child, we must
countenance nutrition before digging into promised confections. The corporate and
scientific history of the Wheatsworth company and the whole wheat products it
manufactured are undeniably less colorful—literally and metaphorically—than the
Gingerbread Castle and its material fantasy. It is impossible to understand the Castle’s
significance without a thorough sense of the industrial baking and health food systems
with which it was intrinsically linked, however, because those systems contribute to the
conditions from which confectionery fantasy ostensibly offers relief.

Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle was the brainchild of commercial bakery owner
and health food advocate Frederick H. Bennett, who conceived the attraction to direct
attention to the Wheatsworth line of whole wheat snacks and flours that anchored his
bakery’s commercial success. Scanty records occlude much of Bennett’s personal life,
but trade and economic reportage construct a somewhat more comprehensive professional narrative. His first known enterprise, the F.H. Bennett Biscuit Company. Established in Manhattan’s Lower East Side in 1907 with a $55,000 investment (approximately $1.5 million in 2021 dollars), endured a series of operational disasters that included equipment failure, fire, and disease among the livery teams that pulled delivery wagons. On the market side, the company’s outsized product line failed to establish a loyal customer base.63 Mounting hardships threatened to derail the enterprise entirely until Bennett’s development of a dog biscuit made from slaughterhouse milk run-off. The product’s economical ingredient sourcing might not have loaned itself to snappy ad copy, but the biscuit “made in the bone-like shape most attractive to dogs” satisfied pets and their owners alike.64 By 1915 Bennett had patented the form, registered the Milk-Bone trade name, and seen his professional fortunes turn with the canine product line whose strong market success “crowded out most of the other bakery products” that the Bennett Biscuit Company produced.65 However, the financial security that Milk-Bone afforded allowed for research and development in baked goods for human consumers, and in the early 1910s the Wheatsworth line of whole wheat products joined Milk-Bone as one of Bennett’s staple brands.

63 F.H. Bennett, “Wheatsworth,” The N.B.C. (April 1931): 14. An important source clarification: though its title invites confusion with the National Broadcasting Company, The N.B.C. was the corporate publication of the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco). A 1927 Los Angeles Times column alludes to Bennett’s having established his bakery in partnership with two of his brothers, both unnamed and neither of whom are included in any collateral or press coverage related to the castle: William Russell White, “Growth of Biscuit Concern Reflects Increasing Call for Health Food Brands,” Los Angeles Times, November 19, 1927, 12.
64 Advertisement: Maltoid Milk-Bone, Harford Courant, November 16, 1910, 6.
By the early twentieth century, an increasingly sophisticated understanding of nutritional science accurately identified the relative health benefits of some foods over others. For nineteenth-century dietary reformers, theological and ideological rationales had more commonly informed the promotion of minimally processed foods like whole wheat, whose bran and germ remain intact in order to preserve the additional vitamins and fiber contained therein. Frequently affiliated with Utopian, Transcendentalist, and Christian movements, early health-food advocates sought to “reaffirm the relationship between man and nature through the vehicle of nutrition” in a theological expression that aligned physical and spiritual well-being, and vested dietary choices with consequences for both body and soul.66 Presbyterian minister Sylvester Graham (1797–1851) remains the best-known of these crusaders due to his name’s continued attachment to unbolted graham flour and the snack commonly made from it, the graham cracker. Graham’s fevered campaign against masturbation and avarice commanded abstinence from sugar, meat, condiments, and other favored foods, and championed wholemeals as effective vice suppressants in a conflation of nutrition, celibacy, and nationalism that translated into an “implicitly racialized and civilizationist construction of an ideal American diet.”67 Americans overwhelmingly rejected Graham’s prescriptions, which proved too moralistic even for the white Christian middle classes, and other radical sectarians saw similarly limited success in promoting widespread dietary change.

Mainstream adoption of nutritional edicts would not gain real traction until century’s end, when the emerging home economics movement centered nutrition and nourishment as domestic and national mandates. Methodological rigor helped to legitimize domestic science as a discipline, but in many respects the field merely expanded the rationale by which a white middle class claimed authority. Though Calvinistic sanctions were less likely to factor into meal planning and women assumed significantly more power—and responsibility—to prescribe dietary habits, such power effectively amounted to the same social policing by which religious and Temperance reformers sought to control followers in the previous century. Modern science could validate the biological benefits of nutritious foods, but could not entirely excise their orientation to moral standing.

Bennett was a vegetarian and came to adopt (or, at the very least, espouse) a degree of nutritional evangelism, but secular and inconsistent advocacy differentiated him from his more fervent predecessors and contemporaries. By his own account, the idea to develop whole wheat products did not occur to him until the company’s enormous general line of “over 100 varieties of crackers and cakes” proved unprofitable. His ambivalent foray into the milling business in 1914 came only after a friend advised that the Bennett Biscuit Company could produce a whole wheat flour superior to and cheaper than that which they were currently outsourcing.

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69 A 1927 article in Vegetarian and Fruitarian magazine identifies Bennett as vegetarian and excerpts a letter in which he declares that he is “keen to make Wheatsworth Crackers with vegetable fat” for a fully vegetarian product,” a goal he later achieved. “Wheat: An Ideal,” Vegetarian and Fruitarian, September 1, 1927.
cautious satisfaction with both the resulting flour and the biscuits made from it, which appear to have been on the market by 1915, contribute to a picture of an industrious but uninspired chief executive. In his own account, however, this period of entrepreneurial conservatism ended with an epiphany:

[… I did not appreciate food value and the true significance of what we were doing. Becoming more interested in the food problem, it eventually dawned upon me that Nature provides perfect foods for man; that man is adapted by nature to a world of natural foods and that we ought to produce, if possible, a 100% natural Graham-flour Cracker.]

This abrupt acceleration from whole-wheat recipe testing to natural foods obsession represented a near-hagiographic conversion, though Bennett offers no catalyst for the pivot other than vague interest in “the food problem.” Unacknowledged, too, is the considerable processing required to produce any commercial crackers, even whole wheat ones: nature might provide perfect foods, but industry more typically prepared, packaged, and distributed them. Initial ambivalence does not challenge Bennett’s later commitment to the nutritional line, but his “new realization” undeniably facilitated future profits. Whether rooted in sincere nutritional conviction, shrewd market appraisal, a bold gamble on disruption, or some other factor altogether, Bennett’s commitment to developing a whole-wheat product line was perfectly timed to accommodate a growing market for nutritious foods.

72 The Wheatsworth biscuit was akin to an English-style biscuit, that is, a cracker or crisp cookie, not the American-style soft biscuit of limited shelf stability. The first print advertisements referencing Wheatsworth whole wheat biscuits appeared in American newspapers in 1915, with the first reference to “Wheatsworth graham crackers” appearing in print advertisements in 1921.


Wheatsworth on the Market

References to Wheatsworth in early twentieth–century media reflect steady growth of both the brand and the American market for health foods. The company’s New York and New Jersey facilities are the only ones referenced in press coverage from that time, but a 1914 Wheatsworth advertisement in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* promoting “Something new; made from real whole wheat,” indicates a new breadth of distribution.75 By the 1920s, the brand appears to have been well established, and its presence in newspapers and magazines advertisements around the country suggest that there were few markets in which Wheatsworth products were unavailable.76 In 1920 Wheatsworth crackers appeared on the daily luncheon menu at New York’s Guarantee Trust Company, where “every employee of the bank, from the page to the president, have the same meals,” an inclusion that indicated the snack’s perceived suitability for a population diverse in age, wealth, and social esteem.77 That same year, the *New York Herald* conducted a comparison test of whole wheat flours in which Wheatsworth, the only branded, 100 percent whole-wheat contender, received special praise from domestic scientist Anna Stanley for its fine texture and “exceptionally good flavor, a little sweeter than the others.”78 Company profits increased every year throughout the decade, and in 1927 the F.H. Bennett Biscuit Co. changed its name to Wheatsworth, Inc. in order to best capitalize on the brand’s appeal.79

75 Wheatsworth advertisement, *Cincinnati Enquirer* (December 6, 1914), 3.
78 Anna Stanley, “Wheat—the Whole of the Wheat—and How to Use It” *New York Tribune*, March 7, 1920. The competition’s other contenders included home ground whole wheat, imitation graham flour, and Franklin Mills “entire” wheat flour in which the bran was partially removed.
High volume, shrewd promotion, and superior quality are all credible keys to Wheatsworth’s success in the 1920s, but a dearth of aggressive competitors was probably the brand’s greatest boon; according to a 1927 Los Angeles Times article, the company’s “remarkable” rise was largely attributable to the fact that it “supplies virtually without competition a type of whole wheat cracker, flour, and cereal for which there is an ever-growing demand.” The benefits of nutritious processed foods were scientifically proven and culturally accepted, but the sector’s profits belonged almost entirely to Wheatsworth. The company’s singular success is all the more unusual because there did exist corporate competition, including two brands that remain prominent today: Triscuit and Shredded Wheat, each of which had peddled their wheat crackers, biscuits and cereals for a decade or more before Wheatsworth’s inception. These competitors also enjoyed national distribution and a consistent advertising presence, but could not claim the same cultural ubiquity that Bennett achieved with his line. While it is difficult to identify the vagaries that drove Wheatsworth’s early popularity, advertisements from this period illustrate one potentially effective element: invocation of sweet tastes and treats.

Savvy marketing bolstered Wheatsworth’s monopoly by promoting sweetness alongside nutrition. A 1922 advertisement in Good Housekeeping targeted the white, middle-class mothers who formed the magazine’s core readership with a photograph of a sturdily built young girl eating a cracker alongside the caption “Um-m-m---They’re Good!” and copy that promises “Delicious, Healthful Whole Wheat Crackers,” agreeable taste, and nutritional value. Additional copy balances a description of the product’s

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“energizing food elements” with the promise that it is a ready vehicle for more indulgent complements like “preserves, chocolate, butter, cheese—and other tasty fillings you can think of.” The ad tacitly acknowledged the aims and realities of healthy snacking: conscientious mothers might wish to follow contemporary prescription, but experienced mothers knew that children, in particular, favored taste over known nutritional benefits. Emphasizing the crackers’ sweetness and compatibility with indulgent toppings reconciled the contention between taste and nutrition and legitimized a mother’s decision to accommodate both. Wheatsworth crackers were appealing because they tasted like a sweet treat but delivered nutritional value.

Another 1922 print advertisement, this one in the New York Herald, took a different tack in a gendered appeal to male productivity. Titled “Eating for Energy,” the copy invoked “The man of brains” who “eats for energy—body, brain, and nerve energy that makes him a driving force in the machinery of business” and appreciates that Wheatsworth crackers’ “tempting wheat-sweet flavor proves instantly the pleasure of eating for energy.” In the rational language of commerce, the ad promoted the benefits of a healthy diet while promising the pleasures of sweet consumption; by Wheatsworth’s reckoning a successful man’s diet should facilitate efficiency, productivity, and participation in a market society, but it should also taste good. Sweetness both catalyzes and rewards “eating for energy,” powering the men who in turn might seek to power the world. Whether speaking to the tastes of children or adults, Wheatsworth advertisements used references to sweetness to figuratively sugar-coat their product,

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81 F.H. Bennett Biscuit Co. advertisement in Good Housekeeping vol 75 no. 6, December 1922, 186.
revealing a corporate conviction that nutrients alone could not reliably entice consumers seeking to feed themselves or their loved ones.

Conceptualizing the Castle

Milling in the American Mythos

A successful line of whole wheat products naturally required access to formidable quantities of whole wheat flour. In 1921 Bennett purchased property in Hamburg, New Jersey, to establish milling operations for the flour used to make Wheatsworth cookies and crackers. The Hamburg property was ideally situated to harness hydropower from the north-flowing Wallkill River, and had long supported a working mill in addition to space for additional facilities. Upon purchase of the property, Frederick Bennett and his industrial baking business became the latest agents in the site’s industrial history. The original mill had been built in 1808, and for the next century both mill and property supported the production of commodities ranging from Jersey Lightning applejack to cement before transitioning to a flour processing enterprise in the 1870s. With periodic modification, including the addition of a grain elevator and the replacement of mill stones with more effective metal rollers at the turn of the century, the mill was a fully functional historical structure. This long history of production and adaptation resonated with Bennett, who recalled the satisfaction of having found a mill “happily dating back to the days when American hardihood was a tribute to the nutritional worth of whole

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83 The original mill was rebuilt following an 1835 fire, and this structure—with modifications—was that which Bennett purchased in 1921.
wheat.” This concise explication deftly emphasized the building’s pedigree, invoked America’s agrarian past, and promoted the nutritional benefits of his products’ central ingredient. Processing its own flour safeguarded quality control and economized production costs, but Bennett’s nod to the mill’s history—and to a romanticized interpretation of nineteenth-century American identity—suggests that he had recognized an opportunity to capitalize on the site itself by trading on a mythologized provenance that had social and cultural resonance in the twentieth century.

The revenue potential in the mill property’s longevity surfaced in media coverage from the time. A 1930 *Time* magazine article reported Bennett’s long-held conviction that the Wheatsworth mill could be a viable tourism destination, declaring that “he had long been certain that if only people would come to see his mill and his factory, his sales problems would solve themselves.” Even with Wheatsworth’s steady growth across the 1920s, his reference to marketing the mill property itself explicitly connected tourism with company profits and articulated the site’s relevance to brand-building. *American Builder and Building Age* went into greater detail, explaining that “the business man wanted to preserve an Early American mill and picked out the little old stone structure built by Joseph Sharp in 1808.” Elsewhere the article refers to Bennett as a baker and a miller; casting him here as “the business man” implies a powerful agent whose preservationist drive was both notable and noble in its incongruity. Bennett the business man was no laboring tradesman, but a benevolent capitalist endeavoring to protect history. The article goes on to report that Bennett hoped to create a museum containing

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“relics of American wars” in the Governor Haines Mansion across the street from the mill site, a plan that never came to pass but suggests either a genuine commitment to public history or canny understanding that the public appreciated such efforts.88

In fact, public appreciation for a mythologically “American” historical aesthetic was at a contemporary high as Bennett determined how best to develop his mill property. The Colonial Revival movement in American decorative arts and architecture, which had emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century, privileged the material culture of the privileged—upper-class, white, Anglo Saxon—from a sentimentalized and homogenized past that conflated several generations of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century inspiration.89 Popular apprehension about the rapidly diversifying and industrialized present during a period of prolific immigration and technological development underlay the movement, which harnessed material expression as a balm for cultural anxieties by asserting the fictive Colonial aesthetic as definitive national style. This perceived authority elevated Colonial Revival from fashionable trend to patriotic metonym through which one demonstrated authentic Americanism.90 In the 1920s the revival also acquired a historic preservation bent, as private homeowners, civic institutions, and educational sites diligently refurbished historical properties.91 Bennett appears to have recognized that the time was ripe to capitalize on his mill’s antiquity and to fashion his Hamburg site into a tourist attraction; it also seems that he

88 “Gingerbread House,” American Builder, 94.
recognized that, even amid renewed appreciation for historic construction, an industrial relic in itself bore limited popular appeal.

Like the Wheatsworth line of healthy snacks whose advertisements employed liberal reference to the products’ sweetness, the Wheatsworth property required a feature to help entice consumers on a visceral level. The appropriate instillation needed to be visually interesting and offer interactive amusement that would attract visitors and encourage their affinity for the site and the Wheatsworth brand. Bennett’s plans for the mill were nominally similar to the “factory gardens” that industrialists had built alongside production sites since the late-nineteenth century; these recreation spaces provided a perk that kept workers’ bodies and allegiances oriented toward their employer. Factory tours that allowed visitors to observe daily operations and explore carefully maintained corporate sites and exhibits had grown popular in the early-twentieth century, and these, too, appear to have influenced Bennett. In Hamburg, additions to the industrial site would engage outsiders, not employees; whether locals or tourists from farther afield, visitors could revel in the bucolic environs, admire models of historic and modern industry represented in the mill and factory, and contemplate the benefits of whole wheat. In Bennett’s vision, the space was neither a glorified park nor an industrial site with concessions kiosks, but an amusement space for leisure, learning, and sales.

Bennett’s idea drew on established trends in and predicted the evolution of American amusement spaces. From a contemporary prospective, Walt Disney World’s cultural supremacy among American theme parks has effectively occluded a robust

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history of amusement tourism in which smaller, regional sites drew visitors in pursuit of leisure and fun. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American variations on the European pleasure garden offered seasonal outdoor parks where for a nominal fee visitors could enjoy gardens, recreation, and entertainments; frequently found in or near urban centers, over time the gardens evolved from relatively democratic spaces to training grounds in which patrons could imitate and enjoy upper-class leisure practices in “a space for Americans to explore what it meant to be American.” These places bore little resemblance to the ride– and attraction-dominated spaces that became popular at the turn of the twentieth century with the success of well-known New York City ventures including Coney Island, Steeplechase Park, Luna Park, and Dreamland, along with similar destinations in cities around the country. Elaborate electric illumination, rides and roller coasters, and diverse attractions drew throngs of visitors and in particular young adults who had both money and time to spend in a new leisure culture.

Recreation and amusement sites were well established by the 1930s. Across the interwar built environment, however, an amusement site with a comprehensive motif like the Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle appears to have been new. An early souvenir postcard includes preprinted text that promises “An enchanted palace, with seemingly sugar-frosted roof, candy stick towers, cake icing turrets and sugar-paned windows,”

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emphasizing the attraction’s confectionery theme rather than its recreational offerings. The Castle itself was an early example of mimetic architecture designed to resemble food, a notable, if not strictly unique, distinction that anticipated the hot dog–shaped snack bars that would dot American roadways by midcentury. The architectural record has not proffered any evidence that would challenge the Gingerbread Castle’s status as the only building in the early 1930s designed to look as though it were constructed from sweets. Regardless of whether it was the only attraction of its kind, the Gingerbread Castle anticipated cultural and aesthetic trends that would inform leisure and landscape throughout the twentieth century. And the legendary designer responsible for its realization is the reason why.

European Aesthetics and American Theater

Faced with a conundrum about how best to exploit his Hamburg property, Bennett found the solution at a November 1927 Metropolitan Opera production of Englebert Humperdinck’s Hänsel und Gretel. The 1893 work had enjoyed critical acclaim in Europe and the United States, where it debuted in 1895, and quickly became an audience favorite, particularly with children. Despite the opera’s established

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97 Gingerbread Castle postcard, undated and unsent, box 32 file 32.1, Joseph Urban Papers, Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts.
99 For the sake of consistency I will use the anglicized form “Hansel and Gretel” for all English-language iterations of the fairy tale and references to the titular characters; when referring to the opera, however, I will retain the German spelling.
100 A 1909 article in the New York Times captured the show’s enduring appeal for young theatergoers in an article reporting “The Metropolitan Opera House was filled with children yesterday afternoon at an extra matinee, to whom the performance of Englebert’s fairy opera ‘Hansel und Gretel’ gave the greatest delight, as it has in the several years gone by in which it has been in the repertory of the Opera House.” New York Times, December 22, 1909, 31.
popularity, the 1927 production marked its first inclusion in the Metropolitan repertory in a decade. The event’s significance occasioned new scenic design by Joseph Urban, renowned Viennese architect and designer for private, corporate, and artistic clients on both sides of the Atlantic.

Simultaneous employment in artistic production and architecture, rare in the present day, was more common in an interwar industry that incubated liberal exchange between theatrical and vernacular design. Joseph Urban’s prolific contributions to American theater, interiors, and built environment inform his legacy as a designer who, according to Christopher Innes, was “shaping the physical spaces and objects of American culture, and making it synonymous with ‘modernity’” in ways that would resonate throughout the twentieth century. That Urban’s aesthetic impact in the United States resonated so strongly testifies his pervasive influence because he did not build a comprehensive American portfolio until the second half of his career. Born in 1872 Vienna to an upper-middle class Jewish family, Urban benefited from immersion in a city and culture that privileged artistic and intellectual labor. Furthermore, he came of age during a uniquely enriching period of Viennese history that “with its acutely felt tremors of social and political disintegration, proved one of the most fertile breeding grounds of our century’s a-historical culture” according to cultural historian Carl Schorske. Serendipity of birth coupled with his own natural talents provided a sturdy foundation for Urban, who earned his first commissions while still an undergraduate at Vienna’s Academy of Fine Arts and after completing his architecture degree established

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a respectable career as a popular and successful illustrator, architect, and founding member of the Hagenbund arts group. Austria’s increasingly volatile political climate in the years leading up to World War I coincided with cooling support for Urban in the design community, and with little to lose, he accepted the position of art director at the Boston Opera Company and emigrated to the United States in 1912. The two years Urban spent in Boston launched an American career that spanned two decades and accommodated an illustrious client roster that included the Ziegfeld Follies, the Metropolitan Opera, William Randolph Hearst’s ill-fated Cosmopolitan Productions motion picture studio, New York City’s Henri Bendel department store, and socialite Marjorie Merriweather Post, for whom Urban designed Palm Beach estate Mar-a-Lago, along with nationwide commissions for commercial and domestic design projects.

Urban’s exhausting commissions schedule and thorough familiarity with the Humperdinck opera (for which he had previously designed theatrical sets in both Boston and Europe) did not compromise his work on the 1927 Metropolitan production. And though Urban scholars Randolph Carter and Robert Reed Cole caution that it is “impossible to fully appreciate Urban’s artistry from photographs or even his own meticulous drawings,” preserved sketches and photographs of the Hänsel und Gretel set realize the designer’s dictum that the theater was “a place in which to experience a heightened sense of life.” The settings depicted in these visual records are imaginary

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Fig. 1.2. *Hänsel und Gretel* Act 2, Scene 3. Set designed by Joseph Urban. Joseph Urban Papers, Columbia University.

Fig. 1.3. *Hänsel und Gretel* Act 3, Scene 2. Set designed by Joseph Urban. Joseph Urban Papers, Columbia University.
and familiar at the same time. Towering evergreens droop with lugubrious menace to compose what the *New York Herald Tribune* approvingly deemed an “old world, German forest” in which Hansel and Gretel lose their way while foraging for food.\(^{106}\) For the bedtime prayer sequence, a luminescent *escalier* flanked with angels promises the glories of celestial ascent while tacitly recalling the more earthly pleasures of similar staircases in the *Ziegfeld* Follies; the resemblance was logical, as Urban designed all of Florenz Ziegfeld’s productions between 1914 and 1931.\(^{107}\) At the witch’s cottage at the center of *Hänsel and Gretel*’s third act, a blend of lustrous and eerie elements compose a scene that is equally dazzling and repellant with brick– and heart-shaped gingerbread masonry supporting an outsized and dramatically sloped roof that sparkles with a crystalline finish under the stage lights. Similarly lush landscaping surrounds the abode, and in the foreground, rows of gingerbread children ominously shrouded in white icing formed a picket fence around the property’s perimeter. Vibrant and meticulous, Urban’s sets accommodated a highbrow art form but never muted the dark and dreamlike tenor that informed the opera’s source material.

The production received unilaterally favorable reviews, with the *Times* praising the “imaginative and poetic setting.”\(^{108}\) From his seat in the audience, Bennett saw commercial opportunity in Urban’s third-act fantasia and its elaborately fabricated edibility, later recalling, “My eye was taken by the quaint fantastic fairyland gingerbread house on the stage. The thought struck me, ‘Just the thing!’”\(^{109}\) Theatrical designers

\(^{106}\) *New York Herald Tribune*, November 22, 1927, 30.


commonly create scale models to illustrate a production’s completed stage sets; at the theater, Bennett seized on the stage set as model for his future Hamburg attraction.

**Design, Form, and Flavor**

If the twenty-nine–month period that elapsed between Bennett’s opera epiphany and the Castle’s grand opening in April 1930 reflects any complications in design or construction, the historical record has not preserved them. In fact, the completed castle’s size and detail suggest that two years was necessary to complete a project of the castle’s scale and detail, particularly one that so carefully articulated Urban’s deftly rendered confectionery design, which presented the castle as a site of imaginary edibility both familiar and fantastic. The motif emphasizes the same duality inherent in the castle’s physical form, which departed from its inspiration on the Metropolitan Opera stage by replacing the vernacular cottage with a larger and statelier category of building that, gingerbread or not, was literally foreign to American culture. Residences for America’s wealthy elite might be large, grand, and reinforced, but in a country that had formally rejected nobility, castles were less an architectural category than a cultural concept distilled from European history and literature. Within this conceptual framework, an American castle is always a translation of another culture’s architectural and sociopolitical values, and so never more than a representation of a castle. From the Smithsonian to San Simeon, the aesthetic of the American castle is artificial by definition and aspirational by design.

With an international reputation built on dramatic extravagance, not outlandish novelty, Urban employed quasi-modernist design to temper romantic fantasy in the
Fig. 1.4. Detail of Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle exterior. Joseph Urban Papers, Columbia University.
Gingerbread Castle’s material commitment to a sweet aesthetic. Seventy feet tall at its highest point, the three-story cement structure boasted turrets, staircases, leaded windows, and statuary. In every component, the confectionery motif offers architectural and thematic unification. On the castle’s exterior, dark swirls etched into the largest turret’s facade and much of the second story evoked chocolate piping, while other walls featured a white-on-white decoration akin to that on an American wedding cake. Geometric assemblages of rectangles, circles, and diamonds suggested ornate but ultimately ersatz masonry, the cookie-and-mortar effect evoked through relief carving and tonal contrast. Brightly colored trim punctuated with heart and pretzel-shaped plaques detailed friezes with a candylike finish that the red-and-white peppermint-striped chimneys echoed.

Read independently of one another, these elements do not necessarily register as confections. A circle need not be a cookie any more than red-and-white stripes mandate peppermint flavoring. However, the ubiquity of sweets like cookies and peppermints made their material characteristics materially familiar to consumers regardless of how often one actually snacked on them. Integrating these elements in a single assemblage invited visual consumers to recognize and interpret the Castle’s sweet, if artificial, edibility, with each decorative component reflecting and reinforcing the confectionery qualities of the surrounding elements. The motif of this confectionery trompe l’oeil was not predicated on uncanny realism but rather on the calculated application of form and color that effectively distilled “sweet” and “edible” signifiers—colors, shapes, and adornments common in candy and baked goods—into a structure that was both architecturally novel and culturally familiar.
This aesthetic distillation differs from the fanciful embellishment and soft lines that suffused rococo architecture in eighteenth-century Western Europe and prompted twentieth-century American industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss to archly question “whether the architects of Paris and old Vienna were inspired by the pastry cooks or vice versa!” In Austria during the late Baroque period, abstract interpretation of the region’s popular whipped cream–crowned viennoisserie suggested edible analogues but did not negotiate the tension between material composition and a perceived imaginary. Whether deliberate or coincidental, abstract decoration that evokes sweets permits visual consumers to identify those similarities, but does not insist on their existence. That tension informs visual engagement with the Gingerbread Castle, which is not made of sweets, and does not look like it is made of sweets, but looks like it is supposed to look like it’s made of sweets. Authenticity is impossible because a three-story structure made of cake could not stand; perfect imitation erases the human effort necessary to materialize the imaginary. But the deliberate suggestion of confectionery allows visual consumers to automatically fill any gaps and in doing so to contribute to the creation of the same pleasures they derive from the space.

The confectionery conceit generated ample media attention that amounted to free advertising on a national scale. Depression-era press coverage unfailingly heralded the design’s imagined edibility as a key component of its appeal. In June 1930, the castle merited the better part of a page in the Minneapolis Sunday Tribune which reported that “white stucco resembling vanilla icing trims the little house so that it

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glistens in the sunlight and glows under the searchlights which illuminate it at night."\textsuperscript{111}

In July of that year, the \textit{Boston Globe} described the roof "like a cake icing six inches thick, with sugar hearts, crescents, and circles encrusting it in a myriad beautiful tints."\textsuperscript{112} On the other side of the country, the \textit{Arizona Republican} carried an AP story explaining that the castle was made from "cement colored to look like gingerbread, icing, and peppermint candy," then three weeks later followed up with an original article further detailing "the sparkling roof, white as cake icing, decorated with pink and blue imitation candy hearts."\textsuperscript{113} The novelty had not worn off four years later, as evidenced by a \textit{Philadelphia Inquirer} reporting that "Astonished visitors" still marveled at the sight of "a castle with 'sugar-coated' battlements and 'frosted' spires."\textsuperscript{114}

Editorial preoccupation with the confectionery motif, around the country and over the course of years, affirmed the design’s novelty.

Media coverage of the Castle’s grislier aesthetic touches were equally respectful. A \textit{Boston Globe} article published shortly after the 1930 opening predicted, “With bated breath the little ones will gather around the caldron in which the giant was brewing his dinner from the bones of his victims when Jack slew him. The fire is there and the flame-colored walls are studded with bones. It is truly a place for wonderful scenes.”\textsuperscript{115}

An article in \textit{The N.B.C.}, Nabisco’s corporate magazine, provided similarly incongruous punctuation to its description of the same ossuary, noting that, “The children like to get into this caldron, which holds twelve of them. In one of the towers of the castle, there

\textsuperscript{114} “North New Jersey Attractive Tour,” \textit{Philadelphia Inquirer}, August 14, 1934, 8.
are eleven birthday cakes bearing 330 candles.”116 The Globe reporter’s confidence that this ghastly scene would invoke delight in young visitors suggests that by the 1930s, the average child would be well-enough versed in both theatrical fantasies to appreciate the scene’s interpretation of familiar source material. The N.B.C. does not hesitate to compartmentalize one feature that imagines boiling children alive alongside another that imagines living for centuries. Food is central to this pairing: a cooking vessel is the set in which children pantomime their own demise, and birthday cakes the measure of life’s progression. Though celebrated as a confectionery imaginary, the Gingerbread Castle’s darker influences only augmented the site’s novelty.

In his analysis of the Gingerbread Castle’s place in the pantheon of interwar modern design, Innes declares the building an “advertising stunt,” and Urban scholars Carter and Cole similarly categorize the structure a “publicity stunt.”117 I would argue that these designations miss the mark. A stunt is an exercise defined by its containment: it is brief, finite, and garners diminishing engagement upon repeated exposure. Unlike a radio spot or newspaper advertisement that goes out with the evening trash, the Gingerbread Castle was conceived and designed as a piece of promotional theater that could be enjoyed on a repeated and ongoing basis regardless of its authenticity in the landscape, and this reveals the American castle’s utility. Inherently inauthentic, these structures signify novelty rather than power. But in amusement attractions, novelty is powerful in its own right.

Reconciling Sweets and Nutrition

116 “Completeness of an Outfit,” The N.B.C., 18.
117 Innes, Designing Modern America, 150; Carter and Cole, Joseph Urban, 184.
Frederick Bennett understood the novelty as an imperative in developing the Hamburg Property: the attraction it would host must capture both the eye and the imagination. As a health food entrepreneur looking to market whole wheat crackers and biscuits, this put him in an awkward position. Many people take pleasure in whole wheat’s health benefits, and many take pleasure in whole wheat’s taste, but few turn to whole wheat when they long to confront the new or bask in the beautiful.

Omission of Wheatsworth branded snacks from the Castle’s design evidences the conviction that appealing to a visitor’s sweet tooth—not her sensibility—would pay greater dividends in the long run. Any structure contrived to be edible could easily accommodate Wheatsworth crackers and biscuits in its design; they were edible, well-known, and resembled bricks in shape and color. But nowhere in the Gingerbread Castle’s media coverage or publicity materials does there appear a narrative conceit purporting that the edifice is “built” of Wheatsworth treats, nor is Wheatsworth flour—milled fifty yards from the castle steps—imagined to be an ingredient in its imagined gingerbread and cake. In foregoing inclusion of the products it was built to promote, the Castle tacitly acknowledged the aesthetic and cultural devaluation of foods marketed as “healthy.” Whatever nutritional benefits whole wheat crackers might offer, and however good they might taste, they rarely boasted the visual appeal and consumer preference of sugary alternatives. A drab brown castle made of whole wheat crackers might have more literally advertised Bennett’s brand, but almost certainly would have failed to entice the public imagination or appetite. Henry Dreyfuss recalled that, in the interwar period, “manufacturers learned that good industrial design is a silent salesman, an
unwritten advertisement, an unspoken radio or television commercial.” For Frederick Bennett and the Gingerbread Castle, “good” design privileged attractive fantasy, not familiar branding.

How, then, did the Castle negotiate the tension between health and indulgence? One example appears in a Castle brochure section titled “Means of Health to be Found at the Gingerbread Castle.” Rather than starting with means of health, the text opens with a breathless litany of the castle’s confectionery details, promising that “Children will talk for days” about animal cracker balustrades and colorful statuary. Only then does the text address the promised topic of health, with an abrupt switch to the second person and a detailed description of the castle’s impact and purpose.

*But you will remember more than these, from your visit to the Gingerbread Castle. . . You will remember that it was built to make you Think of 100 per cent whole wheat as Nature’s best balanced food for you and your children. . . You will see how Wheatsworth Flour is ground so fine that it will make dainty pastries and fluffy cake, containing every particle—100 per cent—of the wheat grain. . . You will learn that, when waffle, pancake, and muffin time comes, these can all be made with the whole wheat’s full nourishment, the whole wheat’s full flavor, and so become not just ‘filling’ diet but healthful foods of tantalizing tastiness, and thus you will conform in part with the laws of Nature by the use of Wheatsworth Self-Rising Whole Wheat Flour.*

Several rhetorical tools invest this passage with urgency and discretion that is absent elsewhere. The first is direct address: petition to a single reader, rather than to a general audience of visitors, consumers, or parents, personalizes the text and suggests

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118 Dreyfuss, *Designing for People*, 19.
119 *The Gingerbread Castle: A Fairyland for Children of All Ages* (New York, NY: Wheatsworth, Inc.). Though it lacks a copyright date, the pamphlet’s production under the auspices of Wheatsworth, Inc. definitively date its publication to the castle’s first year of operation: in January 1931 Wheatsworth’s directors approved the company’s merger with the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco), and though Nabisco retained the Wheatsworth name for the associated product line, Wheatsworth, Inc. was dissolved and its stock redistributed by March 2 of that year: “National Biscuit Adds Wheatsworth,” *New York Times*, January 3, 1931, 19.
that the reader is singular in spirit as well as number. The “Means of Health” to be shared are not for a generic tourist, but for the exceptional and health-conscious individual reading the words. Repetition emphasizes the reader’s participation in this exercise, with appeals to “you” and to “your” concerns appearing nine times in a single paragraph. Finally, the phrases “You will remember,” “You will see,” and “You will learn” allow conflation of tense and mood. Read in the future tense, the passages merely promise what knowledge one will acquire on a visit. But a more minatory tone emerges when “you will” is read as an imperative commanding compliance. In the latter interpretation, the concluding admonition “you will conform in part with the laws of Nature by use of Wheatsworth Self-Rising Whole Wheat Flour” takes on a positively—but presumably unintentional—authoritarian tenor, commanding allegiance to nature itself. Though the rhetoric is heavy-handed, its desperation might be forgiven in a tract otherwise devoted to extolling the delights of confections that Wheatsworth did not and would never sell.

**Contextualizing 1930s Modernity**

**Tourism and Transportation**

For the tourists and locals who flocked to it, the Gingerbread Castle was first and foremost a destination amusement. Though records are scarce, it appears to have been a popular attraction, reporting over 200,000 visitors in its first fifteen months.\(^{120}\) Nestled in the foothills of the Pocono mountains, the site’s bucolic setting offered an abundant natural beauty akin to that which attracted the first wave of American tourism a hundred

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years before the castle’s construction. Wealthy nineteenth-century domestic tourists, according to historian John Sears, had explored similarly pastoral landscapes in an attempt to seek “identity in their relationship to the land they settled,” but by the century’s end tourism was more common, more commercial, and less invested in “conscious and explicit religious resonance.”¹²¹ This sociocultural shift reflected and fostered a related shift in twentieth-century leisure patterns and a trend toward commercial amusement sites.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the introduction—and eventual proliferation—of the automobile changed the face of American tourism. No longer did naturalistic pilgrimages for wealthy elites define leisure excursions; as the number of drivers grew and mass production facilitated access to affordable and reliable cars, more and more middle-class Americans could undertake day trips that traded a few hours in the car for charming scenery and fresh air, then saw their return to the comforts of home by nightfall.¹²² Hamburg’s rural environs belied its relative proximity to densely populated urban centers. Located fifty miles from New York City and one hundred miles from Philadelphia, the castle was well situated for day trips from those metro areas. Regional newspapers generated coverage that was tantamount to free advertising in articles like “Gingerbread Castle Suggested to Vacationists for Automobile Trip”¹²³ and “Young Motorists Lured by Gingerbread Castle.”¹²⁴ In such articles, casual promotion of

vacation options, traffic patterns and picnic suggestions temporarily distract from the
grim realities of unemployment numbers and bread lines.

For would-be visitors without automobile access, the Castle’s own literature took
care to promote alternative transportation. A robust informational pamphlet published in
the Castle’s early years closes with the plea, “Come soon. If you haven’t a car, there are
Busses [sic] from New York to Sussex which stop at Hamburg,” and then provides a
lengthy description of bus and train options. The twenty-two–page treatise primarily
devoted to extolling the Castle’s history and artisanship ends, incongruously, with the
Jersey City station address for the Susquehanna local.125 This lengthy logistical coda is
contextually discordant with the content that precedes it, but both the inclusion and
detail of comprehensive transportation options suggest a concerted desire to solicit a
broad population of visitors. It also amounted to an effective populist marketing tactic,
the success of which translated into attendance. Sussex County’s 1930 population
hovered just under 28,000, a figure that could not alone support the castle’s claimed
first-year admissions unless every Sussex man, woman, and child made five discrete
visits; it remains more likely that those residing in northern New Jersey’s more populous
counties and in the New York and Philadelphia metro regions made the trek to
Hamburg.

The Gingerbread Castle built a successful themed amusement destination in the
vein of Disneyland and more regional post-War theme parks, and did so first. But was

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125 _The Gingerbread Castle: A Fairyland for Children of All Ages_ (New York, NY: Wheatsworth, Inc.), 19–20. Though it lacks a copyright date, the pamphlet’s production under the auspices of Wheatsworth, Inc. definitively date its publication to the castle’s first year of operation: in January 1931 Wheatsworth’s directors approved the company’s merger with the National Biscuit Company (Nabisco), and though Nabisco retained the Wheatsworth name for the associated product line, Wheatsworth, Inc. was dissolved and its stock redistributed by March 2 of that year, “National Biscuit Adds Wheatsworth,” _New York Times_, January 3, 1931, 19.
the Castle a theme park, or merely a roadside attraction? Visual consumers of American roadways have long since integrated roadside attractions into the landscape, where in the twenty-first century they are more likely to stand as sad relics or garish kitsch rather than imaginative architectural disruptions.¹²⁶ In both categories, the classification connects the attraction’s present existence with a prior history in which outsized and fantastic artifice were novel punctuation rather than aggressive disruption along American byways. As the twentieth century progressed and rapid post-war suburban development increasingly commanded automotive transportation for commuting, errands, and social exchange, concentrated commercial strips and networked highway systems acclimated motorists to prolific and physically huge billboards and signage, and the inundation of visual competition and advertising diluted the novelty and appeal of quirky roadside amusements. Until then, the Gingerbread Castle stood as in early and acclaimed example of novelty architecture with a purpose.

Fanciful Architecture and Aesthetic Trends

The gradual proliferation of novelty architecture in the 1930s revealed the new authority that conscious theatricality enjoyed in the commercial built environment. Broadly speaking, American novelty architecture includes reproductions of incongruous or outlandish architectural styles, mimetic buildings that resemble distinctive animate or inanimate subjects, and programmatic buildings of elaborate imitation with forms

relating to the structure’s commercial enterprise. Early examples of American novelty architecture appeared in the 1920s with roadside eateries that adopted fanciful designs in a droll appeal to passing motorists.

Two restaurant chains from this period demonstrate how novelty design was used to attract customers despite ersatz and even offensive engineering. In the Midwest, White Castle hamburger restaurants offered an abstraction of baronial splendor with enamel-coated brick, decorative battlements, and undersized turrets that physically articulated the chain’s name and reinforced intended associations of whiteness with purity and stability. The fanciful buildings invested the mundane purchase of cheap hamburgers with an element of whimsy, and distinguished the nascent chain in a growing fast food market and in a rapidly diversifying architectural landscape. Though little more than a hamburger stand, White Castle’s unique design offered customers visual novelty. A more pernicious strain of theatricality informed the Pacific Northwest’s abhorrently-branded “Coon Chicken Inn” restaurants, which incorporated their overtly racist logo—a crude caricature of an African American porter’s smiling face—into each restaurant’s facade in enormous, three-dimensional relief. Front doors built into the caricature’s mouth turned the sculptural build-out into a vestibule through which customers entered the restaurant and physically occupied the exploited black body. Such architectural embodiments interpretation of noxious racist ideology

did not discourage business; the restaurants remained open into the 1950s, when the Civil Rights movement erupted into national attention. White Castle’s flimsy miniature manors and Coon Chicken Inn’s grotesque racialized engineering architecturally distorted scale and symbolism to create playful spaces that charmed patrons despite hackneyed and offensive motifs. Effectively dramatizing prosaic spaces (restaurants) in turn dramatized prosaic rituals (casual dining) and wrought amusement from otherwise unremarkable practices and places. In a period of pervasive anxiety, novelty architecture’s fantasy offered Americans physical spaces for temporary respite.

The Gingerbread Castle’s architecture was novel not only for its contrived edibility, but for its total rejection of the Art Deco aesthetic that dominated American design in the 1920s and 1930s.131 Originating in Europe in the early twentieth century and predicated on the use of lavish materials and refined craftsmanship, by the mid-1920s Art Deco influenced American buildings from movie theaters to skyscrapers to train stations.132 These large-scale urban structures facilitated public exposure to and interaction with modern design; anyone could enter Radio City Music Hall and inhabit, if temporarily, an architecturally modern space. Art Moderne emerged as an organically American style that used angular forms and tonal contrast to convey a spare and dramatic elegance which translated well on black-and-white film and came to telegraph

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Hollywood glamour throughout the 1930s.\textsuperscript{133} Off-screen, Streamline Moderne evolved as Art Moderne’s industrial sibling, honing linearity and curves to express movement, momentum, and modernism.\textsuperscript{134} The luxury and affluence associated with deco, moderne, and streamlined design suggest that their subtle inclusion at the Gingerbread Castle might have maintained and even enhanced the site’s chimera by tacitly connecting make-believe and real-world extravagance, but no modernist elements smooth the structure’s riot of ornamentation or betray its interwar origins. Excluding overtly contemporary aesthetic influences advanced a fantasy of imaginary provenance. Out-of-time as well as out-of-place, the Wheatsworth Castle did not belong anywhere, but its artificial romanticism and familiar literary inspiration rendered it familiar all the same.

\textit{Conclusion}

Wheatsworth Gingerbread castle effectively symbolized a panoply of issues that resonated in the American 1930s and cast aesthetics, mobility, consumption, and pleasure in unified network. The Gingerbread Castle was conceived and constructed to draw attention to a commercial brand and attendance at an industrial site because Frederick Bennett understood that the fantasy of sweets would attract people in a manner that nutrition and industry would not. A castle that appeared to be built from Wheatsworth’s whole wheat crackers would be a more direct and more logical advertising ploy, but one made of brown squares would not carry the same aesthetic or


sentimental appeal as the colorful confectionery edifice that Urban and Bennett created. The Castle was not merely anchored to the world of industrial food production, but fits into a broader context of American history and culture. The structure drew its design from the theater. Inspired by European castles, implemented with a florid design and confectionery motif, the structure was the antithesis of the fluid modernist design that prevailed during the decade. Finally, in the early years of motor tourism and amusement parks, the Wheatsworth site fit into a broader world of amusement, leisure, and mobility, predicting the post-War explosion in these recreational destinations. Imaginary sweets at a fantastic scale entertained and distracted tourists with a fantasy that had no analogue in amusement sites. It was not, however, the only example of huge imaginary sweets in the culture. Animated films released in the years following the Castle’s opening similarly imagined worlds of abundant confections that filled and defined the landscape. The next chapter will explore these. Urban’s Metropolitan Opera Hänsel and Gretel sets caught Bennett’s attention with elaborate visual spectacle, but invoking sugar to sell nutrition reflects Wheatsworth advertising across the preceding decade.
Like many newspapers, the Louisville, Kentucky *Courier-Journal* featured a regular column to which readers could submit inquiries on factual and instructional subjects. The questions posed and answered in a June 1937 “Answers to Questions” column addressed a typically diverse breadth of topics including the Jewish population of Russia, vitamin depletion in room-temperature orange juice, contract bridge finessing strategies, and the following exchange:

**Q**—*Is Big Rock Candy Mountain a real or fictitious place? If it is real, where is it located?*
**A**—*Big Rock Candy Mountain is the name of a song that was popular some years ago. So far as we know there is no such place.*

“The Big Rock Candy Mountain” was a popular song, but it was first and foremost a hobo anthem written and embraced by a transient underclass, and its lyrics celebrated a realm that boasted the abundant food, uncompromised comfort, and freedom from social persecution and abuse that consistently evaded the itinerant homeless in real life. Literally made of candy, it was an obvious fantasy whose enormous, edible sweetness represented satiety and pleasure for a population with inconsistent access to either. It is a classic example of Cockaigne, the imaginary locale defined by abundance and ease that has been a popular subject in narrative and visual texts for a millennium.

Cockaigne fantasies like “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” frequently emerge during periods and in populations in which hunger, poverty, and other stressors are

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prevalent. The psychology that informs this trend is not complex; as folklorist Luisa del Giudice explains, “The Land of Plenty inversely reflects the Land of Hunger. In other words, utopian visions hold up a mirror reflecting that which the utopianists’ society lacks and desires.”137 While all fantasy is inherently escapist in its temporary diversion of consciousness to an imagined space or scenario, Cockaigne fantasies offer vicarious relief and power that cannot be accessed under lived material and social conditions. Because Cockaigne is oriented in opposition to the reality from which it provides respite, banality and persecution rarely intrude; the fantasy is a private, if shared, paradigm in which its consumer may assume optimism and agency.138

The confectionery Cockaigne cartoons of the Great Depression composed uniquely complex fantasies that refused to ignore the contemporary hardships from which they ostensibly offered respite. This chapter examines five Depression-era animated cartoons that featured Cockaignes with confectionery motifs. Each of these short films imagined outrageous worlds in which sweets composed the landscape, built environment, and inhabitants: whether magical destinations for earthly visitors or contained confectionery worlds, candy, cookies, cake, and other treats dominate and drive the stories. Tropes and conceits that have informed constructions of Cockaigne since the Middle Ages also inform this small catalog of cartoons, affirming their place in Cockaigne’s long and rich history of escapist food fantasy. And yet, familiar challenges and anxieties related to war, poverty, desire, and need appeared across these films,

138 Todd McGowan, Enjoying What We Don’t Have: The Political Project of Psychoanalysis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 199.
complicating the vicarious salves they provided. Animated confectionery fantasias that simultaneously staged and subverted authentic difficulties reveal the social and cultural comforts that sweets allowed.

_Cockaigne’s Origins and Tropes_

Fantastic lands of pleasure and abundance are not unique to the post-Classical imagination or to Western tradition, but one iteration that emerged in Europe during the Middle Ages assumed distinctive and consistent parameters.\textsuperscript{139} English Cockaigne, French _Coquaigne_, Scandinavian _Oleana_, Dutch _Luikkerland_, and German _Schlaraffenland_ are all regional interpretations of the same idea: an imagined realm in which all hungers are sated, all needs are met, no work is required, and no worry is feasible.\textsuperscript{140} The earliest known reference in the written record dates to the c1335 satirical poem “The Land of Cockayne,” which depicts a cohort of wayward monks in a realm of sensual luxury and remains a foundational work in the English-language Irish canon.\textsuperscript{141} Between the sixth and sixteenth centuries, depictions of Cockaigne proliferated in art, music, literature, and oral tradition.\textsuperscript{142} The inexhaustible commodities, carefree existence, and free entry that these fantasies offered directly redressed harsh

\textsuperscript{139} Hal Rammel, _Nowhere in America: The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Other Comic Utopias_ (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 11–13.
\textsuperscript{140} Pleij, _Dreaming of Cockaigne_, chap. 38. Theoretical etymology relates the term _Cockaigne_ to the German word _kuchen_, meaning cake, a derivation that neatly accommodates the homophony between the two words as well as Cockaigne’s associations with gustatory indulgence. The _Oxford English Dictionary_ does not endorse this etymology, however, tentatively positing Middle French derivation secondary to “uncertain and disputed origin,” Oxford English Dictionary, 3\textsuperscript{rd} ed., s.v. “Cockaigne.”
\textsuperscript{142} Pleij, _Dreaming of Cockaigne_, 4.
social and economic conditions in the Middle Ages, but also supported a real human need for indulgence, rest, and sense of place.

Medievalist Herman Pleij writes that “Cockaigne is first and foremost about eating,” and from the Middle Ages through the present day, depictions of Cockaigne inevitably feature fare that is physically enormous and eternally replenishable. Food is both offering and architecture: plated dishes may be present, but the natural and built environments more commonly support provisioning for hungry visitors, and in unexpected and fantastic ways. Landscapes boast pancake trees, brown sugar fields, and rivers of wine, while infrastructure might include gingerbread villages and streets paved with bread. Consequentially, visitors whose own forms scale normally to these elements appear dwarfed when the same elements are gigantic versions of foods that typically fit in the palm of one’s hand. No less common and still more fanciful are the anthropomorphized foodstuffs who inhabit Cockaigne. In many texts, ambulatory and seemingly sentient victuals offer themselves to visitors for consumption, and might literally beg to be eaten in the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. Examples of this trope span centuries and continents, from the medieval “The Land of Cockayne” in which flying roasted geese alight on the plate and advertise their own delectability, to twentieth-century African American folk tales about Diddy-wah-Diddy, where upon arrival “hungry travelers hear ‘Eat me!’ ‘Eat me!’ ‘Eat me!’ and a big baked chicken will come along with a knife and fork stuck in its sides.”

Though Pleij argues that famine, starvation, and other conditions of extreme deprivation were less common in the Middle Ages than

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143 Pleij, Dreaming of Cockaigne, 89.
popularly assumed, preoccupation with food and eating commonly reflects fears of scarcity, and Cockaigne’s tropes of gastronomic abundance trace eternal anxieties related to food insecurity.145 

For the chronically or catastrophically underfed, Cockaigne’s promise of perpetual satiety was no less fantastic a conceit than a talking chicken or gingerbread church. Ruminating on the dire conditions that drive people to consume spoiled food or tulip bulbs, Louise Fresco writes that “For anyone suffering from hunger, everything that can serve as food becomes irresistible.”146 The desperation inherent in what one might refer to as “inadvisable consumption”—the ingestion of technically edible organic or inorganic matter—illustrates the extent to which hunger mortifies the mind as well as the body when it forces sufferers to privilege physical consumption over epicurean discernment in the frantic pursuit of satiety. Charlie Chaplin famously lampooned this survival extreme in The Gold Rush (1925) in a scene that finds his Little Tramp character snowbound and reduced to eating his own footwear on Thanksgiving, a day that celebrates feasting. Despite its outrageous pathos, the scene is comical—and firmly enthroned in cinematic canon—due to the untroubled resignation with which Tramp placidly consumes his shoe.147 Chaplin, whose own childhood included periods of extreme poverty and food insecurity, understood the distinction between mocking hunger and mocking the hungry.148 Cockaigne similarly subverts the degradations of hunger by presenting expansive and unexpected forms of edibility. When the contents

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146 Fresco, Hamburgers in Paradise, 457.
of the world that one inhabits are not only edible, but delectable, consuming any or all of it becomes an exercise in power rather than an act of desperation.

Abundance empowers visitors to indulge at will, but locating the land of plenty in the first place proves more challenging. Vague coordinates typically orient Cockaigne in relation to a known, or at least familiar, world, whether it is “west of Spain,” or “way off somewhere.” Hazy geography reinforces the notion that Cockaigne exists somewhere in the terrestrial realm and is ready to welcome visitors if only they can find it, and in this way sustains the fantasy of its existence. Thematic gauntlets, as in one legend that required visitors to eat their way through a wall of polenta in order to reach Cockaigne on the other side, further complicate access but portend the abundance that awaits. Such tests are physical rather than spiritual in nature, and this distinction illuminates a crucial characteristic of Cockaigne: the realm is open to all regardless of thought, word, or belief. In this regard, Cockaigne differs dramatically from the Christian notion of heaven, a paradise that exists to reward piety and correct religious practice and excludes those who have not earned admittance. People do not need to earn access to Cockaigne, they only need to find it, and this inherently democratic policy offers a sense of autonomous control that religious doctrine prohibits.

American Cockaigne in the Great Depression

The intrinsic relationship between fantasies of abundance and experienced deprivation offers ready justification for Lyman Sargent’s claim that the “best-known American Cockaignes are generally identified with the Great Depression.” Economic depression and high unemployment rates drove austerity, shaping a culture in which lack—of jobs, of money, of food—was a tenacious threat. But surplus and overproduction in the century’s first three decades helped to create the conditions that would eventually force that lack: between 1900 and 1930, American industrial production quadrupled, and market prices plummeted. Production skill could not protect workers from the fallout from overproduction. Agricultural surplus across the 1930s not only failed to dependably assuage hunger and need, but strained markets to the detriment of suppliers and consumers alike. The inherent perversity of a system in which farmers destroyed harvests while millions went hungry invited a new reckoning with America’s mythologized abundance and escapist narratives oriented around fantasies of limitless supply.

A number of factors contributed to the agricultural surpluses that plagued American farmers for the decade leading up to the 1929 stock market crash. World War I had commanded increased agricultural production to sustain American troops, and multi-year growth cycles saw the culmination of these concerted efforts several years after the armistice. Industrialized distribution and growing rates of automobile ownership also catalyzed surplus as the number of horses and mules in the United

States dropped by more than 10,000,000 in fifteen years, and farmers who had once grown animal feed ill-advisedly repurposed fields for human provision.\textsuperscript{155} Perhaps most importantly, the United States Department of Agriculture’s “practical advice and ideological stance […] promoted agricultural abundance above all else,” a mindset and mission that rejected the environmental and economic consequences of surplus.\textsuperscript{156} By the early 1930s, excess tonnage of wheat, beans, tomatoes, pork, and other commodities were glutting markets and driving down prices, leaving farmers struggling to turn a profit. Artificially low prices did little to offset the country’s radically decreased spending power as unemployment numbers and relief rolls expanded, leading farmers to destroy surplus rather than sell or donate it at a loss. In 1933 the White House announced a plan to harness $75 million in funds from the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and Emergency Relief Administration in an attempt to address this “ironical problem” by purchasing agricultural surplus for distribution in relief packages.\textsuperscript{157} Federal efforts, alongside state– and local-level analogues, mitigated some of the immediate suffering that existed despite and because of agricultural surplus, but the inherent tension between abundance and scarcity persisted.

\textbf{Diddy-Wah-Diddy}

Diddy-Wah-Diddy is a mythical land of abundance that originated in African American folklore, origins that make it particularly vital in a canon that disproportionately

\textsuperscript{156} Deborah Fitzgerald, \textit{Every Farm a Factory: The Industrial Ideal in American Agriculture} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 31.
\textsuperscript{157} “75 Millions to Buy Surplus Food for Idle, per Roosevelt Plan,” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune}, September 22, 1933, 3.
preserves white stories and perspectives. Identification with a historically disenfranchised population supports Cockaigne’s traditional association with those subject to deprivation and oppression, and it also illustrates how exploited populations used fantasy to assert power. African American writer Zora Neale Hurston, whose posthumous legacy centered her fiction documenting Black American life in the early twentieth century, recorded an evocative account of Diddy-Wah-Diddy while working as a folklorist for the Federal Writers Project (FWP) in 1938 and 1939. Hurston’s understanding of storytelling and her formal education in anthropology enrich the African American folklore she documented in her native Florida for the FWP. Nowhere are her literary skills more effective than in her description of Diddy-Wah-Diddy, which distills generations of social, spiritual, and economic history into a few brief paragraphs of fantasy.

Food and its political economy suffuse Hurston’s account of Diddy-Wah-Diddy. Produce grows as fast as you can eat it, and animated sweet potato pie comes “pushing and shoving to get in front of the traveler with a knife all stuck up in the middle of it.” Hunger is impossible in this world of limitless bounty that commands consumption, sometimes verbally. But for Black Southerners, an addendum that “the food is even already cooked” pointedly articulates a no-less valuable form of relief for those commonly tasked with doing the cooking. Social and economic conditions in the Jim Crow South disproportionately relegated African American women to domestic service with long hours and low pay, and historian Rebecca Sharpless identifies Black girls as

young as seven years old who worked in white domestic kitchens, a phenomenon that sentenced some women to near-literal lifetimes of labor.\textsuperscript{160} Popular media normalized and fetishized African American servitude to the white middle and upper classes with marketing narratives that taxed African American women to perform emotional as well as physical labor in service to the society that exploited them; according to historian Psyche Williams-Forson, depictions of Black “mammies, cooks, and caretakers were perceived as a salve to soothe the burdens caused by a burgeoning new society.”\textsuperscript{161} A world comprised of prepared foods was a world that explicitly excluded culinary labor and its exploitations. For many Black women, that exclusion meant freedom and power.

Hurston’s Diddy-Wah-Diddy is “a place of no work and no worry for man and beast,” and this dictum, too, assumes particular resonance in relationship to an African American population whose tenure in the United States is rooted in the traumas of slavery and radically undercompensated employment. Persistent stereotypes that maligned African Americans as lazy added literal insult to grievous injury in a country whose white power structures facilitated the exploitation of Black labor.\textsuperscript{162} Descriptions of Cockaigne commonly assert freedom from the need to work, but in Diddy-Wah-Diddy these freedoms encompassed more than relief from physical exertion. When indolence is the natural state, abstinence from labor cannot be condemned, and respite ceases to be a subjective privilege. Diddy-Wah-Diddy was a Cockaigne in which African Americans had both the option and the license to be idle, a concept no less fantastic

\textsuperscript{161} Williams-Forson, \textit{Building Houses out of Chicken Legs}, 21.
than talking sweet potato pie when contrasted with a white supremacist society that sought—and seeks—to control Black bodies, Black economies, and Black leisure.

“The Big Rock Candy Mountain”

Like Diddy-Wah-Diddy, “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” addresses social injustices specific to the disenfranchised community from which it emerged. Though the song first appeared at the turn of the twentieth century, and folk singer Burl Ives’s 1952 recording would become a popular and commercially successful children’s record at the start of the postwar baby boom, popular memory associates the ballad—particularly a 1928 recording by its composer, itinerant laborer and folk musician Harry “Haywire Mac” McClintock—with the cultural canon of the Great Depression. In fact, the song had become a hobo anthem upon its initial release in the late-nineteenth century, and its early popularity was not limited to the down-and-out population it celebrated: healthy sheet music sales suggest that it also appealed to a more economically stable community. Neither the song’s origins in the previous century nor its cross-class appeal compromised its resonance in Depression-era America. The haven that the song imagines is no middle-class reverie, but a mechanism for correcting the degradations and injustices that plagued the hobo community historically and through the 1930s.

165 Rammel, Nowhere in America, 104.
The iridescent confectionery landscape conjured in the “The Big Rock Candy Mountain” belies the more pragmatic pleasures outlined in its lyrics. There might be little visual enticement in a “lake of stew,” but the prospect of limitless warming nourishment would be seductive to those for whom hot meals were sporadic and cold was endemic. A promise that “the hens lay soft boiled eggs” advances fantasies of essential nutrition and wistfully accommodates commonplace compromised dental hygiene. The presence of cigarette trees and alcohol streams not only indulges less salubrious pleasures, but legitimizes indulgence for a population that struggled to meet essential needs. Hunger and malnutrition were not the only indignities plaguing the nomadic homeless; violence at the hands of corporate, municipal, and vigilante law enforcement was also common.\textsuperscript{166} In the land of the Big Rock Candy Mountain, however, respectful brakeman and placid railroad guards abound, and tin jails and the conspicuous absence of chain gang tools reflect a realm where the systems of punishment are themselves defunct. Carceral labor is one of many forms of exertion eliminated in this fantasy, which promises that “handouts grow on bushes,” and visitors will “sleep all day.” Like Diddy-Wah-Diddy, Big Rock Candy Mountain authorizes the freedom to do nothing (and, with a lyric stating that there “they hung the Turk / who invented work,” goes a step further by executing the agent who conceived work in the first place). For the transient poor with whom the song originated, like the working poor who created Diddy-Wah-Diddy, freedom from an exploitive labor system was the ultimate luxury.

\textit{“On the Good Ship Lollipop”}

\footnote{John Lennon, \textit{Boxcar Politics: The Hobo in U.S. Culture and Literature} (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 8.}
“On the Good Ship Lollipop” engendered a cultural resonance so great that in America’s collective imagination the songs remain emblematic of the Great Depression nearly a century later. Six-year-old Shirley Temple sang tribute to the excesses of the good ship in the 1934 feature *Bright Eyes*, one of nearly thirty films in which the child actress appeared that decade. The lyrics celebrate a land liberally populated with by-now familiar anthropomorphized comestibles, frolicking bonbons and dancing devil’s food cake sharing lyrical space with numberless lemonade stands and a chocolate bar large enough to support the song’s titular airship. Unlike Diddy-Wah-Diddy, however, the song notes the existence and consequences of overconsumption, warning “If you eat too much / ooh ooh / you’ll awake with a tummy ache.” The place and its possession are purely imaginary, but the narrative’s imagined fallout is realistic, even inevitable. In his assessment of the scene, historian John Kasson notes that though “the song is ostensibly from the perspective of a child, like Shirley Temple’s movies as a whole, it is in fact a vision of childhood innocence carefully constructed by adults.” Adults cannot evade natural consequences in real life, and could not or would not reject the inclusion of such consequences in the song’s decidedly unnatural fantasy. A Cockaigne can delight, sate, and entertain its denizens, but in some cases, there are strings attached.

American Cockaigne appears more focused on consequences that are traditionally attached to indulgence and overindulgence. Proliferate food and unhindered access allow Cockaigne’s inhabitants, whether temporary or permanent, to eat up to and past the point of satiety. But freedom to feast is not necessarily accompanied by freedom from the physiological consequences of feasting, and depictions of obesity and

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indigestion emerge as common—and threatening—cautions for those who might be tempted to overindulge. In a realm of limitless resources in which commodity depletion is impossible, the body becomes the only place of recourse because there exists no practical or social obligation to check consumption: critics are stripped of objective argument against gluttony and are limited to moralizing: Overindulgence is bad because it exploits an individual ethical obligation to exercise control. In this construction, control, not indulgence, is the greater reward.

Through story and song, these examples of American Cockaigne offered indulgence and agency to historically disenfranchised populations that included African Americans and the homeless, and children—who are subject to their own vulnerabilities—could also delight in subverted fantasy worlds of consumption. In the next section’s animated iterations of Cockaigne, a more diverse cast of characters and beneficiaries emerges.

*Cockaigne in Animated Films*

Animated films with confectionery motifs emerged in the 1930s and merit analysis as a unified category of American Cockaigne. Cake, cookies, candy, and other treats composed the worlds depicted in these cartoons, and suggest that in sugar, American audiences found a particularly compelling motif. Louisa Del Giudice has noted the tendency for gastronomic utopias to reflect a culture’s collective tastes, particularly those considered indulgent; this reckoning accounts for sour cream’s centrality to Scandinavian Oleana, the rivers of wine that flow through Italian Cuccagna, and villages
of bread imagined across medieval Europe.\textsuperscript{168} Animated confectionery cartoons reflected the American taste for sweets dating from the Early Republic, one that falling sugar prices and industrialized food production met as candy and baked treats became cheaper to produce or procure.\textsuperscript{169}

Gastronomical themes in the short cartoons of the 1930s were not limited to sweets, but those featuring explicitly confectionery settings and characters outnumber all other motifs.\textsuperscript{170} The animation medium permitted the depiction of Cockaigne and other scenarios of abundance with a degree of detail that would have been more difficult and more expensive to compose in a live-action film employing props, sets, and backdrops. While illustration necessarily sacrifices realism, detachment from plausibility further augments the thrill and delight that fanciful rendering allows. Here the thrill is premised on the novelty of these phenomena and in seeing the impossible illustrated as possible. In confectionery Cockaignes, this includes the opportunity to see sweets as both living protagonists and as edible landscapes available to all. At the same time, the coupling of these fantasies with realistic boons like plentiful food and rewarding work elicit genuine emotional response because those desires correlate with fundamental needs. Audiences do not and cannot inhabit the animated world, and reality does not and cannot support Cockaigne’s material and metaphysical absurdity. But the confectionery cartoon protagonists who combat hunger, poverty, and exploitation

\textsuperscript{168} Luisa del Giudice, “Mountains of Cheese,” 12.

\textsuperscript{169} Harvey Levenstein, \textit{Paradox of Plenty: A Social History of Eating in Modern America} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 36.

\textsuperscript{170} It is also worth noting that at least two of these films, \textit{The Sunshine Makers} (1935) and \textit{Tea Pot Town} (1936) were produced as advertisements for, respectively, Borden canned milks and Lipton tea.
vanquish familiar challenges. Vicarious triumphs in idealized worlds offered viewers a very real sense of hope.

_Silvery Moon: Unfocused Fantasy_

_Silvery Moon_ (1932) offered an early example of animated Cockaigne that broadly hit every expected beat—in an imagined candy land, the protagonists indulge prodigious appetites and gleefully frolic amid outsized sweets and other pleasures—but differed markedly from others set in confectionery worlds. These differences illuminate animation’s evolution throughout the 1930s, and in turn illustrate what audiences could come to expect from confectionery fantasies during that period. Many of the factors that differentiated _Silvery Moon_ from its confectionery successors cast the film as comparatively primitive, with unsophisticated visuals and an incoherent narrative that failed to conjure the visual and emotional richness expected in fantasies of lush abundance. Coarse production values and slapdash storytelling were not unusual in cartoons produced in the medium’s early period, with animation studios on both coasts scrambling to maximize quantity rather than quality, and at Amedee Van Beuren’s animation studio this ethos was well-established. Technically incorporated in 1928, the Van Beuren studio was merely the most recent configuration of its namesake’s established production company that had operated in multiple film production sectors—including animation—for most of the decade. Despite some modest successes, the

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171 _Silvery Moon_, directed by John Foster and Manie Davis (1932; New York: Van Beuren Corporation), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bdRJllfi4L3g&t=162s.


studio was not known for cartoons of any particular originality or technical esteem, and *Silvery Moon* was no exception.\(^{174}\) A *Variety* review published in December 1932 conceded that “Very, very young children, preferably graduate infants, will enjoy this short,” but found little else to recommend it.\(^{175}\) Age has not meaningfully improved this legacy: only glancing references to the cartoon appear in academic scholarship, and amateur animation historians do not hail it as a text of any particular significance. To dismiss the film due to its narrative and technical shortcomings, however, ignores the very real disquiet conjured in its tedious chaos.

Over the title card a solo tenor sings an up-tempo verse from the 1912 song “Moonlight Bay.” As the film opens on a feline couple enjoying a moonlit canoe ride, the female takes over the song’s chorus while her male companion whistles counterpoint. A jovial Man in the Moon appears in the sky, prompting the cats to argue whether the moon is made of green cheese or “cake and cookies and ice cream,” and in response the moon extends a staircase and unhinges his jaw so that the pair may enter and see for themselves. Crossing the threshold, they enter a realm of sugary excess that abandons any lunar motifs, and the ensuing narrative is little more than a montage of scenes that alternately feature frenetic capering across the edible landscape and frantic gobbling of the sweets that comprise it. Tertiary characters—prancing goblins with electric headgear, a peppermint monarch, a regiment of clockwork feline soldiers—drop into scenes and then disappear without any active role in the broader plot. Eventually, a large, anthropomorphic bottle of castor oil and a spoon sport matching, menacing leers and chase the feline couple who are by now reeling dyspeptically from their

overindulgence. Scrambling to escape these personified agents of punishment, the cats leap off the moon’s edge and land in the water beside their waiting canoe. As they clamor aboard, the Man in the Moon appears once more and serenades the couple with a musical coda in which he expresses regret that he must leave, then cloaks himself in darkness. The cats, alone at last, share a kiss on the now-darkened water.

While later animated Cockaignes would feature original songs with lyrics describing the confectionery world on film, *Silvery Moon* relied on popular music from a previous generation. “Moonlight Bay” was over twenty years old and by 1933, its lingering popularity with barbershop quartets provided the bulk of its cultural currency. With lyrics that wistfully lament a defunct love affair that had bloomed on the titular Moonlight Bay, the song neither relates to the events unfolding on screen nor hints, even metaphorically, at anything akin to Cockaigne. The closing number, a reworking of the 1911 song “Goodnight Mr. Moon,” boasted a faster tempo and new lyrics that fashioned the sentimental ballad into a cheerful parting ditty that Mr. Moon himself delivered, presumably in an attempt to provide a veneer of narrative relevance. In a

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film with minimal dialogue—almost certainly due to Van Beuren’s practice of purposely limiting on-screen discourse in order to save time and money—such forced congruity supplied awkward exposition that ignored entirely the film’s comedic and dramatic action in its confectionery wonderland.¹⁷⁸ Cockaigne seems to be little more than filler to bridge the opening and closing sequences, which in turn appear to have been devised to accommodate the simple visual themes and nostalgic appeal of extant popular music.

Technical trickery bolsters the theory that confectionery Cockaigne was incidental to *Silvery Moon*. The cartoon’s liveliest animated sequences, like its soundtrack, were recycled from a previously proven cultural commodity, in this case the 1931 Van Beuren film *Toy Time*.¹⁷⁹ Seven consecutive segments—nearly a quarter of the film’s six-minute run time—were borrowed from the older cartoon, which featured two mice dancing through a world of giant musical instruments. *Silvery Moon* did not

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Fig. 2.2. Still from animation historian Jerry Beck's comparison study of (left) *Toy Time* (1931, dirs. Harry Bailey and John Foster) and (right) *Silvery Moon*. Cartoon Research.
merely copy these sequences, but reproduced them exactly by reusing the existing cels and backdrops. Capering mice were reconfigured as capering cats who danced atop a succession of drums, horns, and xylophones. To accommodate the confectionery motif, black-and-white peppermint striping was added to instruments and random background elements to signal sweet edibility. The final recycled segment retained the 1931 choreography frame-for-frame but replaced alphabet blocks with candy canes and culminated with a cat triumphantly swallowing one whole; after this point, the film reverted to original animation depicting prolific consumption. Recycling animation was an uncontested practice and often a necessity in an industry that required extensive time and labor to produce even short cartoons, but in the assessment of animation archivist Steven Stanchfield, the transfer between Toy Time and Silvery Moon was “the only sequence that reuses animation so extensively” in Van Beuren’s catalog. A confectionery motif might celebrate fantasy and reflect joy; here, it also provided an easy and efficient mechanism for stretching content.

The black-and-white cartoon’s unambitious production design and grayscale color spectrum did little to enhance the visual impact of its confectionery setting and subject matter. Silvery Moon’s mise-en-scène is unexpectedly limited for a world that ostensibly imagines the unbridled excesses of confectionery fantasy. Peppermint striping, used to cast as confectionery marvels those elements recycled from Toy Time, also proliferated in Silvery Moon’s original animation, and from a production standpoint, it is easy to understand why this particular motif would have been so appealing: easily executed and readily interpreted, peppermint’s illustrative shorthand efficiently informed

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180 Stanchfield, "Comparison Study."
audiences that this was a sweet and edible world. Over the course of the film, however, overreliance on a single type of sweet contributed to a visually monotonous world that in turn compromised the fantasy it promised, particularly for the consumer who did not care for peppermint. The inability to depict confections in vivid or lifelike color further dulled the film’s visual impact, with pastel ice creams, jewel-toned candy, and lavishly iced cakes all reduced to shades of grey.

While color film processing existed in the early 1930s, it was not yet in widespread use in the animation industry, which adopted the evolving technology only gradually in the first half of that decade.¹⁸¹ Until 1935, when Technicolor’s full-spectrum color process become more widely available, animation studios relied on expensive two-tone (and the rare three-tone) color processes that offered greater visual interest than black-and-white production but appeared wan in comparison with the full-scale color that would be standard by decade’s end.¹⁸² Van Beuren Studios began color cartoon production in 1934 with the introduction of its Rainbow Parade series, but still worked exclusively in black-and-white in 1933, as did numerous other studios.¹⁸³ In a market that accommodated a host of chromatic options, Silvery Moon was neither anachronistic nor unfashionable, but the inability to compellingly depict the brilliance and novelty of its confectionery world makes the film an outlier among examples of cartoon Cockaigne in addition to muting the energy and liveliness that the Cockaigne promises.

Later in the decade, larger studios with better technology and a conscious preoccupation with artistry capitalized on sweets’ palette and plasticity to create stylish confectionery realms in which color, texture, and chemistry factor into narrative action and individual characterization. These films stand in stark contrast with *Silvery Moon*, whose animators appear to have been hard pressed to render any confectionery attributes beyond edibility, and whose recycled sequences represent the only portion of the Cockaigne sequence in which the cartoon’s feline protagonists do anything other than frantically consume the lunar confections that surround them. Aimless storytelling, an archaic soundtrack, and rudimentary animation supply no dynamism and diminish any real whimsy in a cartoon that can be distilled into a grey blur of peppermint-striped gluttony. But the very existence of this early cartoon Cockaigne both establishes and predicts a trend for confection-themed fantasies that future iterations would bear out.

*Disney’s Contained (and Questionable) Cockaignes*

The Disney System

A relatively early provenance and deliberately economical production help to rationalize *Silvery Moon*’s underwhelming visual and narrative elements. The two films that followed it in the confectionery Cockaigne genre, both from Walt Disney Studios, require no such qualifications. Produced under different auspices and set in unrelated worlds, *The Hot Chocolate Soldiers* (1934) and *The Cookie Carnival* (1935) share narrative and material elements that align these films with each other and distinguish them from others that depict more traditional confectionery Cockaigne. These elements include two conceits that undeniably subvert fundamental tropes associated with
Cockaigne. First, these texts take place in entirely self-contained worlds that are exclusively confectionery in composition and population and that no human visitors or other audience surrogates infiltrate; every character is an anthropomorphic treat, edible and enticing to the audience but taxonomically mundane within the story. Second, though human characters are absent from these cartoons, human suffering is not: transience, war, and other social perils feature prominently with the edible worlds themselves. In these two regards the Disney texts challenge expected structures but do not reconfigure the stories as mere gastronomic fantasies. The lush edibility that defines the worlds of *Hot Chocolate Soldiers* and *Cookie Carnival* evokes Cockaigne, and both films use confectionery motifs to negotiate interwar anxieties familiar to Depression audiences. Disney’s contained Cockaignes were not sites of respite, but casting hardship in the language of confectionery jubilee still offered audiences a form of escape.

Shared origins naturally informed the aesthetic relationship between Disney’s two confectionery cartoons, which were visually similar (though not identical) to each other, and visually distinct from cartoons produced by other studios in the mid-thirties. Ben Sharpsteen, who served as senior animator on *Hot Chocolate Soldiers* before ascending to direct *Cookie Carnival* the following year, was almost certainly responsible for some degree of this cohesion: the Disney veteran’s artistic preferences “leaned toward action and slapstick,” both of which infused *Soldiers* and *Carnival* despite the serious social issues they depicted. Ultimately, however, all production crew were accountable to Walt Disney himself, and labored in service to his artistic mandates.

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Realism was chief among these, and informed visual and emotional resonance of the studio’s cartoons. Disney famously demanded that shape, motion, and color be rendered as realistically as possible regardless of how fanciful the context, and subjected Disney Studio animators to extensive instruction and browbeating in development of the necessary technical skills. Designs on realism extended to character behavior and motivation, and Disney insisted that his films’ animated agents—whether people, animals, or animate objects—demonstrate fully developed personalities. The impetus to make cartoon characters believable, in the words of one animator, “in motion and emotion,” was the element that “most distinguished Disney animation from its forebears” according to Disney biographer Neal Gabler. Disney’s animate confections exhibit movements, behaviors, and relationships the fluidity of which differentiate them from their anthropomorphic analogues in other cartoons.

Disney embraced technological innovation in his quest for visually sophisticated animation, and the studio’s adoption of color processing substantively reshaped both the look of its films and its own position in the industry. Color immediately distinguishes the Disney confectionery cartoons not only from black-and-white Silvery Moon, but from other color Cockaigne cartoons produced in that decade, and the reasons for this reflect Walt Disney’s shrewd business sense and the period’s rapidly evolving technology. Two-tone processing that produced peaked red-orange or blue-

187 Gabler, Walt Disney, 142–143.
188 Maureen Furniss, Art in Motion, Revised Edition: Animation Aesthetics (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), 23.
green palettes had represented the best options until 1932, when Technicolor perfected a three-color camera that permitted full-spectrum color on film for the first time.¹⁸⁹ Unable to convince any live-action motion-picture studios to invest in the superior-but-costly technology so soon after industry-wide conversion to sound, the company approached Disney Studios for a collaboration that produced *Flowers and Trees* (1932), the first full-color cartoon and the first animated film to win an Academy Award.¹⁹⁰ Media scholar J.P. Telotte assesses the relationship between the two corporations as a logical pairing in which Technicolor recognized in Disney “a client that was not only sympathetic to innovation, but also had a product, the animated cartoon, that might show its technology to maximum effect.”¹⁹¹ Walt Disney secured his studio’s own gains by negotiating exclusive rights to Technicolor’s technology through 1935, and for the next four years Technicolor’s richness and breadth of color was unique to Disney cartoons, relegating rival studios to more primitive color processes and a less visually arresting product.¹⁹²

The visceral desires that depictions of confectionery Cockaigne engage do not require lush and elaborate articulation, but as *Silvery Moon’s* artistic shortcomings make clear, muted presentation in turn muffles the fantasy’s emotional resonance. Exclusive access to a full color spectrum invested Disney’s confectionery texts with a vibrance and realism that other animation studios could not rival. Even with this advantage, however, Disney was not content simply to rely on its superior technical craft. As the

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next two films illustrate, story, character development, music, and pacing were no less important.

The Hot Chocolate Soldiers: Processing Trauma through Chocolate

The first of Disney’s two confectionery Cockaignes capitalized on its dynamic visual medium and vivid confectionery motif to offer an unexpected and arch commentary on the futility of war. This surprisingly grim moral is just one of many features that differentiate the film from the bulk of Disney’s catalog in that same period. Though its length and production values closely resemble the films in the Silly Symphony series, the animated short was specially commissioned for inclusion in MGM’s 1934 live-action film Hollywood Party, itself a thinly-plotted vehicle supporting an outsized cast of popular entertainers including Jimmy Durante, Laurel and Hardy, the Three Stooges. With Disney’s contracted participation, the august cast expanded to include a cameo by Mickey Mouse, who by 1934 had garnered a fan club of over one million members, $600,000 in annual merchandising, and an honorary Academy Award for creator Walt Disney. Despite its A-list bona fides, Hollywood Party earned minimal esteem and has retained even less over subsequent decades. Nevertheless, the brief scene in which Mickey introduced Hollywood Party’s film-within-a-film screening of Hot Chocolate Soldiers represented a sea change in American entertainment. The black-and-white animated mouse—one of the most recognizable faces in the world—

193 The Hot Chocolate Soldiers, directed by Walt Disney (1934; Los Angeles, CA: Walt Disney Studios), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4nTJ661_q8
195 Gabler, Walt Disney, 197–198.
presenting a full-color cartoon to celebrity actors in a black-and-white feature attested to animation’s growing mastery of and relevance to media, technology, and celebrity.

The cartoon opens on a smartly uniformed regiment of chocolate soldiers marching purposefully down candy-paved streets while cheering chocolate crowds throng the sidewalks and wave banners from pastry buildings. A snappy militaristic ballad confirms the visual narrative: Chocolate Town’s military is off to wage war on Pastry Land. In the violent battle scene that follows, the armies assail each other with chocolate-covered cherry cannonballs, flaming marshmallow projectiles, Cracker Jack ballistics, and other weapons fashioned from common candies and desserts; in the end, Trojan Horse trickery secures a Chocolate victory. With missing limbs, open wounds, and a group of terrified gingerbread prisoners-of-war in tow, the army triumphantly returns home to the roaring approval of their chocolate compatriots; as they parade out of crowd’s sight, the scene cuts to a brilliant yellow anthropomorphic sun high in the sky. Breaking the fourth wall, the sun winks knowingly at the viewer and concentrates his radiant beams on the soldiers forging toward their barracks. The soldiers begin to slump, then pool, and finally run together into a liquid mass of melted chocolate in which fragments of candy cane rifles bob about as an iris shot closes the film to black.

The confident cheer with which Hot Chocolate Soldiers pivots from exuberant celebration of war to nihilistic commentary on the fate of those who fight might be unmatched in early twentieth–century cinema, and owes a debt to its animated medium and confectionery motif. Both of these elements blunt the film’s detailed depictions of combat by casting lethal weapons as harmless edible novelties that are typically associated with childhood and celebration, not bloody conflict. In the ninety-second
battle sequence, every frame explicitly details weapons of war and their calamitous consequences, from éclair cannons that mire charging enemies in sticky pastry cream to peppermint battering rams that shatter against cookie doors, but the confectionery visual language presents glorified violence as an exercise in creative ingenuity. These scenarios read as creative rather than horrific specifically because the bodies in peril are no more real and no less plastic than the imagined weapons that rend and distort them. Readily edible and readily imaginary, the physical composition of these characters anticipates and invites destruction.

In his article comparing depictions of racialized animals in World War II–era Japanese and American cartoons, media historian and Japanologist Thomas Lamarre notes that the “plasmaticity of characters in animation seems to encourage all manner
of cruel and violent deformations of the body form.” The impossible armies of *Hot Chocolate Soldiers* support this observation, and their plausible malleability compounds it. Titular chocolate infantrymen have smooth brown bodies that shatter to reveal hollow interiors, while their cookie combatants, flat and sandy, boast crude features and a propensity to produce crumbs. Confectionery physiology allowed animators to illustrate mutilated and destroyed bodies in lurid detail. In their triumphant march home, the chocolate cohort exhibits prodigious casualties that include missing limbs and peppermint stick prosthetics; one headless soldier jauntily maintains the marching beat on his snare drum alongside another whose upper torso floats impossibly over his marching legs, his midsection missing entirely. When battlefield effluvia is nothing more than sugar, the horrors of warfare and its corporeal consequences are tantalizing rather than traumatic.

Human anatomy that diverges from expected forms are more likely to challenge observers visually and viscerally. A body that is missing limbs or exposes interior recesses subverts normative expectations and disturbs those who infer trauma, disease and mortality from physical deformation. Todd Browning’s *Freaks* (1932), a live action film contemporary to *Hot Chocolate Soldiers*, evidenced the discomfort viewers felt when required to visually negotiate physical malformation; the film’s unflinching depiction of actors with congenital deformities troubled critics and audiences who resented being forced to confront the body’s capacity for divergence. Badly maimed American veterans of the first World War confronted similar disquiet and revulsion in the

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United States, according to art historian David M. Lubin, who cites the era’s increasingly sophisticated prosthetics as an apparatus for preserving morale in disfigured soldiers but also in civilians disturbed and distressed by physical evidence of combat’s toll. Casting anthropomorphized confections as combatants allowed Disney to violate and damage bodies without raising hackles about exploitation.

In *Hot Chocolate Soldiers*, sugary stand-ins embody both the horrors of warfare and the zaniness of animation, a medium that permitted and encouraged the physically and materially impossible. In Disney’s subsequent confectionery film, the versatility of cartooning would engage themes that were less visceral and more emotional.

**The Cookie Carnival: Radical Optimism on Parade**

In 1935, Disney’s Silly Symphony *The Cookie Carnival* offered audiences a rags-to-riches allegory complete with a cheerful and industrious protagonist, sympathetic romantic interest, dramatic makeover scene, catchy song-and-dance sequence, and happy ending. Like many fairy tales—but unlike typical depictions of Cockaigne—the film features conflict and hardship in its march to a happy ending. However, action rather than magic propels *Carnival’s* narrative, and characters evolve through their own efforts and the concerned ministrations of peers. Most surprisingly, this sensible story took place in an extraordinary setting: an imagined world in which everyone and everything was a dessert. Meticulously illustrated, elaborately plotted, and presented in

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199 *The Cookie Carnival*, directed by Ben Sharpsteen (1935; Los Angeles, CA: Walt Disney Studios), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4nTJ66I_q8
prismatic Technicolor, *Cookie Carnival* employs its confectionery motif to refresh timeworn tropes with whimsical, radical optimism.

The film begins with a parade of anthropomorphic desserts marching through the streets of Cookietown while over the scene a lively theme song narrates the events on screen: today is the cookie carnival, and the jamboree’s festivities will include the crowning of a cookie queen. As the lyrics conclude the sequence cuts to a more desolate space where a gingerbread man ambles along a railroad track; he has patches on his knees and he shoulders a bindle, but despite these signifiers of poverty and transience that cast him as a hobo, he cheerfully whistles the film’s musical theme until his path converges with that of a drab gingerbread woman whose circumstances appear equally reduced. Immune to his high spirits, the female cookie laments her inability to

![Still from The Cookie Carnival (1935, dir. Ben Sharpsteen). YouTube.](image)
participate in the parade when she “hasn’t any pretty clothes to wear.” Undaunted, the hobo executes an impromptu makeover on his new associate, fashioning an icing-trimmed cupcake-liner gown, repurposing a marshmallow into a powder puff, and teasing an elaborate hairstyle out of her doughy scalp. Newly beautiful, the female cookie is immediately crowned queen of the carnival, paving the way for the film’s third act in which a series of sweets perform brief, vaudeville-style musical acts in audition for the chance to be crowned her king; in the end, she bypasses this slate and selects the hobo hero who was responsible for her transformation. Jubilation reigns as the cookie couple kiss, one glamorous, one scruffy, but both now royalty in the ultimate elevation of the common man.

Investigating the ways in which *Cookie Carnival* enacts Mikhail Bakhtin’s conceptualization of carnival invites unavoidable charges of literality, but the film reproduces a number of relevant tropes that establish Cookieland as a site where audiences may enjoy vicarious power transfer. Communications scholars Terry Lindvall and Matthew Melton more broadly identify twentieth-century cartoons as a comprehensive category of text that collectively replicates carnival in its freedom from internal consistency and license for self-reference and self-mockery.200 *Cookie Carnival* foregoes metareference, but combines preposterous agents and rational operations to tease Bakhtinian dichotomies between the pious and the grotesque. From its opening frames, the cacophonous jubilee around which the film is oriented establishes for viewers the material makeup of the world on screen and the confectionery characters

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who populate it. Exuberant and colorful confections fill the sugary streets in two distinct forms: some are flat, brown, and mimic human shapes with animated expressions detailed in icing and candy, others are anthropomorphic iterations of popular treats with decidedly non-humanoid figures but friendly faces and sartorial accessories. Whether musicians, acrobats, clowns, or a bone-shaped dog biscuit happily scampering after a dripping ice-cream sandwich, every confection performs behaviors appropriate to and expected of the people and animals for whom they serve as confectionery analogues. These characters are physiologically impossible and inherently absurd, but their adherence to socially prescribed codes of conduct tacitly reproduces in a twentieth-century visual medium the “laughing” and “serious” aspects that Bakhtin identified as coexistent in medieval consciousness.\(^{201}\)

The good-natured transient who serves as the film’s protagonist provides the film with a literal embodiment of Carnivalesque inversion. From his first appearance on screen, context clues and sartorial cues signal his status as a cookie first and foremost, but one who is undeniably down on his luck. Icing gloves, dickey, and green gumdrop buttons accessorize his form in accordance with culinary tradition, but crude icing patches at his knees and a bindle suspended from a candy cane wielded jauntily over one shoulder present iconography not commonly associated with his biscuit brethren. These symbols of deprivation and transience do not merely distinguish him from the more festive cookies who predominate throughout the film, they also humanize him by suggesting a relationship to hardship that would be familiar to viewers witnessing economic and social upheaval that reverberated in the United States during the

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Depression years. In a 1932 radio address delivered while campaigning for his first term as U.S. president, Franklin Roosevelt charged, “These unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten, the unorganized but the indispensable units of economic power […] that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid.”

Three years later, Disney centered as its hero the forgotten cookie: economically and socially marginalized, but optimistic and clever despite his travails.

Contradictions abound in a hardship narrative rendered in the visual language of sweets, a commodity associated with pleasure, indulgence, and celebration. Material tension between indulgence and adversity offers viewers sympathetic entry into a film that does not provide more literal audience surrogates in the form of human characters. This is immediately evident in the cookie hobo-turned–cookie king who serves as the film’s protagonist. Like most of the film’s cookies, and like most cookies in general, he is a uniform shade of brown; the exception is his face rendered in a shade of light peach with a delineated border to distinguish it from his darker scalp and body. This articulation codes the protagonist as white. The Cookie Queen displays a similarly pale complexion, enormous violet eyes, and upon her makeover, an elaborate blonde updo fashioned from cookie dough; these features cast her, too, as white. In a population of non-human people both humanoid and non-humanoid in form, the male and female protagonists are the only prominent characters racially coded as white, a distinction unlikely to have been accidental. Why would Disney animators take pains to assign whiteness to inherently raceless pastries whose organic coloring would align with

historically marginalized racial complexions? In a cinematic culture that saw non-white and ambiguously white stars laboring to pass as white, Disney’s efforts to tacitly articulated whiteness in raceless cookies extended a white supremacy already ambient in the field.

Protagonists who are not human but coded as white betray an insecurity related to racial privilege, but the film’s racial coding of non-white characters is still more pernicious. Despite animation’s relative newness as a cultural medium, cartoons employed long-established racist stereotypes that held broad cultural recognition. In his distillation of racist animated stereotypes, cultural historian Nicholas Sammond argues that cartoon characters from the 1920s and 1930s reproduced minstrel entertainments on screen. This holds true in many of the non-human people who populate animated confectionery Cockaignes. Other confectionery cartoons’ resistance to cheap racist humor is perhaps more notable than its casual role in Cookie Carnival.

Race, like class, features prominently in Cookie Carnival, and the appearance of racially coded characters is heavy with meaning. In her analysis of the Disney animated feature Pocahontas (1995), American popular culture scholar Leigh H. Edwards observes that the film “collapses all non-white races into one multiethnic, undifferentiated category, brownness, and it assimilates them into a Western world view.” The critique—wholly legitimate and increasingly common by century’s end as established patterns of Eurocentrism and racial reductionism persisted in Disney

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animated features despite their production for and popularity with diverse global audiences— inadvertently pokes at the problematic racial characterizations in *Cookie Carnival* six decades earlier. Whereas *Pocahontas* blithely reduced indigenous peoples into a single population oriented in contrast with whiteness, the baked goods that populate Carnival’s world are non-human subjects that might legitimately comprise an undifferentiated category in which brownness is a defining characteristic. As desserts, they are inherently raceless; as invented characters, their depiction is limited only by the bounds of their animators’ imagination. Ultimately, however, these bounds hewed to predictable confines of white supremacist thought that conjured white and non-white races from anthropomorphic sweets.

The “Beauties on Parade” who fill the film’s opening sequence introduce Cookieland’s incoherent racial taxonomy and betray the production’s lazy reliance on broad cultural stereotypes. Miss Banana Cake and Miss Pineapple are anthropomorphic iterations of the desserts for which they’re titled, while Miss Peppermint inexplicably presents as a white woman, albeit one scaled to the confectionery world in which she exists. Miss Cocoanut, who occupies an Arctic-themed float fashioned to resemble a sleigh on candy cane runners, introduces a new category of queen. Sporting a hooded anorak of flaky white coconut and brown cookie mittens, she showers the crowd with coconut “snow” and beams manically with outsized front teeth. The depiction capitalized on crude cultural tropes associated with Arctic and sub-Arctic cultures. By the early twentieth century, exhibits featuring circumpolar indigenous peoples were a popular draw at international expositions; and films like *Nanook of the North* (1922) used false documentary merits to further cement an invented anthropology that celebrated the
To ignore coconut’s tropical origins and instead exploit its snowy appearance was an inspired artistic choice, but the crude cultural burlesque to which the sequence was reduced erodes any claims to creativity and emphasizes the absurdity of assigning race to a cookie.

The abjectly hostile depiction of Miss Licorice reveals the entitlement that white Disney animators felt to mock Black bodies. Though the character occupies the screen for only a few seconds, the time proved sufficient to accommodate a slew of racist tropes, and supports cultural scholar Michelle Wallace’s observation that “a complete racial mythology more elaborate, more organized, and, arguably more insidious than any stock behavioral stereotype” operated in animated depictions of African Americans in this period. Black Miss Licorice is literally black, and pale eyes, nostrils, and tongue are the only features visible on her face. She bops in place on long legs twisted like corkscrews, and windmills her similarly contorted arms in a gambol that offers a visual explanation for her licorice twist limbs. Green cloth headgear, white gloves, a colorful tutu, and oversized red pumps comprise her clothing and accessories; though a line vertically bisecting her torso suggests a shirt seam, at a glance she appears topless. Childish clothing and ambiguous coverage simultaneously infantilize and sexualize the character.


Cookie Carnival’s racialized depictions, both the white-coded protagonists and the racial caricatures in the beauty parade, align with Thomas LaMarre’s exploration of speciesism, a phenomenon “a displacement of race and racism (relations between humans as imagined in racial terms) onto relations between humans and animals,” replacing animals with desserts. Through this particular instantiation of the confectionery vernacular, we can see how color animation materialized new technologies and anxieties of race and class. The next two film treat class in similar terms, using the fantastic powers of animation to caricature desires that would otherwise be subtextual alongside common anxieties.

The Protestant Work Ethic and the Spirit of Confections

Kids, Candy, and Reward

The final two films that this chapter will examine are, in many ways, the examples of Cockaigne that align most clearly with the tropes and traditions that define the space. The Bon Bon Parade (1935) and Somewhere in Dreamland (1936) imagine elaborate fantasy worlds made of cake and candy, populated by living confections, and visited by human children. Both cartoons depict sweets of an abundance and variety that matches that of the excruciatingly detailed Disney films, but unlike those worlds, the realms that comprise Bon Bon Parade’s Candytown and the titular Dreamland are not contained worlds, but accessible realms that welcome the presence of their juvenile visitors. The discrepancy lies in the set of conditions that bring the respective films’ protagonists to Cockaigne in the first place: Somewhere in Dreamland implies, and Bon Bon Parade
articulates outright, that the children shall occupy the confectionery destination to redress and reward situations from their respective, equally miserable lives.

Cockaigne’s established distinction from Christian constructions of heaven (that is, a geographical destination that exists to reward in death attitudes, behaviors, and practices that defined one’s life) complicates, but hardly forbids, identifying Candytown and Dreamland as examples of Cockaigne. Though the juvenile protagonists in both of these films ascend to these realms in reward for good works, a dynamic that nominally contradicts Cockaigne’s canonical identity distinct from heaven, Christian or otherwise. I would argue, however, that Parade and Dreamland sidestep this discrepancy by casting impoverished children as protagonists in each film. As children, they are powerless over the circumstances that govern their nourishment, safety, and care; as poor people they are economically marginalized in a way that is immediately recognizable and engages sympathy. Cockaigne’s riches do not exist to reward those who require or deserve it; it exists for those who want it. By making these characters objectively sympathetic, marginalized, and in moral need, these cartoons emphasize an American emphasis on merited welfare.

Each film doubles down on this tacit argument by incorporating specifically commendable behavior to be rewarded: the young protagonist in Bon Bon Parade is given the opportunity to access Cockaigne when he spares the life of a living being whose dangers at his hands was entirely unknowing. Dreamland’s young protagonists, whose bulbous heads, tiny features, and lack of articulated speech make them look barely older than toddlers, trudge barefoot in the snow collecting firewood to keep the household warm. Though Cockaigne is not an earned reward and children are not
socially, legally, or morally burdened to protect the lives and livelihood of anyone other than themselves, this shared scenario makes two assertions. First, that the respective protagonists have earned their admission to Cockaigne, and second, that the doubled qualities of being poor and behaving nobly justifies the indulgence—and overindulgence—that Cockaigne permits. Both The Bon Bon Parade and Somewhere in Dreamland soundly reject the notion that good behavior is its own reward, and posit confectionery Cockaigne as an appropriate counter balance to hardship.

Notable Technology and Technique

Artistically and technically, these films improve on Silvery Moon’s half-hearted black-and-white set pieces that cloak everything in peppermint stripes. And though neither can compete with the elaboration of movement and Technicolor spectrum of the films that the Disney studio produced at that time, both The Bon Bon Parade and Somewhere in Dreamland illustrate the evolving artistry and realism of American studio animation by the mid-1930s.

Dreamland offers a particularly interesting rendering of Cockaigne that is qualitatively similar to those depicted in this chapter’s other films, but technically quite different. Its predominantly sweets-centered landscapes feature the universal edibility and associated tropes expected in Cockaigne: acres of ice cream cones are free for the picking, angel food cakes tower and ribbon candy fences tower in the background, and the road is paved with chocolate bars. However, a technology developed by and unique to the production team at Fleischer Studio, which produced the film, develops a visual texture that the other film’s lack. Called “stereotyping,” it was a technical process that
married animation’s representational license with the depth of live film. The stereotyping process, which Max and Dave Fleischer patented in 1934, utilized three-dimensional models mounted in glass-topped dioramas that they called “setbacks.” Animators laid out two-dimensional character cells over the setback glass to construct scenes whose background field was in three dimensions. The enhanced depth in this perspective conveyed texture and detail of landscape that a traditional animation backdrop could not match without the investment of significant time and labor in more photorealistic drawing. Thus *Dreamland*, though it does not portray technological innovation in the film, manifests modern technology in its own production values. That technology, in turn, enhances the fantasy being sold to the audience.

*The Bon Bon Parade* and *Somewhere in Dreamland*

*The Bon Bon Parade* opens on a commercial street at night, empty except for a young boy clad in patched and ill-fitting clothes who stares longingly at the sweets displayed in the window of a candy shop. Inside, a cheerful fly prances among the confections, thumbing his nose at the hungry child; the frustrated boy slaps the pane in an attempt to shoo away the fly and, accidentally shattering the glass, tumbles into the shop. Dazed but unhurt, he gathers his senses and begins to gobble everything within reach; in his haste, he snatches a tiny cherub who promises that if his life is spared he’ll grant the boy’s “every wish.” The boy agrees and declares his wish to “roll away to live in Candytown!” The cherub accommodatingly conjures a miniature train and shrinks the

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Fig. 2.5. Still from *Somewhere in Dreamland* (1936, dir. Dave Fleischer). Internet Animation Database.

Fig. 2.6. Still from *The Bon Bon Parade* (1935, dir. Ben Harrison). YouTube.
boy to the diminutive size necessary to climb aboard. Traversing an increasingly confectionery terrain, the visitors chug into Candytown where crowds of anthropomorphic treats greet them with cheers and the bonbon king issues a formal welcome. The remainder of the film, nearly four minutes, showcases the many acts and attractions that comprise the visual and performative delights that comprise titular parade—which, besides bon bons, features all manner of candy and baked and frozen sweets—and Candytown itself.

Though the bulk of Bonbon Parade is a vaudevillian showcase for confectionery performance, the opening sequence establishes more complex tensions. The film’s protagonist wears ludicrously outsized attire that overwhims his frame, emphasizing his small size and youth; frayed cuffs, patched pants, and holes in the soles of his shoes visually cue the boy’s poverty at a glance and hint to viewers that if anyone is watching over this child, they, too, are powerless to adequately clothe him. Everything about the boy’s appearance actively—even aggressively—reflects his youth, poverty, and isolation, signaling his vulnerability before any action unfolds. However, the merciful act that casts him as the film’s hero and secures his entry to Candytown is an accidental one; only Cupid’s frantic protestations prevent the boy from consuming the cherub in a fit of gluttony. His distracted indulgence nearly costs him the opportunity to perform the altruistic act which rewards him with confectionery indulgence on an even greater scale. For a character who is both victim and hero, indulgence and reward are two sides of the same coin.
Somewhere in Dreamland similarly celebrates the good intentions and noble behaviors of children. The film opens on a grim scene that was drawn in 1936 but owes an aesthetic debt to Charles Dickens’s nineteenth-century depiction of urban poverty and the urchins who suffered under it. Two small children, dressed in tatters and barefoot in the snow, trudge down a street of small shops in search of firewood, marveling at the contents of each store’s windows. Upon return to their dilapidated home, the children dine on bread and water served by their gaunt and tearful mother, then retire to bed clad in ragged nightclothes. They shiver under blankets so decayed that they are more hole than cloth, an outlandish visual gag that pushes their depicted penury from clichéd to comical. Sleep tumbles the children into Dreamland, a familiar fantasy realm with an entirely edible environment full of gargantuan sweets, where they will forget their cares and sate their hunger. Any anxiety the viewer might feel anticipating the inevitable destruction of the children’s joy upon their awakening is negated by the merciful twist at the film’s end: the children do wake up from Dreamland’s indulgences, but to a house full of toys and a luxurious feast that fills the table. The merchants who witnessed the children’s sad circumstances at the film’s start have banded together to reward the children’s industry, satisfy their needs, and fulfill their desires.

That the protagonists are rewarded twice—with the limitless indulgence they enjoy in the fantasy realm of Dreamland, and with the more measured but no less welcome comforts they are gifted in their animated reality—does not seem accidental in light of the radical squalor in which they live. These children do not live in poverty, but in

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Somewhere in Dreamland, directed by Dave Fleischer (1936; New York: Fleischer Studios), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TcRohLJx6g.
Fig. 2.7. Still from *Somewhere in Dreamland* (1936, dir. Dave Fleischer). YouTube.

degradation: their clothing, food, occupation, and shelter are all insufficient. In these harsh conditions, their mother’s love is evident and sincere, but equally insufficient, as it cannot mitigate or reverse their grim situation. The exaggeration of their suffering demands an equally exaggerated correction, which the film provides in compensation repeated in two realms. But if the central setting’s misery commands joyous inversion, the children facilitate that command through their own sheer doggedness. The public search for firewood brings their predicament to the attention of the agents who will help to improve it, but it is the public performance of poverty (the bare feet, the snow) that mandates the jubilant extravagance of their own personal land of plenty.
**Conclusion**

Optimism born of and found in animated Cockaigne is the driving spirit in these animated films. Though their celebration of indulgence might entertain and awe, the security that these cartoons promise and the decidedly unproblematic surplus that they feature relieved economic anxieties and social tensions of the 1930s. When they compose and occupy the setting in abundant quantity, the confections in these films promise satiety and indulgence; when they are anthropomorphized characters in the story, they promote optimism and joy. This imagery, augmented by vibrant color, novel music, and increasingly sophisticated animation, blurred distinctions between indulgence and reward and posited respite from work as a literally sweet prospect. Amid the uncertainties and insecurities of Depression-era America, candy-colored fantasies of abundance offered viewers a sweet escape in darkened cinemas. In the next chapter, a different set of cartoons from the same period will depict more pernicious interpretations of confectionery abundance.
In June 1937, Southern States Industrial Council (SSIC) president John Edgerton testified at Congressional hearings related to the labor standards legislation that would culminate with the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) the following year. The FLSA would offer imperfect but unprecedented protections for American workers, including restrictions on child labor, a federal minimum wage, and overtime pay for hours exceeding a forty-hour work week. At the 1937 hearings, however, Edgerton professed surprise that external forces of any sort might influence the wage that workers earned. “I have never thought of paying men on the basis of what they need,” he explained to Congress, “I therefore do not inquire particularly into what they need and what their idea of a standard of living is or what not.” Ultimately, he summarized, “what a man can do, what he can produce, his efficiency, his physical condition, and so forth” should be the only factors that determine how much he is paid.211

The testimony articulated the existential cruelties that capitalism facilitates and that the Great Depression catalyzed. To the SSIC president, the individuals in his employ were not people with biological and material needs, but a dehumanized work force for whom productive capacity alone determined the value of their labor. The calculation reduced industrial workers to mere extensions of the machines that they operated, and is startling for the candor and fidelity with which it adopted Marx’s theory

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of alienation as a payroll strategy.\textsuperscript{212} It was particularly pernicious in light of the economic climate in which it was exercised. For the better part of a decade, economic recession and contraction had forced millions of Americans to confront the material consequences of an economy over which they had no control. Unfettered production across the 1920s came to a dramatic halt following the 1929 stock market crash and contributed to newly dire circumstances for America’s industrial working classes; employment hours in non-farm production dropped 31 percent, and in manufacturing declined 40 percent between 1929 and 1933.\textsuperscript{213} Economic precarity and desperation contributed to a vulnerability that some, like Edgerton, were content to exploit as his blithe testimony laid bare.\textsuperscript{214}

In the 1930s, discourse related to labor, leisure, and human needs was not limited to Congressional hearing rooms. As Michael Denning notes, the interwar period supported uniquely explicit labor aesthetics in mass culture.\textsuperscript{215} This chapter examines labor aesthetics in four animated cartoons that centered on industrial confectionery production. Produced between 1934 and 1939, each of these narrative cartoons imagined discrete worlds in which non-human workers, fantastic operations, and outlandish machinery facilitated the mass production of confections and baked goods. Like the cartoon Cockaigne explored in the preceding chapter, these films feature abundant sweets, whimsical characters, and a generally joyous tenor. And as in the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item One could also argue that Edgerton did not see his actions as exploitive, because he did not see his employees as people vulnerable to exploitation in the first place; they were merely cogs in the machine.
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other animated texts, the confectionery vernacular reframes but cannot repress economic aesthetics and anxieties.

Confectionery Labor as Entertainment and Employment

Frustrated Fantasies

Who hasn’t dreamed of working in a candy factory? The work popularly seduces the imaginations of children, who can readily envision unrestricted access to sweets but possess limited understanding of the labor that produces them. Confectionery careers also feature prominently in two texts enshrined in the American cultural canon, affirming the topic’s resonance with a broader audience. One, a 1952 episode of the television comedy *I Love Lucy* titled “Job Switching,” finds the titular protagonist and her best friend Ethel employed as chocolate wrappers in a candy factory; unable to keep pace with the production line’s gradually increasing speed, the pair end up frantically gobbling chocolates in an attempt to reduce the backlog. The scene is an iconic one in American media and rarely goes unreferenced in discourse about the show, but also garners frequent reference in academic scholarship exploring efficiency and productivity. Two decades after “Job Switching” first aired, Paramount Studios produced *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971), a Technicolor musical based on the novel *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* by British children’s author Roald Dahl. The visually lavish film imagined confectionery production as a business that was by turns joyous, menacing, and surreal; despite mixed reviews, the film is both well-known and a cult favorite fifty years later.²¹⁶

Numerous factors inform the renown that these texts enjoy, not least prolific exposure across decades of television reruns. The fantasy of abundant sweets also holds powerful sway, particularly for those who have never worked in confectionery production. However, the ambivalent portrayal of industrial labor in both films—an ambivalence that persists despite the desirability of the commodities that proliferate—resonates with anyone who has experienced alienation and overwhelm in service to industrial capitalism. *Willy Wonka* and “Job Switching” both posit idealized production scenarios, document their inevitable derailment, and supply resolution that simultaneously divorces the protagonist from industrial injustice and assures continued participation in a capitalist economy in which the candy never stops rolling. Mid-twentieth-century industrial production fantasies of abundance, work, and redemption, reassure audiences that no job is perfect.

Grim Realities

Though popular culture played confectionery industry pitfalls for laughs, there was little amusement to be found in the industrial baking and candy manufacture fields in the early twentieth century. Poor environmental conditions, punishing schedules, health hazards, and social stigma dogged employees.\(^\text{217}\) The controlled climates crucial to various stages of baking and sugar work complicated work on multiple fronts. Press accounts heralded the “artificial atmosphere” in modern facilities that maintained the temperatures necessary to proof sweet dough or coat chocolates, but this relatively

cutting-edge technology was slow to be standardized; more common were drafty buildings and industrial ovens that contributed to often-brutal environmental extremes, with bakery temperatures climbing as high as 110 degrees in the summer months. In addition to compromising worker’s physical comfort, facility climate-control woes at times disrupted production entirely. Some confections, particularly those with chocolate coatings, could not set properly in warm temperatures, and many confectionery outfits sharply curtailed summer production—and summer employment—as a result. Cultural calendars also impacted production schedules; the Christmas season, during which demand was highest, typically gave way to a January lull during which sales dwindled and production plant layoffs were inevitable.

Employment in the confectionery industry also invited more serious complaints, including work-related illness. Prolonged exposure to vaporized alcohol (a common ingredient in flavoring extracts), wheat fungus, and chocolate can trigger allergic reactions and migraine headaches in those exposed to the ingredients in large quantities. When aerosolized in the air and inhaled over prolonged periods of time, flour, starch, talc, and sugar contribute to chronic and permanent respiratory disease and fundamental changes in lung function. Today, respiratory illness remains an

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222 Zuskin et al, "Respiratory Symptoms," 436.
occupational hazard; one 2009 study identified flour dust as the leading cause of work-related asthma in the United Kingdom. Though it is impossible to retroactively diagnose illness with any certainty, the persistence of specific health problems in contemporary confectionery labor populations credibly suggests that past generations of people in the same industry would have suffered from the same or similar ailments. For confectionery workers employed a century ago in facilities with ventilation systems markedly less sophisticated than current regulations require, one can safely assume that the work’s threatened health consequences were no less injurious, and probably far more widespread.

In an industry in which grueling conditions and consequences were commonplace, low wages added insult to injury and made confectionery production an exploitive enterprise for many workers. “Cheap candy,” April Merleaux reminds us, “signaled workers’ embeddedness in coercive systems of labor control,” and the low price of candy reflected the exploitation of the people making it. This was particularly true in large-scale production facilities, which neither required nor employed the higher-skilled artisans—typically male, German-speaking, and union-oriented—who commonly staffed smaller commercial outfits. Large-scale industrial bakeries and candy manufacturers, on the other hand, employed a labor force that was disproportionately female, African American, immigrant, or a combination thereof. Already politically, economically, and socially disenfranchised, these workers earned low wages for the

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225 Weinberg, "Uneeda Read This," 3.
226 *Black Worker* vol. 6, 146–147.
same demographic reasons that impeded their ability to secure employment in a more favorable industry, creating dependency on employment that was commonly unpleasant and undercompensated. Hierarchies within the industry were no less insidious; Black workers commonly made less money than white workers, and received less choice assignments in production.\textsuperscript{227} There did emerge occasional opportunities to scale the industry ranks: in early twentieth–century New York City, Italian immigrants—and particularly Italian women—frequently worked making pastry, ice cream, and candy at industrial facilities, but historian Simone Cinotto notes that the local confectionery industry also accommodated immigrant capital and Italians owned more than a dozen candy factories in the city.\textsuperscript{228} At large, however, the confectionery industry offered limited professional opportunities and little room for advancement, particularly for those who were not white, male, or skilled labor.

Popular twentieth-century texts featuring confectionery production wrung humor and redemption from industrial exploitation. In reality, employment in the early-twentieth century confectionery industry featured long hours, low pay, and dangerous working conditions. The serial economic and structural crises that defined the Great Depression disproportionately impacted the same uniquely vulnerable populations—poor and working-class people, and women, African Americans, and immigrants—already trapped in predatory industrial employment. Closer consideration how people constructed and policed labor and leisure during the 1930s will in turn contextualize the

\textsuperscript{227} Merleaux, \textit{Sugar and Civilization}, 137–139.
\textsuperscript{228} Simone Cinotto, \textit{The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City} (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 110.
industrial confectionery production cartoons that centered these same concepts as entertainment.

*Working and Not Working in the Great Depression*

**Labor and Unemployment**

The economic conditions of the Depression’s early years offer good reason to believe that movie audiences might have appreciated labor fantasies. High unemployment rates, compromised work schedules, and reduced wages made gainful employment an impossible dream for many during this time, while an industrial economy predicated on minimally skilled labor allowed little satisfaction or room for professional advancement.\(^{229}\) National employment rates reached a nadir in 1932–1933, at which point approximately 20% of the work force was unemployed.\(^{230}\) Individual regions and populations could suffer at markedly higher rates, particularly women and non-white workers; labor historian Fred B. Glass reports that in 1935 Los Angeles the unemployment rate among African Americans was 50%.\(^{231}\) Sharply curtailed production eliminated huge numbers of manufacturing jobs, reconfigured others through work-sharing and spread schedules that commonly organized days into four six-hour shifts rather than three eight-hour shifts; this allowed employers to preserve more positions, but reduced the number of hours worked—and, consequently, the take-home pay—for individual employees.\(^{232}\) Wages, too, decreased in manufacturing and clerical

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\(^{232}\) Robert Inklaar, et al., "Did Technology Shocks Drive Inflation?,” 847.
sectors. Economist Curtis J. Simon notes that, in addition to the lower rate of pay that employers offered, individuals seeking employment substantially decreased the wage for which they were willing to work, a phenomenon that once again disproportionately affected non-white, non-male labor.\textsuperscript{233} For millions of American work was hard to come by and did not provide a living wage, and workers themselves could not appropriately value their labor because employers could and would not support a fair rate.

**Leisure and Freedom**

Unemployment is abstinence from paid work forced by measures beyond an individual’s control. This involuntary abstinence invites practical threats and psychic frustrations. Most people depend on employment wages to support themselves, and many have families and dependents to support as well; an inability to afford food, housing, and other necessities has obvious consequences that threaten individual livelihood and community stability, and in turn frustrate feelings of competence and contentment. Leisure, on the other hand, implies voluntary abstinence from work, time free to devote to “what you will” in the parlance one labor anthem that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{234} Ostensibly one’s own time, organized by one’s own orientation to work, American leisure has long been a targeted concern of capitalists and social reformers who viewed free time—and specifically, free time for the working classes—as a political, economic, and moral issue, and who have policed it accordingly.


American labor organizers in the 1920s and 1930s centered adequate time for leisure as a worker’s right in a humane and productive economic system of moral capitalism. An industrial economy predicated on ever-expanding technological efficiency, optimists argued, permitted productivity levels to support healthy wages and a thirty-hour work week. Economists, too, saw value in moral capitalism in general and the thirty-hour work week in particular: workers with income to spend and time to spend are integral to a healthy economy in which money circulates. Even some industry titans, most notably Henry Ford, endorsed this model and championed the thirty-hour work week’s benefits for production and for the broader economy. Good wages and a shorter work week would allow workers to lead humane and dignified lives free from destitution and the physical and emotional discomforts of excessive labor, but provoked resentment and anxiety in classes who already enjoyed these common goods. In the nineteenth century, according to historian Lawrence Glickman, “Middle-class commenters feared that working-class leisure would promote less than respectable desires” when workers sought to establish the eight-hour work day. Interwar union efforts to establish a six-hour work day achieved a “political high-water mark” in 1933 and landed on the cover of Newsweek, but could not combat political and economic opposition even while unemployment ran rampant. For anxious and unscrupulous

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powers, work facilitated social control over a population whose economic and temporal freedom represented a moral threat.

*Imaging Confectionery Industries in the 1930s*

Indignity and frustration defined the socioeconomic paradoxes of the Great Depression. Unemployment and economic exploitation most commonly afflicted those who suffered from insecure employment and economic exploitation in the first place. Industrialization and technological innovation could easily stabilize and compensate industrial labor, but instead entrenched a system in which the spoils of productivity benefited capital, not labor. And while millions of unemployed people struggled under involuntary separation from work, handwringing moralists continued to scrutinize the motives and activities of working-class people with free time to enjoy. Disenfranchised people could not catch a break, find a job, or enjoy what freedoms they did have.

The cartoons explored below depict imaginary industrial confectionery production, but the frustrations described above suffuse each film. Across these texts, work is steady, production is abundant, and employment in the system is its own reward. Participation, however, is predicated on dehumanization, alienation, and the deliberate conflation of labor and play. Closer scrutiny of imagined industrial labor reveals that not even absurdist fantasies celebrating gainful employment and abundant sweets can divorce these satisfactions from industrial capitalism’s established horrors.
Doughnuts: Labor as Play

*Doughnuts* (1933) is an early animated film that considers the relationship between sweets, labor, and technology. The cartoon was the penultimate installment in Van Beuren Studio’s twenty-six–film series featuring Tom and Jerry, bumbling chums loosely modeled on the *Mutt and Jeff* comic strip’s titular protagonists. Tall, lanky Tom and diminutive, hyperactive Jerry were physically distinct but shared a similar good-natured amiability, and the pair’s largely voiceless shambling through one outrageous situation after another provided the only real continuity across the series. Many of the films imagined discrete professional tableaus for Tom and Jerry, and *Doughnuts* was no different, casting the duo as bakers whose professional hijinks disrupt a culinary competition. Though cultural stereotypes and visual gags inform the bulk of the film’s scripted humor, across and between these broad japes the cartoon confronted industrial machinery’s role in confectionery production as a source of absurdity and anxiety.

The film opens on an *al fresco* “Baker’s Convention,” an improbable event at which Tom and Jerry helm a doughnut-making enterprise. An extended sequence depicting the pair’s motley competitors occupies nearly half of the cartoon’s run time, after which the film homes in on the protagonists’ predicament: despite an elaborate industrial setup—incongruous at this open-air festival—Tom and Jerry are unable to draw the attention of the convention’s customers or judges. Serendipity intervenes when

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241 The Tom and Jerry who feature in Van Beuren's series, which was produced between 1931 and 1933, are unrelated to MGM Studio’s animated cat-and-mouse team of the same name whose own series spanned from 1940 to 1958. Plausible speculation suggests that both duos were named for the festive—and strongly alcoholic—punch called “Tom and Jerry.”
a drunken sailor reels onto the scene; in short order the infiltrator inadvertently empties his rum jug directly into the churning mixer, blinds himself with raw dough, and stumbles onto the conveyor belt where his mad scrambling on the de facto treadmill integrates him into the production process. The doughnuts, now ostensibly infused with mariner-grade bootleg, delight the judges, who gobble them by the handful in an increasingly intoxicated frenzy as swarming conventioneers clamor for the inebriating treats. The film ends with Tom and Jerry hoisting their first-prize trophy as bakers and judges dance ecstatically before the cheering crowd.

The industrial production line at the center of Tom and Jerry’s operation supports the story’s comedic action and dramatic tension, both of which heighten as the sequence unfolds and operations becomes increasingly preposterous. The mechanical equipment and processes depicted early in the doughnut production sequence would not have been out of place in an interwar industrial bakery: dough tumbles in a large mixing vat, is portioned with the pull of a lever, and travels along a conveyor belt for processing. Absurdity encroaches when Jerry leaps into the cockpit of a miniature steam roller and drives down the line to roll out the doughnuts, the vehicle’s steam whistle tooting a jaunty counterpoint to the film’s musical theme. Shaping the doughnuts commands another retrograde shift in technologies as Jerry abandons the steamroller and clamors onto a pogo stick; bouncing cheerfully on the spring-loaded device, he pierces a hole in each pastry before it rolls off the belt and into the fryer. The scene’s comedic climax, which finds the drunken sailor blindly punching doughnut holes with his peg leg as he runs in place atop the belt, regresses operations to a still more primitive
point as human locomotion and a wooden stick become integral components of ostensibly modern technology.

Integrating archaic steam power and repurposed children’s toys turns the production line into a site of both work and play. This pastiche permits a degree of manpower that automation had increasingly divorced from mass production, and imagines a kind of industrialization that both permits and requires novel human labor. The characters use unexpected tools harkening to a more primitive industry and facilitate the extent to which that labor is recast. On the steamroller and pogo stick, labor becomes frolic, further developing the fantasy of industrial production’s potential satisfactions. Demonstrating ingenuity, no matter how ridiculous, reveals and allows
buffoons to possess competence in their own right. Tom and Jerry’s imagined technologies are absurd, but productive, and repurposing familiar tools and toys for unexpected use is a common trope in animation. Moreover, by making playfulness and play an integral aspect of technological operations, the film imagines an iteration of industrialization that requires—rather than replaces—human participation. Because machines do not distinguish toys from tools, a fully automated pogo stick, would not be a pogo stick at all, only an implement that functions in a similar fashion to the toy. Jerry’s joyful command of the apparatus, however, crystallizes the recreational orientation that the cartoon posits alongside mechanical function. In Doughnuts, a novel machine will never wholly replace workers because workers who delight in operating it construct the machine’s novelty in the first place.

The incongruity of the doughnut machine’s assemblage cast mechanization as an absurdist enterprise and zany set piece, and that absurdity emerges in relief with recognizable technology. Few iconographic elements signaled industrialization more readily than the moving assembly line, which Robert Lewis identifies as “one of the core components of what experts called ‘modern industry’” in the early twentieth century. Belted conveyance systems, first developed for industrial use in the mining industry in the late-nineteenth century, would prove essential to Henry Ford, who by 1915 had adapted the technology for his automobile assembly lines. Over the next two decades, mechanical conveyance systems became a central component of mass production due to the speed and consistency with which they could move large quantities of materials.

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through processing.\textsuperscript{243} Industrial bakeries used conveyor belts to move dough from mixer to roller to cutting station and eventually, with the invention of the band oven in the 1930s, through the 300-foot heated chambers that baked off the goods.\textsuperscript{244} The conveyor belt at the heart of Tom and Jerry's operations immediately signals that theirs is an industrial operation, but the visual incongruity that makes the image humorous concerns the contraption's physical context, not its purpose. The outdoor event that provides the film's setting is more carnival than convention, and in either case an unexpected location for massive industrial machinery. Physical displacement, informs the comedy juxtaposition of industrial processes with pastoralism rather than with the production of treats.

Though Tom and Jerry's elaborate industrial production line occupies center stage in the film and within the story, the comedy that it supports emerges in contrast with the cartoon's peripheral characters. The title duo are colorless: literally, in this black-and-white film, but also figuratively in their absence of any characterization beyond the vapid cheer with which they operate their doughnut stand. In contrast, the supporting cast embodies an array of crude cultural stereotypes from which the film sought to mine humor. At kiosks around the convention, effeminate dandies mince behind the Pansy Cream Puffs counter, Hasidic matzo bakers conspire to attract business in klezmer-infused intonations, and a kilted Scottish customer carefully locks his change in a padlocked sporran. The convention judges, mere pedants in their initial presentation, are revealed as would-be sexual deviants in a conclusion that sees the


two male judges pair up for a romantic tango while the female judge lasciviously pursues the sailor. The unilaterality with which Doughnuts culturally maligns its secondary characters does not mitigate the prejudices that those characters exploit, but it does establish a curious dynamic on screen and in relationship to the audience. Though presented as objects of mockery, the supporting cast references, reflects, and engages a world comprised of diverse individual and community identities. Tom and Jerry—like Edgerton’s idealized workers—exist only as actors of the labor they perform; consequently, they are the story’s least interesting agents.

A sequence in the middle of the film advances this willingness to bend reality. At a canopied kiosk labeled “Ye Pie Shoppee,” the audience meets characters of an entirely different taxonomy. These bakers are approximately human in form, but miniature in size, with bulbous midsections, spindly limbs, and pointed shoes. These must work in a team of four to maneuver pastry crust over a pie that is the size of a child’s wading pool relative to their own diminutive stature while a fifth worker rides a pastry crimper like a unicycle; in another scene, a minion cranks featureless gingerbread men onto a conveyor belt while his colleague uses a Gatling gun loaded with raisins to violently detail the cookies’ faces as they roll by. The film then cuts to the doughnut stand, abruptly returning viewers to the ridiculous human characters who drive the plot. The tiny workers bear a more-than-passing resemblance to Canadian author and illustrator Palmer Cox’s depictions of brownies in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century children’s literature. Cox did not invent brownies, domestic sprites who anonymously and capably assist with household tasks, including cooking.²⁴⁵ However,

his illustrated poems popularized the characters in American culture, and the visual similarities between Cox’s sprites and the miniature workers depicted in cartoons plausibly suggest that the former influenced the latter. 246 It is therefore reasonable to assume that the Pie Shoppee montage did not disrupt the film’s narrative, but expanded the gallery of caricatures offered for amusement.

Hypercompetent miniature pastry chefs, elfin and insectile, were just one more category of worker whose familiar otherness invested pedestrian culinary labor with an element of humor and play. In the following year, Van Beuren would again tap this font to depict a less diverse, more colorful world of professional confectionery labor.

Pastrytown Wedding: Labor as Life

The year following the release of Doughnuts was an eventful one for the Van Beuren studio, which terminated the flagging Tom and Jerry series and ventured at long last into color animation. The Rainbow Parade anthology series of color cartoons comprised the last films produced by the studio, which closed abruptly in 1936 following the sudden death of studio head Amedee Van Beuren, and among the twenty-six Rainbow Parade films are many of the best known works from the “relatively minor” outfit.247 Pastrytown Wedding (1934), the first installment in the series and Van Beuren’s first color film, exhibited this new turn with a fable that melded vast sugary landscapes, romance, and hybrid confectionery production. Unlike Doughnuts, which injected surreal and absurdist elements into a broadly recognizable parody of bakery labor, Pastrytown

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*Wedding* takes place in a fantasy realm in which familiar industrial operations and systems support an entirely fantastic confectionery work force. Centering and celebrating relentless industrial labor in what is ostensibly a whimsical romance, the film illustrates a world in which work is life.

Set in the bucolic environs of Pastrytown, the film opens on a team of diminutive bakers industriously assembling fruit pies under the watchful eye of their captain. Differentiated by his slightly larger size and neckerchief, the chief rolls out pie crust and narrates through song the Pastrytown charge to bake all manner of treats. An extended sequence illustrates the enterprise in multiple scenes of tiny bakers laboring with dogged cheer to produce jelly rolls, animal crackers, iced layer cakes, and other desserts. In the midst of these endeavors, the group’s only obviously female member pours blossom of colored icing onto bare flower stems until a bee the size of her head swoops in to antagonize her. A quick-thinking baker rushes to her aid, and in the breathless aftermath, spontaneously proposes marriage in wordless pantomime. The gardener’s shy acceptance of the proposal sends the groom-to-be running to alert his chief, who immediately redirects all Pastrytown labor to the construction of a wedding cake. An extended sequence documents dozens of bakers working on the project, which culminates with an elaborately decorated four-tier cake that appears several stories tall in comparison with the creatures who built it. The film concludes with the nuptials, which the chief conducts for the happy couple perched on the cake’s top tier. Upon completion of vows read from a prominently labeled cookbook, the foreman

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disappears, and the blissful newlyweds kiss repeatedly, perfectly replicating the bride-and-groom figurines that commonly top American wedding cakes.

The world that *Pastrytown Wedding* imagines intractably coalesces sweets, labor, and daily life. Every character is a worker, all labor relates to confectionery production, and these realities catalyze and contextualize all of the story’s action. The character of the chief both illustrates and enforces this integration: he is the head baker overseeing production, the community leader who both organizes and officiates the wedding, and the narrator who breaks the fourth wall to orient viewers to life in Pastrytown, explaining:

> Pastrytown is in the dough,  
> and dough is what we knead, you know!  
> The more we knead, the more we make,  
> we’re always busy making cake  
> and jelly rolls and coffee rings  
> and fifty different other things—  
> but dough is what we like to make,  
> the same as you, and you, and you!

"Knead," homophonous with "need," engages with “dough” and its twin meanings related to baking and money. Dough is the batter that professionalized protagonists manipulate to produce treats for unidentified masses in the fantastic and impossible world depicted in the cartoon; dough is also the tender over which viewers suffered undue anxiety during the economic turmoil of the 1930s. In this deliberate conflation of financial anxiety and professional mission, the narrator acknowledges the desire for financial security and satisfying occupation.

Both the work they do and the bodies they occupy orient Pastrytown’s workers in a broader tradition of imagined culinary labor. With rotund bodies, spindly limbs, and
perfectly spherical heads adorned with pencil moustaches and prominent cowlicks, they closely resemble the Ye Pie Shoppee sprites in *Doughnuts*, and the black body suits and pointed shoes in which they are clad emphasizes this kinship. These similarities are unsurprising given the respective films’ shared origins in the Van Beuren studio in a two-year period. Less knowable is the extent to which Palmer Cox and his popular Brownie characters influenced the Pastrytown characters’ design, but the resemblance is once again significant. At the time of Cox’s death in 1924 his Brownies had enjoyed a 35-year reign in American mass culture, appearing in magazines and books, on stage, and “in an unprecedented number of product endorsements that appeared in popular women’s and children’s magazines from the 1880s onward.” 249 Among the dozens of licensed Brownie products on the market were the first doll and first food product to feature patented characters. 250 By the 1930s the Brownies’ cultural ubiquity was waning, but it is difficult to imagine that there were many American adults—particularly in the visual culture industry—unfamiliar with the characters and their commercial success. Given the Brownies’ historical popularity, their folkloric associations with supportive labor, and Cox’s own embellishments that had seen the sprites embrace all manner of technology and innovation, their influence on the next generation of comparably industrious characters is logical, and explains the consistent visual vernacular in depictions of animated confectionery workers in early animated films. 251

Again and again, diminutive size emerges as an essential quality in imagined confectionery workers. Their scale relative to the treats they are making invariably

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fluctuates from scene to scene, but whether smaller than a bumblebee or barely bigger than an animal cracker, Pastrytown’s inhabitants are decidedly tiny. Ruminating on the role that size and scale play in the interpretation of the visual world, scholar Susan Stewart observes that “there are no miniatures in nature; the miniature is a cultural product of an eye performing certain operations, manipulating, and attending in certain ways to the physical world.” To this end, it does not matter that the culinary laborers are unrealistically and inconsistently sized in relation to the treats they produce; it only matters that they are markedly smaller than those commodities. This size discrepancy automatically colors their productive work as more important and more difficult than that done in typical industrial positions. Doughnuts rolling down the conveyor belt are literally monumental in size compared with the worker tasked with fashioning their holes, and the wedding cake on which an entire squadron labors could readily be both plinth and pediment for the figures that crown it. The physical exertions necessary to manipulate outsized ingredients and pastries evidence the unique difficulty that this work requires, as one sequence illustrates in the three-man operation required to crack and separate eggs—and in the mess that saturates one unfortunate worker when a yolk escapes the sieve.

In Pastrytown Wedding, as in all of the cartoons explored in this chapter, the distorted size and scale of confectionery production’s workers and products permits creative interpretation of the tools and technologies those workers employ. Like Tom and Jerry, who incorporated familiar but inappropriate machinery into their doughnut machine to parody industrial mechanical production processes, and the sprites Pie

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Shoppe sprites whose traditional culinary implements took on new significance when scaled to the miniature workers who used them, Pastrytown’s bakers utilize tools from a variety of labor spheres. Bowls, spoons, and other tools scaled to the size of the workers in some scenes, but in others—as in the egg-separating scene, which pivots on a sieve the size of a mattress—are comparatively huge and necessitate teams of workers and outlandish ministrations. Those implements that are appropriately sized for the user may still feature in visual gags related to the scale of the treats being prepared, as in one sequence that sees a worker fill a jelly roll with a wheelbarrow of jam. Isadore Klein, a Van Beuren animator on *Pastrytown Wedding*, recalled intervening when a supervisor criticized a colleague’s slow progress animating one such scene. “I found myself speaking up: ‘Burt, the scene Bill’s working on is full of elves riding egg-beaters
on unicycles inside a huge bowl of cake-mix—a hell of a lot of work!” The character astride the eggbeater makes work look like play, but for the animator depicting the scene, the work was undeniable.

Other sequences depict technology that is superficially similar to the industrial machinery employed in large-scale commercial bakeries, but with fantastic twists that charge monotonous assembly lines with metaphysical magic. The minion tasked with putting holes in doughnuts does not use a traditional kitchen tool or a nontraditional implement like Tom and Jerry’s pogo stick; rather, he “pulls” holes out of a giant block of Swiss cheese and tosses the holes at the doughnut as they role by. The job is a repetitive task that creates one absence out of another absence, an impossibility that composes a visually interesting sight gag and, based on the manic good cheer of the worker doing it, a satisfied employee. In another sequence, a worker armed with a whip and clad like a circus ringmaster in top hat and tails oversees an enormous wheel stamping animal crackers; as each cookie is stamped, it springs to life and leaps from the conveyor belt into the box that will presumably transport it to hungry consumers. He, too, wears a broad smile, content in his assembly line job that improbably boasts magic, excitement, and novelty. Like their colleagues exercising more artisan skillsets, the film’s industrial employees are dedicated and happy workers for whom work is a source of satisfaction. Employment on the assembly line, however, features a degree of alchemy and enchantment that not only exceeds the mere novelty of the film’s artisan sequences, but inverts entirely the realities of industrial work in the real world.

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Ultimately Pastrytown’s industrial laborers thrive because they inhabit a realm in which work, life and leisure comprise a unified occupational stream. The tasks at hand might differentiate one state from another, but agents who are delighted to be getting married are no less delighted to be decorating cakes, herding animal crackers or otherwise participating in confectionery labor. Working, living, and playing in the same affective frame establishes a labor force that is not merely also a social network, but a family as well. Tom and Jerry were a team, but the operations of their doughnut machine both allowed and required them to work in relative alienation from one another to each other. Such a dynamic is unthinkable in Pastrytown, where work is play not because the labor is amusing (though it often can be), but because one’s colleagues are one’s closest friends.

Bucolic environs further soften the rigors, indignities, and dangers typically associated with factory life. In fact, in this industrial fantasy, there are no traditional factories; whether manual or industrial, the labor of making sweets takes place out-of-doors. Conveyor belts, industrial machines, and analogue tools of every stripe are used out-of-doors, albeit in varying contexts and material makeup. Some sequences illustrate a familiar Cockaigne complete with edible scenery and outsized treats, while others depict more generically bucolic scenes with grass, trees, and flowers. Against these backdrops, the miniature workers flit and dart with the grace and concentration of honeybees. Marrying the natural world, industrial spirit and chaste romance, Pastrytown has something for everyone, as long as “something” is work.
In Pastrytown, the confectionery industry offered its work force community and romance in addition to gainful employment. In *Candyland* (1934), a Walter Lantz cartoon produced for Universal Pictures’ “Cartune Classics” series, the titular locale supported industrial culinary labor. Squarely a fantasy, the film contained the imaginary characters, whimsical conceits, and outrageous scenarios expected in an inherently fanciful tale. However, creative rhetoric constructed and emphasized industrial labor that emerged in the cartoon’s confectionery production sequences.

Fig. 3.3. Still from *Candyland* (1935, dir. Walter Lantz). Vimeo.
The film opens on a fussy toddler loudly rejecting his father’s heavily-accented petitions, “Whatsa matter? You want a candy? Not again … Go to sleep.” Rather than sleep, the child and his dog depart with the Sandman for Candyland, a walled kingdom in the sky where sweets compose the architecture and an enthroned monarch urges the child to enjoy any part of the kingdom he likes. Before the child can respond, an enormous army of miniature culinary workers marches onto the scene, some shouldering outsized cooking utensils like firearms while others play a variety of traditional and improvised musical instruments. Lyrics to the musical theme explain that the culinary army is “on its way/to work all day” at the Candy Kitchen, and the toddler and his dog eagerly follow the group into the industrial production site. The extended sequence that follows documents some of the industrial and imaginary processes by which the confectionery cooks produce chocolates, jelly beans, marshmallows, and other confections. As the workforce labors to produce sweets that are enormous in their miniature hands, child and dog observe the proceedings and liberally sample the diverse product line. Eventually, and now significantly chubbier, the two return to the Candy King, who exhorts them to close their eyes in anticipation of a “big surprise.” The surprise turns out to be a large spoonful of castor oil, and both child and dog frantically flee the kingdom with the king in hot pursuit. Closing the distance between them, the king turns over his now-gigantic spoonful of oil, and the scene dissolves to find baby and puppy home in their crib, where the child quickly wakes with fretful wails. Retrieving the unhappy child, the resigned father paces the floor and recommences his early

exhortations “What’sa matter? You want a candy? Please, go to sleep!” as the scene irises to black.

Despite lyrics that identify them as “All the men of Candyland,” the parade of cooks marching to work at the Candy Kitchen are not precisely human beings. Barely knee-high to the toddler who observes their procession, and physical clones of one another with bald heads, Van Dyke beards, and waxed moustaches, they are creatures of fantasy. Unlike their vaguely insectile analogues in *Doughnuts* and *Pastrytown Wedding*, these confectioners are humanoid in both form and detail. On their animated antecedents, aprons and toques covered bulbous heads and bodies that were more literally cartoonish; black body suits, white gloves and ovoid feet with pointed toes emphasized the effect and suggested closer kinship with bugs, elves, or Mickey Mouse than with plausible human beings. In *Candyland*, however, the cooks are clad in matching black work shoes, black pants and blue shirts, and sleeves uniformly rolled above the elbow in visual idiom. Along with the requisite aprons and toques, the uniform organizes the group into a single productive unit that is ostensibly human and undeniably professional. They are workers, and telegraph order, precision, and proficiency before the viewer has seen them at work.

Projecting lockstep efficiency is both deliberate and necessary because despite its whimsical locale, fantastic characters, and extended parade sequence, *Candyland* is ultimately a movie about labor. Sequences documenting the practices and processes of confectionery production comprise fully half of the film’s runtime. Professional diligence is an essential aesthetic in this film, whose fanciful locale and characters and hyper-competent, the methods and machinery it employs in production are markedly more
fantastic. Whimsy is not the sole productive force: like the other cartoons in this chapter, *Candyland*’s production sequences feature industrial equipment and processes that would not be out-of-place in a commercial confectionery factory in the 1930s. Once again, the conveyor belt is a consistent presence signaling the operation’s fundamentally industrial character; nearly every scene set in the Candy Kitchen includes a conveyor belt on which sweets in progress through the factory for processing by workers supports an inverse relationship to the labor performed within the Candy Kitchen. A number of these endeavors evoke the same imagined machinery and recreational hybridity with which Tom and Jerry engaged in *Doughnuts*. A pair of Candy Kitchen cooks ride a steamroller down a moving conveyor belt to flatten candy paste into pastilles, while further down the line another team flip the candy disks like tiddlywinks into their packaging.

In another chamber, workers coat gigantic ears of corn with molasses and wire them with TNT, the detonation of which produces popcorn balls larger than the crew making them. One figure gets trapped in molasses and the inevitable detonation with the corn makes him a giant ball of caramel corn on human legs. He is not anthropomorphic food of the sort that appears elsewhere across these cartoons; his edibility conceals rather than defines his personhood. The scene is notable because it marks the only instance in which the candy cooks fail to operate with total competence, and in doing so illustrates the degree of obligation the film places between fantasy and reality. Across the production sequences, the candy cooks’ choreographed perfectionism is no less implausible than their whimsical methods and machinery.
Amid this army there exists a lone exception to the group’s visual cohesion. He is half the size of his already miniature peers, with unruly orange hair instead of a gleaming pate, and in place of his brethren’s compact features he has crossed eyes, a bulbous red nose, and a gap-toothed grin. Though he boasts the same Van Dyke beard and waxed moustache as his fellow workers, his stature, visage, and general comportment differentiate him and cast him as both outlier and clown. The character’s position within the film’s world is inherently unstable: he is a member of the uniform labor force, but not a part of it with his markedly different physical presentation. His distinction portends similar discord in action. In fact, on the factory floor both his bumbling antics and expressions of competence invite darker interpretation due to the industrial metaphors they compose.

Scenes within the Candy Kitchen simultaneously compose the redhead cook’s incompetence and humanity. In preparation for work he does not merely wash his hands, but scrubs in with the care of a surgeon, dutifully turning of the taps with his elbow while a nurse cloaks him in an apron to complete the visual gag, but tying it himself in absentminded negation of his hygienic efforts. He is not only tardy to a regimental inspection, but shoulders his spoon in the wrong arm, further disrupting the rank’s uniformity and attracting the chief’s ire. The situation does not improve later when the character attempts to fill chocolates on a busy assembly line where another candy cook adeptly fills three at a time, easily keeping pace with the speed of the line. The redhead is not nearly so adroit, and despite his best efforts with the pastry bag manages only to deposit its contents onto the conveyor belt in rhythmic intervals while the empty chocolates sail on, untouched. Each of these tableaus emphasizes the
redhead’s deviation from a visual and performative order defined by his surrounding cohort: he alone looks different, runs late, makes mistakes, and fails at prescribed tasks. At the same time, however, he expresses a range of emotions largely absent in his coworkers, from eager pride to concerted effort. Elsewhere the Candy King is jolly, the baby delighted, and the Sandman sanguine, but the film does not flesh out these characters in any real way, and all are secondary to the production sequences dominated by the candy cooks. Until his final scene, then, the redheaded cook emerges as the story’s most complex character, the least competent but the most human.

When the redhead’s competences improve, so, too, do his fortunes in his final scene, which opens with him painting stripes on candy sticks with self-satisfied competence. Tasked with painting stripes on stick candy chugging along on a conveyor belt, the would-be Fordist follows the captain’s demonstration and quickly attains proficiency at the task. This prompts the foreman to guide him to paint the candy one-handed while using his other hand to fill chocolates coming down a second conveyor belt. Pleased with this efficiency but seeing the potential to further maximize production, the foreman hitches the paintbrush to the laborer’s belt, freeing his right hand to insert sticks into the lollipops that are running down a rack overhead. The multiple foci leave the laborer locked in an awkward but steady full-body undulation as he tends, with unceasing rhythm, to his three ceaseless conveyor belts. The scenario inverts the claim made in a 1924 *Scientific American* article that rhapsodized about industrialized candy production in which bonbons were “coated by machines that were almost human”; in the Candy Kitchen, the human worker is almost a machine, and his proletarianization is
Deviation from competence turned the competent cook into a confection; exercising competence turns the deviant cook into a machine.

The misfit redhead’s misadventures surely draw on the cinematic popularity of Charlie Chaplin, whose hapless Little Tramp character was similarly out-of-step with the world around him, and Candyland’s depictions of industry run amok neatly anticipates the Chaplin masterpiece Modern Times (1936) that would be released the following year. Following the Little Tramp’s unsuccessful attempts to retain gainful employment in

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255 Scientific American, “From Cocoa and Sugar to Bonbons,” 105.
a host of industrial and service positions, the film imagines a variety of ways in which mechanization might inform relationships to eating in the modern age, most famously in a segment in which a revolutionary machine force-feeds Chaplin with ever-increasing speed and force. Another vignette, which finds the tramp employed on an industrial assembly line where his actions are consistently out-of-rhythm with those of his colleagues, is still more resonant: in a fevered attempt to stay on pace, Chaplin’s tramp dives onto the conveyor belt and follows his widgets into the guts of the industrial works, smoothly gliding between the gears. Like the redheaded candy cook, the Little Tramp has become part of the machinery responsible for both his livelihood and his entrapment.  

Does turning a man into a machine increase the value of the finished product? In *Candyland*’s depiction of a quasi-human but clearly imaginary workforce, the answer is ambiguous. The red-headed buffoon’s transformation into ideal and idealized worker is predicated on equally on his alienation and virtual mechanization: simultaneously conducting three tasks, simultaneously engaged with three separate automated components, and maintaining three separate and simultaneous rhythms. The products of his labors look perfect as they roll on to their next stop in the assembly line, but the worker displays no pleasure in his hard-won success, only anxiety. His more martial colleagues, on the other hand, enjoy a montage of industrial and artisanal achievements; in such scenes, their posture, facial expressions, and command of the landscape convey confidence and pride. For the consistently competent worker,

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satisfactory work invites self-satisfaction in turn; for the inconsistent bumbler, perfect results are merely a reminder that it will all fall apart at any minute.

*Wonder Bakers at the World’s Fair: The Commerce of Cartoons*

*Wonder Bakers at the World’s Fair* provides a fourth and final example of industrial confection production in Depression-era cartoons, but corporate branding and commercial intent differentiate this cartoons from the preceding texts. *Wonder Bakers* was not produced for theatrical release, but for screening at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. With a run time of less than four minutes, the short cartoon promoted the Continental Baking Company’s Wonder Bread and Hostess Cake product lines, both of which were distributed nationally. More immediately, it oriented fairgoers toward the Fair’s Continental Baking exhibit, which featured an operational model bakery where fairgoers could observe industrial baking processes, as well as a snack bar vending the treats produced on site. Whereas *Doughnuts, Pastrytown Wedding,* and *Candyland* were narrative films with comprehensive storylines, *Wonder Bakers* was an advertisement supporting explicitly commercial aims. At the same time, the film did seek to entertain viewers, and employed visual tropes common in other confectionery cartoons. The ways in which *Wonder Bakers at the World Fair* used an established confectionery vernacular to promote branded baked goods predicts animated advertising’s media domination in later decades.

The film opens with a stage curtain rising on the Happy Wonder Bakers, four miniature men clad in baker’s whites and dwarfed by the gigantic loaf of bread against
which they are foregrounded on stage. An unceasing stream of red, yellow, and blue balloons float upwards as the quartet sings a rousing rendition of their theme song, “Hurrah for the Wonder Bakers.” With the song’s conclusion the action cuts to a new scene where two bakers are stationed at the exterior door of a building labeled “Wonder Bakery” and a long line of anthropomorphized ingredients stretches into the distance. The ingredients—sacks of flour and sugar, boxes of yeast, and bottles of milk—are organized by category, and present themselves to the bakers for examination in groups. Those ingredients that pass inspection waddle happily into the bakery, while the few who fail to meet the grade sadly traipse off. Having dispatched the line, the bakers share a satisfied handshake and the film fades to black.

Though the film marked the Wonder Bakers’ first known foray into cartoons, by 1939 the characters were familiar Continental Baking brand trade character mascots. Radio had long been the primary medium for the quartet, who first occupied the airwaves in the late 1920s. Over the ensuing decade, Continental hosted and sponsored an evolving schedule of musical programming and organized promotional events tied to their radio presence. These shows invariably opened and closed with “Hurrah for the Wonder Bakers,” and the “Yo ho! Yo ho! Yo ho!” that punctuated the jingle became closely associated with the culinary quartet. The characters and their catchphrase appeared in Continental advertising throughout the 1930s, and material

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fabrications of the bakers featured prominently in Continental Baking’s exhibits at the 1934 Chicago World’s Fair as well as the New York event at the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{261} Well-established in mass media and in Continental marketing, the Wonder Bakers would have been familiar to consumers regardless of whether or not they were consumers of Wonder Bread.

Translation into an animated visual medium permitted the Wonder Bakers to assume a degree of creative characterization less easily expressed on the radio or in static illustrations. The animated Wonder Bakers, though nominally more developed than their radio iterations in that they have expressive bodies and faces, are not individualized in any meaningful way. And ultimately, they are indistinguishable from the imaginary workers who populate the other cartoons in this chapter: apparently tiny, undeniably cute, and wholly defined by the job they hold. Though the scale of the baked goods and ingredients around them is inconsistent, it suggests that the Bakers are diminutive in size. Huge eyes, round cheeks, button noses, and rotund midsections give them the appearance of young children, and toques that entirely hide any hair they might have only emphasizes their juvenility. Immaculate bakers' whites, including creased pants and buttoned jackets, uniform the characters for an adult profession, but these bakers do not share the mature authority that the \textit{Candyland} cooks telegraphed. With black body suits and continental facial hair, the World’s Fair’s Wonder Bakers would be interchangeable with the imaginary creatures who labored at Ye Pie Shoppee and in Pastrytown. Factory labor is anonymous and interchangeable.

\textsuperscript{261} “World’s Fair Wonder Bakery Amazes Visiting Millions,” advertisement in \textit{St. Louis Post-Dispatch}, July 27, 1934, 10A.
Because *Wonder Bakers at the World’s Fair* advertised real product lines, its corporate protagonists could not abandon themselves to the absurdist fantasy that saw their Pastrytown and Candyland colleagues crimping pie crusts with unicycles and using dynamite in the kitchen. Real-world sanitary standards and quality control had to prevail at the Wonder Bakery. At the same time, the cartoon was not a documentary, and the medium of animation permitted a degree of whimsy. The anthropomorphized ingredients who proffer themselves for inspection are eager for the opportunity to participate in the production of Continental baked goods. Twin flour sacks pass muster with obvious delight, while packages of yeast and bottles of milk each lose one shamefaced volunteer from their respective ranks because of inferior quality. A confident sack of sugar is the only ingredient not subject to any sort of quality control, waddling purposefully past the inspectors who deferentially wave it through. Sugar’s presumed acceptability could reflect the commodity’s stability relative to eggs and dairy.
that can spoil, yeast that can die, and flour that is readily contaminated by nesting insects. It might also be read as a reflection of the American passion for sweets: bureaucratic quality control will not delay the ready availability of treats for consumers. Either interpretation, and the cartoon’s broader contextualization, assures audiences that the Continental Baking Company tolerates neither skimping nor compromise, and that cupcakes, hand pies, and other Hostess treats are made only from superior ingredients.

The decision to anthropomorphize ingredients and cast them as characters in the Wonder Baker family, such as it was, cleverly emphasizes Continental’s advertised commitment to quality and hygiene. The miniaturized bakers are the same size as the larger-than-life ingredients, who are, in fact, alive, forging visual kinship between worker and commodity and framing the ingredients as sympathetic characters despite the fact that they are obviously not human. Establishing such a relationship ignores the tacit horror that underlies anthropomorphic food fantasies: food exists to be eaten, and so food that is alive lives only to die through cooking and consumption. *Wonder Bakers* does not investigate this gruesome line of thought; its proud commodities waddle through a door and out of sight, exiting as heroes. At the Wonder Bakery, ingredients live and die in service to the products they make, and for the consumer’s benefit.

Establishing the Continental workers and Continental ingredients as peers and as active participants in the baking process distills industrial capitalism’s most troubling properties: labor in service to corporate production is a privilege, workers and commodities are interchangeable, and unsuitability for participation equals failure. Animation literally illustrates these truths in *Wonder Bakers at the World’s Fair*, but
popular visual motifs and established tropes collapse them into one more whimsical fantasy in which the industrial confectionery labor is fanciful and fun.

Conclusion

*Doughnuts, Pastrytown Wedding, Candyland, and Wonder Bakers at the World’s Fair* each conjure a unique ecology that supports fantastic characters in the name of joyous confectionery production. By and large, the workers at the heart of these films are not ambivalent drones but ecstatic agents who thrill at the charge to produce sweets in endless quantities for unseen consumers. Depictions of regimented industrial labor in imaginary confectionery production scenarios nominally realized fantasies of gainful employment during a period of widespread unemployment and job insecurity. But these same depictions more thoroughly articulated the explicit indignities that attended industrial labor. Chief among these was alienation of the worker from his own needs and community. From the Pastrytown couple who meet and marry at work to the Wonder Bakery sugar sacks who proudly march to their doom, characters across these films model cheerful assimilation into work. In the most extreme examples, workers become part of the technology itself, trapped by their own proficiency on assembly lines that will never cease production. Most telling of all, almost none of these confectionery laborers are recognizably human beings, but individuals of ambiguous species whose defining—and unifying—characteristic is their suitability to confectionery labor. Miniature, manic, and entirely interchangeable, they lead small lives in service of outsized products and production, and as such are industrial capitalism’s ideal workers.
Wonder Bakers at the World’s Fair serves as a neat transition into the next chapter, which abandons animation to return to world of material confectionery entertainments. Like the Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle, Continental Baking’s Wonder Bakery at the 1939–1940 New York World’s Fair was an architectural space that existed to amuse visitors and promote branded snacks, in this case Hostess Cake and Wonder Bread. Unlike the Castle, the Wonder Bakery’s predicated its fantasy on idealized industrial production, not imagined confectionery fabrication. Where the films in this chapter imagined confectionery industrialism, the Wonder Bakery would seek to build it.
With their foray into cartoons at the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair, the Happy Wonder Bakers expanded their own presence and the Continental Baking Company’s Wonder Bread and Hostess Cake lines in American mass media. By 1939 the bakers had over a decade’s experience commanding radio audiences with a variety of music-based programs that featured the theme song “Hurrah for the Wonder Bakers!” With a few simple rhymes and competent four-part harmony, the jingle effectively advertised Wonder Bread to radio listeners, but the jaunty tune was no mere earworm; its lyrics assuaged a litany of consumer concerns that continued to dog the commercial baking industry in the early twentieth century.

The decades between the wars saw a steady increase in the number of Americans willing to purchase commercially produced baked goods, particularly bread, which enjoyed widespread—though not universal—acceptance by the time the Wonder Bakers took to the airwaves in the late 1920s. However, some consumers remained skeptical that mass-produced baked sweets were the equal of homemade goodies, and they fretted about commercial cakes that might be contaminated, unpalatable, or inferior merely for lacking the home baker’s affectionate touch. In addition to being jolly entertainers, the Happy Wonder Bakers industrious professionals, and in this dual role petitioned American audiences to trust Continental baked goods. Clad in uniforms of “spotless white” in a radio studio shared with their own Wonder Orchestra, the quartet harnessed popular entertainment and evolving mass media to sell industrial modernity in addition to Wonder Bread and Hostess Cakes.
Continental Baking advanced this synthesis at its 1939–40 New York World’s Fair exhibit, where the Happy Wonder Bakers and other fantasy personas supported the ultra-modern Wonder Bakery that anchored the site. The Wonder Bakery was the exhibit’s flagship attraction, a fully operational production facility where “the famous Wonder Bread and Hostess Cakes are prepared before your eyes by skilled craftsmen with immaculate, magic machines of amazing precision.” At a two-year international exposition that claimed to model “The World of Tomorrow,” the bakery’s industrial technology, streamlined architecture, and specialized labor endorsed a future in which modernism, efficiency, and hygiene defined superior confectionery production. The exhibit’s supporting components, however, boasted no such commitment to modernity’s marvels, and instead employed fairy tale characters, American agrarian legacies, and high-fashion cosmopolitanism to engage visitors.

This chapter explores the themes and artifacts that Continental Baking employed to construct a fantasy site of industrial confectionery production. The foundation for this analysis includes a brief history of the Continental Baking Company, its Hostess Cakes line, and the space that industrially produced and commercially branded cake occupied in the cultural landscape of the 1930s. The chapter then examines three seminal elements of Continental’s 1939–40 World’s Fair exhibit: Alice in Wonderland, the Continental Wheat Field, and Penelope Shoo: the Scarecrow of Tomorrow. Each of these elements offered fairgoers a different thematic lens through which to engage the exhibit’s fantasy of modern industrial labor. Committed to industrial efficiency but dependent on emotional petitions, the Continental Baking exhibit demonstrated the

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262 Exhibit description, untitled and unsigned, October 28, 1938, box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL.
ways in which fantasy continued to mediate consumer engagement with sweets and their production in the final years of the Depression.

_The Continental Baking Company_

The Continental Baking Corporation’s twentieth-century empire belied its humble origins that traced to 1849 New York City, where Irish immigrant Hugh Ward opened a small bake shop in Lower Manhattan. Three-quarters of a century and four generations later, the Ward family dominated American commercial baking with a complex of bakeries and brands that by the mid-1920s they had consolidated into the Ward Baking Company, the General Baking Company, and Continental Baking.263 Continental’s 1924 incorporation merged industrial bakeries around the country into a unified concern boasting 104 plants in eighty-two cities.264 A merger on this scale could not evade public scrutiny, and within a year the Federal Trade Commission had filed a complaint that charged Continental with violation of the Clayton Anti-Trust Act in the corporation’s concerted effort to “to restrain competition in bread, biscuit, crackers, cakes, and other food products.”265 The Bakery and Confectionery Workers International Union, longtime adversaries of Ward bakeries for the exploitative labor practices that the union identified within the company, advocated for dissolution of the “bread trust” in 1925.266 The newly incorporated Continental Baking Co. denied that their operations exploited human labor and that their domination within the industry constituted a monopoly, claiming in

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hearings the following spring that “the baking business in [the metropolitan Northeast] was becoming more and more competitive rather than less so.” Ultimately, the federal government prohibited the Ward companies from pursuing the continued consolidation toward which they were working, but permitted the Continental Baking Company to continue production of the myriad product lines that the company had absorbed in its own incorporation of dozens of bakeries nationwide.

Two product lines strongly drove Continental’s early sales: the Wonder Bread line of white loaves and rolls, and the Hostess line of cakes and cupcakes. The former enjoys a well-documented history that readily traces Wonder Bread’s origins in the Indianapolis-based Taggart Baking Company to its acquisition by Continental in 1925. Hostess’s story is more convoluted. According to the brand history reported on the company website, Hostess “first opened its business and gained a national audience from its base of operations in Kansas City, Missouri in 1919. The company, known as Continental Baking at the time, wanted to start a line of Sweet Treats in addition to their popular bread.” The fact that Continental Baking was not established until 1924 challenges this summation, which appears to collapse the Hostess brand into its post-1995 parent company, the Interstate Bakeries Corporation. Interstate had indeed been founded in Kansas City, but not until 1930, and was itself a conglomerate of regional industrial bakeries in the same vein as Continental. Amid the twentieth-

century commercial baking industry’s constant mergers, acquisitions, and reorganizations, this tortuous lineage was not unique, though it does complicate the ability to identify Hostess Cake’s origins with surety.

I propose an alternative Hostess Cake brand history that places the dessert’s origins in Dayton, Ohio, where the Krug Baking Company began selling cakes under the Hostess label in late 1919—a date that does correlate with the contemporary brand’s self-reported origin story. Founded by George F. Krug in 1900, by 1915 the Krug Bakery boasted an industrial production facility, and by 1919 a fleet of nine delivery trucks transported 2,200 pounds of Krug bread daily. The first media references to Hostess Cake emerged in an elaborate early-1920 advertising campaign that introduced Dayton residents to the mysterious “Fluffy Raffles, the Hostess Cake Princess” and promised cash rewards of $25 each to those who could catch her; conditions for capture included having a Hostess Cake box on one’s person at the time, and uttering the declaration “Pardon me, you are the mysterious Hostess Cake Princess of The Krug Bakery. I like your cake.” Consumers apparently did like the cakes: by 1925, the newly formed Continental Baking Company had acquired the line. The same period saw the ascension of Krug Bakery president George A. Krug (presumably a relative, most likely a son, of the bakery’s founder) to a vice presidency at Continental Baking. Because both the regional bakery’s president and its branded cakes simultaneously advanced to positions in a single national conglomerate, it is reasonable to assume that

Continental’s Hostess line evolved from the Hostess cakes that Krug had promoted in Dayton two decades earlier.

The logo that Hostess Cakes employed for its first two decades bolsters the theory that Krug Bakery’s cakes were the progenitors of Continental’s later product, and also illustrates the complex social and cultural ideologies that a commercial cake line was burdened to negotiate. A simple heart adorned Krug’s print advertisements and packaging for Hostess Cakes in the early 1920s. Following Continental’s acquisition of Hostess, the brand retained the heart logo, but now the emblem enclosed a silhouette of a woman’s profile in white against the heart’s red background. This distinctive two-tone design evoked the cameo brooches that had been popular in the nineteenth century and conjured an old-fashioned charm that was both feminine and eye-catching, though the smoothly styled hair crowning the profile depicted a more modern woman.274 With no detailing other than the simple coiffure, the silhouette’s age and appearance were essentially indeterminate, but the contrast between subject and background emphasized the literally and vividly white subject, tacitly asserting race. Hostess’s depicted hostess was not an ambiguous icon, but a genteel, modern, white woman. As such, she was precisely the consumer to whom the brand’s prepared cakes were marketed: permitted and presumed to adore sweets, and savvy enough to outsource their production.275

In the Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle, Cushman’s Pastrytown Wedding cartoon, and the Fluffy Raffles promotional gambit, commercial bakeries indulged

elaborate fantasy scenarios to market their products. The Hostess cameo logo appealed to a less exotic reverie that celebrated and solicited demure white womanhood. Securing that customer base, however, proved challenging. Entrenched and heavily gendered cultural mores, persistent suspicion of commercial food supplies, a volatile economy, and shifting retail patterns all presented obstacles that Hostess would need to overcome in order to establish brand loyalty.

**Industrial Baking and Domestic Concerns**

**Cultural Convictions**

“Cake,” a capsule newspaper short story published in 1934, succinctly articulates the persistent cultural tension between commercial and homemade desserts. Protagonist Sally is a young housewife who finds her world upended when husband Bill declares their dessert an “excellent cake—for store cake; but it can’t hold a candle to home baked.” Falsely assuring Bill that she can and will bake a cake from scratch, Sally is aghast to learn that no friends are available to oversee her efforts. Her solo endeavor ends tragically with a collapsed cake unfit for consumption, forcing her tearful confession, “I can’t make a decent cake, my mother can’t bake cake, my sister can’t—O, Bill are you sorry you married me?” Bill promises that he has no regrets, only a ready solution: he will bake a cake. His mother taught him how.276

Historian Elizabeth Zanoi observes that commodities like food “operate as vocabularies of codes and symbols that consumers accept, manipulate, and often reject,” and in “Cake,” cake is a commodity that both valuates and is valuated by its

origins. The authority that permits Bill to categorize admittedly “excellent” store-bought cake as an inferior product reinforces the presumed superiority of homemade desserts. This was no literary conceit, but an accurate representation of culinary and cultural prejudices that persisted into the mid-1930s. In the early twentieth century, cheap and plentiful commercially produced candy filled the American consumer landscape and diet, but baked desserts enjoyed sacrosanct associations with maternity and security. Unlike candy and bread, mass-produced cakes, cookies, and pastry were slower to gain traction among both producers and consumers. Food historian Megan Elias cites a number of reasons for this lag: because the industrialized mass-production of cake, cookies, and pastry required specialized machinery to execute the distinctly different processes by which each is mixed, the cost of production was high. Delivery was also a more expensive prospect, as the delicate structure of many baked sweets, unlike a relatively sturdy loaf of bread, required greater care in shipping. Rising production and distribution costs would inevitably carry over to consumers, who were less likely to pay high prices for non-staples that they could make more cheaply at home. Finally, the same women who were happy to outsource time- and labor-intensive bread-baking may have continued to find emotional satisfaction in providing treats that pleased—not merely nourished—household members. The last supposition illustrates domestic baking’s potential status as a labor of love whose product both represents and is appreciated for an inherent emotional value, a theory supported by anthropologist

Daniel Miller’s observation that for some housewives, “it is love alone that can satisfactorily legitimate their devotion to this work.”

The domestic production of sweets was a gendered exercise whose labor fell almost exclusively to women. Women, and particularly mothers, baked the treats that delighted children, satisfied the family, and affirmed domestic security. In the cultural imagination, homemade treats symbolized happy and secure homes in which happy and secure women were stewards of family health (nourishing foods) and happiness (sweet treats). Sally’s existential crisis in “Cake” acknowledges the entrenched relationship between baking proficiency and acceptable womanhood: when she fails to produce an acceptable cake—and despite her simultaneous, competent, and cheerful preparation of a dinner that includes meat, potatoes, vegetable, and salad—she questions her own legitimacy as a wife, and fears that her husband will, too. Burdened not only to produce sweets from scratch, but to ensure that they accommodated individual tastes, aesthetic trends, and emotional mores, women became increasingly open to commercial options from industrial bakeries.

Commercial brands used advertising to address and dispel cultural convictions that disparaged industrially produced cakes as suspicious, inferior, or dangerous. Continental Baking created fictive “food expert” Alice Adams Proctor to address such concerns in the company’s advertising with a voice and format that deliberately mimicked the home economics movement’s authoritative treatises. In a 1931

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advertisement titled “New Freedom Has Come to Housewives,” Proctor invokes the woes of her own, equally fictive mother, challenging those who might romanticize home baking’s storied legacy. “By the time she’d finished baking rolls and bread and icing cakes and baking panful after panful of cookies, she was too tired and fretful even to watch us,” Proctor recalls, going on to declare “I honestly don’t believe that women should feel the tiniest bit selfish for not wanting to bake any more” with superior Wonder products on the market. After all, “anything that offers new freedom from household cares should receive the warmest of welcomes.”

The ad’s frank tone and deft simulacrum of home economics literature invited white, middle class women to acknowledge the real ways in which domestic labor compromised mental health, to adopt available shortcuts, and to discard any guilt that might attend such shortcuts. In this rather radical restructuring, homemade treats represented neglectful, not dutiful, mothering, whereas commercial alternatives were both appropriate and advisable.

Convenience and economy took center stage in ads that positioned mass-produced cake as a superior alternative to homemade endeavors, but graphic and rhetorical clues suggest that relief from the burden of baking was not on offer to all. Occasional references to family confectionery preferences emphasize the female consumer’s obligation to satisfy household tastes. These gustatory yens compose the sum contributions that men and children make to dessert planning and leave women to negotiate preparation time, labor, and costs. Hostess ads from the 1920s and 1930s also fail to acknowledge the possibility of hired help in the kitchen, though these

ads for years; for the sake of convenience I site Proctor as the authorial voice, but all content attributed to her is advertising copy.

decades saw the twentieth century’s highest rates of domestic service employment in middle-class households, and many Depression-era homemakers who could afford to pay retail prices for cake could also afford at least part-time household help.284 “I find it is much easier to enjoy the privilege of someone else’s good baking than to assume the responsibility myself,” one allegedly real homemaker cheerfully declared in a 1931 Hostess ad, in which “someone else’s good baking” refers to an industrial corporation, not hired kitchen labor.285 Ads that refused to acknowledge that domestic laborers might also benefit from time- and labor-saving commercial desserts peddled culinary convenience as a class-based entitlement, not a work-related practicality, and white, middle-class women were the only beneficiaries.

Sally and Alice Proctor queried the class legitimacy of store-bought cake, but more urgent and less nuanced concerns troubled consumers familiar with historically lax regulation of American culinary industries. If mother didn’t bake the cake, who did? And what was in it?

Hostess and Hygiene

Buying a prepared cake at the grocery store saved time and energy, but domestic authorities expressed concern that these savings might come at cost to cultural fabric and physical well-being. Early home economists and progressive reformers had insisted that commercial culinary production sites could not possibly rival the cleanliness of the home kitchen, and offered moralizing and prejudiced rationales to

lament those who would outsource meals and snacks. \(^{286}\) Historical precedent legitimized some concerns about commercially produced foodstuffs; prior to Congress’s 1906 passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act, inconsistent and inadequate regulation had facilitated the contamination of commercial foods with impurities. \(^{287}\) The more stringent regulation efforts that emerged during the Progressive Era sought to reduce the potentially fatal consequences of tainted ingredients, dirty equipment, or poor employee hygiene. \(^{288}\) A 1914 ordinance detailing sanitation regulations for bakeries in Cleveland, Ohio, offers one example of sanitary conditions newly requisite in food production enterprises at that time, such as adequate plumbing and the Board of Health’s ultimate authority to destroy substandard foodstuffs, but in practice, enforcement remained inconsistent. \(^{289}\) Only during the 1930s did reliable standards and oversight become standardized, as expanded government programming supplied the manpower and resources necessary to enforce regulations. \(^{290}\)

The language of science had framed domestic education and social reform rhetoric since the end of the nineteenth century. \(^{291}\) In an effort to combat stigma against industrial bakeries that lingered into the interwar period, Hostess advertising embraced a vocabulary similarly preoccupied with hygiene and quantification, but dependent on

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\(^{290}\) Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 261; Thomas, *In Food We Trust*, 68–70.
vague superlatives and irrelevant accounting. A 1927 advertisement for the brand’s “Dixie Triangles” advised consumers that “only the finest ingredients are used” including “pure milk and the finest blended cake flours!,” the exclamation point that punctuated the list further emphasizing the fineness of its contents. The following year, a full-page advertisement in Good Housekeeping promised that a “special staff of sixteen food experts tests every batch of ingredients” and proceeded to outline the scientific standards to which each ingredient was held: butter must meet “‘point 92 score’ by U.S. Government tests,” twice-pasteurized milk was “carefully heated to 212 degrees,” and sugar was “99.7 pure.” By 1931, Hostess Dessert Fingers were “precision baked” in a process that the copy neglected to describe, though it did offer the tautological promise that precision baked cakes would “show you what a difference precision baking makes.” For decades home economists had employed scientific language and mathematical standards in order to position domestic operations as models of modern efficiency. Industrial food production, already predicated on efficient technological operations, now used the same language to liken their processes and products to those produced at home while still positioning their wares as superior.

Effective marketing and a strong consumer track record both helped to ease concerns related to commercial cake consumption. Concerns related to price and procurement would take longer to combat over the course of the Great Depression.

**Economic Anxiety and Retail Resistance**

293 “A Holiday Dinner? Here’s a Dessert That Cannot Fail!,” advertisement in Good Housekeeping vol. 88 no. 6 (December 1928), 216.
294 Advertisement, “Berries Are Down,” St. Louis Post Dispatch, May 22, 1931, 12D.
Even the most persuasive advertising could not coax money from people who had none to spend, and the Depression’s economic impact on household finances translated into losses for suppliers and advertisers as well.\(^{295}\) “Sweet goods” from industrial bakeries were a logical casualty in financially fraught times, and according to a 1935 *Wall Street Journal* article, the “first to feel the pinch of the depression and the last to recover.”\(^{296}\) Decreased spending power and cautionary austerity inhibited discretionary funds for treats that could usually be prepared more cheaply at home. A drop in commercial cake sales occurred in 1930, concomitant with the first economic downturn, and over the next two years industry experts estimated that there was a 30–50 percent decrease in sales.\(^{297}\) Some fluctuation existed within this trend, as evidenced by a 1931 report of a 50% increase in Continental cake sales over a recent five-week period, despite the fact that the day’s commercial bakers “bake only about 20% of the country’s cake production.”\(^{298}\) However, it was not until 1939 that Continental reclaimed the sales high it had last secured in 1930.\(^{299}\) For all of the effort that Continental invested in legitimizing and celebrating commercially baked cakes, the company could not effectively compensate for its former customers’ loss of income. Purchasing power in middle income tiers stabilized and increased in the second half of the 1930s, but disposable income was not the only economic factor impacting sales. The political economics of the grocery supply chain impacted where and how people did their shopping, influencing sales of and attitudes toward branded baked

\(^{298}\) “Continental Baking’s Better Results,” *Barron’s*, June 22, 1931, 17.  
goods. Steady growth of commercial grocery chains in the 1930s fomented pushback from anti-chain crusaders who resented the diversion of funds from local producers and vendors to large corporations.\textsuperscript{300} In some cases, protest included action against national brands, as in a 1930 boycott of Wonder Bread and Hostess Cakes in Portland, Oregon.\textsuperscript{301} Street markets where rural women vended produce and wares provided an alternative supply line for homemade baked goods, according to historian Anne McCleary, who notes that “Urban women, who were baking less at home, appreciated being able to acquire items fresh from the maker rather than having to purchase factory-processed goods at the grocery store.”\textsuperscript{302} For the urban woman who was baking less at home, lacked access to local vendors, trusted industrial supply chains, and had money to spend on outsourced treats, branded desserts from industrial bakers emerged as genuinely viable option.

\textbf{Outsourced Cake in Media and Culture}

A stable economy, more stringent food safety regulations, the irreversible proliferation of grocery stores, and new license for women to outsource arduous domestic responsibilities all helped to destigmatize and legitimate commercial cake consumption in the interwar period. Depression-era cultural texts that observed or articulated a distinction between commercial and homemade suggest that the topic was


familiar to American consumers. In an *Aunt Het* comic strip from 1929, the stoic title character declares that “I may be a hypocrite in some ways, but I ain’t never put icin’ on a store-bought cake” in a folksy assertion that does not disparage commercial options, only the trickery it might facilitate.\(^3\) Shortly into Franklin Roosevelt’s first presidential term, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* gave home bakers tacit permission to consider the merits of outsourcing in a report that the White House procured its cake from a Washington bakery, “O, not at a small luncheon, nor an intimate dinner…. But when they are entertaining a thousand hungry people at a reception […] that’s exactly what they do.”\(^4\) The following year, a home economist writing in the *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune* explicitly advised readers to embrace commercial options, writing, “Cakes in an almost unlimited variety are today available in practically every grocery and delicatessen, as well as in one’s neighborhood bakery. So that if the home cook prefers to use her baking time for other duties her family need not be deprived of their favorite desserts.”\(^5\) Grammarians waded into the fray to regulate commercial cake’s vocabulary, with a 1929 newspaper grammar column declaring that “boughten is a dialecticism for ‘ready-made’ in the sentence ‘I don’t like boughten cake,’” while a master’s thesis written nearly a decade later challenged such dialectic legitimacy with the instruction, “Do not say ‘This is a boughten cake.’ ‘This is a bought cake’ is correct.”\(^6\) Then—as now—there did not exist a unilateral consensus regarding

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\(^5\) “Cake–The Favorite Family Dessert,” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, April 8, 1934

commercial cake’s satisfactions, but its proliferation on grocery store shelves and in the mass media affirmed its place in the culture at large.

The later 1930s saw improved employment rates, rising rates of disposable income, broad improvement in the national economy, and an American appetite for amusement that the conditions of the preceding decade had restrained but could not quell. Large-scale expositions remained popular diversions—and effective commercial enterprises—even while the economy languished, and great excitement attended plans for a New York City World’s Fair that would straddle the last year of the 1930s and usher in the new decade. Continental Baking intended to be there.

The New York World’s Fair

Continental’s Wonder Bakery

In the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair design historian Christopher Innes identifies “the most concentrated expression of American modernism anywhere,” at that time. While the flagship building on Continental’s exhibit site was no exception, discrepancies between the reported design and actual structure are noteworthy for their determination to cast the bakery as an architectural novelty akin to Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle. Designed by the architectural firm of Skidmore and Owings, the Wonder Bakery merged whimsy and modernism to strategic and striking effect, but did not proffer any confectionery gimmicks despite widespread media coverage that used near-identical language to report on the “model building, shaped like a doughnut, for the

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dramatization of the making of bread and cakes.” In point of fact, the building did not resemble a doughnut in any meaningful way, and certainly not in any way that would have been recognizable at ground level. The architectural model on display at the 1937 contract signing and an aerial illustration of the completed building both depict a teardrop-shaped center chamber with geometric elements that break up the curved lines. Correspondence between Continental executives and Fair officials during construction did not indicate any substantial architectural changes to the exhibit, and references to doughnuts do not appear in any descriptions of the building published during the Fair’s two seasons; these omissions from the written record further suggest that the doughnut description was both inaccurate and incidental to the completed exhibit—an exhibit that was, at any rate, contractually prohibited from producing or vending doughnuts.

Insistence that Continental’s confectionery production site must have adopted a confectionery shape persists in current scholarship. Cultural scholar Michael Robertson employs the “doughnut” description to illustrate the extent to which the “architecture of much of the fair was indistinguishable from advertising” with buildings designed to

308 Such outlets were almost certainly sourced in a corporate press release, a common practice that would explain the similarities in editorial content.
309 “Bakers Sign for Fair Exhibit,” Journal of Commerce and Commercial Bulletin, December 3, 1937. Continental Baking included the aerial-view illustration as a logo on their corporate stationery at least as early as April 1939, and through 1940.
replicate consumer products. By 1939 and continuing through century’s end, Americans had come to accept, and even expect, that spaces related to sweets and desserts would incorporate material representations of such treats. A decade earlier, the Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle made national news with its confectionery fabrication; at the World’s Fair, a presumptive relationship between sweets and spaces forced representational novelty everywhere, or at least in sites designed to celebrate confectionery products in commercial amusement spaces.

In fact, the Wonder Bakery was a large structures whose curved walls and swooping rooftop were designed to “blend so harmoniously with the severe, flat roof levels and facades.” The design hewed to interwar architectural trends that privileged sleek surfaces and clean lines suggesting momentum and efficiency, its soaring curves and pristine white surfaces were a world away from the brick fortress that housed commercial bakeries elsewhere in the city. Publicity materials billed the structure “one of the outstanding modern buildings of ‘The World of Tomorrow’” with “graceful, undulating, curves,” a “unique entrance,” and a 50-by-40-foot window behind which a conveyor belt paraded a line of popular characters associated with Continental brands. Round windows illuminated in red, yellow, and blue dotted the white façade to mimic Wonder Bread’s iconic balloon wrapper. The building’s interior offered a more literal interpretation of the theme: a 50-foot ceiling featuring “the thrilling spectacle of thousands of red, yellow, and blue balloons massed together forming a veritable

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312 Script, undated, signed Gerald Wendt, box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL. Wendt was the Fair’s Director of Science and Technology, and the script contains the handwritten label “Material from Mr. Skidmore’s office,” which almost certainly refers to Louis Skidmore of the Skidmore and Owings architectural firm.
Fig. 4.1. Postcard illustrating the Continental Baking pavilion’s Wonder Bakery at the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair.

Fig. 4.2. Wonder Bakery entrance. The frescos to the right and above the door depict scenes from the Alice books, but the sign pointing “TO WONDERLAND” directs visitors into the working bakery where Wonder Bread and Hostess Cake were made. 1939NYWorldsFair.com
fairyland” above visitors in the circular main gallery. Colorful murals decorated the walls of the gallery, beyond which lay the model bakery for touring.

The model bakery, through which visitors traipsed along a path distanced from operations, was ostensibly the central feature of the exhibit. However, Continental’s elaborate design and decoration of the building indicate corporate comprehension that the visual interest of an industrial bakery had its limits, even with gleaming machinery and cakes churned out by the dozen. The architectural details and thematic motifs that decorated the building, then, took on particularly significance as aesthetic themes and marketing tools. The inclusion of characters from Alice in Wonderland included in the front windows, in the gallery murals, and among exhibit staff was crucial to this aim.

Alice in Wonderland at the World’s Fair

The Wonder Bakery was designed to be a model of modern industrial efficiency in service to a goal that most would endorse: the production of delicious treats. Machinery that whizzed Wonder Bread and Hostess Cakes through production and overt petition to popular sentimentality took form in the Alice in Wonderland theme that adorned the Wonder Bakery and permeated promotional materials for the exhibit. Consumption of food and drink—with frequently outrageous results—served as a recurrent theme in Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and its many literary and performative adaptions. Continental’s commitment to the Wonderland motif at its 1939—

313 Exhibit description, undated and unsigned, box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL.
314 For the purpose of this analysis and in common cultural shorthand, “Alice in Wonderland” refers to the stories presented in the Victorian children’s novels Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There (1871).
40 World’s Fair exhibit nimbly exploited an intrinsic and immediately recognizable food fantasy, and demonstrated the company’s keen understanding of the book’s cultural resonance in the United States, where generations of readers, particularly children, knew and loved the story.

The novels Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland (1865) and Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There (1871) emerged from the mind of English mathematician Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, who had created the stories to entertain a friend’s young daughters; the girls’ delight in the fantastic narrative had inspired the reserved academic to pursue publication under name Lewis Carroll. In imaginary Wonderland, the books’ titular seven-year-old protagonist contends with enigmatic characters, baffling rituals, and outrageous social hierarchies as she endeavors to return to her upper middle–class Victorian home. Wordplay, riddles, and verse enhance the absurdity that Alice must countenance, and lend the tale a rhetorical complexity that induces readers to engage thoroughly with the text as well as the story.

Alice’s narrative and structural harmony benefited further from the contributions of artist John Tenniel whose illustrations virtually define the story in the cultural record. In artist and art historian Frankie Morris’s assessment, “Never have pictures so complemented and developed an author’s text.” Evidence for this kinship between word and image emerged in the proliferation of Alice imagery that referenced or duplicated outright the distinctive anatomy and attire that Tenniel created for

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315 Frankie Morris, Artist of Wonderland: The Life, Political Cartoons, and Illustrations of Tenniel (University of Virginia Press: Charlottesville, 2005), 149. Tenniel was a popular political cartoonist for the nineteenth-century humor magazine Punch, and many of his works for that publication inspired illustrations that he made for Alice, Michael Hancher, The Tenniel Illustrations to the “Alice” Books (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985), chap. 1.
Wonderland’s denizens: the Mad Hatter’s diminutive frame and enormous headgear, Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee’s bulbous midriffs and beanies, and the Cheshire Cat’s face-splitting leer all emerged from Tenniel’s pen, not Dodgson’s, but have come to define those figures in the popular imagination. The absence of any apparent copyright protections for the illustrator significantly facilitated Wonderland’s commodification: with no legal obstacles to reproducing Tenniel’s illustrations, the same images could dominate the commercial record as well. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tenniel’s depictions of Wonderland decorated items including cookie tins, wallpaper, and menu cards, in varying degrees of faithfulness the original renderings. Imaginative, comical, and complex, the books evolved from popular juvenile reading to classic works of English-language literature, and in the process, Alice in Wonderland became a cultural touchstone.

Alice in Wonderland references in American media in the 1930s evidenced the story’s secure position as a cultural touchstone. A Chicago department store’s newspaper assumed readers would understand allusions to the Mad Hatter and White Rabbit, respectively invoked to sell “utterly swank afternoon and evening gloves” and Heure Intime perfume. In her nationally syndicated marriage-advice column, Dorothy Dix applauded a gentleman who wrote that he “just simply couldn’t marry a woman who didn’t see any sense in Alice in Wonderland,” and cited the position as an example of the right tastes upon which young couples must agree before engagement. New York Tribune food columnist Clementine Paddleford promoted a local line of Alice in

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316 Morris, Artist of Wonderland, 147.  
317 Morris, Artist of Wonderland, 103.  
318 Advertisement, Chas. A. Stevens & Co., Chicago Tribune (November 15, 1933).  
Wonderland–themed condiment sets that contained one-ounce jars of pepper jelly, cocktail onions, and other delicacies for $1.25 each. Not every iteration was successful; though Wonderland and its inhabitants enjoyed repeated depictions on stage, on screen, and on ice, neither the source material nor a formidable cast could salvage Paramount’s 1933 film treatment, which garnered ambivalent reviews. The odd misfire, however, did not seem to dampen American affection for the story.

While the Depression years did not necessarily support more Alice-themed advertising than other periods, the decade’s economic, social, and cultural conditions seemed particularly ripe for association with the fantasy. Alice navigates an impossible space peopled with absurd characters, and despite instances of accommodation and assistance, her experiences in Wonderland are primarily confounding and frustrating; her perseverance demonstrates the value of adaptation, negotiation, and perseverance when navigating an unstable world. Adopting Alice to market baked goods allowed Continental to draw on the story’s six decades of established cultural capital in the United States. Vibrant and comical, peopled with literally and figuratively colorful characters, Alice in Wonderland–themed advertising allowed Continental Baking to capitalize on the shared Wonder brand name.

While there survives a variety of marketing materials depicting Continental Baking’s affiliation with Alice in Wonderland, determining the origins of that relationship are difficult. In a 1938 letter petitioning World’s Fair administrators for the exclusive rights to employ Alice in Wonderland characters in the Continental exhibit, company

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321 Brands including Guinness, Ford, and Ex-Lax have all appropriated the fantasy cast to peddle their respective—and wildly diverse—products in the American twentieth century.
vice president H.E. Hildebrand informed World’s Fair vice president Howard Flanigan that the theme was “one which for several years has been associated with ‘Wonder’ products of our company” and that he was “enclosing a copy of advertising material which indicates how the ‘Wonderland’ idea has been used in connection with ‘Wonder’ products.” He attached to the letter a waxed paper Wonder Butter Crackers wrapper printed with the brand’s signature red, yellow, and blue balloons dispersed among labeled illustrations of Wonderland characters, including a blonde Alice clad in apron and chef’s toque. The wrapper seamlessly blended its corporate branding with the borrowed characters and upbeat copy that evocatively connected Wonderland with Wonder brand, though it did not affirm Hildebrande’s claim that Continental had been using the motif for years. In fact, Alice does not appear in any commonly available Continental advertising or packaging contemporary to that period. A dearth of material evidence leaves open the possibility that Continental’s affiliation with Wonderland was not particularly fixed or widely promoted in the American marketplace, and that Hildebrande exaggerated the company’s prior use of Wonderland to bolster the request for exclusive rights to the theme. Continental Baking identified value in Alice in Wonderland as a suitable pitch for World’s Fair visitors as well as baked goods consumers.

The World’s Fair director of exhibits and concessions and World’s Fair director of entertainment debated the extent to which Continental’s use of Wonderland might confuse or compete with the presence of the Winter Wonderland Village before

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322 Continental Baking Company vice president H.E. Hildebrand to New York World’s Fair vice president Commander Howard Flanigan, August 28, 1938, box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL.
concluding that the likelihood was not an issue. Ultimately, however, the Fair refused to grant Continental exclusive use of the Alice in Wonderland and Wonderland themes, inviting the company to employ them as they wished but pointing out that because Alice had been in the public domain since 1922, any entity was permitted to use the characters. Continental accepted this legally sound rejection of their request with grace, but two weeks later Hildebrande contacted Mermey with concerns about bakery competition at the fair and seeking assurance that no other World’s Fair bakeries would be permitted to license or advertise any official concessions, an occurrence that had arisen at the 1934 Century of Progress Exhibition. In response, director of exhibits Mermey advised the vice president that he recommended a prohibition on licensing agreements “for any bread products other than those of an exhibitor at the Fair.”

Inability to secure exclusive rights to Alice in Wonderland did not discourage Continental’s employment of the stories and characters, which featured prominently in the Wonder Bakery’s decoration and programming. A 1938 press release promoting the future exhibit promised that “Animated characters from Alice in Wonderland combine to create an enchanting greeting to the visitors entering this bakery Wonderland—the first time these classic characters have been used in this manner.” Publicity materials that describe the characters as “animated” require clarification to distinguish the contents of

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323 Rowland F. Bardell, memo to John Krimsky. September 17, 1938; John Krimsky, memo to Rowland F. Bardell. September 24, 1938, box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL.
324 Maurice Mermey, letter to H.E. Hildebrand, September 30, 1938, box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL.
325 H.E. Hildebrand, letter to Maurice Mermey, October 13, 1938, box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL.
326 Director of Exhibits (signed Leslie S. Baker), memo to unnamed vice president, October 24, 1938, box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL.
327 Untitled exhibit description, October 28, 1938, box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL. It was, of course, hardly the first time that the “classic characters” had been conscripted to shill products tangentially related to the stories, but this discrepancy was unlikely to trouble fairgoers.
the window display from projections of animated films and from the considerably more sophisticated animatronics featured at amusement parks in later decades. The Wonder Bakery exterior featured a 40-foot-long picture windows behind which a mechanized parade of two-dimensional Wonderland characters and Happy Wonder Bakers progressed on a perpetually looping belt. With hinged joints and stiffly oscillating limbs, the figures were, technically, animated, though the display’s visual dynamism could not compete with that of attractions like General Motors’ legendary “Futurama” exhibit and its soaring automated skyway. But if the mechanical simplicity of the window’s occupants was unlikely to thrill visitors, it was also unlikely to repel them. Gliding silently across the façade in an endless circuit, the procession of familiar faces could attract notice and evoke affection, essential functions in any marketing ploy.

To further capitalize on the popularity of the Wonderland theme and the Fair-wide practice of employing “attractive women who serve as hostesses and demonstrators,” Continental hired young women to staff its exhibit in character as Alice. In addition to the work she did at the Wonder Bakery, Alice became a popular ambassador for both the Continental brand at the World’s Fair, and for the World’s Fair itself. A July 1939 New York Times covering the Fair’s new ferry service to the Florida exhibit reported employee Nina Dean’s desperation to secure VIPs for the boat’s first trips; with the maiden voyage limited to World’s Fair officials and military officers, she was angling to secure Alice in Wonderland for the second trip, and to expand the guest list to include other Wonderland characters. “Miss Dean has a white rabbit costume, if she can get someone to wear it. ‘It’s the Mad Hatter part that has me worried,’ she told us

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plaintively. ‘You don’t know where we can get a Mad Hatter?’” The “Alice” persona also had utility for women who did formally occupy the role, as the 1939 article “New Techniques Used in Dealing With Mashers” makes clear. Investigating the diverse ways in which beleaguered female employees dealt with “inquisitive and amorous young men,” the columnist learned that when “young male visitors” requested the name of any Wonder Bakery counter girl, she would inevitably claim it was “Alice,” then “coyly” recite the opening lines to the nonsense poem “Jabberwocky” that Carroll penned for Through the Looking Glass. Given the documented harassment that young female employees routinely received from intoxicated and otherwise unruly or disrespectful fairgoers, which surely did not evade the women tasked to play Alice in Wonderland in a public-facing role, there is no small satisfaction in identifying the cover that the Alice persona permitted in its anonymity and license to confound.

Primitive animatronics and first-person interpretation invested Continental’s Wonderland mascots with varying degrees of life, but the most comprehensive employment of the theme appeared in the Wonder Bakery gallery. Despite a 1939 Parents magazine article that refers to an “Alice in Wonderland show inside” the bakery, implying a regular, live performance of some sort, no other media corroborate any sort of show in relation to the attraction. Elaborate, if static, tableaus from the Wonderland stories did greet visitors as they entered the exhibit gallery, however. An undated Continental Baking exhibit description details the Wonder Bakery gallery and its “beautifully executed frescoed murals” of Wonderland characters that “converge towards the central motif—The Mad Tea Party” scene painted over the doorway leading

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into the bakery itself."331 A historical photograph taken inside the gallery confirms this
description, capturing a portion of the Tea Party scene over the bakery entrance and an
adjacent mural depicting a chess scene from *Through the Looking Glass and What
Alice Found There*; a painted sign directing readers “To Wonderland” points to the
entrance of the bakery.332 This last detail reveals the fundamental point of the Wonder
Bakery, which existed to impress on customers the modern technologies and superior
products that informed the production of Wonder Bread and Hostess Cake. Though the
Wonderland motif was an effective and popular marketing ploy, Continental baked
goods were the product for sale, and they needed to remain the exhibit’s single greatest
subject of wonder.

By employing aesthetics that occupied different, even antithetical ends of the
aesthetic spectrum, the Wonder Bakery harnessed the emotional persuasion of
competing styles. Where the pavilion’s architecture promised efficiency, sterility, and
volume, the use of Alice in Wonderland offered comfort, familiarity, and fun. The
juxtaposition of these two ideologies predicts their future adjacency at Disneyland,
where Fantasy Land and Tomorrowland reside side by side. In fact, both dimensions
indulged wistful ideals. The efficiency, energy, and proliferation that modern design
enabled, and the comfort and escapism that the familiar fairy tale proffered, gave
visitors the dual satisfactions of labor and play, production and indulgence, and
progress and familiarity. Another prominent—and popular—element of the exhibit, the

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331 “The Wonder Bakery at the New York World’s Fair, exhibit description, undated, box 455 file 12,
NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL.
332 “Wonder Bread Entrance,” photographer unknown, courtesy of Randy Richter on website 1939 NY
Continental Wheat Field, would engage many of the same themes, and add to more: education in historical connection.

*Wheat Field*

The Wonder Bakery’s sleek industrial facility, whimsical adornment, and Alice in Wonderland motif blended technology, fun, and fantasy, but Continental exhibit planners had identified an avenue by which they could further develop their site and appeal to an entirely different set of cultural knowledge and values. Adjacent to the Wonder Bakery would grow the Continental Wheat Field, where “bright yellow wheat with white chaff will wave in the prevailing breeze from Long Island Sound” in a material example of outer-borough agriculture agrarian history that the press breathlessly reported would “rival such attractions as eskimo igloos and time capsules.”333 A decade before the Wonder Bakery opened to the New York World’s Fair public, Frederick Bennett had conceived a confectionery attraction to draw attention and visitors to his mill property and its historical legacy. The parallels between the Wheatsworth Castle and Wonder Bakery sites are imperfect, but present, and together they demonstrate patterned ways in which sweets, industry, and agrarian history conversed with one another in interwar amusement spaces.

Plans to juxtapose an agricultural space alongside the Wonder Bakery were in place when Continental president F. Lee Marshall signed the corporation’s contract with World’s Fair organizers at the end of 1937.334 A number of possible phenomena can

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reasonably be assumed to have inspired the exhibit component. At an exhibit space dominated by a working bakery, the relationship between wheat, flour, and baking offers the most obvious and most likely thematic rationale. Outside, visitors could see wheat rooted in the ground in its nascent form; inside, they could purchase baked goods made with processed wheat flour (albeit not with the wheat grown on-site, which was dispatched to an unknown fate after harvesting). Though fairgoers could not participate in the field’s cultivation and tending, observing these practices could provide better understanding of labor and time involved in commodity production. For fairgoers with limited or no exposure to agriculture processes—almost certainly a greater percentage of the New York City metro population than that in rural or midwestern communities—a field of wheat would have been a genuine novelty, and one that merited inspection even if it did not tempt frequent or prolonged visits. At an exposition designed to celebrate a fast-paced and largely automated world—and in an exhibit whose dominant attraction, an industrial production plant, did the same—the wheat field’s incongruity also made it a gamble: could the exhibit successfully enjoin spectators to, essentially, watch grass grow? The field’s positive press and general popularity affirms that both the exhibit planner’s instincts and the true novelty of agricultural production in an urban center.

Continental Baking ignored few opportunities to promote the wheat field’s novelty in twentieth-century New York City. A sign on-site proudly pronounced, “This field of wheat is the first to be planted in New York City since 1875.” Publicity materials repeated the claim (and its variant, “The first wheat to be sown in greater New York for
the past 65 years!”) at every opportunity. Continental attributed this assertion to Fred Schumacker, Sr., “an authority on farming in New York” whose “birthplace was a farm located at the spot that now serves as the intersection of 72 street and West End Avenue.” The address of Schumacker’s birthplace effectively illustrated how novel a field of wheat would be for twentieth-century New Yorkers in general and Manhattanites in particular, given the concentrated development of the urban landscape, and at the same time connected Continental’s World’s Fair endeavor to a longer agrarian legacy in the northeastern United States.

Promotional materials may have oriented the Continental wheat field in a broader historical context, but the field’s existence at the World’s Fair was a testament to twentieth-century achievements in science and agriculture. The land that the fairgrounds occupied was not organically suited to agricultural production, a reality that the New York Herald succinctly distilled in its headline “Dump to Grow Field of Wheat at World’s Fair.” Transforming the 1,200-acre ash dump into a space that could support the Fair had been a lengthy process that required the excavation of more than 6,000,000 cubic yards of ash and rubbish. In order for Continental’s exhibit site to accommodate successful wheat growth, the designated plot required additional—and extensive—intervention. Correspondence between Continental executives, World’s Fair administrators, and county and state agricultural advisors documents some of the practical negotiations that the endeavor presented, including topsoil requirements, and

336 “World’s Fair Will Boast Only Wheat Field,” box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL.
procurement burdens, and the relative merits and drawbacks of different wheat varieties.\textsuperscript{339} In autumn 1938 this effective collaboration and care, in tandem with persistent warm weather, nearly compromised the project when the sown wheat flourished so well that it threatened to reach the developmental stage carefully planned to coincide with the Fair’s grand opening the following April; fortunately, an October snowstorm arrested growth to the appropriate degree and allowed the crop to develop on a schedule that would provide maximum interest for Fair visitors.\textsuperscript{340}

The wheat field was no small feat of agricultural engineering, a reality prompted Continental to advertise it as “the most expensive in the world for its size.”\textsuperscript{341} but faith in the endeavor was not unilateral. One letter from an unnamed exhibit engineer to Continental executive G.G. Robinson reports the opinion of World’s Fair “Landscape Expert” Henry Nye, who had mused that “Personally, I wonder how effective such a crop would be here at the site. It would mean that, in the early spring months and the late summer months, the crop would not be a very interesting exhibit. After the wheat has been cut, the ground would be bare and would give a very uninteresting picture.”\textsuperscript{342}

The concern was a logical one considering agricultural cultivation’s limited visual dynamism, but Nye’s aesthetic objections are no less persuasive given the field’s location. The Wonder Bakery was modern and dramatic by design, its gleaming white façade, illuminated balloons of red, yellow, and blue, and parade of animated Wonder Bakers and Alice in Wonderland characters composing a monument to stylized

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\textsuperscript{341} “World’s Fair Will Boast Only Wheat Field,” undated

\textsuperscript{342} K.F.B., letter to G.G. Robinson, June 10, 1938.
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industrial artifice. Fantastic, efficient, and colorful, the edifice would boast no aesthetic or productive affinity with the adjacent wheat field’s incremental growth and limited palate of green, yellow, and brown.

Objections such as Nye’s did not impede the field’s planning and cultivation, but a late addition to the field suggests that its planners remained cognizant of and open to ways to make the field more visually interesting. An April 1939 letter from Marshall to New York World’s Fair Corporation president Grover Whelan references a recent Saturday Evening Post article that had detailed Whelan’s fondness for corn flowers, a happy coincidence for the baking company since “It happens we have planned to plant a border of corn flowers around the wheat field at the Wonder Bakery” the following week.343 He goes on to cite a European tradition of planting wheat and corn flowers together, the corn flower’s function as “an emblem of ‘Peace and Prosperity,’” and the blue and gold colors in the official Fair emblem that the corn flower and wheat field would match. The corn flower border may well have added visual diversity and signified a host of positive meanings, but the mere act of appealing to the landlord’s aesthetic preferences was not without value.

Producing wheat at its exhibition site permitted the Continental Baking Company to insert itself into economic, industrial, and historical systems beyond those related to cupcake production. The company’s own product lines, the U.S. economy, and human survival all depended on functional agricultural operations for survival. The Continental Wheat Field offered fairgoers the tacit reminder that without wheat and the flour into which it was processed, there would be no Wonder Bread or Hostess Cakes; without

343 F. Lee Marshall, letter to Grover Wheland, April 14, 1939, box 455 file 12, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL.
agricultural cultivation, there would be no United States. In this narrative, Hostess Cakes and Wonder Bread are not merely commodities, but vital symbols of productivity and progress. Inviting fairgoers to witness and vicariously participate in a broader historical and agrarian tradition connected those individuals both to the past and to the branded baked goods produced and sold at the Wonder Bakery.

Justification for the Wheat Field’s presence at the Continental Baking exhibit is easy enough, but in the same way that the Wonder Bakery used Alice in Wonderland to attract visitors, the addition of an elaborately wrought character revealed a fundamental insecurity that the wheat field alone might not provide the interest necessary to attract and sustain visitors. To this end, Continental turned to Penelope Shoo.

The Scarecrow of Tomorrow

Penelope Shoo, “The Scarecrow of Tomorrow,” debuted at the New York World’s Fair in June 1939. Standing guard over the Continental wheat field, Penelope was no stuffed burlap dummy, but a seductively attired high-fashion mannequin of uncommonly louche elegance. Embraced by the media, adored by fairgoers, and personified by all, Penelope proved to be a wildly popular exhibit feature in both the in the 1939 and 1940 seasons, and was the Wonder Bakery exhibit element most commonly referenced in the media. A provocative wardrobe and smoldering makeup contributed to a sexualized persona equally at odds with the wholesome whimsy of Alice in Wonderland and the Happy Wonder Bakers, and the patchwork utilitarianism of other scarecrows. Discordant

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344 "Crows Discouraged as Fair Visitors with Dedication of Scarecrow of Tomorrow," press release, June 10 1939, box 455 file 13, NYWF 1939–40 Records, NYPL. Actor Buddy Ebsen, comedian Jack Pearl, and a trained crow named “Roscoe” on load from the “Merrie England” exhibit presided over Penelope Shoo’s formal presentation on June 13.
Fig. 4.3. Penelope Shoo, the Scarecrow of Tomorrow, in the Continental Wheat Field (1939). 1939NYWorldsFair.com.

Fig. 4.4. Penelope Shoo, the Scarecrow of Tomorrow, in the Continental Wheat Field (1940). 1939NYWorldsFair.com.
but hardly alienated, Penelope emerged an unlikely totem of modern industrialism and sentimental agrarianism.

Scarecrows embody—however abstractly—a paradoxical form of labor that is simultaneously inanimate and active. Ostensibly intended to protect cultivated crops from avian plunder, they have featured in agriculture for millennia.\(^{345}\) The reasoning behind their use is rooted in the assumption that life-sized, humanoid decoys mounted amid crops will frighten away scavenging birds by suggesting that area is occupied by a human antagonist. In practice, as an 1876 *Scientific American* article noted, it was not uncommon to see scavengers “complacently picking up young corn almost within the shadow of as an elaborate a stuffed scarecrow as ever was erected.”\(^{346}\) Despite its limited efficacy, in the United States and elsewhere the scarecrow has retained a cultural and material affiliation with agricultural life and labor. Continental’s exhibit planners understood that for most visitors—and particularly for those with limited agricultural knowledge—a scarecrow was both a logical and expected addition an agricultural landscape, regardless of the figure’s practical benefit.

Penelope Shoo’s existence accommodated a largely urban body’s expectations for a wheat field’s contents, but her appearance diverged dramatically from the primitive effigies that typically serve as scarecrows.\(^{347}\) Composed of a smooth synthetic composite with long, slim, white limbs, Penelope was a literal fashion model with an urbane pedigree. Artist Jean Spadea had been a successful fashion illustrator whose


\(^{346}\) “About Scarecrows,” *Scientific American* vol. 34 no. 18 (April 29, 1876): 271.

\(^{347}\) Lorimer, “Scaring Crows,” 183. Lorimer identifies scarecrows as consistent examples of vernacular art primarily affiliated with rustic, outsider, and primitive art movements.
frustration with dowdy merchandising mannequins inspired her to tackle three-dimensional design in the mid-1930s.\textsuperscript{348} Her mannequins had small waists, large breasts, and long legs that exaggerated and sexualized female proportions; wide eyes, high cheekbones, and a look of “stylish arrogance” detailed their faces and vested them with an attitude well-suited to the world of elite couture.\textsuperscript{349} Immediately popular with retailers, the mannequins flourished in New York City and, eventually, across the country, and the artist herself garnered notice in industry and popular media both for her celebrated figures and for the skillful entrepreneurialism that she demonstrated in their creation and marketing. Continental’s decision to tap Spadea for their World’s Fair scarecrow suggests that the company identified value in the elite provenance and uniquely sexual aesthetic that a Spadea mannequin conveyed.

Positioning a fashion icon in the middle of the wheat field was a gamble that paid off handsomely in free publicity for the Continental exhibit. The incongruous pairing of fashion and farming engaged press and public throughout two World’s Fair seasons. Incongruity between the scarecrow’s form and function does not appeared to have troubled many, including those in communities more thoroughly versed in agricultural props than a New York City–based industrial baking corporation. The \textit{Minneapolis Star}, published in the metropolitan center of an agricultural heartland, approved of Penelope’s “beautiful face and better-than-average scarecrow figure.”\textsuperscript{350} Syndicated fashion columnist Isabella Taves indirectly addressed the mannequin’s appeal with the

\textsuperscript{348} “‘Eve’ to Appear at World’s Fair: Mannequin Designed by Jean Spadea Appeals to Fifth Avenue,” \textit{Globe and Mail}, November 28, 1938, 19. The article reports that in 1936 Spadea earned “a yearly salary running into five figures,” which would amount to $180,000 annually in 2020.
\textsuperscript{350} “Scarecrow of Tomorrow,” \textit{Minneapolis Star}, June 16, 1939.
arch observation, “I guess in the next generation there won’t be any question as to how they’re goin’ to keep ’em down on the farm.” Penelope’s impossible physique garnered a degree of appreciation that exceeded any offense it may have triggered in agricultural purists.

Penelope’s attire, also sourced from the Manhattan fashion elite, further authenticated the scarecrow’s unexpectedly cosmopolitan persona. Stylist and retailer Hattie Carnegie, whose eponymous boutique outfitted New York’s elegant elite, supplied Penelope’s wardrobe for both of her display seasons. The Carnegie name conferred a bourgeois authority that Continental happily exploited and the press dared not overlook; *Women’s Wear Daily*, the American fashion industry’s publication of record, diligently detailed the dramatic picture hat and black satin slit-skirt evening dress that the scarecrow wore for her 1939 debut, taking care to note the “novel sleeve treatment, accented by an unusual note of filigreed straw extending from Penelope’s wrists.” Residence in an agricultural space did not relieve the pressure to remain fashionably cutting edge, and in advance of the 1940 season Penelope received a facelift and wardrobe change that traded the vampy glamour of her previous ensemble for a sunbonnet and crisp white apron that cast her “nearer the Maud Muller type” in the words of one report. Unlike nineteenth-century American poet John Greenleaf Whittier’s titular farm maid, however, Penelope sported dramatic makeup and crimson fingernails, and the apron that comprised her sole attire only partially concealed the

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354 Berger, “At the Fair,” June 6, 1940, 28.
unclothed female form beneath it. In 1939, Penelope’s clothing highlighted her dissonance with her surroundings; in 1940, it both engaged and subverted expectations with the risqué presentation of utilitarian apparel.

Penelope’s wardrobed sexualized her. Media and fairgoers alike accepted and expanded on Penelope’s sultry persona. The same *Women’s Wear Daily* article that detailed her inaugural attire also editorialized that the outfit was “so revealing—so very daring—that some persons seem to think that Penelope has placed the exhibit area in direct competition with the amusement zone,” referencing the area of the Fair that featured mature entertainments.\(^{355}\) *New York Times* reporter Meyer Berger, whose column reported daily events and gossip from the World’s Fair, casually bestowed her with monikers like “the hussy scare-crow of Wonder Bakers’ wheatfield” or, after high winds blew her dress skyward, “the Brazen Scarecrow of Tomorrow.”\(^{356}\) Penelope proved irresistible to Intoxicated fairgoers, who attempted to abduct her with reliable frequency. Her first disappearance came mere days after her debut, and though police soon recovered her at “the center of merriment for a group of slightly tipsy revelers,” the incident necessitated her temporary relocation to a less accessible section of the wheat field.\(^{357}\) Whereas intoxicated women typically pulled down the scarecrow in order to compare her measurements with their own, Berger reported, intoxicated men were more apt to abscond with the scarecrow altogether, and by the end of the 1939 season, “She had been arrested eleven times (brought to the World’s Fair police station after she had been rescued from the hands of drunken Fair pilgrims) and had lost her

\(^{355}\) “Black Satin for Penelope,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, 5.
\(^{356}\) Berger, “At the Fair,” June 21, 1939, 20; Berger, “At the Fair,” June 16, 1939, 18.
\(^{357}\) “Scarecrow Glamor Girl Rescued from Playboys,” New York Herald Tribune, June 20, 1939, 12.
The apparently common impulse to steal and strip the scarecrow offers a telling, and troubling, glimpse into the id of the fair-going public matched only by the mainstream media’s gleeful reporting on the subject.

Penelope Shoo challenged and supported geographer Hiram Lorimer’s assertion that scarecrows are “the crudest of mannequins, styled somewhere between the grotesque and the carnivalesque.” Though her highly refined form subverted aesthetic precedent and expectation, she drew uncommonly ribald and rowdy responses from the press and the public. Media coverage was not exclusively predicated on a contrived sensuous allure, but such characterization predominated, and occludes any clear sense of broad popular response to the exhibit feature. Were city kids excited to see a real scarecrow, or did they feel cheated to confront a figure identical to that in dozens of Manhattan shop windows? Did adults appreciate the irony of the elegantly-garbed figure, or were they exasperated that a decidedly family-friendly exhibit would center a semi-nude mascot? Penelope’s participation in traditional publicity gambits like radio interviews and programming events—including one party celebrating the automatons, mannequins, and models employed in exhibits around the Fair—suggest that Continental employed the mascot in a variety of marketing exercises for a variety of audiences. Nevertheless, the volume of articles featuring tongue-in-cheek criticism of the scarecrow’s purported sexual proclivities vastly outnumber factual reporting on her agricultural, corporate, or artistic function. Outrageous, amusing, and

always in the news, The Scarecrow of Tomorrow was, above all, a smashing success for Continental Baking and baked goods marketing.

Conclusion

The 1939–40 New York World’s Fair strived to showcase the World of Tomorrow, but Continental Baking saw a limited relationship between their products and that theme. Industrial technology changed entirely the cultural orientation of baked sweets, normalizing their procurement outside of the home, from national corporations, with anonymous and mechanized production. Corporate conglomerates like Continental only existed because industrial technology permitted the unskilled labor, large-scale production, and broad distribution networks that facilitated baking for a nation of consumers. Though the Wonder Bakery showcased and celebrated an idealized model of industrial production in the bakery itself, none of its World’s Fair marketing motifs or exterior exhibit features drew on that modality. Instead, the company embraced the familiar fantasy of Alice in Wonderland, the staid science of the Continental Wheat Field, and the incongruous sophistication of Penelope Shoo to attract consumers and market the breads and cakes whose cultural legitimacy was still a new and evolving phenomenon. The aesthetic of the Wonder Bakery, predicated on emotional petitions rather than mimetic imagery, expands understanding of the confectionery vernacular to recognize mutual relationship between sweets and the cultural iconography to which it is connected.
Conclusion | Creating a Confectionery Vernacular in the Twenty-First Century

The thirties marked neither the birth nor the apex of confectionery fantasy in American popular culture, but these years provided fertile ground in which to develop and root cohesive confectionery imaginaries. Imagined and imaginary sweet worlds established a comprehensive visual language that consumers could use to contend with anxiety and desire during the Great Depression. The preceding chapters explored the ways in which two distinct sets of cultural artifacts from the period, animated cartoons and hybrid production-and-amusement attractions, used a consistent confectionery argot to negotiate insecure apposition with labor, industry, and indulgence. This conclusion moves the discussion to the twenty-first century to investigate the contemporary confectionery vernacular’s conditions and expression. Foundational to this investigation is a thorough understanding of how radically the American diet has changed in the past century and the physical and social consequences that these changes have wrought. In relief with this new and sobering order stands Whipped Cream, a lavish American Ballet Theater production that reinterprets confectionery Cockaigne as live performance and high art. And finally, two viral memes built on a single image of anthropomorphic ice cream will illustrate how digital content creators use the confectionery vernacular to negotiate labor and reward. Confectionery depictions during the Great Depression probed indulgence and reward, through industrial capitalism’s ability to validate and victimize laborers. In the twenty-first century, imaginary sweets continue to mitigate these contentious relationships amid an
epidemic that sugar catalyzed and a pandemic that fundamentally changed the American lived experience.

Sugar’s American Legacy

Fat, Sick, and Poor

Confectionery imaginaries in the twenty-first–century United States cannot be considered without first taking measure of the contemporary American diet and its consequences. Simply put, Americans are fat.\textsuperscript{361} According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) data, in 2013–2016, 70.1 percent of American adults over age 20 qualified as overweight or obese. This figure reflects a substantial increase over 1988–1994 when “only” fifty-six percent of adults carried excess weight, and amounts to an annual growth rate of nearly one percent.\textsuperscript{362} Calculating obesity independent of other weight classifications produces even more troubling statistics. In the 1988–1994 period, 22.9 percent of American adults qualified as obese; by 2017–2018, the figure had nearly doubled to 42.2 percent.\textsuperscript{363} Children have not fared much


\textsuperscript{362} Table 26: Normal weight, overweight, and obesity among adults aged 20 and over, by selected characteristics: United States, selected years 1988–1994 through 2013–2016.

better in this national order, with CDC data estimating that 18.5 percent of youth aged 2–19 qualified as obese in 2015–2016. As computational averages, these figures are significant; when adjusted to reflect demographic categories, they reflect disproportionate prevalence in socially and economically vulnerable populations. Obesity rates are higher among African American and Hispanic populations than white and Asian. Lower-income groups report higher obesity rates across race. College education and obesity correlate inversely: the more college coursework a person has completed, the less likely they are to be overweight or obese. Compounding the gravity of the situation is the absence of evidence that obesity rates will plateau or decrease in the near future. One peer-reviewed study projects that by 2030, 48.9 percent of the American population will be obese, and “severe obesity is likely to become the most common BMI category” for three groups: non-Hispanic African Americans, low-income adults, and women.

America’s weight problem is ominous both for the public health crisis it portends and for the economic consequences that result within the usurious American healthcare system. Health impacts emerge on two fronts. First, obesity is itself a chronic disease with consequences that can severely degrade both health and general quality of life. Mobility limitations, low self-esteem, social isolation, and discrimination commonly

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attend the overweight and obese and compromise individual well-being. Though social and political activism on behalf of fat acceptance has labored to delegitimize aesthetic prejudices and to champion body diversity and potential health at any size, reducing cultural stigma cannot erase many of the consequences that excess weight threatens. Second, obesity commonly catalyzes comorbidities including cardiovascular disease, certain cancers, dementia, and more, nearly all of which cause negative health outcomes and elevate mortality rates. Diabetes, an endocrinal disorder that compromises the body’s ability to adequately produce insulin and process blood sugar, is a profound example of one such comorbidity due to its prevalence, correlation with obesity, and deleterious impact on essential bodily operations such as circulation and vision. Thirteen percent of the U.S. adult population has diagnosed diabetes, and eighty-nine percent of that group is overweight or obese; an additional 34.5 percent of adults meet at least one criterion for prediabetes. While diabetes diagnoses skyrocket, so do the costs related to treating the disease, and within the United States’ notoriously unregulated healthcare market the financial implications can be catastrophic. Individuals with type-1 diabetes require synthetic insulin injections for survival, and insulin prices have increased as much as eightfold in two decades; as a result, many type-1 diabetics who lack adequate funds or insurance must ration doses or forego insulin altogether at significant risk to health and life. With lower income

people more likely to be overweight, overweight people more likely to suffer from health problems, and health problems more likely to generate substantial personal debt, obesity emerges as both cause and consequence of economic disenfranchisement.\textsuperscript{369}

Fat, sick, and poor, America is in crisis because of the calories we consume, but effective resolution is far more complicated than the relatively simple equation that informs excess weight. Weight gain results from calorie surplus; in order to lose weight, one needs to run a calorie deficit by consuming fewer calories or burning off excess calories. Avoiding obesity—and consequently lowering morbidity rates, improving health, and reducing medical expenditures—in theory requires nothing more than controlled diet and exercise: eat less and move more to maintain the deficit necessary to lose weight or the equilibrium necessary to maintain it. Seemingly straightforward, this prescription’s application is deceptively difficult in the twenty first–century United States, where the conditions of daily life and functions of capitalism have compromised individual access to and control within food systems. Financial insecurity, geographic disparities, industrial food production, and a largely sedentary workforce are just some of the factors catalyzing overweight and obesity, and investigation into these phenomena has fueled necessary academic research, political action, and public discourse. Ultimately, however, socioeconomic factors cannot be separated from the importance of diet—the food that Americans consume, the quantities in which they consume it, and its effect on the human body—as the single element that most directly

informs endemic weight problems. And in the twenty-first century, conversations about American diet invariably center on sugar.

**Sugar Consumption and Change over Time**

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) began tracking sweetener consumption in 1970, and patterns that emerge from these records challenge the popular belief that American dependency on sweets is a recent development. According to USDA estimates, annual per capita consumption of refined sugar averaged 59.8 pounds in 1970; in 2018, the most recent year for which figures are available, the amount is 40.3 pounds. This same period saw exponential increase in high fructose corn syrup consumption, whose annual per capita consumption in 1970 totaled a negligible 0.3 pounds; in 2018, the figure was 22.1 pounds—and this represented a substantial decrease from the 1999 high of 37.5 pounds per year. “Other sweeteners,” a category which includes honey, dextrose, and glucose, has maintained comparatively static consumption rates, increasing by only .6 pounds. All told, Americans in 2018 consumed an additional 2.9 pounds of sweeteners than did their 1970 counterparts, and while this 4.13 percent increase is not negligible, it does not scale to the obesity epidemic’s disproportionate acceleration. Nor do these statistics support the fantasies about twentieth-century confectionery austerity and self-discipline:

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for as long as sweeteners have been available and affordable, Americans have enjoyed them, and in quantities that far exceed contemporary nutritional recommendations.

While sugar consumption rates have seen relatively constrained growth, the ways in which we consume sugar have changed more fundamentally. The prevalence of ultra-processed foods in the twenty-first-century American diet marks the single greatest change in American foodways compared with the interwar period. Ultra-processed foods are industrially formulated for mass production and distribution, and typically include substances not used in culinary preparations, in particular additives used to mimic sensorial qualities of minimally processed foods. Refined sweeteners, themselves processed ingredients, are common additives in ultra-processed foods, where they act as preservatives, enhance color, improve texture, and correct flavor profiles. Homemade scratch cooking and minimally processed foods most commonly employ sugar in sweets and baked goods, but as commercial food processing evolved and the industry expanded throughout the twentieth century, sweeteners appeared in everything from cereal and condiments to lunch meats and frozen dinners.373 Convenience, portability, and shelf stability grew demand for and reliance on such foods, which are typically less expensive than minimally processed and small-batch alternatives. By 2016, one study found that ultra-processed foods (including sugar-sweetened beverages) provided 57.9 percent of American caloric intake, and nearly ninety percent of calories from added sugars.374 Americans are consuming slightly more


sugar than did previous generations, but they are consuming it in markedly more foods and more steadily throughout the day. And while sugar alone is not responsible for ultra-processed foods’ high calorie content and dubious nutritional value, sugar’s ubiquity stymies its controlled consumption, particularly for those with limited food budgets. If one is poor, avoiding sugar in such forms is virtually impossible.

Among ultra-processed foods, sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) have a particularly notorious reputation that has nudged dietary discourse closer to culture war. Between 1977 and 2001 sugar-sweetened beverage consumption increased by 135 percent; a 2006 study found that SSBs accounted for nearly half of all added sugars in the American diet.375 High in calories and offering little by way of nutritional value or satiation, sugary drinks are analogous to dessert, but came to replace water, coffee, and other less caloric beverages. With inadequate dietary adjustment to accommodate the liquid calories consumed with and between meals, the consequences were inevitable: in the last quarter of the twentieth century overweight and obesity rates, particularly among children, rose in correlation with increased SSB consumption.376 The attested connection prompted concerted political and public health initiatives seeking to reduce SSB consumption, with mixed results; soda consumption has fallen while consumption of other SSBs, particularly energy drinks, continues to climb.377 At the same time, advertising restrictions, soda taxes, and sales bans in school districts and


municipalities around the country have earned condemnation from critics who interpret
dietary intervention as an attack on personal liberty. For nutritional reformers,
consuming sugary beverages is a transgressive act that compromises collective health;
for political reactionaries, consuming beverages is a transgressive act that asserts
individual autonomy. In both cases sugar becomes both subject and agent of the
discourse that shapes American identity.

Whipped Cream and the Highbrow Confectionery Vernacular

In October 2016, the American Ballet Theatre (ABT) announced the creation of a
new production to be performed in the company’s spring 2017 season. Titled Whipped
Cream, the work originated with the largely forgotten 1924 ballet Schlagobers by
nineteenth– and twentieth-century German composer Richard Strauss, pairing Strauss’s
score and libretto with ABT artist-in-residence Alexei Ratmansky’s original
choreography and lavish production design by pop artist Mark Ryden. ABT artistic
director Kevin McKenzie confidently declared that the “combination of fantasy and
surrealism will prove something dreamlike from [Ratmansky and Ryden],” and the
finished production realized this prediction both literally and metaphorically.

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around its juvenile protagonist’s dyspeptic fever dream, the ballet’s sets, costumes, and choreography construct a live-action confectionery Cockaigne in which lushly realized sweets tantalize and at the same time tease more sinister implications. Whipped Cream’s visual majesty and grotesquerie offered twenty-first-century American audiences a confectionery fable that celebrated sugar’s favored status while warning audiences about the consequences of its overconsumption.

The ballet’s original production in interwar Europe and contemporary staging in twenty-first century United States emerged in markedly different contexts but explore similar contentions of indulgence, greed, and consequence. Ratmansky, a Ukrainian national born in 1968, grew up in the then-Soviet state with limited access to and availability of the sugary sweets that were increasingly ubiquitous in the United States in the twentieth century. To a New York Times reporter he recalled the astonishment that he and his wife, Tatiana, experienced upon their 1992 arrival in North America to dance for the Winnipeg Ballet, explaining “At the time, food was scarce in the Ukraine, you could buy nothing, and suddenly there was all this stuff … Tatiana loves whipped cream and would run to the store to buy those cans you can squirt.”380 The product to which he referred, pressurized cans of cream whose enclosed carbon dioxide cartridges generate mounds of whipped cream at the touch of a nozzle, eliminate the labor historically associated with producing the voluminous garnish and offer a handy metaphor for the volume and ease of sweets in the United States. For those accustomed to scarcity and

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austerity, post–Cold War America was a literal Cockaigne in which sweets in volume were readily available and easily accessed.

Interwar Origins

Understanding the content and implications of Whipped Cream in 2015 requires a thorough sense of the conditions that shaped its source material nearly a century earlier. In 1919 Richard Strauss assumed co-directorship of the Vienna State Opera, and with this esteemed appointment the popular composer saw an opportunity to expand on his heretofore limited repertoire for ballet in partnership with renowned choreographer Heinrich Kröller. In 1922 the pair began collaboration on a ballet that would blend artistic refinement and grand spectacle to celebrate fin-de-siècle Vienna and the cultural apex that period represented for the Austrian people. The production, for which Kröller developed the choreography while Strauss created the music, libretto, and scenario, invoked a specifically national cultural pride in both title and topic: Schlagobers translates to “whipped cream,” but the German language word is an exclusively Austrian colloquialism well known in a city so famed for patisserie that there exists a culinary category of baked sweets known as viennoiserie.381 The period in which Strauss developed his project was a grim one for his adopted country. World War I and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire had obliterated the regional landscape, economy, and spirit. The new Austrian state was carved from the former empire’s German-speaking region centered around Vienna and, like Germany, faced growing economic instability and social fracture in the years following the Armistice of

Food insecurity was a particularly pervasive and devastating problem thanks to depleted production, disrupted supply chains, and inequal distribution, all of which contributed to the grim cultural event known as die Hungerkatastrophe, the Hunger Catastrophe.\textsuperscript{382} The riot of sweets around which Strauss would structure his new work celebrated the achievements and luxuries that had defined Vienna at the height of its cultural dominance, and also composed a wistful fantasy of plenty in a period of deprivation.

Realizing this fantasy came neither cheap nor easy. Astronomical costs and persistent delays plagued Schlagobers, which Strauss had originally hoped to mount in early 1923 but which ultimately premiered in June 1924. The ballet’s elaborate staging included nearly four hundred costumes and a giant pastry-chef automaton, and expenses rapidly surpassed available state funds and required repeated appeals to private investors; the final price tag was nearly four billion kronen, a figure that reflected rampant postwar inflation but remained more than twice the original budget.\textsuperscript{383} Financing woes held up production and attracted criticism in the Viennese press, which dubbed the show the “billionaire’s ballet” and derided its private backers with thinly veiled antisemitic language.\textsuperscript{384} Controversial content in the ballet’s libretto also contributed to production delays and required Strauss’s reworking; these included a sequence set at a political rally at which matzo danseurs “distribute incendiary literature

\textsuperscript{383} Wayne Heisler, \textit{The Ballet Collaborations of Richard Strauss} (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009), 147. The period’s hyperinflation complicates the ability to convert that sum’s equivalence into U.S. dollars: I have been unable to locate any historical or contemporary conversion chart for the Austrian Krone, whose devaluation under inflation prompted the adoption of the Austrian Schilling in 1925.
\textsuperscript{384} Heisler, \textit{Ballet Collaborations}, 162.
to the crowd" in a pandering appeal to anti-Semitism, and a *pas-de-deux* between French and German liquors that suggested a degree of conviviality that many Austrians resented when directed toward an Allied Power, albeit an imaginary one.\(^{385}\) In politically charged and economically ravaged post-war Vienna, there existed a network of transgressions that confectionery whimsy could not mask.

Response to the ballet was mixed, with the strongest criticism coming from Austrian critics for whom the finished production’s visual splendor failed to justify its shortcomings. Musicologist Andreas Giger notes that while some reviewers were content to dismiss the production as slight despite its elaborate detail, others declared its expense was unconscionable, its score insufficiently Viennese, and its motifs too similar to those of existing ballets.\(^{386}\) More censorious criticism reflected the radically changed country in which the ballet premiered. In the spiritually and financially fragile capital of a once-great power, artful depictions of frivolity and gluttony might offer a painful reminder of reversed fortunes rather than a delightful respite from reality. Austrian music critic Ernst Decsey, whom music historian Wayne Heisler quotes in translation in his own comprehensive analysis of Strauss’s ballet works, declared, “‘Only a prosperous man would get the idea to dramatize the luxurious atmosphere of the Prater and Gerstner,’” referring to the famed Viennese confectioner’s shop.\(^{387}\) For many in the post-Empire order, Vienna’s cherished cultural products assumed nationalist significance and the burden to reinforce a dignified identity. With its elaborate depictions


\(^{387}\) Heisler, *Ballet Collaborations*, 36.
of indulgence and joyful pastiche of sentiment and fantasy, *Schlagobers* failed to meet this challenge.

Ambivalent reception hastened the ballet’s lapse into relative obscurity, but could not erase it entirely from the public record. Its legacy in the United States, in particular, merits attention: in contrast with the opprobrium it attracted in Vienna, *Schlagobers* enjoyed generally amiable coverage in the American press before and after the ballet’s June 1924 premiere. Untroubled by the political missteps and profligate costs that had frustrated the production’s Viennese critics, American critics tended to focus on the ballet’s bright spots, as evidenced in a *Variety* review that diplomatically ascribed to the production “a book with almost no content, and music with a super-content.”

Musicologist Carl Engel did not share *Variety’s* esteem for the score, but couched his criticism in similarly affable terms in the *Musical Quarterly*, remarking that “Strauss had a good time writing this music. One can see that. And he did not sweat over it that much.”

The confectionery motif generated explicit enthusiasm, including from one *Living Age* critic whose comment that “the music is said to be delightful” suggests that he did not actually attend the performance he described. His presumably second-hand account nonetheless included a vivid description of the first act’s finale, in which “forty ballet girls—oddly costumed so that they look both pretty and like whipped cream, no mean triumph for the costumer—whirl out of the bowl and into the rhythm of a new Strauss Waltz” in unqualified delight. The costumes similarly impressed *Women’s Wear Daily*, whose Vienna bureau reviewer not only appears to have attended a live

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390 “Strauss’s Whipped Cream,” *Living Age*, June 28, 1924, 1257.
performance, but was familiar enough with Viennese culture to unpack the layers of social and culinary representation incorporated into the confectionery costumes, such as those for *Schillerlocken* cakes, who “one must know, are not counted among the upper classes of the cake world.” The willingness of American critics to emphasize the *Schlagobers*’ strengths and excuse its shortcomings reflected their security as citizens of a country victorious in the recent war and largely unafflicted by the destabilization it wrought even after fighting ceased. With a strong economy, unaltered landscape, and dependable food supply, Americans in the 1920s could afford to indulge Strauss’s confectionery fantasy in a way that critical Austrian audiences would not.

**Schlagobers in the Twenty-First Century**

The twenty-first century iteration of the ballet opens on a class of young first communicants joyously departing church for the local confectioner’s shop to celebrate their shared sacramental milestone. There the children gorge blissfully on sweets until a boy who has been gobbling whipped cream with single-minded intent collapses with a stomach ache, prompting his removal on a stretcher. In the now-empty shop, a variety of sweets and favored hot beverages emerge from their respective packaging and dance in changing configurations, but return to their tins when a confectioner enters. As the chef busily whips cream in an enormous bowl, the set morphs to depict the vessel’s billowy contents and the corps de ballet, clad in diaphanous white, performs an interpretive whipped cream waltz to conclude Act I.

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Fig. Concl.1. Scene from *Whipped Cream* Act I, featuring a lone baker at work (2017 American Ballet Theatre). BrightestYoungThings.com.

Fig. Concl.2. Scene from *Whipped Cream* Act II, featuring peppermints and petit-fours (2017 American Ballet Theatre). Love-dance.kazeo.com
Dreamy flourishes and soft hues infuse these scenarios, from the garland-draped omnibus that transports the children to the gilded pink wallpaper that backgrounds the patisserie. Pastels predominate and evoke the same prettily iced petits fours who later emerge as agents; when the anthropomorphized confections take the stage, their visual affinity with the environment they occupy implies a natural order within the bounds of fantasy. The events of Act I are unlikely to challenge the imagination in a culture in which sentient sweets have long featured in fantasy and advertising, nor are such conceits foreign to ballet despite the art form’s highbrow associations: since the mid-twentieth century *The Nutcracker*, in which personified confections and beverages dance throughout much of the second act, has been a holiday season mainstay for professional and amateur ballet companies throughout the United States.392 For audiences primed to accept *Whipped Cream*’s fantasy at face value, the first act’s placid aesthetic synchronicities bolster the ballet’s own visual and narrative charms and invite rumination on pleasures of childhood, celebration, and sweets themselves.

Despite applications to familiarity and comfort, other visual cues subtly disrupt the first act’s pleasant confectionery harmonies to portend more sinister forces at play within the fantasy. The most effective of these cues manifests in the priest, omnibus driver, and pastry chef characters, each of whom features an impossibly large artificial head but is otherwise clad in the uniform of his respective occupation.393 The dramatic disproportion of the fabricated heads, fully half the height of the bodies that support them and with a circumference that spans the shoulders, are viscerally grotesque

393 The doctor, who first appears in Act II, is similarly styled, though the second act’s production design and story explicitly realize traumatic exchange between confectionery and the body.
because they deviate so radically from standard human proportion and in doing so imply trouble within the body. On stage, the disruption is all the more jarring because ballet’s physical and aesthetic ideals command a homogeneity predicated on exacting proportion. Biological and artistic deviation in a whimsical and literally candy-colored world challenges conventions within and about confectionery fantasies and tacitly orients form, body, and representation in proximity with consumption.


Act II opens with the bedridden young protagonist facing down a variety of medical horrors at the hands of an incompetent doctor and his accompanying battalion of nurses armed with hypodermic needles the size of bazookas. Aghast and delirious, the boy imagines a grand parade of anthropomorphic creatures and candies marching into his room. The parade gives way to a *pas-de-trois* featuring Champagne, vodka, and
kirsch that concludes with their collaborated attack on the doctor, who becomes drunk and passes out on the boy’s sickbed. Despite their collective efforts to abstain, the nurses, too, succumb to the spirits’ temptations and conclude their shift in inebriated chaos. After anxiously witnessing these professional transgressions, the boy awakes in an elaborate confectionery realm teeming with anthropomorphic sweets and imaginary beings. An extended finale featuring dozens of confections and concludes with a wizard-like emcee crowning the boy and dispatching him to join the gracious Princess Praline; from their platform at center stage, the couple surveys their kingdom of oddball and confectionery friends and the curtain falls.

The fit of indigestion that provides the first act’s dramatic apex borrows directly from the original text’s libretto, which similarly saw its protagonist danseur succumb to the consequences of overindulgence. As discussed in earlier chapters, the trope frequently features in stories of confectionery abundance, and lends a note that it both cautionary (too much of a good thing can be a bad thing) and punitive (consequences await the greedy); indeed, the Act I scenario in which too many sweets lead to physical distress is both straightforward and familiar. The second act, however, pushes the theme to dramatic and visceral extremes. Confinement to bed and stomach pains are not the boy’s punishment; they position him for the real punishment to follow. Much of Act II’s action depicts violence against the body and within the mind—the drunken doctor is both callous and bumbling, the veiled nurses level giant hypodermic needles, an eight-foot peppermint-striped worm slithers through a confectionery dreamscape with unctuous and unsettling agility—in face of which the victim is powerless, immobilized in his sickbed. Even by the most vindictive standards, such torments are disproportionate
to a bit of lighthearted gluttony, but in the broader context of the American obesity crisis they assume a metaphoric feasibility. When unconscious overconsumption is the status quo, repercussions compound quickly. It is no less ironic that ballet—an art form that traditionally, even punishingly, tasks professional dancers to maintain low bodyweights and slim figures—should support a narrative that so vividly depicts caloric abundance and gluttony. *Whipped Cream*’s second-act horrors, absent from Strauss’s 1924 text, directly reflect the twenty-first-century reality in which excess sugar has induced genuinely traumatic consequences on individual bodies and on the collective good.

The ABT is a vital cultural institution in the United States, but one of admittedly limited reach. Its position in the artistic world and location in New York City orient the institution within a caliber of funding and resources that few American ballet companies could hope to secure. Elite talent and elaborate productions come at a quite literal cost, however; as of 2019, the cheapest tickets for an ABT performance were $45 (or six hours, twelve minutes of work at the federal minimum wage) and the most expensive more than five times that. *Whipped Cream*’s commentary on sweets, indulgence, and consequence, though rich and relevant, is unlikely to become familiar to large or diverse audiences. The next two sections consider a confectionery imaginary in a more accessible medium: the internet meme.

*Confectionery Vernacular in the Digital Age*

The photograph is a selfie. This means that the picture’s subject is also the photographer, who in this case chose to capture his image reflected in the mirror rather than his physical self. Harsh lighting, an off-kilter camera angle, and the sink filling the
lower third of the frame provide all the hallmarks of a bathroom selfie, a category of visual text uncommon before the twenty-first century but ubiquitous by its second decade.\textsuperscript{394} Within this familiar setting looms the picture’s unexpected subject-photographer, a giant anthropomorphic ice cream cone. Known as “Coney,” the figure is a brand mascot for the Baskin Robbins chain of ice cream parlors, and the human interpreter wearing the Coney costume is camouflaged behind a triangular panel of fabric silk screened to resemble a textured waffle cone body and a fabricated scoop of vanilla ice cream that serves as a head. A fixed, jolly visage, hot fudge hair, and a Baskin Robbins baseball cap personalize the character. Though other images reveal that the Coney costume includes oversized hand and feet coverings, here the interpreter remains ungloved and the human hand that clutches the phone stretches awkwardly from the rotund ice cream–cone body to capture the image.

The confectionery costume disguises, but cannot obviate, the personhood of the individual who wears it; Coney is the character who represents the brand, but he is also the interpreter who occupies the role and costume of the character. In his article “The Semiotics of Brand,” anthropologist Paul Manning refers to “fantastic characters” as one

category of corporate branding personas used in the United States. Coney, an imaginary figure who more closely resembles a cartoon character than he resembles a human being or an ice cream cone, occupies this category and supports Manning’s observation that such characters “embody affectively engaging attributes of cuteness” in order to attract consumers. More objectively, fantastic character mascots animate inanimate objects, then anthropomorphize those animated figures. Anyone looking at this picture understands that it is a person dressed as an ice cream cone, but the incongruity of an ostensibly inanimate, anthropomorphized creature engaged in the aggressively human act of snapping a selfie is as preposterous as it is unexpected, and constructs a humorous visual premise in its own right.

Funny on its face, the photograph has twice featured in digital content that achieved viral popularity on social media. First in 2018 and again in 2020, Twitter account holders paired the Coney selfie with text to deliberate humorous effect; in both cases the original tweet spawned hundreds of imitators and turned a multimodal joke into a bona fide meme. Though each tweet grounded its joke in the implication that its respective author was the depicted subject-photographer, the selfie does not belong to or depict either one, and the picture’s ice cream cone–costumed interpreter remains unknown. Ultimately, inauthentic premises and unknown provenance are immaterial to these tweets and the memes they inspired, all of which fit into a category of digital

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396 Digital Communications scholar Limor Shifman defines internet memes as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, or stance, which (b) were created with awareness of each other, and (c) were circulated, imitated, and transformed via the internet and many users” in Digital Keywords: A Vocabulary of Information Society and Culture (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 71.
humor defined by recursive creation and content that is “mixed and remixed, copied and imitated, propagated and diffused by participants on the web.” Though the illustrated set-up is a fiction, it supports a narrative punchline that in both cases interrogates relationships between work, reward, and dignity. During a period of relative economic security and again in the midst of dramatic economic collapse, Coney selfie memes illustrate how a confectionery vernacular continues to facilitate labor discourse in the twenty-first century.

The Coney selfie’s first viral moment came in the summer of 2018 when Twitter user @iPurrple posted the photograph under the caption that read, “Wake up hustlers, let’s get this bread. No days off.” By the end of the week it had garnered over 200,000 likes and 60,000 retweets, and had inspired hundreds of users across Twitter to post their own mascot selfies with identical or similarly galvanizing mottos. Digital cultural content aggregators like Buzzfeed and Mashable republished the original meme and its legions of copycats. Even traditional media streams picked up on and advanced the joke’s viral spread; three days after iPurrple’s initial post, an NBC Today show story featured his original tweet and several of the copycats it had inspired. Reporter Savannah Sellers informed viewers that “Social media users were motivated by the photos, giving the mascots credit for what can be an exhausting job in costume.” The Coney image spoke both to those workers whose labor required identified costumes, and to those whose work masks were metaphorical rather than material.

398 Jay (@iPurrple) “Wake up hustlers, let’s get this bread. No days off,” Twitter, July 31, 2018 8:32 a.m.
The photograph’s subject is simultaneously a fantastic imaginary character and a beleaguered corporate employee, and attributing relentlessly self-motivating platitudes to either identity appears to have amused far more people than it motivated. While some comments posted in response to the original tweet and its many republications do applaud the text’s ambitious patter, others detected more mockery than enthusiasm in its tone. “Hustlers,” “let’s get this bread,” and “no days off” are all terms and phrases common to a colloquial vocabulary of self-discipline and success; when used in earnest such terminology most typically correlates success with wealth accrual (“bread” being a long-established slang term for money) and career advancement. In recent years, digital humorists have appropriated this lexicon to lampoon concerted and nakedly ambitious capitalist effort. An ice cream cone’s imagined participation in the rat race is funny because it is both impossible and incongruous. The Coney mascot gives an imaginary character the physical form of a frozen treat that most Americans recognize and enjoy. He is both fantastic and familiar, but above all he is a signifier who telegraphs ice cream’s pleasurable associations. Some of these associations, like indulgence and celebration, are common to sweets as a general category. Ice cream also might invoke associations specific (though not necessarily unique) to the confection, such as summer vacation or hot weather. Relentless careerist drive is unlikely to rank among the pleasures ice cream evokes and forcing the association tips the joke into surrealism.

400 “Let’s get this bread,” Know Your Meme. The inherently imitative construction of memes and the speed with which they evolve complicates the ability to identify with certainty the origins of popular tropes, but unofficial cultural records suggest that the ironic use of career-hustle language, and in particular the phrase “Let’s get this bread,” gained traction in 2017 and 2018. One early meme features a bathroom mirror selfie of a man clad as the eponymous mascot for children’s party franchise Chuck E. Cheese, the costume’s oversized head balanced in one arm; the caption reads, “Wake up hustlers, let’s get this bread. No days off.” The tweet received a modest response, but nothing approaching that which the 2018 Coney iteration enjoyed even though the latter is an undeniable—and presumably deliberate—recreation of the former.
The incongruities that inform the joke are farcical when imaginary Coney is the subject, but assume a darker tone when centering the person wearing the Coney suit. In this case, the humor engages the chasm between the optimism and opportunity in the fast food industry, in particular for front line employees. Franchises like Baskin Robbins pay notoriously low wages in the United States, engendering precarious financial conditions for service workers. In 2013 the University of California, Berkeley Labor Center reported that fifty-two percent of all fast food service workers’ families receive at least one form of public assistance. Organized efforts to mandate a living wage across the fast food industry have achieved a measure of success in some municipalities and markets, but continually meet resistance on corporate and public fronts. Balanced against standard costs of living, it is virtually impossible for American fast food service workers to maintain a living wage on an industry paycheck. Critics who dismiss fast food service work as unskilled labor seek to justify poverty wages by diminishing the effort and engagement such work requires, and in doing so endorse an insidious social hierarchy that echoes the same marginalist commodity valuation that John Edgerton invoked in his 1938 Congressional testimony: labor, not humanity, determines an individual’s ability to meet fundamental needs. In a culture that invokes “flipping burgers” as shorthand for employment to which one is reduced rather than to which one aspires, fast food service garners social derision as well as exploitive

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compensation. In such an oppressive system, the motto “No days off” becomes a mandate.

*The Confectionery Vernacular in the Age of COVID-19*

In January 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic arrested normal daily life for billions of people across the globe. Highly contagious, with rare but severe health consequences and an alarming mortality rate, the novel coronavirus spread rapidly and prompted aggressive containment measures in nearly every country it penetrated. Restricted travel, closed schools, remote work, and physical distancing became the new normal for billions of people. By March 23, one-fifth of the world’s population was under order or advisement to stay home in order to inhibit the virus’s spread. In the United States, such physical distancing measures had no precedent in the nation’s history. At the behest of CDC authorities, on March 16 President Donald Trump formally advised Americans to avoid leaving home unless necessary. State, county, and municipal leaders implemented official orders limiting and prohibiting (and, in some cases, criminalizing) nonessential commuting and errands, public congregation, and failure to maintain physical distancing parameters outside of the home. Those with confirmed exposure to the virus received even more stringent quarantine and isolation mandates. In this new order, staying home was a public health prescription and ethical imperative.

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The abrupt interruption of public life triggered socially debilitating and economically devastating consequences. In the United States, approximately thirty million Americans lost jobs between March and June 2020, with unemployment rates reaching a record high of 14.7 percent in April of that year. For many who were able to keep their jobs, hours were reduced or restricted due to the pandemic; Erica Groshen, a former Bureau of Labor Statistics commissioner, told the Wall Street Journal that “Depending on how you count it, you’re talking about something like a quarter of all U.S. jobs being disrupted by the pandemic.” The upheaval catalyzed and revealed the precarious economic straits in which millions of Americans were already living. Though a decade-long bull market had effectively camouflaged growing wage disparity from any meaningful public scrutiny, COVID-19 laid bare the economic order’s material and social inequities.

In the midst of this chaos, “essential workers” became a central topic in the country’s “operations and discourse. Though the definition differs according to varying state and federal guidelines, the employment category is broadly intended to protect operations related to public utilities, food supply chains, transportation, childcare, and other industries that needed to function continually in order to ensure the country’s

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physical and economic well-being.\textsuperscript{408} Depending on the locality’s definition and enforcement of “essential,” businesses from restaurants to retail were permitted to remain open amid Covid shut-downs.\textsuperscript{409} In the press and on social media, public-facing essential workers from emergency room physicians to supermarket cashiers received flurries of gratitude and praise for the labor they performed at increased risk to their own health as the virus spread. At the same time, a smaller but no less persistent chorus called attention to radical discrepancies between the labor collectively agreed to be “essential,” the insufficient wages that many people in essential positions earned, and the real physical risks those workers incurred during a pandemic.\textsuperscript{410} A divided public grappled with these new distinctions within the new uncertain order. Fast food employees and hospital orderlies deserved respect—but did they deserve to be adequately compensated?

On April 4, a familiar face—and photograph—entered the debate on Twitter. The same Coney selfie that iPurrple had employed to great effect in 2018 reemerged, this time on the account of Louisville, Kentucky-based Twitter user @LilTreProd, who tweeted the picture under a caption that demanded “how tf am i essential worker.”\textsuperscript{411} At that moment in the United States, the question \textit{How the fuck am I an essential worker?}

\textsuperscript{411} @LilTreProd “how tf am i essential worker,” Twitter, April 4, 2018 8:17 p.m. https://twitter.com/LilTreProd/status/1246592875544051717/photo/1.
was a legitimate one. On March 16, Kentucky governor Andy Beshear had issued an executive order that closed restaurants to on-site consumption in an attempt to minimize the physical proximity that facilitated Covid-19 transmission between people; such establishments, including ice cream parlors, were permitted to remain open for carry-out, delivery, and drive-through service. As the month progressed and the virus spread steadily across the United States, the country braced itself for an April surge that would see skyrocketing infection, hospitalization, and death rates. By the end of March the portents were grave enough for President Trump to adopt a rare tone of solemnity at a press conference at which he warned the country of “a very painful, very very painful, two weeks” ahead. In Kentucky, Governor Beshear extended his executive order of March 16, but did not further restrict or close food service establishments. Disaster loomed, but Baskin Robbins would remain open.

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LilTreProd’s Coney selfie meme encapsulated the illogical and outrageous mandates. It employs visual and verbal vocabularies to construct a joke that interrogates socioeconomic disparities—disparities that the Covid-19 pandemic was rapidly catalyzing throughout the United States. A facepalm emoji punctuates the meme’s central query, conferring a tone that is equal parts incredulity and resignation: he is aghast but unsurprised about the ludicrous system. At the same time, his use of profanity, deployed in shorthand, emphasizes his frustration with a reality in which serving ice cream became an essential service in the midst of an epidemic that explicitly jeopardized those in proximity with other people.

As in the tweet from which the picture was borrowed, the joke is predicated on the implication that its author is offering up his words from the depths of the Coney mascot suit, though in reality both the picture’s origins and details of LilTreProd’s employment are unknown. And once again, the contrived premise does not appear to have weakened the joke’s resonance with digital content consumers. Within three weeks, the Essential Worker Coney tweet had garnered over 370,000 likes and 64,000 thousand retweets, in addition to republication by various social and cultural content aggregators. It also—inevitably—inspired a spate of imitators who affixed the question to a variety of corporate and athletic mascot selfies. Among these it is difficult to ascertain which might depict people actually obligated to suit up as essential workers, and which were merely replicating the joke as memes demand. However, the large numbers of positive responses and copycats suggest that hundreds of thousands of people understood and appreciated the premise.
One key to the meme’s popularity lies in its blend of absurdity and plausibility. An ambulatory six-foot ice cream cone provides amusement and diversion, not an essential service; this is no less true in normal times than in the throes of a viral pandemic. But three decades into the twenty-first century, the economic inequalities outlined above—those that Covid-19 catalyzed, and those with deeper roots—had effectively normalized the exploitation and dehumanization of those with the fewest resources. For food service employees who could not afford to miss a paycheck, working in a public-facing job in the midst of a pandemic was, ironically, an act of survival despite the physical and mortal risks it posed. Essential Worker Coney may question why he’s needed, but the mere act of donning a costume to perform non-essential labor implies dependence on the money that labor provides. Whether or not one has ever needed to endanger one’s own life for poverty wages, a reality in which some people are expected or obligated to is built into America’s capitalist paradigm.

Conclusion

This dissertation opened on a Depression-era fantasy about an ice cream factory where workers were showgirls, operations were magical, and the product was given away for free. It ends in the bathroom of a corporate ice cream parlor where a low-wage employee clad in a ridiculous costume prepares to shill ice cream in the midst of a pandemic. The 1934 Kid Millions ice cream fantasy and the Coney Essential Worker meme that went viral in the early months of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic both use absurd depictions of ice cream to illustrate fraught relationships between humanity and capitalism during economic and social destabilization. Though film and meme represent
two radically different mediums, and the conditions of the Great Depression and the 2020 pandemic differed markedly despite obvious parallels in unemployment and financial vulnerability, both texts’ reliance on confectionery contextualization reveals that the visual language of sweets offers an effective shorthand for probing contentions unrelated to dessert.

In the popular imagination, the Great Depression began abruptly on Black Monday, ended with the United States’ entry into World War II, and between these bookends accommodated a decade of breadlines, dust bowls, and federal programming. The reality was both more nuanced and more complicated. Many of the factors catalyzing the stock market’s dramatic collapse in 1929 had been simmering throughout the decade following World War I, including the overvaluation of the stock market and the undercapitalization of banks. In the years between 1929 and 1932, persistent recession and decreased production contributed to unemployment, homelessness, and hunger, and these phenomena most commonly affected those who were poor or working class to begin with. In that time of economic hardship, confectionery imaginaries offered both a means of escape and insight into the laborer’s dilemma.

At the Wheatsworth Gingerbread Castle, Frederick Bennett displayed a canny understanding of the aesthetic and emotional power that sweets wielded over consumers. The destination amusement’s fundamental purpose was to attract attention that could then be directed toward the Wheatsworth whole wheat product line on which Bennett built much of his success. The nineteenth-century flour mill and modern processing facility that shared the Castle’s site gave physical form to fetishized historical
and industrial ideals, but neither was able to spark the popular appreciation necessary for effective promotion. Sweets, on the other hand, invited attention even when rendered in inedible and fantastic form. The discrepancy between the health food that Bennett marketed and the confectionery motif he used to attract consumers tacitly acknowledged the persistent fondness that Americans harbored for sweets regardless of evolving nutritional knowledge.

Confectionery Cockaignes cartoons produced throughout the 1930s illustrate the artistic and cultural appeal that animation studios found in complex depictions of sweet edible landscapes and characters. The conceits informing these narratives inevitably echoed those defining the Cockaigne texts that emerged in Europe during the Middle Ages: oversized and infinite foods—in these films, almost exclusively confections—composed both landscape and infrastructure, provisioning required neither labor nor petition, and abstinence from work or obligations of any kind was the norm. These confectionery fantasies inverted the stresses of Depression life by directly redressing the indignities of deprivation and establishing conditions in which surplus was useful, viable, and delicious.

In the four Depression cartoons featuring industrial confectionery production, abundance adopts a menacing tenor. Each of these films tasks industrial workers to capably bake, shape, decorate, and otherwise prepare and produce a seemingly limitless quantity of sweets for unseen consumers. A career in confectionery production is a popular fantasy for children, but the sector’s history documents a pattern of exploitation common in industrial employment in addition to dangers and indignities unique to the large-scale production of candy and baked goods. These movies, in turn,
literally dehumanize the actors at their center, casting confectionery labor forces as non-human persons, elfin and insectile in turn. In the depths of the Great Depression, as now, most people work in order to exist; in these manic fantasies of provisioning, laborers exist in order to work.

At decade’s end, the Wonder Bakery and Continental Baking Pavilion at the 1939–40 New York World’s Fair synthesized concepts related to fantasy, abundance, and modern industry in a dynamic exhibit visited by thousands. At this site, visual whimsy, fairy tale characters, and streamlined industrial designs contributed to an elaborate both to sell commercially produced baked goods, and to sell the public on the cultural legitimacy of commercially produced baked goods. The exhibit’s popularity and the untroubled appreciation that its chaotic pastiche garnered reflect a population of cultural consumers conditioned to identify sweets with wild and whimsical imagery and associations. Like the characters who advertised them and the model bakery that produced them at the World’s Fair, hostess cakes were cultural artifacts inexorably associated with competent fun.

This project centers the visual and material culture of sweets in an effort to fill a gap in American cultural scholarship. Existing literature related to sweets provides limited consideration of confectionery cultural capital and aesthetic impact, and those works that do make limited inroads into the twentieth century. Foundational and recent academic queries into sweets more typically confront the political economy of sugar, cocoa, and other commodities under colonialism, capitalism, and global industrialization. Cultural commentary and popular histories of confections more commonly address the public health crises that overconsumption has catalyzed rather
than confectionery’s aesthetic resonance in the collective imagination. Sweets are a favored and fraught dietary component, and their prevalence in the cultural record merits more rigorous study not merely because a research gap exists, but because their visual and material depictions reconcile deeper contentions with consumption, creativity, and modernity. The stories that confectionery depictions tell contribute to a larger narrative that reports the American experience and reveals how people make and claim meaning in mass culture and in daily life.
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