Feeding the body politic: metaphors of digestion in Progressive Era US immigration discourse

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ABSTRACT

In the era between the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and the Immigration Act of 1924, nativist advocates for immigration restriction commonly invoked metaphors of eating and digestion to support their cases. This essay draws on political, popular, and scientific discourses around immigration and digestion in order to analyze the affective power of the rhetorically constructed “body politic.” While numerous scholars have addressed the ways immigrants have been variously figured as threats to the nation—as pollutants, toxins, disease, floods, or invading armies—few have analyzed metaphors of eating and digestion. I argue that the national body became a metonym for the ideal (white) citizen body, which supported anti-immigrant rhetoric through metaphors of eating, digesting, and eliminating undesirable aliens—those who did not agree with the national stomach. The body politic came to represent the ideal US American body as individuals were invited to identify with the nation through the trope of the body politic; immigrants who did not share this ideal body were rendered undesirable through their association with indigestibility and disgust. This essay demonstrates the affective and thus political power that digestion metaphors provided, shedding light on an early instantiation of the disgust that pulses through twenty-first-century anti-immigrant discourse in the United States.

If a crude mass of undigested food attempts to pass into the duodenum with the chyme, it instantly closes, and the intruder is carried back, to be subjected still further to the operations of the stomach. If it be of an indigestible nature, it is finally either permitted to pass into the intestinal tube, or is suddenly and convulsively ejected from the stomach through the meat-pipe and mouth.—Sylvester Graham, 1854

We need a breathing spell to absorb those who have come to us in enormous numbers … We are suffering from indigestion of the foreign element in our body politic.—Rep. Arthur Greenwood (Ind.), 1924

Discourses of immigration in the United States are rife with metaphor. Becoming a citizen is called “naturalizing,” the immigrant success story is held up by “bootstraps,” the nation “opens the door” or “shuts the gates,” and the country is a “melting pot,” a “salad bowl,” a “rainbow coalition.” These metaphors punctuate our public debate, are given form in works of art, mark the pages of the Congressional Record, and star in our own narratives
of place, arrival, and self. They are effective packages of meaning and memory that play significant roles in shaping and circulating discourses about immigration. This article focuses on a prominent historical metaphor that is seemingly absent in contemporary immigration discourse: digestion. Metaphors of the nation as an eating body politic and immigrants the cause of its indigestion were prevalent in immigration debate from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century, a key time period for US nation-building and political boundary-making. Though the digestion metaphor has fallen away, its affective production of disgust has remained, feeding a powerful legacy in today’s immigration politics. In this essay, I explore the metaphor cluster around eating and digestion that provided a rich representational toolbox in the era between the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act through the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, through which the fertile figure of the US nation-as-body was mobilized in anti-immigrant discourse.

As scholars have long claimed, borders are symbolic human constructs—the borders of a nation are constructed and enforced symbolically as much as they are materially. What counts as part of the nation or separate from it is continually established and reinforced. In moments of crisis, the figurative language used to represent the nation—who belongs and who remains apart, often dangerously so—takes on heightened tones. In fact, the symbolic border depends on crisis to create and maintain itself, a frenetic reiteration that betrays anxieties of security and belonging. In the Progressive Era, this took on numerous metaphorical forms, many of them familiar to us in the twenty-first century: immigrants as a flood, as disease-carrying pathogens, as pollution, as invaders, and as indigestible. This time period was foundational to immigration and the US nation-state as we know it today. It also saw the development of nutritional science and strengthening ties between diet and good citizenship. It is no surprise, then, that the representation of the nation as an eating body and immigrants in terms of their nutritive value and digestibility emerged. Immigration policy was articulated through this embodied form of allegiance and belonging. In lobbying for immigration restriction in 1924, Congressman Ralph Gilbert of Kentucky diagnosed the nation with “a bad case of immigrational indigestion,” while Representative Addison Smith of Idaho expressed concern about “a great, undigested mass of alien thought, alien sympathy, and alien purpose.” In making similar arguments, Congressman Benjamin Rosenbloom stated explicitly that “the body politic … is not unlike the human body.” Analyzing the historical representation of immigrants through the register of digestibility tunes us into the material and embodied dimension of the rhetorically constructed “body politic.” This essay demonstrates the affective and thus political power that digestion metaphors provided, shedding light on the origins of disgust that pulse through twenty-first-century anti-immigrant discourse in the United States.

This essay considers not just how discourses within the United States represent immigrants, but how in the representation, the nation itself is constructed. Scholarship that addresses metaphorical framings of immigration understandably often focuses on immigrants themselves or immigration as a phenomenon rather than the constitution of the national body. Though public and political debate about immigration tends to focus on the immigrant other, the outsider coming in, the boundaries of national belonging shift and harden through these conversations. The immigrant as a political, legal, and social position only exists in relation to the nation. Metaphors of immigration thus often
encapsulate this relationship—between guest and host, flood and land, food and eater, parasite and host. Focusing solely on how “the immigrant” is constructed can imply that the nation is pre-existing and stable, objectively “real.” Every construction of the immigrant also constructs the nation—and this often happens implicitly. For whom is the nation home? If an immigrant is welcomed, what does the nation that welcomes them become? If a group is framed as alien to the nation, how does this shape that nation? If incoming people represent a threat, how do these vulnerabilities figure national identity? As Mae Ngai writes, “the notion that migrants pose a potential threat of foreign invasion has become a familiar provocation in nationalist discourses.” The “we” and the “our” of the nation and its borders are constantly established and reinforced.

I focus on metaphors of immigrants’ digestibility within the US body politic for two reasons. First, because the nation is often personified as “the body politic,” a human form rich with rhetorical resources. Studying how the nation is made into a body in a particular historical moment can illuminate not only how immigrants and the nation were made sense of, but also how the body was conceived. What better way to make something abstract like a nation relatable than to compare it to the body’s processes—something to which everyone can relate? This is what I. A. Richards classified as an “emotive metaphor,” which produces meaning not through comparing like objects, but by producing an emotive or affective charge. In his example, calling a person swine could refer to a physical likeness, “but it may be because you have towards him something of the feeling you conventionally have toward pigs, or because you propose, if possible, to excite those feelings.”

Analyzing the form and function of these metaphors helps us to determine their somatic and affective impacts.

Second, even though the term “assimilation” as it is used today does not appear to be a metaphor, I argue that it maintains the metaphorical implications accrued during its representational history. Said another way, the metaphor of digestion is foundational to the discourse and practices of immigration and the nation. Digest and digestion are words commonly used to describe the body’s breakdown of organic matter, while assimilate and assimilation are more often used to describe cultural or racial rather than organic encounters. Assimilation is a process of incorporation, but its emphasis is on making one element like another, “to become of the same substance; to become absorbed or incorporated into the system.” While digestion is the process of breaking down and disposing, assimilation is the process of synchronizing the parts with the whole, a metamorphosis from difference to sameness. Through assimilation, immigrants are to become at once like the whole and systematically reduced into familiar and uniform parts. Both processes enact change in order to ensure the proper functioning of the system. They share more than these similarities, however. In nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientific and popular discourses, assimilation and digestion were synonyms. To digest your food was to assimilate it, and to assimilate your food was to digest it. “Immigrational indigestion” thus appears to our contemporary sensibilities as overtly figurative language—of course we don’t actually eat immigrants—while assimilation has become so synonymous with Americanization and naturalization that it seems to be an abstract representation. This essay shows digestion to be present within the US imaginary at critical points of meaning making around race and national identity.

My analysis addresses popular and scientific discussions of digestion as well as how the metaphor is taken up in immigration discourse. I structure the essay roughly by the stages...
of digestion, moving from taste and appetite to the mouth, the gut, and finally, elimination. There is some overlap between sections—figurative language that refers to multiple stages of digestion at once. This is also true of the digesting body; though we think of eating, digesting, and defecating as distinct processes, there are not clear demarcations between the end of one and the beginning of another. Ultimately, I argue that the national body became a metonym for the ideal (white) citizen body, which supported anti-immigrant rhetoric through metaphors of eating, digesting, and eliminating undesirable aliens—those who did not agree with the national stomach. The body politic came to represent the ideal US American body, while citizens were invited to identify with the nation through the trope of the body politic; immigrants were rendered undesirable through their association with indigestibility and disgust. In making this claim, I argue that both terms of the metaphor constitute one another. Metaphors of digestion were used to represent immigrants, and this usage affected not only conceptions of immigrants, but also understandings of digestion and the body. In the next section, I address scholarship on metaphor and immigration in order to frame my argument about discursive nation-building.

Figurative language and the framing of immigration

The figurative language we use in public and political discourse has tangible effects. William Franke writes that metaphor “should be conceived of always as inventing its own world and object rather than as referring to things that already exist without it.”

We conceive of the world through metaphor; we make the world rather than just describe it. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue in their classic work Metaphors We Live By that “language is an important source of evidence for what that [a cultural] system is like.” In other words, through studying discourse with an eye toward how language makes a world, we can analyze the values and assumptions of a given cultural or political context. Kenneth Burke defines metaphor as “a device for seeing something in terms of something else. It brings out the thisness of a that, or the thatness of a this.” It “brings out” or allows us to see an already existing thing differently. It also creates the “this or that” anew. When we liken a body to a temple, or the US nation to a body in pain, we reimagine the meaning of both the thing and its likeness—the body, the temple, and the nation.

I. A. Richards’s theoretical model of metaphor has been foundational in rhetorical scholarship on figurative language. He identified the tenor as the subject of the metaphor (immigration), and the vehicle as the object that carries or transfers meaning (digestion). Though Richards distinguished two components that make up the “double unit” we term metaphor, he also emphasized their interanimation: “the co-presence of the vehicle and tenor results in a meaning (to be clearly distinguished from the tenor) which is not attainable without their interaction.” As David Douglass has pointed out, many communication scholars have taken up Richards’s theory in ways that downplay this interaction. The tenor frequently accrues meaning from the vehicle, even when the metaphor is not overtly apparent. For example, migrant bodies carry the border with them, and the border becomes associated with migrants. As Lisa Flores writes, “suspect bodies carry the border on them,” and Kent Ono notes, “the border moves with migrants.” This is the process through which the immigrant becomes criminal. A less emphasized exploration of the interaction between vehicle and tenor is the way the vehicle takes on new meaning
through its interaction with the tenor. The idea that some immigrants are indigestible impacts not only the perception of immigrants, but how digestion is understood.

One of the primary ways that boundaries of race, class, gender, and culture are drawn is through food and eating—who eats what, when, with whom, and how. As Kyla Wazana Tompkins argues, eating is a primary way in which people perform their race and gender and read others’ bodies. Rhetorical scholars have analyzed how bodies and bodily practices are endowed with meaning through medical technologies, public health measures, consumer culture, and popular representation. Historian Pablo Mitchell has argued that bodily comportment plays a key role in establishing racial categories and hierarchies: “images of the ineffective control or maintenance of human bodies—as in improper excretion, salivation, lactation, consumption, and so on—frequently represent perceived threats to the maintenance of social order.” Because eating is necessary to sustain life, and because of the physical vulnerability inherent in the act of eating, anxieties over racialized encounters often emerge as anxieties about foreign foods and strange eating cultures. This anxiety is frequently about what happens after a person eats or drinks, not only about the act of eating in the moment, but what happens in someone’s gut over the next hours and days—a space where there is a lack of control, where the body’s processes take over. Digestion is particularly salient because of the ways that race in the United States has always been constructed through discourses that center on and through the body. Claude Lévi-Strauss famously likened cooking to a form of language through which a culture could be read. And as Parama Roy has so eloquently stated in her study of the alimentary in colonial and postcolonial India, “the stomach served as a kind of somatic political unconscious in which the phantasmagoria of colonialism came to be embodied.” The affective link between the national body and the individual subject body is a productive site for fear and disgust, which Sara Ahmed tells us are affects with significant political capital.

Historically and today, most of the metaphors used to support nativist immigration policies cultivate the fear of being overwhelmed, and rhetorical scholars have produced a significant body of criticism about these discourses. Tides and floods are commonly used metaphors that, like digestion, borrow credibility from natural law and persuasive influence from common knowledge. Parama Roy has shown that the social and political dimensions of food, appetite, and eating (or fasting) were fundamental to colonial and postcolonial India; she writes that the alimentary tract “was the banal yet crisis-ridden theater for staging questions central to encounter and rule, questions of proximity, cathexis, consumption, incorporation, digestion, commensality, and purgation.” In the context of twentieth-century US immigration debates, Gerald V. O’Brien argues that dehumanizing representations of immigrants as indigestible food, conquering masses, and waste were central to the rhetorical project of convincing Americans who were themselves descendants of immigrants to support immigration restriction; this required persuading immigrant Americans that the newly incoming populations were significantly different from them. O’Brien’s analysis thoroughly examines and classifies numerous denigrating metaphors of immigrants that supported restrictionist policies, but as Lisa Flores has argued, neutral and positive representations of immigrants are equally important to consider. Flores shows how the tropes of Mexican immigrants as “unthreatening peons” and “criminal aliens” are built of the same logical bricks, and though they do so in different ways, they can both be used to disenfranchise Mexicans and Mexican Americans as a group. Critical race scholars have established that in the construction of a
racialized other, the dominant group often remains unmarked; analyzing whiteness as a racial category reveals its constructed nature and challenges its normalized dominance. Thus, this essay considers the representational context that produced both denigrating portrayals of immigrants and the white national body. In the following section, I begin the analysis of appetite and taste—the selection of what to eat.

**Discriminating taste: appetite and the body politic**

The choice of what to eat is political and saturated with cultural values. Eating and digestion metaphors provided the rhetorical tools to legitimate (if not necessitate) discrimination by likening it to the kinds of choices people made every day about what to eat. In his testimony to Congress in 1924, California Representative Philip Swing claimed that the nation had a right to discriminate among populations. He equated excluding immigrants from southern and eastern European with an individual choosing what to eat at the dinner table:

> When I sit down to a table spread with various kinds of foods I proceed to discriminate in my selections against those foods which experience has shown are not wise to be taken into my body, and discriminate in favor of those foods which when eaten will produce comfort, strength, and health. The table of immigration is spread for us by foreign countries.

The United States was imagined as a consumer, an eater with a discriminating palate and a common sense preference for foods that made it feel good. In Swing’s analogy, discrimination became a matter of taste, quality, and self-preservation rather than exclusion. Taste, however, is not universal. Swing assumed taste based on a Euro American palate and digestive system, which are culturally constructed. This Euro American body determined what type of immigrant could be assimilated—who could be processed to reproduce this racially specific body. New York Representative Charles Stengle claimed that “Prior to the Revolutionary War America received the cream of Old World people, though she also got some of the skimmed milk in the form of criminals and paupers.” Stengle defined immigrants’ quality by their level of milk fat, relative to nutritional density in order to forward his argument that restricting immigration was “not discrimination, but rather a desire to bring about successful and speedy digestion.” In these representations, the national body had to eat the foods, or intake the immigrants, which would allow it to maintain the same racial and cultural form.

The US national body—from its appetite and its tastes through its entrails—was established discursively as a white body of northern European heritage. A January 1905 *New York Times* cover story featured the comments of new Commissioner General of Immigration Frank P. Sargent on the “grave crisis” of immigration, the million expected to arrive that year and the “thousands of whom are unfit for assimilation.” The article established Sargent himself as a “representative American,” and did so through describing his body in great physical detail: “Physically large and of a girth partly inherited and partly acquired from a hearty fondness for life,” it located “crude fighting power” in his jawline, and “kindliness and a sense of humor” in his “shrewd gray eyes.” The article further connected the nature of his European heritage with the nurture of his American upbringing to argue that northern Europeans were genetically predisposed to thrive in the United States: “Piecing these characteristics together, a solid—perhaps stolid—Scotch-Irish ancestry is
revealed, with an added sharpness of expression attributable to the Vermont grindstone” he worked as a child. The article fashioned him as an archetypal American—a combination of innate and learned vitality, wisdom, and kindness, and perhaps most importantly, northern European stock paired with American cultivation. In an article ostensibly about the immigration crisis, much of the text used Sargent’s body as a proxy to construct the body of the nation.

The national body, then, was maintained through culturally specific diet. There were, however, competing claims about how US Americans should eat. Followers of dietary reformers like Sylvester Graham advocated for vegetarianism and temperance; at the same time, the increased wealth brought by industrialization allowed US workers to consume a diet rich in meat and animal products. Though one diet was rich and the other austere, they shared the ideological assumption that eating practices were a way of establishing and maintaining identity; they differed on which regimen best represented that identity. Both diets reinforced the superiority of US national identity—one through the rejection of foreign products and excess, and the other through the “American right” to consume rich foods. Around the time of the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Gentlemen’s Agreement with Japan, nativist labor advocates framed diets along a value hierarchy that associated meat, milk, and bread as superior, masculine, and white, while vegetarian and rice-based diets were associated with femininity and nonwhiteness. These assertions of dietary superiority correlated with claims of political, cultural, and racial superiority. They also served to justify nativist arguments for immigration restriction in the name of labor politics. In 1879, Secretary of State James G. Blaine made an argument for Chinese exclusion in dietary terms:

You can not work a man who must have beef and bread, and would prefer beef, alongside of a man who can live on rice. In all such conflicts, and in all such struggles, the result is not to bring up the man who lives on rice to the beef-and-bread standard, but it is to bring down the beef-and-bread man to the rice standard.

His argument was both economic and imbued with moral judgment. Chinese workers were perceived as a threat because of the frugality of their diet, which made them willing to work for lower wages than the meat-centric workers from northern and western Europe. Blaine articulated the fear of loss and degradation—of moving down—that underlay so many nativist arguments.

Meat consumption was a matter of national ethos as much as taste. A 1907 editorial in The Independent lamented that the United States was second to “Australasians” in meat consumption. It claimed that some reformers’ push for vegetarianism might drive the United States further down in the rankings:

It is plain that we have seen our best days as a meat-eating people. The great cattle ranges can never again be what they were. Will our national energy now decline, or as we resort more and more to cereals and bananas, shall we still be quite energetic enough?

Cattle ranges are symbolic of the US West, of settler colonial conquest and the rugged individual on the frontier. Cereals were domestic goods, while bananas were imported from the Caribbean and Central and South America; this editorial criticized both vegetarian reformers and the import of foreign goods. The meat industry around the turn of the century had a total value of $10.6 billion, the article stated, and “in 1900 we rejoiced in
the possession of 93,502,000 animals available for slaughter." The United States had a surplus of meat, the editorial boasted, an eighth of which was exported, “and our surplus would feed either the United Kingdom or the German Empire for half a year.” Meat production and surplus were represented as evidence of global superiority.

Food was a strong marker of national identity; though there were differing schools of thought on the particulars of the superior diet, they all shared the commitment to consuming US commodities and eschewing foreign ones. Bread arose in the nineteenth century as central to the American diet, as settlers planted wheat to cultivate the nation’s vast and expanding territory. This produced a commodity that reduced consumption of “foreign” commodities, and eating bread became a moral duty linking good citizenship with proper consumption. Kyla Tompkins explains that diets based on foreign goods in an increasingly global consumer economy were considered detrimental to the antebellum body. Sylvester Graham, a prominent dietary reformer whose followers were called “Grahamites,” wrote that for healthy functioning, “food should be mild and unexciting.”

Spices, the culinary hallmarks of exotic otherness and drivers of colonialism, had no nutritional value, offered no help to the stomach, and further, Graham claimed, “considerably retard the process of digestion, and render it less complete and perfect.” He wrote that spices like mustard, pepper, and nutmeg “hurry the contents of the gastric cavity into the small intestine in a comparatively crude state.” According to Grahamites, spice increased the speed at which food traveled through the system, bypassing the stomach’s processing and the gatekeeper’s intuition. In his 1885 Practical Manual of Health and Temperance, John Harvey Kellogg—who was a nutrition advocate, eugenicist, and, with his brother Will, inventor of corn flakes—warned that “lovers of pepper and mustard should look out for their livers.” Eating spicy food even once had a negative effect on the system, but chronic consumption led to chronic debility that affected every part of the body. Graham claimed that

> the habitual use of these substances [spices] always and inevitably causes ... exhaustion and debility in the whole system, predisposes it to disease of every kind ... subjects him to frequent depressions of mind and painful despondency, and increases his liability to insanity.

These dietary reformers insisted that the Euro American body could not assimilate the spices from foreign lands—they were stimulants like alcohol, tobacco, and promiscuous sex that threatened the mind as well as the body. The Euro American body became a synecdoche for the US body politic—the body worth talking about, worth taking care of, the body that was white but unmarked as such. The rejection of foreign spices as dangerously unhealthy mirrored the rejection of “foreign elements” that structured immigration policy.

**Mouth of the body politic**

The figurative moment when the eater-nation sat at the table, immigrants on a platter, brings us to the mouth, the site of intake—the gate, the processing center. This was the liminal space between the national insides and outsides where public health officials screened for the racially and physically unfit. The mouth is the site where, to survive, the body must take in external substances; here, the limits of sovereignty are exposed. Sovereignty requires the establishing of borders, though that sovereignty is inherently incomplete and the notion of pure autonomy is a mythical construction. The mouth is
the entrance to the body’s digestive system, the opening where the body first encounters food. Ahmed writes that “the openness of the body to the world involves a sense of danger, which is anticipated as a future pain or injury.” This openness is both vital and necessarily involves risk. In his 1904 report to Congress, Immigration Commissioner William Williams stated that efficient medical screening at the nation’s gates was the question of “greatest immediate importance to the American people in considering the entire matter of immigration.” At the port of entry to the United States, where medical examiners evaluated the fitness of incoming immigrants, immigrants were rigorously classified and categorized. Some were accepted into the body of the nation to be Americanized while others were rejected and returned to their country of origin.

One of the causes of the immigration crisis, according to restrictionists, was that the nation had taken in too many immigrants too quickly. Idaho Congressman Addison Smith inserted an article into the Congressional Record from World’s Work that viscerally described the perilous condition of the nation’s gut:

We have prattled on about the “melting pot” and have wakened to find the stomach of the body politic filled to bursting with peoples swallowed whole whom our digestive juices do not digest. Wise doctors have compounded a prescription called “Americanism” which we are assiduously pouring down our throat in the hope that it will disintegrate these knots that give us such pain and allow us to absorb the meal we have gorged ourselves with.

The article caricatured the United States as a gluttonous cannibal who did not bother to chew his food. While some praised the melting pot—that homogenous stew of assimilated foreigners—the nation was busy swallowing whole immigrants who had not yet been processed into a digestible soup. Chewing both slows down the process of eating and breaks food down into smaller parts before sending it into the gut. Smith, in his amplification of the article’s metaphor, asserted that the nation had brought the problem on itself through the gluttonous and reckless consumption of immigrants ill suited to the body politic.

Swallowing food without chewing it thoroughly was a central concern for dietary reformers and nutritionists, as many considered that digestion began in the mouth. When “mastication is properly and thoroughly performed,” wrote Sylvester Graham, “the process of assimilation or digestion commences in the mouth.” Chewing stimulated gastric juice, which he described as “truly a solvent fluid,” a “vital solvent.” A solvent dissolves, breaks down a solid to form a solution, and weakens or dispels a particular attitude or situation. He figured the stomach as a system with finite processing potential that could be overwhelmed by swallowing food whole, by “those masses which ought to have been broken down and finely comminuted by the teeth.” Health food enthusiast Horace Fletcher became tremendously influential through his advocacy for chewing food so thoroughly—as many as 200 times per mouthful—that it practically “swallows itself.” As Fletcher wrote in 1903, “there are discernible in the mouth distinct senses of discrimination against substance that is undesirable for the system. If the mouth senses are permitted to express an opinion, their antipathy is easily read.” Swallowing food whole overrode those senses.

Much of the immigration debate revolved around how to properly and thoroughly screen immigrants at the site of intake. Reports to Congress detailed how many immigrants were excluded, for what conditions, and recommendations for new screening measures. A 1904 report stated that the new practice of dividing the inspection line
into two made the process more efficient, and made “for more careful examination … and for the most part during the hours of daylight.” The report also called for “larger and more suitable rooms for special medical examination of aliens turned aside from the line” and the construction of a larger space to streamline medical examination and the clerical collection of data. Thorough processing, taking the time to screen for communicable and congenital diseases, was required to make sure that every person who was allowed to enter the country would not end up sickening the national body as a “public charge.”

Similarly, dietary reformers and political economists insisted that improper consumption diverted bodily resources away from the brain and diminished a person’s capacities. Fletcher wrote in 1903 that

imposition upon the body of any excess of food or drink is one of the more dangerous and far-reaching of self-abuses; because whatever the body has no need of at the moment must be gotten rid of at the expense of much valuable energy taken away from brain-service.

Economist Irving Fisher, who was a strong advocate of Fletcherism, wrote in 1907 that

the loss of the delicate food instinct in the ordinary man has been aggravated not only by the habit of food-bolting, but by the habit of eating what is set before us by others, instead of choosing our food for ourselves.

Humans had lost touch with their innate ability to discern by taste and instinct what the body needs; eating too quickly and eating whatever was put in front of them dulled these perceptive abilities. In this rendering, US Americans had become passive consumers instead of active agents. Fisher’s interest in diet emerged from his role as a social scientist, concerned with maximizing the efficiency of labor. He wrote, “industrial inefficiency is the price of malnutrition. Increased labor power will be the practical outcome of diet reform.” The reason for reforming diets was to increase labor efficiency and output, not for the sake of health and well-being.

Nutritional scientists aimed to maximize the productive potential of the individual body—the more thoroughly food was chewed, the less energy was required by the gut to digest it—while immigration policymakers sought to maximize the efficiency of the body politic—the more thoroughly immigrants were processed at the site of intake, the less energy would be required to assimilate those who passed through. The nation became an eating body as the eating body became a stand-in for the nation.

**Crisis in the gut: a case of national indigestion**

While metaphors of taste and appetite referred to selective immigration policy and the metaphor of the mouth addressed screening and processing immigrants, references to the gut concentrated on the already-existing crisis within the body politic—where the effects of gluttony and improper eating were felt most acutely. In a 1905 *New York Times* article, Commissioner General of Immigration Sargent portrayed immigrants as pollutants to the pure national body—constituting an endless meal that made the nation physically ill. He warned that immigrants

will soon poison or at least pollute the very fountain head of American life and progress. Big as we are and blessed with an iron constitution, we cannot safely swallow such an endless course dinner, so to say, without getting indigestion and perhaps National appendicitis.
Careful to note the size and strength of the United States—the problem was not its weak constitution—it was neither safe nor wise for the nation to take in these immigrants. Even the healthy body politic had its limits. Similarly, in 1916, Congressman Raker inserted an article into the *Congressional Record* from California newspaper the *Yreka Journal* that he claimed was “as clear a presentation as any man could possibly make” on the issue. The article stated that many immigrants were unassimilated, not sympathetic to American institutions, and only offered partial allegiance to the government. It personified the nation as a suffering body, a glutton who ate more than his body could process:

A nation that fails to assimilate its immigrants suffers from an acute attack of indigestion. … It is in the position of a man who has eaten more than he can digest. When a man thus suffers he abstains from eating for a time, or eats but sparingly.

As an argument for immigration restriction, the metaphor would have resonated with commonly held knowledge and experiences of eating, as well as the dietetic and nutritional science being advocated at the time by experts and government officials. Raker’s adoption of the metaphor rendered America’s bloated body at a turning point—having eaten too much, taken in too many immigrants, it was necessary to restrict immigration so the processes of assimilation could catch up.

Immigration restrictionists depicted the national body as fundamentally healthy but in crisis, vulnerable to aliens who were pathologized variously as agents of disorder, illness, and infection. America was rendered as a suffering body, its natural state of racial health disrupted by incompatible others. Its system was unable to digest immigrants rapidly enough. The *Albuquerque Morning Journal* wrote in 1918 that “even if no more human raw material comes here for the next ten years, America has an undigested immigrant malady that calls for prompt and vigorous treatment.” In similar terms, the *Fort Wayne News Sentinel* wrote in 1922 that “too many foreign elements have been taken into our national scheme for our social and digestive organs properly to assimilate them.”

Popular journalist and novelist Kenneth L. Roberts wrote in his 1922 book *Why Europe Leaves Home* that if immigrants continued to enter the United States at a significant rate, one of two things would happen: “either the United States will develop large numbers of separate racial groups … or America will be populated by a mongrel race entirely different from the present American people as we know them to-day.” This mongrel race, he continued, would be “a hybrid race of people as worthless and futile as the good-for-nothing mongrels of Central America and Southeastern Europe.” Indiana Representative Arthur Greenwood stated to Congress in 1924 that “we need a breathing spell to absorb those who have come to us in enormous numbers … We are suffering from indigestion of the foreign element in our body politic.” These comments expressed fear of debility, and also fear of becoming foreign, of being consumed by the consumed.

Through figurative language, immigration restrictionists made the distinction between the people who were and those who were not easily digestible appear natural and self-evident; the consequences of intaking those indigestible populations thus appeared to be naturally detrimental. They aligned northern and western European immigrants with familiar and well-tolerated foods, while those from the rest of the world, including eastern Europe, China, Japan, and Mexico, were associated with foreign and toxic substances. One body could only consume a limited amount of food since digestion takes
time, and the more alien the food, the longer and more taxing the process. According to Progressive Era nutritionist Clara Witt, congestion, indigestion’s twin ill in popular health discourses and discourse on immigration, was “caused by overeating, impure foods, and wrong combinations. … This results in fermentation, and the effects of fermentation absorbed into the blood poisons the entire system.”57 The congested body was polluted with rotting masses of undigested, unassimilated food. Representative Stengle of New York claimed that “The fire has apparently gone out under the melting pot and the original American stock is not absorbing these insoluble alien elements.”58 In both renderings, the processes of digestion and absorption had been stopped, and the body politic was in need of remedy.

Unassimilated immigrants were also linked with political radicals as threats to the US nation, defined as belonging to and being composed of Anglo-Saxon people. In 1919, California Congressman Raker made reference to immigrant indigestion in more explicitly eugenicist terms. He stated in Congress,

I am proud of the fact that I have the honor to represent a district in which there are but few aliens, and, so far as I am aware, no anarchists, Bolshevists, I.W.W.’s, or other similar radicals. We are not afflicted with that sort of cattle. My constituents are almost altogether of pioneer American stock—pure Anglo-Saxon—but for that very reason they are vitally interested in this problem.59

In his testimony, Raker cast the fear of being overtaken by foreigners through the metaphors of the melting pot and digestion. In each case, the undesirable others were rendered as waste. He continued,

Our country is becoming alienized instead of this polyglot foreign population becoming Americanized … If we are to be a “national melting pot,” we should be a real melting pot, and not merely a receptacle for dross. We neither need nor want any material which will not melt into the national form of Americanism.60

Assimilating the class of immigrants that came to the United States in the last century, Raker stated, “would give us a bad—perhaps incurable—case of national indigestion.”61 Medicine might not remedy the national ills; if there was a cure to be found, it must involve prevention. The portrait of America bloated and in pain identified a dual solution—prevention and medicine for the damage already done. This cure, Americanism, was portrayed as capable of breaking down the knots of racial difference to allow foreign elements to be reconfigured and absorbed into the body politic. This analogy of Americanization fairly accurately represented the process of assimilation that required immigrants to shed their allegiance to their native countries along with the cultural markers—language, food, clothing, and comportment—or that rejected them outright. Presumably, though, the medicine would not work for all of the knots, and some would pass through the nation’s bowels undigested, unincorporated, and unchanged.

Understandings of the body aligned with the abstinence and Americanism prescribed by immigration restrictionists. The body was assumed to have a natural ability to evaluate entrants and sort them according to threat. Once the stomach had converted food into a homogenous substance termed “chyme,” Sylvester Graham wrote, the muscles of the stomach moved the chyme toward the “pylorus or gate-keeper, which, by a nice organic instinct, perceives its character and condition, and immediately opens and suffers it to pass into the portion of the small intestine.”62 Graham’s metaphor of the perceptive
Gatekeeper made the digestive organs into agents, which were instinctive and rational, allowing only those of proper form to continue through the assimilative process. He detailed what happened when food was swallowed whole, not chewed, dissolved, or transformed into chyme, but remained in the stomach, at the gate: for a properly functioning digestive system, he wrote,

if a crude mass of undigested food attempts to pass into the duodenum with the chyme, it instantly closes, and the intruder is carried back, to be subjected still further to the operations of the stomach. If it be of an indigestible nature, it is finally either permitted to pass into the intestinal tube, or is suddenly and convulsively ejected from the stomach through the meat-pipe and mouth. \[63\]

Graham personified crude or raw food as an intruder, a stranger who did not belong. The gate-keeper had methods of detecting unauthorized entry, as well as the means to escort the mass back for further assimilative procedures. Indigestible food was ejected from the system either through the mouth (vomited) or passed through the intestines whole to be eliminated as waste. The system’s response equaled the harm wrought by the unwelcome mass: “in proportion to its deleteriousness or offensiveness to the vital properties of the system, so is the rallying of the vital forces to expel it as soon as possible from the circulation and to eliminate it from the body.”\[64\] Despite the body’s ability to regulate its intake, overreliance on the system’s crisis response was understood as weakening the system as a whole.

Eating indigestible or undesirable food was not simply a problem of taste or poor choice, but was a fundamental threat to the body. The healthy system had the ability to police and manage entrants without detrimental effects to the system itself. Each such encounter, however, weakened the system and, over time, undermined its regulatory abilities. When the digestive system was not healthy and functioning properly, the stakes were quite high. Graham explained that when “crude substances are frequently permitted to pass into the intestines … they become the causes of irritation, and produce many uncomfortable disturbances, and in some instances fatal disorders.”\[65\] Thus, the healthy digestive system had natural mechanisms for accepting assimilable food and expelling the indigestible, but the compromised system did not. For the vulnerable body, these digestive failures could result in death.

**Waste, elimination, and the production of disgust**

Arguments for immigration restriction frequently stopped short of explicitly completing the digestive cycle. This makes sense given that the primary goal of immigration restriction was not to deport or expel foreigners, but to limit intake and allow the digesting body politic to continue its machinations. While digestion and health, what one chose to eat, were acceptable subjects for polite company and public discourse, what happened behind the closed door of the bathroom or the outhouse was not. The same held for the dirty work of racial cleansing—it was not fit for polite political discourse. John Quinn, leader of the American Legion, stated in March of 1924 on the subject of immigration that “if you have indigestion you do not continue to gulp down the food that caused it. Any physician would direct you to stop eating until the trouble had vanished.”\[66\] This begs the question, how might this digestive trouble vanish? With a sleight of hand or behind a
curtain? Quinn’s framing euphemized the violences of immigration law, making populations into “trouble” that would, with time, “vanish.”

The composition of the national body and of the bodies that belonged in the nation was produced not only in positive terms by what it was, but also what it was not. A 1901 article from a Nebraska newspaper claimed that

A nation is under no obligation to the outside world to admit any body or anything that would injuriously effect the national family ... No distinct race like the Chinese can come into this country without exciting a friction and a race prejudice.67

These kinds of sentiments rendered the Chinese distinct, injurious, and foreign, all of which simultaneously create the US nation as not-Chinese. A 1902 American Federation of Labor pamphlet claimed that the Chinese were a “nonassimilative race, and by every standard of American thought, undesirable as citizens.68 It continued, “They can not, for the deep and ineradicable reasons of race and mental organization, assimilate with our own people and be molded as are other races into strong and composite American stock.”69 Increased anxiety about what entered the human and national body reflected insecurities about national identity and belonging.

The edges and openings of the body politic are the sites of the most anxiety and control. Judith Butler writes that

What constitutes through division the “inner” and “outer” worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control. The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excreting function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit.70

The boundary between inner and outer can be violated; excreting is a one-way process of the inner becoming outer. Some immigration discourse prefigured immigrants as waste upon arrival, violating the proper order of consumption and digestion. In his 1904 report to Congress, Immigration Commissioner Williams claimed that Europe was, in his words, “dumping … their paupers and dependents upon the American people,” European emigrants who brought disease to the continent.71 The influx of “undesirable” and disease-ridden immigrants, presumably those Europe found unfit for reproducing a healthy citizenry, was a commonly used trope—that the United States was a dumping ground for Europe’s waste.

The vilest language about immigrants in this time frame was reserved for the Chinese, so blatant that it was built into the law by name: the Chinese Exclusion Act. An American Federation of Labor pamphlet advocating for exclusion exemplified racist representations of the Chinese. To produce an affective connection to disgust, the pamphlet quoted extensively from a San Francisco county and city report on the social habits of the Chinese, highlighting especially the violation of social codes for the boundaries between eating and going to the bathroom. Chinatown’s “habits, manners, customs, and whole economy of life violating every accepted rule of hygiene; with open cesspools, exhalations from water-closets, sinks, urinals, and sewers tainting the atmosphere with noxious vapors and stifling odors.”72 The sink, the stove, and the water-closet were all in the same room, and sometimes the urinal was adjacent to the cooking range. The descriptions are full of grotesque detail: “the intermingling odors of cooking, sink, water-closet, and urinal, added
to the fumes of opium and tobacco smoke, and indescribable, unknowable, all-pervading atmosphere of the Chinese quarter, make up a perfume which can neither be imagined nor described.” Ahmed reminds us that nothing is inherently disgusting, and Julia Kristeva writes that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.” The ability of the Chinese to exist on wages and in conditions that would kill white laborers was represented not as a superior ability but as a disgusting one. The affective production of disgust perhaps masked the paradox of the United States as simultaneously weak and vulnerable and dominant.

Rendering some immigrants abject or disgusting was a way of insisting on who belonged within the US body politic and who did not. Ahmed argues that disgust is fundamental to relationships of power. She writes, “Lower regions of the body—that which is below—are clearly associated both with sexuality and with ‘the waste’ that is literally expelled by the body.” The AFL pamphlet described Chinese laborers as living in bowels:

Descend into the basement of almost any building in Chinatown at night; pick your way by the aid of the policeman’s candle along the dark and narrow passageway, black and grimy with a quarter of a century’s accumulation of filth; step with care lest you fall into a cesspool of sewage abominations with which these subterranean depths abound. … It is a sense of horror you have never before experienced, revolting to the last degree, sickening and stupefying.

Though the Chinese cooks and servants who worked in people’s houses, the pamphlet continued, appeared very clean, it was from these “pest holes” and ways of life that they emerged. Their adaptability, the ability to put on “habits of decency,” was part of what made them a threat. The disgust response became, in Ahmed’s words, “properties of their bodies,” so that they embodied “that which is lower than human or civil life.” Abjection is violent, a bodily imperative to expel or move away from. Yet it is also relational, implying the moment of contact and connection, a proximity that spurs elimination. The inevitable conclusion of the digestive process is where the most anxiety is felt, because pathways out are vulnerable to penetration, places of ambiguity where control is not possible. Discursively associating populations with the lower regions of the body creates a powerful affective connection to disgust.

**Conclusion**

I have argued that when the nation was made metaphorically into a body in Progressive Era immigration discourse, the predominant way of framing the debate was to portray immigrants as impediments to health, their foreignness innately inassimilable within the body politic. When the vastly complex and often abstract concept of the nation is discursively made into a human body, individuals are invited to make sense of it through embodied and affective experiences like hunger or the pain of overeating, the fear of illness, the specter of death. Immigrants construed as indigestible can only be indigestible in the context of the body that is consuming them, as digestion is a process, and an interaction. Something that is indigestible to one body is digestible to another; we can think of the body, then, as the context or conditions that enable the claim of indigestibility. Immigration restrictionists produced the national body politic and the undesirable immigrant in the relationship of consumer and consumed, eater and eaten, which are discursively and
materially co-constituted. These metaphors not only shifted perceptions of immigrants but shifted understandings of digestion and the body. As people were rendered foreign, indigestible, and threatening, so were foreign foods cited as unhealthy and threatening to the body’s digestive order (including some that are now considered particularly healthy for digestion, like ginger).

The time frame this essay considers ends with the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which created a legacy not only through its restrictive quota system, but also in its creation of the Border Patrol. The law eliminated nonwhite immigration almost entirely and simultaneously created an agency to patrol and reinforce the nation’s boundaries. It is a myth that any nation, public, or community is pure or that any nation exists outside of globalization and migration; this myth, however, is a powerful tool for conservative, nativist immigration policies. Neither the body nor the body politic is a closed system. To seal the passages between the inside and the outside, if it were even possible, would cause the system to collapse. In today’s era of heightened anxiety around terrorism and vitriolic anti-immigrant sentiment, critical rhetorical scholars have much to contribute, particularly in unpacking how “truths” about nations, the body, and belonging are human constructions that can be challenged and constructed in new ways.

This essay has demonstrated the affective power of metaphor in connecting individual bodies to larger collective bodies at the level of race and nation. The political production of disgust sets off a feedback loop: individuals experience somatic responses of disgust, which are read as natural, and inform political policymaking, which is then deemed necessary. I contend that attending to the material and embodied dimensions of the rhetorically constructed “body politic” is vital to analyzing rhetorics of race and immigration.

Notes


4. Ralph Gilbert, Congressional Record 68, Pt. 6 (April 12, 1924), 6262; Addison Smith, Congressional Record 68, Pt. 6 (April 5, 1924), 5698.

5. Benjamin Rosenbloom, Congressional Record 68, Pt. 6 (April 8, 1924), 5851.

25. Philip Swing, Congressional Record 68, Pt. 6 (April 12, 1924), 6270.
26. Charles Stengle, Congressional Record 68, Pt. 6 (April 8, 1924), 5848.
27. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Tompkins, Racial Indigestion, 70.
36. Ibid., 612.
37. Ibid.
38. John Harvey Kellogg, Practical Manual of Health and Temperance: Embracing the Treatment of Common Diseases, Accidents, and Emergencies, the Alcohol and Tobacco Habits, Useful Hints and Recipes (Battle Creek, MI: Good Health Publishing Co., 1885), 130.
42. Addison Smith, Congressional Record 68, Pt. 6 (April 5, 1924), 5704.
43. Graham, Lectures, 166.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. “Grave Crisis at Hand,” X1. On immigrants portrayed as pollutants, see Cisneros, “Contaminated Communities.”
54. Fort Wayne News Sentinel, June 1, 1922, 4.
56. Arthur Greenwood, Congressional Record 68, Pt. 6 (April 12, 1924), 6264–5.
57. Clara Witt, The Rose Cross Aid Cook Book: Containing Instructions in the Art of Cooking and the Correct Combination of Foods (Kansas City, MO, chapter of the Rose Cross Aid, 1917),

58. Charles Stengle, *Congressional Record* 68, Pt. 6 (April 8, 1924), 5848.

59. John E. Raker, *Congressional Record* 66, Pt. 1 (December 20, 1919), 990–1. Earlier that year, anarchist groups had sent bombs to more than 30 government officials, business leaders, and prominent figures.

60. Raker, *Congressional Record* 66, Pt. 1 (December 20, 1919), 991. The metaphor of the melting pot has been used to represent both the melting together of different metals and the combination of foods into a stew. Though in contemporary discourse the food metaphor is more prevalent, both were frequently used in the early twentieth century.

61. Ibid.


63. Ibid.

64. Ibid., 509.

65. Ibid.


69. Ibid., 27.


73. Ibid.


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