INTRODUCTION

"**AMERICA IS A NATION** of fruit-eaters," declared the commissioner of the US Viticultural Convention in 1886.[1] In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Americans consumed an unprecedented amount of fruit as it grew more accessible with technological advancements and expansionist laws that boosted the production and consumption of fruit across the country. What was once a luxury food mainly affordable to the elite was now becoming democratized and accessible to people of all social classes.[2] The growing availability of fruit matched its growing visibility in American still life paintings, prints, photographs, and advertisements (fig. 1). Still life pictures of food, in fact, became staples in American homes during the 1860s and '70s, with lithography firms such as Currier and Ives and Louis Prang distributing inexpensive still life prints to the masses for decorating their dining rooms.[3] Not only accessible to consumers of all classes, representations of fruit were also accessible to artists across race, gender, and skill level—artists who were usually prohibited from depicting the nude figure or the loftier subjects of

FIGURE 1

Currier and Ives, *Fruits of the Tropics,* ca. 1871. Hand-colored lithograph. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

history painting reserved for experienced artists, typically white and male. The very content of fruit pictures was also democratic in spirit, often promulgating a message of inclusivity in pictures uniting fruits from the North and South on American tables after the Civil War. Its sweet taste and cheerful color lent fruit naturally to joyful messages of unity and abundance designed to uplift the nation after a period of political turmoil. The surge in fruit and its imagery after the Civil War promoted optimistic ideals of inclusivity and equality.

As much as fruit represented these ideals, its production, consumption, and depiction also hinged on inequities of power and exclusive hierarchies of race that showed through in images of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While pictures of California grapes, for instance, galvanized American support behind a new center for American grape culture, they also denigrated the role of Mexican and Chinese laborers who harvested the very grapes that catapulted California to success. Pictures of orange groves in Florida similarly celebrated new industries in the South while also endorsing the North's consumption of southern land and paternalistic program to "rescue" newly freed African Americans from southern barbarism. Images of watermelons offer the most obvious example of how fruit pictures reflected exclusivity; depictions of African American men stealing watermelons and salivating over them propagated stereotypes about the savagery of black people that challenged their new

privileges and status as citizens in society. Representations of bananas and pineapples in the twentieth century continued to disparage people of color in advertisements that exoticized or sanitized them and minimized their role in the production process. Increased representations of fruit coincided with intense periods of national expansion as well as xenophobia. Because pictures of fruit were so embedded in conversations about race, labor, and territorial gains, they are useful artifacts for studying attitudes about America's expanding and diversifying empire.

Food, in general, is a good measure of national aspirations in the United States because it had been long used to represent and advance the nation's political ambitions. Since the eighteenth century, Americans invented recipes for independence cake, election cake, and congressional bean soup in honor of the nation's republican ideals and practices.[4] Recipes for George Washington and Abraham Lincoln cake also honored America's leaders, and the presidents themselves grew fruit on their estates to model fine taste and agrarian virtues for the nation.[5] American eaters even sculpted their food in the shape of iconic national artifacts and figures, constructing a Liberty Bell from towers of oranges and a sculpture of Christopher Columbus from chocolate (fig. 2).[6] Americans honored their most esteemed leaders and symbols by translating their likenesses into rich, delicious foods. Performing citizenship through food was an important exercise in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when Americans were accused of having no distinct cuisine of their own. This charge was hard to stomach for Americans who believed that "the advancement of a people is measured by its proficiency in the *cuisine*."[7] Russian Grand Duke Alexis Alexandrovich was one critic who proclaimed during his visit in 1871 that America possessed an unsophisticated cuisine, plainly derivative of French food and techniques. This outraged Chef James Parkinson, who defended American gastronomy in a lengthy manifesto listing the "scores and scores of dishes which are distinctly and exclusively American," highlighting the nation's fruit in which "America leads the world, and will take the largest number of first-class gold medals."[8] Parkinson concluded his essay by declaring that "we are not the sheep of French pastures," a direct dig at the Russian duke.[9] This exchange confirms that food was more than a nutritional substance for survival; it was a nationalistic symbol that measured the accomplishments of American society.

At the same time that food was used to honor and uplift the country, it also was used to weaken certain communities. As early as the eighteenth century, patriots famously boycotted imported British tea to protest British forces and the taxes they imposed on such goods. By the turn of the nineteenth century, American abolitionists boycotted sugar, rice, and other foods produced by enslaved labor in order to weaken slave-powered industries. Abolitionists protested slave-produced goods in paintings, prints, and ceramic bowls engraved with messages that bluntly stated, "Sugar, Not Made By Slaves." Boycotts of slave labor persisted into the Civil War era, when many northerners refused to purchase southern foods on those grounds. Protests penetrated both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line; many Americans in the South used the same strategy to boycott