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Cooking with Scissors and Paste: Recoveries and Reconsiderations of Motta Sims's Composition Book at Spelman College

Andrew Fiss

Abstract: This "Recoveries and Reconsiderations" describes and contextualizes the composition book of Motta L. Sims, held in the Spelman College Archives. The composition book consists of Sims's notes taken during a Spelman cooking class in 1916, including numerous excerpts from a textbook, perhaps re-typed, and pasted in. Given the form of the document, Sims's composition book invites reflection about scrapbooking as writing, particularly how it supported the framing of cooking as scientific study. Sims went on to have a career as a home economics professor at various Southeastern HBCUs, but her work appears only in collections named for other people, with her composition book in the Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection. Acknowledging how the archival records of Black women, even when signed, face deep problems of fragmentation and erasure, this article offers a preliminary analysis of Sims's composition book for cooking as scientific study.

Keywords: archival research, cooking, domestic science, Historically Black Colleges and Universities, home economics, recoveries and reconsiderations, scrapbooking

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Within the Spelman College Archives, there is a document labeled "composition book" and signed "Motta L. Sims/ First Year Cooking/ Spelman Sem./ Oct. 14, 1916" (Sims "Composition Book"). In 1916, Motta Sims (1900-1968) traveled from rural Georgia to Spelman to take an introductory class in cooking before pursuing a home economics degree at Fisk University and a certificate as "supervisor of household arts" at Columbia Teachers College ("Miss Motta Sims" 12). Ultimately, Professor Sims had a wide-ranging career teaching home economics at various Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs): Tuskegee in Alabama, Shaw State in North Carolina, South Carolina State, Virginia State, and Fort Valley State in Georgia ("Miss Motta Sims" 12). Despite Professor Sims's importance, her writings appear only in collections named for other people, with her composition book in the Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection in the Spelman College Archives, which has not been digitized.[1] A chronicler of the scientific trends of her communities, Sims's composition book shows evidence of scrapbooking, using numerous excerpts from a cooking textbook, perhaps re-typed, which supported the framing of cooking as scientific study.

1 I would like to thank Ms. Holly Smith, archivist of the Spelman College Archives, for introducing me to the institution's collections and published histories, as well as granting me permission to quote from Motta Sims's composition book. Thank you, as well, to Ms. Nicole Carr, Spelman Archives administrative assistant, for meeting with me. Ms. Cheryl Ferguson of the Tuskegee University Archives helped me through the process of gaining permission to quote from the George Washington Carver Papers. Jason Gart of History Associates additionally provided me access to the Library of Congress microfilm.

Andrew Fiss is associate professor of technical communication at Michigan Technological University. He teaches classes in scientific and technical communication at the undergraduate and graduate levels. His research is at the intersections of STC and STS (science, technology, and society), generally writing about unexpected texts in university archives. His book P*erforming Math: A History of Communication and Anxiety in the American Mathematics Classroom* (2021) won the CCCC Best Book Award in Technical or Scientific Communication 2023.

The label "composition book" refers to the book's marketing, pre-printed with lines indicating where a student could write, and it moreover draws attention to Sims' writing and typed snippets. Sims emphasizes the cut-and-pasted excerpts, writing minimal notes especially at first. For instance, the first page has a cursive "Lesson I" in black pen above the excerpted section listing the "Table of Abbreviations" and "Table of Measurements" (Sims "Composition Book"). Subsequently, Sims's own writing takes more space starting with Lesson II on Cleaning and ending with the final lesson, Lesson XXX on Cake. Still, cut-and-pasted snippets continue to appear. Even for Lesson XXX, the bottom of the previous page has an excerpted recipe for "Mother's Cake" (Sims "Composition Book"). For Sims, the acts of writing and recycling others' print go together.

Scrapbooking was a common writing technique of the time. Ellen Gruber Garvey has analyzed a large range of scrapbooks from 1860-1920s America, arguing how "writing with scissors" (scrapbooking) allowed self-fashioning for people in power and also allowed "people in positions of relative powerlessness…to make a place for themselves and their communities by finding, sifting, analyzing, and recirculating writing that mattered to them" (4). According to Garvey's sources, Black people of the time often used scrapbooking to construct "alternative histories" at odds with racist narratives of American slavery and Reconstruction, while activist women did so for "self-creation" (23). She notices how students, too, learned scrapbooking as a means of collecting, curating, and recycling print (Garvey 11). For such pedagogical technique, however, Garvey's *Writing with Scissors* points to the work of a White teacher in White schools. Sims's composition book draws attention to the presence of this writing technique at an institution for Black women, particularly in its scientifically oriented class on cooking.

Such scrapbooking, I argue, furthered the framing of cooking as scientific study. Gail Lippincott has argued for the feminist rhetorical practices that reframed American cooking of the 1890s-1910s: combining entertainment with the familiar, using techniques of knowledge communication, and recognizing diverse audiences. Through these techniques, scientists shifted perceptions of cooking from everyday chore to scientific spectacle, site of experimentation, and novel academic study. Though Lippincott's articles mainly analyze the writings of the White professor Ellen Swallow Richards, new work has started to recover histories of Black women in home economics (Nickols and Peek; Alishahi; Jackson). Motta Sims's composition book invites us to consider uses of scrapbooking in similarly framing cooking as scientific.

Motta Sims's records also show problems with accessing historical documents from Black women students. Even when available, such documents might be nested within collections of others that stayed with an institution for longer: faculty, administrators, or even clubs (Royster; Logan). In the Fall 2021 issue of *Peitho*, Susan Ghiaciuc, Cathryn Molloy, and Vanessa Rouillon used the case of writer Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's nine letters with physician Silas Weir Mitchell to argue for the importance of archival materials seemingly hidden within collections of misogynist men. With Sims's papers, the historical contributions of a Black woman can be overlooked within the administrative files of a White college president. Also, as I learned later, Sims has notes in the George Washington Carver Papers, the wide-ranging scientific papers

of a Black man. Together, Sims's archival presence therefore mirrors the intersectional challenges for Black women in STEM fields, as Professor Evelynn Hammonds more recently discussed as being overlooked for White women and Black men (Sands 31-39). In general, as in the case study of the late 1800s and early 1900s Virginia's Central State Mental Hospital (Jones & Williams), archival records of Black women face deep problems of fragmentation and erasure.

Given these challenges, I should take a moment to locate my own position and access. I was able to visit the Spelman College Archives in 2023, shortly before FemRhets 2023. As a male technical communication professor, I felt it necessary to explain my interest in a historically Black women's college, and the conference provided an opportunity. As a Puerto Rican/Jewish academic, I have written about historical developments in science education, inspired by feminist scholarship in technical communication (Jack; Seigel). I met with the Spelman archivists about these interests, and they suggested the Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection, which led me to Motta Sims's composition book. Because of limitations of my positionality, I here offer a preliminary description and contextual analysis of Motta Sims's composition book.

In the spirit of "recoveries and reconsiderations," I aim to describe and contextualize Motta Sims's book as an archival document potentially of interest to *Peitho* readers. I begin by arguing how Sims's scrapbooking furthered the general frame of cooking as scientific study, in the first section, and then proceed to the larger context of Spelman's history and print cultures that supported Sims's reuse of printed matter. Finally, I end with some thoughts about Motta Sims's career and notes in the papers of George Washington Carver. Sims's collected work, particularly her composition book for cooking, invites reflection and reconsideration about the role of scrapbooking in supporting the framing of cooking as scientific study, particularly at a historically Black women's college.

Motta Sims's Composition Book for Cooking

In Sims's time, home economics was developing through a productive tension between its component parts: a focus on the "home" meaning the domestic; and on "economics" standing for general scientific principles. Gail Lippincott has analyzed the ways that this tension developed into three expected approaches to writing in the field. First, particularly in the work of scientist Ellen Swallow Richards, the field "communicated knowledge of new scientific information and technology for the workplace of the home" (Lippincott, "Experimenting at Home" 366). Second, with Richards's involvement in the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, home economics used an "entertaining but familiar atmosphere" to introduce unexpected, new cooking technologies and their knowledges (Lippincott, "'Something in Motion'" 141). Third, in publications from Richards's New England Kitchen, the field negotiated competing approaches for disparate, diverse audiences (Lippincott, "Rhetorical Chemistry" 10). Referring to these three components of home economics – knowledge communication for the overall work of the home; a frame of familiarity; and complex approaches to scientific authorship – I here provide a preliminary description of Motta Sims's composition book. Through its use of excerpts from a textbook, perhaps re-typed, Sims's composition book participated in the framing of cooking

as broadly scientific.

Sims's composition book began with the familiar to introduce scientific knowledge relevant to the home. After a title page, the first page consists of a pasted Table of Measurements with a penned note calling it "Lesson I." It lists abbreviations, followed by equivalences such as:

TABLE OF MEASUREMENTS

4 ssp. equal 1 tsp.	2 tbsp. butter equal 1 oz.
3 tsp. equal 1 tbsp.	4 tbsp. flour equal 1 oz.
4 tbsp. equal ¼ c.	2 tbsp. liquid equal 1 oz.
4 c. equal 1 qt.	2 tbsp. sugar equal 1 oz.
4 c. fl. equal 1 lb.	2 c. butter equal 1 lb.
2 c. granulated sugar equal 1 lb.	

—(Sims "Composition Book")

With features both common and distinctive, the table corresponds incompletely to digitized textbooks from the time period, and perhaps it was re-typed in an original form that synthetized multiple books' material.[2] Sims's approach to the snippet is not clear, as there are no notes surrounding it, beyond the label of "Lesson I." Still, beginning with tables, numbers, measurements, and equivalences emphasizes the aspects of cooking that were quantitative, ordered, and broadly scientific. By 1916, it was an approach to knowledge communication codified in textbooks and classes labeled "home economics" or "domestic science."

Such a scientific approach to the home extended beyond cooking, as shown in the next section. The next page of Sims's composition book lists "Lesson II," beginning with a typed snippet about the importance of clean water:

2 A quick search provided partial matches with Josephine Morris's *Household Science and Arts for Elementary Schools* (1913) and Mary E. Williams and Katharine Rolston Fisher's *Elements of the Theory and Practice of Cookery: A Text-book of Domestic Science for Use in Schools* (1916). The Spelman College Archives does not have a record of the textbook used in the cooking class that Motta Sims attended. Thanks to Dr. Faith Morrison, emerita professor of chemical engineering, for sharing her notebooks and making the point that the excerpts could have been re-typed onto new pieces of paper by Ms. Sims or others in her communities.

WATER

Water dissolves more substances than any other liquid. It is because of this property that it is sometimes hard. Hard water may be somewhat softened by boiling. Impure water may be made safe for us by boiling.

Since by ordinary means water cannot be made hotter after it begins to boil, fuel is wasted by keeping up more fire than is required to keep the water at the boiling point.

SOME AIDS TO CLEANLINESS

Cleansing materials act either by friction or chemically. Of the first class, among the most useful are bath brick for scouring steel knives; whiting for cleaning silver, glass, and aluminum; and sapone or old Dutch cleanser for cooking utensils. Of the second class, sal-soda and ammonia are most useful in the kitchen. Kerosene is useful for cleaning polished wood, rusty iron or zinc. (Sims "Composition Book")

The uses of water and other cleaning tools "useful in the kitchen" are justified, dealt with through general, scientific principles about water and even statements about the act of "cleansing" itself. Moving from a description of water as a familiar "liquid," the excerpt begins to introduce the chemical terminology of "silver," "aluminum," "sapone," "sal-soda," "ammonia," "iron," and "zinc." Such sections served as an introduction to chemistry, about the overall work of the home and also scientific knowledge useful to it.

Unlike in Lesson I, Sims did include her own lengthy notes on Lesson II, adding explanations and instructions that emphasized the frame of the familiar. Below the printed excerpt for Lesson II, Sims penned in dark ink:

LESSON II Cleaning

The dirt in houses consists mostly of dust. Mixed with the dust are particles so fine they can only be seen with a microscope. These tiny things are of three kinds, – yeasts, molds, and bacteria.

Some kinds of bacteria cause diseases. Some kinds are useful.

Like all plants, bacteria require food, warmth, and moisture in order to grow. Harmful bacteria grow best in damp, dark places.

Any thing that kills bacteria or hinders their growth is called disinfectant. Sunshine, soap and hot water are good disinfectants.

Dish Washing

1. Scrape all food from the dishes and wipe greasy dishes with soft paper.
2. Wash all dishes in hot, soapy water and rinse in clear hot water.
3. Use a brush to wash wire stainers [sic] and a wooden skewer to clean seams in cooking dishes.
4. Soak cooking dishes in cold water that have been used for sweet or greasy things soak in hot water. (Sims "Composition Book")

A mix of scientific explanation, justification, and procedural instructions, Sims's writing supplements the pasted excerpt, explaining what should be cleaned away and how to wash dishes. Now longer and more detailed than the excerpt, Sims's Lesson II shows how she begins to write herself into the course in cooking and more broadly domestic science.

Sims's composition book most shows her approach to authorship in that it's signed. Even though much of the document consists of cut-and-pasted excerpts of others' words, it does begin, "Motta L. Sims/ First Year Cooking/ Spelman Sem./ Oct. 14, 1916." Such a historical document therefore stands in contrast to the many archival materials from Black women that are unsigned, erased, or entirely missing (Jones and Williams; Royster and Kirsch). Though it is difficult to find this document – it is, after all, in the files of a White college president – its authorship does not point to President Tapley but instead to Ms. Sims. Later bringing home economics to HBCUs in the Southeast, Professor Sims brought this approach to scientific authorship: partially fashioned with recirculated text, her notes on cooking are clearly hers.

Contexts of Scrapbooking as Writing

Especially relevant for Motta Sims's composition book is the context of scrapbooking as writing. Americans' scrapbooking became so prevalent during the Civil War and into the twentieth century in large part because of the decreasing cost of producing newspapers, books, and other printed matter (Garvey 6). Mirroring Shewonda Leger and Chantalle Verna's analysis of recent zines, scrapbooks have been ways of reusing cultural ephemera for personalized, small-scale productions with diverse ends, including social resistance. Sims's scrapbooking within an educational institution, while not as explicitly disruptive, draws attention to the meaningful reuse of print, fashioning a composition notebook for cooking. In doing so, it invites contextualization through Spelman's history and cultures of print.

Spelman College, from the beginning, was an environment in which print was prevalent. Sophia B. Packard and Harriet Elizabeth Giles founded the institution on a Baptist mission to the South (Lefever 60). White teachers from New England, Packard and Giles then worked for Baptist Churches in the Boston area. There, they and other women founded the Woman's American Baptist Home Mission Society (WABHMS),

a group devoted to the education and conversion of Black and Native women ("Packard, Sophia B." 270-271). Under WABHMS, Packard began to tour large cities of the South: Richmond, Nashville, and New Orleans, where Giles joined her after Packard became ill. Befriending a Black preacher named Reverend Frank Quarles, Packard and Giles settled in Atlanta, where they began to teach groups of Black women to read the Bible in the basement of the Friendship Baptist Church (Spelman College Archives "A Guide to the Sophia B. Packard Papers"). Though Packard and Giles's letters imply that their teaching role was incompletely recognized by the WABHMS (Letter to Rev. H.L. Morehouse Sept 1881), they did begin with a sizable collection of printed missionary materials: Bibles, other books, and stationary from both the WABHMS and from the New England churches that previously employed them. The wealthy, New England-based Rockefeller family donated to Packard and Giles's efforts, which led to the school's naming to honor the parents of Laura Spelman Rockefeller in 1884 (Spelman College Archives "A Guide to the Sophia B. Packard Papers"). By 1888, Spelman Seminary was officially incorporated, and by that time, it had its own buildings outside the city, options for boarding on site, teachers, and classes of various levels and in different courses of study. It was an environment already rich in print.

Moreover, Spelman soon produced its own print materials, in courses of study that connected cooking and printing. Packard passed away in 1891, leaving the administration of the seminary to Giles alone. Under Giles, the institution continued to grow in teachers and students. Along with offering elementary and high school courses of study, Spelman advertised college courses, as well as ones preparatory for missionary work, nursing, teaching, and playing musical instruments/singing, and it had specialized facilities for cooking, laundry work, sewing, and printing (Spelman Seminary "Spelman Seminary Picture Book 1891"). By 1901, such offerings had consolidated into an "Industrial" course of studies (Spelman Seminary "Spelman Seminary Picture Book 1901"). The printing class/facility continued to expand the institution's access to print. Spelman's Printing Office allowed curricular experiences for students, produced materials that advertised the school's offerings, and importantly printed instructions on ways to donate to the efforts (Spelman Seminary "Spelman Graduates"). By the time Lucy Hale Tapley became president in 1910, Spelman had a large collection of printed ephemera, not only from religious and founding materials but also from their own presses operating over decades.

In a place rich with print, Motta Sims cut and pasted a cooking textbook, perhaps re-typed in a way that synthetized multiple sources, into yet another book, pre-printed with horizontal lines. Pre-lined composition books were likely rare at the time; recent artists have started to speculate that composition books were adopted from Western Europe and popularized in America only starting in the 1890s (Kearns). It was an unusually print-rich environment additionally because typed sources (whether textbooks or re-typed pieces of paper) were not necessarily understood to be so expendable elsewhere (Kidwell et al. 3-20). Sims's composition book used the print-rich environment to recycle texts as a way of composing, using scrapbooking to recraft available print materials into her own work in scientifically oriented cooking.

Conclusion

Sims's composition book therefore draws attention to scrapbooking as a way of framing cooking as scientific study. Moreover, it does so in a document signed by a student who went on to have a wide-ranging career as a professor at Southeastern HBCUs. After the course in cooking at Spelman, Sims went on to study in courses explicitly named for home economics, first at Fisk, where it was a course of studies separate from others (Horne 90), and later at Columbia Teachers College, which had started hiring Black women to their faculty (Williams). Then, Professor Sims went on to teach at Tuskegee in Alabama, Shaw State in North Carolina, South Carolina State, Virginia State, and Fort Valley State in Georgia ("Miss Motta Sims" 12). Though I have not found records of her further scrapbooking, Professor Sims's continued work in teaching the science of cooking is well documented across institutions.

Meanwhile, home economics at HBCUs developed into a problem, for some. A federal education committee of 1939 noted "home economics" as especially limiting for Black women. They critically quoted an assistant superintendent, "In our State it would seem that Negroes should be trained in agriculture, and farm mechanics, and the girls in home economics, with specific reference to home service" (quoted in Wilkerson 106). Noting the closed-mindedness of this statement, the committee pointed out how HBCUs offered "restricted programs." Black colleges and universities, they wrote, had nearly two-fifths of their students "concentrated chiefly in the fields of agriculture, mechanic arts, and home economics" (Wilkerson 73). Though Professor Sims supported such fields, home economics was not only a route to "home service" for her. She taught the management of groups outside the home, as when she served as hostess for a service club during World War II ("Miss Motta Sims" 12). Nor was home economics truly a restricted career path for her, as it allowed access to the professoriate. As Margaret Rossiter has argued about Ellen Swallow Richards, home economics provided Sims an "entering wedge," a place from which she could open doors to higher education for herself and later for others (Rossiter 1).

Motta Sims's work, I learned, appeared not only in the Lucy Hale Tapley Presidential Collection but also in the George Washington Carver Papers of Tuskegee University Archives, distributed by the Library of Congress. Dr. George Washington Carver is the subject of multiple new biographies, showing connections from his classes to environmental conservation (Hersey), or to food justice in cooperative farming (White). While at Tuskegee, Professor Sims observed Dr. Carver's teaching and noted some of his aphorisms, now transcribed in government microfilm: "Significant Statements Taken From Illustrated Lecture By Dr. George W. Carver./ By Motta L. Sims." Undated, likely from the 1930s, the document ends with a piece of advice about being a trend-setter. "Be an individualist and not a copyist," Carver expounded. "A man can be truly proud of his productions if he is the originator and promoter of the idea." (Sims "Significant Statements… By Dr. George W. Carver") In this statement, Dr. Carver observes how "a man" should strive to originate and promote ideas, not copy them. In contrast to such a gendered emphasis on originality, Prof. Sims's notes show the value in being a "copyist." Her composition book at Spelman recycles a printed textbook as a basis for new understandings of cooking, as her Tuskegee notes preserve Dr. Carver's sayings.

Yet there is a difficulty in drawing attention to the notetaker. When Prof. Sims's notes about Dr. Carver's sayings are cited, it is more prominent that he said these things than that she wrote them down (Gart 100). Similarly, studying academic scrapbooking is more than an investigation of how well students followed the directions of a teacher in snipping, pasting, writing, and recirculating. As literature about more recent zines has shown (Leger and Verna), such productive reuse of text is a composing process, one that can show complicated approaches to teachers and institutional structures.

Moreover, Sims's work reminds us of potential disciplinary prejudices that sometimes keep cooking classes out of stories of STEM opportunities. Working to correct this view are graduate students and early-career scholars, recovering stories of inspiring professors such as Mary E. Creswell in Georgia (Nickols and Peek), educational visionaries such as Nannie Helen Burroughs in Virginia (Jackson), and food activists such as Blanche Armwood in Florida (Alishahi). Similarly, Sims's legacy as a professor was not forgotten, as Fort Valley State awarded the Motta Sims Home Economics Award, though that digital record was taken down during the writing of this article. Given such disciplinary erasure, how might we work to recover and reflect on historical stories of domestic science, home economics, and broadly cooking?

Additionally, Motta Sims's composition book and her notes generally invite reflection about historical scrapbooking as writing and about its preservation. How might we locate practices of reusing print in historical records, and how might we come to understand them as composing? Moreover, Sims's composition book and notes present a problem of access, leading to more questions about Black women's institutional experiences (Royster; Jones and Williams). How might we expand our materials and practices to be more attuned to stories about institutions for Black women, but how might we additionally acknowledge the omissions or erasures that often accompany Black women's historical experiences? Though Ms. Sims's notes do not appear as a collection under her name, she does sign them, which can lead to further stories about her work, writing practices, and scientific study of her time.

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