

# Cooking and Writing in African-American Culture: Representation, Genre, Ceremony

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## Abstract

### Introduction

Connections between cooking and writing in African-American culture were announced in the slave narratives, which frequently respond to slaveholders' regulation of the literacy and diet of their human property by recounting episodes of secret reading and eating. These affinities are consolidated by the analogous freedoms cooking and writing opened to the first black cookbook writer Abby Fisher and the first published black poet Phillis Wheatley respectively. Nor are these affinities confined to the nineteenth century: rather, they survive due to the disproportionate occurrence of illiteracy and malnutrition among African Americans both before and after the Great Migration. Recent years have witnessed numerous scholarly investigations of illiteracy, which often identify the recollection of autodidacticism as a pivotal episode on which autobiographies by African Americans turn. However, although hunger figures equally prominently within this archive, the interest in writing has contrasted with a relative silence on cooking.

### Chapters One to Three

This thesis concentrates on three narratives: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1938), Richard Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1944), and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981). These narratives interconnect because, in order to expose hunger as preventable, they all contrast representations of malnutrition with images of food abundance. Implicitly, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* creates this contrast by representing an autonomous town from which want and white populations have been expelled. This joint expulsion lays blame for malnutrition less with food shortages than with white American privileges. Wright's autobiography explicitly reiterates this position by enforcing commensurate juxtapositions between its titular condition and white neighbours' ample food supplies. Spatial intimacy between the hungry and the sated becomes concentrated yet further in *Tar Baby's* representation of a Caribbean estate owned by a white businessman but maintained by black servants. This novel, too, repeatedly attributes dietary differences between these racial groupings less to shortage than to white employers' wish to preserve racial hierarchies.

### Conclusion

Although these narratives all thus insist that hunger is avoidable, however, their portrayals of theft, foraging and culinary innovations simultaneously dramatise moments when food is acquired from sources outside the capitalist market. Consequently, these narratives all employ writing in order to invoke cooking as another form of cultural production that, like autodidacticism, destabilises racial inequality.

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## *Introduction*

I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. [...] From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. [...]

Colonel Lloyd kept a large and finely cultivated garden, which [...] abounded in fruits of almost every description, from the hardy apple of the north to the delicate orange of the south. This garden was not the least source of trouble on the plantation. Its excellent fruit was quite a temptation to the hungry swarms of boys, as well as the older slaves, belonging to the colonel, few of whom had the virtue or the vice to resist it. Scarcely a day passed, during the summer, but that some slave had to take the lash for stealing fruit. The colonel had to resort to all kinds of stratagems to keep his slaves out of the garden.

**Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)<sup>1</sup>**

This thesis investigates the uses cooking and writing have extended to three narratives published by African Americans: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1938); Richard Wright's *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1944); and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981). From this investigation, it extrapolates the distinctive ways in which twentieth-century African-American culture has upheld, endorsed and reformulated the connections between cooking and writing that were introduced into the public tradition by *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* among other slave autobiographies. It contends that, no less than this nineteenth-century archive, recent writing by African Americans connects cooking and writing together since it, too, often identifies both as cultural processes by which

which inequalities created by racial injustice can be eroded and even overcome. These abiding and profoundly politicised interconnections are signalled most clearly when *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, and *Tar Baby* turn to the description of hunger and of the ministrations of hunger's cure: cooking. For these moments, when the resourcefulness and ingenuity of individual cooks fill a nutritional absence in which both racism and capitalism are characteristically implicated, vividly evoke that pivotal autobiographical episode, featured in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964) among many others, when another void – illiteracy – is filled via self-education. Connections between cooking and writing and, specifically, between autodidacticism and culinary resourcefulness thus issue from these narratives' shared insistence upon the capacity of both cultural processes to replenish two disabling voids – hunger and illiteracy – which external forces have invested with special prominence throughout African-American history.

As *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* confirms, however, interconnections between cooking and writing in African-American culture predate the twentieth century. For a hallmark of the slave narratives which Douglass's autobiographies pioneered and exemplified lies in their repeated description of slaveholders' attempts to monitor, regulate and circumscribe both the literacy and diet of their human property. Nor are these narratives limited to decrying slaveholders' ubiquitous circumscription of cooked foods and written words: rather, they equally often refer to food theft and foraging, to surreptitious autodidacticism, and to other individual rebellions which undermined such ubiquity and challenged such circumscription. By characterising cooking and writing as volatile forms of knowledge which held out a promise to slaves and a threat to slaveholders, occasioning "stratagems" through which plantation codes could be alternately transgressed and consolidated, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* typifies this genre. Certainly, episodes of cooking and writing rendered by Douglass's first autobiography bear comparison with experiences chronicled by other slave narrators and documented by slave historians. And what these episodes suggest is that, within the plantation, the constant ability of slaveholders to control access to foods and words coincided with the occasional ability of slaves to disrupt this calculated distribution to sustain a negotiation of the white supremacist ideology on which slavery was founded. For, if slaves could reassert their humanity by appropriating "white" foods and "white" books, then slaveholders could assuredly

deny it by withdrawing such materials and so returning their property to what had been designated an animalistic diet and an animalistic illiteracy. Similarly, if slaveholders could abject their African property by banishing them from their Edenic orchards, then slaves could launch nocturnal forays which, by lifting “the hardy apple” and “the delicate orange” from out of predestined white mouths, amounted to a reaffirmation of their own Christian humanity. If every food slaves secretly ate and every word they secretly read eroded the edifice of plantation life, in other words, then every withdrawal of these desirable and contentious materials by slaveholders rebuilt it.

It is this politicisation of food, this transformation of a necessary human activity into a forum in which white supremacist ideology can be affirmed and challenged, that distinguishes many African-American views of cooking from those forwarded in the cultures of other US racial or ethnic groupings. That is to say, Douglass’s account of the possibilities food opens for disciplinary control and defiance – possibilities that abide due to the occurrence of malnutrition among African Americans before and after the Great Migration – exemplify the distinctive politicisation in operation within black culinary culture. Of course, Irish and native American histories of famine, not to mention the continuing controversy surrounding the causes of such catastrophes, reveal that African-American is far from the only national subculture in which food has been subjected to such intense politicisation. What differentiates this particular culinary culture from those of other social groupings, however, is that historical experiences of “black” hunger neither arose from westward US expansion nor prompted a wholesale immigration but occurred within the secured borders of existing states. As Douglass’s autobiography reminds us, hunger was as normalised and integral to the status of slaves as illiteracy. If to be a slave was also to be unlettered, then it was equally true that it was to be hungry, or at least it was to be dependent for one’s nutritional satiety upon notoriously unreliable and often vindictive slaveholding authorities. In a striking conjunction of hunger and of intense labour productivity, many African Americans experienced malnutrition even as they contributed to the creation and consolidation of a national harvest that has proven to be among the most dependable and abundant in the world. Slaves and sharecroppers often experienced food shortage, in short, in the course of producing food surfeit.

The abiding imbalance between the intense labour activity and nutritional want experienced by the sharecropping and, later, the proletarian descendants of slaves is iterated implicitly by *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and explicitly by *Black Boy (American Hunger)* and Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981). By divergent means, these narratives all invoke this characteristic imbalance between the economic contributions and economic earnings of African Americans in order to establish adequate nourishment as another achievable social goal which, like universal literacy, has been denied due to a blend of white supremacist ideology and unrestrained capitalism. None of these three texts merely represent hunger. All also surround their representations of want with images of that American harvest to which black labour has generously, if sometimes involuntarily, contributed – with images of a cornucopian abundance whose pervading presence and apparent inexhaustibility reveals the hungers endured in the course of such labour to be preventable. From this figuration, which is a rare unifying characteristic between these very different writers, the thesis proceeds to identify the disparate responses each narrative makes to a malnutrition all represent as imposed, unnecessary and solvable. The following pages thus abound with episodes of food foraging, food theft, and with moments when a resourcefulness forged by slavery or poverty defeats squeamishness to facilitate the consumption of pig feet, chitterlings, pig tails, and of numerous other inexpensive or free food sources. African-American cooking – which incorporates an extraordinary number of strategies by which to tenderise the frequently stubborn textures of such offal – thus emerges from these pages as a profoundly liberating activity, which enables a hunger each novelist deems unnecessary and avoidable to be, however temporarily, overcome.

Any thesis exploring food must accept that cooking is a significant cultural activity often undervalued by Western cultures. Consequently, although this thesis is concerned less with the history of African-American culinary movements than it is with the literary treatment of these movements, even this specifically literary remit must be assisted by an endorsement of the validity of cooking as cultural practice. It must recognise that cooked foods are interpreted by their destined audience, that foods, in short, *signify*. A cake is as interpretable and as culturally meaningful as a poem. It is, if not a text as such, then a cultural product which can be interrogated as endlessly and as profitably as a text. A cake can fatten, satisfy,

give energy, convey love, and kill; yet these are only a few of its potential physical and psychological effects, which are ultimately as endlessly interpretable as those of a poem. As such, this thesis, although literary in focus, combats any dismissal of cooking as an inartistic craft by recognising that it possesses all the interpretative value that has long been attributed to writing. All that follows, then, is not only influenced by Angela Davis's famous polemical assault on domestic work, 'The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework', but also by those who have recently revised this account by distinguishing the potentially creative processes involved in cooking from such monotonous tasks as cleaning, ironing, and washing.<sup>2</sup> It is influenced, for instance, by Doris Witt's recent reappraisal of soul food, *Black Hunger* (2000), which is motivated by a reluctance to follow Davis and "label as simple 'false consciousness' the (aesthetic) pleasure that housewives, servants, and others might understand themselves to derive from their labour in the kitchen."<sup>3</sup> No other critical text has proven more pivotal to my research than this study, which incorporates discussions of Dick Gregory's highly publicised hunger strikes of the 1960s, of the dietary injunctions of the Nation of Islam, and of Julie Dash's cinematic representation of Gullah culture, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). Of the insights supplied by these discussions, however, the most useful to what follows has been Witt's willingness to expand our understanding of cooking, to acknowledge that this cultural process is an inherently political and even volatile activity in which as many negative as positive elements can operate. For, by acknowledging that cooking "belongs" neither to women nor families exclusively, Witt realises a newly complex view of culinary practice which asserts that, as African-American literature informs us, even the most apparently nurturing meal presented to families by mothers can disguise poisonous emotions and even, sometimes, poison itself. Witt's willingness to engage with the more traumatic and even sinister aspects of cooking, as such, constitutes a prompt for the following research, which likewise strives to approach culinary practices as complex, signifying acts of cultural creation.

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## A. Cooking and Writing in African-American Culture

We whose Names are under-written, do assure the World, that the POEMS specified in the following Pages, were (as we verily believe) written by PHILLIS, a young Negro Girl, who was but a few Years since, brought an uncultivated Barbarian from *Africa*, and has ever since been, and now is, under the Disadvantage of serving as a Slave of a Family in this Town. She has been examined by some of the best Judges, and is thought qualified to write them.

**‘Preface [To the Publick]’, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, by Phillis Wheatley (1773)**

The publication of a book on my knowledge and experience of Southern Cooking, Pickle and Jelly Making, has been frequently asked of me by my lady friends and patrons in San Francisco and Oakland, and also by ladies of Sacramento during the State Fair in 1879. Not being able to read or write myself, and my husband also having been without the advantages of an education – upon whom would devolve the writing of the book at my dictation – caused me to doubt whether I would be able to present a work that would give perfect satisfaction. But, after due consideration, I concluded to bring forward a book of my knowledge – based on an experience of upwards of thirty-five years – in the art of cooking Soups, Gumbos, Terrapin Stews, Meat Stews, Baked and Roast Meats, Pastries, Pies and Biscuits, making Jellies, Pickles, Sauces, Ice-Creams and Jams, preserving Fruits, etc. The book will be found a complete instructor, so that a child can understand and learn the art of cooking.

**Preface, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking* (1881)<sup>4</sup>**

This thesis, as the first three words of its title suggest, establishes interconnections between cooking and writing – establishes interconnections which arise whenever these pages turn to writings, produced by authors’ hands, that capture in words the hand movements of a fictional or otherwise represented cook. Necessarily, the establishment of such interconnections between cooking and writing – the vocational use of which, whether bureaucratic or aesthetic, has long been a marker of high status – must also negotiate those gender, race and class hierarchies that have, historically, delegated these distinct processes to distinct social groups. Furthermore, the fact that the history of cooking predates the history of civilisation – the fact that, indeed, even Neanderthals cooked – problematises any attempt to interpret culinary practices as proof of the achievement of civilisation in quite the same way that written artefacts have been interpreted by Egyptologists and

classicists. Nor are perceptions that writing reigns supreme over the functionalist act of cooking the exclusive preserve of such researchers into history and prehistory. Rather, these cultural perceptions, the relevance of which to the first poems and the first recipes published by African Americans will shortly be explored, continue to pervade Western cultures, for many reasons. Among them is the fact that residual reductions of manual practices such as cooking to an inartistic functionalism remain a hallmark of almost all cultures whose philosophical and epistemological foundations lie in the Judaeo-Christian separation of the body and soul. For such religious separations of human anatomy and thought, compartmentalisations later consolidated and secularised within Cartesian philosophy, often produce a suspicion of bodily functions which, in turn, galvanises an insidious recommendation of the virtues of cerebral work over those of manual work. Resulting assumptions of the insignificance or mundanity of cooking, meanwhile, are further bolstered by patriarchal prejudices that traditionally undervalue the complexities of all cultural practices either associated with or dominated by women. Gender prejudices have, finally, been endorsed by suspicions, articulated by Socrates in the Platonic dialogues, that cooking is a decadent, corrupted science – a science, contaminated by the pursuit not of progress but of pleasure, which fraudulently adorns “the mask of medicine, and pretends to know the foods that are best for the body”.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, the supremacy of oratory and, later, of writing over cooking has become embedded in the Western tradition in a way that contrasts sharply with, say, the Chinese valorisation of the *ch'i* of food explored by Jack Goody and, more recently, E. N. Anderson.<sup>6</sup> As attitudes that continue to prevail, prejudicial simplifications of cooking permeate African-American political discourses as profoundly as they have the canon of Enlightenment thought. The idea that writing is somehow culturally supreme, for instance, numbered among the few attitudes Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois held in common. For, although Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois often disagreed as to the merits of teaching writing and cooking skills to black students, they nevertheless agreed on these activities' respectively high and low positions within a received hierarchy of cultural endeavour. For all their differences, both Washington and Du Bois tended to accept and to echo the prevailing characterisation both of cooking as a functional, inartistic practice and of writing as a passport to political awareness, high culture, ambition, and upward mobility. Indeed, the acceptance of this

familiar binary by both Washington and Du Bois often led them to invoke cooking and writing simultaneously in order to typify the choice between the vocational and the academic which, they agreed, faced all black education leaders. Oppositional differences between Washington and Du Bois proceed from their shared endorsement of this fundamental binary: to put it crudely, whereas the former advocated the vocational route encapsulated within the apprenticeship of cooking, the latter favoured the uplift facilitated by the individual Enlightenment of a literary education. That is to say, Washington tended to think of cooking, which nourished families and sometimes earned wages, as an end in itself. Writing, meanwhile, seemed to him, at best, as a means to an end and, at worst, as a bourgeois practice which could prematurely arouse in his students professional aspirations that racist American society was not ready to fulfil. Any writing that did not serve the immediate practical function of recipes, engineering manuals or legal documents was eschewed by Washington as too rarefied to assist in the delicate and attritional business of racial uplift. Banning the excessive teaching of “rhetoric” at Tuskegee, Washington prescribed only “good, simple, direct English” for his students.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, W. E. B. Du Bois felt that the superficially impractical field of writing held untold yet latent value – that it held the inestimable capacities, if not of a strictly economic uplift, then of one effected via the less measurable fields of politics and culture. Indeed, if anything, the basic binary between cooking and writing emerges more strongly in Du Bois’s writings than those of Booker T. Washington. For instance, although the fractiousness between Tuskegee and the NAACP decreased following Washington’s death, in a 1930 Commencement address at Howard Du Bois nevertheless remained mindful of unsettled scores as he defended writing’s “glorious world of fancy and imagination, of poetry and art, of beauty and deep culture.”<sup>8</sup> From this defence of the rarefied and aesthetic strata of literature, Du Bois proceeded to dismiss as antiquated that fabled culinary talent of black people, which Washington’s Tuskegee had sought to demystify, theorise, and teach. “Our success in household arts is due not to our effective teaching so much as to the mediaeval minds of our women who have not yet entered the machine age. Most of them still seem to think that washing clothes, scrubbing steps and paring potatoes were among the Ten Commandments.”<sup>9</sup> Such snobbery adds gender prejudice to the concerns Cornel West has recently expressed regarding Du Bois’s “inability to immerse himself in black everyday life [... whose

occasional] ritualistic explosion of energy frightened this black rationalist.”<sup>10</sup> However, by confirming that Du Bois regarded as counterproductively obsolescent a practice valued by Washington, such snobbery also reveals that at the root of these antithetical figures’ assessment of cooking and writing was a disagreement upon the perceived usefulness these cultural activities held for the nascent African-American classes. Both continued to endorse and to proceed from a binary between “functional” cooking and “academic” writing, and differed only insofar as Washington prized the practical whereas Du Bois, though not blind to the virtues of apprenticeship, tended to emphasise the scholarly path he himself had trod. Indeed, it is tempting to suggest that, if an ideal graduate of Tuskegee might have been Abby Fisher, then an ideal Du Boisian graduate might have been Phillis Wheatley, who had successfully escaped the manual work of the plantation, and who shared what West characterises as Du Bois’s “Enlightenment world-view”.<sup>11</sup> Certainly, Abby Fisher would have been a model member of the audience for Booker Washington’s address to Tuskegee in 1910, when he commanded his female students to:

Study the soil [...] Now you think I mean you have got to get a book and sit down and bury yourself in it for two or three hours when I say I want you to make a study, but I mean [...] find out what will grow in the community where you will reside [...] make a study of the best methods of cooking that food. You know what I mean when I say “cooking.” Sometimes girls get so mixed up on this subject of Domestic Economy that they forget all about cooking. I am talking about cooking, not about Domestic Economy.<sup>12</sup>

Although Washington is here characteristically contemptuous of the theoretical designation “Domestic Economy” in particular and of intellectualism in general, his own mastery of prose suggests that this contempt is directed not at writing *per se* but the idea that it is a suitable field for study by ordinary black women. Subsequently, although more clearly sympathetic to the value of “female” cooking than Du Bois, Washington, too, confirms the supremacy of writing simply by characterising it as the province of an elite to which black people (and particularly black women) had no hope of belonging en masse. Writing remains in the Washingtonian vision a signifier of “deep culture”, its supremacy as secure as in Du Bois’s works. The thought of both Du Bois and Washington thus remained entrenched in a contemporary culture which prioritised a litany of intellectual

pursuits from which cooking had been disqualified on the grounds that such a “female” and manual craft was, by definition, inadequately cerebral. Both largely endorsed the prevailing cultural acceptance that the written word constituted the ultimate durable marker of a given social group’s achievement – of an achievement, that is, for which Washington felt his contemporaries remained unprepared, but which Du Bois insisted could be drawn within reach. Throughout their disagreements, neither of these robust thinkers were to suggest that a marker of the cultural achievement of black people might already exist in the form of the foods which they cooked for their own enjoyment and, often, for that of whites. The comparably sexist yet otherwise divergent appraisals of cooking offered by these figures reveal that both remained unwilling either to acknowledge the contribution women had made to African-American literature, or to consider the possibility that foods might likewise comprise credible materials for meaningful cultural creativity. Abby Fisher’s description of cooking as an “art” is echoed neither by the industrial nor the cultural objectives advocated, respectively, in the progressive ideologies of Washington and Du Bois. Both endorse the prevailing views of writing as a supreme cultural endeavour: both allow its reign over cooking and other manual activities to pass unchallenged.

On this evidence, then, any association between cooking and writing can hardly comprise a partnership of equals. Writing, it seems, reigns supreme as the ultimate achievement of any given Western culture. Oddly, this supremacy is consolidated even within the work of those scholars who have sought to develop a workable theory of cooking and food. For these scholars have very often turned to language for inspiration, thus not only confirming the association made by the thesis title, but extending it by placing cooking and writing into a hierarchical sequence in which writing invariably retains a primary position. Given that these theories aim to establish food as a credible field of research, this effect is richly ironic, for it forces cooking into a second hand relationship in which any aesthetic prestige it might acquire must first be borrowed from writing. Yet it is an effect nevertheless achieved, perhaps inadvertently, by three of the most influential of researchers into cookery – Mary Douglas, Roland Barthes and Claude Lévi-Strauss – who each use theories of language as springboards from which to launch their divergent theories of food. All three, that is, justify their unorthodox academic interest in foods by stressing just how much these foods share with that classic

object of scholarly research, the written word. For they each write about foods in the language of linguistics – in the language, that is, of language. For example, in ‘Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption’ (1961), Roland Barthes, having asked to be “permitted to use such a metaphor,” challenges scholars to construct a “grammar of foods [... using] syntaxes (‘menus’), and styles (‘diets’) no longer in an empirical but in a semantic way”.<sup>13</sup> Although Barthes then foregoes such direct references to language, adopting instead a semiotic vocabulary tailored to reading visual and other artefacts as “texts,” his footnotes confirm that throughout the essay he uses “the word *structure* in the sense that it has in linguistics”.<sup>14</sup> As such, the approach advocated by Barthes’s short essay relates linguistics, whose basic unit is the letter, to the study of cooking, whose basic unit is, perhaps, the ingredient, or even the chemical element. From this structuralist premise, a number of conclusions can be drawn: a dish can be defined, like a word, as syntagmatic; a culinary style, as syntactical; and the systems of pollution taboos and purity myths explored by Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1966) as, indeed, a kind of grammar.<sup>15</sup> Barthes’s identification of the “grammar” and “semantics” of food thus relies less on a widening of these originally lexical terms than on a narrowing of foods that neglects their inherent and irreducible tangibility in order to corroborate their resemblance to signifying words. Foods are moulded to fit into a prior structure Barthes inherits and leaves largely unchanged from the linguistic discourse. In the process, Barthes implies that cooking can only achieve a higher currency in academic and other cultural circles once some of writing’s prestigious lustre has rubbed off on it. Cooking, in Barthes’s formulation, does not challenge writing’s throne so much as it is forced to ingratiate itself into the favour of writing’s court. Its importance here, being limited to that which writing deigns to grant it, seems hardly greater than that allowed by Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

Mary Douglas’s critical interest in food – evident in *Purity and Danger* itself but elaborated in the 1975 essay ‘Deciphering a Meal’ – grants writing a similar ascendancy. This is despite the fact that her essay initially complicates and critiques the strictly structuralist analysis of food advocated in Barthes’s early essay. The principal target of this critique of structuralism is not, however, Barthes, who by the time of its publication had complicated his earlier position. Rather, Douglas directs her attack against Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose work, with

far greater consistency than that of Barthes, approaches foods from the foundation of language and sees in them a structure akin to those identified by linguistics. Douglas's essay reserves particular ire for Lévi-Strauss's extensive use of binary oppositions, a theoretical technique inherited from the linguist Roman Jakobson. Douglas's essay concedes that here "and there [...Lévi-Strauss's] feet touch solid ground, but mostly he is orbiting in rarefied space where he expects to find universal food meanings common to all mankind. [...] Worse than clumsy, his technical apparatus produces meanings which cannot be validated." These criticisms of Lévi-Strauss's neglect of the changing contexts of cooking initially ignite hopes that Douglas's essay might try to recapture that very substantial, sensory presence of foods that differentiates them so sharply from words. Such hopes are, however, disappointed as Douglas echoes both Barthes's "grammar of foods" and Lévi-Strauss's definition of "the cooking of a society [as] a language" by observing that: "food elements can be ranged until they are all accounted for either in grammatical terms, or down to the last lexical item."<sup>16</sup> Douglas quotes approvingly from Michael Halliday's 'Categories of the Theory of Grammar' (1963):

Eating, like talking, is patterned activity, and the daily menu may be made to yield an analogy with linguistic form. Being an analogy, it is limited in relevance; its purpose is to throw light on, and suggest problems of the categories of grammar by relating these to an activity which is familiar and for much of which a terminology is ready to hand.<sup>17</sup>

Here, Halliday's qualifications can be regarded as qualifications for Douglas's own linguistic analogy only insofar as she provides none of her own. Douglas's juxtaposition of this quotation with her demolition of Lévi-Strauss's work also reveals that she considers *The Raw and the Cooked* (1964) to be flawed, not because it proceeds from a linguistic base, but because this base lies in structuralist assumptions that seek to yield through binary analysis untenably broad, universal conclusions. Douglas's conflict with Lévi-Strauss thus runs the risk of becoming little more than a spat between linguists. Its connection to food itself becomes tenuous. It is exposed, instead, as a kind of mirror image of the concerns that Douglas's linguistic advocate, Michael Halliday, expresses with regard to the work of Lévi-Strauss's linguistic mentor, Roman Jakobson. Thus, from its ambitious and suggestive beginnings, Douglas's essay simply confirms, yet

again, that linguistics should be the base for any critical enquiry into cooking. Her essay concludes:

To take our analysis of the culinary medium further we should study what the poets say about the disciplines that they adopt. [...] The rules of the menu are not in themselves more or less trivial than the rules of verse to which a poet submits.<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Mary Douglas all argue that critical approaches to cooking must retrace steps already taken in critical approaches to writing. In their willingness to extend to foods analytical procedures others would apply to language, these critics not only contend that a cake is as interpretable as a poem, but that a cake might even be interpreted *in a* similar way to a poem. Such a contention, intimated in *The Raw and the Cooked* but made explicitly by Douglas and Barthes, is deliberately provocative. It can, to those keen to safeguard literature's prestige as a supreme marker of cultural achievement, spark defensive reactions akin to those sometimes prompted by Barthes's 'The Death of the Author' (1968). As a contention it can appear to some infected by a levelling ambition, by an ambition to relegate writing to the manual and formulaic level of cooking rather than vice versa. This conservative anxiety, however, is dwarfed by other problems arising from the linguistic analogies of Lévi-Strauss, Douglas and Barthes. For the real flaw in these analogies is not that they threaten literature's aesthetic prestige but, contrariwise, that they tend to overlook those tangible sensory attributes of foods that are manipulated and transformed through the processes of cooking. For Douglas's assertion that "the rules of the menu are not in themselves more or less trivial than the rules of verse" potentially performs exactly the reductive underestimation of cooking that her essay sets out to attack. Potentially, that is, Douglas's linguistic analogy commits foods to the two-dimensionality of the page – neglecting the taste, texture and smell of a doughnut: reducing a lobster's claw to the flatness of a serif – robbing them of the very substantiality that makes them what they are. Any discussion referring to the "syntax" or "semantics" of cooking runs the risk of stripping away foods' capacity to stimulate all of the senses. Smell, taste and touch can be neglected by a critical approach founded on the relation between foods and the aural and visual medium of language. None of these theories quite admits of the fact that a child eats food long before he or she says words, or that those among the human population who

can cook have always outnumbered those who can write. And so, ironically, these critics produce an effect quite the opposite of their intentions. Their legacies have been to confirm the supremacy of writing, to endorse the aesthetic pleasures that Du Bois found in the “glorious world of fancy and imagination” of language itself. Writing, in short, remains king.

To develop a theory that neither places writing on a pedestal nor into a relationship with cooking which requires us to view the two as structurally identical, it is necessary to turn to the renowned case of Phillis Wheatley and to the almost unknown case of Abby Fisher. A comparison of the individual histories of these published African-American cultural practitioners complicates the hierarchical perception of cooking and writing endorsed, whether intentionally or not, in the theories and opinions of Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas and Roland Barthes. It complicates this perceived hierarchy since the biographies of the first published African-American poet and of the first published African-American cookbook writer are themselves complex. The curious conjunction of illiteracy and culinary expertise in Abby Fisher’s biography mean that permutations arising from a comparison of her work with Wheatley’s are manifold and can seem, in some respects, to confirm the supreme usefulness of writing and, in others, to challenge it. Through the unravelling of these permutations, however, a theory can nevertheless be reached which dislodges cooking from its earlier Du Boisian association with a “mediaeval” mentality. For this unravelling subjects the binary between “high” writing and “low” cooking which constituted a rare common thread between Du Bois and Washington to a profound challenge that disturbs, destabilises and finally dissolves its patriarchal tenets. This destabilisation occurs since expertise in cooking and writing, as employed by Fisher and Wheatley respectively, served as similar and equally potent means by which these pioneering artists gained access to a greater personal freedom, wealth and security. This unravelling suggests, in other words, that these two activities, so often figured as alternatives to each other, actually numbered together among the few forms of African-American cultural production that nineteenth-century American society, in the form of a paying white readership, was willing to make public.

And yet, on first sight, the path by which Phillis Wheatley became the first black woman to publish poems, and that followed by Abby Fisher, amount to another endorsement of the supreme political and cultural usefulness which writing assumes in African-American and, indeed, in any culture. After all, illiteracy is itself the reason why so little is known about Abby Fisher, a woman who, as the first published black cookery writer, surely merits but is rarely granted association with such other cultural pioneers as Wheatley, the first published African-American poet. For whereas most of these cultural pioneers have bequeathed voluminous letters and other biographical documents, thus facilitating the historical commemoration of their achievements, Fisher's legacy remains, on the other hand, strictly limited to the very object of her pioneering achievement, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows*, itself. Virtually all we know of Fisher's life is bequeathed to us via her transcribed book, which simply tells us that, having won awards for her pickles, sauces, jellies and preserves both at the Sacramento State Fair of 1879 and at the San Francisco Mechanics' Institute Fair of 1880, Fisher was asked by the Women's Co-Operative Printing Office to produce a book of recipes.<sup>19</sup> No diaries, letters or other biographical texts are available for us to retrace the steps that brought Fisher to this local renown. The class, race and gender ramifications of her explosive appearance amongst the "mechanics" of the San Francisco Fair must be largely left to the imagination. Fisher's illiteracy, and the subsequent absence of any biographical data that might have outlasted her life, thus hampers those historians who, like Karen Hess, aim to establish her at the head of a culinary publishing tradition which also accommodates such later cooks as Vertamae Grosvenor and Jessica B. Harris. Hess must instead negotiate and speculate in order to compensate for the lack of biographical information which directly results from the fact that this most ironic of publishing pioneers was, in her own, transcribed words, "without the advantages of an education". Thus Hess's brief biographical portrait of Abby Fisher is forced to acknowledge illiteracy as the reason why, although the 1880 national census registers a "mulatto" by the name of "Mrs. Fisher" working as a cook in Second Street, San Francisco, the events which brought this unlettered cook to California from her home state of South Carolina remain mysterious. Hess tentatively asserts of this elusive cook: "I think it safe to say that she was born a slave [...] she would have been about 33 years of age at the close of the Civil War." This likely background in slavery presupposed, Hess loses the trail of Abby Fisher's Emancipated life, and is forced, by her own

admission, to speculate as to how she and her husband might have journeyed to the Pacific Coast. "The Union Pacific transcontinental railroad had been completed in 1869, but such a journey by newfangled rail would have been costly [...] it is not inconceivable that Mrs. Fisher signed on as a cook on a wagon train; cooks have always been welcome passengers."<sup>20</sup> Such speculation extends to *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* itself, if only because the obsequiousness, "doubt" and formality of its preface suggest that Fisher's voice has here been highly mediated by her "lady friends and patrons in San Francisco and Oakland". Subsequently, Fisher's illiteracy not only dramatically thins out bibliographical evidence of her existence, but also, by necessitating transcription, destabilises the one historical document that she *has* bequeathed to the historical archive. For all these reasons, illiteracy can be cited as the principal reason why the first African American to publish recipes is absent from Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopaedia* (1994), despite this otherwise exhaustive dictionary's enthusiasm for female-dominated cultural activities.<sup>21</sup>

The case of Phillis Wheatley could hardly be more different, for a number of reasons. Most obviously, Wheatley – whose entry in Hine, Brown and Terborg-Penn's encyclopaedia equals the length of that accorded to the first African-American Nobel Prize-winner, Toni Morrison – was famously, contentiously literate. Indeed, this literacy appeared to many of Wheatley's contemporary readers the most significant aspect of her work. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. emphasises in a 1987 essay on the contemporary critical reception of Phillis Wheatley's poetry, the woman Benjamin Franklin dubbed the "Black Poetess" was read mainly because she wrote. Almost "no one discussed the book as poetry", notes Gates; what really mattered was not *what* Wheatley wrote but the mere fact that she *had written* – that she had put pen to paper and managed to produce readable sentences.<sup>22</sup> As Gates suggests, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson all approached Wheatley's poems not for the meanings to which they referred but as a performative text that dared to suggest and then to enact the dangerous possibility of black literary proficiency. Such a possibility was dangerous, Gates argues, since it paraded before the sceptical eyes of those assured of their own innate superiority a vision of black literacy which disrupted all Enlightenment attempts to dissociate both Africans and the unlettered from a

limiting and idealised definition of mankind. As Toni Morrison suggests in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), those democratic principles which Washington and Jefferson had done so much to implement, defend and develop, and which even now retain enormous political resonance, were originally defined against a body of racial assumptions inherited from the European philosophic tradition. Morrison writes: “the rights of man, [...] an organizing principle upon which the nation was founded, was inevitably yoked to Africanism.”<sup>23</sup> Following a reading of Gates’s essay, which extensively explores the influence of Hegel and Locke upon the thinking of Jefferson and Washington, Morrison’s comment might be broadened to reveal that these democratic “rights” were “inevitably yoked” to the unnerving presence of the colonial black population as well as to that Lockean Chain of Being which, by denigrating African humanity, legitimised Transatlantic slavery in the first place.

Consequently, Wheatley’s poetry was published into a culture that defined its positive stereotype of the *lettered* democratic white man against a negative stereotype of the *illiterate* African. Wheatley’s mastery of letters radically disrupted these Enlightenment principles and the racial and gender binaries on which they were predicated. By reaching across the bridge of this racial and gender opposition to claim for herself literacy skills notionally reserved for white men, Wheatley mounted a challenge that struck at the heart of the hierarchical social structure of the emergent Republic. Indeed, this challenge was so penetrating, it became possible for the white male defendants of the new Republic to feel threatened even by so ostensibly unthreatening a verse as that which paid patriotic tribute to George Washington. Those who, like Jefferson, were sensitive to the connotations arising from a black woman’s adoption of so erudite and laudatory a pose seemed aware that it implicitly extended the new democratic rights to African Americans. They seemed aware, that is, of what now seems clear: that Wheatley’s knowing tribute immediately introduced into the African-American literary discourse that familiar polemical strategy, recently explored by C. K. Doreski, via which the idealism of Constitutional rhetoric is contrasted with racist injustices in order to expose governmental hypocrisy.<sup>24</sup> Jefferson responded to this threat by narrowing yet further the prohibitive and apparently amorphous criteria forbidding African Americans from entering the prestigious circle of humanity to which he himself, naturally, belonged. Jefferson remarked that “never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration [...] Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Whately [sic] but it could not produce a poet.”<sup>25</sup> No longer did

African Americans, in order to qualify as human, merely need to write: now, it seemed, they had to write *well*.

Yet even in Jefferson's dismissal the wounds that Wheatley's poetry had inflicted upon the racial hierarchies determining the American social body become visible. Even over this dismissal, that is, the threat Wheatley's verse posed to the Jeffersonian position lingers as an unresolved and irreconcilable dilemma. Justifications of slavery as a form of white guardianship over childish blacks were, after all, critically undermined by the emergence of a black woman whose literacy made her, according to the most stringent Enlightenment measure, anything but a child. Nor were the political leaders who enshrined the rights of man alone in finding their racial assumptions disturbed by the alarmingly unexpected and exceptional fact of Wheatley's literacy. For although these assumptions and their disturbance by Wheatley indeed found their clearest expression among those who, like Jefferson, had been schooled in the European philosophical tradition, the associations between humanity and literacy and, negatively, between African-American illiteracy and ignorance were at the time universally recognised and almost universally endorsed by whites. Indeed their currency in the contemporary culture makes it possible, Gates implies, for historians to use the views of a given white person concerning Wheatley's verse as a measure for his or her views concerning black humanity. Gates suggests that, as "William Cairns recognized as early as 1912, the criticism of Wheatley's poetry has been a matter centered primarily around exactly what the existence of the poesis faculty signifies about a far more problematical inquiry."<sup>26</sup> As such, Wheatley's contemporary critical reception was itself composed of responses to the more expansive problematic, here understood as black literacy, which it opened. Abolitionists admired the verses without exception – or, more precisely, they admired the fact that an African American had produced them, since this itself comprised an eloquent rebuttal of prevailing, racially hierarchical formations of humanity. Opponents of manumission, meanwhile, felt obliged to disdain them, to dismiss them either as a forgery or to follow Jefferson's lead and belittle them as evidence of nothing more than that black people could be taught to "ape" white American art (a perspective which overlooked the fact that, as Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland have argued, much of this colonial verse itself blatantly "aped" European forms).<sup>27</sup>

Consequently, both by virtue of its very existence and of the polemical uses to which it was put, Wheatley's literacy became a contentious knowledge that her defendants found necessary to "examine", legitimise, and "under-write". By contrast, Abby Fisher's friends in San Francisco, who themselves requested the "publication of a book on my knowledge and experience of Southern Cooking", did not feel compelled either to examine the contents of its author's brain or to "under-write" her expertise. Fisher's step-by-step recipes for croquettes, gumbos and Yorkshire pudding by no means comprised an oeuvre that challenged dominant perceptions of black, and particularly black female, intelligence. Rather, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* was, as it were, exactly what she was *expected* to know. Unlike the poetic insight and literacy that Phillis Wheatley unleashed upon her unsuspecting white readership, Abby Fisher's was an anticipated and culturally normalised form of knowledge. That Fisher confirmed received stereotypes of African Americans as accomplished cooks seems revealed by the fact that *her* book's preface entirely lacks the defensive, painstaking tone of Wheatley's. Evidently, neither Fisher nor her transcribers felt obliged to pre-empt suspicions that the recipes might have been forged, or cannibalised from the non-sequential utterances of a gifted yet instinctive black cook. The preface imparts no sense that what Mrs. Fisher "knows" might translate into some unconscionable political ideology or demand. Rather, the easiness of this preface, when compared to the almost barristerial case introducing Wheatley's verse, testifies to a situation wherein many whites "have never read, and are proud to say so, *any* African-American text", as Morrison observes, yet even the racist have gladly eaten food made by black hands.<sup>28</sup> Published eight years before the Quaker Oats company launched its Aunt Jemima trademark, and eighteen years before Joel Chandler Harris dedicated a volume of plantation poems to all "the faithful mammies who ever sung southern babies to rest", *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* merely fed a longstanding fascination about black female cooks. Unlike the radical literacy practised by Wheatley, it simply participated in what Doris Witt has termed the venerable "desire for African American women to be the ever-smiling producers of food, to be nurturers who themselves have no appetite and make no demands".<sup>29</sup>

These distinctions are confirmed by the similarity between the title of Fisher's book and that of a novel published seventeen years later, Henry James's *What Maisie Knew* (1898). For Fisher's title, like that of James's novel, refers to a

mysterious knowledge and then advertises itself as the solution to this mystery. It positions itself as a book whose pages will, when opened, introduce a fascinating enigma. Unlike James's novel, however, the title to Fisher's book does not attribute this knowledge to a mysterious individual, but to a mysterious group of people, African-American women. Consequently, unlike that neglected yet wealthy child Maisie, whose inner thoughts, James felt, had been left unrecorded by literature – and, indeed, unlike the thoughts of the unusually literate Phillis Wheatley – the mystery of Fisher's book pertains to a hitherto unrecorded, collective “mind of the South”, rather than to the insights of an individual psyche shaped by exceptional circumstances. Even as it marketed itself as mysterious, then, the title of Fisher's book did not suggest that this mystery was unexpected or challenging to prevailing social norms. It offered itself, not as a revelation, but as a kind of documentary that added detail to a culinary tradition practised by African-American women with which the national culture was already familiar, albeit vaguely. After all, “What Mrs. Fisher knows” is “southern cookery”: her knowledge derives not from the individual insight or unique eloquence commonly associated with poetry, but from a collective, organised tradition transmitted via generations of slave cooks. Cooking as such remains, even in this pioneering text, an expected, normalised body of black knowledge. Fisher's book presented itself as rather less than a revolutionary text, and, duly, it was hardly greeted as such. It hardly challenged the racist assumptions underlying the venerated philosophies expounded by Hegel, Hume and Locke. It hardly attempted to extend the rights of white men to black women. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that, whereas Wheatley's poems inspired seismic reverberations among their contemporary white readership, Fisher's recipes barely registered a murmur.

And yet it is clear that, although this contrast might consolidate the perceived “supremacy” of Wheatley's verse, correspondingly trivialising Fisher's recipes into a commonplace cultural document, such a position hinges on a very specific interpretation of the term “conventionality”. For though Fisher's recipes were indeed conventional in that they manifested a body of knowledge already associated with a certain stereotype of African-American women, equally, it can be said that Wheatley's poetry was conventional in the sense of being indebted to the European tradition. Indeed this indebtedness has been the crucial sticking point for almost all critics of Wheatley's verse, and not only for white readers like

Thomas Jefferson. During the 1960s and 70s, Jefferson's criticisms of Wheatley were echoed by the African-American critics Addison Gayle and Vernon Loggins, who repeated his charge that her verse appropriated the mores of an alien aesthetic tradition, reversing it only insofar as they identified in this grasping gesture a disavowal of blackness rather than, as Jefferson saw it, a threat to the unblemished whiteness of the American cultural fount. As Gayle remarked, Wheatley's poetry was "modelled upon that of such Anglo-Saxons as Pope, Carlyle, Mills, and Byron." In it, "the truth of the philosopher Frantz Fanon is evidenced over one hundred years before his birth: The colonized yearns to become the colonizer, the slave, to become the master." To these criticisms can be added Vernon Loggins's remark that Wheatley's poetry is principally "noteworthy as an accomplishment in imitation."<sup>30</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr. is dismissive of such remarks, and aims instead to read Wheatley's poems as texts whose ostensible replication of English poetic convention actually facilitates opportunities for subversion. Gates's focus on the significant omissions and implications of Wheatley's verse is elaborated by Barbara Johnson's *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (1998), which similarly emphasises the knowing nuances of Wheatley's poetic position.<sup>31</sup> Yet, although Gates and Johnson are extremely eager to correct the limiting critical reception received by Wheatley's work, they nevertheless fail to refute the central objection that limited this reception in the first place, namely, the excessively determining influence that European styles have upon her verse. They direct their efforts, not towards revealing that Wheatley was extremely original after all, but towards accepting the conventionality of her verse and then probing and interrogating it to discover the political tensions and contradictions that it hid. Although the most persuasive of Wheatley's modern defendants, even Gates and Johnson are forced to concede that her poems attempt to replicate classic form and, thus, to imitate, in Gates's words, "Pope in rhythm and sentiment." Despite the persuasive defence of Wheatley offered by these critics, neither distinguish this problematic poet's oeuvre from those which, written by contemporaries like Timothy Dwight and Philip Freneau, were determined by their fidelity to predefined European form.

As such, dismissals of the "conventionality" of Abby Fisher's recipes can themselves begin to be dismissed once we appreciate and recognise that they were, in fact, far less indebted to preceding European form than the poetry of Phillis Wheatley. For conventionality, when understood in this sense, reveals that the

supremacy which writing assumed in colonial and early republican American society not only blessed Wheatley's poems with an instant celebrity, but also cursed them by straitjacketing them into a European form which yielded little breathing space for her own experiences. By contrast, although Fisher's recipes did not provoke but were accepted by her readership, they nevertheless reveal a high level of experiment, and were by no means so obviously determined by an enforced and inescapable obligation to mimic Eurocentric form. Admittedly, the recipes in *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* include a number of such European delights as Yorkshire pudding, 'Ox-Tail Soup', Roast Beef, 'Milanese Sauce', Apple Sauce, all of which are also included in such a canonical work of English cuisine as the later editions of *Mrs. Beeton's Cookery Book* (1901).<sup>32</sup> On first glance, such recipes suggest that Abby Fisher was as deeply beholden to the culinary conventions of England as Wheatley was to its literary conventions. And yet, whereas such conventions largely dictate Wheatley's poems, being undermined only through significant omissions and the sheer fact of their author's racial and gender identity, in *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* all such English influences are radically balanced out by the inclusion of dishes derived from other sources. Most obviously, the dominance of European culinary convention is checked by the inclusion in *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* of dishes originating from that West Africa provenance which, in Gayle and Loggins's fundamentally essentialist purview, would also have supplied Wheatley's verse with a range of more racially "authentic" cultural forms. For example, Fisher's recipe for 'Ochra Gumbo' not only imports its central ingredient from West Africa but also both parts of its name, for, as Karen Hess observes: "Okra is native to Central Africa and was brought to the New World by way of the slave trade. *Okra* is derived from *nkru-ma*, its name in the Twi language of Ghana, according to Jessica B. Harris. *Gumbo*, its other name in English, comes from *kingombo* from Angola".<sup>33</sup> Thus, rather as "Lake Windermere" compresses three distinct language traditions into a single place-name that actually translates as "Lake Lake Lake", so Fisher's 'Ochra Gumbo' translates as "Okra Okra", and, in these twin etymologies, offers vital evidence that the dish itself derives from an African source.

Abby Fisher's recipes are not only interesting as a historical document of African retention, however. They do not simply record a cuisine fossilised by the Middle Passage, and nor are they as straitjacketed by a tradition inherited from Africa as Wheatley's poems are by the suffocating legacy of European verse.

Rather, to the classically African version of 'Ochra Gumbo' – which, in its etymologies and ingredients, retains great fidelity to a Gold Coast provenance – *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* adds another kind of gumbo, or Creole, in which the geographically diverse cookery traditions that gained representation in the South constitute a new template for the infinite fusions of a new, unequivocally American cuisine. That is to say, the occasional cultural exchanges evident in Wheatley's verse multiply in Fisher's recipes, to which can be applied Paul Gilroy's description of the former poems as "complex, compound formations" that demand "to be evaluated on their own terms". Another gumbo of diverse cultural flavours and fusions, Fisher's recipes, too, "should not be valued only as means to observe the durability of African elements or dismissed as an inadequate mixture". Rather, the "legacy" of fusion disclosed by artefacts like this emergent cuisine is "most valuable as a "mix, a hybrid. Its recombinant form is indebted to its 'parent' cultures but remains assertively and insubordinately a bastard."<sup>34</sup>

Cultural "bastardy" of this kind, via which Gilroy radically translates familial tropes of illegitimacy into a newly triumphant hybridisation, is exemplified throughout *What Mrs. Fisher Knows*, and is evidenced, for example, by Fisher's recipe for succotash and other Native American dishes. Yet it is highlighted equally powerfully by her recipes for such classic soul food dishes as fried chicken, sweet potato pie and cornbread. For, although these three dishes have all recently been incorporated by Sheila Ferguson, Ntozake Shange and Jessica B. Harris into cookbooks which also emphasise African retention, none, however, possess an African antecedent so clear as Okra Gumbo and are, instead, the products of African-American culinary invention in the South. For example, Abby Fisher's recipe for Sweet Potato Pie fuses the English tradition of custard- and tart-cooking, documented in Mrs. Beeton's cookbooks, with West African cookery's extensive use of yams and other tubers to produce a dish which is one part African, one part European, but wholly American. This signal dish, as such, radically exchanges European, African, and American forms, suggestively encapsulating many of the tensions between assimilation and autonomy that nuance much African-American cultural production, in ways to which my discussion of Wright's oeuvre returns. Dishes like these reveal that the cultural style practised by Fisher was less concerned than Wheatley's verse to replicate Old World traditions (whether African or European), and was, instead, eager to experiment both with this inherited

template and with new ingredients to produce dishes of an unquestionably American provenance.<sup>35</sup>

That *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* offers a new, innovative and multicultural form of cuisine, which strikingly resembles such modern celebrations of ethnic American cooking as Dorinda Hafner's *United Tastes of America* (1997), is confirmed by the difficulties that Abby Fisher's transcribers faced when recording her recipes. For instance, these transcribers bracketed almost a fifth of the recipes of *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* into a section marked 'Miscellaneous', thus revealing that the prevailing vocabulary of much white American culinary culture was inadequate when faced with Fisher's intercontinental bricolage of forms. That the 'Miscellaneous' section indeed served as a sanctuary for those innovative dishes which were actually integral to Fisher's culinary practice is demonstrated by the appearance within it of a raft of recipes that can be more readily associated with twentieth-century American cookery than with its nineteenth-century European counterpart. Whereas 'Yorkshire Pudding' and 'Rice' belong under a familiarly English category entitled 'Puddings', for example, 'Stuffed Tomatoes', 'Beef a la Mode' and 'Terrapin Stew' all appear as part of a 'Miscellaneous' section which can subsequently be approached as a ragbag assortment of an emergent national cuisine. Even succotash appears within this section, Fisher's transcribers' mistranslation of this unique Native American dish as 'Circuit Hash' enabling them to place it alongside 'Corned Beef Hash' despite the many differences between the two dishes.<sup>36</sup> Nor is this the only mistranslation which Fisher's transcribers place under the 'Miscellaneous' section: a recipe for Jambalaya, for example, is recorded in *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* as 'Jumberlie'. This particular mistranslation reveals, not only that Fisher had retained a South Carolinian lilt, but also that her culinary sensibility was not yet catalogued and had not yet been cemented, by the opening of restaurants or by the publication of newspaper articles, into national public consciousness.

One effect of these mistranslations is to impose a formal distance between *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* and Fisher herself – to problematise, that is, the relationship between this published text and its frontispiece's claims to have been authored by Abby Fisher. For, although these claims present *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* as a contribution to a published as well as to a culinary tradition, the lack of authorial control betrayed by the text's multiple mistranslations at the same time disrupt and complicate its position within the canon of African-American literary

production. They suggest, in other words, that the cookbook rightfully belongs less to this published canon in general than to that problematic branch within it which consists of white listeners' transcripts of the oral accounts of African Americans. The transcribed background of *What Mrs. Fisher Knows*, which recalls Joel Chandler Harris's contemporaneous use of transcription as a dramatic conceit of the Uncle Remus stories, thus makes it difficult to establish whether the words that this text presents in black and white are indeed those that Fisher uttered. And this, together with the text's representation of its recipes in the succinct and almost laboratorial, systematic method pioneered by Mrs Beeton, redirect our attention to the dishes themselves, to the foods that these untrustworthy words describe. Although manifestly an important contribution to the establishment of a tradition of publication by African Americans, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows*' greatest significance thus lies in those innovative foods which contemporary white American language, apparently, struggled to accommodate. Even as it records some dishes that bear a "multicultural" influence, and others that witness an African influence which potentially endorse "Afrocentrism", nowhere in this text are either of these twentieth-century coinages employed, and its dishes remain, somewhat misunderstood, part of a cuisine awaiting a publishable vocabulary.

That the dishes which *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* represents often appear to seize on the diversity of the American population demonstrates that Fisher's cultural practice could, in fact, hardly be *less* conventional than that of Wheatley's. Unlike Wheatley's verse, Fisher's recipes were conventional only in the sense that they comprised a body of knowledge which the American population already tended to associate with women in general and with African-American women in particular. Whereas the supremacy writing had assumed in white American culture partly stifled Phillis Wheatley, forcing her to replicate classic form and thus prove herself a worthy poet, the complementary neglect of cooking actually freed Fisher from convention and allowed her to create a radical, innovative body of cultural production.

And yet to argue that Abby Fisher's recipes merit as much attention as the poems of Phillis Wheatley is to deal solely with their artistic status as innovative, pioneering cultural works. Certainly, it is not to deal with the many more practical, socio-economic factors which Henry Louis Gates cites to support his assertion of the

supreme usefulness of literacy to African Americans. That is to say, Gates's essay speaks not only of the aesthetics of Wheatley's cultural contribution, but also of writing's political uses, arguing that literary was a "commodity" which "enlightened antislavery advocates [... used] to determine and to demonstrate in the most public way just how far removed from the ape the African was in fact." Gates's argument thus shifts away from assessing the cultural or artistic value of Wheatley's literacy, to a new, socio-economic focus, which judges writing according to its capacity to advance the cause of freedom. This shift in emphasis implies that, unlike cooking or any other cultural activity, writing acted as a weapon in African Americans' fight against slavery and, later, racial injustice. Unlike cooking, that is, writing stands revealed in Gates's essay as a radical form of knowledge which enabled slaves to achieve: the over-ordering and siphoning of plantation stock; the forgery of identity papers, and thus the impersonation, once away from the plantation, of freed blacks; and the publication, upon arrival in the North, of pamphlets and narratives that would contribute to Abolitionism. All such reasons, Gates contends, coalesced in the slavery era to create a situation in which "learning to write, as measured against an eighteenth-century scale of culture and society, was an irreversible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom even larger than physical manumission."<sup>17</sup>

This is not a claim often made for cooking. Yet the crucial point here, is that this does not mean that it might not be. After all, if Karen Hess is correct, and the illiterate Abby Fisher began her life as a slave in South Carolina, then we must ask what enabled her to make her own "irreversible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom even larger than physical manumission"? One answer to this question is, of course, the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet it is interesting that Gates's formulation of the freedom which literacy could allow to be gained associates this freedom with something which is at once "larger" and less specified than the literal unchaining of Emancipation. Possibly this association – which begs the question of just what freedom could possibly have seemed "larger" to slaves than manumission – justifies Hazel Carby's condemnation of Gates for repeatedly collapsing the very different conditions of slavery and sharecropping in order to maintain slave culture's position as the ultimate source of the African-American literary canon. That is to say, Gates's minimising of Emancipation here potentially exemplifies what Carby has characterised as his tendency to conflate the "two very distinct modes of production, slavery and sharecropping".<sup>18</sup> Carby's criticisms here

are telling, yet in the course of making them she tends to adopt an unnecessarily oppositional stance, counteracting Gates's negation of the differences between slavery and sharecropping by herself negating their similarities. For, despite Carby's intervention, it remains possible that slavery and sharecropping might not have appeared as "two very distinct modes of production" to the ex-slave sharecropper. Gates's description reminds us that Emancipation not only failed to free most African Americans from the tortuous picking of "cotton", but also led to a new racial system which still sought to deny them the individual Enlightenment that can be understood as a "larger" manumission. And, if black freedom can indeed be understood in the de facto terms of labour and of an individual Enlightenment as much as in the juridical promise of Emancipation itself, then, it is clear, cooking freed Abby Fisher as much as writing did Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown or Phillis Wheatley. Cooking was, indeed, the skill that enabled Fisher to take her own "irreversible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom even larger than physical manumission."

This is confirmed by the fact that, in the guesswork that Karen Hess is forced to complete in order to produce a sequential biography for Abby Fisher, each suggested, speculated detail emphasises the usefulness of cooking skills. "Cooks have always been welcome passengers," writes Hess when suggesting that Fisher's knowledge might have gained her and her husband a free train journey from the Atlantic to the Pacific seaboard. Likewise, Hess implies that, even if Fisher had remained in South Carolina, then the prizing of black cooks by local whites would have made it unlikely that she would have toiled in the "cotton field." Although such speculation is open to challenge, Hess's emphasis on the usefulness of Fisher's cooking knowledge nevertheless correlates with biographical details that *are* known: that she and her husband left South Carolina as recently Emancipated slaves, and then re-emerged in San Francisco having secured a "larger" freedom, apparently, via food. Thus, if Phillis Wheatley's success is cited by Gates as evidence of the political power of black writing, the preface to *What Mrs. Fisher Knows*, with its curious conjunction of illiteracy and culinary prowess, reveals that freedom could be possible without it. Whereas Wheatley's experience confirms Du Bois's view of literacy as a passport by which the "mediaeval" mindset of manual labour might be left behind, Abby Fisher's experience disturbs the binary behind this viewpoint, indicating, with radical force, that manual labour might even be a freedom in itself.

The purpose of these comments is neither to place cooking and writing into a rivalry nor into equivalence with each other. It is to suggest neither that cooking was more useful to Abby Fisher's attempts to gain freedom and independence than writing was to Phillis Wheatley, nor that it was useful in an identical way. Rather, these comments simply seek to challenge a few assumptions regarding the uses to which cooking and writing have been put in African-American culture. That is to say, my earlier commentaries on structuralist theorisations of food, when allied with the comparison of Abby Fisher and Phillis Wheatley, seek to work towards a theory which, while recognising the enormous and significant differences between cooking and writing, nevertheless identify an affinity between them in the usefulness they held out to African Americans seeking freedom. For example, although writing's supremacy can seem confirmed in the way that illiteracy destabilises our own knowledge of Abby Fisher's biography, it is, however, *refuted* by illiteracy's failure to prevent Fisher from gaining a freedom from hard labour through her cooking skills. To compare unfavourably this freedom with the more renowned, because *written*, freedoms attained by Phillis Wheatley, is potentially to judge it according to the ease with which its course can be retrospectively compiled. It is far better to dispense with all cultural assumptions privileging literature and to approach instances of writing and cooking alike as cultural moments which, whether they result in a poem or a cake, are not in themselves superior or inferior to one another but which must be assessed on their own terms. Only after this new objectivity has been achieved can the decisive role that cooking knowledge played in Abby Fisher's attainment of freedom be properly acknowledged. Only from the basis of this new objectivity, that is, can we begin to acknowledge that, in certain circumstances, cooking can be just as politically provocative, artistically suggestive and socially useful as writing. Only then can we see that the underestimation in wider American culture of cooking as an art form actually meant that African Americans' practice of it was not subjected to the same stringent control that confronted Phillis Wheatley. With this new objectivity in mind, we can recognise that cooking actually freed Abby Fisher – freed her to synthesise a new cultural style which, rather like jazz, fused a distinctive African-American sensibility with old European and new multicultural styles. Throughout this thesis, the artistic, cultural, social and economic importance of cooking established by *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* is related to the meal scenes portrayed by Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright and

Toni Morrison. The cooks characterised by these three writers will be approached throughout as figures who, whether they are artistic, innovative, cruel or provocative, possess the same, immense power as cultural creators that Abby Fisher displays despite the questionable mediations of *What Mrs. Fisher Knows*. Cooking is therefore read throughout this thesis as a profoundly politicised, powerful and aesthetic form of cultural practice. It is seen, throughout, not as a something that is either inferior nor identical to writing, but as a cultural activity in which the manipulation of a spoon, knife or ladle can become as meaningful as the manipulation of a pen.

## B. Representation and Genre

And Whereas the having of Slaves taught to write or suffering them to be employed in Writing may be attended with great Inconveniencys Be it therefore Enacted by the authority aforesaid that all and every person and persons whatsoever who shall hereafter teach or Cause any Slave or Slaves to be taught to write or shall use or employ any Slave or Slaves as a Scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever hereafter [...] shall for every such offence forfeit the Sum of Fifteen pounds Sterling. [...]

And whatsoever Master Owner or Overseer shall permit or suffer [...] Feastings of Strange Negroes or Slaves in their Plantations shall forfeit Thirty Shillings Sterling for every such Offence upon Conviction[.]

**'Act for the better Ordering and Governing of Negroes'**  
**Royal Legislature of Georgia (1755)**

But our children shall be fed, and the Black Panther Party will not let the malady of hunger keep our children down any longer. [...] Hunger is one of the means of oppression and it must be halted.

**Black Panther Newsletter, (1968)<sup>39</sup>**

The most cursory reading of African-American political history confirms that representation, though in theory a right, has in daily practice been a privilege. Cross-sections of the racial demographics of any given Congress in United States history reveal that, notwithstanding the brief and partial hiatuses of

Reconstruction and Affirmative Action, African Americans have politically conformed to Ralph Ellison's association of blackness and invisibility. Difficulties facing all minority groups within mass democratic societies, no less than overt racism within government ranks, have meant that African-American access to political representation, although ostensibly feasible Constitutionally, has in effect functioned as a negotiable privilege which those in power have withheld, conferred, or rescinded.

As an example of what Mick Gidley terms the "association" between artistic and political representation, the fitful course of African-American political progress is paralleled by African-American culture in general and by black culinary and writerly practices in particular.<sup>40</sup> For the fact that artistic representation has also often functioned as a negotiable privilege – as a bargaining chip that is at times offered and at others withheld – is proven by the above citations. The first of these is a law passed by the Georgian Royal Legislature in 1755, which was self-explanatorily entitled an 'Act for the better Ordering and Governing of Negroes'. The clauses cited above, which restricted slaves' opportunities to practice writing and cooking respectively, were merely two among the many strictures that this law imposed against the few outlets of cultural expression open to contemporary slave culture. Although not atypical of laws passed elsewhere, the severity of this particular act is also explained by the Georgian legislature's desire to compensate for an earlier ambivalence on slavery and so secure a regime capable of treating black rebellion as stringently as that of Virginia. Evidently, foremost among the tactics by which this legislature intended to bring about its disciplinary objective was the attempt to control the practice of both cooking and writing within the region's emergent African *and* American slave culture. Identifying cooking and writing as sources for potential rebellion, the Georgian act of 1755 thus concentrated upon restricting that dangerously autonomous Gullah culture which had grown out of what Peter Kolchin describes as the colony's "preponderance of blacks, [...] geographic isolation, and owner absenteeism".<sup>41</sup>

It is significant that Gullah cooking culture, the continuing vibrancy of which is celebrated in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988), also extended north into South Carolina and, conceivably, influenced Abby Fisher's schooling in southern cookery.<sup>42</sup> At the very least, these Georgian laws against slave cooking and writing (which remained in place throughout the antebellum era) limited African Americans' literary and culinary ambitions respectively, transforming the cultural

forms which Fisher and Wheatley practised into covert and punishable acts. Debarring “the having of Slaves taught to write” and “Feastings of Strange Negroes”, these laws effectively circumscribed any representations of the kind which Wheatley and Fisher pioneered via their published recipes and poems.

In the process, these laws confirm that African-American access to a national audience via publication is indeed akin to political representation, that it, too, indeed often functions as a negotiable privilege that controlling authorities can withhold or confer rescind at will. For they show that, as the agencies of freedoms gained by Fisher and Wheatley, cooking and writing often occurred in defiance of limiting racial assumptions which, although encapsulated in Georgian colonial legislature, were frequently national in breadth.

Polemical pamphlets issued by the Black Panthers in 1968 to promote their 1968 ‘Breakfasts for Schoolchildren’ initiative, a lengthier discussion of which is included in my thesis conclusion, present an interesting juncture at this point. For, by so repeatedly denouncing hunger as a “means” rather than symptom of “oppression”, this Black Panther rhetoric effectively insists that the disciplinary limitation of African-American cooking witnessed in Georgian legislature in some form survived the ostensible liberations of Emancipation, Reconstruction and Civil Rights intact. Nor is this all: via its valorisation of education, and via its own exemplification and display of literacy’s polemical capacities, the rhetoric of the Black Panthers implicitly asserts that African-American writing remains likewise subject to a continuous if de facto circumscription. Of the imposed absences of illiteracy and hunger, in other words, the first is filled by the Black Panthers’ polemical reaffirmation of writing, and the second by the countervailing and compensatory acts of cooking to which these self-consciously defiant words refer. In the process, and rather as in our earlier case studies of Wheatley and Fisher, cooking and writing emerge from Black Panther rhetoric as complementary cultural practices that mutually defy those absences of illiteracy and malnutrition which, it is claimed, are imposed by racist law.

Consistencies between the 1960s situation denounced by Black Panther polemic and the colonial situation established by Georgian law, as such, form a political framework to which the treatment of hunger and cooking offered by the three novels discussed in this thesis in different ways respond. For, in dramatically different ways and for dramatically different reasons, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Black Boy (American Hunger)* and *Tar Baby* all approach the nutritional

dissatisfaction that Doris Witt terms “black hunger” as a sign of inequalities caused by racism, capitalism, or a combination of the two. As an emptiness that awaits foods rather as illiteracy awaits words, hunger duly functions in each of these novels as a metaphor for other absences – for absences of representation, of those published works, those political positions by which other social groups within US society have traditionally found an influential voice.

Given that these novels repeatedly express desires for representation and for the fulfilment of absence that it heralds, it is fitting that they should also number among those African-American literary texts which force into the consciousness of the national canon foods that have hitherto remained invisible.

Dishes and ingredients used in soul food cooking, which are referred to only briefly in earlier novels such as Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892), in each of these three novels receive extensive representation. Just as one-pot meals, Jambalaya and Gumbo repeatedly appear in Hurston’s writings, and just as pig-feet, biscuit and watermelon are instrumental to many of Morrison’s novelistic scenes, so Wright’s autobiography refers repeatedly to fried chicken, molasses, hush puppies, fried fish sandwiches, meal, pork and beans, and buttermilk.

The proliferation of such food imagery in these novels also explains why my thesis subtitle also includes the term “genre”. For the inclusion of this term is intended to perform two limiting functions, which, combined, specify the scope of this thesis. The first limitation invoked by this term is of a strictly literary nature, and restricts the archive of this thesis to the “genre” of the long narrative, under which category *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*), and *Tar Baby* can each be grouped. Given that these narratives themselves boast a raft of references to foods, however, the thesis subtitle also serves to limit the following discussions to representations that fall into the “genre” of the meal scene. “Genre”, in this sense, thus limits the scope of this thesis to meals – to breakfasts, dinners, and teas – around which families or other social groups congregate, converse, celebrate and argue. Objections raised earlier to the direct application by certain scholars of the language of linguistics to food possibly complicate this culinary use of “genre”, if only because the term is most commonly associated with the field of literature. For these reasons, it must be emphasised here that this use of “genre” implies no consistency between the meal and the text, but merely refers to a particular kind of food event, to a particular social form in which the ingestion of

food is central. Thus, to specify what I mean by the “genre” of the meal, it is now necessary to turn to the final word of the thesis title: “ceremony”.

### C. Ceremony

People should see to it that in every home [...] a certain ceremony, a certain importance, be attached to partaking of the food. See to it, in the first place, that there is a time, thoroughly understood by father and by mother, thoroughly understood by each member of the family, when each meal is to be served. Then the head of the family should see to it that the food is not only prepared in the most tempting way, but that it is served in the most attractive and beautiful way. See to it that plenty of time is given to the preparation of the table, to the cleanliness of the cloth, to the decoration of the table, and, above all things, give attention to the place where food is to be taken.

Booker T. Washington, ‘A Sunday Evening Talk’ (1910)<sup>43</sup>

The term “ceremony”, as understood in this thesis, encompasses any food event to which its participants and organisers assign more than merely nutritional significance. Accommodating the celebratory meals represented in Zora Neale Hurston’s novels as well as the institutional and familial dinners represented in Richard Wright’s autobiography, this broad understanding of “ceremony” encompasses the religious and the secular, the private and the public, and the civic and the familial.

Among the reasons for the broadness of this understanding of “ceremony” is a desire to disconnect the term from the many misleading connotations that now surround it. It is, in other words, to counteract those popular associations that have limited the meaning of “ceremony” – and, to a similar extent, of “ritual” – to religious aspects and to an anthropological interest assumed to lie exclusively in the cultural practices of pre-industrial societies. For, given that the three novels dealt with by this thesis concern societies at various stages of industrialisation, these limiting associations are inevitably counterproductive. More than this, however, any association between the ceremonial and the pre-industrial, no less than equally stereotyped simplifications of anthropological archives, become

especially harmful here due to this thesis's engagement with the writings of Zora Neale Hurston. After all, such simplifying associations, which have been undermined by the actual practice of anthropologists since Franz Boas, can potentially lead to a reductive and generalised interpretation that sees *all* Hurston's work, including her novels, as sentimental valorisations of southern black communities falsely characterised as pre-industrial. Residual associations between "ceremony" and the pre-industrial must, therefore, be jettisoned altogether in order to facilitate the following chapter's interpretation of Hurston's Eatonville less as a recollection of how life *was* in the South than it is a projection of how life *might* be.

Assistance in this lies in the fact that the anthropologist who was for a time Hurston's mentor, Franz Boas, himself complicated the clear distinctions between the industrial and pre-industrial often imagined in popular Western culture. Certainly, Boas never associated "ceremony" exclusively with the latter form of society. Rather, his writings consistently present his distinctive conceptualisation of ceremony – which characterised it as an event with a "partly political [...] end" that "the tribe, or large parts of the tribe, join in" – as applicable to all communities, including those of the industrialised West.<sup>44</sup> Boas's view of the ceremony as a prearranged event which extends to all or most members of any given social unit a frame and opportunities for cohesion as well as dissension, as such, endorses the breadth by which the term will be understood in this thesis. Indeed, Boas's view of ceremony is actually far broader than those posited by some of his anthropological followers, and certainly extends beyond Ruth Benedict's definition of the term as a form of "pageantry" which produces a "nonreligious satisfaction".<sup>45</sup> Unlike such a specific definition, which only accommodates the grand barbecue served in Hurston's Eatonville, Boas's broader conceptualisation also incorporates the less ornate Sunday dinners and breakfasts served in *Black Boy (American Hunger)* and *Tar Baby* respectively, enabling all three to be loosely grouped under a single designation.

This broadening is further facilitated by Booker T. Washington's definition of "ceremony", which he articulated in an address to the female students of Tuskegee cited earlier. Among other things, this definition confirms some of his assumptions about gender and, in particular, exemplifies the very Victorian way in which Washington's idealisation of a model wife at some point coalesces and blurs into his idealisation of a model cook. Obviously, this thesis does not intend to

reiterate or lend credence to such gender assumptions: the desire here to re-evaluate activities historically dominated by women by no means translates into an endorsement of the patriarchal social codes, promoted by Washington, that led to this involuntary dominance in the first place. Yet, if we forgo the sexism of Washington's speech, it remains possible to draw from it an understanding that does extend our understanding of ceremony beyond Benedict's "pageantry". "Ceremony", as conceived by Washington, instead endorses Boas's broader conceptualisation, referring to any meal into which more than average time and labour has been invested.

This new understanding enables this thesis to concentrate upon those episodes in Hurston, Wright and Morrison's novels that portray Sunday dinners, barbecues, romantic meals and Christmas dinners. In other words, the new definition means that this thesis need not be limited to the scarce few meal scenes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Black Boy (American Hunger)* and *Tar Baby* which are sufficiently public or extravagant as to qualify, under more stringent, conventional definitions, as "ceremonial". Equally, however, the new definition frees the thesis from any obligation to discuss each single reference to food made by these three novels. Instead, Washington's redefinition of "ceremony" enables the thesis to adopt the middle course of focusing on those scenes in these novels that describe meals that are neither exceptionally indulgent *nor* mundanely ordinary. It allows the thesis to concentrate on those meals depicted in the three novels over which character and author alike seem to pour, salivate and linger. This concentration is useful because, although these more broadly ceremonial meals are not necessarily extravagant, they all nevertheless promise the temporary satisfaction of hunger. Whether public or familial – whether they consist of a slain hog or a platter of fried chicken – each of these ceremonial meals is distinguished, not only by the extra time and labour invested in them, but because they offer or pretend to offer extra *food*. For the other assumption made by Washington in his speech is that a ceremonial meal can only qualify as *truly* ceremonial if it *truly* satisfies – if it is "prepared in the most tempting way", and "served in the ~~most~~ most attractive and beautiful way". In other words, this understanding of "ceremony" compounds my interest in this thesis with those food episodes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, and *Tar Baby* in which the satisfaction of hunger is promised and, often, achieved. These episodes, in which the hunger our three writers present as imposed is usually transcended.

momentarily transcend economic circumstances, enabling African-American cooks to pool a community's resources, or contemplate a donated hog, and produce from such materials a cure for a malnutrition that has become utterly politicised. These ceremonial meals, as such, mark moments when the political resistance foreshadowed by *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* is finally realised, in writing, as a gesture of defiance.

## End Notes

- 1 For prefatory references, see Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Dover, 1995), pp.22-23, p.9.
- 2 Angela Davis, 'The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective' in *Women, Race and Class* (London: Women's Press, 1984) pp.222-244.
- 3 Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.10.
- 4 See Phillis Wheatley, 'From *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*' in *The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature* (New York and London: Norton, 1997), ed. by Henry Louis Gates Jr and Nellie Y. McKay, pp.164-177 (p.167); and Abby Fisher, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking: Soups, Pickles, Preserves, etc.* (Bedford, MA: Applewood, 1995), ed. by Karen Hess, p.v.
- 5 Plato, 'Gorgias' in *Plato on Rhetoric and Language: Four Key Dialogues* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1999), ed. by Jean Nienkamp, trans. by Donald Zeyl, pp. 85-164 (p.101).
- 6 See: E. N. Anderson, 'Traditional Medical Values of Food' in *Food and Culture: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), ed. by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, pp.80-91; and Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp.98-118.
- 7 Booker T. Washington, 'A Letter to John Robert E. Lee, Nov 2 1909' in *The Booker T. Washington Papers: Volume 10, 1909-11* (Urbana, Chicago and

- London: University of Illinois Press, 1981), ed. by Louis Harlan and Raymond Smock, p. 188.
- 8 W. E. B. Du Bois, 'Education and Work' in *The Seventh Son: the Thought and Writings of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Random House, 1971), Vol. 1, ed. by Julius Lester, pp.558-576 (p.575).
- 9 'Education and Work', p.565.
- 10 Cornel West, 'W. E. B. Du Bois: An Interpretation' in *Africana: the Encyclopaedia of the African and African-American Experience* (New York: Basic Civitas, 1999), ed. by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., pp.1967-1982 (pp.1967-1968).
- 11 'W. E. B. Du Bois: An Interpretation', p.1967.
- 12 Booker T. Washington, 'A Sunday Evening Talk' in *The Booker T. Washington Papers: Volume 10, 1909-11*, pp.298-303 (pp.301-302).
- 13 Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption' in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, pp.20-27 (pp.23-24).
- 14 Roland Barthes, p.26.
- 15 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966), pp.37-38, p.2.
- 16 Mary Douglas, 'Deciphering a Meal' in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, pp.36-54 (p.37).
- 17 Quoted in 'Deciphering a Meal', p.37.
- 18 'Deciphering a Meal', p.53.
- 19 *What Mrs. Fisher Knows*, p.v.
- 20 Karen Hess, 'What We Know about Mrs. Abby Fisher and Her Cooking' in *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* pp.75-94 (pp.76-78).
- 21 *Black Women in America: an Historical Encyclopaedia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), ed. by Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkly Brown and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn. Abby Fisher's absence from the historical record is confirmed by her omission from encyclopaedias published after the re-issue of her cookbook in 1994, for instance, *Africana: the Encyclopaedia of the African and African-American Experience* and *The Dictionary of Global Culture* (London: Penguin, 1998), ed. by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr..
- 22 Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the 'Racial' Self* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.5.

- 23 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p.38.
- 24 C. K. Doreski, *Writing America Black: Race Rhetoric in the Public Sphere* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 25 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), p.140.
- 26 *Figures in Black*, p.79.
- 27 Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1991), pp.61-138.
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- 28 *Playing in the Dark*, p.13.
- 29 See Joel Chandler Harris, 'Introduction' in *Bandanna Ballads* (New York: Doubleday, 1899), no pagination; and *Black Hunger*, p.23.
- 30 See Addison Gayle Jr., *The Way of the New World: The Black Novel in America* (New York: Anchor, 1976), p.xiii, p.5; and Vernon Loggins, *The Negro Author: His Development in America to 1900* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1964), p.16.
- 31 Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.62.
- 32 Mrs. Beeton, *Mrs. Beeton's Cookery Book: a Household Guide all about Cookery, Household Work, Marketing, Prices, Provisions, Trussing, Serving, Carving, Menus, etc. etc.* (London: Ward, 1901).
- 33 Karen Hess, *The Carolina Rice Kitchen: The African Connection* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), p.111. For research into African retention in American food, see John Edward Philips, 'The African Heritage of White America' in *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp.225-239 (pp.229-235).
- 34 Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.117.
- 35 See Ntozake Shange, *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can* (Boston: Beacon, 1998); Sheila Ferguson, *Soul Food: Classic Cuisine from the Deep South* (New York: Grove, 1989); and Jessica B. Harris, *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking* (New York: Fireside, 1999).

- 36 For mistranslations of Succotash and Jambalaya respectively, see *What Mrs. Fisher Knows*, p.69, p.57. For a classification of these dishes according to a modern understanding of American ethnicity, see Dorinda Hafner, *United Tastes of America* (London: Ebury, 1997), p.135, p.15.
- 37 *Figures in Black*, pp.4-17.
- 38 Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), p.147.
- 39 See 'An Act for the better Ordering and Governing Negroes and other Slaves in this Province' in *The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia: Volume XVIII: Statutes Enacted by the Royal Legislature of Georgia from its First Session in 1754 to 1768* (New York: AMS, 1970), ed. by Allen D. Candler, pp.102-144 (p.131, p.136); and 'To Feed Our Children' in *The Black Panthers Speak* (New York: Da Capo, 1995), ed. by Philip S. Foner, pp.168-169 (pp.168-169).
- 40 Mick Gidley, "Representing Others: An Introduction" in *Representing Others: White Views of Indigenous Peoples* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1992), ed. by Mick Gidley, pp.1-13 (p.2).
- 41 Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery 1619-1877* (London: Penguin, 1993), p.48.
- 42 Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day* (New York: Vintage, 1993).
- 43 Booker T. Washington, 'A Sunday Evening Talk', p.303.
- 44 Franz Boas, 'The Religion of American Indians' in *A Franz Boas Reader: The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883-1911* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pp.257-267 (p.266).
- 45 Ruth Benedict, 'Religion' in *General Anthropology* (Boston: Heath, 1938), ed. by Franz Boas, pp.627-665 (p.656).

*Chapter 1*

**Orange County: Citrus Fruit and Barbecue in  
Zora Neale Hurston's Eatonville**

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Of the three texts discussed in this thesis, the representation of food offered by *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1938) is, ostensibly, the least politicised. Certainly, Zora Neale Hurston's renowned novel issues no statement upon food or hunger to match the ideological stridency of those put forth by *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (1944), or by the black nationalistic dialogue of Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981). Unlike the cast of Morrison's novel – which includes the “fugitive” Son Green, who launches an attack upon the domestic arrangements of his white capitalist host Valerian Street – the characters of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* include no such ideologue to lambaste the inequities of Floridan life. Most appear to draw from the same parochial worldview, and certainly none mention those contemporary movements like Garveyism and the NAACP that were challenging the segregation system which had so decisively shaped all quarters of southern society. Unlike *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, meanwhile, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers no Marxist rhetoric, but principally presents a homespun narrative voice whose concern seems to be to offer guidance and wisdom as opposed to ideological opinion. This individualising and, apparently, depoliticising approach is exemplified in the novel's opening sentences: “Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men. Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth.”<sup>1</sup> On first reading, the mythic personification, the gender generalisations, and the appeal to eternity (“they sail forever”) of this revelatory introduction announce a self-contained

narrative concerned with the “timeless” values of love and individual ambition more than with any doctrinal agenda. Yet even here, even as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* announces itself as a romantic adventure cast in fabular mould, implications unfold which, although not spelling out an ideology as boldly as *American Hunger* or *Tar Baby*, nonetheless trace a new political outlook. Even in these innocuous sentences, the feminist implications that Alice Walker identifies as such an innovative aspect of Hurston’s oeuvre become visible.<sup>2</sup> For the innocence of these sentences masks their declaration of a new and radical approach to African-American women. It discreetly disguises their suggestion that black women possess a mastery of memory superior to that of men, and, by implication, that they comprise a superior repository for cultural retention. It softens a contention that the biographies of black women cannot be accommodated within the navigation and conquest tropes by which the narrative, employing a familiar body of marine imagery, epitomises male ambition.

These sentences also exemplify a prose style which, since the critical rediscovery of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* during the 1970s, has often been characterised, whether Hurston wanted it to or not, as the result of a singularly African-American form of literary production. Consequently, even as these sentences exemplify the “conjure” Houston A. Baker characterises as an “African-American cultural sign” that “unites mythomania [... with] classical cultural performance”, so this racialised literary classification alerts us to risks involved in approaching even naïve moments of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as straightforwardly apolitical.<sup>3</sup>

It remains the case, however, that a political reading of Hurston’s novel cannot be sustained with quite the ease and confidence by which we might classify *Black Boy (American Hunger)* as Marxist or Morrison’s *Son Green* as a black nationalist. Whereas the political motives of Wright’s autobiography and *Tar Baby* are manifest, anyone still wanting to read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as an innocent and apolitical romance, arguably, can. The radicalism of Janie Starks’ life-story is activated via authorial deed rather than claim – is accomplished, for example, via its mediation of African-American dialect; via its sympathetic rendering of black women; and, above all, via its affirmation of a female sexuality that disrupts patriarchal associations of the ideal wife and the ideal cook – and thus its delivery of a political outlook remains unpronounced, a performative effect rather than a declared objective of the text.

Given this, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* might appear an odd place at which to begin this thesis. As a text, it might appear of less use than *Black Boy* (*American Hunger*) or *Tar Baby* in supporting this thesis's central postulation that African-American literature frequently politicises food and interprets black hunger as an avoidable condition. Particularly, the novel's scenes of feasting in Eatonville – scenes dealt with throughout this chapter, and given specific attention in its third section – might seem an unpromising springboard from which to launch this inquiry into African-American experiences of hunger and malnutrition. Why, then, begin here?

One reason is that the very absence of ideological commentary in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* – its very status as a romance – reveals that perceptions of black hunger as avoidable and thus as ineluctably political have never been the exclusive property of overtly radical or political African-American writers. That the politicisation of hunger in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is achieved via characterisation rather than rhetoric reveals, in other words, that such politicisation actually belonged to a familiar and received array of assumptions regarding African-American experience. For *Their Eyes Were Watching God* indeed subtly implies what Wright and Morrison insist (and via such subtlety itself becomes insistent): that African-American struggles for food, since they almost invariably took place amid an abundant harvest, were necessarily imposed, and interpretable as a symbol of racial injustice.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* most clearly signals this political interpretation in its representation of Eatonville as an all-black town from which hunger has been magically expelled.

This magical expulsion of hunger and its attendant ailments must be considered alongside those other civic aspects which isolate the Eatonville of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a fictionalised town exceptionally unlike and preferable to African-American life as experienced in the contemporary South. Ever since Wright's *New Masses* review attacked the novel as a form of "minstrelsy [...which] carries no theme, no message, no thought", such idealisation has attracted allegations that Hurston effectively massaged her white patrons' sensibilities, effacing the reality of Jim Crow, in order to secure publishing success.<sup>4</sup> Wright's argument has recently been extended by Hazel Carby, who characterises Eatonville as a "mythic space" which effects a "displacement of the

urban and [of] issues of black American migration". This displacement, Carby contends, "denies the transformative power of both historical and urban consciousness".<sup>5</sup> Complaints like these, which can appear to assume that Hurston's rejection of realism inevitably leads to a wholesale rejection of politics, will here be substituted for a more fruitful approach. Here, although publishing pressures will always be acknowledged, Eatonville's idealisation will not be solely accounted for by the pragmatic self-censorship to which Hurston was occasionally compelled. Instead, this chapter will draw from the positive view offered by Susan Willis's *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (1987), which approaches Eatonville as the focus, not of evasive political displacement, but of an intentional "utopian fantasy".<sup>6</sup> Using Willis's description as a springboard, this chapter relates the apparently magical improvements of Hurston's imagined African-American community to those achieved in preceding utopian fictions. This is not to say that what follows classifies Eatonville alongside such canonical English utopias as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1551) and Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1624). Rather, Willis's use of "utopia" essentially divests the term of its residual canonical connotations and returns to its original Greek senses of *outopia* as "no place" and of *eutopia* as "good" or "fortunate place".<sup>7</sup> For Eatonville's remarkable absence of hunger and violence indeed qualify it not only as more "fortunate" than elsewhere in the contemporary black South but as *so much more fortunate* as to loosen its ostensibly pinpointed position upon the Floridan map and transform it into a "no place". With Eatonville's expulsion of poverty and hunger, in other words, the thread connecting this town to its factual referent frays and – although the realistic verisimilitude of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* never unfurls altogether – eventually stretches sufficiently as to qualify it as an *outopia*. Moreover, the fact that these improvements lack any fantastic or supernatural aspect fails to disqualify Eatonville from the utopian genre and associates it, instead, with specific examples within this tradition that have shared Hurston's emphases upon the achievable. Indeed, a reason why the following section extensively refers to *New Atlantis* is because, despite its manifest differences with *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Bacon's utopia has been characterised by Krishan Kumar as "ultimately, in the foreseeable future, realizable". Equivalently realisable aspects emerge in other utopian projections – in, for instance, Norman Geras's socialist advocacy of a "minimum utopia" that demands "a simple sufficiency of the means and conveniences of life [...] a release from extreme want

and toil”.<sup>5</sup> Read in this light, it can be seen that, since the achievable aspects of Hurston’s jettisoning of hunger fail to distinguish her works from utopian tradition, no contradiction in fact exists in the designation – *achievable utopia* – by which this chapter henceforth refers to Eatonville.

Advantages in describing the Eatonville of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as an achievable utopia lie in the fact that it releases us from the obligation of glossing over Hurston’s apparent airbrushing of violence, poverty and political extremism. This designation, in other words, allows us to accept that Wright was correct to identify a certain implausibility in Hurston’s second novel, but to then suggest that this implausibility might be better attributed to an underlying utopian motive than to an alleged “minstrelsy”. Furthermore, serious consideration of Eatonville’s idealisation (as opposed to a blanket condemnation of it) shows that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* indeed implies what Wright and Morrison insist – that it indeed surrounds black hunger amidst an abundant American harvest and thus reveals it to be unnecessary. The approach achieves this since it enables us to draw from Terry Eagleton’s recent definition of utopia “as a way of interrogating the present which unlocks its dominative logic by discerning the dim outline of an alternative already implicit within it.” “Authentic” utopianism, Eagleton suggests, is concerned “with that which is encoded within the logic of a system which, extrapolated in a certain direction, has the power to undo it.”<sup>9</sup> As an “interrogation” of a Jim Crow “present” vitiated by black hunger, the foods offered by Hurston’s Eatonville as such exemplify Eagleton’s definition since they, too, trace the “dim outline” already “implicit” in a surrounding yet factually inaccessible American harvest. That the absence of hunger constitutes Eatonville’s central utopian claim thus reveals how deeply Hurston’s representations were steeped in southern reality and, accordingly, that they can be approached as implicit political commentaries upon this reality. In this way, a notion vehemently propounded in *Black Boy (American Hunger)* is signalled with great subtlety as Hurston portrays a town from which not only malnutrition but also the racism *now shown to be responsible for it* have been sidestepped. The achievable utopia of Eatonville, as such, reveals that the removal of a white authoritarian presence *is* the removal of hunger, violence and poverty.

### A. Citrus and the Utopianism of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

[T]he migration of [... citrus] – from its origins near the South China Sea, down into the Malay Archipelago, then on four thousand miles of ocean current to the east coast of Africa, across the desert by caravan and into the Mediterranean basin, then over the Atlantic to the American continents – closely and sometimes exactly kept pace with the major journeys of civilisation. There were no oranges in the Western Hemisphere before Columbus himself introduced them. It was Pizarro who took them to Peru.

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#### John McPhee, *Oranges* (1966)

[A] while after came the notary to us aboard our ship, holding in his hand a fruit of that country, like an orange, but of colour between orange-tawney and scarlet, which casts a most excellent odour. He used it, as it seemeth, for a preservative against infection.

[... Later] there were brought in to us great store of those scarlet oranges for our sick, which, they said, were an assured remedy for sickness taken at sea.

#### Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis* (1624)

The Negro [...] men went forth and made their support in cutting new ground, building, and planting orange groves. Things were moving so swiftly that there was plenty to do, with good pay. Other Negroes in Georgia and West Florida heard of the boom in South Florida from Crescent City to Cocoa and they came. No more back breaking over rows of cotton; no more fear of the fury of the Reconstruction.

#### Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)<sup>10</sup>

This section of the chapter draws out the utopian aspects of Hurston's Eatonville by comparing it with the more conventional, systematic and fantastical utopia of Bacon's *New Atlantis*. It does not claim that the authorial perspective adopted, however subtly, by Hurston is in any way comparable to that of Bacon. Rather, this enquiry concentrates upon the formal strategies via which Bacon negates many of Elizabethan England's social problems, inverting its unreliable harvests, religious schisms, and intermittent violence, in order to produce, in *New Atlantis*, a

community which systematically recasts and improves upon contemporary reality. For this model of utopian manufacture, this transposition of social weakness into fantasised strength, of threat into security, and of hunger into satiation, anticipates the way three of the most pressing problems facing inter-war African-American society – racist violence, malnutrition and poverty – become the most remarkable *absences* of Hurston's Eatonville. In this strictly formalist affinity, then, Eatonville and Bensalem visibly display their shared debt to what Zygmunt Bauman calls the “galvanising feeling of deprivation and the chastening squeeze of omnipresent and stubborn realities” which shape utopian ideals.<sup>11</sup> In Eatonville and Bensalem alike, those fantasised aspects which most obviously solve such “stubborn realities” also make these new worlds most utopian: it is the contrast between lived and desired experience, the promise of peace to the threatened and food to the hungry, which makes these fictional paradises paradisiacal.

Despite the specifically formal nature of this enquiry, however, it remains the case that any comparison between these utterly divergent authors inevitably meets with so wide an array of social differences as to become problematic. Bacon was, after all, an author who gained his position within the Elizabethan elite not just through his seemingly limitless creative energy but also through the class, gender and racial status that made those around him receptive to his genius. Hurston, meanwhile, was socially the opposite of such a man: *her* genius was notoriously devalued by publishers, and “even the eminent Franz Boas”, alleges Houston A. Baker, produced a preface to *Mules and Men* which simplified all that followed by invoking “Uncle Remus as the prototype of the Afro-American tale-teller.”<sup>12</sup>

Any comparison of these writers, then, must negotiate the fact that, together, each of the now-familiar shibboleths of cultural difference – gender, class, race, region, religion – weave a web of social power in which the white male Elizabethan Bacon occupies the centre and the female African American Hurston the margin. Indeed, it might even be said that only Thomas More's *Utopia* – a vision of a perfected society that, notoriously, retains slavery – is further removed from Hurston's Eatonville than Bacon's island of Bensalem. The immanence of Western formations of humanity together with their lingering effects on twenty-first century culture force a social gulf between *New Atlantis* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* so wide as to complicate any comparison between them. For what, possibly, could connect Bacon's utopian fantasy of Bensalem with the hubbub of

Floridan boom-times as depicted in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? What is there in common between what Hurston calls a “raw, bustling frontier”, and what Paolo Rossi terms Bacon’s “unfinished picture of an ideal scientific community”?<sup>13</sup> How can an Elizabethan’s dream of a seafarer’s sanctuary, located somewhere, inevitably off the map, within the Pacific Ocean, compare with the capitalistic and geographically pinpointed landscape inhabited by Tea Cake, Janie, and Joe Starks?

The most obvious answer to these questions is the orange. In both narrative visions, the orange is located at the entrance of the utopian landscape: it is handed to, and functions as a gateway for, the fortunate newcomers to Florida and Bensalem alike. Yet this answer – if related to those familiar assumptions, explored in the introduction, upon the divergent estimations of writing and cooking as modes of cultural production – might also appear quite trivial. The orange, that is, might appear a mere detail in the scenes cited above – its appearance might seem merely decorative, cosmetic, and not at all sufficient material from which to extend a literary comparison. As the introduction also suggests, however, residual attachments to the assumed supremacy of writing must be dispelled if an investigation of literary representations of cooking is to be adequately completed. Food must, instead, be approached as a powerful cultural symbol, which is every bit as interpretable as the word with which it has so often been unfavourably compared. As such, the inclusion of the orange within these otherwise divergent fictional episodes must not be seen as occurring by chance but because it summons an array of connotations which are in some way useful to Bacon and Hurston.

Foremost among these connotations in the case of *New Atlantis* are the American associations that the orange gained in European Renaissance cultures. Occidental associations partly resulted from the fact that the orange was among the most successful of the many fruits and vegetables which early European explorers brought to the newly discovered Americas. No other imported tropical fruit has ever converted so rapidly to American conditions as the orange. Brought to the Caribbean and the southern States in the sixteenth century, it established itself within a few generations and even escaped the cultivated grove to grow wild alongside native pineapples, avocados and guava.<sup>14</sup> This proliferation swiftly captivated European narrators of colonial exploration. In his ‘Discourse Concerning

Western Planting' (1584), for example, Richard Hakluyt was already advocating the further planting of "oranges" and "lymons" in the Virginian "inland" as a strategy by which superior wealth and thus an Imperialist advantage over Spain and Portugal could be attained.<sup>15</sup> Though not pinpointing the specific Asian provenance of the fruit, Hakluyt's characterisation of the orange as a useful *import* to the Americas nevertheless acknowledges its general origins in an "older" world to the east of the Atlantic.

From such interventions, however, seedbeds were literally planted that supported a later literary figuration, evident in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) as well as William Bartram and Captain John Smith's travelogues, wherein that American abundance of oranges and lemons which actually resulted from Imperialism became painted as a virginal precursor of it. Whether fictional or factual in orientation, these English language narratives of westward discovery sought to naturalise these orange, yellow, green and pink orbs to America – to rank them alongside guava, coconut and avocado – to claim citrus, in short, as a symbol of the native fecundity of the new Imperial territories.

*Robinson Crusoe* thus carpets its shipwrecked protagonist's new home with an abundance of "orange, and lemon, and citron trees", the proclaimed "wild" status of which cannot be easily reconciled with the fact that the island has been briefly visited but never settled by Europeans.<sup>16</sup> Assimilation thus becomes total and ultimately transcends genealogy as Defoe's novel suppresses Richard Hakluyt's 'Discourse' and the ambitious importation plans it augmented in order to resituate the fruit as undeniably, wholly native to the Americas. Westward trade routes that first brought citrus to the Americas, as described by John McPhee, become likewise obscured as the orange, as though feeling an immigrant shame over its origins, is stripped of its past and duly granted the full American "citizenship" of guava and avocado. Released from its troublesomely Asian genealogy, then, citrus becomes enlisted into a new body of imagery at once utopian *and* American. It comes to epitomise that benevolent fertility of the New World soil, which initially aids Crusoe's survival, and which eventually contributes to his utopian project. The facts of McPhee's history – for instance, his statement that there "were no oranges in the Western Hemisphere before Columbus himself introduced them" – are thus obliterated as *Robinson Crusoe* catapults the orange into an entirely new realm rife with utopian connotations.

Seventy years following the publication of *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Travels of William Bartram* (1791) – a narrative of journeys undertaken by the narrator through Florida and the Carolinas – consolidates the nativity of citrus as portrayed by Defoe’s influential novel. This becomes evident, for instance, as Bartram describes British land-owning practices in Florida:

I have often been affected with extreme regret, at beholding the destruction and devastation which has been committed or indiscreetly exercised on those extensive fruitful Orange groves, on the banks of St. Juan, by the new planters under the British government, some hundred acres of which, at a single plantation, have been entirely destroyed, to make room for the Indigo, Cotton, Corn, Batatas, &c, or, as they say, to extirpate the musquitoes, alleging that groves near the dwellings are haunts and shelters for those persecuting insects.<sup>17</sup>

Here, even as he describes the desecration of the Floridan orange plantations, Bartram nowhere mentions that what he calls these “native” groves had in fact been planted either by the ancestors or by the Spanish Imperialist rivals of those now destroying them. Such an acknowledgement would, after all, critically undermine Bartram’s Revolutionary denunciation of the perfected American biosphere’s wanton devastation by European Imperialism. Bartram must instead portray the orange as a plant native to this original perfection if he is then to characterise its destruction as a symbol of the broader threat that British Imperialism’s later thrust into the American interior posed to nature as a whole. Only when clothed in this persistent yet falsified American provenance, in other words, can the orange’s annihilation remain translatable for Bartram as a symbol of the merciless annihilation of the American wilderness from which it is now alleged to derive. The displacement of the orange’s botanical provenance under the emphasised wildness of this manufactured nativity simultaneously effaces the possibility that, beyond the gaze of European explorers, the Seminoles of Florida may have nurtured the fruit in the manner that, as Dee Brown reports, the Navaho had become “especially proud of their peach orchards, carefully tended since the days of the Spaniards.”<sup>18</sup>

Consequently, even when associating the orange with an anticipated ecological collapse – a presentiment which contrasts sharply with the untouched nature of the island biosphere of *Robinson Crusoe* – Bartram nevertheless reiterates Defoe’s occasional tendency to invoke citrus as an embodiment of the

virginal and natively non-European properties of the new Americas. *The Travels of William Bartram* differs from *Robinson Crusoe* only insofar as this virginity is no longer venerated so much as its defilement is decried, its author continuing:

Some plantations have not a single tree standing; and where any have been left, it is only a small coppice or clump, *nakedly exposed and destitute*; perhaps fifty or an hundred trees standing near the dwelling-house, having no lofty cool grove [...] to shade and protect them, exhibiting a mournful, sallow countenance; their *native perfectly formed* and glossy green foliage as if *violated, defaced, and torn to pieces* [Emphases added]<sup>19</sup>

Though such language seems to tell of an almost Edenic Fall, the orange, unlike Eve's apple, has not here become the agency of this collapse but remains rather a victim of it. Unlike the apple, that is, the orange in Bartram's account remains singularly prelapsarian, its perfection remaining still unblemished by a Christian humanity that has encountered it only after its development and formation beyond the horizon of the known World. Even on the verge of this new Eden's destruction, then, the orange retains its captivating lustre: as American as it is utopian, it is presented by Bartram in diametrical opposition to the European Imperialism which had, in fact, been responsible for its Transatlantic importation.

In earlier texts, such as Captain John Smith's *General Historiees of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles* (1624), a comparable obfuscation of the orange's Transatlantic importation intermingles with an awareness of the recuperative benefits that the fruit offered to those suffering from scurvy. Historical discussions of such benefits remain contentious, and mainly because of continuing confusion surrounding the actual date on which dietary influences upon scurvy were discovered. Greatest acclaim is customarily accorded to the British Naval Surgeon James Lind, who, in 1753, successfully recommended that citrus be distributed to the sailors of the Royal Navy and, in the process, inspired the durable nickname "Limeys". Often, however, accolades that Lind has rightly received for this lifesaving initiative have been compounded by historians wishing to honour him for identifying the therapeutic benefits that citrus's antiscorbutic property held for those afflicted with the disease. Certainly, this is a position adopted explicitly by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1974) and implicitly by Peter

Kolchin's *American Slavery* (1993), which observes that, "unbeknownst to anyone" before the Revolutionary period, scurvy was caused "by a deficiency of vitamin C".<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult to reconcile such observations with the fact that Smith's *General Historie*, which predates Lind's nominal discovery by over a hundred years, proclaims "Oranges and Limons" to be an "undoubted remedie" for "Scurvie".<sup>21</sup> What is really crucial here, however, is that in Smith's *General Historie* such seeming medical prescience is juxtaposed to that suppression of the fruit's Asian origins now familiar to us through our readings of *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Travels of William Bartram*. Defoe and Bartram's symbolic layering of such genealogical suppression with Edenic virginity, for instance, recalls Smith's failure, when describing the orange trees of Bermuda, to mention their non-American origins even as he emphasises their contribution to the islands' immaculate atmosphere of "serenity and beauty".<sup>22</sup> Consequently, to the two signifiers attached to the orange by Defoe and Bartram – which tacitly refer, firstly, to the Garden of Eden and, secondly, to a manufactured American provenance – Smith's *General Historie* adds a new, therapeutic capacity which simply multiplies yet further the fruit's utopian potential. Indeed, one might even suggest that Smith's *General Historie* elevates citrus into a natural saviour for the Royal Navy, into a sign which – as a nourishment, cure and geographical signifier rolled into a single orange orb – encapsulated the welcome that the America lands were extending to England's Imperial ambitions. For what better proof of the predestination of this colonial project could there be, than that in these Western lands there grew a fruit which cured the very diseases contracted in the process of sailing there?

The orange Bacon places at the entrance to *New Atlantis* – a narrative posthumously published in the same year as Smith's history – alludes to and gains utopian force through exactly these three signifiers. That is to say, the "scarlet oranges" enwrapped in the hand of Bensalem's notary are presented as: a cure for scurvy; a fruit native to the Occidental world; and a crop which signifies a harvest so abundant and tropical as to merit the name "paradise". For one thing, the oranges this notary distributes among the ailing European sailors are, of course, precisely the food their bodies need most after a long sea voyage. Utopianism already inherent in the remedy awaiting these fictionalised sailors is bolstered further by the possibility that neither they nor Bacon's readership (and nor, for that matter, John Smith) would have quite known how such a cure operated. The

bodily transformations that sailors underwent when recovering from scurvy, as described by McPhee, would subsequently have been received by Bacon's readers as inexplicable and thus as a mysterious remedy with an immediate utopian lustre:

[S]ailors noticed that if they ate limes, lemons, and oranges in the course of long voyages, the livid splotches went away around the roots of their hair, their muscles stopped aching, their skins regained color, their once appalling breath grew sweeter, the swelling in their legs went down, bruises vanished, new strength replaced a feeling of deadening fatigue, their gums stopped bleeding, their teeth stopped dropping out, their bones stopped breaking, their hair began to grow again, and their spirits rose.<sup>23</sup>

This cure might well seem utopian even when it can be explained: yet if it remains mysterious, as it would have to Bacon's contemporary readers, such utopianism surely rises inexorably and acquires exactly that impression of mystifying fortuitousness which the entire narrative of *New Atlantis* strives to generate. Throughout *New Atlantis*, moreover, the emphasis on the orange's magical ability to transform the scurvy-ridden body intermingles, as it does in John Smith's history, with a parallel desire to associate the fruit with the West. The oranges of Bensalem are not, after all, recognised by its new European arrivals: they are rather the first among the many unknown native foods that the narrative is later to list at length. In addition – as, again, in John Smith's history – this intermingling effectively adumbrates all grateful references to the curative powers of the orange with broader and no less grateful references to the Western lands from which it so fortunately grows. Oranges are celebrated not only as a cure for scurvy but as a sign that the very soil that yielded them *do not want* European sailors to have scurvy. Even in Bacon's utopian account, as such, the will and beneficence of the New World territories remain on England's side.

Equally, although the land of *New Atlantis* (and therefore the “scarlet oranges” it produces) are located to the west even of California, there is evidence to suggest that, at least with regard to citrus, this Pacific utopia was built by Bacon upon an American inspiration. For Bacon, who characteristically enthused upon newly discovered botanical phenomena, elsewhere expresses delight at the preponderance of citrus in the New World as reported by explorers like John Smith. In writings other than *New Atlantis*, that is, Bacon's scientific eye alights with particular interest upon that self-fertilisation – that astonishing way in which oranges and lemons had “escaped” the cultivated American grove – by virtue of

which citrus had begun growing wild within generations of Richard Hakluyt's original 'Discourse'. Furthermore, those episodes of what we might term botanical escapology with which Bacon was concerned had, without exception, occurred in Florida. As he remarks in his *New Organon* (1620), the shores of this new English colony were already lined with "odoriferous [...] woods of orange trees", which, entering sailors' nostrils before their boats had even landed, became a kind of sensory siren for scurvy's awaiting, homeopathic cure.<sup>24</sup> As such, the image of the Occidental orange as the saviour of the ailing sailor, which with hindsight appears to have much to do with its abatement of scurvy, had gained an American association in Bacon's mind even before his invention of Bensalem.

Permutations like these reveal that, in *New Atlantis* as elsewhere in Bacon's oeuvre, the orange had already acquired that utopian allure which, as it were, achieves fruition in *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Travels of Thomas Bartram*. Edenic without being implicated in Eden's Fall, American without regard to its actual Asian provenance, citrus becomes as much an inspiration to Bacon's colonial commentaries as it is an enabler of Bensalem's utopian project. Oranges become, throughout Bacon's oeuvre, a sure sign of the mystical and wondrous experiences that await the fortunate entrant to America and utopia alike. Citrus is, in brief, installed as the key to a world that is not only far preferable to, but which lies far beyond the reach of, that other island, Britain, where none but the bitterest oranges grow.

Compare this to the following extract from Olaudah Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* (1789):

[A] poor fisherman [...] had brought his little all for a venture, which consisted of six bits worth of limes and oranges in a bag; I had also my whole stock; which was about twelve bits' worth of the same kind of goods, separate in two bags; for we had heard these fruits sold well in that island. When we came there, in some little convenient time, he and I went ashore with our fruits to sell them; but we had scarcely landed, when we were met by two white men, who presently took our three bags from us. [...] We told them these three bags were all we were worth in the world; and that we brought them with us to sell when we came from Montserrat, and shewed them the vessel. But this was rather against us, as they now saw we were strangers as well as slaves. [...] Thus, in the very minute of gaining more by three times than I ever did by any venture in my life before, was I deprived of every farthing I was worth. An insupportable misfortune!

The disaster of this mugging is overcome in part after Equiano, having traced the whereabouts of its perpetrators:

besought them again and again for our fruits, till [... their companions] asked if we would be contented if they kept one bag, and gave us the other two. [...] We then proceeded to market to sell them; and Providence was more favourable to us than we could have expected, for we sold our fruits uncommonly well; I got for mine about thirty-seven bits. Such a surprising reverse of fortune in so short a space of time seemed *like a dream to me*, and proved no small encouragement for me to trust the Lord in any situation. [Emphasis added]<sup>25</sup>

Nowhere in Equiano's account are the utopian properties of oranges as revealed in *New Atlantis*, *Robinson Crusoe* or Captain John Smith's *General Historie* considered. The account offers no description of the fruit whatsoever, and, indeed, in its refusal to linger and pause before the orange seems to mirror the frantic desperation of the events that it narrates. Even the eponymous colour of the fruit remains unmentioned as Equiano emphasises, instead, its reified status as a desirable item that might fetch a price that might, in turn, allow him to "obtain my freedom".<sup>26</sup>

In a manner open to a Marxist reading, Equiano, as the powerless yet aspirant capitalist, encounters his property as a commodity from which all connections with both labour and the soil have been removed. He approaches it, instead, as mere converted capital, which he wishes to reconvert to money in order that he, another mere commodity, might "purchase" himself. What *Capital* calls the "fetishism of commodities" – a theory of capitalism's abstraction of goods from their point of production which Marx, interestingly, elaborates with reference to the market-less world of *Robinson Crusoe* – thus implies that, for all Equiano is concerned, his goods might as well consist of apples or bananas as of oranges.<sup>27</sup> Of course, such indifference is quite understandable. What is really interesting about this episode, however, and what particularly suggests a certain dissembling shrewdness, even a tricksterism, on Equiano's part, is that his entry into the commercial world is brought about by exactly that fruit whose forced appropriation by Fetishism (which labels this most lustrous fruit as "just another commodity") would have been unimaginable to those who, like Francis Bacon, have built their utopian dreams around it. The utter lack of poetic imagery in Equiano's account, together with his urgent need for a commodity of any kind, in this way lodges a

startling and almost comic response to Bacon and Defoe's preceding valorisation of the orange, which says much about the forced involvement of non-white peoples in the attempted construction of European social dreams in the Americas. The Fetishism of the commodity, here, becomes not the self-perpetuating practice of those in control of a society's surplus value, as imagined in *Capital*, but the basis for an necessarily disrespectful debunking of European utopian myths by those unexpectedly adept figures whose compelled labour produces their flawed approximation in American reality.

In other words, just as the question of whether an American is native or an immigrant has never quite been applied to African Americans, so, in Equiano's account, it is no longer a question of whether the orange is indigenous or imported to the New World. Rather, the question Equiano poses here is: how can he, a slave desperately trying to find some commercial means by which to buy his freedom, approach the orange as anything other than food or money? How can he possibly indulge in the utopian dreaming of a Francis Bacon? Indeed, what forms will the utopias of the hungry, enslaved and poor take, when the freedom, foods and wealth already enjoyed by others comprise a fair approximation of paradise?

Yet it is equally clear that the orange ultimately emerges from this episode having regained some of that utopian capacity which is at first undermined by Equiano's pragmatic and commercially-minded indifference toward his property. The Emancipation objective which at first propels Equiano toward Fetishism, once obtained, prompts a retroactive reversal of the process which reinvests the fruits with a new utopian appeal the equal of that assigned to them by Bacon. To say this is simply to observe that, at the end of this episode, which begins by typifying the way Fetishism makes commodities anonymous, these oranges have become associated with freedom itself. Oranges begin the episode as an interchangeable commodity, and end it as the cause of a "reverse of fortune [... that] seemed like a dream to me" (a phrase which, by referring to a mere "thirty-seven bits," itself speaks volumes about the utopianism commonplace objects can acquire to those dispossessed of them). Here, then, far from remaining the subject of capitalistic indifference, these fruits, by facilitating the strict functional objective of Emancipation, find their original utopian allure reinvigorated. Oranges, although never subjected to Edenic imagery by *The Interesting Narrative*, and although

forced into a dehumanising equation with human freedom, nevertheless find that their position at the entrance of this particular utopian ambition is ultimately no less secure than at the gateway to *New Atlantis*. Even in such a desperate and pragmatic episode as this, then, these oranges, as principal agents in the attainment of Emancipation, implicitly gain an entirely new utopian capacity. They become, in short, the building blocks of the new and achievable utopia of freedom itself.

The challenge this remarkable episode poses to preceding European utopian formations, together with the specific symbolic connection it makes between the orange and Emancipation, are revisited in the oeuvre of Toni Morrison. Particularly, the transference by which *The Interesting Narrative* shifts a fruit situated at the centre of Bacon's Bensalem utopia to the head of the newly achievable utopia of freedom re-emerges in *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Beloved* (1987). The first few pages of *Tar Baby*, for example, tell of how the as-yet-unnamed Son Green escapes imprisonment for an unspecified crime by climbing aboard a boat, *Seabird II*, in the Caribbean Sea. Son's runaway status, his entrance into a liminal space suspended between recapture and a utopian freedom, strongly recall general figurations which have become familiar to us from the body of slave narratives as a whole. Yet *The Interesting Narrative*, often acknowledged as this tradition's progenitor, in particular shadows Son's fugitive flight as Toni Morrison reiterates Equiano's emphasis not only upon the immanence of a surrounding capitalist system but also upon the orange as a potential sign of future freedom. Capitalism is summoned during the stowaway Son's explorations of *Seabird II* since, as he smells fast food and admires the boat's classic furniture, it becomes clear that he has entered a propertied context as incompatible with his "underclass" background as the commercial market was to Equiano's status as a slave. Furthermore, as Son pauses in the kitchen, scanning the shelves for something to eat, so Equiano's three bags of citrus, which were "all we were worth in the world", metamorphose into an equally commercialised "crate" containing "twelve miniature orange trees, all bearing fruit."<sup>28</sup> The uncanny affinity in the way both *The Interesting Narrative* and *Tar Baby* thus position citrus immediately before their protagonists' securing of freedom could, perhaps, be dismissed as simply coincidental if the episode had not been repeated by *Beloved* in Morrison's novel of that name. For soon after *Beloved's* arrival in Sethe's house, whereupon she falls ill and is forced to remain in

bed, this mysterious character, who Linda Krumholz characterises as a “trickster figure”, enters into a similarly transfixed and liminal transformation prompted, it would seem, by an encounter with orange.<sup>29</sup>

It took three days for Beloved to notice the orange patches in the darkness of the quilt. Denver was pleased because it kept her patient awake longer. She seemed totally taken with those faded scraps of orange, even made the effort to lean on her elbow and stroke them. An effort that quickly exhausted her, so Denver rearranged the quilt so its cheeriest part was in the sick girl’s sight line.<sup>30</sup>

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Thus, in a domestic context, and having recently escaped enslavement in the South, Beloved undergoes an encounter with orange which seems just as transfixed and just as uncannily connected with freedom as those which Son Green and Olaudah Equiano experienced upon the Caribbean Sea. Encountering orange in the approach to freedom, these three fugitives all inhabit narratives which seem to characterise the fruit as a kind of edelweiss – as a plant which, discoverable only after the hardest and most hazardous of journeys, hopefully heralds the relative riches and freedoms of the future. Occasional European efforts to valorise the orange as both an American and an Edenic fruit are subsequently recast by *Beloved*, *The Interesting Narrative* and *Tar Baby* into a fundamentally different context in which all Imperialist subtext has been replaced by the new and achievable imperative of Emancipation itself. For although these texts also position the orange at the entrance to a new utopian freedom, unlike in, say, *New Atlantis*, this freedom is shaped not by its offering of unattainable wealth but by the contrast it presents to the captivity in which the utopian dreamer has hitherto been held. Though these texts transfer the orange from an Edenic environment into quite unsentimental, domestic and commercial contexts, the fruit nevertheless remains utopian since it now functions as a “cure” for captivity no less desirable than a cure for scurvy. Even when transported from its verdant tropical grove, then, these oranges remain idyllic, since they have now become a harbinger not of an anticipated Imperial success but of a freedom long anticipated.

Each permutation that this exploration of African-American and European texts has touched upon re-emerges in new forms in Hurston’s oeuvre. Effectively, the Eatonville of *Dust Tracks on a Road* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

conflates the Edenic imagery of Bacon and Bartram's descriptions of citrus with Equiano and Morrison's more specific and pragmatic association of the fruit with Emancipation. For, on the one hand, Hurston's representation of Eatonville at times concurs with Equiano's implication that the only two functions of the orange, to the hungry and poor, are as food and as money. Such pragmatic interpretations emerge from a quotation already cited at greater length:

The Negro [...] men went forth and made their support in cutting new ground, building, and planting orange groves. Things were moving so swiftly that there was plenty to do, with good pay. [...] No more back-breaking over rows of cotton; no more fear of the fury of the Reconstruction.

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As in *The Interesting Narrative*, the industriousness of these self-improving actions is mirrored by the way the passage describing them refuses to linger poetically before the orange and extols it instead as a "mere" commodity whose prime function is as a fiscal cure to "the fury of the Reconstruction." Correspondingly – and, again, as with *The Interesting Narrative* – any comparison of this strictly pragmatic passage from *Dust Tracks on a Road* with *New Atlantis* must be limited to the practical advantages with which the orange is invested by the latter text. Citrus in this moment of Hurston's autobiography offers to those involved in its planting, picking, processing and packing nothing more transcendent than the chance of a better life. It neither heralds nor promises the fulfilment of a mythic or otherwise unattainable dream. Any such appeal remains, simply, unmentioned.

A few sentences later, however, we encounter the following scene:

We lived on a big piece of ground with two big chinaberry trees shading the front gate and Cape jasmine bushes with hundreds of blooms on either side of the walks. I loved the fleshy, white, fragrant blooms as a child but did not make too much of them. They were too common in my neighborhood. When I got to New York and found out that the people called them gardenias, and that the flowers cost a dollar each, I was impressed. The home folks laughed when I went back down there and told them. Some of the folks did not want to believe me. A dollar for a Cape jasmine bloom! Folks up north there must be crazy.

There were plenty of orange, grapefruit, tangerine, guavas and other fruits in our yard. We had a five-acre garden with things to eat growing in it, and so we were never hungry. We had chicken on the table often; home-cured meat, and all the eggs we wanted. [...] Any left-over boiled eggs could always be used for missiles.

There was plenty of fish in the lakes around town, and so we had all that we wanted. [...] We had oranges, tangerines and grapefruit to use as hand-grenades on the neighbors' children.<sup>31</sup>

Not only by the way such tropical foliage springs into life as though without effort on the part of Hurston's family, but also in the garden's positioning amid a world of "cypress swamps", the environment described here effectively reanimates the Edenic terrain which Thomas Bartram had portrayed centuries earlier. Thus, within the space of a single page, a world of industrial agriculture and capitalistic self-improvement yields to a newly burgeoning realm of almost mythic plenitude. Nor is Bartram's narrative of Florida the only text recalled by the total and deliberate deletion of hunger achieved by this scene. Just as the oranges in this garden recall those growing in that of Frederick Douglass's Master Colonel Lloyd, so they also suggest *New Atlantis*, and the almost infinitely diverse produce reaped annually from Bensalem's secure and dependable harvest. In particular, the nonchalant note which Hurston sounds at the prospect of describing the utopian abundance (as a child she does "not make too much" of these foods: they are "too common in my neighborhood") resembles the weariness of Bacon's island guide:

"I will not hold you long with recounting of our brew-houses, bake-houses, and kitchens, where are made divers drinks, breads, and meats, rare and of special effects. Wines we have of grapes, and drinks of other juice, of fruits, of grains, and of roots; and of mixtures with honey, sugar, manna, and fruits dried and decocted"[.]<sup>32</sup>

Although there are many reasons why the striking affinity between these descriptions of food abundance should not be interpreted as a sign of a broader affinity between *New Atlantis* and Hurston's Eatonville, I want to emphasise only two. The first lies in the fact that, as we have already noted, this utopian and Edenic tone is struck by *Dust Tracks on a Road* only a few sentences after a documentary account of Florida's booming citrus industry which more vividly recalls *The Interesting Narrative*. In itself such complex and, perhaps, contradictory intertextual signification warns us against reading the utopian aspects of Hurston's Eatonville in any way straightforwardly as a mere reproduction of tropes inherited from the European tradition. Indeed, such complexity in fact implies that the affinity between Bacon and Hurston's descriptions of food abundance should not be interpreted as the product of any

similarity in these authors' intentions whatsoever but rather in the fundamental and "real" social problems which their utopian landscapes eradicate. The orange's centrality in both utopian landscapes, that is, constructs a consistency not in authorial motive but in the fruit itself – in its exemplification of the soil's fertility, its embellishment of the appealing difference of southern climes, its alleviation for vitamin deficiency or outright scurvy. Both Hurston and Bacon, in other words, situate the orange so centrally since the fruit itself embodies the tropical allure that most starkly differentiates their contrasting utopias from, respectively, interwar New York and Elizabethan England. Oranges function for both as a broader signifier that epitomises their utopias' fundamental and geographical inversion of the real-life worlds in which they are both written and, in most cases, read.

A second and crucial reason why we should not interpret the affinity between these descriptions of food abundance as a sign of a broader compatibility between Eatonville and Bensalem lies in the different social statuses of the two utopias' authors. For *New Atlantis's* inversion of the most urgent problems confronting contemporary English society and culture, its negation of periodical famine and intermittent violence, is at every turn manifestly the strategy of an author secure in his position as social leader. Utopia is summoned in *New Atlantis* through prescription and by edict – through the furthering of scientific knowledge, and through the consolidation of an ecumenical yet devoutly worshipful society. Such emphases on orderliness and leadership reflect the class structure of Elizabethan England as well as Bacon's own status within this hierarchical context. Whereas, to a modern readership, the utopianism of *New Atlantis* becomes clearest in its extension to the entire population of privileges enjoyed only by the Elizabethan English elite, to Bacon himself, as a member of this elite, a greater appeal might have been found in the hierarchical stability offered by the island. The material with which Francis Bacon had to work – the "real" England in which he had gained some measure of power and wished to make it more secure – in this way shaped a utopian vision which, though it wrestles with the problems of poverty and hunger, always addresses such concerns from the vantage point of the elite. By contrast, Zora Neale Hurston's material – the "reality" from which, by comparable tactics of negation and inversion, she created the utopia of Eatonville – was one in which violence, poverty and hunger were no longer problems of universal or

national relevance but carried a particularly urgent force for the African-American minority.

For example, the property which produces both utopias' abundance of fruits, the soil itself, is granted an immense richness by the representation of Bensalem and Eatonville alike. Indeed, in both, one might imagine that the fertility of this soil is such as to forgive even the most ignorant farmer, as it is endowed with a "rare fertility" in *New Atlantis* and is "soft to the touch of a plow" in *Dust Tracks on a Road*.<sup>33</sup> Yet even here, even as these narratives deliver a seemingly similar vision of the soil's fertility, the social chasm dividing Bacon and Hurston visibly opens. For whereas Bacon describes the soil in the abstract, theoretical terms of agricultural science, Hurston writes from the ground level of farming itself, and is instead concerned with the potentially debilitating effects that agricultural labour might have upon the body.

Another example of this lies in the fact that the "real" hunger inverted by Eatonville resulted not from a general crop failure but from the way sharecropping and other economic systems had been structured in order to keep African-Americans hungry and poor. The "real" hunger that Bacon negates in Bensalem, on the other hand, was a product not of the debilitating and deliberate processes of an inherently unequal economic system but of the intermittent, arbitrary crises of harvest failure. These intermittent English hungers, which affected a far higher proportion of the contemporary population than the American Depression, implicated no particular social group since they could be readily explained in terms of unavoidable natural catastrophe. Indeed, as Stephen Mennell observes:

Mortality among élites, whom one might expect to have been better fed, seems to have been just as high as among the mass of population in Western Europe. [...] In England scarcity following crop failures no longer reached famine proportions by the first decade of the eighteenth century, though food prices rose very high and death rates were still noticeably up in years of bad harvests in the 1720s and 1740s.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast to this view of hunger as a generalised, national problem, Gunnar Myrdal's documentary study of black poverty in the United States, *American Dilemma* (1944), persistently insists that malnutrition has a particular urgency for the African-American minority:

Roughly 30 per cent of the “normal” Negro nonrelief families in the South did not consume any milk during a whole survey week in 1936. There was a similar proportion of Negro families reporting no consumption of eggs. Almost half the Negro farm and village families consumed no potatoes or sweet potatoes. Two thirds of the farm Negroes, one-half of the village Negroes and over one-fourth of the city Negroes failed to eat any fresh fruit for the week. [...] In every single case the Negroes were worse off [than neighboring whites].<sup>35</sup>

These disturbing visions create an interesting opposition wherein the prospect of collective hunger collapses the class differences of Elizabethan England but then amplifies the racial differences of the interwar American South. Possibly, this opposition arises because class, as the principal marker of Elizabethan social demarcation, became less visible as a controller of unequal food distribution when no food remained to be distributed. On the other hand, race, as the principal marker of social demarcation in the American South, becomes yet more significant and yet more dangerously unstable as a cause of social division during times when whites remained relatively well fed and blacks conspicuously hungry.

It is this difference, this contrast between a food shortage of universal relevance and one of a specifically racial cast, which I want to stress here, since it says so much about the subtle utopian strategies through which Zora Neale Hurston’s writings come to present black hunger as an avoidable condition.

This representation of hunger as an avoidable condition becomes visible, for instance, in the intersection between Hurston’s claim that she and her siblings “were never hungry” and the way local whites never disrupt or intrude upon her remembered, idyllic family garden. For this intersection has the effect of suggesting that a connection exists between these two aspects of Hurston’s remembered childhood experience. That is to say, the intersection implies that, whereas the utopian aspect of *New Atlantis* is manifested through a sustained appeal to undiscovered scientific knowledge, Hurston has here manufactured a comparably idealised world simply by removing a white authoritarian presence from it. In other words, as white Americans are pushed to the periphery of Eatonville, and as their appearances are reduced to merely comic or transitory episodes, so this ironic marginality disables the unequal economic system which, *American Dilemma* suggests, was largely responsible for African-American malnutrition. This gradual erasure, in a single stroke, allows Hurston to contextualise her enviable childhood diet within an equally enviable social space

that remains utterly unencumbered either by racism or economic inequality. This single erasure, in short, enables Hurston to produce a remarkably utopian childhood scene from which each of the food shortages described by Gunnar Myrdal seem almost systematically negated. Eggs, so rare and unattainable to a black underclass trapped within a Jim Crow system, now become plentiful – become so abundant, indeed, that Hurston wastes them as missiles with which to attack neighbouring children. Fruit, meanwhile, though utterly absent from Myrdal's account, abounds in Hurston's garden. Hurston now has "chicken on the table often; home-cured meat [...] plenty of fish [...] oranges, tangerines and grapefruit". Each of these individual negations in this way coalesce to summon a fictional world whose abundant and secure supply of food differentiate it as sharply from Gunnar Myrdal's South as Bensalem was from Elizabethan England. And yet the only possible explanation for this miraculous difference, the only principle which might make this sublime transformation plausible, is to be found in the disappearance from Eatonville of the KKK, of overseers, sawmill bosses and policemen, and of other white authority figures. In Eatonville, then, the condition of hunger becomes solvable at the exact moment when the ideology of racism is eradicated: and thus, by virtue of their shared absence from the text, the two become subtly connected together, as unnecessary obstacles to the achievement of Hurston's achievable utopia.

Nowhere is Eatonville's abundance of food signalled more forcibly than on the one occasion when Zora Neale Hurston mentions hunger in connection with it. The scene is from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and, among other things, dramatises that egotism of Joe Starks which the next section explores at length. On this occasion, Joe's "longing for peace but on his own terms", leads him to bait a shop customer, "Mrs. Tony Robbins" (113). Robbins is a comical figure who continually yet falsely complains of hunger:

"Ah'm hongry, Mist' Starks. 'Deed Ah is. Me and mah chillun is hongry. Tony don't fee-eed me!"

This was what the porch had been waiting for. They burst into a laugh.

"Mrs. Robbins, how can you make out you'se hongry when Tony comes in here every Satiday and buys groceries lak a man? Three weeks' shame on yuh!"

"If he buy all dat you talkin' 'bout, Mist' Starks, God knows whut he do wid it. He sho don't bring it home, and me and mah po'

chillun is *so* hungry! Mist' Starks, please gimme uh lil piece uh meat fur me and mah chillun."

"Ah know you don't need it, but come on inside. You ain't goin' tuh lemme read till Ah give it to yuh." (113-114)

That Mrs. Robbins is here merely counterfeiting hunger is confirmed as, following her departure, the men on the porch ruminate on her and her husband's marriage:

"In de fust place Ah never would spend on *no* woman whut Tony spend on *her*."

Starks came back and took his seat. He had to stop and add the meat to Tony's account.

"Well, Tony tell me tuh humour her along. He moved here from up de State hopin' tuh change her, but it ain't." (116)

The comic resolution of this scene invokes a new definition of the term "hunger" which has little in common with that operating in *American Dilemma* or, for that matter, in Stephen Mennell's discussion of the famines of pre-Industrial England. For the term here, as it is used by both Joe Starks and by the satirising narrative voice, has been dislodged from that grave association with malnutrition and physical want with which most accounts of interwar African-American society, whether documentary or fictional, imbue it. Hunger, here, has instead been returned to that more familiar sense, current since the eradication of famine in the industrialised countries, in which it becomes synonymous with "appetite". After all, judging from the incredulous responses of the men on the porch, Mrs. Robbins' professions of hunger no longer refer to bodily need so much as they do to a far vaguer desire that, though both physical and psychological, has now lost all semblance of urgency. However, although Mrs. Robbins' hunger is in this way relegated to the passing and impulsive desire of the economically secure, the elaborate and (to the uninitiated) persuasive expression that she gives to it still bears the imprint of a more genuine malnutrition. That is to say, Mrs. Robbins might now only be hungry in the sense of wanting to snack between meals, yet the persuasiveness of her performance as an underfed person suggests that she indeed once experienced "genuine" malnutrition and now knows how to reproduce its characteristic gestures. The accomplishment of her confidence trick, the attempted mimicry of a "true" and verified need meriting charity, suggest that, no matter how well fed Mrs. Robbins might be *now*, hunger has not always manifested itself so

benignly. By turning hunger into a mere memory of Mrs. Robbins – who is, significantly, a new arrival to the area – Hurston subtly confirms that Eatonville is indeed unique, as a utopia surrounded by hunger as Bensalem is surrounded by sea.

Zora Neale Hurston's remarkable representation of Eatonville might, then, be said to be a kind of gumbo in the sense that it mixes ingredients characteristic of European utopian narrative with a newly pragmatic sensibility derived from the Black Atlantic canon. This intermingling is exemplified in the way Hurston's treatment of the orange allows European utopianism and the appeal of Emancipation to sit side by side in a new vision as recognisably achievable as it is Edenic. What is principally demonstrated by this signal flavour of citrus, this intermingling of European and African-American cultural tropes, is that Equiano's simple dream of freedom can indeed cohabit with the propensity to dream of the unattainable. It demonstrates that, although Eatonville is an achievable utopia in the sense that a white authoritarian presence has been removed from it, such seemingly moderate ambition does not translate to the culture of the community. On the contrary: the removal from Eatonville of this authoritarianism, and the town's subsequent achievement of its achievable socioeconomic targets, by no means infects the field of culture with a corresponding levelling of ambition. Instead, it frees Hurston to deliver a more vivid and celebratory account of black communal life. Space that naturalistic representations of black southern life would have devoted to the inequities of Jim Crow is now left empty for Hurston to do with as she wants. Rather than refute the stereotyping of African Americans, she can now capture with new vibrancy the metaphoric dynamism of black southern dialect. Rather than confront the sexual suppressions and demands to which the African-American body was subjected, she can now produce an open and affirmative representation of female sexuality. And rather than concentrate on hunger as an integral experience of black southern life, Hurston can now focus on moments of culinary transcendence, when just such deprivation was fleetingly transcended, and African-American cooking elevated to the pageantry of the communal feast. Black hunger, vanishing from Hurston's Eatonville alongside the racism now shown to be responsible for it, no longer infects African-American cooking with the contaminating association of food's failure. Rather, these utopian

strategies enable Hurston to return us to a world Albert Murray, in a different context, calls a “paradise lost land of gumbo and barbecue”.<sup>36</sup>

### **B. The Familial Meal of Janie and Joe Starks: A Private Ceremony**

Life in the Big House, with its affection and hatreds, its interracial attachments and intolerance, its extraordinary kindnesses and uncontrollable violence, represented in all of these contradictions paternalism in its most heightened form.

#### **Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: the World the Slaves Made* (1972)**

People should see to it that in every home [...] a certain ceremony, a certain importance, be attached to partaking of the food. See to it, in the first place, that there is a time, thoroughly understood by father and by mother, thoroughly understood by each member of the family, when each meal is to be served. Then the head of the family should see to it that the food is not only prepared in the most tempting way, but that it is served in the most attractive and beautiful way. See to it that plenty of time is given to the preparation of the table, to the cleanliness of the cloth, to the decoration of the table, and, above all things, give attention to the place where food is to be taken.

#### **Booker T. Washington, ‘A Sunday Evening Talk’ (1910)**

Poison held a special place in the arsenal of slave weapons throughout the Americas. [...] Long before Africans fell prey to the slave trade they had mastered the art of poisoning as a means of dealing with enemies. From the moment they embarked for the New World, they resorted to poison against the whites, and they continued to practice the art throughout the eighteenth century. Poisoning, at least as reported in an era of growing self-censorship by the press, declined during the nineteenth century but recurred often enough to suggest a pervasive nervousness.

#### **Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: the World the Slaves Made* (1975)<sup>37</sup>**

The Edenic aspect of Eatonville is consolidated further since, just as the Fall is precipitated by one of the fruits that helped to make the Garden idyllic, so the

same patriarchal zeal for leadership by which Joe Starks built up the town leads to its disintegration. In the early stages of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie's second husband is almost heroic. Energetic and passionate, he is at first as committed to and as convinced of the possibility of a collective racial uplift as Booker T. Washington. Initially, his claims to leadership – succinctly embodied in his recurring exclamation “I god!” – marshal Eatonville's sceptical inhabitants into building a town whose utopian aspects, though achievable, once seemed prohibited by the legacy of racial injustice. Locals who had “never seen no sich uh colored man befo' in all mah bawn days” forgo neither their reservations nor disbelief yet cautiously embrace Joe's ambitious progressive project of turning Eatonville into an autonomous African-American municipal town (62). That this progressive project is indeed instigated by one man rather than the citizenry as a whole is confirmed as the town's regenerative construction work is completed by these citizens entirely at the office-bound Joe's behest, leaving them and even his wife Janie “astonished” (66). The building of new houses, the opening of the town store, the purchase of a street lamp – all these startlingly visible co-ordinates in Eatonville's seemingly inexorable upward trajectory are at this early stage of the novel attributed to Joe Starks' unique gusto.

Even as Janie retains a kind of benumbed approval of her husband's single-handed execution of racial uplift, however, elsewhere in the novel there already emerge dissenting voices, voices which, occasionally, suggest that Joe's real motive is to become a patriarch of the order of Genovese's patriarchal slaveholder. The exclamation “I God!” – always a dubious sign of egoism – becomes yet more dubious as the narrative gradually accompanies its utterance with suggestions that such self-proclaimed omniscience merely re-enacts forms of power characteristic of slavery. Eatonville comes to seem, increasingly, the outward municipal agency of an uplift not *of* its African-American population but of Joe Starks *over* this population. At its extreme, such dissension clearly recasts Joe as an antebellum plantation owner:

The rest of the town looked like servant's quarters surrounding the “big house.” And different from everybody else in the town he put off moving in until it had been painted, in and out. And look at the way he painted it – a gloaty, sparkly white. The kind of promenading white that the houses of Bishop Whipple, W. B. Jackson and the Vanderpool's wore. It made the village feel funny talking to him – just like he was anybody else (75).

Although this passage characterises as mere servants the townspeople whose houses huddle inconspicuously around Joe and Janie's significantly white house, it at the same time arouses suspicions that these people themselves would not be so discreet, and would articulate the unspoken metaphor of slavery that haunts these suggestive sentences. In the process, this passage also reveals that the utopian appeal of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* yields finally to a racial problematic, and is in this sense comparable to Patricia Storace's description of Toni Morrison's recent *Paradise* (1998) as a "novel about pioneers laying claim to a country, and, less explicitly, about the ways in which possession of this country has been extended and justified, [...] so that the story of its claiming almost irresistibly evokes images of white founding fathers".<sup>38</sup> More frequently in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, denunciation through the vocabulary of race and class yield to a gender critique, and, indeed, it is in the exposure of the chauvinist assumptions behind Joe's municipal aspirations that his individual Fall is brought about. For, as we shall see, Joe's demands concerning what a wife should be are neither less conservative nor less prescriptive than those Booker T. Washington expounds regarding the "ceremonial" dinner. Janie, once she has rejected these domesticating marital demands, becomes the focus for a new narrative movement away from the collective utopia of Eatonville and towards the romance of her own individual life-story.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Barbara Johnson have pinpointed this rejection in the moment when Janie, sitting in on a signifying session on her and her husband's store porch, responds to one of Joe's many insults by unexpectedly producing a wittier and therefore more damaging insult of her own:

"I god amighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!"

A big laugh started off in the store but people got to thinking and stopped. It was funny if you looked at it right quick, but it got pitiful if you thought about it awhile. It was like somebody snatched off part of a woman's clothes while she wasn't looking and the streets were crowded. Then too, Janie took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's face, and that was something that hadn't been done before. [...]

“Naw, Ah ain’t no young gal no mo’ but den Ah ain’t no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah’m uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat’s uh whole lot more’n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but ‘tain’t nothin’ to it but yo’ big voice. Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout *me* lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life.” (121-123)

In *The Signifying Monkey* and *A World of Difference* respectively, Gates and Johnson read Janie’s startling allegation as a response not only to Joe’s insult but also to his earlier statement that: “mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. [...] She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (69). Both critics read this forceful scene as a cataclysmic detonation of such attempts by Joe to “construct” Janie as he has constructed Eatonville – to force her into the Washingtonian mould of the passive, deferential trophy wife. In the process, both also place an emphasis, pronounced in *The Signifying Monkey* yet also evident in Johnson’s essay collection, on voice and, in particular, on the way the accomplishment of voice might translate into the accomplishment of a more generally emancipated and undiminished sense of selfhood. The prestige voice assumes in such influential African-American critical works as Houston A. Baker’s *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (with its interest in African-American culture’s “expressive legacies”) and *The Signifying Monkey* itself (with its attempted classification of the “speakerly text” as a distinctively “black” genre) enables Gates and Johnson to parallel their emphasis on Janie’s resistance to patriarchy with a further resistance, effected by the novel as a whole, to stereotyped representations of African-American dialect.<sup>39</sup> In this way, Johnson and Gates both identify Janie’s insulting of Joe Starks as a pivotal narrative moment that produces a radically and successfully stylised representation of black speech within which resistance to patriarchal expectation is simultaneously articulated. Earlier associations of Joe with plantation ownership – associations which cover his marital home in white paint, as befits Genovese’s envisioning of the antebellum Big House – subsequently supply a racial subtext to the pronounced gender affirmation of Janie’s public denunciation of her husband. In Gates and Johnson’s reading, then, Janie’s breathtaking insult constitutes the novel’s critical rupture, which enables a subsequent articulation of a notion of independence that is at once feminist *and* African-American. As Johnson summarises the interpretation:

as store owner and mayor of the town, [... Joe Starks] proudly raises Janie to a pedestal of property and propriety. Because this involves her submission to his idea of what a mayor's wife should be, Janie soon finds her pedestal to be a straitjacket, particularly when it involves her exclusion – both as speaker and as listener – from the tale-telling sessions on the store porch and at the mock funeral of a mule. Little by little, Janie begins to talk back to Joe, finally insulting him so profoundly that, in a sense, he dies from it.<sup>40</sup>

Johnson supports these contentions with a long quotation from the novel that dramatises, first, the violent culmination of Joe Starks' desperate attempts to force his wife into a preordained mould of domesticity, and, second, Janie's reaction to it. I cite verbatim the quotation used by Johnson:

“Dat’s ’cause you need tellin’,” he rejoined hotly. “It would be pitiful if Ah didn’t. Somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows. I god, they sho don’t think none theirselves.”

“Ah knows uh few things, and womenfolks thinks sometimes too!”

“Aw naw they don’t. They just think they’s thinkin’. When Ah see one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don’t understand one.”

Times and scenes like that put Janie to thinking about the inside state of her marriage. Time came when she fought back with her tongue as best she could, but it didn’t do her any good. It just made Joe do more. He wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it.

So gradually, she pressed her teeth together and learned to hush. The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. It was there to shake hands whenever company came to visit, but it never went back inside the bedroom again. So she put something in there to represent the spirit like a Virgin Mary image in a church. The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired.

She wasn’t petal-open with him anymore. She was twenty-four and seven years married when she knew. She found that out one day when he slapped her face in the kitchen. It happened over one of those dinners that chasten all women sometimes. They plan and they fix and they do, and then some kitchen-dwelling fiend slips a scrochy, soggy, tasteless mess into their pots and pans. Janie was a good cook, and Joe looked forward to his dinner as a refuge from other things. So when the bread didn’t rise, and the fish wasn’t quite done at the bone, and the rice was scorched, he slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears and told her about her brains before he stalked on back to the store.

Janie stood where he left her for unmeasured time and thought. She stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. In a way she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. She was saving up feelings for some man she had never seen. She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them (110-112).

Examining this passage, Barbara Johnson does not mention the failed meal at its centre but concentrates, instead, on the “relation” it sets up “between an inner ‘image’ and outward, domestic space.” It is, Johnson suggests, “an externalization of Janie’s feelings onto the outer surroundings in the form of a narrative of movement from private to public space.” This “narrative of movement”, then, formally mirrors and thus reinforces what Johnson sees as Janie’s growing awareness that her escape from domestic violence lies in the public sphere. This “movement” is towards a new, less secretive persona, towards a more public, empowered and independent personality able to disturb Joe’s Washingtonian association of the ideal wife with the ideal cook. Johnson argues that, significantly, it is “from this point on [...] that Janie, paradoxically, begins to speak. [...] Henceforth, Janie will grow in power and resistance, while Joe deteriorates both in his body and in his public image.”<sup>41</sup>

To Barbara Johnson’s persuasive attempts to explain solely in terms of public voice Janie’s resistance to Joe, however, I want to suggest here that a further reason can be found in the failed meal which is quoted but not mentioned by *A World of Difference*. Indeed, if anything, Hurston’s account of Janie’s failure to produce an appetising meal – a meal which Joe can enjoy, with Washingtonian escapism, as a “refuge from other things” – bears greater responsibility for her husband’s death than her unprecedented intervention in the store’s signifying contest. The deterioration of Joe’s body is not, after all, merely a symbolic manifestation of Janie’s transformation of this contest into a gender battle. It also bears the characteristic hallmarks of a poisoning – of a physical reaction

attributable to Janie's "scrochy, soggy, tasteless mess". After all, immediately following this meal, symptoms of the sickness that is to lead to Joe Starks' death first arise. His stomach, in particular, becomes distended: Janie instantly notices that his "prosperous-looking belly that used to thrust out so pugnaciously and intimidate folks, sagged like a load suspended from his loins" (120). This symptom worsens with each day that Joe's death draws nearer. Janie, noticing "how baggy Joe was getting all over", now regards his stomach as a "sack of flabby something [that] hung from his loins and rested on his thighs when he sat down" (125-126). That this distension is the principal cause of Joe's death is confirmed since the inflammation reaches an extreme in the final moments of his life, when it appears to Janie eaten away, emaciated, "like some helpless thing seeking shelter" (131).

Thus, Joe's physical reaction to this "scrochy, soggy, tasteless mess [...] that chasten all women sometimes", not only crystallises the irony behind this apparently conservative authorial comment, but also reveals that, to the acquisition of a voice emphasised by Barbara Johnson, Janie has here found another solution to domestic violence: poisoning. This solution, which requires Janie neither to leave her home nor to insult him in the store, challenges the way much feminist ideology then and now associates gender equality with women's entrance into the public sphere – with the exchange of onerous domestic responsibilities for a place in the job market, and with the attainment of national positions of the order of that posthumously granted Hurston within the American canon. In particular, Janie's discovery of this response to domestic violence within the sphere of domesticity itself challenges the way feminism's public emphasis has assisted normative assumptions and made the departure of the beaten wife and not of the beating husband Western societies' favoured solution to marital aggression. To the paradox Johnson identifies in Janie's discovery of both an inner personality and a public persona, then, there can be added the further paradox that she achieves independence from Joe both through a public gesture characteristic of feminist liberation narrative and through a private poisoning entirely atypical of it. She answers Joe's violence, in short, both by staking her position outside the marital home and by returning violence in kind within it. Indeed, Hazel Carby has noted that Janie reclaims power within the home so successfully that, when she comes to recount her life-story, she can do so from the "porch because she *owns* it".<sup>12</sup> In the process, Janie's pivotal reclamation both of public and private space results in a mastery of her "inside" and "outside" that then confirms the scene's

utopian aspect, enacting Eagleton's characterisation of "authentic utopian" thought's propensity to "break the system open [... along with] the very opposition between 'inside' and 'outside'".<sup>43</sup>

Having said this, it is important to remember that Janie does not consciously poison her husband. Unlike the day-to-day slave resisters described by Genovese, Janie claims to have no idea of the effect her cooking will have. Ostensibly, all she asks her husband to eat is an unappetising meal. Despite this, however, the compelling resemblance between this "accidental" episode and deliberate poisonings from elsewhere in Hurston's oeuvre suggest that, despite its surface appearance, the animus of Janie's mind has in this scene metaphorically transferred to her meal and in the process made it toxic. Certainly, such subliminal poisoning is suggested by the strong resemblance between Joe's symptoms and those endured by a violent neighbour whose punishment is recounted in the 'Hoodoo' section of *Mules and Men*. In this ethnographic scene, a roots doctor places:

"uh gopher in her belly. You could see 'm movin' 'round in her. And once every day he'd turn hissself clear over and then you could hear her hollerin' for more'n a mile. Dat hard shell would be cuttin' her insides. Way after 'while she took down ill sick from it and died. Ah knowed de man dat done dat trick. Dat wuz done in uh dish of hoppin-john."<sup>44</sup>

Similarities between this scene and the poisoning of Joe in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* extend beyond the mere fact that this lethal dish of Hopping John – defined by Hurston's footnotes as "peas and rice cooked together" – shares at least one ingredient with Janie's meal. For, in both, we also encounter a distension of the stomach that suggests an ingested yet living animal (a "belly" Janie now thinks of as a "helpless thing seeking shelter"). The repetition of this uncanny image constructs intertextual affinities, which, in turn, invite us to interpret Janie's dinner as a response to Joe's aggression rather as this poisoned meal is a response to neighbourly transgression. In its disproportionately lethal effects, therefore, Janie's meal exhibits a concept of cooking which seems to take the conjure episodes of *Mules and Men* as a kind of inspirational template rather as Houston Baker cites conjure as a model for Hurston's own writing. That is to say, just as Baker talks of the way *Their Eyes Were Watching God* enlists an "African-American

cultural sign of conjure” which unites “mythomania” and “classical cultural performance”, so Janie’s cooking might be said to be similarly founded on hoodoo’s impenetrable inner logic and general cultural style. It may be too much to follow Baker – who describes *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* not as books *about* conjure but as “conjure books of the first magnitude” – and describe Janie’s ostensibly accidental poisoning as a form of “conjure” cooking.<sup>45</sup> Yet in its shocking provoking of violence, in its capacity to turn such plain ingredients as rice, fish and bread into poison, the meal nevertheless recalls the way, in the very “conjure books” cited by Baker, hoodoo generates poisons from such attractive ingredients as “filet gumbo with red-pepper” and “coconut”.<sup>46</sup> A voodoo aspect is further suggested in Joe’s response to the continuing and worsening inflammation of his stomach, which is to turn to a “root-doctor” from “over around Altamonte Springs” and have her “cook for him.” For, given that Joe had previously “been scornful of root-doctors and all their kind” (126), this response suggests, firstly, that he suspects he has been the victim of conjure and, secondly, that he is cognisant of the received cultural wisdom, articulated in *Mules and Men*, that only conjure doctors can cure conjure since “Medical doctor[s....] can’t do them kind of cases no good at all. Fact is it makes it worsen.”<sup>47</sup> Joe, “driven by a desperate hope to appear the old-time body in [his wife’s....] sight”, thus turns to conjure to restore his vanity and to find an antidote for what, to him, appears the conjure worked on him by Janie’s “scrochy” meal (126). Janie, meanwhile, remains the unwitting agency of the imminent physical disaster, and a sign that her crime is indeed accidental is manifested in her wish for her husband to see a qualified “doctor, and a good one”(126).

In the process, the scene envisions cooking to be a far more potent cultural process than that imagined by most culinary texts in preceding American culture. Victorian stereotypes in which idealisations of the silent wife blended with those of the efficient cook are comprehensively disrupted by the way Janie kills her husband with foods as well as words. Finally, then, Janie’s failed meal can be cited in tandem with her public insulting of Joe as complementarily resisting actions which, together, disrupt the same stereotype of womanhood. Emerging from the pages of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a new model of the female African American cook, in which she is no longer seen as the mere facilitator of a therapeutic ceremonial space in which the industrious male might forget his tiredness and tribulations. Now, this female cook has become the producer of a

broader and far more empowering array of physical and emotional effects: still able to convey love if so inclined, she also now stands revealed as a potentially terrifying figure who possesses, among other things, the ability to kill.

Much of the force of the Garden of Eden myth's cautioning against temptation derives from the fact that, as a fantastical landscape, it is itself tempting. Indeed it is precisely this ironic force – which qualifies the Garden of Eden both as a *outopia* (“no place”) and *eutopia* (“good” or “fortunate place”) – that has made the fable so valuable to such divergent texts as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* (1998). For to the dispossessed, hungry and cold, the Garden of Eden inevitably appears a place that will induce neither a craving for more nor a desire for alternative modes of living but a sense of deep and well-founded satisfaction. Eden is a space in which the nudity of Adam and Eve connotes sexual availability, in which the absence of rival inhabitants guarantees peace, and in which the proliferation of wild fruits and other foods safeguard the health and vigour produced by adequate nourishment. That Eve is offered all this yet still seeks something else serves to relativise desire and envy, to illustrate, in her dissatisfaction even amid so satisfying a world, the elusiveness of human contentment. A similar fate befalls Joe Starks in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A man whose hunger for change and uplift transforms Eatonville into a true “eating” town – a town from which malnutrition has been comprehensively banished – is finally himself poisoned, like Eve, and forced by death to leave the site of his utopian dreaming. Lying on his deathbed, his emaciated belly seeming like “some helpless thing seeking shelter”, he seems himself transformed into food at which the town – his “eating” town – now gnaws away. He reminds Janie of nothing so much as a “hog dying down in the swamp” (131) – of a hog which has escaped the roasting coals of the town's barbecues, perhaps, but only to meet a more humiliatingly protracted, debilitating fate. Thus, just as that temptation which guides Eden's construction becomes embodied in an apple then ingested and regurgitated by Eve, so Joe Starks, as Eatonville's architect, seems swallowed up by the force that he unleashes. And yet, if the fall of Eden comes about not because it is insufficiently satisfying but because of the human personality's incessantly relativising attitude to temptation, so Joe Starks' collapse is caused by his own vanity and not because the ideals behind the Eatonville project are necessarily flawed. Rather, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

remains committed to the self-evident fact that adequate nutrition and housing are, to those without them, aspirations worth striving for. The ceremonial feast that Joe Starks first wove into the municipal fabric of the town remains intact and is repeated at his own funeral. Finally, then, the death of Joe Starks does not entail a death of the utopian space his authoritarian leadership helped create. Rather, it marks the emergence of a new ambivalence regarding its more excessive patriarchal manifestations, which intermingles with a retention and reinvigoration of its principal claim: the end of hunger. Nowhere, in short, are the utopian aspects of Eatonville clearer than in the downfall of its architect.

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### C. Eatonville's "Street lamp" Barbecue: A Public Ceremony

"Y'all know we can't invite people to our town just dry long so, I god, naw. We got tuh feed 'em something, and 'tain't nothin' people laks better'n barbecue. Ah'll give one whole hawg mah ownself. Seem lak all de rest uh y'all put tuhgether oughta be able tuh scrape up two mo'. Tell yo' womenfolks tuh do 'round 'bout some pies and cakes and sweet p'tater pone" (71-72).

**Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)**

To get one thing straight right away: there is no single Kansas City style of barbecue. [...] Instead, due in part to [...] the Kansas Citian's open barbecue attitude (locals may be highly educated on the subject, but they are not, and they have never been, barbecue snobs), the city's frenzy supports a democracy of styles. Natives were weaned on briskets and burnt ends – those crunchy bits cut from the richly marbled tip of the brisket – and a whole realm of pork ribs: standard spares, St. Louis-style slabs, meaty baby backs, and "poor man's ribs" (rib tips). Crucial, too, in K.C. are hearty beef ribs and dainty Denver lamb ribs; sliced, chopped, and pulled pork (often piled on a soft bun and topped with coleslaw, a trick imported from either South Carolina or Memphis, depending on who's talking); and Italian sausage, Polish sausage, and "hot links" that fall somewhere in between. There's also chicken, fish, pig snouts (for barbecue fundamentalists), and whole heads of garlic (for left-wingers).

**Connie McCabe, 'KC BBQ: Smoke and Succulence in Kansas City' (1998)<sup>48</sup>**

If Eatonville becomes most visibly idyllic via its emergence as an “eating town”, then the barbecue feast that marks the acquisition of its first street lamp also marks the apotheosis of this utopian accession. And if this utopian accession is indeed organised by Joe himself, then his leadership over the town suggests this barbecue must accordingly be seen as the culmination of *his* dream, of *his* grand municipal project. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*’s representation of Joe’s “street lamp” barbecue is subsequently approached by this section as a final moment of civic pride before Janie’s signifying and poisoning interventions rupture Eatonville’s new society. Such civic pride, which remains at this point compelling enough to unite the community, is called into being by the barbecue no less than by the street lamp that it nominally celebrates. For, in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, barbecue functions among Eatonville’s populace as a signifier of a broader social identity, which binds them together as markedly as their shared and utopian emancipation from hunger, violence and racism.

Possibly, by so elevating barbecue into an affirmative symbol of social unity, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* reveals itself as a characteristically “southern” text, which endorses the close association that Connie McCabe’s ‘KC BBQ: Smoke and Succulence in Kansas City’ constructs between a particular food and a particular regional identity. After all, Joe Starks’s speech and McCabe’s essay are both premised on the belief that the barbecue ceremonial can, at least shortly, transcend the differences within a given southern community and consolidate some basic unity between its members. In Joe Starks’ case, barbecue’s potential to unify the motley citizenry of Eatonville is a major reason why he has arranged it. Presented as a generous offering by him to “his” people, it confirms his benevolence even as it solidifies the community’s ties. Connie McCabe’s late twentieth-century celebration of Kansas City barbecue, though valorising diversity and difference, ultimately makes a comparable appeal to social cohesion. This is despite the fact that McCabe’s celebration effectively exchanges the famous image of the melting pot, into which ethnic differences were required to liquidate, for a new vision, now epitomised through barbecue, in which such diversity is no longer deemed finite but embraced with open arms. Alongside interstate differences, McCabe now welcomes and celebrates Polish, Italian and other European tastes, citing this characteristically American triumph of entrepreneurialism and consumer choice as evidence of a vigorous and secured immigrant mosaic. Unity, in McCabe’s essay, is

encountered through a shared and binding experience of difference: social diversity, though by definition experienced differently by different people, paradoxically becomes the experience which these barbecue chefs and consumers hold in common.

Yet the word “race” never appears in McCabe’s essay. McCabe’s essay instead emphasises an overarching immigrant mosaic whose gaze, no less than that of the melting-pot image which it ostensibly updates, remains fixed upon Europe as cultural fount and ancestral origin. Such an emphasis on ethnicity was, perhaps, once reconcilable with the tremendous demographic transformations which nineteenth-century European immigration wrought upon those northern metropolises to which the theory of the melting pot was typically related. When applied to a twentieth-century American city profoundly implicated in the black-white problematic, however, the tensions within such an emphasis on ethnicity become at once more obvious and less sustainable. It becomes more obvious, for example, that McCabe’s celebration of ethnic difference within Kansas City’s restaurants is neither prefigured nor boosted by a parallel reconciliation between their black and white owners and customers. Race only re-emerges subliminally – in references to “barbecue” fundamentalists, for instance, whose taste for cheap cuts of meat seems to signal a broader affection for soul food – even as the colour of the African-American chefs remains displaced to the photographic portraits which illustrate the essay.

Such absences reveal that McCabe’s essay actually differs markedly from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* since, although it shares Hurston’s sense that barbecue can consolidate social unity, it applies this unifying capacity to European-American tropes of ethnicity rather than to African-American culture. As a signifier, barbecue functions similarly in these two texts, as a guarantor and promoter of social unity. In terms of the specific society this signifier signifies, however, a crossroads is opened up between McCabe’s essay and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which direct us towards European- and African-American culture respectively.

The redirection toward African-American culture to which *Their Eyes Were Watching God* orients its representation of barbecue is first signalled by its incorporation of the ceremonial into a sequence narrating Eatonville’s assumption as an all-black utopia. The barbecue is held to celebrate Eatonville’s first street

lamp, after all, the purchase of which is itself a sign of how far the town, under Joe Starks' stewardship, has progressed from its earlier incarnation as just another poor black community. Barbecue thus becomes bound up within an intensely racialised narrative of societal ambition and achievement. It becomes as interpretable as the street lamp it celebrates as a sign of the town's transformation from a collection of "shame-faced houses scattered in the sand and palmetto roots" which Joe and Janie had first encountered (56). The fact that these "roots" actually instigate street-lighting – Joe recognises that this "town needs some light right now. [...] 'Tain't no use in scufflin' over all dese stumps and roots in de dark" – further associates the barbecue ceremonial with Eatonville's ascension towards an enlightenment both literal and figurative (70).

Literal enlightenment, since it occurs during that early part of the novel which still casts Joe, to some extent, as heroic, remains as favoured by the narrative as the racial uplift to which it so visibly contributes. At this point, barely a criticism is offered of Joe as, in a typical response combining autonomous action with belated democratic gesture, he sends off to "Sears, Roebuck and Company for the street lamp and told the town to meet the following Thursday night to vote on it" (71). At the same time, however, this reference to Sears Roebuck is in many ways ambiguous. For it reminds Eatonville's inhabitants not only that their previously insular and independent town is indeed situated within a national context but also that any further civic regeneration will necessitate an increased participation in this surrounding economy. In itself, the mere mention of the company name thus reveals that self-sufficiency will be the price of racial uplift. In this specific moment, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* resembles 'The Man Who Was Almost a Man' (1961) and the way in which Richard Wright's protagonist Dave gains a new "sense of power" through a gun first glimpsed in the Sears Roebuck catalogue. For, in both texts, social control seems if anything strengthened by the way such empowerment – which in Dave's case merely extends to the ability to "Kill anybody, black or white" – is so closely associated with and dependent upon a commercial source which itself represents a certain white authority.<sup>49</sup> In both texts, that is, the mere mention of Sears Roebuck reminds us that these very insular and parochial domains are indeed situated within a national economy, and that any effort to gain greater empowerment or freedom must be managed through the intermediary of its fiscal and social outlets. Negotiations with these outlets, as such, foreclose the fragile possibility of emancipation with the immediate

recognition of the limitations imposed upon it from outside: Dave's utopian dreaming of "somewhere where he could be a man" is no sooner sensed than it is overwhelmed by the unwelcome restrictions of economic circumstance.<sup>50</sup> Joe Starks, meanwhile, suffers a similar fate as what began as a utopian ideal – the attainment of street lighting – is appropriated by the mundanity of the mail-order catalogue. That sequence of progressive actions which at first seemed to spring from the spontaneity and originality of Joe Starks' personality, increasingly, stand revealed as stepping stones in a route towards capitalist success which has already been trodden by millions of other Americans. The "firsts" of consolidation, lighting and mayoralty are exposed by the new dependence on Sears Roebuck as achievements which seem remarkable only when given a racial prefix – as achievements which, when related beyond a specific African-American constituency, are shown to have already been achieved by countless others countless times before. In this way, as Joe buys his mass-produced street lamp from a catalogue distributed nationally, and as tinned produce and Coca-Cola come to line the shelves of his store, so the civic progress which he instigated becomes figured as a cipher for Eatonville's industrialisation and mechanisation. The arrival of street lighting in this way becomes interpretable, within the peculiar context of Hurston's Eatonville, as heralding the arrival of industrial agriculture and, with it, the collapse of its preceding Edenic aspect.

However, although the "street lamp" barbecue is thus surrounded by signs of Eatonville's entrance into the national economy, nevertheless the sequence, trappings and materials of the ceremony itself are represented in such a way as to set it apart from the town's increased participation in capitalism. Joe, after all, does not donate to the proceedings any of the tins of food or Coca-Cola so recently arrived in his store, and instead conforms to a more traditional mode of communal food exchange by giving (rather than paying for) "one whole hawg mah ownself." Likewise, the townspeople are far less dependent on Sears Roebuck or any other national outlet for the barbecue than they are for the street lamp that this barbecue celebrates. Rather than roasting their hand-reared meat on a mass-produced furnace, the townsmen, on the "day before the lighting", dig a "big hole in back of the store and filled it full of oak wood and burned it down to a glowing bed of coals" (72). As such, preparations for the ceremony, by repeating tasks characteristic of agrarian tradition, give every appearance of honouring such

agrarianism even as they celebrate a decisive moment in its disintegration. They, as it were, bury agrarianism even as they praise it.

Awareness of such contradictions in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is essential to a proper understanding of the text. Such contradictions, that is, enable us to avoid the recent moves made within academic discourse to apply what Kadiatu Kanneh characterises as misinterpretations of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) and to repudiate Eatonville as the embodiment of "merely a regional nostalgia for racial authenticity."<sup>51</sup> For such criticisms are complicated once we recognise that Hurston's sentimentalisation of her "rural black folk" is less a flaw of the novel as a whole, as Hazel Carby among others suggest, and more the product of a specific authorial strategy that persistently pits such agrarianism against the contesting forces of mechanisation, urbanisation and industrialisation.<sup>52</sup> Significant distinctions like these, in turn, confirm that Hurston's representation of the "street lamp" barbecue as a folkloric retention does not displace the surrounding twentieth-century world so much as it asks how the desire to celebrate such retention can be reconciled with the encroachments of an increasingly sophisticated capitalist economy. These distinctions demand, in other words, that Hurston's representation of barbecue be approached not as a reactionary effacement of modernity but as an uneasy and self-consciously naïve passage in which such modernity becomes a prime source of anxiety:

The women got together the sweets and the men looked after the meats. [...] It took them the whole night to barbecue the three hogs. Hambo and Pearson had full charge while the others helped out with turning the meat now and then while Hambo swabbed it all over with the sauce. In between times they told stories, laughed and told more stories and sung songs. They cut all sorts of capers and whiffed the meat as it slowly came to perfection with the seasoning penetrating to the bone (72).

Unspoken contradictions adumbrating this passage – for instance, that Eatonville's capitalistic phase of enlightenment is to be ushered in by a characteristically agrarian ceremonial – gain urgency as *Their Eyes Were Watching God* then turns to the representation of the meal itself:

"Dis occasion is something for us all to remember tuh our dyin' day. De first street lamp in uh colored town. Lift yo' eyes and gaze on it. And when Ah touch de match tuh dat lamp-wick let de

light penetrate inside of yuh, and let it shine, let it shine, let it shine. Brother Davis, lead us in a word uh prayer.” [...]

As the word Amen was said, he touched the lighted match to the wick, and Mrs. Bogle’s alto burst out in [...]

They, all of them, all of the people took it up and sung it over and over until it was wrung dry, and no further innovations of tone and tempo were conceivable. Then they hushed and ate barbecue (73-74).

This passage exemplifies the way in which Hurston’s representation of African-American dialogue often complicates white Americans’ racist stereotyping of such speech even as it draws on precisely those themes of comedic verbosity and merciless burlesquing which characterise so much of the humour of, say, ‘Amos and Andy’.<sup>53</sup> Implicitly, this playful satirising of caricature helps identify the great and probably insurmountable obstacle which stands between Joe and the fulfilment of his capitalist ambitions: race. That is to say, the worshipful paean that the Eatonville citizenry here offer to the street lamp is contradicted by the implied and contradictory indifference in which those at Sears Roebuck would have distributed it. Economic disadvantages among African Americans in the South thus force the responses of Joe’s audience into the territory of the burlesque. In the process, these characters’ exaltation in profoundly religious terms of a light that is no less a product of the conveyer belt than cans of Coca-Cola raises significant questions about contemporary African-American society. For, by simultaneously affirming and satirising a characteristically African-American approach to ceremony, Hurston effectively asks how what she regards as a source of racial pride might survive the coming transition to capitalism. Although less elegiac regarding the fate of rural southern African Americans as *Cane* (1923), nevertheless Hurston here reiterates fears, as expressed by Jean Toomer, that the “spirit” of these folk “was walking in to die on the modern desert”.<sup>54</sup> For it is not so much that agrarianism here displaces urbanisation and industrialisation, as Hazel Carby alleges, as it is that urbanisation and industrialisation in fact threaten to make absurd the agrarian ritual of barbecue.

Alice Walker, a novelist who has often acknowledged Zora Neale Hurston as a decisive influence on her work, communicates comparable fears when typifying the cultural estate of the black Southern writer:

What the black Southern writer inherits as a natural right is a sense of *community*. Something simple but surprisingly hard,

especially these days, to come by. My mother, who is a walking history of our community, tells me that when each of her children was born the midwife accepted as payment such home-grown or homemade items as a pig, a quilt, jars of canned fruit and vegetables.<sup>55</sup>

Revealingly, Walker's narrative here proceeds from present to past tense, from a characterisation of what the "natural right" of the Southern writer *is* to an admission that such inheritance is "surprisingly hard, especially these days, to come by." As with Hurston, another rural southerner who relocated north to pursue a literary career, Alice Walker here associates looking southward with looking backward. That is to say, the conscious and self-advertised modernity of twentieth-century American metropolises here introduces into Walker's essay a nostalgic hindsight as profound as that through which *Their Eyes Were Watching God* views the southern barbecue. At the same time, however, these texts characterise the South as being incubated neither from modernity nor capitalism, but rather as a region which epitomises a to some extent desirable way of life that is itself nevertheless being eroded by these forces. Indeed, the South inhabited by Alice Walker's mother is described in terms that suggest its previous, pre-industrial incarnation has been more extensively eroded than that of Eatonville. After all, although Joe Starks and Alice Walker's mother both conform to a pre-industrial mode of communal food exchange, donating hogs and "homemade" foodstuffs, the latter's gesture, characterised as a "payment" in lieu, actually suggests that, as a mode of exchange, capital has already achieved a certain local dominance.

Difficulties inevitably arise whenever a relocated and newly-urbanised writer turns to the remembrance of the South: such a gaze can often excite a certain sentiment, a certain airbrushing of the past; and, since it generally represents rural characters for urban consumption, it can potentially sidestep any accountability to its audience. For these reasons, Hazel Carby is surely right to urge against the casual positioning of Hurston as "foremother to contemporary black women writers," even if this concept is actively invited by Alice Walker's own *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1984). Carby is also surely correct to proceed from this observation by endorsing Susan Willis's view that "Hurston's journey North and her subsequent education at Barnard created a distance between the author and the people she was to represent in her fiction, autobiography and anthropological writing."<sup>56</sup> For such distance is, undoubtedly, problematic, and

must be constantly borne in mind when approaching Hurston's representations. Such distance reveals, for example, that the utopian transformations to which *Their Eyes Were Watching God* subjects Eatonville are not necessarily answerable to the town's "real" inhabitants – that these nominal subjects might well fail to recognise themselves in a utopia so desirably bereft of hunger, violence and racism. At the same time, however, this distance between author and character should not be characterised as simply detrimental to Hurston's work. Rather, in the freedom from the documentary constraints of realism offered by such unaccountable utopianism, and in the tensions between capitalism and a pre-industrial form of ceremonialism that arise in Hurston's representation of barbecue, we might equally read this distance as allowing a certain artistic liberation. At the very least, the geographical distance which characteristically existed between Hurston and the Eatonville she wrote about can be said to have produced a valuable dynamic, also evident in Walker's essay, in which those pre-industrial cooking traditions lost to capitalistic progress become recoverable precisely through the metropolitan activity of writing. One response to industrialisation and urbanisation's erosion of the agrarian mode of barbecue, in other words, is to capture the character of this threatened ceremonial in print. Permanence, effected in the act of publication, thus becomes an objective through which the female black writer might offer protection to those culinary traditions dissipated by the rise in pre-packaged consumer produce and other "convenience" foods. Barbecue is thus locked into place by Hurston's representation of it: cooking and writing become interpretable as reciprocating cultural processes which, as the latter represents the former, strive to preserve preceding forms of culinary creativity.

Another response to the perceived threat of industrialisation and urbanisation, however, is to forge links between one's own community and those elsewhere under similar threat. The attempt to identify commonalities between diverse communities is, in a specifically African-American context, generally presented under the borrowed rubric of Diaspora. The reaching out from one's own specific culture, the searching for cultural connections between, say, Harlem and Rio de Janeiro, had not achieved its present prominence during Zora Neale Hurston's lifetime, and the term itself remained almost exclusively associated with Judaism. For all her impatience with doctrine and polemic, though, moments arise in Hurston's oeuvre that seem to turn away from United States society and to

present instead a pre-industrial and international community based on those notions of racial kinship that guide later and more explicitly diasporic texts. In the process, Hurston herself documents some of those connections between diverse African-American communities that are nowadays promoted vigorously by such self-proclaimed diasporic chroniclers as Ntozake Shange or the filmmaker, Julie Dash.

The outline of this embryonic diaspora emerges in the relentless revisions, improvisations and repetitions to which Hurston subjected her representation of the “street lamp” barbecue.

That is to say, alongside the “poisoning” scene explored in the previous section, the “street lamp” barbecue can be read as another instance of Hurston’s recurrent strategy of rewriting scenes and then placing them in the different genre contexts of her disparate oeuvre. Indeed, if anything, the barbecue scene in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* resembles other scenes from elsewhere in Hurston’s oeuvre far more strongly than our previous “poisoning” example. After all, the ceremonial trappings, sequence and presentation of the “street lamp” barbecue – the way the roasting of Joe’s hog is accompanied by storytelling, music and dance – recall a similar scene from Hurston’s first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934):

When the cotton was all picked and the last load hauled to the gin, Alf Pearson gave the hands two hogs to barbecue.

That was a night. Hogs roasting over the open pit of oak coals. Negroes from three other plantations. Some brought “likker.” Some crocus sacks of yellow yam potatoes, and bushels of peanuts to roast, and the biggest syrup- kettle at Pearson’s cane-mill was full of chicken perleau. Twenty hens and six water-buckets full of rice. Old Purlee Kimball was stirring it with a shovel. [...]

The hogs, the chickens, the yams disappeared. The old folks played “Ole Horse” with the parched peanuts. The musicians drank and tuned up. Bully was calling figures.

“Hey, you dere, us ain’t no white folks! Put down dat fiddle! [...] Less clap!”

So they danced.<sup>57</sup>

The affinities between this representation of barbecue and that offered by *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are considerable. After all, neither scene is told through the eyes of a genuine participant in the meal; both are depicted through the distancing lens of a third person narrator. Both describe the preparation of the barbecue at greater length than they do its consumption. Both thus frame the hog’s

actual consumption with a series of more protracted shared experiences which not only engage with the sensory presence of the meat itself but also with that “garnish” of storytelling, music and dance which, through Bully’s assertion, is actively associated with African-American identity. Differences between the narrative context of these scenes – *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* sets its barbecue on a white-owned plantation, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in independent Eatonville – further suggest that Hurston has here to some extent disregarded plot in order to “insert” a ceremonial meal that she saw as somehow vital to African-American culture.

Yet the similarity that the “street lamp” barbecue scene of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* bears with this scene from *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, though considerable, is if anything outweighed by the similarities between it and a scene from *Tell My Horse* (1938). For in this ethnographic investigation into Haitian and Jamaican Vodún and culture, Hurston offers an episode in which she takes a characteristically proactive approach to her folkloric research and infiltrates an all-male group of Maroons on a hog-hunt in the Jamaican rainforest. Once the hog has been captured:

all of the men began to cut dry wood for a big fire. When the fire began to be lively, they cut green bush of a certain kind. They put the pig into the fire on his side and covered him with green bush to sweat him so that they could scrape off the hair. [...] Everything was now done in high good humor. [...] The meat was then seasoned with salt, pepper and spices and put over the fire to cook. It was such a big hog that it took nearly all night to finish cooking. It required two men to turn it over when necessary. While it was being cooked and giving off delicious odors, the men talked and told stories and sang songs. One told the story of Paul Bogle, the Jamaican hero of the war of 1797 who made such a noble fight against the British. [...]

Towards morning we ate our fill of jerked pork. It is more delicious than our barbecue. It is hard to imagine anything better than pork the way Maroons jerk it. [...] We came marching in singing the Karamente’ songs.<sup>58</sup>

Read against the “street lamp” barbecue, this scene exhibits a yet stronger affinity with *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which confirms that Hurston indeed regarded barbecue as a ceremonial of utmost importance to African-American culture. Both scenes, after all, portray the participants of the ceremonies as an all-male crowd, described by broad assertions as a single unit – “they” are said to “dig”

this and to “do” that, to “cut dry wood” and to “cut all sorts of capers”. Likewise, both passages begin by describing a fire that is “a big fire [of] dry coals” in the former, and a “glowing bed of live coals” in the latter. Both proceed to emphasise the time taken to cook the hog: “all night” in the former, the “whole night” in the latter. In both the meat is then turned by two men, who are identified as Hambo and Pearson in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but who remain nameless in *Tell My Horse*. Indeed, the following construction in the former – “while it was being cooked [...] the men talked and told stories and sang songs” – produces a very direct echo of the latter – “in between times they told stories, laughed, and told more stories and sung songs.” These passages, in short, quote each other nearly verbatim, and, in the process of the firing, basting, turning, and, finally, the consumption of the hog, create a unity between the very different contexts of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Tell My Horse* and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*.

The affinities between these texts bring to mind that form of inter-textual referencing which Henry Louis Gates Jr. identifies as a characteristic trait of African-American literature and which, borrowing from black dialect, he terms “signifying”. Indeed, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is called upon throughout *The Signifying Monkey* to support Gates’s central contention that African-American literature exhibits a referential dynamic roughly comparable to the way “repetition of a form and then inversion of the same through a process of variation is central to jazz. A stellar example is John Coltrane’s rendition of ‘My Favorite Things’ compared to Julie Andrew’s version.”<sup>99</sup> Despite the prominence Hurston’s writings are given by Gates’s theorisation of signifying between African-American writers, however, these three barbecue scenes more precisely exemplify a form not of *inter-* but of *self-*revision, of *self-*repetition and improvisation. That is to say, in these scenes from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Tell My Horse*, Hurston signifies upon no one so much as herself. As such, a jazz comparison more pertinent than John Coltrane’s caustic transformation of a Hollywood musical standard might be his contemporary and incessant modification of his own “Africa” and “Alabama”. After all, Hurston’s strategy here is not one of literary homage but of a far more introspective and apparently restless dynamic which, judging from the legacy of Coltrane, is no less characteristic than signifying of a consciously African *and* American cultural sensibility. This is confirmed by Alice Gambrell, whose recent association of Hurston with Frida Kahlo and Leonora Carrington as “women intellectuals” reveals that the critical stature her oeuvre has

gained in African-American literary criticism is matched by the prestige it has attained within feminist discourses. For Gambrell observes that the author who had woven together these three barbecue scenes was indeed “a prodigious producer of textual variants – so much so that this has recently emerged as one of the most charged topics in Hurston studies.” Gambrell continues by suggesting that, although Hurston was frequently obliged to create such variations in order to meet the demands of publishers and patrons, this was by no means the only motivation behind their production. Subsequently, Gambrell contends, they should be treated to an:

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analysis that is both conscious of Hurston’s textual metamorphoses and of the historical determinants and political implications of those metamorphoses. [...] On one hand, then, self-revision reflects the sharply determined limits within which Hurston operated – it is a form of self-censorship and a sign of either voluntary acquiescence or victimisation; on the other, however, and less pessimistically, it represents a constant inventiveness.<sup>60</sup>

The approach urged here bears comparison with the one adopted by this chapter since it suggests that any interpretation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* must consider Hurston’s publishing pressures and financial constraints yet must not inflate these factors into an exclusive explanation for her idealisation of Eatonville. In Gambrell’s formulation, after all, the “other” hand – the “inventive” hand – is seen as an influence on Hurston’s representations which is equally decisive as that which was bound to the vagaries of her patrons and publishers. Disappointingly, however, although Gambrell rightly insists that such “textual metamorphoses” are always flavoured by the involvement of this “inventive” hand, she does not suggest any specific benefits within this generalised enrichment. This is in spite of the fact that many can be cited. For example, we have already seen how Hurston implicitly adumbrates Janie’s failed domestic meal with a poisoning episode from *Mules and Men* in order to transform this ostensibly harmless food event into one with the power to kill. Self-revisions such as this thus produce not merely a generalised “inventiveness” but manufacture a fluidity of association which in turn enables, in Gates’s words, “so many critics embracing such a diversity of theoretical approaches [...] to find something new at which to marvel in her texts.”<sup>61</sup> Equally, by inviting readers to make these kinds of connections between anthropological, autobiographical and fictional texts, such self-revision

effectively unifies an oeuvre dispersed across a wide range of different publishers, periodicals and pamphlets.<sup>62</sup> Self-revision, as such, places a kind of distinctive imprint upon each of Hurston's writings, reining in an oeuvre which might otherwise have become bewilderingly diffuse.

Genre is not, however, the only form of categorisation transcended by the connections with which Hurston's techniques of self-revision imbue her three barbecue scenes. National boundaries are also obliterated. Affinities between the barbecue scenes of *Tell My Horse*, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in other words, serve not only to affiliate them within the same body of work but also to invest a certain commonality between the very different regions in which they are set. By representing such a similar barbecue feast in such a similar way, that is, Hurston effectively associates Jamaica and Florida together. Self-revision, in this way, uses barbecue scenes in order to lodge an implication about the commonalities between diverse African-American communities in a way which is far more subtle yet in some ways as effective as the pronouncements of a more self-consciously diasporic text. By dramatising the affinity between the processes and trappings of Jamaican and Floridan barbecue ceremonials, Hurston represents a connection spelt out far more boldly in such later diasporic accounts as Ntozake Shange's *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can* (1998):

What's amazing to me, though I guess it shouldn't be, is that our compatriots in Trinidad and Tobago used these same oil barrels that we use to barbecue to make steel drums, ranging in tonality from tympani to well above high C [...] further south in the Caribbean, we produced C. L. R. James and Eric Williams, intellectual renegades. So what we eat fuelled all that.<sup>63</sup>

Hurston's incorporation of an archetypal barbecue scene into her writings about Jamaica and Florida, effectively, delineates claims of affinity between disparate territories and cultures that bear comparison with Shange's explicit assertion of diasporic continuity. That is to say, Hurston's oeuvre, here, constructs a deliberately mysterious interconnection between Jamaican and Florida barbecue practices, but does not then attribute such consistency either to African retention or to those powers of ancestral memory that are, ironically, vaunted in the first sentences of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Rather, by subtly incorporating such consistencies into an oeuvre that nevertheless tends not to highlight them, Hurston

invites and sustains an explanation for diasporic commonalities more complex than Shange's monolithic Africa legacy.

In the process, interconnections within Hurston's oeuvre remind us that there is no coincidence in the consistencies we have encountered through this chapter between the most temporally and geographically divergent of Black Atlantic sources. They explain why the foodstuff referred to at the beginning of this chapter – citrus fruit – appears in *Beloved*, *Tar Baby* and *The Interesting Narrative* as well as throughout Hurston's own oeuvre. Similarly, they indicate why diverse novels like the Martiniquan Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992) and Jean Toomer's *Cane* describe similar landscapes of intensive sugar production, or indeed why almost all the family of that most influential Black Atlantic thinker, C. L. R. James, found work in Trinidad's sugar processing plants.<sup>64</sup> For Hurston's anticipation of a diasporic geography through the interconnections of her oeuvre effectively confirms that, in the Americas, wherever sugar and orange plantations are to be found, so, overall, are African Americans. With few exceptions, and most notably the "breadbasket" of the American Midwest, regions of the continent historically committed to the intensive production of specific cash crops were also the prime destinations for African slaves. A map locating the major sites of cotton, tobacco, citrus and sugar production throughout north America is also, by and large, a map showing the regions where slave regimes remained at their most vigorous and African-American populations at their highest. In the process of documenting the consistencies between the material cultures encountered by slaves throughout the continent, Hurston uncovers an argument for African-American commonality more persuasive than the essentialist Afrocentrism to which diasporic discourses repeatedly resort. For this material connection shows that any commonality between, say, slaves in North Carolina and Brazil was not dependent on the remembrance of a monolithically African cultural sensibility but was actively promoted by their common *American* encounter with forced labour and with the racism which legitimised it. As the sign of a cultural kinship between marooned black communities scattered through the Americas, then, Hurston's self-revision of her barbecue scene persuasively insists upon a diasporic connection already anticipated in the affinity between her representation of citrus and those of Toni Morrison and Olaudah Equiano. Hurston's oeuvre, finally, proceeds from the unique utopia of Eatonville towards a gradual association of the town with other

marooned African-American communities – towards a placing of the town no longer just within a sea of hunger, but within an archipelago of other autonomous islands.

## End Notes

- 1 Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (London: Virago, 1986), p.9. All further references to this edition appear in the text itself.
- 2 Alice Walker, 'Looking for Zora' in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: Women's Press, 1984), pp.93-116.
- 3 Houston A. Baker, *Workings of the Spirit: The Poetics of Afro-American Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.77.
- 4 Richard Wright, 'Between Laughter and Tears,' *New Masses*, 5 October 1937, pp.25-6.
- 5 Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), p.132, p.157.
- 6 Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), p.56.
- 7 Mishtooni Bose, 'Introduction' in Thomas More, *Utopia* (Ware, Herts: Wordsworth, 1997), pp.vii-xiv (p.vii).
- 8 See Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p.30; and Norman Geras, 'Minimum Utopia: Ten Theses' in *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias: Socialist Register 2000* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Merlin, 1999), ed. by Leo Panitch and Colin Leys, pp.41-52 (p.43).
- 9 Terry Eagleton, 'Utopia and Its Opposites' in *Necessary and Unnecessary Utopias: Socialist Register 2000*, pp.31-40 (p.34).
- 10 For citations see John McPhee, *Oranges* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.6; Francis Bacon, 'New Atlantis' in *The Moral and Historical Works of Lord Bacon* (London: George Bell, 1874), ed. by Joseph Devey, pp.269-306 (pp.272-274); and Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (London: Virago, 1986), p.8.
- 11 Zygmunt Bauman, *Socialism: the Active Utopia* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976), p.14.
- 12 *Workings of the Spirit*, p.97.
- 13 See *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p.10; and Paolo Rossi, 'Bacon's Idea of Science' in

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- The Cambridge Companion to Francis Bacon* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ed. by Markku Peltonen, pp.1-24 (p.13).
- 14 For a botanical account of the orange's proliferation in the American colonies, see Nigel Smith, Donald Plucknett and Jennifer Talbot, *Tropical Forests and their Crops* (Ithaca, NY: Comstock, 1992), p.98.
- 15 Richard Hakluyt, 'A Discourse Concerning Western Planting' in *Documentary History of the State of Maine* (Cambridge, MA: John Wilson, 1877), Vol.II, pp.1-167 (p.158).
- 16 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.114.
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- 17 William Bartram, *Travels of William Bartram* (New York: Dover, 1955), ed. by Mark Van Doren, p.213.
- 18 Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (London: Vintage, 1991), pp.23-24.
- 19 *Travels of William Bartram*, p.213.
- 20 Entry for 'Vitamin C Deficiency' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (London: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1974), Vol. X, p.469; Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (London: Penguin, 1993), p.21.
- 21 Captain John Smith, *The General Historiees of Virginia, New England and the Summer Isles* in *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp.27-475 (pp.237-8).
- 22 *The General Historiees of Virginia*, p.340.
- 23 *Oranges*, p.76.
- 24 Francis Bacon, *The New Organon and Related Writings* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960), ed. by Fulton Anderson, p.222.
- 25 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp.117-8.
- 26 *The Interesting Narrative*, p.119.
- 27 Karl Marx, *Capital* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), ed. by David McLellan, p.42.
- 28 Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (London: Picador, 1981), pp.5.
- 29 Linda Krumholz, 'The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*', *African American Review*, 26 (1992), 395-408 (402).
- 30 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1997), p.54.
- 31 *Dust Tracks on a Road*, pp.18-19.

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- 32 'New Atlantis', p.300.
- 33 See 'New Atlantis,' p.298; and *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p.8.
- 34 Stephen Mennell, 'On the Civilizing of Appetite' in *Food and Culture: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), ed. by Caroline Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, pp. 315-337 (pp.319-20).
- 35 Gunnar Myrdal, *The American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944), p.373.
- 36 Albert Murray, *The Seven League Boots* (New York: Vintage, 1995), p.100.
- 37 For citations see Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: the World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p.363; Booker T. Washington, 'A Sunday Evening Talk,' in *The Booker T. Washington Papers: Volume 10, 1909-11* (Urbana and London: University of Illinois Press, 1981), ed. by Louis Harlan and Raymond Smock, pp.298-303 (p.303); and *Roll Jordan Roll*, p.616.
- 38 Patricia Storace, 'The Scripture of Utopia', *New York Review of Books*, 11 June 1998, pp. 64-69 (p.64).
- 39 Houston A. Baker Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p.xviii; Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.170-216.
- 40 Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p.160.
- 41 *A World of Difference*, p.162-3.
- 42 *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America*, p.179.
- 43 'Utopia and its Opposites,' p.34.
- 44 Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), p.186.
- 45 *Workings of the Spirit*, p.88.
- 46 *Mules and Men*, pp.274-275
- 47 *Mules and Men*, p.186.
- 48 Connie McCabe, 'KC BBQ: Smoke and Succulence in Kansas City', *Saveur*, 27 (1998), 70-83 (p.72).
- 49 Richard Wright, "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" in *Eight Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1996), pp.3-18 (p.10).
- 50 *Eight Men*, p.18.

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- 51 Kadiatu Kanneh, *African Identities: Race, Nation and Culture in Ethnography, Pan-Africanism and Black Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p.65.
- 52 *Cultures in Babylon*, p.131.
- 53 Though this is, naturally, not to compare *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with 'Amos and Andy': the claims of the most self-aggrandising and hubristic of Hurston's characters are always foiled by other black characters, and never by an external and rationalising white authority.
- 54 Jean Toomer, *The Wayward and the Seeking: A Collection of Writings by Jean Toomer* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980), ed. by Darwin T. Turner, p.123.
- 55 Alice Walker, 'The Black Writer and the Southern Experience' in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, pp.15-21 (p.17).
- 56 *Cultures in Babylon*, p.131.
- 57 Zora Neale Hurston, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (London: Virago, 1987), pp.58-59.
- 58 Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), pp.36-37.
- 59 *The Signifying Monkey*, p.104.
- 60 Alice Gambrell, *Women Intellectuals, Modernism and Difference: Transatlantic Culture 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.113, p.115.
- 61 *The Signifying Monkey*, p.180.
- 62 *Women Intellectuals, Modernism and Difference*, p.14.
- 63 Ntozake Shange, *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), pp.65.
- 64 C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p.7..

## Interlude #1

Occasionally, critical discussions of the works of Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright seem to feel obliged to side with one or the other, to co-opt the qualities of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and contrast them with the perceived weaknesses of *Native Son* (1940), or vice versa. Such approaches tend to presuppose that the canon comprises an exhaustible archive, which can accommodate certain texts only at the expense of others, and which is subject, therefore, to an ongoing and competitive critical negotiation. The inclusion of Hurston in the African-American literary canon can be seen, within this way of thinking, as an admittance so hard won as to recast this canon's entire structure, to the point where Wright's oeuvre is, in consequence, excluded or, at the very least, marginalised. Observations similar to these can be made of those defenders of Wright who perform roughly the opposite of this manoeuvre. Although it is easy to dismiss such approaches, it is equally easy to recognise that the constraints of marketing, of teaching time and reading time continue to pressurise the literary world, limiting the number of texts that can feasibly be read. Indeed, precisely these pressures sometimes lead those critics advocating the inclusion of the works not only of Wright but also of Hurston to suggest that the two literary bodies are not so different after all, but sustain an unexpectedly rich comparison. Overemphasis on similarity is as much of a risk to critics wanting to canonise *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Native Son* as overemphasis on difference is to those wishing to prioritise one and marginalise the other.

An objective of this thesis is to shift critical approaches to Wright and Hurston beyond matters of similarity and difference, to see that their oeuvres are neither entirely oppositional nor surprisingly cognate, but self-contained bodies between which there is no obligation for us to choose. It achieves this by resisting any impulse to capture or define categorically the essence of either writer's aims,

and by instead focusing upon a single aspect of their work, which in this instance is, of course, food. The emphasis here, therefore, is upon specific instances and representations within these authors' oeuvres. Of these instances, the contextualisation of black hunger amidst a world of food abundance that Hurston repeatedly emphasises is of special relevance for the following chapter. This is because, as this following chapter demonstrates, *Black Boy (American Hunger)* similarly insists that Wright's childhood hunger was not caused by food shortage but by an avoidable social inequality. What *Their Eyes Were Watching God* implies by figuring a utopian world from which both hunger and white Americans have been expelled Wright's autobiography thus renders explicit via its unceasing, insistent, and denunciatory rhetoric.

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## The Political Uses of Hunger in the Autobiography of Richard Wright: Protest and Resistance

Among the many editorial interventions, amendments and rejections that dispersed the writings which Richard Wright issued in his lifetime, those surrounding the publication of his autobiography remain particularly difficult to unravel. As Arnold Rampersad has observed, Wright at first entitled this autobiography *Black Confession*, but quickly changed his mind and renamed it *American Hunger*. Settling on this title, Wright divided his narrative into two lengthy sections entitled 'Southern Night' and 'The Horror and the Glory', which dealt respectively with his childhood in the Deep South and his migration to Chicago in early adulthood. Under this new title and in this bisected format, Harper and Brothers accepted Wright's autobiography in January 1944. That Wright's complete Bildungsroman nevertheless only gained an unabridged publication in 1991 is explained by the fact that Harper and Brothers then repeated a marketing ploy which had served *Native Son* so well in 1940: they forwarded the manuscript to the Book of the Month Club. The response of the Club was illuminating and, perhaps, betrayed a desire to repeat the sales but not the controversy that had surrounded Wright's first novel. At the very least, the two conditions that this literary organisation imposed upon its distribution of the autobiography led to a published version radically different from Wright's original intentions. The first of the Club's demands was for the removal of the autobiography's second section, 'The Horror and the Glory', which described events following Wright's arrival in Chicago. Among other things, this removal silenced the comparisons that Wright's full manuscript explicitly and implicitly draws between the racial ideologies held by southern whites and by certain white

Communists, employers and colleagues encountered in the North. At the time, as Rampersad points out, Wright suspected that “pressure from Communists had led the book club to ask him to drop” the concluding section of his autobiography.<sup>1</sup> This suspicion was founded in an acknowledgement that the Party indeed retained influence among the metropolitan intellectual circles of the time. It remains questionable, however, whether or not such influence extended to a capitalistic institution like the Book of the Month Club, which Joan Shelley Rubin has characterised as a “child of advertising” with a “consumer mentality,” that was steeped in “the intrinsic values of the liberal arts.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, when the Book of the Month Club’s reduction of Wright’s manuscript is considered alongside its second intervention, an alternative to Wright’s party political explanation for these changes emerges. For this second request, for the replacement of the title *American Hunger*, complemented the first in the sense that it, too, limited the terms of Wright’s incendiary autobiography to regional rather than national dimensions. Eliminating its northern section, and asking Wright to formulate the third title of *Black Boy*, the Book of the Month Club effectively localised the autobiography’s narrative and racialised its name, slanting it towards the “South, where the race question is forever on the mat,” in H. L. Mencken’s phrase. Regardless of the rationale behind them, then, these interventions ultimately rendered Wright’s autobiography more marketable, because less manifestly discomfiting, to anyone wishing to follow Mencken’s view of race relations as a “national problem” only in the sense that white northerners “bear a part of the burden” for white southerners’ mistakes.<sup>3</sup> Anxieties surrounding the North’s role in the promulgation of a racism many still chose to associate exclusively with a seemingly distant Jim Crow were thus soothed by the external renaming and abbreviation of Wright’s autobiography.

Throughout, this chapter designates as *American Hunger* an autobiography that has previously been known either as *Black Boy* or by the accommodating compromise of *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. This designation is intended as a minor contribution to the restoration of Wright’s original autobiography, a process which began with the publication of its unused portion by Harper and Row in 1977, and which culminated in the complete Library America edition of 1991. Primarily motivating this decision is the fact that, as Rampersad confirms, *American Hunger* was the title Wright “originally applied to the work as a whole.”<sup>4</sup> Proceeding from

this, however, is an interrelated sense that the dual interventions of the Book of the Month Club not only narrowed the national dimensions of Wright's narrative but implicitly reduced the hunger announced by its original title to a leitmotif of the text. Via its titular abridgement, that is, this hunger potentially lost textual significance, becoming interpretable strictly as a reference to nutritional want rather than as a broader thematic umbrella under which such want could be grouped alongside – and thus related to – desires for autodidacticism, enlightenment, and political reform. By returning to the original title *American Hunger*, then, this chapter seeks to acknowledge and to reassert the centrality such hunger occupies within Wright's autobiography. It seeks to reflect the prioritisation of hunger that Wright signalled in his original title as well as in the retrospective compensation which, during interviews to promote *Black Boy*, he seemed to pay to this formerly eponymous keyword. Many of these promotional interviews indeed betray a desire to correct the disappearance of hunger from the autobiography's title. In an interview conducted mere weeks before *Black Boy*'s publication in 1945, for example, Wright asserted that “colored people are thinking about meat and food now and meat and food after their jobs close.”<sup>5</sup> In an interview conducted mere weeks after *Black Boy*'s publication, meanwhile, Wright insisted that the “judgement” delivered by the autobiography was that: “the environment the South creates is too small to nourish human beings, especially Negro human beings.”<sup>6</sup> This characteristic progression from literal to “human” nourishment, no less than Wright's repeated return to the concern of hunger, suggests that to refer to the autobiography as *American Hunger* is simply to contribute to a restatement of its thematic priorities which Wright himself initiated upon *Black Boy*'s publication.

But it also reminds us that *American Hunger* is a title that ascends and then descends – is a title that pits a familiar patriotism against the political reformism often provoked by the presence of malnutrition. Rather in the manner of Gunnar Myrdal's contemporaneous *American Dilemma* (1944), in other words, the title *American Hunger* juxtaposes a form of nationhood intrinsically linked to egalitarianism and the pursuit of happiness with a disruptive and unsettling reminder that, for many, such Revolutionary pledges remain unfulfilled. Even more than this, *American Hunger*, by placing malnutrition into such close quarters with an adjective that notoriously inflates national into continental boundaries, combines an image of shrinkage with an almost Imperial image of expansion and, in the process, pinpoints the narrative's concerns with material, social and cultural

inequalities. Elements within Wright's original title in this way prepare readers for a narrative of protest – for a narrative that denounces hunger in all its interrelated cultural, nutritional and political manifestations.

Yet *American Hunger* does not simply protest. It also *resists*. Apparently paradoxically, it protests “this hunger of mine” at the same time as it prizes a “hunger for life”.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, Wright's autobiography simultaneously treats malnutrition as a social fact that must be denounced, and as a galvanising experience that profitably commits those who endure it to the path of political activism. *American Hunger* repeatedly freights its denunciation of nutritional want with a valorisation of such hunger's propensity to motivate politically the formerly docile. The three sections of this chapter chart this autobiographical progression from protest to resistance, cataloguing and interrogating the debilitations as well as the ultimate advantages bound up within Wright's conceptualisation of want. It seeks to establish this conceptualisation as neither a leitmotif nor a passing concern of the text, but as the pivot on which it turns, as the overarching sensation under which myriad other desires are accommodated. Ultimately, then, this chapter seeks to establish Wright's conceptualisation of hunger as the source for other desires, not only for food but also philosophy, not only for reformism but also for the autodidacticism via which he completed an autobiography which, henceforth, will be designated *American Hunger*.

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## A. Protest

[Before 1929, Chicago's white] papers talked of unending prosperity and were advertising a second World's Fair to celebrate a Century of Progress. But Negroes were a barometer sensitive to the approaching storm. They had reason to fear, while most of the Midwest Metropolis seemed to suspect nothing, that the Fat Years were about to end.

Chicago's banking structure broke at its weakest link – in the Black Belt. In July of 1930, Binga's bank closed its doors, while mobs cried in the streets for their savings. Within a month every bank in Black Metropolis was closed. As white housewives balanced the budget, their Negro servants were often the first casualties. When factories cut production, unskilled Negro labor was usually the first to go. [...] The Depression had come to Midwest Metropolis and Black Metropolis reflected the general disaster. The Lean Years were at hand.

### Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis* (1939)

[Bigger Thomas] had strained himself from a too long lack of sleep and food; and the excitement was sapping his energy. He should go to the kitchen and ask for his dinner. Surely, he should not starve like this. [...] On a table were spread several white napkins under which was something that looked like plates of food. [...] There were sliced bread and steak and fried potatoes and gravy and string beans and spinach and a huge piece of chocolate cake. [...] He rested his black fingers on the edge of the white table and a silent laugh burst from his parted lips as he saw himself for a split second in a lurid objective light: he had killed a rich white girl and had burned her body after cutting her head off [...] and yet he stood here afraid to touch food on the table, food which undoubtedly was his own.

### Richard Wright, *Native Son* (1940)<sup>8</sup>

Whereas many scholastic texts published between the wars often condemn hunger as one among many aspects of poverty, Richard Wright's early works persistently consolidate such condemnation by engaging with the actual impact that nutritional hunger has upon the body. The contemporary academic tendency to assume that hunger is undesirable without explaining why emerges in the way many of Wright's academic contemporaries refer extensively to malnutrition in their prose but not in the indexes at their books' conclusions. Although the title of Cayton and Drake's survey of segregation and ghettoisation in interwar Chicago, *Black Metropolis*, lays claim to scholarly comprehensiveness, its index contains no references to Cooking, Diet, Food, or Nutrition. The same is true of E. Franklin

Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939).<sup>9</sup> By contrast, Wright's oeuvre abounds with representations of meals and of cooking, with enquiries into hunger, and with episodes in which dilemmas between physical safety and nutritional satiety become fraught. This is exemplified not only in *American Hunger* but also *Native Son*, which Wright characterised as an attempt to distil "the emotional and cultural hunger" of American slum experience into the single, nihilistic personality of Bigger Thomas.<sup>10</sup> It is conceivable that *Black Metropolis*, although published scarcely a year earlier than *Native Son*, influenced this rigorous profiling of nutritional and psychological want. At the very least, in his 1945 introduction to a reissue of the work, Wright acknowledged the connections between the texts, paying tribute to Cayton and Drake for picturing "the environment out of which the Bigger Thomases of our nation come".<sup>11</sup> Yet, as the indexical absences of *Black Metropolis* reveal, the methodological representation that this environment received at the hands of these social scientists includes far fewer references to food and hunger than the austere fictionalisation it received in *Native Son*. Even *Black Metropolis*'s description of African Americans' special susceptibility to "Lean Times", although constituting one of Cayton and Drake's few references to the diet of an urban population they otherwise exhaustively survey, points specifically to unemployment but not to any impact such redundancy had upon nutritional intake. *Native Son*, by contrast, pictures a scene in which Bigger Thomas, having half-accidentally murdered his white employers' daughter, finds his equally amateurish attempts to extract a ransom obstructed by food's visual promise of imminent physical satisfaction. By so viscerally intensifying Bigger's conflicting impulses for satiety and for flight, the sensory presence of this tantalising meal establishes concerns about the disciplinary usefulness of food to which Wright, unlike many contemporary social scientists, consistently returns.

The following pages investigate the ways in which the representations of hunger supplied by Wright's narratives, and in particular by *American Hunger*, intersect with and disrupt those of contemporary methodological analyses of poverty. It is important to begin by stating that, *Black Metropolis*' index notwithstanding, this involves more than simply contrasting the formidable presence hunger achieves in Wright's oeuvre with its absence in much contemporary scholarship. It also requires us to engage with those statements on

nutrition that were issued by contemporary scholars, and to clarify those aspects that distinguish them from the imagery employed by Wright.

Of these differences, among the most noteworthy is the challenge Wright's literary narratives lodge against the tendency among many contemporary social scientists to characterise hunger as a by-product of poverty. Evidence of this causative perspective arises from *Black Metropolis* itself. As the epigraphic citation attests, Cayton and Drake's survey parlayed contemporary assumptions that hunger was symptomatic, was a branch sprouted from the malignant root of economic inequality. Characterising the fractious transition from Boom to Bust as one from "Fat" to "Lean Times", Cayton and Drake vividly establish an economic *cause* – unemployment – which then has a direct *effect* upon the waistbands of those turned away from Chicago's warehouses and factories. Nor does the sequential link that this passage constructs proceed from a single economic cause to a single nutritional effect, since, manifestly, "Lean Times" synecdochically refers to an economic climate in which African Americans found not just food but *everything* scarce. Thus, while Cayton and Drake's metaphor prioritises nutritional concerns, it at the same time encompasses many other shortfalls, many other "branches", all of which, as elements within a generalised dispossession, face back to the one malignant root of economic poverty. Consequently, like so many rashes, spells of dizziness, and bouts of nausea, shortfalls in shelter, insurance, healthcare, housing and, explicitly, food all function symptomatically as diagnosable signs of a single malaise: poverty.

Despite sharing with *Black Metropolis* a title that announces its scholastic ambition, *American Dilemma* refers to Nutrition in its index and discusses problems arising from malnutrition in its text. However, while Gunnar Myrdal's magisterial enquiry acknowledges that non-economic factors can differentiate nutritional intake even when "income is kept constant", it more frequently reiterates the symptomatic conceptualisation of hunger that informs Cayton and Drake's analysis. *American Dilemma* characterises hunger as one among many symptoms of poverty, not just by conceding that "deficiencies in diet [...are] highly dependent on income", but by bracketing its discussion of such diet alongside subheadings like 'The Family Budget' and 'Housing Conditions' within an overarching chapter on money.<sup>12</sup>

There is no evidence to suggest that Wright considered the causational approach to hunger typified by *Black Metropolis* and *American Dilemma* to be anything other than useful, not to mention necessary. Accordingly, these pages are not intended as an attack on those postwar social scientists who endorse the causational view embodied, for instance, in the subtitle of Isobel Cole-Hamilton and Tim Lang's *Tightening Belts: A Report on the Impact of Poverty on Food* (1986).<sup>13</sup> It is, after all, obvious that, in highly industrialised economies like interwar Chicago, hunger all but invariably results from a prior economic setback. Manifestly, those who sought the alleviation of relief stations and were thus forced into what *American Hunger* terms "a public confession of [...] hunger", had only been brought to such a low following a collapse in income (353).

Justifiable and necessary though these symptomatic conceptualisations are, however, it is significant that they are rarely reiterated in Wright's oeuvre. What one often encounters instead is a figurative approach which isolates hunger from other symptoms of poverty and which, having established it as a "disease" in its own right, engages with it as a political condition. Interestingly, this approach can be detected in the aforementioned introduction to *Black Metropolis*, which begins with Wright's memory of how, after his flight from the South to Chicago, he "lived half hungry and afraid."<sup>14</sup> This prefatory focus on a word to which the subsequent pages only intermittently refer is made explicit as Wright observes:

Current American thought [...] has quite forgot the reality of the passion and hunger of millions of exploited workers and dissatisfied minorities [...] Let us disentangle in our minds Hitler's deeds from what Hitler exploited. His deeds were crimes; but the hunger he exploited in the hearts of Europe's millions was a valid hunger and is still there. Indeed, the war has but deepened that hunger, made it more acute.<sup>15</sup>

Anxieties surrounding totalitarianism, the feeling, expressed by C. L. R. James, that the "German intellectual" before 1933 had been "at much the same stage that the American intellectual is today", here fuse with Wright's other major preoccupation – hunger – to establish a startling corollary to the black urban experience documented by Cayton and Drake.<sup>16</sup> Characteristically, Wright's references to hunger here remain ambiguous – it remains impossible to establish whether this "valid hunger" is metaphorical or literal, whether it emblematises National Socialist desires for Lebensraum, or instead summons the memory of that

actual starvation many Germans experienced immediately after World War One. Yet it would be a mistake to interpret such ambiguity as anything other than intentional. For, as the following pages suggest, Wright's work continually enlists such ambiguity in the representations of want, not to disrupt the empirical investigations of colleagues in the social sciences, but to advance a new conceptualisation which could acknowledge that such ambiguity indeed resided in the experience of hunger itself. Wright's view of hunger, in short, dissolved the clear denominative boundaries separating "actual" hunger (such as occurred in Germany after World War One) from "metaphorical" hunger (such as the Lebensraum policies by which National Socialists hoped to avenge Versailles), revealing that, psychologically, the two actually possess a far greater mutuality and mutability than is often allowed by social scientist practices. Indeed, part of this broader, more complicated conceptualisation of hunger in all forms emerges from Wright's introduction to *Black Metropolis* itself. For, if the above words are placed into a temporal rather than a textual relationship with Cayton and Drake's work, they become interpretable less as an introduction to the sociological investigation and more as a postscript via which Wright voices his responses to it. This accomplished, it can then become tempting to speculate that, given Cayton and Drake's failure to include an extended discussion of nutrition in their text, Wright is actually implicating *Black Metropolis* in his criticism of the significant silences "current American thought" displays on the "passion and hunger" of the "exploited". Whether this is true or not, it is significant that Wright follows this criticism with a renewed concentration on hunger which not only isolates it from other social "symptoms" but almost treats it as *Black Metropolis* treats poverty: as an organisational umbrella under which material shortfalls can be grouped. Equally, although Wright's "valid hunger" phrase recalls Cayton and Drake's metaphoric use of "Lean Times", his countervailing refusal to anchor this signifying hunger to a specific economic referent actually releases it from any rigidly causative conceptualisation in which it would synecdochically invoke distinct symptomatic shortfalls in housing, insurance, or healthcare. Nor does Wright here conceive hunger as a merely metaphorical referent for political desire: rather, by affirming its reality, validity, venality, and inexorability, he presents a broader, more fluid condition able to accommodate nutritional desires together with those political passions with which they now become blurred. In the process, this new fluidity and breadth reminds us that, psychologically, the desire for economic

reform and the desire for food might actually resist the clear compartmentalisation premised by the causative, symptomatic approach of certain social scientists. It reminds us that neither the hungry nor the revolutionary might as efficiently distinguish the perception of political oppression from the experience of malnutrition – that, within such “exploited” personalities, reformism and hunger may overlap and, as mutable desires, coalesce to become as inseparable as yeast and flour in dough.

In an essay entitled ‘Black Studies and the Contemporary Student’ (1969), C. L. R. James has recounted a dinner in France which Richard Wright, who “fancied himself as a bit of a cook”, prepared “in some Southern way”. Before this expatriated soul food meal’s commencement, James received a guided tour of his host’s temporary European home. Pausing before some bookshelves, Wright declared to his fellow writer: “Look here, Nello, you see those books there? They are by Kierkegaard. [...] I want to tell you something. Everything that he writes about in these books, I knew before I had them.” Having reported the remark, James insists that it was intended, not egotistically, but to attribute intellectual foresight to African Americans in general. Understanding Wright in social terms, James concludes: “What he was telling me was that he was a black man in the United States and that gave him an insight into what today is the universal opinion and attitude of the modern personality.”<sup>17</sup> Interpreting the anecdote in *Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy confirms this view, noting that “Wright’s apparently intuitive foreknowledge of the issues raised by Kierkegaard was not intuitive at all. It was an elementary product of his historical experiences as a black growing up in the United States between the wars”.<sup>18</sup>

In some ways, *Black Metropolis*’s introduction itself demonstrates the “insight” into modernity that Wright’s comments on Kierkegaard assign to much African-American cultural production. Rather as James and Gilroy suggest that American racial hierarchies foreshadowed elements explored by Kierkegaard, that is, so this introduction’s representation of a hunger bound by these hierarchies foreshadows directions pursued by Western intellectualism after the war. For example, by subtly resisting Cayton and Drake’s causative approach, Wright’s *Black Metropolis* introduction constructs a rich and sustainable affinity with research undertaken by Raymond Williams in the 1970s. Particularly, the introduction’s tacit subversion of foregoing efforts to separate the desire for food

from the desire for political change exemplify Williams's insistence in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) that: "Practical consciousness is almost always different from official consciousness". Rejecting the "handling of fixed forms and units" which *Marxism and Literature* assigns to "official" thinking, Wright's embrace of political and nutritional desires as mutable facets within an overarching "hunger" anticipate Williams's reemphasis on "what is actively being lived, and not only [on] what it is thought is being lived".<sup>19</sup>

Episodes from *American Hunger* further substantiate these interconnections. Describing the days immediately following his flight to Chicago, for instance, Wright recalls that he "hungered for a grasp of the framework of contemporary living, for a knowledge of the forms of life about me, for eyes to see the bony structures of personality" (334). Such terms virtually paraphrase those by which *Marxism and Literature* sets out what Edward Said terms the "seminal phrase 'structures of feeling'."<sup>20</sup> Almost uncannily, they call to mind Williams's advocacy of a new intellectual engagement with "meanings and values as they are actually lived and felt".<sup>21</sup> Nor are *Marxism and Literature's* "structures of feeling" and *American Hunger's* "structures of personality" comparable only semantically, but because both recommend lived experience as the ideal guide for future intellectual engagements. Nor, indeed, is it accidental that Wright's autobiography should position its version of this call as a form of hunger. Even before its 1991 restoration, after all, Wright's original title *American Hunger* palimpsestically burnished his "official" autobiography, re-emerging in smuggled phrases which signalled a concern with "the plight of the Negro in America" as a whole rather than in a part of it (321). Not only hunger but a once-eponymous *American Hunger* thus endured the revisions to which Wright's autobiography was subjected, remaining as a principal concern throughout the surviving narrative. Throughout, Wright imbues the condition of hunger with a certain determinism: his very "consciousness" is "riveted upon obtaining a loaf of bread" (274); he asserts that "I lived on what I did not eat" (161); he describes hunger as "my daily companion" (307). Constantly positioning hunger as an omnipresent experience, the autobiography shapes from it a lens through which the living, moving world is filtered – a lens, indeed, that exerts such influence on Wright's perception as to qualify under Williams's "structure of feeling" designation.

In turn, the differences between the representation of hunger by certain social scientists and by Wright crystallise. On one hand, scholarly texts published

by Democrats, liberals or socialists in the Depression and New Deal eras often imply that American capitalism, which produces many intolerable symptoms for its individual victims, is in urgent need of reform. Wright, however, collapses the economic fulcrum within this construction, concentrating its terms, to establish an equivalency between the desire for bread and the desire for political change. *Hunger*, in Wright's oeuvre, is reformism: it is radicalism; and, if exploited with sufficiently Machiavellian intelligence, it can even become that totalitarianism which, in its fascist and Stalinist forms, preoccupies much of his autobiography's narrative.

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One response to this treatment of hunger is to say that, far from realising a "structure of feeling", it merely manifests a rhetorical conceit which blurs meaningful distinctions between income and nutrition in order to succinctly capture a particular political temperament. Such a response could certainly be bolstered by the fact that, as a novelist, Wright's trade was in the imaginative use of language, whereas Cayton and Drake's lay in its uses as an analytic tool. Evidence that Wright's representation of hunger results from more than mere aesthetic considerations is, however, supplied by his autobiography's dramatisation of the uses underfeeding offers to social authorities wanting to force the potentially troublesome into acquiescence. This dramatisation of hunger as a disciplinary tool first emerges in the autobiography's opening pages, which recount childhood experiences when Wright knew that he was hungry but did not yet know that he was poor. Among other things, Wright's use of childhood naivete in these pages facilitates a reversal in the cause-and-effect sequence that informs much contemporary scholastic writing on hunger. It establishes hunger instead as a foundation upon which a postponed yet inevitable realisation of poverty can be subsequently constructed. This, in turn, allows *American Hunger* to position nutritional want, not as an "incidental" symptom of poverty, but as a condition which exerts pressures and sets limits that maintain social acquiescence.

Of these childhood years, Wright admits, "I was not aware of what hunger really meant" (16) – was not yet cognisant either of its potential for enforcing subordination or of its profundity as a perspective filter for an emergent "structure of feeling". Yet although it resists explanation, and although it remains a "cloudy notion", hunger is nevertheless recognised by the young Wright as a guide to his initial encounters with white-dominated social authorities and institutions (10). The

privileges of white Americans, which Wright is later to denounce in extensively analytical terms, are first forced into his consciousness because of their unexplained access to an unimaginable supply of food. Mystification mixes with an inarticulate sense of injustice as Wright recalls that, if his mother's white employers "left anything, my brother and I would eat well; but if they did not, we would have our usual bread and tea. Watching the white people eat would make my empty stomach churn and I would grow vaguely angry" (22). Even Wright's attitude to the black church is shaped by anger borne of this vague and as yet unstructured hunger. Preachers – who, again, *American Hunger* later denounces in an extensive and sophisticated diatribe – are not at first condemned due to problems of faith or dogma, but because these representatives on earth are, in a word, gourmands:

In the center of the table was a huge platter of golden-brown fried chicken. I compared the bowl of soup that sat before me with the crispy chicken and decided in favor of the chicken. [...]

"Eat your soup," my mother said.

"I don't want any," I said. [...]

The preacher had finished his soup and had asked that the platter of chicken be passed to him. It galled me. He smiled, cocked his head this way and that, picking out choice pieces. I forced a spoonful of soup down my throat and looked to see if my speed matched that of the preacher. It did not. [...]

As piece after piece of chicken was taken, I was unable to eat my soup at all. I grew hot with anger. The preacher was laughing and joking and the grownups were hanging on his words. My growing hate of the preacher finally became more important than God or religion and I could no longer contain myself. I [...] screamed, running blindly from the room.

"That preacher's going to eat *all* the chicken!" I bawled (30-31).

Thus, years before his adoption of Marxism, and decades before his adoption of existentialism, Wright became converted to the atheism which customarily accompany these philosophical ideologies by hunger and hunger alone. The complex and extensive analyses by which Wright elsewhere condemns white southerners and black preachers are prefigured, in the sequence of his autobiography, by the accusation that neither group intervened to assuage his hunger.

Following this scene, *American Hunger* details those years of late childhood when the mental and physical deterioration of Wright's mother stripped his family

life of the small semblance of security it once possessed. Chronicling his relatives' failed attempts to keep him within the family circle, Wright turns to the representation of what he calls a Methodist "orphan home" in Memphis. The fact that Wright, unlike *Oliver Twist* and *Jane Eyre*, knows his parents survive but must still be designated an orphan in order to qualify for state guardianship prime the narrative for a representation that in many ways signifies upon foregoing portrayals of institutional life.

The orphan home was a two-story frame building set amid trees in a wide, green field. [...]

The house was crowded with children and there was always a storm of noise. The daily routine was blurred to me and I never quite grasped it. The most abiding feeling I had each day was hunger and fear. The meals were skimpy and there were only two of them. Just before we went to bed each night we were given a slice of bread smeared with molasses. The children were silent, hostile, vindictive, continuously complaining of hunger. There was an over-all atmosphere of nervousness and intrigue, of children telling tales upon others, of children being deprived of food to punish them. [...]

Each morning after we had eaten a breakfast that seemed like no breakfast at all, an older child would lead a herd of us to the vast lawn and we would get to our knees and wrench the grass loose from the dirt with our fingers. [...] Many mornings I was too weak from hunger to pull out the grass; I would grow dizzy and my mind would become blank (33-34)[.]

In its Puritanical atmosphere, which actively intensifies and exploits the guilt orphans are expected to feel about their orphanhood, *American Hunger's* Memphis institution recalls Lowood House in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) as well as the "branch-workhouse" that introduces Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837-9).<sup>22</sup> Implicitly, by signifying upon British representations issued from the early phase of what Michel Foucault termed the Great Confinement, *American Hunger's* orphanage scene effects a necessary racial complication, which emphasises the disproportionate presence African Americans assume within this imprisoning movement's later cycles in the USA. That this scene as such bridges the class dynamics of the utilitarian workhouse with the class and race dynamics of the state penitentiary is confirmed as Wright autobiographically locates it in a pre-World War One period which Rayford Logan identified as "the nadir of the Negro's status in American society."<sup>23</sup> In *The Betrayal of the Negro* (1954), Logan defends his assertion by noting that this period witnessed: state disfranchisement of

African Americans, both constitutionally and by stealth; an escalation in lynchings; record KKK membership; and the consolidation both of segregation and of racial stereotyping. In short, *The Betrayal of the Negro* characterises a period of racial brutality – a period when almost every conceivable tool of social control at the disposal of white American culture was dedicated to preserving the essentialist hierarchies which once legitimised slavery.

Of these tools of control, it is the distribution of food which, significantly, Wright pushes to the foreground of his orphanage scene. Wright and his fellow inmates “continuously complain of hunger”: the “most abiding feeling I had each day was hunger”; hunger even debilitates Wright to the extent that he cannot wrench grass from the ground. Obviously, any attempt to attribute this hunger to a disciplinary tool must first negotiate the possibility that it merely arises from a financial shortage – that it is merely a symptom of institutional poverty after all. It is, however, significant that such financial restrictions remain unmentioned by *American Hunger* as, indeed, they are by *Oliver Twist*, which describes the utilitarian regime by which orphans “got thin” as being “rather expensive, [...] owing to the] necessity of taking in the clothes of all the paupers”.<sup>24</sup>

Wright’s refusal to explain institutional hunger financially, since it implies that malnutrition is intentional rather than symptomatic, also buttresses the ideological foundations upon which Zora Neale Hurston builds her Eatonville utopia in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. That is to say, the absence of financial considerations in *American Hunger* confirms Hurston’s implication that, given the almost Edenic abundance of the American harvest, African-American malnutrition is neither incidental nor inevitable but an intentional result of racial inequality. What *Their Eyes Were Watching God* achieves via the positive representations of Eatonville – an African-American community from which an intertwined white racism and black hunger have been coincidentally expelled – *American Hunger* thus confirms by protesting an orphanage wherein malnutrition is shown to be no less solvable, reformable, or unnecessary.

In the course of this denunciatory exposure, *American Hunger*’s accumulating references not only isolate and engage with hunger as a condition in its own right. They also show that this isolation results from something other than a merely aesthetic motivation. They reveal that the autobiography’s isolation of hunger is a verisimilar representation of an isolation first initiated by an orphanage regime eager to enlist such want in its imposition of acquiescence. They

suggest, in other words, that this prioritisation of hunger over poverty results, not from a rhetorical conceit, but from Wright's realist ambition to capture the principal position that nutrition indeed occupied in his early experiences.

In order to clarify this, we must return to the key phrase "Great Confinement", and to Foucault's empathetic commitment to those subjected to the "institutions of repression, rejection, exclusion, marginalization [...] that permit the fabrication of the disciplinary individual."<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in another manifestation of the insight James and Gilroy interpret from Wright's remarks on Kierkegaard, *American Hunger's* orphanage scene anticipates Foucault's concerns with the limitations institutionalisation places upon individual free will. That is to say, rather as it paraphrases Williams' *Marxism and Literature*, so *American Hunger* – which elsewhere identifies Wright's "need" to "use words to create religious types, criminal types, the warped, the lost, the baffled" (334) – engages with the archive of "marginalization" that Foucault explores in *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Moreover, this interest in the treatment of the socially marginal by the socially authoritative extends, in *American Hunger* and *Discipline and Punish* alike, to the institutional segregation of inmates both into cells and into fixed timetables. What *American Hunger* signals through repetitious phrasing – wherein hunger abides "each day", molasses are served "each night", and grass is uprooted "each morning" – is a "daily routine" which, in the terms of *Discipline and Punish*, regulates "the relations of time, bodies and forces".<sup>26</sup> One insight of *Discipline and Punish* is that such temporal and spatial segregation increases institutional authorities' ability to withhold and to grant, to mete out punishments and to dole out rewards, to turn "need" into "a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used".<sup>27</sup> Punishment, Foucault suggests, thus becomes "only one element of a double-system: gratification-punishment." This "double-system" secures acquiescence by defining "behaviour and performance on the basis of the two opposed values of good and evil". Foucault's identification of this institutional "circulation" both of "debits" and of "awards", as such, reminds us that inmates' desires can be manipulated as profitably as their fears – that beatings, deprivations, isolations and humiliations can all produce acquiescence; but so can bribery.<sup>28</sup>

Yet it also reminds us that the distribution of food which this Memphis orphanage imposes, since it determines who will be fed and who will not, is also a distribution of hunger. It, too, is a "circulation" which, by simultaneously parading food's presence as an "award" and threatening food's absence as a "debit", meets

both polarities delineated by Foucault's "double-system" of "gratification-punishment." Furthermore, this particular "circulation" becomes intensified since the "debit" of hunger, which can be defined as a desire that solicits its own cessation, inordinately increases the appeal of food's "award." Children are punished by a distribution of hunger – they are "deprived of food to punish them" – yet they are also bribed into submission by the mutual counterweight of hunger's promised termination, which, perhaps, tempts inmates into "telling tales upon others." Functioning complementarily as threat and as promise, the oppositional yet interdependent distributions of hunger and food thus enable the institution to resolve in its favour everyday flashpoints, disputes, and rebellions, securing a regimented, disciplinary tranquillity.

Given that food and hunger thus unite into this institutionally useful double system of "punishment-gratification", it is perhaps unsurprising that Wright should then charge the orphanage authorities with attempting to maximise their inmates' feelings of appetite. Certainly, it seems significant that, like *Oliver Twist*, Richard Wright is *underfed* rather than *un-fed*. Wright is given food, after all – he is not simply being starved to death. But it is possible that the orphanage regime actually maximises Wright's appetite via the very paltriness of the food that it promises, via the very inadequacy of the meals that it awards. At any event, literary and academic evidence suggests that the rationing which Wright's orphanage enforces may intensify appetite more effectively than any other dietary regime. *Oliver Twist*, after all, grows "voracious and wild with hunger" because he is being subjected to the "tortures of slow starvation" rather than to starvation outright.<sup>29</sup> In an unpublished PhD investigating the short-term effects of hunger, meanwhile, the biopsychologist Andrew John Hill suggests:

It is generally recognised that for those people who totally abstain from eating, the feeling of hunger disappears in a matter of days [...] On the other hand, hunger is a constant presence when people are only semi-starved. [...] The desire [...] to redress the energy deficit spills over into daily life and for some people becomes the central feature of their interest. It is apparent that satiety is a state never achieved in these circumstances.<sup>30</sup>

Hill's remarks suggest that "a breakfast that felt like no breakfast at all" optimises Wright's psychological desire for food far more efficiently than would a

breakfast which, as it were, *was* “no breakfast at all”. They reveal that the manner in which this morning meal seems to vaporise before Wright’s eyes, postponing indefinitely the satiety that it visually promises, simultaneously revitalises this promise, reinvigorating the potent memory of adequate nutrition.

Nor does Wright’s dismay at these institutional meals result only from their paucity, but also from the character of the social ceremony which frames them. In other words, between the meals that *American Hunger* depicts both inside and outside the Mississippian orphanage, there exists a certain fragile unity, a certain concatenation in the deployment of ritualistic detail and the use of peripheral material. Outside and inside, these meals incorporate the same saying of Grace, the same tables, chairs, cutlery and crockery; they draw the same veil of silence across the table at the moment of the food’s arrival. “Granny said that talking while eating was sinful,” Wright observes of one such family meal, “God might make the food choke you” (165-166). By the duplication of this fearful silence, by the saying of Grace, and by the echoes of the institutional “dishes rattling” – by the conspiracy of these microscopic effects, the shadow of a Sunday or holiday family dinner becomes cast from outside across the institutional table (36). The intruding shadow is a point of comparison: it reminds inmates of what they are missing, of the memory of prandial satisfaction, of an idealisation of the family table as the fount of a food and a nurturing love which increasingly intermingle. Yet it can also be seen as a kind of mirror, since it generates an illusion of substance that is shattered the moment its viewers reach out to touch it. It is this moment, when the knife strikes the plate, which thus imbues these meals with their strange, paradoxical duality, wherein they remain what they nominally are – breakfast – at the same time as they achieve their own negation as “no breakfast at all.”

Consequently, useful though brief spells of starvation may be, it is *underfeeding* – the slow drip of routine rationing – that most successfully keeps inmates’ hunger alive and with it food’s venal potential. Foods, as a material within a “circulation” of nutrition, are thus, as Foucault suggests, sufficiently “meticulously prepared” and “calculated” to produce a diet that is exactly sufficient to prevent outright starvation, yet exactly insufficient to assuage malnutrition. These evaporating meals, ostensibly fulfilling yet actually renegeing on the promise of satiety, work to promote the hunger that they allegedly abolish, prompting Wright, like Twist, to ask for more.

Since underfeeding rather than outright starvation guarantees hunger's omnipresence as an "abiding feeling", molasses, as the only food specified by the orphanage scene, can be seen as a kind of prison guard, which locks Wright inside his "cell" of nutritional desire. Molasses is certainly well equipped for this corporal role, for three interrelated reasons. Firstly, like the equally calorific white sugar from which it is separated during sugar cane processing, molasses produces an intense rush of energy that rapidly induces a craving for more. Molasses, as such, concentrates the mind on hunger, and especially so in those children who, like Wright, depend upon it as their only source of the nutrition they need for bodily growth.

Even more than this, however, molasses is bound up with the economic histories of US and Caribbean slavery – is as deeply steeped in these histories, indeed, as cotton and tobacco. The gathering of cane, which Ntozake Shange describes as "torturous labor" that callused the hands and exhausted the spine, was invariably delegated to the poorest, and namely the black, sections of the southern and Caribbean populations.<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, the processes which separate canes into molasses and refined sugar were occasionally overseen by slaves or by their descendants – by actual men like C. L. R. James's "pan-boiler" grandfather, and by fictional men like Jean Toomer's David Georgia, whose days were surrounded by "grinding cane and boiling syrup".<sup>32</sup> Upon the completion of this process, plantation owners received two commodities, white sugar and brown molasses, the first of which was valued far more highly by Western markets than the second. Indeed, by thus pricing white sugar above brown molasses, these Western markets can be said to have constructed a commodity hierarchy based on colour that not only mirrored but potentially consolidated those pre-existing racial hierarchies which, among other things, had originally determined the racialised demographics of sugar production. Molasses, its cheapness then attributed to an innate inferiority rather than to entrenched cultural connotations of colour, could duly be fed to slaves like Booker T. Washington as though to persuade them, too, that their social inferiority was neither designated nor imposed but natural. Indeed, having recounted how he had looked forward to the distribution of molasses "once a week from the 'big house'", Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) then confirms that this food was involved in a racialised culinary binary by noting that only "the whites had been accustomed to use" sugar.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, the racialised

binary between white sugar and brown molasses that *Up from Slavery* confirms is far from unique. Divisions imposed by sugar refinement resemble, for instance, the divisions which pork butchery rather more forcefully imposes upon pig carcasses, as it produces binaries between pork chops and chitterlings, between bacon and pigfeet, which can then be classified by a price hierarchy comparable to that which relegates molasses beneath sugar.<sup>34</sup> Nor should the fact that sugar refinement and pork butchery are often imagined, respectively, as chemical and biological processes mislead us into thinking there is something natural or innate about these price hierarchies. While we may share cultural preferences for sugar or bacon, we must always view these preferences as socially constructed forms of evaluation. Washington's assertion that molasses were "much more enjoyable to me than is a fourteen-course dinner", like Bessie Smith's demand for a "pigfoot and a beer", must thus be seen as radical disruptions of demarcating binaries – should be seen, in Ntozake Shange's phrase, less as "arbitrary predilections of the 'nigra' [than....] they are symbolic defiance".<sup>35</sup>

Having said this, *American Hunger's* orphanage scene by no means reassesses molasses in the radical manner of *Up from Slavery*. To put it simply: if Washington's assertion questions why molasses should be thought inferior, Wright's orphanage scene questions why he should be fed something thought inferior. This distinction brings us to the third factor that qualifies molasses for its corporal role in *American Hunger's* orphanage scene, namely, its uses in farming and animal husbandry. These uses are signalled by the memory of "silage ricks fed with molasses" which introduces Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City* (1973), and are confirmed by the food scientists Neil Pennington and Charles Baker's classification of "blackstrap" molasses as "cattle feed".<sup>36</sup> Not only was molasses frequently distributed to the poorer populations of the southern states: it is frequently distributed to cattle throughout the West. This, in itself, invites us to interpret the molasses that so thinly lines Wright's evening sandwiches as the digestible agent. not only of inferiority, but of what Paul Gilroy terms "infrahumanity".<sup>37</sup> It suggests, in other words, that the racialised food binary between molasses and sugar sketched by *Up from Slavery*, by subordinating blackness to whiteness, actually inflates this latter polarity into a new and exclusive equivalence with humanity which, by implication, animalises its darker binary opposite. Certainly, *American Hunger's* juxtaposition of molasses and the animalisation encapsulated in its references to "herding" also recall the

characterisation in William Faulkner's contemporaneous 'The Bear' (1942) of the white, poor and vulgar Boon, whose red face, bestially consuming "popcorn-and-molasses", looks "more and more like he should never have brought it out of the woods".<sup>38</sup> Such apparent animalising capacities of molasses mean that, by nominating the food as the corporal custodian of hunger, Wright's institutional authorities can unsettle their inmates' self-image as humans, and can, in the process, prime them for the bovine activities which conclude *American Hunger's* orphanage scene. For in this concluding image Wright and his fellow orphans are forced out into "the vast lawn" and then to "get to our knees and [to] wrench the grass loose from the dirt with our fingers. [...] I would grow dizzy and my mind would become blank". Wright and his fellow orphans, as such, involuntarily embody a compromised and contorted infrahumanity presaged in their consumption of cattle feed. This startling image, which implies that the molasses being processed in Wright's stomach will soon be joined by clumps of indigestible grass, vividly recalls Dee Brown's report of the behaviour of white trader Andrew Myrick, who, when confronted with the hunger of the Sioux, paraphrased Marie Antoinette's alleged remark and said: "let them eat grass".<sup>39</sup> For, here, too, these orphans – who are forced to join a "herd", to sink to their "knees", and to make their minds bestially "blank" – are expected to submit to caricature, to metaphorically assume a quadruped shape. Much as this scene recalls this implicit invocation of the buffalo, moreover, so its characters' enlistment into a dehumanising performance also echoes the animalising imagery that punctuates *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and its descriptions of slave auctions, slaves' "feeding", and punishments. For in this Memphis orphanage, it seems, a racialised definition of humanity obtains which remains comparable to that which organised the slave auction, as described by Douglass, in which "old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination."<sup>40</sup> Such dehumanisation reaches an extreme in the autobiography as Douglass recalls the manner in which slave children were fed:

Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called *mush*. It was put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush; some with

oyster-shells, others with pieces of shingle, some with naked hands, and none with spoons. He that ate fastest got most; he that was strongest secured the best place; and few left the trough satisfied.<sup>41</sup>

*American Hunger's* orphanage scene must be cast against this dismal historical background. For, by creating another institutionalised environment in which slave children orphans, having “been worked”, were forced to do without human comforts like chairs and cutlery in order to gain sustenance, Douglass vividly prefigures the outrageous bovine implications invested in the geophagy, or dirt-eating, forced upon Wright in the Memphis orphanage. Likewise, just as Henry Louis Gates argues that the dehumanising imagery of Douglass's autobiography highlights the brutality of slaveholding ideology, thus negating “those very values on which it is built”, so the animalisation of *American Hunger's* institution counterproductively corrodes the human validity of those who cling to racial thinking.<sup>42</sup> In both texts, animalisation ultimately serves to animalise those who attempt to implement it. It questions the personalities of those who claim to belong to a supreme race. It makes actual pigs and actual cows seem somehow preferable to those who seek to reduce other humans to their barbaric level. And it, finally, reanimates the intertwined etymologies of “cattle” and “chattel”, drawing these words back towards their common root, equating, at last, the orphan institution with the Peculiar Institution of slavery.

These slices of “bread smeared with molasses”, then, not only consolidate the authority of the orphanage because of their calorific quality and inadequate quantity. They also mirror racial binaries influencing the social hierarchies prevailing in the external world of the United States as a whole. As a foodstuff involved in a binary with a designated “superior”, molasses introduces Wright to the broader, racialised role in which Jim Crow has already cast him. Fetishising and branding inferior the brown food that he consumes, the Memphis orphanage force Wright to, as it were, face the mirror and fetishise his skin – to see himself in essentialist terms, as a boy whose blackness makes him to whiteness as molasses is to sugar. Constructing race through the consumption of a black substance posited against a white opposite deemed superior, these molasses sandwiches thus contribute to what Doris Witt terms soul food's capacity to function as a “site of interracial struggle over the regulation of [...] blackness.” In its relationship with

normative and nominally refined white sugar, molasses bear comparison with that “social order [in which] hog bowels are overdetermined to be both fetishized and abjected”. Routinely fed to animals, molasses thus numbers alongside chitterlings as an item “which transgresses the boundaries between food and excrement [...] through which privileged identities such as whiteness, masculinity and heterosexuality are maintained”.<sup>43</sup>

Via its orphanage scene, then, Wright’s autobiography demonstrates that hunger can be imposed as a way of subordinating African Americans to a racial hierarchy that designates them inferior. It shows that hunger is, in short, rather more than a mere symptom that arises, as though incidentally, from poverty. It is instead a tool of that economy of propaganda and psychological manipulation which, Wright’s protest suggests, has been dedicated to preserving the racial foundations upon which national American culture is built.

As I have suggested, the significance of Wright’s elevation of hunger into a “structure of feeling” is not that it discredits but that it complements the causative approach adopted by the social sciences with its reemphasis on lived experience. Differences between the approach adopted by Wright and those of contemporary social scientists amount less to an ideological distinction than to subtler variations in rhetorical emphasis. Wright interrogates hunger as a vital sensory experience, dissecting the impact it has upon individual free will, the pressures it can exert, the limits it can impose. This rigorous and analytical protest against hunger, by vividly dramatising the psychological and physical debilitations resulting from malnutrition, actually assists contemporary social scientists’ economic analyses since it explains exactly why the hunger they assume to be undesirable is undesirable. Ostensible discrepancies between the social science approach and that adopted in Wright’s oeuvre actually lead to an ultimate agreement upon the urgent need for hunger’s cessation. It is simply that Wright reaches this ideological destination via a radical route, via an iconoclastic view that sees poverty as symptomatic of that “structure of feeling” now designated as the “disease” of hunger.

## B. The Political Uses of Hunger: from Protest to Resistance

When the time comes to break the sod, the sod must be broken; when the time comes to plant the seeds, the seeds must be planted; and when the time comes to loosen the red clay from about the bright green stalks of the cotton plants, that, too, must be done even if it is September and school is open. Hunger is the punishment if we violate the laws of Queen Cotton.

### Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941)

But in its blind unrestrainable passion, its were-wolf hunger for surplus-labour, capital oversteps not only the moral, but even the merely physical maximum bounds of the working-day. It usurps the time for growth, development, and healthy maintenance of the body. It steals the time required for the consumption of fresh air and sunlight. It higgles over a meal-time, incorporating it where possible with the process of production itself, so that food is given to the labourer as to a mere means of production, as coal is supplied to the boiler, grease and oil to the machinery.

### Karl Marx, *Capital* (1867)<sup>44</sup>

Thus, by segregating inmates, by threatening food's absence and promising food's presence, and by supplying an inadequate molasses diet, *American Hunger's* orphanage regime imposes a contract which punishes insubordination with hunger, which awards acquiescence with food, and which regulates behaviour in general through a distribution of nutrition. Subsequent pages of Wright's autobiography extend this disciplinary food contract beyond the walls of the Memphis orphanage. They establish hunger as the automatic "punishment if we violate the laws" throughout the United States, including the entire southern region which *Twelve Million Black Voices* unconventionally feminises into "Queen Cotton".

This furnishing of the food contract with national dimensions in the process necessitates a readmission of those economic aspects upon which the orphanage scene remains silent. Financial factors omitted in this scene are reconsidered as Wright enters a society in which wages complicate and mediate the direct equation that this orphanage constructed between behaviour and nutrition. Even as he acknowledges these factors, however, Wright continues to resist any conceptualisation of hunger as symptomatic of poverty. This is because, despite

Wright's disenchantment with Communism, *American Hunger* retains the fundamentally Marxist view that the capitalist economy in general merely manifests and exacerbates pre-existing social stratification and that money in particular merely functions as exchangeable value. Reiterating *Capital's* position that, even when currency takes the form of gold, "commodities" remain the truly "precious metals", Wright engages with income only insofar as it can provide him with the means of subsistence, can provide him what Marx terms "natural wants, such as food".<sup>45</sup> Unaffected by the fetishism of commodities, by the translation of objects into sellable and purchasable commodities that enabled Olaudah Equiano to reconvert his own freedom, Wright instead limits the terms of his economic involvement to those of food. "Frantically [... converting] all of my spare money into food", Wright implicitly conceives his wages as a mere means to an end and, by implication, as a mere intermediary of a food contract whose primary equation remains between behaviour and nutrition (327). Realising currency's value only in terms of its ability to answer his physical needs, Wright observes: "I felt that pork chops were a fundamental item in life, but I preferred that someone else chart their rise and fall in price" (423). The combined nutritional prioritisation and economic effacement of this characteristic statement reveal that Wright remains bound in a food contract which, although complicated by the intervention of the economy, essentially repeats disciplinary strategies first encountered in the money-free world of the institution.

What these disciplinary consistencies between the institutional and the national imply is that life has been debased on either side of the orphanage walls – that the ambitions of African Americans have everywhere been forcibly reduced to the vulgar materialism of "the culture that condemns" them (321). *American Hunger* as such protests a situation wherein those orphans who kept their noses clean by paradoxically thrusting them into the "lawn outside", like those African Americans in the outside world who either submit or pretend to submit to an equivalently inhuman servility, secure neither financial security nor access to cultural uplift but the vulgar functionalism of food. Throughout the USA, *American Hunger* suggests, the awards and debits of an ultimately national food contract degrade conformity and misbehaviour alike to an equivalent level wherein civilisation and education are relegated beneath a nutritional distribution which barely distinguishes humans from machines. Such vulgarisation is why *Twelve Million Black Voices* insists that, much as Marx's labourer in capitalism is given

food “as to a mere means of production,” white landowners and overseers consider “black bodies” to be “good tools that had to be kept efficient for toil.”<sup>46</sup>

That the Memphis institution is, therefore, a kind of disciplinary gateway, which actually introduces children into an ultimately national food contract, is first signalled by *American Hunger*'s account of Wright's failed escape:

The dinner bell rang and I did not go to the table, but hid in a corner of the hallway. When I heard the dishes rattling at the table, I opened the door and ran down the walk to the street. Dusk was falling. Doubt made me stop. Ought I go back? No; hunger was back there, and fear. [...] Where was I going? I did not know. The farther I walked the more frantic I became. In a confused and vague way I knew that I was doing more running *away* from than running *toward* something. I stopped. The streets seemed dangerous. [...]

I stood in the middle of the sidewalk and cried. A “white” policeman came to me and I wondered if he was going to beat me. He asked me what was the matter and I told him that I was trying to find my mother. His “white” face created a new fear in me (36-37).

These sentences specifically style Wright's attempted flight as one “*away* from” the orphanage's “dinner bell”, the chiming of which seems to resound in Wright's mind no matter how far he removes himself from its aural source. In the process, *American Hunger* substantiates its interconnections with Foucault's critique of institutionalisation yet further, centring upon what *Discipline and Punish* terms that “precise system of command” by which “the activity of the disciplined individual must be punctuated and sustained by injunctions whose efficacy rests on brevity and clarity”. For, as a signal which neither explains nor adjusts its external circumstances, the monosyllabic bell of *American Hunger*'s orphanage merely “triggers off the required behaviour and that is enough.”<sup>47</sup> The effects of this bell are twofold: it consolidates the institution's aforementioned attempts to animalise its inmates via molasses; and, by echoing Frederick Douglass's memories of the “horn” that “was blown [... to recall slaves] from the field to the house for breakfast”, it strengthens the aforementioned similarities between *American Hunger* and *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.<sup>48</sup> For the “correct response” stimulated by both this “dinner bell” and “horn,” which is of course to prompt orphans and slaves alike to come running for food, constructs an echo with Pavlov's bell which, in turn, corroborates the charge of animalisation

that *American Hunger* originally lodged via its references to molasses and, subliminally, to cud-chewing. In fact, the Pavlovian echo of this dinner bell actually specifies and makes this charge yet more telling, revealing that the orphanage authorities intend to adjust their inmates to the characteristic behaviour not of *all* animals so much as of tameable animals like cows and dogs. After all, as Paul Gilroy reminds us, a “dog is not a fox, a lion, a rabbit, or a signifyin’ monkey” – and nor, it might be added, is a cow.<sup>49</sup> That is to say, unlike Brer Rabbit, a food forager extraordinaire whose audacious thefts are discussed in Chapter Three, neither dogs nor cows hunt independently and are, instead, fed from bowls and troughs. Both are as dependent on the sustenance of their human owners as the inmates of *American Hunger*'s orphanage are upon rationed molasses for fodder. In other words, in terms of either food supply or companionship, both are servants to human needs. Tamed, obedient, industrious, and cheap, these animals thus comprise an exemplary model by which to introduce children into that similarly infrahuman automation in which, as *Twelve Million Black Voices* suggested, “black bodies” become “tools”.

On one level, then, this Pavlovian dinner bell completes the self-negation of food that *American Hunger* has already signalled through its references to a “breakfast that felt like no breakfast at all”. By tolling for a meal Wright equates with “hunger” and “fear”, it confirms that both malnutrition and malnutrition’s solution mutually coalesce into a system of “gratification-punishment” far more involved and complex than the discrete “good” and “bad” polarities originally imagined by *Discipline and Punish*. On another level, however, the fluid duality of this Pavlovian bell uncannily yet fittingly seems to equip the escaped Wright’s hearing with an optimised canine range which forces him to hear it tolling for hunger even after it is out of human earshot. In the process, this bell reveals that, for Wright, it is far easier to escape the physical boundaries of the orphanage than the hunger these environs have manufactured within him. Hunger remains a vital legacy of this institutional regime, calling to Wright via its Pavlovian bell, even after the orphanage itself has vanished from his sensory perception. Like a disliked cellmate to whom he has been handcuffed, hunger becomes an unwanted accomplice to the breakout, which finally leads directly back into the disciplinary embrace of a policeman whose “white” race is revealed, courtesy of its surrounding speech-marks, as no less negotiable than Wright’s alleged infrahumanity.

If the national dimensions of the food contract are established by the unsolicited collaboration of hunger in Wright's breakout, however, they are confirmed by textual interconnections that later pages of *American Hunger* construct between the orphanage and Wright's attempts to gain service work. One of these interconnections emerges from a scene depicting Wright's first white employer:

I was sweating. I swept the front walk and ran to the store to shop. When I returned the woman said:

"Your breakfast is in the kitchen."

"Thank you, ma'am."

I saw a plate of thick, black molasses and a hunk of white bread on the table. Would I get no more than this? They had had eggs, bacon, coffee... I picked up the bread and tried to break it; it was stale and hard. Well, I would drink the molasses. I lifted the plate and brought it to my lips and saw floating on the surface of the black liquid green and white bits of mold. Goddamn... I can't eat this, I told myself. [...] The woman came into the kitchen as I was putting on my coat.

"You didn't eat," she said. [...]

"Well, I just wasn't hungry this morning, ma'am," I lied.

[...]

"You don't like molasses and bread," she said dramatically.

[...] "I don't know what's happening to you niggers nowadays," she sighed, wagging her head. She looked closely at the molasses. (172-173).

Most of the interconnections between this scene and *American Hunger's* representation of the Memphis orphanage flow from the reappearance, here, of molasses and bread. By itself, the reappearance of this singularly unappetising meal connects the world of the labour market to the world of the orphanage, revealing that paid work, for Wright, amounts to little more than a means of maintaining a subsistence level first endured in state care. These interconnections are elaborated by the figurations with which *American Hunger* surrounds its representation of this nauseatingly viscous, neither solid nor liquid meal. They are sustained, for instance, because the designated destination of this molasses – namely, the mouth of an African-American servant – confirms its status within dominant white culture as inferior food suitable only as highly calorific "fuel" for labourers or, for that matter, for animals. *Up from Slavery's* binary between sugar and molasses is, meanwhile, enlisted here within a broader yet equally racialised opposition as, for reasons already investigated, molasses actively increases a

hunger that is then manipulated by the penetration within Wright's sensory perception of designated "white" foods like "eggs, bacon, coffee." That this and the orphanage's distribution of molasses to African Americans both aim to consolidate social hierarchies is further substantiated by the fact that the white woman's response to Wright's rejection of the food is also an apprehensive premonition of racial rebellion. "I don't know what's happening to you niggers nowadays," she states, her invective revealing that her provision of molasses, like that within the orphanage, springs less from patronal concern than from a desire to lock Wright into a preordained social role of tameable inhumanity.

Even as this scene furnishes the food contract with national dimensions, however, it at the same time reveals flaws within this expanded disciplinary system, flaws that enable Wright to initiate the resistance investigated by this chapter's remaining pages. This scene reveals, for example, that this disciplinary system has failed to abolish the possibility of rebellion – that it has neglected to prepare for the resurgence of humanity, for those disruptive personalities willing to reject molasses along with the inferiority it implies. Possibly, this neglect explains why Wright's spurning of molasses provokes the same dismay as *Oliver Twist's* request for second helpings – explains, that is, why "I don't know what's happening to you niggers nowadays" echoes the threatening prophesy of Dickens' workhouse authorities: "that boy will come to be hung."<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, molasses' status as a highly calorific foodstuff which optimises appetite means that Wright's unsettling request, although for less rather than more, is nevertheless interpretable as a defiance of imposed hunger and is therefore comparable to *Twist's* workhouse rebellion. That is to say, Wright's request for less and *Twist's* request for more, although ostensibly paradoxical, remain analogous in the sense that both reject the proscription of diet by external authorities and, in the process, implicitly articulate this rejection as a reassertion of humanity. Dickens scathingly describes his workhouse regime as a "system of farming" after all – a phrase which, by summoning the bovine imagery of *American Hunger's* orphanage scene, confirms that *Twist* and Wright's dietary rebellions resist roughly equivalent efforts to manufacture in humans the docile virtues of tameable animals.<sup>51</sup>

Crucially, however, the oppositions lodged by this scene against the animalisation of a national food contract are not limited to the actions it describes, but also proceed from its very status as a scene, from its very existence as an artefact that describes events in writing. This is because *American Hunger*

consistently pits the animalising uses that hunger extends to disciplinary authorities against the countervailing, humanising uses that literacy extends to the disciplinary subject. It consistently draws from and invigorates into a twentieth-century context the advantages that literacy held to those slaves for whom, as Henry Louis Gates observes, it often constituted “an irreversible step away from the cotton field toward a freedom larger even than physical manumission.”<sup>52</sup> Of these manumitting advantages, particularly relevant to Wright’s scene of dietary rebellion is the opportunity such autodidactism opens up for retrospective and polemical revenge. Control over the weaponry of words, as represented in *American Hunger*, repeatedly arms Richard Wright and enables him to prevail over battles which, when illiterate, he had lost. Remembered episodes of racist insults and violence, by being transmitted to an audience of millions through a newly empowering literacy, are fought anew, the victorious aggressors of the time now becoming, within the context of the book, overshadowed by the retrospective authorial victory of their erstwhile loser. Cultural associations equating literacy with humanity in this way enable Wright to reconfigure his rejection of molasses into a scene whose cast contains an indisputable villain. Literary style and access to publication almost permanently contextualise this rejection within an antiracist purview, creating a narrative situation in which a white woman who describes African Americans as “niggers” automatically describes herself as something mentally inferior, brutalised, and abject. By suggesting that those who seek to animalise others effectively inflict animalisation upon themselves, autodidactism thus sustains a corrective rhetoric that enables the adult Wright to join arms with his younger servile self against an animalising food contract. That reclamation of humanity, that antiracist resurgence of undiminished selfhood, which the younger Wright initiates via his rejection of molasses is finally upheld by the elder Wright’s autobiographical use of literacy’s capacity to write wrongs, as it were. Autodidactism, as such, emerges in Wright’s autobiography as the means by which to escape the sonic influence of the Pavlovian bell, to defy the inhumanity implied in the consumption of molasses – to protest and resist, in short, what has now become a truly national, truly *American Hunger*.

### C. Resistance

That night in my rented room, while letting the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the sink, I opened *A Book of Prefaces* and began to read. I was jarred and shocked by the style, the clear, clean, sweeping sentences. Why did he write like that? And how did one write like that? I pictured the man as a raging demon, slashing with his pen, consumed with hate, denouncing everything American, extolling everything European or German, laughing at the weaknesses of people, mocking God, authority. [...] Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon? (293)

#### Richard Wright, *American Hunger* (1944)

In common with *American Hunger* itself, the narrative Wright's biographers present of their subject's life often position such autodidactism as a fulcrum on which his elevation in status turned, transforming a bellboy into a spokesman, a mere statistic into a thorn in the side of the American government. Kenneth Kinnamon, for instance, suggests that autodidactism provided an "imaginative and emotional liberation" which proved instrumental to what his biography terms *The Emergence of Richard Wright* (1972).<sup>53</sup> At the same time, *American Hunger*'s description of the transformation which Wright's exposure to Mencken's incendiary, militarising polemic provoked is very different from that experienced by Cross Damon, who, in *The Outsider* (1953), must obliterate all documentation of his former life in order to recast himself as a new man. Literacy, in its autobiographical application in *American Hunger*, orchestrates no such Gatsbyesque razing of the past, but deliberately calls it to mind, voluntarily summoning dehumanising hungers endured both within and without the orphanage in order that the political conditions which produced them can be more persuasively denounced. Yet literacy's capacities to resist such dehumanising hungers at the same time explain why Wright's efforts to obtain it are so consistently blocked. After all, although free, Wright enjoyed neither an adequate education nor the partial privileges of the Talented Tenth, and was instead schooled by a Mississippian system which, as he observed in 1945, "spends \$40 a year on the education of a white child, \$5 a year on a black child."<sup>54</sup> *American*

*Hunger* itself confirms these inequalities, insisting that, a century after its postbellum decriminalisation, African-American literacy remained no less subject than foods to the controls of a white supremacist oligarchy that rightly recognised the implications such knowledge held for the fields of political consciousness and organisation. Machinations Wright completes in order to steal into a Memphis library – a library “Negroes were not allowed to patronize” (288) – confirm that in this disciplinary society, writing remains a prestigious signifier of the demarcations of political power:

That afternoon I addressed myself to forging a note. Now, what were the names of books written by H. L. Mencken? I did not know any of them. I finally wrote what I thought would be a foolproof note: *Dear Madam: Will you please let this nigger boy – I used the word “nigger” to make the librarian feel that I could not possibly be the author of the note – have some books by H. L. Mencken?* I forged the white man’s name.

I entered the library as I had always done when on errands for whites, but I felt that I would somehow slip up and betray myself. I doffed my hat, stood a respectful distance from the desk, looked as unbookish as possible, and waited for the white patrons to be taken care of. When the desk was clear of people, I still waited. The white librarian looked at me.

“What do you want, boy?”

As though I did not possess the power of speech, I stepped forward and simply handed her the forged note, not parting my lips (291).

To be successful, a forgery must complete three interrelated subterfuges. Visually, it must reproduce the idiosyncrasies of its subject’s handwriting style. Linguistically, it must impersonate the distinctive semantics of this subject’s prose. And logistically, it must manufacture an impression of the circumstances of dispatch quite distinct from those that have actually transported the message from sender to receiver. Each of these three subterfuges is accomplished by Wright’s forgery. Wright outmanoeuvres the white librarian due not just to his forgery’s imitation of “white” handwriting and prose, but also to the no less deceitful circumstances in which he then delivers it. In this progression from composition to performance, Wright graduates from an authorial mimicry of a white bourgeois literary style to an actorly mimicry of an “unbookish” meekness which, though stereotypically suited to the colour of his skin, is no less incompatible with his private literary ambitions and talents. The sheer speed of this transformation from

an authoritative white to a submissive black persona enables Wright's forgery to succeed, which is to say that it enables his authorship to remain invisible. And yet such authorial invisibility should not be seen as a relinquishment by Wright of authority in relation to his text, but, contrariwise, as a sign of his mastery over it. For Wright's declaration that he "*addressed myself* to forging a note" reveals the tautology operating behind this forgery's manufacture, wherein its author must write *to himself* – must achieve supremacy over the text, installing himself as its principal writer *and* reader – in order to then absent himself, creatively, from it. Nor does such supremacy, to be achieved, simply require Wright, paradoxically, to erase all trace of his own voice from the text. It also requires him to erase all clues as to his authorial motives – to excise any profit which he, as the forgery's camouflaged author, stands to gain from the request that it makes. Possibly, this camouflaging of authorial motive explains why Wright's desire for words, which the autobiography figures elsewhere as another form of American Hunger, also obliges him to erase all signs of literal appetite from his performance, forcing him to lock his mouth and remain, "not parting my lips." For this mimicry of the facial gestures by which hunger is characteristically suppressed suggests, perhaps, that Wright is here subconsciously reverting from impersonating black servility back to that forged authorial persona whose whiteness, in the terms of *American Hunger's* disciplinary food contract, guarantees access both to foods and to libraries. Indeed, it is as though hunger could here disqualify the aspiring autodidact as automatically as blackness itself: as though, since Wright cannot mask his colour, he might, at least, attempt to act away the hunger whose identification would expose him as an unwelcome and politically troublesome reader in the library.

Yet while this episode can thus be read as an intense competition between the white controllers of literature and the blacks who they exclude, it also reveals a certain consensus between these warring parties, since it is contested over a knowledge both recognise as a source of intellectual enfranchisement. The librarian whose duties include the maintenance of an entire apartheid of education must blockade the apparently meek black boy precisely because she agrees with him that his successful penetration of literature would confirm an African-American humanity which, in turn, would defeat the animalising hungers of Jim Crow. At no point during Wright's self-education is the prestige that such white custodians reserve for the literature that they safeguard challenged or eroded. Rather, the

nutritional value of words remains undiminished, and Wright, having raided these enemy grounds, merely uses the weaponry of Mencken et al in order to subject the hungers imposed by Jim Crow to an unorthodox, almost guerrilla-like resistance. Consequently, while this episode stands alone since it tells of a victory won at the time rather than retrospectively, nevertheless it shares with the autobiography's other, belated revenges a conceptualisation of writing as defiant enlightenment – as a nourishment, indeed, for a hunger through which the world has been hitherto filtered.

Contrast this with a more notorious forgery, composed during the lengthy interval between Wright's claimed infiltration of the Memphis library and his autobiographical representation of this event at the close of World War Two. Significantly, the fictionalised author is Bigger Thomas, the forgery an attempt to secure dollar bills rather than the intangible, cerebral profits of a rhetorical education.

He put on the gloves and took up the pencil in a trembling hand and held it poised over the paper. He should disguise his handwriting. He changed the pencil from his right to his left hand. He would not write it; he would print it. He swallowed with dry throat. Now, what would be the best kind of note? He thought, I want you to put ten thousand.... Naw, that would not do. Not "I." It would be better to say "we." *We got your daughter*, he printed slowly in big round letters. That was better. [...] There was in his stomach a slow, cold, vast rising movement, as though he held within the embrace of his bowels the swing of planets through space. He was giddy. He caught hold of himself, focused his attention to write again. Now, about the money. How much? Yes; make it ten thousand. *Get ten thousand in 5 and 10 bills and put it in a shoe box...* That's good. He had read that somewhere... *and tomorrow night ride your car up and down Michigan Avenue from 35th Street to 40th Street.* That would make it hard for anybody to tell just where Bessie would be hiding. He wrote: *Blink your headlights some. When you see a light in a window blink three times throw the box in the snow and drive off. Do what this letter say.* Now, he would sign it. But how? It should be signed in some way that would throw them off the trail. Oh, yes! Sign it "Red." He printed, *Red*.<sup>55</sup>

Read alongside the similar scene from *American Hunger*, this moment from *Native Son* effectively confirms that both forgeries are inspired by a hunger in which, as a broad structure of feeling, desires for autodidacticism and desires for food

indeed coalesce and become as inseparable as yeast and flour in dough. That is to say, modern readers, knowing what they know about Bigger Thomas, might find his textual deception more problematic than Wright's attempted penetration of the Memphis library, and not least because this latter action so presciently anticipates 1960s struggles over the racialised designation of public space. Indeed, such readers might consider it significant that, whereas Wright's forgery transgresses a segregation law now abolished, Bigger's ransom demand remains a federal offence. Yet conceptualisations distinguishing the autodidactic motivations behind *American Hunger's* library note from the material ambitions of Bigger Thomas must contend with the fact that both aim to defy hunger. Wright's forgery is inspired by a desire to assert humanity – by a desire, that is, to resist the animalisation bound up in a food contract to which he has previously been subjected. Bigger's ransom demand in *Native Son*, meanwhile, is also forced into existence by want, as is confirmed when its composition is interrupted by the “slow, cold, vast rising movement” of hunger. That Wright was not content to infect Bigger with an aforementioned “emotional and cultural hunger”, but also conferred upon him literal, physical malnutrition is demonstrated both by the dizziness that interrupts the forgery's composition and by the circumstances under which its logistical subterfuge is then consummated. Creeping into the Daltons' palatial home, Bigger finds his efforts to dispatch the ransom demand and escape detection disturbed by a “strange sensation” that “enveloped him”. Bigger's “knees wobbled” as he enters the house, only to be confronted by the sight of “sliced bread and steak and fried potatoes and gravy and string beans and spinach and a huge piece of chocolate cake.” Hence, in a matter of pages, *Native Son* moves from Bigger's composition of his ransom demand to a representation of his anxious contemplation, filtered by an encompassing hunger, of an unimaginably generous meal. What this narrative shift confirms is that the primary desire motivating Bigger's forged demand for money is what prompts Wright to steal into the library. The characters of Wright and Bigger – one inspiring sympathy, the other discomfort, one a focus for antiracist morality, the other for the nihilism of ghettoisation – nevertheless act in tandem against an omnipresent American Hunger.

What, in fact, distinguishes these scenes is their respective successfulness. Wright's forgery is unequivocally victorious: he withdraws Mencken's *Book of*

*Prefaces* from the library, in the process initiating an autodidactic resistance which is to prove central to his emergence at the autobiography's close as a political, erudite author. On the other hand, Bigger Thomas ends *Native Son* facing the electric chair: his forgery sows the seed, not of triumph, but defeat. This significant contrast becomes clearer when considered in the light of Barbara Johnson's recent essay collection *The Feminist Difference* (1998), which mainly deals with *Native Son*. Reflecting both on Bigger's pseudonymous signature and on the Communist allegiances which coincidentally vexed his creator, Johnson remarks that, like "Richard Wright himself in 1940, Bigger is compelled to sign his writing 'Red.' Yet the note is signed 'Black' as well: 'Do what this letter say.' Hidden behind the letter's detour through communism is the unmistakable trace of its black authorship."<sup>56</sup> By implication, such remarks confirm that Wright's own authorly and actorly performances in *American Hunger's* forgery meet with unqualified success. But by contrast, they also identify the seed of failure of *Native Son's* forgery as lying, not merely in Bigger's infantile deployment of ambidexterity and gloves, but in his linguistic failure to displace the destabilising presence of an eponymous "native" African-American demotic.

Even without the aid of *The Feminist Difference*, the forgeries of *American Hunger* and *Native Son* call to mind many permutations regarding the tensions between assimilation and autonomy which nuance much African-American cultural production. For instance, the fact that, in order to achieve any kind of nourishment, both Bigger and Wright must forge "white" writing suggestively parallels the way in which the first slave cooks, faced with the demands of colonial plantation owners, effectively "forged" the dishes of a foreign culinary tradition. Read in this light, the invective volunteered by *American Hunger's* hidden self-address – "Will you please let this nigger boy" – interestingly intersects with the inclusion of such foundational English dishes as rhubarb pie and Yorkshire pudding in the first cookbook by an African American, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* (1881). For, in Abby Fisher's instruction to "rub the butter and lard into the flour", we again encounter an image of black hands working to produce a cultural form – in this case, shortcrust pastry – which is more characteristically associated with an English provenance and with a contemporary white American constituency.<sup>57</sup> Thus, shortening pastry and printing *nigger* respectively, the fingers of Fisher and Wright reproduce signifiers that so manifestly belong to a perceived white cultural

vocabulary that their use, now, serves to consummate the overall forgery, decisively hiding from slaveholders and librarians alike the indigestible fact of African-American cultural creativity.

Since notions of forgeries hinge upon a binary between “alien” and “natural” cultural paradigms, potentially drawing us into the volatile territory of racial essentialism, an aspect of *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* first stressed in the introduction should be reiterated at this point. That is, among the recipes offered by Abby Fisher, stereotypically English dishes like roast beef or rhubarb pie coexist both with soul food standards like fried chicken and with such ingeniously misspelled native and Creole titles as ‘Circuit Hash [Succotash]’ and ‘Jumberlie [Jambalaya].’ On one level, the foregoing observations are not affected by this nascent culinary multiculturalism. After all, Abby Fisher’s specifically English dishes are so absent of any discernible American, let alone African-American influence, that they can be viewed in isolation as the vestigial legacy of a colonial period, before southern cookery’s Victorian popularisation, when plantation cooks had indeed been obliged to “forge” European foods. On another level, however, and now *with* the assistance of *The Feminist Difference*, this analogy can be broadened to accommodate *What Mrs. Fisher Knows*’s soul food and multicultural recipes. For Johnson’s contention that Bigger’s ransom demand exceeds “its contextual function” enables us to imagine a literary biography, punctuated by the forgery’s recurrence as event and as episode, wherein Wright masters white cultural style in Memphis and then, during *Native Son*’s composition, intentionally disrupts such mimicry by invoking the black vernacular. And this progression from the accomplished veil of “nigger” to the intended black signifier of “do what this letter say” recalls the way slave cooks, having gained proficiency in European cuisine, then experimented with it, leaving, as Karen Hess puts it, “their thumbprint on every dish” they ostensibly imitated.<sup>58</sup> Complicating English dishes with ingredients or techniques either retained from Africa or originated in America, those slave cooks of whom Abby Fisher is our nearest available historical representative gradually inscribed upon the colonial foundation of southern cuisine new cultural influences out of which soul food and plantation cookery subsequently emerged. Fisher’s recipe for sweet potato pie – which can be categorised alongside Hoppin’ John and grits among the dishes with which southern cooking is most closely associated – supplies a clear example of this intergenerational, potentially

fraught process of culinary experimentation. Baking a shortcrust pastry identical to that she uses for rhubarb pie, Abby Fisher layers this English foundation with a signal ingredient which not only figures prominently in African-American cookery but is frequently confused with those yams which, as Jessica B. Harris has noted, feature heavily in West African cuisine traditions.<sup>59</sup> Sweet potato pie thus emerges from *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* as an exemplary culinary fusion, which blends together two venerable African and European ingredients to produce a new dish entirely original to America. And, as such, it can be ventured that Bigger's "*do what this letter say*" functions much as these sweet potatoes function – that it decisively intervenes, as an irrepressible sign of African-American cultural creativity, which rests in the European "pastry case" of Marxism and standard American English. Thus, if it is true that "hidden behind [... Bigger's ransom demand's] detour through communism is the unmistakable trace of its black authorship," as Barbara Johnson suggests, then sweet potato pie's "detour through" English pastry cooking surely displaces similar clues as to the dish's suppressed yet discernible African-American provenance. Just as "the possibility – and the invisibility – of a whole vernacular literature" lies behind "*Do what this letter say*," so behind sweet potato pie's signal ingredient there must lie the possibility – and the invisibility – of an entire African-American cookery tradition.

Little direct light is cast upon these interconnections between cooking and writing by *American Hunger*, which is, indeed, starkly absent of any supporting evidence for C. L. R. James's observations upon Wright's prowess as a cook. This reflects a broader displacement, effected in Wright's oeuvre as a whole, wherein the concomitant valorisation of writing and prioritisation of hunger effectively cuts out the middle (wo)man: the cook. This displacement is evidenced in several episodes from *American Hunger* alone. For example, in the Sunday dinner and orphanage meals previously discussed in this chapter, foods often appear to arrive readymade at the table with no acknowledgement of the preparatory processes that have produced them. Episodes in which culinary processes *are* declared, meanwhile, effectively replace such invisibility with a reductive representation that limits such cookery to an inartistic, merely scientific functionalism. Examples of this reductive portrayal recur with greatest frequency in those passages of *American Hunger* that describe the various menial positions Wright held before *Native Son*'s success. They include a moment when Wright finds himself alone in a white employer's kitchen

and, exploiting this brief and precarious solitude, “hurriedly scramble[s] three or four eggs at a time and gobble[s] them down in huge mouthfuls” (176). Although Wright in this scene radically disrupts food binaries previously imposed upon him via his virtual force-feeding of molasses, enabling him to ingest expensive foods nominally reserved for white consumers, time pressures also mean that he here dispenses of any notion that cooking may comprise a creative or artistic form of cultural production. This abnegation of the artistry of a process culturally associated with women culminates in a scene in a Chicago restaurant, in which the appalled Wright witnesses a European immigrant cook periodically “clear her throat with a grunt, [...] cough, and spit into the boiling soup” (323). Wondering “if a Negro who did not smile and grin was as morally loathsome to whites as a cook who spat into the food”, Wright presents this desecration of food less as a potential proletarian rebellion than as a desecration of the imaginative or creative capacities of cooking (326). This abnegation of the artistry of cooking is, meanwhile, as frequently signalled by *American Hunger* in less dramatic ways – is frequently signalled, for example, in scenes which seem to limit food to a kind of textual decoration that adorns but in no way determines the action. This is epitomised by the episode that introduced this section, in which Wright, having consummated his library forgery, returns home to discover what exactly there is in Menckonian polemic that obliged white southern authorities to deny African Americans access to it. For this scene so strenuously focuses upon Wright’s illegal encounter with Mencken’s words that readers could be forgiven for not noticing that this act of reading is accompanied by a concurrent act of cooking. Letting “the hot water run over my can of pork and beans in the sink,” the stark contrast between this definitively inartistic act of cooking and Wright’s exalted absorption in Mencken’s humanising polemic consummates his oeuvre’s repeated neglect of the potential craft involved in food’s cultural production.

On one level, this reductive approach can be cited in support of the anxieties many critics continue to feel regarding Wright’s general treatment of gender. Indeed, insofar as *American Hunger* concentrates its discussion of inspirational literature upon such canonical figures as Dostoevsky and Mencken, writing is gendered as a male pursuit and in the process opposed to those modes of cooking historically delegated to women. Questions of Wright’s gendering of the apparently oppositional activities of cooking and writing – which Barbara Johnson

summarises by asking where, “in Richard Wright, does the black woman stand with respect to the black man’s *writing*?”<sup>60</sup> – can, perhaps, be answered simply: in the kitchen. *American Hunger*’s description of Wright’s first attempt at writing, after all, concludes as Wright enters the house of a neighbour, interrupts “her as she was washing dishes and, swearing her to secrecy, [...] read the composition aloud. [...] God only knows what she thought [Emphasis added]” (141-142). Close juxtapositions between a writing figured as male and domestic activities figured as both female and functional thus potentially contribute to those charges of sexism which are more often sustained with reference to Wright’s oeuvre’s repeated portrayals of misogynist violence. In *The Feminist Difference*, however, Johnson resists this view, supplying a more complicated interpretation which implicitly accepts that the maleness of literature and the functionalism of cooking, as represented by Wright’s oeuvre, merely reflect histories of patriarchy and of the prevalence of menial labour among African Americans respectively. Johnson suggests that encounters between male writers and female cooks instead function as negotiations of the power and insight of black women to which, as an unresolved anxiety, Wright’s oeuvre repeatedly returns. African-American women are so often situated in kitchens by Wright’s fictions, Johnson suggests, because that is where they were often situated in Wright’s life, as in society in general; yet, crucially, his narratives complicate such gender demarcation by making “the figure of the black woman as *reader* in his work [...] fundamental.”<sup>61</sup> This complication of Wright’s admiration for the figures within a male-dominated literary canon, no less than the fact that he actually “fancied himself as a bit of a cook,” thus suggest that we must look elsewhere for an explanation for the relative lack of representation cooking receives in *American Hunger*.

But it also reveals that *American Hunger* presents a profound and unsettling contradiction, whereby this original title foregrounds a narrative which focuses on hunger, yet which at the same time consigns this condition’s solution – food – backstage. It reveals that, given Wright’s expansion of hunger into a broader condition only autodidacticism can satiate, his simultaneous cooking of “pork and beans” and reading of *A Book of Prefaces* creates an absurd and illogical situation wherein words counteract an appetite actively increased by the consumption of such debased foods. The coalescence of multiple psychological and physical desires within this overarching conceptualisation of want, in other words, finally produces a warped situation in which what Wright phrased as a “hunger to know” somehow

loses its metaphoric aspect.<sup>62</sup> It is as though the memory of semi-starvation remained so vivid in Wright's mind as to contaminate food itself – as though, in contrast to the biopsychologist Andrew Hill's remarks, *any* kind of dietary regime, *any* kind of nutrition here becomes implicated in the hunger only autodidacticism can resolve. Just as he resists the causative approaches of social scientists, then, so Wright involves hunger so profoundly within his analyses of disciplinary mechanisms that, ultimately, food itself can no longer solve it, can no longer challenge writing's ability to resist the dehumanisation of Western racial ideology.

## End Notes

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- 2 Joan Shelley Rubin, 'Self, Culture and Self-Culture in Modern America: The Early History of the Book-of-the-Month Club', *Journal of American History*, 71 (1985), 782-806 (789-796).
- 3 H. L. Mencken, 'Negro Spokesman Arises to Voice His Race's Wrongs', *New York Evening Mail*, 19 September 1917. This citation is from *The Impossible H. L. Mencken: A Selection of His Best Newspaper Stories* (New York and London: Doubleday, 1991), ed. by Marion Rodgers, pp.186-191 (pp.188-190).
- 4 Rampersad, p.489.
- 5 Richard Wright, 'Book-of-the-Month Author Talks for AFRO', *Afro-American*, 13 January 1945, p.1.
- 6 Richard Wright. 'How Richard Wright Looks at *Black Boy*', *PM*, 15 April 1945, pp.3-4.
- 7 Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), p.148, p.453. All further references to this edition appear in the text itself.
- 8 For epigraphic citations, see Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1946), p.84; and Richard Wright, *Native Son* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p.175.
- 9 E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947), pp.673-686.

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- 10 Richard Wright, 'How Bigger Was Born' in *Native Son*, pp.i-xxvi (p.xiv).
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- 15 Richard Wright, 'Introduction' in *Black Metropolis*, pp.xxiii-xxv.
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- 17 C. L. R. James, 'Black Studies and the Contemporary Student' in *At the Rendezvous of Victory: Selected Writings* (London: Allison & Busby, 1984), pp.186-201 (pp.195-196).
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- 19 For these and previous citations, see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.130-132.
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- 21 *Marxism and Literature*, pp.130-132.
- 22 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Penguin, 1985), p.48.
- 23 Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: from Rutherford Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Da Capo, 1997), p.52.
- 24 *Oliver Twist*, p.55.
- 25 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin, 1991), trans. Alan Sheridan, p.308.
- 26 *Discipline and Punish*, p.157
- 27 *Discipline and Punish*, p.26
- 28 *Discipline and Punish*, pp.180-181.
- 29 *Oliver Twist*, p.56.
- 30 Andrew John Hill, *Investigation of Some Short-Term Influences on Hunger, Satiety and Food Consumption*, unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds, Department of Psychology, Nov 1986, p.10.
- 31 Ntozake Shange, *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), p.17.

- 32 See Jean Toomer, *Cane* (New York and London: Norton, 1988), p.8; and C. L. R. James, *Beyond a Boundary* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), p.7.
- 33 Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1987), p.245, p.10
- 34 A further discussion of the cultural, culinary binary between “refined” sugar and molasses can be found in Chapter Three, pp.181-186.
- 35 See *Up from Slavery*, p.246 and *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can*, p.6. Also, for transcripts of Wesley “Six” Wilson’s lyrics to ‘A Pigfoot and a Beer’ (1933) and other Bessie Smith songs, see: [blueslyrics.tripod.com/lyrics/bessie\\_smith](http://blueslyrics.tripod.com/lyrics/bessie_smith).
- 36 See Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1973), p.12; and Neil L. Pennington and Charles W. Baker, *Sugar: A User’s Guide to Sucrose* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990), pp.18-20.
- 37 Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Colour Line* (London: Penguin, 2000) p.22
- 38 William Faulkner, ‘The Bear’ in *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp.135-236 (p.164).
- 39 Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (London: Vintage, 1991), p.40.
- 40 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (New York: Dover, 1995), p.27.
- 41 Douglass, p.16.
- 42 Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the “Racial” Self* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p.93.
- 43 Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.82, p.86.
- 44 For epigraphic citations, see Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1995), p.64; and Karl Marx, *Capital* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), ed. by David McLellan, p.163.
- 45 *Capital*, p.55, pp.111.
- 46 *Twelve Million Black Voices*, p.25.
- 47 *Discipline and Punish*, p.166.
- 48 Douglass, p.52.
- 49 *Between Camps*, pp.203.

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- 50 *Oliver Twist*, p.58.
- 51 *Oliver Twist*, p.49.
- 52 *Figures in Black*, p.4.
- 53 Keneth Kinnamon, *The Emergence of Richard Wright: A Study in Literature and Society* (Urbana, Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press, 1972), p.36.
- 54 Richard Wright, 'This, Too, Is America,' *Tomorrow*, 4 May 1945, p.63.
- 55 *Native Son*, pp.166-167.
- 56 Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp.61-73.
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- 57 Abby Fisher, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking: Soups, Pickles, Preserves, etc.* (Bedford, MA: Applewood, 1995), ed. by Karen Hess, p.24.
- 58 Karen Hess, 'What We Know about Mrs. Abby Fisher and Her Cooking' in *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* pp.75-94 (p.79).
- 59 Jessica B. Harris, *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking* (New York: Fireside, 1989), pp.95-96.
- 60 *The Feminist Difference*, pp.68-69
- 61 *The Feminist Difference*, pp.61-73.
- 62 Richard Wright, 'Black Boy and Reading' in *Conversations with Richard Wright* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), ed. by Keneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre, pp.81-82 (p.81).

## Interlude #2

Thus, by revealing that underfeeding upon ingredients like molasses and fried chicken can in fact heighten appetite, *American Hunger* ultimately implicates food itself in the optimisation of the hunger that it protests. As we have seen, a consequence of this emphasis on malnutrition is to prevent the incorporation within the autobiography of any celebration or other affirmation of the cooking skills in which Wright, by C. L. R. James's account, revelled. Such affirmations, after all, can hardly remain cogent if they coexist on the page with grim and unsparing descriptions of malnutrition. When its attention turns to moments of cooking, *American Hunger* instead characteristically reduces such activities to a strict functionalism from which any semblance of artistry has been mercilessly jettisoned.

At this point, the oeuvre of Toni Morrison offers an interesting juncture. For Morrison's fictionalising approach to African-American society, which consistently seeks less to defend or affirm than to mediate and represent its distinctive experiences and histories, instils a profound ambivalence on certain political issues. On issues that retain controversy within black political culture, Morrison's novels continually delegate possible ideological positions and their possible ideological oppositions to the level of characterisation. This is true of Morrison's most recent novel, *Paradise* (1997). In this narrative, gardening and a homegrown quasi-vegetarian cooking style are represented as a source of pride and pleasure to those inhabitants of the Convent who practice them. Gardening and the cooking of nourishing and healthy food are gendered and then cited as a source of feminist affirmation no less firmly than they in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1974). Unlike *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, however, this representation in *Paradise* is neither isolated nor unequivocally endorsed but

placed in “garden battles” against a masculine world encapsulated in the carnivorous “stick-roasted rabbit” and “cold buffalo meat” of the nearby barbecue Oven.<sup>1</sup> Two incompatible approaches to African-American cooking thus receive representation in *Paradise*, the third person narrative of which never sides unequivocally with either, but remains committed to the characterisation of both.

Morrison’s desire to create African-American worlds rather than to give voice to political perspectives is equally in evidence in *Tar Baby* (1981), the novel with which the next chapter is concerned. In this novel, after all, we encounter, in the form of Son Green, another politicised black southerner, another African American in whom nutritional and political hungers have become no less fused or inseparable than yeast and flour in dough. Yet, we also encounter the appropriately named cook Ondine, who practises a form of soul food cooking comparable to that celebrated by Shange and Harris. We encounter, in other words, a novel that typifies Morrison’s oeuvre in its accommodation of what can seem the fullest possible range of African-American cultural references and viewpoints. In turning to *Tar Baby*, therefore, the following pages engage with a fictionalised Caribbean landscape in which the utopias of Hurston and the hunger of Wright become encompassed within what, as such, can be read as a culmination of a specific, ongoing African-American cultural discourse.

## End Note

1 Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Vintage, 1999), p.89, p-99.

Chapter 3  
Hunger Overcome:  
The Blossoming of Brier in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby*

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“But, aunt, she is really so very ignorant! [...] She thinks of nothing but the Isle of Wight, and she calls it *the Island*, as if there were no other island in the world.”

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814)<sup>1</sup>

Until now, this thesis has dealt with the autobiography of a “black boy” who institutional authorities seek to indoctrinate into racial inferiority via a course of hunger; and with a fictionalised town, Eatonville, from which such want, together with the white presence deemed responsible for it, has been magically expelled. Previous pages have subsequently opened a binary, between Wright’s representation of an American society that prematurely orphans and systematically underfeeds him, and Hurston’s representation of a black island which, although surrounded by this white sea, seems somehow fortified, somehow exempted from its disciplinary strategies.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter seeks to complicate this binary, which can be summarised as that between Hurston’s utopianism and Wright’s realism, by turning to a novel in which these distinctive modes of literary production become fused. For Toni Morrison’s representation of a Caribbean estate in *Tar Baby* (1981) indeed interweaves culinary affirmations that recall the idealisations of Hurston’s barbecue episodes with moments when this estate’s white owner, Valerian Street, deprives his black staff of food in a manner redolent of that chronicled by Wright. Consequently, as will be seen, Morrison sculpts from her novelistic landscape an

inclusive forum that advances and ultimately transcends previous literary viewpoints to achieve a new complexity in which affirmations of black cooking and condemnations of black hunger can, finally, coexist.

One benefit of this complication lies in its reminder that, as Du Bois's renowned "double consciousness" strategy indicates, most African Americans inhabit neither Wright's "white" world nor Hurston's black island exclusively but draw on and influence the enmeshed and inextricable cultures of both. This reminder occurs as *Tar Baby* concentrates those social inequalities which circulate along regional or neighbourhood contours in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *American Hunger* into a single household in which largely black servants and their largely white patrons occupy separate quarters. Among other things, this heightened spatial intimacy enables Morrison to undermine the ghettoising perspective, encapsulated by *Mansfield Park*'s homophonic punning on the British Isle of "Wight", which figures racial enclaves as hermetically sealed units between which little or no interaction occurs. Corridors and stairways, although enforcing a segregated boundary comparable to those imposed by cypress swamps and other geographical features in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *American Hunger*, nevertheless narrow and puncture this racial frontier, rendering transgressions of it pronounced. Interracial encounters that occur infrequently in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and only sometimes in *American Hunger* become sustained as *Tar Baby* locates all its characters squarely on the interface between black and white. Concurrent with this concentration on interracial exchange, however, such intimacy also casts the abundance of employers' diets and the want of their staff into a new contiguity, into a stark adjacency via which the preventability of malnutrition that Hurston and Wright articulate in regional terms can be more persuasively announced.

In all of this, *Tar Baby* is assisted by its textual antecedent 'Tar Baby', as is demonstrated by the following synopsis of the folktale.<sup>3</sup> For example, the folktale's fictional landscape, a supernatural topology whose location remains unspecified, is also split into two distinct yet spatially intimate enclaves. The orderly rows of peanuts or corn or cabbage that, depending on which transcript you read, grow in Brer Fox's field connote an agricultural expertise which subsequently positions his cultivated land diametrically against the neighbouring brier patch inhabited by his

“wild” adversary Brer Rabbit. Such apparently unassailable differences are, however, breached nightly as Brer Rabbit’s search for food leads him to abandon his native patch and thus to transgress the fences by which Brer Fox enforces this cherished boundary. Correspondingly, Brer Fox interprets these nocturnal incursions as threatening that Manichean system of land distribution from which, as the sole food producer among the folktale’s personified creatures, he has so visibly benefited. Subsequently, Brer Fox constructs a Tar Baby and christens it “she”, drawing on a heterosexuality apparently presupposed by Brer Rabbit’s masculinization to reveal that this trap, unlike a scarecrow, is meant to attract rather than repel. Lured by this curiously inanimate female figure, Brer Rabbit duly embraces its gluey surface and is immediately infuriated to what Ralph Ellison’s *Juneteenth* (1999), in another context, called “that quick, heated fury which springs up in one when dealing with the unexpected recalcitrance of some inanimate object”.<sup>4</sup> Immobilised by his feet and hands’ manacled against its **liminal**, neither solid nor liquid, **substance**, Brer Rabbit stands imprisoned, his fur slowly tarred by a black skin that exposes him as the thief of Brer Fox’s food. When finally confronted by Brer Fox, Brer Rabbit realises that linguistic deception is his only possible means of escape. Claiming that no punishment could be worse than being sent to the brier patch, Brer Rabbit manipulates what he correctly assumes to be Brer Fox’s preconceptions about this abject territory, persuading his vulpine captor that even death is preferable to its unimaginable terrors. Brer Rabbit thus ends ‘Tar Baby’ back home due to a failure of imagination, due to Brer Fox’s inability to conceive that the brier patch might, after all, be habitable.

Of the multiple connotations that arise from this synopsis of Joel Chandler Harris’s version of the tale, many of which are explored in this chapter, I want to focus here on the opening image in which the hungry Brer Rabbit stares from the weeds of his brier patch upon Brer Fox’s cornucopian cornfields.<sup>5</sup> For, as an image of desire which Morrison’s narrative repeatedly revisits, this anxious surveillance of the overfed by the underfed condenses the nutritional inequality which Hurston and Wright articulate in racial and regional terms into the clarified and distilled context of an individual encounter. Like the Dickensian street urchin peering into a sweet shop window, this exchange between fox and rabbit effectively forces the hungry to come face to face with the satisfied, to confront those who possess the cure to the ailment that debilitates them. Morrison’s signifying on ‘Tar Baby’ in

general and on this image of inequality in particular, then, not only modernises a story once told by slaves, but also intensifies that juxtaposition of hunger and abundance already stated by *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *American Hunger*. Accordingly, the following pages proceed from the intimate nutritional inequality on which both 'Tar Baby' and *Tar Baby* are based to an exploration of how the latter text, via denunciatory gestures and ironic juxtapositions, responds to what it insists is a continuing injustice.

### A. 'Tar Baby' as Racial Allegory: the Critical Debate

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[O]ur ship [... was] stationed at Cowes, in the Isle of Wight. [...] While I was here, I met with a trifling incident which surprised me agreeably. I was one day in a field belonging to a gentleman who had a black boy about my own size; this boy having observed me from his master's house, was transported at the sight of one of his own countrymen, and ran to meet me with the utmost haste. I not knowing what he was about, turned a little out of his way at first, but to no purpose; he soon came close to me, and caught hold of me in his arms as if I had been his brother, though we had never seen each other before.

Oludah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative* (1789)<sup>6</sup>

As the earlier citation from *Juneteenth* attests, the African-American literary canon frequently revisits an apparently archetypal episode in which assailants are paralysed in the throes of attack by the unforeseen stickiness of their victims. For example, while hiding "in the weeds" of Central Park, the protagonist of Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1985) shocks a white woman who falls and then reaches out "a small white hand [... that] let go when she felt it was his hand." In Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1953), meanwhile, Cross Damon sees his lover "as an image of woman as body of woman" and fights his "urge to bind her to him", thus imbuing her with a volatile yet somehow inhuman sexual allure that vividly recalls the uncanny charisma of Tar Baby. Ellison himself signifies on the folktale not only in *Juneteenth* but also in *Invisible Man* (1952), which is famously introduced by an attack on a white man in which the narrator "seized his coat and lapels and [...], butting him as I had seen the West Indians do, [...] kicked him repeatedly".<sup>7</sup> In their sudden violence, in their occasional emphasis on brier and other weeds, and in their focus upon contact between limbs, these episodes thus

disclose a clear debt to that frozen moment when Brer Rabbit's arms and legs become glued to his passive adversary.

Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative*, meanwhile, raises the possibility that, as a foundational episode to which writers persistently return, elements of 'Tar Baby' predate even the Joel Chandler Harris version with which it is most frequently associated. This becomes possible due both to the current scholarly acceptance that the folktale originated in West African cultures and, in particular, to narratives that Melville and Frances Herskovitz collected on a 1931 tour of a Dahomean region to which *Uncle Remus: his Songs and Sayings* (1881) had not circulated.<sup>8</sup> For stories catalogued in the subsequent *Dahomean Narrative* (1958) include 'Tar Drum', a fable in which the trickster figure Yo finds his nightly forays into Dada Segbo's compound confounded by a drum covered with "a sticky thing." Distracted from his efforts to gain food, Yo seems as transfixed by this drum as Brer Rabbit is by Tar Baby: he approaches it, "and struck it with his hand. And his hand stuck. He said, 'Let go.' The drum would not let go. [...] Yo said, 'I am angry!' [...] He kicked it with his foot. His foot stuck. He struck with his other foot, and both feet stuck. He struck it with his head, his head stuck."<sup>9</sup> Although it is highly unlikely that this exact story was told during Equiano's boyhood in the Igbo valley of Essaku, nevertheless his Isle of Wight anecdote displays similarities both with it and, even more apparently, with 'Tar Baby' itself. In the above scene, after all, Equiano pictures himself standing in a cultivated "field" whose association with whiteness is signalled, firstly, by the fact that it is owned by "a gentleman" and, secondly, via a trenchant punning on the Isle of Wight that anticipates *Mansfield Park*. This field "belonging to a gentleman," then, also figures Equiano as alien: and his trespass upon it, like that of Brer Rabbit, is duly exposed by a black figure who, catching "hold of me in his arms", intertwines his limbs in a locking embrace. In the process, Equiano substitutes the violence and sexual violence emphasised by Walker, Wright and Ellison with a less turbulent scenario which, by dramatising the empathy between those forced into minority status, redirects attention to the mysterious allure that first binds Brer Rabbit and Tar Baby together. Walker, Wright and Ellison's transplantation of the agrarian context of 'Tar Baby' into the brutalised territories of an urban demimonde is, therefore, challenged by its moulding in Equiano's hands into a parable of what, after Eve Sedgwick, we might term homosocial love.<sup>10</sup>

Despite their differences, however, all of these episodes allude to the folktale in ways that subvert prevailing cultural assumptions about Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox's contest for food. After all, to observe that Equiano's Isle of Wight anecdote bears comparison with 'Tar Baby' is to establish the folktale as Henry Louis Gates Jr. has sought to establish the Esu-Elgebra stories, namely, as a myth born in Africa and nurtured in slavery, which gives shape to the African-American literary canon.<sup>11</sup> Equally, to observe that Walker and Ellison's scenes of interracial violence reformulate key elements of the story is to lodge the suggestion that Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox, as speaking animals, are not merely personified but in fact racialised. Both of these suggestions thus necessitate the dismantling of those assumptions which, firstly, have subordinated the folktale to the authorship of Joel Chandler Harris and, secondly, characterised it as a childish tale entirely innocent of racial subtext.

Literary articles and newspaper reviews published at the height of Joel Chandler Harris's popularity in the 1880s and 1890s immediately established these assumptions. For, even as Harris himself insisted that "the animal stories told by the Negroes in our Southern States [...] were brought by them from Africa," certain of these articles submitted English folklore, the writings of Thomas More, and the Indian subcontinent as alternative origins for the tales.<sup>12</sup> Commentaries less concerned with questions of provenance, meanwhile, tended to emphasise what was generally accepted to be the beguiling "childishness" of the stories while at the same time praising Harris, the creator of their fictional narrator Uncle Remus, to the hilt. For instance, a *New York Times* review of 1892 suggested that within these stories "the machinery is so simple. An honest colored man, who loves the family he was born in, and a little white boy, his darling, and that is all." Yet, the reviewer continues, the stories of this speciously loyal and assimilated "colored man" are as so many "lesser details" when set against the "literary art of the author, the creator," Harris himself.<sup>13</sup> In this way, the *New York Times* repeated a pattern laid out by Mark Twain, who, eleven years earlier, had dismissed Harris's reluctance to accept credit for the tales. Partly this dismissal stemmed from impatience with the modesty of Harris, the "shyest full-grown man" Twain had ever met. However, it also reflected the contemporary tendency to characterise Remus as the fruit of an imaginative faculty inordinately more acculturated and

sophisticated than the tales he happened to tell, which, with their elaborate cast of supernatural animals, appeared to betray the legacy of a fundamentally primitive if charming polytheism. “In reality,” Twain wrote to Harris, “the stories are only alligator pears – one merely eats them for the sake of the salad-dressing”, thus redirecting attention to an Uncle able to accommodate himself to servitude no less enthusiastically than his near namesake Tom.<sup>14</sup>

Disagreements surrounding the provenance and mediation of ‘Tar Baby’ thus nourished a contemporary critical situation in which those textual elements that apparently necessitated artistic expertise were habitually attributed to Harris and those connoting noble simplicity to his African-American sources. Certain twentieth-century academics have, however, been quick to point out that, if anything, the reverse was the case. In an introduction to a 1986 Penguin reissue of *Uncle Remus: his Songs and Sayings*, for instance, Robert Hemenway undermines such assumptions by affirming the folktales’ African provenance and by noting that “Brer Rabbit expresses archetypes of [...] liberation embedded deep in Afro-American history.” In this section, I want to contrast Hemenway’s observation that Harris rather than any black source actually engineered the retreat these stories effect “from an adult, public world of difficult decisions” against Craig Werner’s observation that, even now, “almost no one recognizes [...] the] harshly realistic [...] separatist implications” of the folktale.<sup>15</sup> For, as will be seen, the consensus which now surrounds the assignment of the stories to an African-American source exists in marked contrast to the continuing academic failure to assimilate Hemenway’s complementary assertion that their mediation by Harris served, not to capture their innocence, but to render them innocent. It is almost as though, in an inversion of the contemporary prioritisation of Uncle Remus over the stories he tells, many critics now suspect that the shadow of this objectionably faithful figure casts too decisively over ‘Tar Baby’, discouraging the interrogation of its racial permutations. At the very least, only a handful of critics, such as Lawrence W. Levine and Houston A. Baker, have wholly separated the folktale from its depoliticising Remus context and thus approached it, as Hemenway advocates, as manifesting “a revolutionary consciousness which says that one need not accept the world as it is”.<sup>16</sup>

This curious situation, in which many scholars attribute the authorship of ‘Tar Baby’ to African-American oral storytellers yet continue to characterise its content as childish and thus as racially innocent, emerges in such postwar texts as Richard Dorson’s *American Negro Folktales* (1967). For this anthropological survey, like its contemporary near namesake J. Mason Brewer’s *American Negro Folklore* (1968), acknowledges that slaves identified with Brer Rabbit.<sup>17</sup> On another level, however, Dorson remains reluctant to conclude from this that ‘Tar Baby’ might correspondingly allegorise race in the manner of Hurston’s folktale ‘Kill the White Folks’ or those concerning the actual slave, John.<sup>18</sup> As though unable to disengage Brer Rabbit from his neutralising association with Remus, Dorson fails to admit the possibility that, as Hurston indicated by ranking Brer Rabbit among those trickster figures who are mere “continuations of [...] John,” this trickster’s adventures might circulate around unmentioned yet influential racial codes.<sup>19</sup> Instead, these animal stories remain for Dorson a naïve archive against which later cultural forms – jazz, the blues, and “urban” folktales in which “the note of social protest has come to sound more overtly” – can be contrasted.<sup>20</sup> Manifestations of Brer Rabbit in twentieth-century African-American cultures are correspondingly characterised by Dorson, not as instances of continuity, but as satires via which modern storytellers ironically juxtapose past innocence with the ingrained cynicism of the urbanised present. Discussing *Deep Down in the Jungle* (1964), for instance, Dorson attends to Roger Abrahams’ awareness of folkloric changes wrought by urbanisation and ghettoisation far more than to his attendant identification of maintained traditions. This leads Dorson to interpret Abrahams’ comment that Brer Rabbit “becomes the hard man” on the Philadelphia streets to mean he becomes unrecognisably transformed into a “fast-talking, sporty hipster”.<sup>21</sup>

Melville Herskovitz often betrayed a comparable contradiction, insofar as he acknowledged that slaves identified with Brer Rabbit, yet continued to characterise stories involving this trickster as relatively innocent of racial subtext. Just as Dorson consigns ‘Tar Baby’ to agrarian cultures effectively concluded by the Great Migration, so Herskovitz approached the exploits of Brer Rabbit as a rather innocuous and deracinated stratum of folklore against which the more robustly politicised strains of recent years could be set. Discussing folktales collected before the Great War, for example, Herskovitz comments that “animal tales predominate, with the result that Negro lore was, and still is, largely looked upon as the epitome

of primitive naïveté. [Emphasis added.]”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, when referring to Georgian folktales that describe the Tar Baby’s “black lips [as] ever parted in an ugly grin”, Herskovitz fails to note that a similarly crude distortion was commonly enacted in the caricatures via which white American culture pictured the story’s black originators. The possibility that this distortion reformulates racist caricature never arises in *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), which opts instead to read the lips from which the Tar Baby’s “supernatural powers” spring as an individual “abnormality”.<sup>23</sup>

That, although Negroid caricature conventionally directs attention towards exactly this facial feature, Herskovitz nevertheless figures these “lips” as abnormal and thus as the aberrant characteristic of an implicitly deracinated individual effectively demonstrates the contradictions that permeate both his and Dorson’s approach to ‘Tar Baby’. For, on the one hand, these and other twentieth-century scholars have been quick to interrogate Joel Chandler Harris’s mediation of what came to be known as the Uncle Remus stories. They have successfully registered the decisive authorial interventions that the dissembling modesty and insouciance of Harris’s prefaces disguise. With equal success, they have rebutted those who, like Twain, ignored Harris’s own protestations and attributed the ingenuity behind the stories to him rather than to an African-American constituency. On the other hand, however, and as Herskovitz’s displacement of Tar Baby’s racialisation evinces, these twentieth-century academics have remained trapped in a Victorian purview that categorises the folktale as childish and, subsequently, as deracinated.

Figure One reveals that Joel Chandler Harris’s illustrators Frederick Church and James Moser suffered no such uncertainty. For, whereas Harris’s text for ‘Tar Baby’ mentions the blackness of this central figure only in passing references to “turkentine” and “tar”, contrariwise, illustrations which Church and Moser produced for this story’s reprint in *Legends of the Old Plantation* (1881) explicitly retrace contours drawn in contemporary Negroid caricature.<sup>24</sup> Accentuating the whiteness of the Tar Baby’s eyes, for example, this drawing anticipates the stereotypically petrified black servants who, Donald Bogle has shown, were to fill cinema screens a few decades later. Tar Baby’s mouth, meanwhile, here gains prominence as though in anticipation of the picturing by the aforementioned *New York Times* review of the “thicker tongue [and] less flexible



*Figure One*

Frederick Church and James Moser, "The Wonderful Tar Baby" in Joel Chandler Harris, *Legends of the Old Plantation* (1881)

lips” of Harris’s African-American sources.<sup>26</sup> In the process, Church and Moser’s caricature exposes as untenable their collaborator Harris’s discreet attempt to smother the starkly racial world out of which Uncle Remus narrates under the deracinated cosmology that this narrating opens up. In brief, the blankness in which Harris’s text envelopes *Tar Baby* is destabilised, disrupted and finally announced as a blackness in Church and Moser’s illustrations. Nor should the fact that this announcement occasions a flirtation with obscene racist caricature blind us to the key point that the racialisation which Church and Moser, unlike Harris, admits had originally been attributed to *Tar Baby* by “her” African-American creators. Works on which Harris, Church and Moser collaborated, like the close juxtaposition of contradictory positions that they construct, in this way articulate an unresolved dialogue on caricature and deracination which rehearses tensions enacted in less brutal fashion by the anthropological prose of Herskovitz and Dorson.

Church and Moser’s denigration of *Tar Baby*, their decision to picture this archetypal figure in a caricature more often applied to its black originators, thus sheds light on the continuing scholarly reluctance to classify the folktale as anything other than a naïve and essentially childish narrative. For Craig Werner’s observation that “each element [... of the tale] remains open to a multitude of interpretations” is proven, not only by Harris, Church and Moser’s negotiations, but by scholars’ continuing inability to disentangle the dilemmas between deracination and caricature that their uneasy coalition outlined.<sup>27</sup> All of these artistic and scholarly negotiations reveal that ‘*Tar Baby*’ is well named, that it shares with its eponymous material a certain slipperiness, a certain multiplicity of form, which sustains disparate interpretative possibilities. Tar may be black, but it is also viscous: it is slippery and difficult to capture; it can be moulded to fit any given shape, any given interpretation. Equally, Hemenway’s remark that “the allegorical identification between Brer Rabbit and black people is extremely complicated” encounters ample literary support in the form of recent reformulations of *Tar Baby* by Carole Weatherford, Albert Murray and Ntozake Shange among others. For instance, Carole Weatherford’s poem ‘*Tar Baby on the Soapbox*’ dramatically inverts the Cimmerian blackness of Church and Moser’s portrait into an equally pronounced and fabricated whiteness that then qualifies this impassive figure to appear in a washing powder advertisement where it can

“mouth white lies”.<sup>28</sup> Morrison’s *Sula* (1973), meanwhile, includes among its cast Tar Baby, an appropriately “beautiful” yet inappropriately lightened man who “Eva said [...] was all white”.<sup>29</sup> These radical reinterpretations, by lightening Tar Baby into a white as extreme as the blackness of Church and Moser’s caricature, thus exemplify Mary Douglas’s description of the viscous as “a state halfway between solid and liquid” which gives “an ambiguous sense impression”.<sup>30</sup>

Yet they also demonstrate that Toni Morrison’s publication of *Tar Baby* in 1981 marked a pivotal moment, which issued into the African-American literary canon a decisive refutation of preceding attempts to characterise the folktale as either deracinated or childish. Continuing tensions between these literary reformulations and anthropological analyses reveal, in other words, that upon publication Morrison entered an unresolved debate whose participants were by no means unanimously predisposed to accept her insistence, lodged throughout *Tar Baby*, that her folkloric source allegorised interracial encounters and exchange.

*Tar Baby* manifests this insistence, imposing upon the folktale from which it takes its name an explicitly racialised reading, via explicit and implicit references, with which I now deal in turn. Explicitly, *Tar Baby* effects this racialisation by providing opportunities in which characters can retell the folktale and, in the process, layer it with nuances and emphases that were displaced by those negotiations left unresolved in the production of Harris, Church and Moser’s “official” transcript. In the following narration of the folktale, for instance, Jadine’s lover Son Green transforms Brer Fox into a “farmer” whose race is then explicitly stated. Son tells Jadine:

She looked at him and when he saw the sheen gone from her minky eyes and her wonderful mouth fat with disgust, he tore open his shirt, saying, “I got a story for you.”

“Get out of my face.”

“You’ll like it. It’s short and to the point.”

“Don’t touch me. Don’t you touch me.”

“Once upon a time there was a farmer – a white farmer...”

“Quit! Leave me *alone!*”

“And he had this bullshit bullshit bullshit farm. And a rabbit. A rabbit came along and ate a couple of his... ow... cabbages. [...] Just a few cabbages, you know what I mean? [...] So he got this great idea about how to get him. How to, to trap... this rabbit. And you know what he did? He made him a tar baby. He made it, you hear me? He made it!”<sup>31</sup>

Given that Son is a black fugitive who repeatedly articulates pride in his racial identity, it can become tempting to interpret this retelling as a conscious act of reclamation, in which a self-proclaimed heir of the story's oral originators redeems their cherished template from its corruption and commercialisation by Harris. Such an interpretation is, however, complicated by the fact that this retelling not only racialises but also modernises the folktale, tailoring it for a newly urban, newly cosmopolitan audience. For the grievance pinpointed here directs attention neither to slavery nor to Harris's alleged plagiaristic exploitation of the black folkloric tradition, but to a still vital inequality which Son enthusiastically equates with the injustices produced by the spatially intimate segregation operating inside Valerian Street's grand estate. In this new scenario, then, the viscous "sheen" and the "wonderful mouth" of Jadine, from which issues paradoxically attractive injunctions against touch, identify her as the latter day agent, as the latter day Tar Baby of an ongoing spatial apartheid which, while it may bear comparison with slavery, nevertheless belongs very much in the present. By implication, this identification of Jadine as Tar Baby and of Brer Fox as white also combine to associate Son with Brer Rabbit. That this latter identification occurs implicitly reveals, meanwhile, that Morrison is here radically inverting the assumptive literary tendency, identified in *Playing in the Dark*, which normalises white identity into a presupposed character trait that can then be signalled when, and indeed because, "nobody says so."<sup>32</sup> For, whereas Church and Moser's illustration fetishises Tar Baby's blackness by stereotyping her facial features and inking in her body, Son, here, turns the whiteness of his reinvented Brer Fox into a feature demanding description, eliciting blackness, by contrast, via absence.

Implicitly, *Tar Baby* consolidates this explicit racialisation of the story via a series of references to substances that are not only viscous but are also often pressed into disruptive metaphors with skin. Summoning the interpretative instabilities and possibilities that Douglas identifies in the viscous, *Tar Baby's* references to saliva, molasses, sealskin and quicksand thus call to life an array of racial permutations that it pursues, negotiates, and underscores. Pigmentation and other classifying bases of racial differentiation are duly destabilised as they become connected with those neither solid nor liquid substances whose notoriously indeterminate consistencies ultimately render the notion of race itself unstable. Many episodes throughout *Tar Baby* could be cited in this context, yet the imagery

of the following beach scene, which juxtaposes the neither solid nor liquid state of quicksand against the neither black nor white but “yelluh” skin of Jadine, invests these disruptive alliances with especial urgency.

The circle of trees looked like a standing rib of pork. [...] It was amazing; the place looked like something by Bruce White or Fazetta – an elegant comic book illustration. [...] Jadine] walked toward it and sank up to her knees. [...] She struggled to lift her feet and sank an inch or two farther down into the moss-covered jelly. The pad with Son’s face badly sketched looked up at her [...] Movement was not possible. At least not sudden movement. [...]

[W]hen Son came sweating up the hill she was crying a little and cleaning her feet and legs with leaves. The white skirt showed a deep dark and sticky hem and hung over the door of the jeep. [...]

“What the hell happened to you?” [...]

She didn’t look up, just wiped her eyes and said, “I took a walk over there and fell in.”

“Over where?”

“There. Behind those trees.”

“Fell in what?”

“I don’t know. Mud I guess, but it felt like jelly while I was in it. But it doesn’t come off like jelly. It’s drying and sticking.”

Son kneeled down and stroked her skin. The black stuff was shiny in places and where it was dry it was like mucilage (183-185).

This traumatic encounter with quicksand, by establishing Jadine as the victim of a viscous substance, effectively undermines Son’s attempt to identify himself with Brer Rabbit and his “model” lover with Tar Baby. By extension, this apparent role reversal also undermines those critical interpretations that have sought to characterise the cast of Morrison’s novel as a straightforward mirror image of the cast of her folkloric source. It reveals, in other words, that Susan Willis’s definition of Jadine as “a contemporary ‘tar baby,’ a black woman in cultural limbo” must always be set alongside those antithetical scenes, such as the above, in which she becomes the subject rather than object of a viscous substance’s attentions.<sup>33</sup> Morrison achieves this reversal, this attempt to write against the shadow of ‘Tar Baby’, via at least three discrete allusions. She extends the shadow of this folkloric source across the scene, firstly, by ensuring that Jadine initially yields to the quicksand as voluntarily as Brer Rabbit embraces Tar Baby. Lured by its uncanny resemblance to an “elegant comic book illustration”, Jadine willingly enters the enchanted forest clearing and, once there, becomes imprisoned like Brer Rabbit to the “permanent embrace” of a tree’s inanimate limbs (184). Morrison’s

folkloric source also emerges as she translates the contrast constructed between Tar Baby's impassivity and Brer Rabbit's animation into a battle wherein Jadine, frantically "fighting to get away", struggles against quicksand that seems ossified by its absorption of a static "pad with Son's face badly sketched" upon it. The third authorial method by which Morrison acknowledges the influence of the 'Tar Baby' folktale derives from her deployment of colour. Colourings recalling Morrison's folkloric source surface most conspicuously via descriptions of the quicksand, which is not only as "black" as tar but, as a simultaneously "shiny" and "dry" substance, evidently shares its ambiguous viscosity. The absorption of Son's "badly sketched" portrait into this quicksand, moreover, lards the colour binary between it and Jadine's "white" skirt with an additional and associative gender binary that reinvigorates the heterosexual coupling presupposed in the reciprocal feminisation of Tar Baby and masculinisation of Brer Rabbit. In this way, Morrison's third and final allusion, by tacitly adumbrating Jadine's struggle with a sexual subtext, connects with her other authorial strategies to establish the folktale as a pivotal influence upon the scene.

Yet this suggestive play on colour binaries simultaneously reveals that, via this and other implied references, Morrison is also here seeking to establish a new view of 'Tar Baby' itself, to persuade audiences that it, too, narrates interracial encounters and exchange. This point becomes yet clearer since the scene is written not only against this nominal master text but a raft of cultural and literary sources, foremost among which is Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928). Nor is it that Jadine's quicksand simply recalls *Quicksand* because, as one of the earliest and most renowned of novels to be published by a female African-American, Larsen's work is often seen as a predecessor for the postwar flowering of black women's writing with which Morrison's oeuvre is closely associated. *Quicksand* also provides a vital reference point because both its protagonist, Helga Crane, and its author share with Jadine an ambiguously "mixed" racial identity which *Tar Baby* encapsulates via the chef Thérèse's references to the latter's "yelluh" skin. A novel Barbara Johnson characterises as a "story of the neither/nor self", *Quicksand* is thus revisited by *Tar Baby*'s characterisation of Jadine and then literalised by her confrontation with the neither solid nor liquid substance invoked by Larsen's title.<sup>34</sup> In the process, Morrison forces both the folktale and Larsen's novel to enter into a triangular frame of intertextual reference wherein the latter's explicitly racial concerns effectively illuminate not only those of *Tar Baby* itself but, by

extension, anxieties aired in code within the animalised world of Brer Rabbit. Subsequently, then, these implied references to *Quicksand* reveal that the struggles fought not only by Jadine but also by her occasional literary antecedent Brer Rabbit unfold along inescapably racialised parameters. What Doris Witt terms “soul food’s complicity with certain pivotal, powerful, and enduring stereotypes of blackness” is after all consolidated by this quicksand’s association with the tree resembling “a standing rib of pork”, a standby of southern barbecue which is also sufficiently calorific as to threaten Jadine’s modelling career.<sup>35</sup> These associations, as such, together insist that both the quicksand and the tar with which these characters wrestle must be recognised as neither deracinated substances which happen to be black nor mere embodiments of blackness itself, but as portentous signs of a racial essentialism intent on fixing this blackness in eternal opposition to whiteness. References to Larsen’s racial concerns in this way nourish two quite distinct ambitions, exposing not only *Tar Baby* but, retrospectively, its folkloric namesake as narratives whose startling associations of viscosity with blackness render the second of these categories as unstable and as open to interpretation as the first.

The delight of Hollywood’s special effects technicians, viscous substances have been reconstructed pixel by pixel and their computerised simulations then placed centre stage in productions like *The Abyss* (1989), *Alien Resurrection* (1992) and, above all, *Terminator 2* (1991). In what is now a familiar scene, human heroes race from assassins whose superhuman flexibility enables them to convert every chromosome to viscosity and so flow like treacle through keyholes, under doors, and down telephone lines. In Hollywood productions, viscosity thus functions to erode boundaries, to collapse doors and gateways, to guarantee that dreaded, violent encounters will occur no matter the lengths mere mortals take to avoid them. *Tar Baby*’s multiple references to viscosity facilitate a similar focus on encounters between two opposed cultural worlds. Quicksand, sealskin, molasses, and saliva exist in a fictional context which, by pressing segregation codes into the spatial intimacy of a single household, systematically undermines those characters who wish to retreat into their respective milieus. Willed ghettoisation, the desire to seal oneself off in a hermetic racial enclave, becomes an impossible manoeuvre as Son and Jadine increasingly bridge both the white world of Valerian Street and the black world of his staff, rendering the corridors between these spaces unstable,

negotiable, and permeable. Finally, then, and as the next section illustrates, Toni Morrison's references to 'Tar Baby' actually do more than merely retrospectively establish this folktale as a fable that allegorises and comments upon modes of interracial encounters. They also establish her novel as another text concerned with interracial exchange, as another text that focuses on the capacity of the viscous, or of those with neither-nor racial status, to form a bridge between artificially divided worlds.

### B. Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?

It was a wonderful house. Wide, breezy and full of light. [...] One or two had reservations – wondered whether all that interior sunlight wasn't a little too robust and hadn't the owner gone rather overboard with the recent addition of a greenhouse? Valerian Street was mindful of their criticism, but completely indifferent to it. [...] The new greenhouse made it possible to reproduce the hydrangea [...] The rest of what he loved he brought with him: some records, garden shears, a sixty-four-bulb chandelier [...] and the Principal Beauty of Maine. [...] And whatever he did think about, he thought it privately in his greenhouse. [...] At first he'd experimented with Chopin and some of the Russians, but the Magnum Rex peonies, overwhelmed by all that passion, whined and curled their lips. He settled finally on Bach for germination, Haydn and Liszt for strong sprouting (9-10).

#### Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (1981)

The Old South was made by slaves. The fields cleared from the forests and the crops with which they were planted, the fine dinner parties and leisured white women, [...] all of the things that made the South the South were accomplished through the direct physical agency of slaves. Yet through the incredible generative power of slaveholding ideology, the slave-made landscape of the antebellum South was translated into a series of statements about slaveholders [...] Slaveholders became visible as farmers, planters, patriarchs, ladies, and so on, by taking credit for the work they bought slaves to do for them.

#### Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul* (1999)<sup>36</sup>

Jadine's brush with quicksand and Son's retelling of the folktale create implicit and explicit parallels between 'Tar Baby' and *Tar Baby* that are confirmed by the fact that the latter text also splits its fictional Caribbean island into two. The architect

of this split is Valerian Street, who “loved the island, but not his neighbours” and accordingly imposes a distinction between his “wonderful” retirement home and its beautiful yet inhospitable surroundings (12). Attempting to expel psychologically the island’s native inhabitants, Valerian’s fabrication of a hermetic white enclave is nourished by a familiar binary between Northern civilisation and the uncultivated “brier” of the Caribbean that also feeds his anxiously nostalgic devotion to what he deems “pure” white culture. The sheer effort involved in maintaining this illusory binary despite the surrounding and ample evidence of island society finds absurd expression in Valerian’s commissioning of a greenhouse that, unlike most other greenhouses, is designed to simulate temperate conditions in a tropical climate rather than vice versa. No less incongruously than an iceberg in a jungle clearing, this greenhouse sits amidst a local biosphere whose superior fertility it denies, a folly to Valerian’s melancholic Eurocentrism. Local ants, marching in from the surrounding brier, are at first dispatched from the greenhouse by spray and then, after Son’s ironic suggestion, by mirrors which, from inside, would transform its glass panes into walls (148). Musical pieces to which Valerian treats his hydrangea and peonies, meanwhile, draw exclusively from a classical canon from which any later Russian, European or American works possibly influenced by jazz have been ruthlessly weeded out.

These and similarly strenuous efforts by Valerian to deny the very land on which he stands expose his greenhouse as a territorial “palimpsest”, as what the *Oxford English Dictionary* terms a “parchment [...] written upon twice, the original writing having been erased or rubbed out to make place for the second”.<sup>37</sup> That is to say, these hydrangea and peonies inscribe on this reclaimed and recondite site a new and self-consciously Eurocentric script that at once obliterates native roots and seeks to close off the rhizomorphous possibilities of interracial fertilisation. Rather as Stuart Hall observes that colonial labour is ingrained “in the sinews of the famous British ‘sweet tooth’”, however, so *Tar Baby* juxtaposes the ceaseless expulsion of non-white cultural materials from Valerian’s greenhouse against the fact that he has gained his fortune through sugarcane. Juxtapositions like these complicate Valerian’s Eurocentrism by pointing out that, as a confectionery magnate, his individual version of what Hall terms “economic blood-stream” has received a particularly generous transfusion from postcolonial cane pickers.<sup>38</sup> They expose the gratifying distraction Valerian finds in his temperate plants to be, not only a process necessary to his territorial palimpsest’s manufacture, but an

extravagance that has actually been made possible by the labour of those whom this palimpsest displaces. This concomitant dependence on and denial of Caribbean society as such unmasks a vexed and contradictory dynamic that recalls Walter Johnson's characterisation of the antebellum South as a society which, although reliant on slaves, nevertheless became assiduously "translated into a series of statements about slaveholders." For, just as "all of the things that made the South the South were accomplished through the direct physical agency of slaves". so Valerian's greenhouse actually depends on those whose culture it obfuscates, becoming, indeed, a territorial palimpsest that must draw sustenance from its original, buried script.

Nor is this palimpsest manufactured only by the greenhouse, which rather signifies a broader suppression, a broader displacement also encapsulated by Valerian's diet. For almost all of the foods that Valerian eats must be imported from ships from the USA, which is to say that almost all of them could be grown in his uniquely cooling greenhouse but nowhere else upon the island. Jettisoning abundant local produce from his diet as rigorously as he jettisons "passion" from his plants' musical youth, Valerian shuns chilli, salt fish, avocado and fresh pineapple in favour of expensive imports that include croissants and, most ironically, pineapple in its tinned form (21). Paralleling the hydrangea and peonies that grow in the greenhouse, this no less relentless expulsion of local produce from Valerian's digestive tract reaches an extreme in the plans he and his wife Margaret devise for an "American", "traditional Christmas dinner". For these plans require the household to redouble the imports that it consumes, to concoct an elaborate and luxurious dinner consisting exclusively of foods grown in Pennsylvania, France and other temperate regions. As the centrepiece of this projected expatriate meal, Valerian proposes that the family enjoy a "goose". Margaret's response to this Dickensian suggestion is revealing:

"Geese?" She stared at Valerian for suddenly she could not imagine it. [...] Turkey she saw, but geese... "We have to have turkey for Christmas. This is a family Christmas, an old-fashioned family Christmas, and Michael has to have turkey."

"If Tiny Tim could eat goose, Margaret, Michael can eat goose."

“Turkey!” she said “Roast turkey with the legs sticking up and a shiny brown top.” She was moving her hands to show them how it looked. “Little white socks on the feet.”

“I’ll mention it to Ondine, ma’am.”

“You will not mention it! You will tell her!”

“Yes ma’am.”

“And apple pies.”

“Apple, ma’am?”

“Apple. And pumpkin.”

“We are in the Caribbean, Margaret.”

“No! I said no! If we can’t have turkey and apple pie for Christmas then maybe we shouldn’t be here at all” (29-30).

Here, Margaret’s aggressive displacement of the local environment reveals that behind her deceptively innocuous appeals to “America” and “family” lies a volkish nostalgia for an abandoned white world in which the disruptive frequencies of a surrounding black culture somehow sounded less perceptibly. In the process, this dialogue demonstrates that Valerian and Margaret share an ambition to expel these frequencies, to “cleanse” their greenhouse and Christmas dinner alike of all ostensible markers of African or Caribbean influence, invention, and intervention. Despite their inter-marital disagreements, then, the Eurocentric emphases these expatriate figures place on plant production and food consumption together translate these key points into performative arenas wherein a common yearning to substitute the local with the Northern can be enacted. This section investigates not only these palimpsestic manoeuvres, which momentarily so overwhelm Margaret she must be reminded that “we are in the Caribbean,” but also those countervailing strategies by which Son disrupts their consummation. Focusing on *Tar Baby*’s repeated association of Son with Brer Rabbit, the following pages thus engage Morrison’s folkloric source in order to show how food distribution in Valerian’s home entrenches still further social distinctions already enforced by its spatial separation of employers from employees. Yet these pages also show that this intimate spatial inequality is breached by Son’s arrival in the household, by his theft of food and, later, by his polemical disruption at the dinner table of Valerian and Margaret’s plans for the approaching Christmas festival. Indeed, as the scene of Son’s insistence that his hosts’ extravagance depends on a lifelong underpayment of their new yet forgotten neighbours, the meal on which this section focuses could even prompt the familiar question: guess who’s coming to dinner?

That *Tar Baby* narrates Valerian and Margaret's lengthy arrangements for a ceremonial Christmas dinner but not its consumption itself recalls the similarly pivotal yet uneaten meal that concludes Stanley Kramer's famous 1967 film. This narrative of interracial love, in which Sidney Poitier's John Prentice enters a San Francisco mansion and asks for permission to marry his white fiancée Joey Drayton (Katharine Houghton), is further summoned by the moment in *Tar Baby* when Valerian learns of his butler's ceramic skills and cries "Sydney? A potter?" (73). A hidden answer to the question posed by Stanley Kramer's film title, this rather shoehorned exclamation directs attention towards broader similarities between the casts of these two texts, which both include a retired couple, a glamorous young woman everyone agrees to be beautiful, and black staff. Only in the figure of Son Green, who infiltrates Valerian's mansion in search not of marriage but of food, does *Tar Baby* transcend such formal similarities and announce itself as a direct challenge to *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. For this intruder, unlike Poitier's John Prentice, is less interested in African charity and scientific research than he is in escaping prison. He is, indeed, a man who asks as many questions as others ask of him.

Toni Morrison and Stanley Kramer make for unlikely bedfellows. The creative period that culminated in Morrison's receipt of the Nobel Prize in 1993 coincided with the publication of a raft of critical works that almost universally dismissed Kramer's oeuvre as the embodiment of humanist cliché and integrationist condescension. Indeed, it is hardly putting it too strongly to say that, at the same time as novels like *Tar Baby* have been lifted above criticism, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* has been deemed a film beneath contempt. Outrage at the film upon release was not confined to Black Nationalist or otherwise radical critics, and was even articulated by what Michele Wallace describes "as the quintessential historical document in the white phallogocentric tradition [... of] liberal humanism" – the *New York Times*. Questioning whether Poitier's "brilliant, charming Negro" would actually consider marrying a "starry-eyed college senior", the *New York Times*' review indeed repeated objections raised in more radicalised quarters, in the process distinguishing its own brand of "liberal humanism" from that apparently pursued by Kramer's films.<sup>39</sup> That these objections issued from such disparate sources confirms that, to many, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* has always exemplified that cinematic stereotyping of Poitier wherein his every line, his every

throwaway gesture, has become generalised into the actions of a people rather than a person. What, then, could be gained from comparing this liberal peace offering, this premature epitaph for racism, to a novel as keen to register the endurance of white supremacy as *Tar Baby*? From what basis could a comparison of the two proceed?

Answers to these questions emerge from a reading of James Baldwin's investigation into the cinematic representation of African Americans, *The Devil Finds Work* (1976). Characterised by James Campbell as "personal reminiscence" and "ostensible subject" in equal part, this narrative cautiously exempts from its denunciation of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* Poitier himself, who had joined Baldwin both in the Freedom March of 1963 and at Martin Luther King's funeral five years later.<sup>40</sup> On other aspects of the film, however, Baldwin is unreserved. Reiterating a point made by the *New York Times*, he observes that Prentice's parents actually "outrank their hosts, and might very well feel that the far from galvanizing fiancée is not worthy of their son".<sup>41</sup> Spotlighting Kramer's representation of the maid Tilly, meanwhile, Baldwin addresses a concern to which his essays repeatedly return, in which he seeks to expose her loyal servility – also a characteristic of Uncle Remus – as the product of compensatory fantasies borne of racial anxiety. Fantastical aspects to Tilly's character surface as Baldwin observes: "And yet, black men have mothers and sisters and daughters who are not like that at all!" Notions of kinship between the server and served are accordingly dismissed as Baldwin then insists that "she assuredly does not love the white family so deeply as they are compelled to suppose."<sup>42</sup> Wholesale rejections like these, which seek to demolish Kramer's characterisation of the Drayton family's African-American staff, provide one reason why our comparison between *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *Tar Baby* is of value. For these stereotypical figures exist in such palpable contrast to those of *Tar Baby* – which clearly seeks to follow black servants into their own quarters, to capture their inner lives – that Valerian's veiled utterance of Poitier's name becomes an interpretable sign that Morrison's desire is to challenge Kramer's purview. Critiques of Kramer's use of stereotype such as that offered by Baldwin, in other words, assist us in recognising that the ciphered references by which *Tar Baby* summons *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* signal an authorial ambition, not to refigure, but to transfigure Kramer's film. They reveal that similarities *Tar Baby* constructs with the cast of *Guess Who's*

*Coming to Dinner* result, not from ideological affinity, but from Morrison's disquiet with Kramer, from her wish to mutate his self-assured Draytons into the volatile Streets, his loyal Tilly into the angry if well-named cook Ondine, and the beautiful Joey into the beautiful, black Jadine.

This fractious intertextual signification gains confirmation as *The Devil Finds Work* turns from Kramer's use of stereotype to his representation of the landscape on which these apparently limited characters interact. In order to elucidate the codes of territorial land segregation on which Stanley Kramer's representation of the Draytons' palatial home is predicated, Baldwin first analyses one of the few scenes in the film in which this home's white occupants leave its four walls and enter downtown San Francisco. Baldwin pinpoints:

that lamentable scene in the city when [Spencer] Tracy tastes a new flavor of ice cream and discovers that he likes it. This scene occurs in a drive-in, and is punctuated by Tracy's backing his car into the car of a young black boy. The black boy's resulting tantrum is impressive – and also entirely false, due to no fault of the actor (D'Urville Martin). The moral of the scene is *They're here now, and we have to deal with them*[.]<sup>43</sup>

Here, through a compensatory naming of D'Urville Martin designed both to correct his character's anonymity and to absolve him from the scene's dubious implications, Baldwin redirects attention towards the man he implicitly deems auteur, Kramer, and towards his forcing of his cast into preconceived, stereotypical moulds. Significantly, however, this dissection prompts a discussion of Kramer's representation of landscape, of his association of downtown San Francisco with black criminality and the Heights with white gentility, from which arises the incontrovertible moral: "*they're here now, and we have to deal with them*". Ventriloquising a racial attitude he had come to consider characteristic of bourgeois liberalism, Baldwin thus exposes consistencies between this 1960s stance and that adopted by Brer Fox, who likewise "dealt" with the alien figure in his fields by constructing the Tar Baby. For this premonition of invasion, this sense of surrender indeed leavens the racialised stereotype of criminality that Martin personifies with a further abjection, a further Othering, that renders this actor no less foreign in San Francisco than Equiano was in the Isle of Wight. Baldwin's polemical denunciation of the hidden resonance that binary racial segregation sustains despite the antiracism espoused by Kramer's film is, meanwhile, bolstered

as *The Devil Finds Work* proceeds to describe the Draytons' household in terms that recall the ideological foundations of Valerian's estate. For Valerian and Margaret's paradoxical reliance on and displacement of the Caribbean presence that surrounds them is reinvigorated as Baldwin juxtaposes the stereotypes of black criminality encircling the Draytons' home with the peripatetic status of those who, like Tilly, labour within it but return to their ghettos nightly. Characteristically inhabited by whites but managed by blacks, the Draytons' mansion becomes for Baldwin a space which, by situating its labourers within range but out of sight, correspondingly demands Poitier to embody saintliness and superhumanity before it can consider accepting this notionally equal African American into its fold. If Valerian's appropriately Imperial rule over his estate is recalled by racial codes operating in this newly urbane scenario, however, then Baldwin cements such parallels by noting that the Draytons' home is also built on land reclaimed from its original inhabitants. It is founded:

on the heights of San Francisco – at a time not too far removed from the moment when the city [...] reclaimed the land at Hunter's Point and urban-renewalized the niggers out of it. [...] And the black doctor [Sidney Poitier] is saying, among other things, that his presence in this landscape (this hard-won Eden) will do nothing to threaten, or defile it [...] One can scarcely imagine striking a bargain more painless[.]<sup>44</sup>

And so we return once more to Brer Fox and Brer Rabbit's territorial battle. For here, as though inspired by the fact that brier must have proliferated before Brer Fox cut it back to the merest "patch", Baldwin's sympathies lie with those previous inhabitants who land appropriation has likewise forced into ever smaller and less desirable racial enclaves. Signifying on the folktale, although complicated by the fact that Poitier is here offered as a compromise rather than an invader like Brer Rabbit, is in other ways sustained as Baldwin characterises this particular "Eden" as no less "hard-won" and thus no less cultivated than Brer Fox's fields of corn. What this oxymoronically manufactured Eden signifies, in other words, is that a previous script has been buried beneath it rather as nutrients, injected into the soil by the humus of brier, nourish the corn that replaced these weeds. In the process of this rhetorical exposure, Baldwin reveals the literally whitewashed mansion of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* to constitute another territorial palimpsest, another "parchment written upon twice", whose creation bears

comparison with that of Valerian's greenhouse in particular and his estate in general. For, rather as this estate required Haitian labourers "to clear the land" and to fold "the earth where there had been no fold" (7), so the Draytons' home can be seen to be founded on a similarly paradoxical dependence on and displacement of its previous black inhabitants.

Not only *Tar Baby* but many of Toni Morrison's novels are set in just such territories. As Barbara Johnson has observed, a primary motive behind Morrison's oeuvre, which arises in almost all of her works, is the desire to recover historical moments and thus register that "there once was a *there* and now it is gone".<sup>45</sup> The interwar Harlem society of *Jazz* (1992), the postbellum black autonomy of *Paradise* (1998) – these abandoned moments, over which subsequent generations have since inscribed new scripts, are resurrected by Morrison's constant desire to chronicle experiences displaced by the dominant narratives of American historiography. Of the disparate worlds that are recovered by Morrison's authorial strategies, however, the upheavals and forced removals that introduce *Sula* (1973) are especially relevant to this discussion:

In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom.<sup>46</sup>

*Sula's* especial relevance to this discussion lies in the way that Morrison articulates its particular topological split in what appears to be the vocabulary of pork butchery. That is to say, these introductory sentences not only manufacture a land division redolent of *Tar Baby*, but then frame this binary demarcation in the terms of a bodily amputation, in which the expensive pork "Medallion" becomes estranged from the cheaper "offal" of Bottom. In the process, by reserving that section of the landscape signifying bodily activities for African-American inhabitation, *Sula* delineates an association between food and landscape on which *Tar Baby* also signifies. For what *Sula* tacitly announces via its use of regional names is a system of biracial food distribution whose endorsement and effective entrenchment of racial ghettoisation is similarly outlined and, ultimately, challenged by *Tar Baby's* narrative. Concentrating *Sula's* biracial topology into a

single household, *Tar Baby* describes a more intimate but nevertheless very similar situation wherein financial inequalities created by capitalism, racism or a combination of the two eventually distinguish in certain key areas the diets eaten by these spatially estranged white employers and black employees. This is not to say that *Tar Baby* fails to acknowledge that certain overlaps exist between these diets, that certain foods eaten by Valerian and Margaret are also eaten by their cooks Ondine and Sydney. Nor is it to suggest that *Tar Baby* neglects the fact that, despite Valerian and Margaret's Eurocentric proclamations, these white and African-American diets share a comparable foundation in that complex fusion of African, American and European cookery traditions evinced by *What Mrs. Fisher Knows* (1881). Rather, it is to observe that, throughout her narrative, Morrison distinguishes these diets from each other for much the same monetary reasons that, in *Sula*, force the original inhabitants of the "blackberry patches" to make room for "the Medallion City Golf Course". For the resourcefulness that enables these inhabitants to then transform land discarded by neighbouring white populations into a liveable space becomes reinvigorated by *Tar Baby*, by its representation of black cooks who, by implementing equivalently regenerative strategies, likewise transform discarded materials into edible foods.

This is despite the fact that *Tar Baby's* account of Son's arrival on the island and of his undetected infiltration of Valerian's estate emphasises theft rather than such culinary transformation of waste as the principal means by which to appease hunger. That, in these nightly invasions of Valerian's estate, Son is repeating the actions of Brer Rabbit is confirmed as *Tar Baby* describes his body as being as "lean as a runner's" (130), compares him to "a foraging animal" (104), and pictures him searching for a "hutch" (136). More broadly, Son clearly retreads the footsteps of Brer Rabbit as he, too, departs from the jungle in which he hides and, entering a cultivated space, siphons nourishment from its abundant food supplies. In turn, these references thus establish Son as native to the surrounding brier, to the jungle that continues "creeping into Valerian and Margaret's seasoned and regulated arguments, subverting the rules" (67). They ground him as an encroaching presence, whose hunger has now become suitably animalistic:

he was so tired in the day and so hungry at night, nothing was clear for days on end. [...] The first night he entered the house was by accident. The broken pantry window where he was accustomed

to look for food and bottled water was boarded up. He tried the door and found it unlocked. He walked in. There in the moonlight was a basket of pineapples, one of which he rammed into his shirt mindless of its prickles. He listened a moment before opening the refrigerator door a crack. Its light cut into the kitchen like a wand. [...] Three chicken wings were wrapped in wax paper. [...] He ate the bones even, and had to restrain himself from going right back and raiding the refrigerator again (137-138).

Even as this passage ostensibly narrates Son's thefts, however, it at the same time carefully characterises the foods attracting his attention as though they had merely been lying around Valerian's house. The apparent arbitrariness with which Son stumbles upon each ingredient of his makeshift meal is, furthermore, complemented by the fact that one of these ingredients is a fresh pineapple. For Son's apparent good fortune in discovering a foodstuff eaten neither by Valerian nor Margaret, who prefers the fruit in its tinned form, indeed confirms that the spoils of his foray consist of foods which the owners of the household have rejected. What Son steals, in other words, consists literally and figuratively of the offal that the estate's owners have rejected – of the chicken wings which, when set against the chicken breast preferred by Valerian and Margaret, posit a culinary equivalent to the territorial binary that *Sula* constructs between Medallion and Bottom. Yet the fortuitous appearance of these actions has already been unmasked by the narrative's account of Ondine's assistant Thérèse. For, unbeknownst to Son, Thérèse:

knew of his presence twelve days ago long before he left the trail of chocolate foil paper [...] Before that mistakable trail, he left the unmistakable one of his smell. [...] So a hungry man was on the grounds, or, as she said to Gideon, "Somebody's starving to death round here." [...] So she took to bringing two avocados instead of one and leaving the second one in the washhouse. But each third day when she returned it was still there, untouched by all but fruit flies. It was Gideon who had the solution: instead of fixing the sash on the window of the pantry as he was ordered, he removed one of its panes [...] Soon they saw bits of folded foil in funny places and they knew he had gotten from the pantry chocolate at the very least (104-105).

Read in conjunction, then, these passages reveal that the burglaries upon which Son congratulates himself are actually facilitated by Thérèse and Gideon. They reveal that Son's entries into the house came about not, as he imagines, "by accident" but after an invitation that these native Caribbean workers extended to

him, firstly, by removing a “window pane” and, secondly, by leaving the kitchen door unlocked. Even as it complicates our view of Son’s infiltration of Valerian’s estate, however, the above passage supplies further evidence that the foods reaped during these nocturnal forays generally number among those eaten by the black but not the white members of the household. After all, to the chicken wings and fresh pineapple that are rejected by Valerian and Margaret and duly appropriated by Son, this passage adds a third discarded ingredient in the form of the avocados that Thérèse begins “leaving [...] in the washhouse”. Nor is it simply that these fruits, upon whose “wholly satisfying meat” Son relies for satiation (135), are never eaten by the landowning Valerian, thus confirming that this fugitive character’s diet is indeed constituted of materials his ostensible victim has rejected. For the appearance of the avocado in Morrison’s narrative simultaneously orients us towards Mark Twain’s aforementioned summarisation of the Uncle Remus stories as “only alligator pears – one merely eats them for the sake of the salad-dressing”. Just as *Tar Baby* rehabilitates its folkloric source, then, so it redeems this maligned fruit by restoring its Nahuatl name and by validating its “wholly satisfying meat” as a food without need of adornment – with as little need for adornment, perhaps, as ‘Tar Baby’ had for Harris’s “dressings”. *Tar Baby*’s refutation of Twain’s analogy, by translating his archaic “alligator pears” back into the Nahuatl “avocados”, thus forces the fruit into an indigenous vocabulary that yields yet further evidence that it, like the equally native pineapple, belongs to the surrounding island rather than to Valerian’s attempted displacement of it. Including the chicken wings that Son pilfers from the fridge, then, these three foodstuffs all share the same status as ingredients that figure prominently in the diets of the estate’s black staff but not at all in that of Valerian and Margaret. As such, all three foods bear comparison to those which Sethe steals from her employer in *Beloved* (1987):

None of the sausages came back. The cook had a way with them and Sawyer’s Restaurant never had leftover sausages. If Sethe wanted any, she put them aside soon as they were ready. But there was some passable stew. [...] Had she been paying attention rather than daydreaming all morning, she wouldn’t be picking around looking for her dinner like a crab. [...] Mr. Sawyer included midday dinner in the terms of the job – along with \$3.40 a week – and she made him understand from the beginning she would take her dinner home.<sup>47</sup>

What enables these thefts to be defended, to be redeemed to the point where they cease to be thefts and can become presented as acts of redistribution instead, is more than Mr. Sawyer's prior awareness that Sethe intends to siphon from his stock. Justification solely stems neither from Sethe's knowledge that she is being underpaid nor from the narrator's implicit feeling that reparations for slavery and for continuing racism remain unpaid. Alongside such ideological attitudes, these redistributionist thefts find further legitimacy from the fact that they, like those committed by Son, concern foods that would otherwise not be eaten. For the critical distinction between what "the restaurant could not use" and the smaller category of foods that Sethe "would not" use means that her haul consists mainly of leftovers, of foods included within the restaurant clientele's definitions of waste but not within her own. Far from theft, then, this critical distinction means that Sethe's siphoning from the restaurant supplies actually centres on those foods which, had she not taken them, would be thrown to "the four kitchen dogs waiting for scraps."<sup>48</sup> Thus, the innuendo Morrison implants in the phrase "passable stew" implicitly renders this dish as invisible to Mr. Sawyer's eyes as fresh pineapple, avocados and chicken wings are to the Eurocentric gaze of Valerian and Margaret Street.

Consequently, as they are shown to concern foods considered edible by those who steal them but inedible by those who own them, these ostensible thefts become entirely decriminalised. They become absolved, become bereft of all opprobrium, not only to their perpetrators but also to such nominal "victims" as Mr. Sawyer, whose response might be characterised as one of benign neglect. Crucially, however, *Tar Baby* proceeds to show how this acceptance of employees' theft of waste materials fails to extend to the theft of foods that employers still deem edible. For when Thérèse and Gideon graduate from avocados and chicken wings to the stealing of apples, a food that occupies centre stage in Margaret's Christmas arrangements, Valerian's punishment of them is in no way benign. These apples are, after all, anything but "passable". In order to meet his wife's demand for an American grown variety, Valerian has had to "alert a friend at customs because apples were contraband and [...] only French-grown fruit and vegetables could arrive at" Dominique (108). Thus, by increasing Valerian's difficulty in obtaining what has now become "contraband", the object of this theft, unlike those previously committed by Thérèse and Gideon, stands revealed as a food which their employer has in no way yet rejected as waste. Unlike pineapples and avocados, then, these

apples can grow nowhere on the island but inside Valerian's greenhouse and thus cannot be counted among "the 'perishables'" that "attracted flies into the [...] kitchen" (105). With this in mind, Valerian's response is, perhaps, predictable:

"Gideon stole apples?" asked Son.

"Yep." Valerian's back was to them. "I caught him red-handed, so to speak. Them, rather. She, Mary, had them stuffed in her blouse. He had some in each pocket. [...] I fired him. Her too." [...]

Son's mouth went dry as he watched Valerian chewing a piece of ham [...] approving even of the flavour in his mouth although he had been able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow old in regal comfort; although he had taken the sugar and cocoa and paid for it as though it had no value, as though the cutting of cane and picking of beans was child's play and had no value (202-203)[.]

Valerian's reassertion of materials he owns, his misnaming of Thérèse as Mary and his violent response to her theft, renew and reinvigorate the household hierarchy over which he presides. Reaffirming these hierarchical distinctions, Valerian's violent response thus entrenches the spatially intimate system of inequality that was earlier partially undermined by Son's successful appropriation of food from his host's kitchen storeroom. Contradictions between this response to Thérèse and Gideon's theft and Valerian's neglect of these appropriations by Son, as such, reveal that this Imperial figure's concerns lie less with the uniform distribution of justice than with the further solidification of the distinctions between his diet and those of his staff. Rather as his wife's rejection of fresh pineapple appears somehow related to this fruit's proliferation upon the island, in other words, so Valerian's disciplinary protection of these apples signifies a broader defence of their Eden, of their palimpsestic attempts to fabricate a temperate utopia upon this tropical soil. However, whereas Baldwin's commentaries reveal that Poitier's character fails to unearth the prior demographic on which the similarly palimpsestic *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* is set, Son now substantiates the foreboding contained in this film title's question. Upon learning of Valerian's action, his objective appears to become a wholesale exhumation of the original script buried both by his host's greenhouse and the Christmas dinner arranged by his host's wife. Observing that two "people are going to starve so your wife could play American mama and fool around in the kitchen", Son insists that such indulgent nostalgia relies on a lifelong underpayment of Caribbean labourers, on a

capitalistic “scale of value that would outrage Satan himself” (204-206). By espousing such anticapitalist rhetoric at his host’s dinner table – indeed, by equating this host with the colonial and slavery owners whom he has succeeded on the island – Son thus ensures that, for all their structural similarities, *Tar Baby* concludes in a manner quite unlike *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. For, whereas the meal announced by the title of Kramer’s film is served after the eventual resolution of its plot, the Christmas dinner which Valerian and Margaret surround with such elaborate arrangements only occurs after the dissolution of their Caribbean household. It is served only after Jadine leaves the island, only after Ondine has announced that Margaret tortured her son, only after Son’s polemic – only after, that is, Valerian has been exposed as a tragic figure, who has imprisoned himself in the palimpsestic Eden he so anxiously constructed.

### C. Soul Food and *Tar Baby*’s Reconstitution of Western Value

Held tightly in the arms of Son, Ondine was shouting wildly, “You white freak! You baby killer! I saw you! I saw you! You think I don’t know what that apple pie shit is for?” (209)

#### Ondine to Margaret Street, *Tar Baby* (1981)

*Obviously, the tails have gotta be washed off, even though the fat seems to reappear endlessly. When they are pink enough to suit you, put them in a large pot full of water. Turn the heat high, get 'em boilin'. Add chopped onion, garlic, and I always use some brown sugar, molasses, or syrup. Not everybody does. Some folks like their pig extremities bitter, others, like me, want 'em sweet. It's up to you. Use a large spoon with a bunch of small holes to scrape off the grayish fats that will cover your tails. You don't need this. Throw it out. Let the tails simmer till the meat falls easily from the bones. Like pig's feet, the bones are soft and suckable, too. [...] There's nothin' wrong with puttin' a heap of tails, feet or pig's ears right next to a good-sized portion of Hoppin' John, either.*

Ntozake Shange, ‘Pig’s Tails by Instinct’ in *If I can Cook / You Know God Can* (1998)<sup>49</sup>

Everyone knows that those who work the hardest, and who complete the dirtiest jobs, are invariably paid the least and eat the cheapest foods. What many often

misunderstand, however, is that cheap foods are not necessarily inferior foods. Rather, they are merely foods that have been rejected by the group holding the greatest purchasing power in any given society. This significant distinction is often disguised by the fact that these rejections can be determined by nutritional or other health factors, and in consequence frequently attach the lowest value to foods that can indeed be said to be innately inferior. One reason why fruit and vegetables marketed in Western supermarkets as “organic” cost more than those that are not, for example, is because they are said to contain far fewer harmful fertilisers and toxins. In other cases, however, those notions of prestige and exclusivity that have clustered around organic foods’ recent marketing success function entirely unassisted by such health concerns, singlehandedly prizing certain foods over others even when they are nutritionally identical. As we shall see, this latter phenomenon is exemplified by the way molasses, although neither less calorific nor more unhealthy than any other sweetener, has nevertheless remained cheaper due both to its abundance and to longstanding consumer preferences for the nominally more “refined” staple of white sugar.

The fact that the price of all foods is determined as much by cultural assumptions as it is by nutritional concerns means that, although the poorer characters of *Tar Baby* indeed overcome hunger by siphoning waste from their rich employers, their diet does not necessarily suffer in consequence. Despite certain overlaps between the black cookery traditions practised by these poorer characters and the Eurocentric culinary tradition prized by Valerian and Margaret, Thérèse, Son and Gideon do not share their employers’ prioritisation of goose over chicken wings or of tinned over fresh pineapple. In the course of their redistribution from Valerian’s storerooms, foods that he and his wife designated as waste can thus shed this inferior status and, via their incorporation into the radically new hierarchies prevailing within soul food valuation, acquire entirely new prestige. As thefts or other acts redistribute these foods from their original Eurocentric context and into the new modes of soul food cookery, so there open new opportunities for reinterpretation, for a revaluation which can prize chicken wings over chicken breast, pork ribs over sirloin and, indeed, fresh over canned pineapple.

Procedures by which foods rejected in certain culinary traditions become valorised by others are stressed in many commentaries on soul food in particular and on African-American cookery in general. Such revaluation emerges, for

example, in Ntozake Shange's recipe, 'Pig Tails by Instinct'. After all, these pig tails are a by-product of the butchery trade, and are therefore interpretable as a rejected waste material as Sethe's "passable stew" or the fresh pineapples and chicken wings that Son eats undetected. The toughness of the tails, meanwhile, is negotiated in the recipe's method, which advocates fast boiling until the meat finally falls "easily from the bones". Residual squeamishness is defeated, and new tastes achieved, via a method that thus enables a new and countervailing prioritisation of what Shange terms "pig extremities" over expensive cuts like bacon, pork shoulder, or pork chops. Indeed, Shange's taste for this offal is so pronounced, she trails the Five Boroughs searching for a soul food purveyor, finally finding a "calm I must attribute to the satisfaction of my ancestors" in a "small market" with "sawdust on the floor".<sup>50</sup> Notwithstanding the essentialist associations with which she surrounds it, Shange's valorisation of a food that dominant American cooking culture has traditionally designated as either offal or as inedible nevertheless supplies valuable literary evidence in support of the contentions lodged by this concluding section. For, in this section, attention shifts away from *Tar Baby's* episodes of theft and towards those that dramatise the processes by which other waste materials, other materials deemed inedible or unattractive, are likewise transformed into aesthetically usable, even preferable foods.

Such transformations emerge, for instance, in the aforementioned references to Valerian's "contraband" apples, which, the narrative of *Tar Baby* observes, were imported by the "ships [that] unloaded wilted lettuce, thin rusty beans and pithy carrots every month." A "hardship for the rich and the middle class, neither of whom would consider working a kitchen garden", such shoddy merchandise is revealed by Morrison's narrative to be "of no consequence to the poor who ate splendidly from their gardens, from the sea and from the avocado trees that grew by the side of the road" (108-109). Gardening subsequently effects in *Tar Baby* a radical alteration which, like Shange's postmodern treasure hunt, supplants foods conventionally prized in the West with those that remain invisible to Valerian's Eurocentric gaze.

A fuller example of this phenomenon, in which foods conventionally categorised as either offal or waste eventually become favoured by African-American culinary mores, is provided by the details *Tar Baby* supplies of Valerian's

working life. This brief biographical sketch, which chronicles the family's ownership of a sweet factory in Philadelphia, concentrates on the response Valerian's uncles offer to his father's death.

[T]he uncles gathered to steady everybody and take over the education of their dead brother's son since it was, they said, "self-understood" that he would inherit the candy factory. And just to show how much they loved and anticipated him, they named a candy after him. *Valerians*. Red and white gumdrops in a red and white box (mint-flavoured, the white ones; strawberry-flavoured, the red). *Valerians* turned out to be a slow but real flop, although not a painful one financially *for it was made from the syrup sludge left over from their main confection – Teddy Boys.*

"What's the matter with them?" asked the uncles.

"Faggoty," said the sales reps. [...]

"But somebody's buying them," the uncles said.

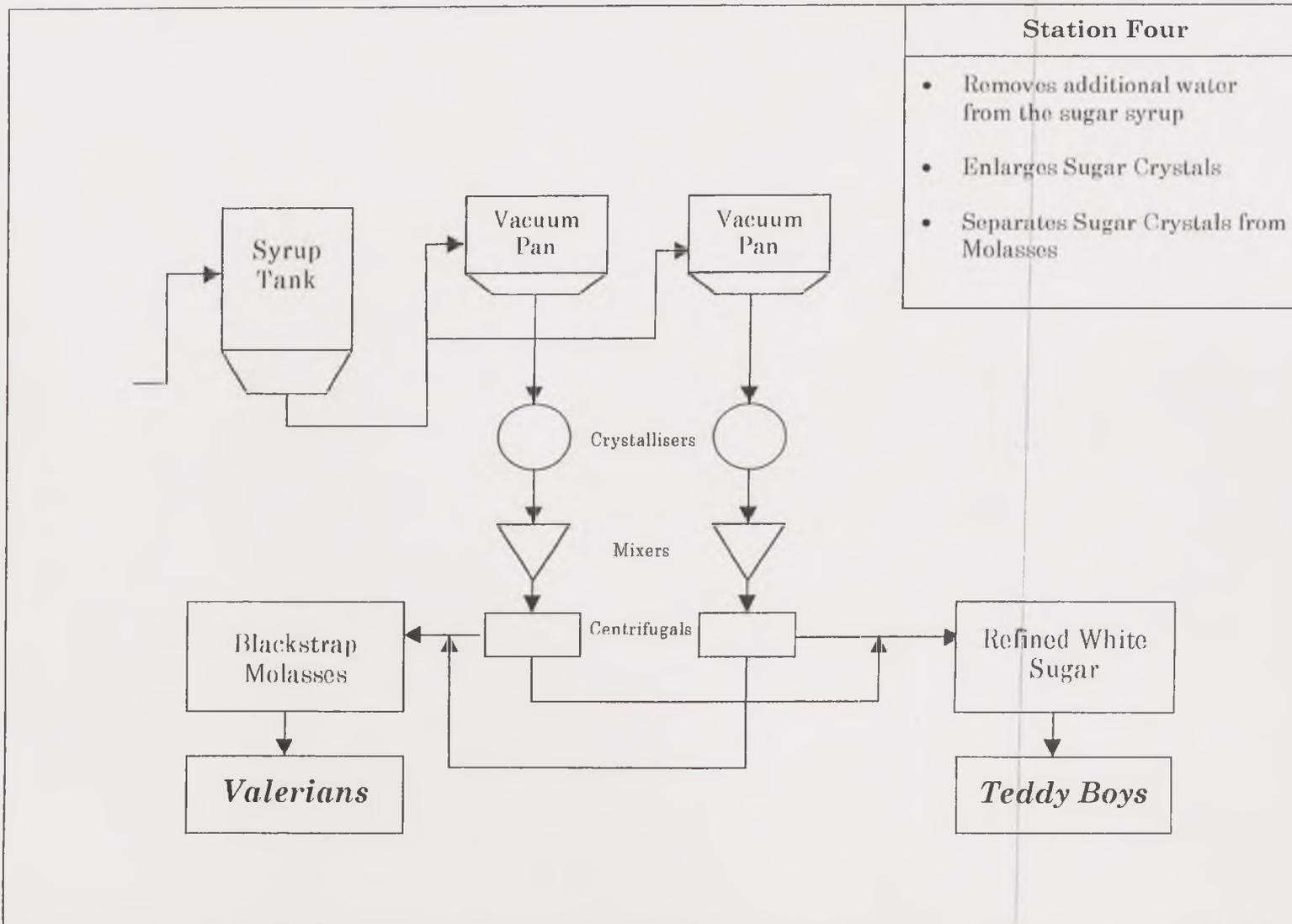
"Jigs," said the salesmen. "Jigs buy 'em. Maryland, Florida, Mississippi. Close the line. Nobody can make a dollar selling faggot candy to jigs." [...]

But they didn't close it out. Not right away, at least. The uncles let the item sell itself in the South until the sugar shortage of the early forties and even then they fought endlessly to keep it on: they [...] held caucuses among themselves about whether to manufacture a nickel box of *Valerians* in Mississippi where beet sugar was almost free and the labour too. [Emphasis added] (47-48).

The rest of this section unpacks this extremely suggestive episode, in which a food eaten by African Americans (*Valerians*) is, once more, disdained by whites in favour of a more expensive product (*Teddy Boys*). Indeed there is a great deal to unpack here, as Barbara Rigney has pointed out in 'Rainbows and Brown Sugar', an extensive discussion of Toni Morrison's use of food imagery. Regarding this scene, Rigney notes that "these '*Valerians*,' manufactured by Valerian Street's father [...] are [...] sickeningly sweet [...] metaphors for Valerian's own questionable masculinity and, presumably, for that of all white men. Black children will not buy them because the candies are 'faggoty.'"<sup>51</sup> This analysis remains useful despite the textual errors that it commits by, firstly, attributing the *Valerians* to their namesake's father rather than his uncles and, secondly, by suggesting that the children who refuse to buy *Valerians* are black when in fact their race is left unspecified. One reason why it is crucial that the latter of these errors is rectified is because only after this correction can we recognise that the homophobic view positioning masculinity and homosexuality as exclusive states is

here being articulated by Morrison's characters rather than by Morrison herself. Only after this correction, in other words, can we see that this scene instead typifies Eve Sedgwick's thesis that homosocial circles like the Streets' male boardroom often invoke both homophobia and racism as ciphers by which to banish difference and solidify by an insisted conformity the cohesion of the group.<sup>52</sup> Bearing in mind Eve Sedgwick's discussion of homosocial groups, the homophobia here not only associates the odd choice of these despised consumers with naïve effeminacy but also masks the threatening politics that this choice conjures up. For the tribute Valerian's uncles pay to his late father, which involves the industrial manufacture of Caucasian bodies no less inanimate than the Tar Baby produced by Brer Fox's hands, indeed opens unforeseen opportunities for black consumers to indulge in a politically strategic play upon cultural clichés of interracial cannibalism. After all, by consuming these Valerians from head to foot, by masticating these figurines of a man who later so underpays his staff that they must steal food, these southern African-American "jigs" perform gestures of racial resistance, gestures that these uncles will inevitably find unpalatable. For these imagined moments of consumption, which apprehend the lynching ceremonial's emphases on corporeal form and amputation, reshape from such historical terrors a newly absurd violence that nevertheless remains, to these capitalists, terrifying due to its unpatriotic irreverence for the red and white clothing of its edible boyish victim. Because of this, Valerians' uncles and their salesmen cannot conceivably welcome the success of their product among southern black customers, but must instead invoke an array of prejudices with which to direct attention away from the unconscionably revolutionary implications that this success heralds. Motivating their homophobia, then, is a desire to depose the racial anxieties provoked by this mischievously cannibalistic play under the discreet veil of a known sexual taboo about which conversation comes more easily and jokes can even be cracked.

Valerian's uncles and their salesmen, by enlisting homophobia in a bid to humiliate those they allege to be humiliating Valerian, in the process implicitly attribute the consumer choices made by these southern "jigs", not to perversity, but to an unexpected radicalism. This radicalism is compounded by the fact that, unlike Thérèse and Gideon, these southern "jigs" do not transgress but transcend the binary food oppositions of dominant American culinary culture. That is to say, whereas Thérèse and Gideon's theft of apples effectively confirms the higher value



Andrew Warnes

Tar Baby

**Figure 2.** Sugar Processing Diagram, Illustrating the Sources of the Main Ingredients of “Valerians” and “Teddy Boys”  
 Amended from: Neil L. Pennington and Charles W. Baker, *Sugar: A User’s Guide to Sucrose* (1990).

that Valerian attaches to such American produce, these “jigs” embrace a confection constituted by “syrup sludge”, by a waste material left behind in the manufacture of the dearer Teddy Boys. Their choice, as such, resembles Shange’s preference for pig tails over pork sirloin, since it, too, suggests that a resourcefulness necessitated by historical experiences of poverty has effectively fostered a preference for foods others would consider waste. Nor is their preference for Valerians comparable only to Shange’s writings, since Morrison’s description of this “syrup sludge” as a material “left over” from the processes of sugar refinement identifies it as Blackstrap Molasses and, accordingly, as the foodstuff which Wright consumed in his Memphis orphanage.

Because *American Hunger* along with Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery* contain episodes of molasses consumption, thus conveying the foodstuff’s particular significance within black cookery traditions, the flowchart at Figure Two focuses on the binary between it and the white sugar which constitutes their dearer counterpart, Teddy Boys. Despite this focus on materials produced by sugar refinement, however, it must here be emphasised that similar flowcharts could be devised for many other foodstuffs. For example, as both Shange’s ‘Pig Tails by Instinct’ and *Sula*’s topological split reveal, a comparable flowchart could be devised for pork butchery and those modes of distribution which, by designating the exquisite “Medallion” to bourgeois cookery, have associated pig offal or “Bottom” with soul food cookery. Indeed, given that neither Valerian nor Margaret eat anything other than white meat, a further flowchart could draw from the moment *Tar Baby* in which Jadine, reeling from the sight of chicken livers, asks Ondine, “Is there anything inside a chicken we don’t eat?” (35). These examples reveal that the opposition schematised by Figure Two, although specifically allied to that between Valerians and Teddy Boys, is not solely applicable to this binary but describes that broader system of biracial food distribution which has often differentiated the diets of black and white Americans from each other. Hence this flowchart, even as it returns us to our earlier discussion of sugar and molasses, now cites these foods as a metaphor in which those equivalent binaries that have affiliated pig tails and chitterlings with soul food and Canadian bacon and pork sirloin with white bourgeois cookery become encapsulated.

We have already seen that white sugar has long been valued far more highly by Western markets than brown molasses. We have also noted that the price hierarchy into which these foods became invited collaborated with the colour distinction between them in order to create a situation in which, as *Up from Slavery* and *American Hunger* testify, molasses came to be deemed appropriate for African-American consumption. What must be stressed here, however, is that these binary systems and the racial designs they enforced were neither immanent nor innate but open to revaluation, to reinterpretations that, at their extreme, could even invert their cherished binaries outright. Again, in Washington's assertion that he found molasses "enjoyable" and in Bessie Smith's demand for a "pigfoot and a beer", we have already encountered examples of these inversions, which demonstrate Shange's description of how what appear "arbitrary predilections of the 'nigra'" in fact constitute "symbolic defiance".<sup>53</sup> In its description of southern "jigs" who actively prefer confectionery made with molasses to that made with refined sugar, however, *Tar Baby* delivers a scene that effectively consummates these strategies of food revaluation.

It consummates these strategies because those assumptions upon the innate superiority and prestige of white sugar that the choices of these black consumers unsettle nevertheless retain great resonance in Western cultures. That is to say, although the manual on which Figure Two is based, *Sugar: A User's Guide to Sucrose*, was only published in 1990, the assumptions behind the food binary that it endorses remain very similar to those which, as *Up from Slavery* shows, once distributed molasses to the slave quarters and white sugar elsewhere. For Neil Pennington's schematic diagram, like those in all sugar processing manuals, is titled not after these molasses but white sugar, and is in other ways principally oriented towards the production of this dearer ingredient. Each of the labels describing the steps within this processing – *crystallising, mixing, reduction* – refer to transformations undergone by this prioritised white sugar rather than that molasses which it subsequently associates as a by-product of the system. This association is confirmed as Neil Pennington's text then categorises "the blackstrap [...] as a cattle feed [... also used] in the production of industrial alcohol, yeast, organic chemicals, and rum".<sup>54</sup> And the fact that *Tar Baby's* black consumers favour a foodstuff that is thus still often thought of as unfit for human consumption reveals that this preference, like those of Booker T. Washington and Bessie Smith,

orchestrate a wholesale reconstitution of conventional Western food value. It reveals, in other words, that the notions of purity and refinement to which even scientific manuals continue to subscribe actually constitute, as Mary Douglas observes, a “relative idea” which “exists in the eye of the beholder”.<sup>55</sup> Summarising the views both of Douglas and Julia Kristeva, Witt notes that these “anthropologists argue, of course, that ‘filth’ is a relational category, one that has no absolute existence, no universal definition; filth is simply that which remains outside a given system of order, matter (or actions) out of place.”<sup>56</sup> Witt’s discussion of the relevance of these anthropological insights to soul food encompasses such canonical episodes as the “chitterling eater” episode of *Invisible Man*, not to mention the fractious 1960s dialogue between Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones)’s celebration of soul food and Eldridge Cleaver’s denunciations of its revival.<sup>57</sup> Yet *Tar Baby* avoids these general attacks and counterattacks in order to spotlight specific foods, foremost among which is molasses, that are associated not only with black material consumption but also with an oppositional yet related food which has historically been more expensive. Thus, the cultural choices that these southern “jigs” disrupt are directed not towards entire culinary traditions but to a specific food binary which prompts racial associations since it draws from what Paul Gilroy terms the “prestige attached to the metaphysical value of whiteness” and Sidney W. Mintz calls the “symbolic linkage of whiteness to purity”.<sup>58</sup> By rejecting this most prestigious of ingredients, then, these southern consumers not only exemplify Douglas’s observations, revealing that these definitions are indeed relative, but also undermine those preconceptions with which these Western cultures have long surrounded whiteness and blackness. Thus the choice which so disarms Valerian’s uncles, by not merely retrieving the edible from the inedible but then asserting such nominal waste’s superiority, also consummates those strategies by which poorer cooks and consumers have reconstituted Western systems of food value. In this radical reconstitution, this wholesale inversion of prevailing food codes, *Tar Baby*’s southern consumers thus attribute to molasses all the prestige conventionally associated with sugar: they turn molasses into sugar, just as Shange effectively turns pig tails into bacon and, indeed, as *Beloved* turns brier into fruit:

Stamp [...] stopped and backed up a bit to tell about the berries – where they were and what was in the earth that made them grow like that.

“They open to the sun, but not the birds, ’cause snakes down in there and the birds know it, so they just grow – fat and sweet – with nobody to bother them ’cept me because don’t nobody go in that piece of water but me and ain’t too many legs willing to glide down that bank to get them. Me neither. But I was willing that day. Somehow or ’nother I was willing. And they whipped me, I’m telling you. Tore me up. But I filled two buckets anyhow. And took em over to Baby Suggs’ house. It was on from then on. Such a cooking you never see no more. We baked, fried and stewed everything God put down here. Everybody came. Everybody stuffed. Cooked so much there wasn’t a stick of kindlin left for the next day.”<sup>59</sup>

What occurs here is, by definition, impossible: brier bears fruit. Moreover, by narrating such miraculous events, this scene consolidates the reinvention effected by *Tar Baby*’s southern consumers, revealing that her novelistic practices indeed fuse utopianism and realism, embracing affirmations of African-American cooking as well as condemnations of hunger. *Tar Baby* exemplifies the oeuvre of Toni Morrison in that it, too, delineates a system of food distribution which is no less unequal than that of *American Hunger*. It validates Wright’s insight that, as a politically useful, potentially venal condition, his hunger was by no means unavoidable but the result of the orphanage and other disciplinary authorities’ to transform him into a docile, subordinate subject. Yet this fruition of brier, like the preference for molasses of *Tar Baby*’s southern consumer, nevertheless layers the continuing presence of this disciplinary system with a new emphasis on the means by which the hunger it imposes can be avoided. By theft and, even more significantly, by the reconstitution of waste, episodes throughout Morrison’s oeuvre recount instance in which brier, in both the literal and the figurative sense of waste, blossoms.

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In an article written for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1973, Toni Morrison revealed that she shared with her fellow novelist Richard Wright a love of cooking

for family and friends. Describing the preparations and consumption of a picnic held to celebrate the visit of an uncle from the South, Morrison lists a number of those classic soul food ingredients – corn pone, biscuit, sweet potato – whose cultural significance is explored extensively by Shange's *If I can Cook / You Know God Can*. Also like Shange, Morrison ascribes an organic mysticism to these culinary processes, utilising the outdoors location of the meal to enlist it within a naturalised and unifying cosmology that ensures “we were all there. All of us, bound by something we could not name. Cooking, honey, cooking under the stars.” Writing about cooking, and thus exemplifying the mode of cultural production explored throughout this thesis, Morrison attaches to the culinary practices of her relatives an immense mysteriousness, a mystifying inability to name or define this form of creativity in any way. This stands in contrast, however, to the expertise Morrison insists that her family brings to this form of creativity, to the skills which ensure that their cooking acquires a “grandeur, a cohesiveness, [as] a constant reminder of what they all had done to survive and even triumph during the last 141 years.”<sup>60</sup> What is important here, and what most starkly distinguishes these comments from the representations delivered by Wright's oeuvre, is that cooking is here invoked not only as a strategy of survival but also of triumph. For whereas the unrelenting emphasis *American Hunger* places on the condition announced by this autobiography's title yields little to no room for the affirmation of cooking practices, Morrison's novels, on the other hand, continually juxtapose political protest with scenes that erode the immanence of material inequality. Distinguishing financial need from poverty itself, Morrison's oeuvre repeatedly challenges the commercial and other cultural judgements made by dominant American culture in order to reveal that cheaper ingredients such as fresh pineapple or molasses can indeed be preferable to their more expensive, binary equivalent. Opening a gap between systems of food value, exposing the possibilities for what she calls a “triumph” over circumstance, emphasising opportunities for a radical revaluation – by these means, Toni Morrison reveals that the hunger which she too considers avoidable can be overcome.

## End-Notes

- 1 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (London: Penguin, 1996), p.17.
- 2 Throughout, “America” refers to the USA, while Morrison’s fictional island is distinguished as “Caribbean.” Obviously, these designations are extremely problematic, and are used here only because of the continuing absence of a geographically accurate adjective for the USA.
- 3 Hereon in, *Tar Baby* refers to Toni Morrison’s novel, while ‘Tar Baby’ indicates the folktale. When in standard typeface and without speech marks, Tar Baby refers to the inanimate character central to the folktale’s plot.
- 4 Ralph Ellison, *Juneteenth* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1999), p.8.
- 5 This synopsis is consistent with the folktale as it is presented in Chapters Two and Four of Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (London: Penguin, 1986).
- 6 Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative* (London: Penguin, 1995), p.85.
- 7 See Alice Walker, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (London: Women’s Press, 1985), pp.145-152; Richard Wright, *The Outsider* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), pp.66; and Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1965), pp.7-8.
- 8 Melville and Frances Herskovitz, *Dahomean Narrative: A Cross-Cultural Analysis* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1958), p.6
- 9 ‘False Friendship: Tar Drum’ in *Dahomean Narrative*, pp.326-329.
- 10 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp.1-20.
- 11 *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- 12 A lineage tracing ‘Tar Baby’ to the works of Thomas More is asserted in an 1892 review in *Punch*, @xroads.Virginia. edu/~UG97/remus/punch.html. An attempt to attribute it to English West Country folklore can be found in the *North Carolina Journal of American Folklore* review included @xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/remus/review1.html. A scholarly article asserting

- an Indian provenance to the tale, meanwhile, is Ruth Cline, 'The Tar-Baby Story', *American Literature*, 2 (1930), pp.72-78.
- 13 'Review of *Uncle Remus and his Friends*', *The New York Times*, 18 December 1892, p.19.
- 14 Mark Twain, 'Letter by Mark Twain to Joel Chandler Harris, August 10, 1881' in *Mark Twain's Letters* (New York: Gabriel Wells, 1917), ed. by Albert Paine, p.401.
- 15 See Robert Hemenway, 'Introduction: Author, Teller, and Hero' in *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, pp.7-31 (pp.30-31); and Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race and the Soul of America* (Edinburgh: Payback, 2000), pp.260-261.
- 16 Hemenway, p.29. For refutations of the childishness of 'Tar Baby', see Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp.131-132; and Houston A. Baker, *Long Black Song: Essays in Black American Literature and Culture* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1972), pp.24-27.
- 17 See Richard Dorson, *American Negro Folktales* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Premier, 1967), p.18; and J. Mason Brewer, *American Negro Folklore* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1968), p.4.
- 18 Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), p.89
- 19 *Mules and Men*, p.247
- 20 Richard Dorson, p.18
- 21 Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970), p.73. For Richard Dorson's brief discussion of this work, see *American Negro Folklore*, p.18.
- 22 Melville J. Herskovitz, *The New World Negro* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), p.175.
- 23 Melville J. Herskovitz, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper, 1941), p.255.
- 24 For references to "turkentime" and "tar" see *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings*, p.57. Also, illustrations by Frederick Church and James Moser are contained in Joel Chandler Harris, *Legends of the Old Plantations* (London:

David Bogue, 1881).

- 25 See Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: an Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1994); and 'Review of *Uncle Remus and his Friends*', p.19.
- 26 See Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: an Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1994); and 'Review of *Uncle Remus and his Friends*', p.19.
- 27 Craig Werner, 'The Briar Patch as Modernist Myth: Morrison, Barthes and Tar Baby As-Is' in *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison* (Boston: Hall, 1988), ed. by Nellie Y. McKay, pp.150-170 (p.155).
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- 28 See Hemenway, p.25; and Carole Boston Weatherford, 'Tar Baby on the Soapbox', *Callaloo*, 14 (1991), 923.
- 29 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Plume, 1982), p.39.
- 30 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966), p.38.
- 31 Toni Morrison, *Tar Baby* (London: Picador, 1981), p.273. All further references to this edition appear in the text itself.
- 32 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p.72.
- 33 Susan Willis, 'Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison', *Black American Literature Forum*, 16 (1982), 34-42 (34).
- 34 Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p.39.
- 35 Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.80.
- 36 Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.102.
- 37 *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), Vol.XI 'Ow-Poisant', p.95.
- 38 Stuart Hall, 'Racism and Reaction' in *Five Views of Multi-Racial Britain: Talks on Race Relations Broadcast by BBC TV* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1978), pp.23-55 (p.25).

- 39 See Michele Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso, 1990), p.xviii; and Bosley Crowther, 'Review of Guess Who's Coming to Dinner', *New York Times*, 12 December 1967, p.56.
- 40 James Campbell, *Talking at the Gates: A Life of James Baldwin* (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1991), p.245.
- 41 James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work* (London: Joseph, 1976), p.75
- 42 *The Devil Finds Work*, p.72.
- 43 *The Devil Finds Work*, p.76.
- 44 *The Devil Finds Work*, p.70.
- 45 *The Feminist Difference*, p.75.
- 46 *Sula*, p.3.
- 47 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1997), p.189.
- 48 *Beloved*, p.127.
- 49 Ntozake Shange, 'Pig's Tails by Instinct' in *If I can Cook / You Know God Can* (Boston: Beacon, 1998), p.9.
- 50 *If I can Cook / You Know God Can*, p.9.
- 51 Barbara Rigney, *The Voices of Toni Morrison* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1991), p.86.
- 52 *Between Men*, pp.1-20.
- 53 Also see Chapter Two, pages 121-122.
- 54 For source of sugar processing diagram and citation, see Neil L. Pennington and Charles W. Baker, *Sugar: A User's Guide to Sucrose* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990), pp.18-20.
- 55 *Purity and Danger*, p.38.
- 56 *Black Hunger*, p.85.
- 57 *Black Hunger*, pp.79-101. In the course of her discussion, Witt analyses the "chitterling eater" episode of *Invisible Man*, pp.213-216. She also refers to the fraught debate initiated by the celebratory view of soul food of Le Roi Jones (Amiri Baraka), 'Soul Food' in *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Morrow, 1966), pp.101-104. This celebration, originally published in 1962, prompted Eldridge Cleaver to describe the soul food revival as "counter-revolutionary black bourgeois ideology" in *Soul on Ice* (New York: Laurel-Dell, 1972), p.40.

- 58 See Paul Gilroy, *Between Camps: Race, Identity and Nationalism at the End of the Color Line* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.31; and Sidney W. Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1996) p.89.
- 59 *Beloved*, p.156.
- 60 Toni Morrison, 'Cooking Out', *New York Times Book Review*, 10 July 1973, 4, 16.
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## Conclusion

The Negro question in the united States [sic] is the No. 1 minority problem in the modern world. It is No. 1 because if this cannot be solved, then there is no possibility of the solution of any minority problem anywhere. The fate of six million Jews in Europe, of perhaps twice or three times that number of individuals in the prison-camps of Russia, of Poles enslaved by Germans as a subordinate nation, [...] all this shows that here the world is not moving towards the peaceful enlightened solution of minority or national problems. It is doing the opposite.

The Negro problem becomes therefore a sort of touchstone. [...] The Negroes do not seek any special privileges, constitution or statehood. All they demand is freedom and equality. The world watches this extraordinary situation.

C. L. R. James, *American Civilization* (circa 1939-1950)<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, although occupying a distinct literary field of cultural creation, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Toni Morrison all bring to bear upon their narratives concerns with nutritional inequality that echo and anticipate insights articulated by politicians, intellectuals and social scientists throughout the twentieth century. That is to say, on questions of nutrition, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *American Hunger* and *Tar Baby* each adopt a position that resembles the efforts others have made to assert the urgency, feasibility, and desirability of food redistribution within the United States.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* advances this redistributionist position by constructing a world, Eatonville, from which such want has so easily yet so magically been expelled. The coincidence of this removal of hunger with the removal of a white authoritarian presence from the town, after all, elicits a connection between the two in which the latter now stands revealed as responsible for the former. A radical expulsion of racism as such elicits a domino-like collapsing

of hunger, producing an image of utopianism whose sustained negation of whiteness and want weaves both, inextricably, together.

*American Hunger*, meanwhile, makes the same point with far greater polemical vigour, as befits its original title. Throughout his autobiography, Wright insists that his childhood and adolescence hungers invariably occurred in close proximity to a very different white social world in which food plenitude was taken for granted. The existence of those southerners who were white *and* hungry, although acknowledged in Wright's essay *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941), is suppressed in an autobiography which, to assist its polemic, superimposes the class inequalities of the United States onto its racial inequalities with utmost precision.<sup>2</sup> Such suppression allows Wright to situate hunger as a characteristically "black" ordeal that can then be seen to be more visibly and obviously solvable by the gaining of access to a food surfeit conventionally allocated to whites. Cooking a breakfast for his employer's family, for example, Wright encounters a kitchen so full of "eggs, bacon, toast, jam, butter, milk, apples" that these white diners can use such stores as artillery in what we might now dub a food "war". Passively watching as these makeshift missiles chart their trajectories across the table, Wright pictures himself as the captive audience to a decadent ceremony, a ceremony whose explicit message is that white Americans would rather ruin the food they will not eat than give it to their hungry black neighbours. The only advantage in such surfeit, as far as Wright is concerned, is that it frees him to siphon off the kitchen supplies undetected, to "hurriedly scramble three or four eggs at a time and gobble them down in huge mouthfuls".<sup>3</sup> *American Hunger* thus generalises almost all of its white American characters into a normalised middle class, which it then characterises as the holder not merely of the cure for the "black" disease of hunger, but of an excess of dosages of this cure.

The adjacency of plenitude and hunger, through which *American Hunger* endeavours to expose what Wright sees as the barbarity of Jim Crow, is forced into even closer proximity by *Tar Baby* and its representation of a Caribbean estate owned by whites yet maintained by African Americans. By investing this internal segregation with such a visible colour cast, *Tar Baby* identifies in the nominally new societies of the postcolonial Caribbean a system of racial demarcation more commonly associated with the pre-Civil Rights South. Read in conjunction, the full narrative of *American Hunger* and *Tar Baby* thus promote an outward movement from the South to Chicago and, finally, to the Caribbean, expanding the patterning

of nutritional inequality from a regional to a national to an ultimately international plane. Read in conjunction, that is, the Chicago sections of *American Hunger* and the island setting of *Tar Baby* suggest that late capitalist forms of labour exchange merely reproduce racial inequalities of the kind in operation in Wright's interwar Mississippi. On the one hand, then, *Tar Baby* acknowledges the Civil Rights successes of the 1960s and the benefits these breakthroughs have brought for African Americans. It concedes that Ondine, Sidney and other staff are no longer excluded from the more prestigious "upstairs" portion of the house because they are black, but because they are poor. On the other hand, though, *Tar Baby* then suggests that this critical and highly publicised shift away from the juridical endorsements of a racialised economy will nevertheless remain incomplete so long as black people number disproportionately among the poor. Late capitalism, *Tar Baby* implies, not only preserves the racial hierarchies of preceding economic systems, but supplements such stratification with the new legitimacy of an ostensibly deracinated, pseudoscientific system. Even in this post-Civil Rights context, then, the hungers of Son, Therese and Gideon remain avoidable, since they, like Richard Wright before them, could so easily be satisfied if only their white employer threw open his larder doors.

All of these authors as such employ distinctive fictional strategies, manufacturing distinctive narratives, distinctive plots, characterisation and settings: yet these divergent routes ultimately usher each to a similar destination, to a comparable realisation that hunger could be solved by a more equitable allocation of the American harvest.

On one level, this advocacy of nutritional redistribution merely states the obvious. One hardly needs to read Wright in order to interpret malnutrition, amid a society routinely producing a food surplus, as a sign of the unnecessary inequities of the economic system. Nor do we need the more politically ambivalent narratives of Hurston and Morrison to see that to advocate hunger's abolition is not to assert an "official" ideology such as socialism, but a basic, fundamental humanism. However, as has been pointed out by Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winning economist whose theories of famine prevention frame these closing comments, the "idea of inequality is both very simple and very complex. At one level it is the simplest of all ideas and has moved people with an immediate appeal hardly matched by any other concept. At another level, however, it is an exceedingly

complex notion which makes statements on inequality highly problematic".<sup>4</sup> Rather as Sen's enquiries into economic inequality complicate the hypothetically simple goal of universal satiety, that is, so these narratives counterbalance the ease by which their modest nutritional objectives can apparently be reached against those domestic social structures that, still bearing racism's schismatic imprint, prevent the fulfilment of such reform. The collision acted out in these texts, between a simple humanist goal and a reactionary racialism that prohibits its attainment, effectively mediates and rehearses dilemmas that retain urgency in American society. To take one example, the partial defeat of Eurocentric assumption in intellectual circles has coincided with successive American administrations that have allowed basic needs among that underclass in which non-Europeans figure disproportionately to pass unmet. As Kwame Anthony Appiah notes in a familiar lament, "the revival of Zora Neale Hurston hasn't altered wage inequalities; nor is her name one to conjure with in the primaries even of her native Florida".<sup>5</sup> Malthusian economics – a theory that notoriously characterises famine as a natural valve on population growth, the pessimistic and disciplinarian precepts of which W. E. B. Du Bois and, much later, Benedict Zwane have repudiated – have been reincarnated in successive American governments' attempts to depict domestic hunger as the regrettable by-product of a capitalistic system it deems reformable only by a now discredited Keynesian or socialist intervention.<sup>6</sup> Explanations of Third World famine in terms of natural catastrophe – explanations Sen has done so much to challenge – have subsequently been paralleled by the creeping naturalisation of domestic US hunger into a class structure considered to be fixed and unalterable. On a less firmly ideological basis, meanwhile, the sight of the poor and hungry in the American cities along with the constant knowledge of the often unseen ghetto has become so commonplace as to, apparently, insulate many from the avoidable inequality that these forbidden yet local territories embody. Given this situation, the basic reform to which *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *American Hunger*, and *Tar Baby* alert us – the redistribution of the American harvest – confronts and remains obstructed by an array of complex, entrenched assumptions that continue to prevent its implementation.

This almost Senian confrontation between a simple objective and the complexities frustrating its implementation also leads us towards an acknowledgement of these three narratives' international resonance. It reveals that

the spatial intimacy between want and satiety encountered in these texts establishes a distinctive trope of the preventability of hunger that is less refutable than equivalent signifiers invoked by those national traditions where shortage has appeared either universal or the problem of distant wildernesses metropolitan circles can feasibly neglect. Although you can plausibly blame hunger on nature if no food exists within a fifty-mile radius, such effacing gestures can hardly be repeated if the hungry are forced, as Wright was, to witness the nutritionally-sated hurl their breakfast across the table. The sheer spatial adjacency between the underfed and overfed acted out by these three narratives finally banishes, or should finally banish, any lingering ambition to explain famine in terms of natural catastrophe. Emphases on spatial intimacy, which among other things anticipate the return famine discourses have since made to a more explicitly socioeconomic frame of analysis, thus qualify these narratives as an example of what C. L. R. James characterised as the special “touchstone” quality of the African-American discourse. For these narratives send a signal out into the world, an insight upon the inescapable economic context of hunger that holds special significance for those countries which, lacking America’s spectacular food abundance, have nevertheless grown intoxicated by the capitalist rhetoric which the institutions of this most overdeveloped country disseminate.

### A. African-American Hunger: a Colonial Context

Forced by economic necessity to sell his produce [the Irish peasant ...] was furiously resentful when food left the market towns under the eyes of the hungry populace, protected by a military escort of overwhelming strength. From Waterford, the Commissariat officer wrote to Trevelyan, on April 24, 1846, ‘The barges leave Clonmel once a week for this place, with the export supplies under convoy which, last Tuesday, consisted of 2 guns, 50 cavalry and 80 infantry escorting them on the banks of the Suir as far as Carrick.’

It was a sight which the Irish people found impossible to understand and impossible to forget.

Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger* (1962)

While all this was happening and the streets of Calcutta were strewn with corpses, the social life of the upper ten thousand of Calcutta underwent no change. There was dancing and feasting and a flaunting of luxury, and life was gay. [...] The

horse races in Calcutta continued and attracted their usual fashionable throngs. [...] In this gay life both Englishmen and Indians took part for both had prospered in the business of war and money was plentiful. Sometimes that money had been gained by profiteering in the very foodstuffs, the lack of which was killing tens of thousands daily.

India, it is often said, is a land of contrasts [...] Never before had these contrasts been so much in evidence as in the city of Calcutta during those terrible months of famine in the latter half of 1943. The two worlds, normally living apart, almost ignorant of each other, were suddenly brought physically together and existed side by side.

**Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (1944)**

[I]n the Bengal famine of 1943 the people who died in front of well-stocked food shops protected by the state were denied food because of lack of legal entitlements and not because of their entitlements being violated.

**Amartya Sen, 'Ingredients of Famine Analysis: Availability and Entitlements' (1981)**

[H]unger has to be recoded "as a sign of exploitation" in order to become a mobilizing force in politics. This is what Amartya Sen has recently accomplished in his ground-breaking work on famine, in which he shows that it is not the lack of food but the inability to purchase it that causes such catastrophes. People starve because they *have* no food, not because there *is* no food, and the problem, therefore, is "entitlement" to food, rather than its notional availability. By interpreting famine as a fluke of nature rather than a symptom of political inequities, economic policies have often exacerbated the privations they purported to be trying to assuage.

**Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists* (1993)**

I entered that broad and blatant hotel at Lake Minnetonka with distinct forebodings. [...] The long loft reserved for us, with its clean little cots, was reassuring; the work was not difficult, – but the meals! There were no meals. At first, before the guests ate, a dirty table in the kitchen was hastily strewn with uneatable scraps. We novices were the only ones who came to eat, while the guests' dining-room, with its savors and sights, set our appetites on edge! [...] It was nasty business. I hated it.

**W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater* (1898)<sup>7</sup>**

Comparisons between African-American experiences and those of colonised peoples, although the inspiration for much compelling antiracist rhetoric, can as easily become counterproductive in academic contexts. They can fall victim to an unnecessary exaggeration of the sheer practical harshness of black American life

and, by invoking a phenomenon that arguably peaked a hundred years ago, can effectively downplay the tropes of metropolitanism and modernity which have long dominated African-American cultural production. The internecine character of crime in American ghettos, to take one example, cannot be adequately negotiated if it is solely related to that explicitly revolutionary violence which, as though to fulfil Fanon's more dismal prophecies, has punctuated many countries' transition to postcolonial autonomy.<sup>8</sup> Outright starvation, to take another, features less prominently in African-American than in other histories, as is revealed by the contrast between Du Bois's description of momentary hunger and the more abject wants described by that figurehead of postcolonial India, Jawaharlal Nehru, and the historian Cecil Woodham-Smith. African-American history fortunately possesses no equivalent to the famines which awaited native Americans upon the frontier, famines that Dee Brown's history *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1991) repeatedly suggests number among the most deliberate, because preventable, in human history.<sup>9</sup> Considered too economically useful to be jeopardised by the imposition of an unreliable diet, the health of most black bodies may have been secured, in the slavery context, at the price of their humanity; but it was secured nonetheless.

More significant for present concerns is the consensus that emerges from our readings of Hurston, Wright and Morrison, which maintains that the hunger African Americans *have* experienced has, characteristically, remained stubbornly impermeable to the effacing "fluke of nature" theory outlined by Maud Ellmann. As a feat of rhetorical agility, the Malthusian and pre-Senian assignment of hunger to drought or famine has been pushed beyond even the wildest racial apologist due to the visible and tangible abundance of the surrounding American harvest. As Du Bois's attestation of his white customers' literally conspicuous consumption confirms, want in America has almost invariably occurred within easy reach of food: and, needless to say, hunger is not so easily legitimised when its cure remains within its sufferer's sensory embrace.

Although its concerns lie with more general issues surrounding inequality, Wright's essay 'How "Bigger" Was Born' (1940) nevertheless reiterates this spatial intimacy, observing that US racism is distinguished by the fact that "the blacks were so *close* to the very civilization which sought to keep them out". It is this spatial intimacy, Wright suggests, that differentiates what he terms the "program

of oppression” which white Americans have implemented against their black compatriots from projects pursued overseas. For, unlike the strictures of official colonialism, this dynamic occurred “between people who were neighbors, whose homes adjoined, whose farms had common boundaries. [...] Had the Negro lived upon a common territory, separate from the bulk of the white population, this program of oppression might not have assumed such a brutal and violent form.”<sup>10</sup> Since a similar proximity between the overfed and underfed is revealed in the commentaries of Nehru and Woodham-Smith, we must remain cautious about Wright’s claim that this concentration, this Balkanisation, of inequality comprises a uniquely American phenomenon. Instead, what really distinguishes the United States from colonial Ireland and India is that, for the majority of its population, such Balkanisation came to be experienced, not as an exception to or aberration of social norms, but as a familiar and commonplace daily event. Unlike those negotiable forms of nationalistic identification that often distanced colonisers from the colonised at least psychologically, both blacks and whites in the US have long regarded themselves as American. Concentrated American spatial segregation, an intricate patchwork quilt of interlocking racial enclaves, has collaborated with this uniquely shared national identification to trap black and white together in a fractious dynamic from which, with the negligible exception of abortive repatriation schemes, all escape routes have long been closed. The coloniser could always return home: yet to white and black Americans alike, those sites in which the violent flashpoints of race relations occurred *were* home. Experiences of inequality thus became domesticated for each of its participants, acquiring an aura of the commonplace, even of mundanity. This explains why the “furiously resentful” emotions described by Woodham-Smith so strikingly yield, in Du Bois’s account, to a resigned and necessary cynicism that accepts hunger to be an inevitable outcome of the starving subject’s classification on the wrong side of the racial partition. Du Bois’s hunger, in short, may be less severe than those endured in India and Ireland: but it is also a more manifestly politicised condition, since it has so irrefutably been caused by *someone* (whites) rather than *something* (nature).

To demonstrate these differences further, we must now turn to those postcolonial experiences, in Ireland and in India, which, even now, remain occasionally subjected to the legacy of Victorian, *laissez faire* assumption.

It has become something of a cliché to say that many histories of Britain's involvement in Ireland wear their political sympathies on their sleeves. The disclaimer with which Terry Eagleton begins his study of Irish literature, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995) – “Irish cultural and historical writing are as much a minefield as the area they map, and for much the same reasons” – is in this respect standard.<sup>11</sup> Nowhere is such polarisation revealed more clearly than when students and scholars of Irish history turn their attention to the Famine of 1849. Nor does such subjectivity arise simply because the event was, as Eagleton remarks, “the greatest social disaster of nineteenth-century Europe”.<sup>12</sup> The disaster has become yet more contentious due to continuing difficulties surrounding its causes. Some have explained the famine solely in terms of the “fluke of nature” theory that Ellmann classifies as pre-Senian. Generally, if those following this approach have acknowledged Westminster's promotion of Irish agricultural specialisation, which encouraged dietary dependency on the potato, they have done so with distinct reluctance and have sought to downplay its significance. Others, meanwhile, have concurred with Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger* (1962), still the most well known history of the Famine, and vilified the British Whig government of the time for failing to see beyond its ideological commitment to free trade and bring relief to Ireland with sufficient speed. Typically, such latter approaches accept that the fungus *phytophthora infestans* was, literally, at the root of the famine and, concentrating upon the aftermath of this ecological disaster, critique the flaws of Westminster policy. As Cormac Ó Gráda suggests, opinion on the “efficacy of action taken [...] ranges from that caught in fiery nationalist John Mitchel's accusation that ‘the Almighty sent the potato blight, but the English created the famine’ [...] to William Wilde's claim that ‘the most strenuous efforts which human sagacity, ingenuity and foresight could at the time devise were put into requisition’.” These continuing controversies free a substantial middle ground to be claimed by the self-nominated “objective” historian. Such a stance emerges from Ó Gráda's own *The Great Irish Famine* (1995), which proceeds to call for a new and “full appraisal [...] of] the issue of blame”.<sup>13</sup> Even Terry Eagleton – whose critical technique is hardly famed for laying claim to the middle ground, an often unreliable territory more often associated with liberalism than Marxism – adopts a self-consciously neutral tone, echoing Ó Gráda's dispassionateness:

There was no question of calculated genocide; and food imports, contrary to nationalist mythology, far outstripped exports in the Famine years. But neither was the Famine an act of God.<sup>14</sup>

In the interests of balance, Eagleton here provides the facts to an issue that he rightly describes as one of the most contentious episodes in Britain's involvement in Ireland: the continuing exportation of food even at the height of the Famine. Yet these exports – which, as we have seen Cecil Woodham-Smith suggest, Irish citizens “found impossible to understand and impossible to forget” – are here resolved into and then putatively dismissed by an equation that shows them to be far outweighed by imports. Moreover, this equation is then called into the service of a refutation of the nationalist allegation of genocide; the balance sheet becomes evidence that this was not, after all, a rehearsal of the Holocaust.

At the same time, however, Eagleton's comments provide a good example of the way the inveiglements of Irish historiography can produce a skewed logic which designates certain “issues” to certain “groups” regardless of the actual point being made. The question of exports, here, is characterised as the natural terrain of “nationalist mythology”, and its discrediting is then, by extension, seen as discrediting this particular political faction. Eagleton thus presents his comment as evidence in favour of the British government's role, which he then scrupulously counterbalances with evidence against it. At the same time, however, this comment necessarily admits that exports, even at the height of the Famine, continued. Hence, it sustains the view it purports to challenge. That is, Eagleton here supplies data suggesting that exports recorded on this balance sheet, like the ships sailing out of Limerick and Dublin harbours, were redeemed by the existence of those sailing *in*. Yet this position invites its own nationalist rebuke: namely, that *no* ships should have been leaving these harbours, that *no* crops should have been exported at all, when those living nearby their place of production remained without food.

What these rather surprising negotiations delineate is the struggle that Amartya Sen's theoretical innovations must face if they are to wrestle the discursive vocabulary through which we understand famine away from *laissez faire* assumption. For Eagleton's commentary, by apparently accepting that imports may mitigate exports in times of food shortage, demonstrates that this vocabulary indeed remains saturated in a Victorian ethos which holds that economies must

recover by their own, capitalistic means if they are to become less vulnerable to future famine. That even a Marxist could, perhaps unwittingly, draw from this intellectual source confirms Sen's own observation that his critical project, despite its appearance of simplicity, remains complicated by residual and stubborn assumptions.

This repudiation of laissez faire assumption has been achieved by Sen's own writing and its re-emphasis on the, again, ostensibly simple fact that money is often an unreliable mediator of access to food. As Sen notes: "Famines often take place in situations of moderate to good food availability, without any significant decline of food supply per head".<sup>15</sup> Sen elsewhere re-emphasises this critical distinction by urging that, since "income is not desired for its own sake, any income-based notion of poverty must refer – directly or indirectly – to those basic ends which are promoted by income as means. Indeed, in poverty studies related to less developed countries, the 'poverty line' income is often derived explicitly with reference to nutritional norms."<sup>16</sup> Such insights position Ó Gráda's statement that "the earnings gap between Britain and Ireland on the eve of the Famine was significant" as, in itself, sufficient evidence as to why British efforts to keep the Irish economy running as normal so singularly failed to avert starvation.<sup>17</sup> They discredit Eagleton's downplaying of the exportation of grain from Ireland, since they reveal that those imports whose sheer magnitude ostensibly nullified such exports, in fact, helped maintain an economy that was itself responsible for pricing foods beyond the means of the poor. They explode the ideological foundations that supported British governmental attempts to present colonial famine as the growing pains of capitalism, which could be curtailed by a restoration of free trade via a renewed defence that guarded crops as though they were munitions.

Surprising as it may seem, however, this repudiation of laissez faire assumption has also been advanced by *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *American Hunger* and *Tar Baby*. That is to say, by demonstrating that despite its abundance even American society has failed to banish hunger, these narratives consolidate the entitlement approach and confirm that, like famines, hungers often take "place in situations of moderate to good food availability, without any significant decline of food supply per head". They consolidate this approach since, while those wishing to may still attribute distant famine to drought rather than to the economy, it is

impossible to submit an equivalent explanation for, say, the hunger Du Bois experienced in “that broad and blatant hotel at Lake Minnetonka”. It is precisely in the way these writers represent domestic black hunger as so avoidable, as so glaringly adjacent to a food surfeit, that we encounter ample literary evidence that “people starve because they *have* no food, not because there *is* no food, and [that] the problem, therefore, is ‘entitlement’”.

In this way, these texts contribute to the realisation, reached by diverse politicians and intellectuals following the Second World War, that the universal distribution of adequate nutrition across the world was an achievable goal. They helped to foster that heightened receptivity to those calls for famine’s total prevention that were made and are being made by such diverse figures as Gandhi, Cecil Woodham-Smith, Jawaharlal Nehru, Maud Ellmann, Martin Luther King, and Amartya Sen. Both domestically and, as C. L. R. James emphasises, internationally, these narratives have participated in the dawning realisation across diverse global discourses that this globe in fact possesses sufficient food for each man and woman upon it. Consequently, however unquantifiable their final influence may be, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *American Hunger* and *Tar Baby* undeniably helped to forge new intellectual territories in which new pronouncements, such as the following by Martin Luther King, could be made:

If Western civilization does not now respond constructively to the challenge to banish racism, some future historian will have to say that a great civilization died because it lacked the soul and commitment to make justice a reality for all men. [...]

Two-thirds of the peoples of the world go to bed hungry at night. They are undernourished, ill-housed and shabbily clad. [...]

There is nothing new about poverty. What is new, however, is that we now have the resources to get rid of it [...] famine is wholly unnecessary in the modern world. Today, therefore, the question on the agenda must read: Why should there be hunger and privation in any land, in any city, at any table, when man has the resources and the scientific know-how to provide all mankind with the basic necessities of life?<sup>18</sup>

Due to its frequent representation of the abolition of hunger as an achievable goal, the African-American literary tradition partly contributes to King’s confident realisation that “famine is wholly unnecessary in the modern world”. His assertion is facilitated by *American Hunger*’s revelation that it is absurd to suggest to a black employee confronted by a “food war” that his or her hunger is caused by natural catastrophe. Posthumously, King’s ideas have also

gained credence from representations delivered by *Tar Baby*. For Morrison's exposure of the abyss separating the diets of a rich employer and of poor employees inside a single household endorses the suggestion in *Where Do We Go From Here?* (1967) that capitalism creates "a gulf between superfluous wealth and abject poverty" as wide as that which segregation imposed between black and white.<sup>19</sup> No one has contributed more to achieving Martin Luther King's ambition of abolishing hunger than Amartya Sen. However, positions reached by these three very different African-American writers, by so unequivocally situating hunger as an avoidable condition, also participate in the increasing credibility of King's as yet unfulfilled objectives. Whereas Sen's contributions to understandings of hunger are manifest and theoretical, in subtler ways *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *American Hunger* and *Tar Baby* have helped to acclimatise the international intellectual environment to the notion that malnutrition can be extinguished from the world.

### B. African-American Hunger: a Domestic Context

[The] nation's first multicultural riot was as much about empty bellies and broken hearts as it was about police batons and Rodney King. [...] At Christmas more than twenty thousand predominantly Latina women and children from throughout the central city waited all night in the cold to collect a free turkey and a blanket from charities. Other visible barometers of distress are the rapidly growing colonies of homeless *compañeros* on the desolate flanks of Crown Hill and in the concrete bed of the L.A. river, where people are forced to use sewage water for bathing and cooking. [...] Unlike the looters in Hollywood (some on skateboards) who stole Madonna's bustier and all the crotchless panties from Frederick's, the masses of MacArthur Park concentrated on the prosaic necessities of life like cockroach spray and diapers. [...] Meanwhile, thousands of *saqueadores*, many of them pathetic scavengers captured in the charred ruins the day after the looting, languish in County Jail, unable to meet absurdly high bails. One man, caught with a packet of sunflower seeds and two cartons of milk, is being held on \$15,000 bail[.]

#### Mike Davis, 'Los Angeles Was Just the Beginning' (1992)

[T]he overwhelming need continues. Hundreds of mothers carry their babies across heat-parched lands on the weeks-long walk to feeding centres, hoping to get a little rice, flour and cooking oil. Many die on these treks, their bodies too frail to survive a diet of bugs and twigs. Their bodies dot the roadside, a bitter reminder of this daily tragedy. Your immediate support can help change this horror ... and help us to prevent it from happening in other places. [...] I hope and pray you won't turn away from this crisis. [...] Whatever you can spare will be used to help us get food.

medical help, clothing and other supplies to starving little children in Africa and all across this world.

### Fundraising Letter of The Children's Food Fund (2001)<sup>20</sup>

Often, polemicists working towards King and Sen's goal of abolishing famine from the world have sought to maximise the emotive appeal of their rhetoric by focusing upon hunger's physical victimisation of children. Characteristically, this rhetorical concentration aims to profit from the perceived cultural assumption that such children embody an innocence which supersedes, or should supersede, race along with the notional economic failures of their nations or families. The purposefully emotive pamphlets of charity fundraising, for example, regularly display images of children which, it is hoped, will transcend entrenched notions of intransigent cultural difference and so activate Western audiences' latent sympathies for the hungers of distant lands. Although the concerns of advocates of state intervention lie more with the domestic than the international, nevertheless they, too, often aim to mobilise their audiences by manipulating concerns which are perceived to surround all threats to children's presupposed innocence. For example, Mike Davis's essay on the LA riots presents those childhood needs that are being allowed to pass unmet – the lack of basic necessities, of “diapers”, “milk” and clean water – as an especially outrageous social failure for which only a more muscular governmental involvement is adequate. Davis's essay thus employs a distinctive symbolism, used incessantly in anti-hunger polemic, in which the stereotypically moonlike eyes and passive manner of the starving child tacitly fill our gaze in order to depoliticise malnutrition and establish it as a matter, not for ideology, but for a humanist morality considered universal.

As a rhetorical tradition, the invocation of youth in denunciations of hunger is old. Indeed, long before the erosion or outright abandonment of welfare by Western governments, this form of symbolism was regularly incorporated into those late nineteenth and early twentieth century socialist polemics that originally helped to set this now frayed safety net in place. Before the New Deal, Revolutionaries and reformers alike often approached the hungering child in much the same manner as charities today: as a figure in whom a readymade and irrefutable appeal for Christian benevolence or socialism was embodied. Foremost

among these reformers was Jacob Riis, whose special “sympathy” for “the cases of children and virtuous women,” as characterised by Robert Bremner, is amply captured by some of his titles: *Children of the Poor* (1892), *Nibsby’s Christmas* (1893), *Children of the Tenements* (1903), *Christmas Stories* (1923).<sup>21</sup> Among revolutionary texts that exploit the emotive potential of childhood hunger, meanwhile, we might include Frederick Engels’ *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), Jack London’s *The People of the Abyss* (1903), even George Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). The most comprehensive use of childhood hunger as a de facto argument in favour of revolution remains, however, John Spargo’s *The Bitter Cry of the Children* (1906).

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This polemic, completed shortly before Spargo embarked on a controversial transition from socialism to an advisory role to Woodrow Wilson, was published in response to the American press’s questioning of statistics on child poverty submitted by Robert Hunter’s *Poverty* (1904). It sought to defend Hunter’s investigation and, in particular, to corroborate his estimation that “in normal times there are at least 10,000,000 persons in the United States in poverty”, a statistic which lay at the root of most media criticisms of the work.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in *The Bitter Cry of the Children’s* introduction, Hunter himself praised Spargo’s work as a potentially:

mighty factor in awakening all classes of our people to the necessity of undertaking measures to remedy the conditions which exist. The appeal of adults in poverty is an old appeal, so old indeed that we have become in a measure hardened to its pathos and insensitive to its tragedy. But this book represents the cry of the child in distress, and it will touch every human heart and even arouse to action the stolid and apathetic.<sup>23</sup>

Hunter’s prose here lodges an implication which also informs much of Spargo’s subsequent narrative: namely, that the American press criticised the statistical evidence of *Poverty*, rather than the precepts of its argument, since even the most avid advocate of unrestrained capitalism cannot justify childhood hunger. This perceived consensus between right and left stops *The Bitter Cry of the Children* from lengthily implicating the United States government in the hunger of its younger citizens, since Spargo assumes, throughout, that such implications muster widespread agreement. Rather than tackle economic theories outside this perceived consensus, Spargo concentrates on undermining the more insidious

strategy, employed in right wing quarters of the American media, of absolving such implications simply by refuting the evidence attesting to the existence of such hunger. Thus, Spargo's approach becomes an exercise in statistical accumulation, of layering evidence upon evidence, in support of Hunter. A characteristic passage reads:

[Hunter] has observed that poverty's misery falls most heavily upon the children, and that there are probably not less than from 60,000 to 70,000 children in New York city alone "who often arrive at school hungry and unfitted to do well the work required." By a section of the press that statement was garbled into something very different, that 70,000 children in New York city go "breakfastless" to school every day. In that form the statement was naturally and very justly criticised, for, of course, nothing like that number go absolutely without breakfast. It is not, however, a question of children going without breakfast, but of children who are *underfed*, and the latter word would have been better fitted to express the real meaning of the original statement than the word "hungry." Many thousands of little children go breakfastless to school at times, but the real problem is much more extensive than that and embraces that much more numerous class of children who are chronically underfed[.]<sup>24</sup>

The polemical intentions of these ostensibly objective sentences are betrayed only by the description of hungry children as "little", an emotive designation which not only recalls the sentimentality engineered by Charles Dickens throughout *Little Dorrit* (1855-57), but also anticipates strategies employed in the fundraising publicity of The Children's Food Fund. As such, Spargo's writing here draws upon what might be termed an accepted stratification of want, which divides humans according to their perceived capacities for self-sufficiency, and thus places the child at the head of an imagined hierarchy of need. Possibly, when it is considered that the perceived dependency of children which so prioritises them is also *upon* those adults whose own needs are relegated by this approach, such stratification of want becomes problematic. There is little point in ensuring that children receive proper nutrition, after all, if other aspects equally integral to their care cannot be adequately fulfilled since their parents remain hungry. Such contradictions, indeed, emerge no less clearly in conventional Western television reporting of Third World famine. Here, cameras typically point at a child who has been isolated from others and, by these means, tacitly direct the gaze and thus the compassion of audiences away from those adults on whom such

children depend. Often accompanying such news footage, a voiceover that appeals to notions of humanism by emphasising the essential kinship between those who, bound into an unequal partnership by satellite, watch and those outside the West who are being watched. Although the relative invisibility of starving adults in such coverage immediately throws these appeals to kinship into question, potentially exposing such humanism to be a merely premature deracination, the emotional resonance such footage stimulates in multiracial Western audiences cannot be lightly dismissed. Joined together by a globalised economy whose benefits and hardships neither can control, televisual exchanges between starving subjects and sated Western viewers provide a forum in which the latter can, among other things, complete a belated, insignificant yet sincere admission of the privileges they enjoy. Like the readers of *The Bitter Cry of the Children*, the responses of viewers of famine news footage may be problematic; yet they are also responses which, demonstrably, save lives.

In itself, this fact demands that we approach *The Bitter Cry of the Children* as a text that does not necessarily share the special urgency that its readers invest in childhood hunger, but which manipulates such urgency in order to advance its own, socialistic objectives. As Hunter states, Spargo emphasises childhood hunger not because he himself necessarily reserves a special sympathy for it, but because he realises that even the most “stolid and apathetic” among his readers cannot hear “the cry of the child in distress” without it touching their “human heart[s].”

Yet the special urgency of childhood hunger also clarifies the ways by which, in the first half of *American Hunger*, Richard Wright strives to prompt his readers’ outrage at the treatment he received when young. “I would feel hunger nudging my ribs, twisting my empty guts”, remembers Wright, evoking sensations which, he hopes to imply, no child should have to feel. “I would grow dizzy and my vision would dim. I became less active in my play,” proceeds the narrative, incidentally demonstrating why Spargo characterises malnutrition as an insurmountable obstacle to educational development.<sup>25</sup> *American Hunger*, having invoked the association between hunger and childhood in order to arouse a special sympathy in its audience, then channels this elicited compassion towards those caricatures of Negro boyhood for which white Southern culture reserved a certain indulgent affection. Having induced such compassion, however, Wright tests the extent to which it relies on its subject’s incubation in prepubescence by initiating a

chronological progression, preordained by the genre of the autobiography, towards that black masculinity for which white Southern culture, by contrast, reserved its most pressing anxieties. The conventional progressions of the Bildungsroman thus enable Wright to erode and finally to expose the racial assumptions underpinning a sympathy he originally inspired by presenting himself as a hungry black boy. Having invited tears to fall at his personification of childhood helplessness, *American Hunger* implicates its readers in their own tears, asking what share of the American harvest *they* receive, in a narrative sequence which systematically replaces empathy with guilt, and sympathy with a restatement of social inequality.

James Baldwin – who once, when attempting to encapsulate the “mischief” of the author of *Native Son*, described Wright as a knowing “pickaninny” – exploits the same special sympathy for the tribulations of the young in *No Name in the Street* (1972).<sup>26</sup> Indeed, in narrative moments such as the following rhetorical flourish, Baldwin associates this special sympathy specifically with hunger:

America proves, certainly, if any nation ever has, that man cannot live by bread alone; on the other hand, men can scarcely begin to react to this principle until they – and, still more, their children – have enough bread to eat. Hunger has no principles, it simply makes men, at worst, wretched, and, at best, dangerous.

*No Name in the Street* is not, however, a discussion of food and hunger, and fails to expand on these tantalising suggestions. Instead, Baldwin’s narrative is a personal history of the assassinations of black leaders during the 1960s. It presents itself as an inside account of the violence of the time, of a violence that involved Baldwin so profoundly that his very clothes became “drenched in the blood of all the crimes of my country.” Narrating the victories, setbacks and manoeuvres of the Civil Rights and black nationalist movements, Baldwin positions himself as an elder who oversees these threatened yet youthful constituencies – who, indeed, recognises the youth of its participants more readily than they themselves can. Of Malcolm X, Baldwin’s principal memory is that he was “young and looked younger;” Medgar Evers, meanwhile, had a “country boy preacher’s grin”, while the youth of Martin Luther King, Jr. is accorded similar emphasis.

Yet *No Name in the Street*’s manipulation of the cult of youth reaches an apotheosis as it turns to the killing of Black Panthers at the end of the 1960s. Baldwin laments the Oakland Police Force’s shooting of the “unarmed black

adolescent” Bobby Hutton as well as the way this attack, which *No Name in the Street* squarely positions as another assassination, traumatises the surviving “comrade” Huey Newton. Youth subsequently becomes for Baldwin and Baldwin’s sister alike the single defining characteristic of the survivor Newton. For Angie Baldwin, Newton is simply “that nice boy”, while for Baldwin himself, visiting him in the penitentiary, he is:

a hard man to describe. [...] Huey looks like the cleanest, most scrubbed, most well-bred of adolescents – everybody’s favourite baby-sitter. He is old-fashioned in the most remarkable sense, in that he treats everyone with respect, especially his elders. [...] That day, for example, he was dealing with the press, with photographers, with his lawyer, with me, with prison regulations, with his notoriety in the prison, with the latest pronouncements of Police Chief Gain, with the shape of the terror speedily engulfing his friends and co-workers, and he was also, after all, at that moment, standing in the shadow of the gas chamber.

Anyone, under such circumstances, can be pardoned for being rattled or even rude, but Huey was beautiful[.]<sup>27</sup>

Implied in this invocation of beauty is an emphasis upon Newton’s resemblance with an innocent child, an emphasis, that is, which inevitably envelops what Baldwin considers to be American society’s failure to allow this black boy a childhood. Interestingly, however, this implication was echoed by the sympathy Newton and Bobby Seale extended to those even younger than they were. Early policies of the Black Panthers were principally concerned with issues facing schoolchildren, demanding, for example, a more adequate “education [... able to expose] the true nature of this decadent American society.”<sup>28</sup> Such rhetoric, when placed alongside Baldwin’s own emphasis on Huey Newton’s youth, opens up two forms of distance, between the self-styled “elder” and young men, and between these young men and children. For there emerges from Black Panther Party rhetoric that urgent and deliberately humanitarian desire to cure childhood hunger which also animates *The Bitter Cry of the Children* and *American Hunger*. As a declaration of 1969 stated:

The Free Breakfast for School Children is about to cover the country and be initiated in every chapter and branch of the Black Panther Party. This program was created because the Black Panther Party understands that our children need a nourishing breakfast every morning so that they can learn.

These Breakfasts include every nutrient that they need for the day. For too long have our people gone hungry and without the proper health aids they need. But the Black Panther Party says that this type of thing must be halted, because we must survive this evil government and build a new one fit for the service of all the people. [...]

It is a *beautiful* sight to see our children eat in the mornings after remembering the times when our stomachs were not full [...] At one time there were children that passed out in class from hunger, or had to be sent home for something to eat. But our children shall be fed, and the Black Panther Party will not let the malady of hunger keep our children down any longer. [...] *Hunger is one of the means of oppression and it must be halted.* [Emphases added]<sup>29</sup>

I conclude this discussion of cooking and writing in African-American culture with a citation from Black Panther rhetoric for three reasons. I quote this rhetoric, firstly, not to suggest a direct correlation between it and the speculations of African-American literature, but to give shape to a mode of thinking on hunger and food that permeates much American culture. For this polemic by the Black Panthers embodies both the simplicity and the complexity which, following Sen, is identifiable in the positions *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *American Hunger* and *Tar Baby* advance on questions of inequality. That is to say, the objective it describes, of universal nutritional satiation, is entirely consistent with these narratives since it, too, appears entirely achievable in a United States routinely producing a food surplus. Yet, as these three narratives also make clear, this simple objective remains frustrated, remains complicated by the lingering imprint of racial inequality upon American social structures.

But I also conclude with this quotation because, like *American Hunger*, it forces us to revise our understanding of hunger itself. That is to say, if Wright's autobiography complicates conventional sociological characterisations of hunger as symptomatic of poverty, then the reorientation towards lived experience that this complication necessitates musters support in the Black Panthers' assessment that "hunger is one of the means of oppression". For, by characterising hunger as a "means" rather than symptom or end of "oppression", this statement of intent succinctly reiterates Wright's lifelong insistence that malnutrition, far from being a passive repercussion of poverty, actively manufactures its culture of debilitation, docility and ignorance. The Black Panthers' restoration of this previously faceless measure of social failure into an ordeal that "our children" actually experience thus

consolidates both the politicisation and the centrality which hunger assumes in Wright's autobiography. Nor is this all: after hunger has been so prioritised, this rhetoric immediately proposes a solution to it as simple and achievable as that indicated in the joint expulsion of hunger and whiteness from Zora Neale Hurston's Eatonville. Proof that this text affirms both Wright's explicit and Hurston's implicit view of hunger as avoidable and politicised is, meanwhile, provided by the controversies that this scheme excited among political leaders. At least, only by understanding the affinity between Emancipatory and nutritional demands can we explain Huey Newton's remark that the "survival program that seemed most laudatory – that of providing free breakfasts to schoolchildren – was pinpointed by J. Edgar Hoover as the 'real long-range threat to American society.'"<sup>30</sup> For such paranoia stemmed, not from the prospect of African-American bodily nourishment *per se*, but from the possibility that such satiation would prompt interrelated calls for a psychological or political nourishment, provoking a collapse in the docility which, produced by hunger, had reconciled the poor to their penury. Hoover, in this sense, agreed with these black revolutionaries since he, too, saw that the abolition of nutritional hunger might facilitate an education that, in turn, might facilitate the satiation of such hunger's political equivalents. The fact that, in Hoover's shifting scale of national anxieties, the Black Panthers' Breakfast scheme looked down upon such passing concerns as Vietnam and nuclear war provides the most eloquent evidence yet to support *American Hunger's* insistence that its eponymous condition is not only political but actively corroborates hierarchical inequality.

Finally, however, I conclude with this citation because it advocates these profound and, to Hoover, intimidating objectives through cooking *and* writing. In other words, the Black Panthers here enlist the culinary practice that carried the freed slave Abby Fisher to Californian publishing renown and the writerly practice that manumitted Phillis Wheatley into a coalition whose members, whether they stir spoons or manipulate pens, all work towards a hunger now characterised as nutritional *and* educational in equal part. On one hand, then, cooking here produces breakfasts for hungry schoolchildren. It radically refuses an absence which is here recognised as no less avoidable than those of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *American Hunger* and *Tar Baby*. Bobby Seale's later reminiscence of the era's "multi-thousand plate barbeque fund-raisers", together with the soul food cookbooks which he published during his later career as a restaurateur, thus endorse the heroism that Toni Morrison identifies in her cook Ondine's

transformation of “waste” into nourishing food.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, however, foods created by these acts of cooking are not only consumed by hungry schoolchildren, but by those readers who “digest” their polemical representation. *I* consume them, *you* consume them, *we* consume them because they have been represented in *words*, in *writing*. It is not just that cooking *is* a way of defying oppression: it is that this rhetoric, like Hurston, Wright and Morrison’s prose, says that it is. Even in this rhetorical statement, that is, writing remains crucial as a process that will broaden the food relief programme and, it is hoped, place it upon a national basis. For these Breakfasts for Schoolchildren require publicity, they require a rhetorical representation able to depict cooking in words. The image many of these polemical and novelistic writers hold of themselves – as practitioners who not only reflect society but seek to alter it by the radicalism of their words – is mirrored, finally, by the image they hold of these cooks and their resistance of hunger. For, into the voids of hunger and illiteracy respectively, these acts of cooking and the writers representing them pour foods and words, filling an absence imposed from without. Cooking and writing, in these literary texts, thus emerge as complementarily radical processes which, together, actively resist policies and activities that have sought to limit African-American culture’s imaginative scope. Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright and Toni Morrison can each thus be seen as occasional contributors, as occasional emissaries of the intellectual movement, often associated with Sen, that has sought to resolve hunger’s increasingly paradoxical presence upon our evermore productive planet.

## End Notes

- 1 C. L. R. James, *American Civilization* (Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), ed. by Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart, p.201.
- 2 For example: “The Lords of the Land stand in our way; they do not permit the poor whites to make common union with us, for that would mean the end of the Lords’ power.” Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1995), p.47.
- 3 Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), pp.175-176.
- 4 Amartya Sen, *On Economic Inequality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p.vii

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- 5 Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'Battle of the Bien-Pensant,' *New York Review of Books*, 27 April 2000, pp.41-45 (p.42).
  - 6 Benedict Zwane summarises the Malthusian position as suggesting that 'the fault for poverty and misery is not to be found in the production relations but in the power of the population to increase faster than the means of subsistence. Therefore, the poor, particularly those in the developing countries, are responsible for their own suffering if they produce too many children.' See 'Overpopulation and Economic Growth in the Developing Countries,' *Transition*, No. 49 (1975), pp.53-63. W. E. B. Du Bois more tersely brackets 'the population theories of Malthus' alongside the racial theories of 'Gobineau and Reisner' in 'Colonies and Moral Responsibility in some General Problems of Education in Dependent Territories,' *Journal of Negro Education*, 15 (1946), 311-318.
  - 7 For epigraphic citations, see Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp.76-77; Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Bombay and New York: Asia Publishing House, 1961), p.497; Amartya Sen, 'Ingredients of Famine Analysis: Availability and Entitlement', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 96 (1981), 433-464 (438); Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists* (London: Virago, 1993), pp.5-6; W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The Servant in the House' in *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1999), pp.63-69 (p.64).
  - 8 See, for example, Frantz Fanon, 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders' in *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 1990), pp.200-250.
  - 9 Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West* (London: Vintage, 1991).
  - 10 Richard Wright, 'How 'Bigger' Was Born' in *Native Son* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970). No page numbers given in this edition.
  - 11 Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), p.ix.
  - 12 Eagleton, p.23.
  - 13 Cormac Ó Gráda, *The Great Irish Famine* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.3-4.
  - 14 Eagleton, p.24.
  - 15 'Ingredients of Famine Analysis', 433-434.

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- 16 Amartya Sen, 'Capability and Well-Being' in *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), ed. by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, pp.30-53 (pp.41-42).
- 17 Ó Gráda, p.15.
- 18 Martin Luther King Jr., *Where do we go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam, 1967), p.206.
- 19 Martin Luther King Jr., p.217.
- 20 For citations, see Mike Davis, 'Los Angeles Was Just the Beginning: Urban Revolt in the United States: a Thousand Points of Light' in *Open Fire: the Open Magazine Pamphlet Series Anthology* (New York: the New Press, 1993), ed. by Greg Ruggerio and Stuart Sahulka, pp.220-242 (p.221-222). Fundraising letter from The Children's Food Relief, British Registered Charity No.1045672, was received by the author on Tuesday, 13 March 2001.
- 21 Robert H. Bremner, *From the Depths: the Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1956), p.69.
- 22 John Spargo, *The Bitter Cry of the Children* (New York and London: Johnson Reprint, 1969), p.61.
- 23 Robert Hunter, 'Introduction' in John Spargo, *The Bitter Cry of the Children*, pp.vii- xii (p.viii).
- 24 *The Bitter Cry of the Children*, pp.61-62
- 25 *American Hunger*, p.16.
- 26 The full description is as follows: "I always sensed in Richard Wright a Mississippi pickaninny, mischievous, cunning, and tough." See James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dell, 1961), p.148.
- 27 References are, in order, to James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (London: Corgi, 1973), p.60, p.17, p.66, p.100, pp.112-3.
- 28 'What We Want: What We Believe: October 1966 Black Panther Party Platform and Program' in *The Black Panthers Speak* (New York: Da Capo, 1995), ed. by Philip S. Foner, pp.2-4 (p.2).
- 29 'To Feed Our Children' in *The Black Panthers Speak*, pp.168-169 (pp.168-169).
- 30 Huey Newton, *War Against the Panthers: A Study of Repression in America* (New York and London: Harlem River, 1996), p.45.
- 31 Bobby Seale, *Barbeque'N With Bobby* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed, 1988), p.ix.'

## *Bibliography*

I began this research as a student who had previously concentrated on American literature, and who, in consequence, possessed far more knowledge about African-American writing than about African-American cooking. My first step was therefore to gather as much data on food as possible, to collect as many cookbooks, histories, polemics, sociological and structuralist theories as I could. Only after I had digested this material could the thesis's main business of considering how such cooking interrelates African-American literary representations of meals proceed. The following pages retread the course of this research, beginning with a critical bibliography entitled 'Cooking', in which cited texts concerned with hunger and food are catalogued. Following this, the Bibliography turns to the broader section of 'Writing', in which I have alphabetised all other works used in this thesis, most of which are oriented towards literature or other cultural aspects.

### **A. Cooking**

My first moves towards a broadening of my understanding of black cookery practices directed me towards cookbooks by African Americans. Many cookbooks published in the last two decades adopt explicitly Afrocentric positions and, by assuming a largely black readership, characteristically challenge these presumably inquisitive cooks to declare their own membership within the diaspora by incorporating into their dishes ingredients used by black communities in, say, Brazil or Brixton. Foremost among these are those written by Jessica B. Harris, who is described as 'a Professor of English in New York City and a culinary

consultant' on the back page of *The Kwanzaa Keepsake* (New York: Fireside, 1998). Cookbooks like these, which provide a kind of manual for the correct mode in which to hold the overtly diasporic celebration of Kwanzaa, are complemented by Harris's publication of such more broadly Afrocentric cookbooks as *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking* (New York: Fireside, 1999). Similar emphases on African retention are filtered through a more deliberately "literary" lens in Ntozake Shange, *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can* (Boston: Beacon, 1998). For a cookbook which endorses this diasporic heritage while simultaneously contextualising it amidst myriad other "ethnic" US traditions, see Dorinda Hafner, *United Tastes of America* (London: Ebury, 1997). An academic history of cooking practices during slavery, which supplies hard data supporting the African retention asserted by Harris and Shange, is Karen Hess, *The Carolina Rice Kitchen: The African Connection* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992).

In their eagerness to assert this African lineage, these cookbooks occasionally displace the influential European legacies which emerge from Abby Fisher, *What Mrs. Fisher Knows About Old Southern Cooking: Soups, Pickles, Preserves, etc.* (Bedford, MA: Applewood, 1995), ed. by Karen Hess. Exchanges between black and white American culinary cultures are manifested by the incorporation into this text of a raft of dishes also included in Mrs. Beeton, *Mrs. Beeton's Cookery Book: a Household Guide all about Cookery, Household Work, Marketing, Prices, Provisions, Trussing, Serving, Carving, Menus, etc. etc.* (London: Ward, 1901). That explicitly Afrocentric cookbooks occasionally downplay these more problematic forms of interracial rather than diasporic exchange is further confirmed by the reappearance of such ingredients as black-eyed peas and sweet potatoes – which are used extensively in Sheila Ferguson, *Soul Food: Classic Cuisine from the Deep South* (New York: Grove, 1989) – in such cookbooks by white southerners as *Recipes from Miss Daisy's* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 1985) and Lo'retta Love, *The Redneck Cookbook* (New York: Black Dog and Leventhal, 1997). White tastes for soul food are similarly demonstrated in Joni Miller, *True Grits: the Southern Food Mail-Order Catalog* (New York: Workman, 1990) and Connie McCabe, 'KC BBQ: Smoke and Succulence in Kansas City', *Saveur*, 27 (1998), 70-83. Consistencies between nominally white and African-American cookbooks must thus constantly be considered and counterbalanced alongside those diasporic similarities which emerge from the affinity between, say, Harris's work and dishes

included in Norma Benghiat, *Traditional Jamaican Cookery* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1985).

More methodological examinations of food include the structuralist and poststructuralist investigations of Roland Barthes, Mary Douglas, Jack Goody and Claude Lévi-Strauss. An introduction to the pivotal work of these three readers can be found in the anthology, *Food and Culture: A Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), ed. by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, which includes: Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', pp.20-27; Mary Douglas, 'Deciphering a Meal', pp.36-54; Jack Goody, 'Industrial Food: Towards the Development of a World Cuisine', pp.338-356; and Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'The Culinary Triangle', pp.28-35. Each of these sample essays comprise useful introductions to work more broadly set out in: Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966); Jack Goody, *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (London: Pimlico, 1994). Also of use in this excellent anthology are: E. Anderson, 'Traditional Medical Values of Food', pp.80-91; Janet M. Fitchen, 'Hunger, Malnutrition, and Poverty in the Contemporary United States: Some Observations on their Social and Cultural Context', pp.384-401; and Stephen Mennell, 'On the Civilizing of Appetite', pp.317-20. Further articles and texts that were pivotal to this research include: Lydia Martens and Alan Warde, 'Power and Resistance at the Dinner Table' in *Consuming Cultures: Power and Resistance* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1999), ed. by Jeff Heazrn and Sasha Roseneil, pp.91-108; Sidney W. Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon, 1996); and, above all, Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Data on specific foods was supplied by: John McPhee, *Oranges* (London: Penguin, 2000); Nigel Smith, Donald Plucknett and Jennifer Talbot, *Tropical Forests and their Crops* (Ithaca, NY: Comstock, 1992); and Neil L. Pennington and Charles W. Baker, *Sugar: A User's Guide to Sucrose* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990).

Questions of hunger have been no less important than questions of food to this thesis, and a key guide to literary representations of emaciation is Maud

Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists* (London: Virago, 1993). Throughout this literary interpretation, Ellmann repeatedly applauds the economic theorisation of famine which Amartya Sen offers in such texts as: 'Capability and Well-Being' in *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), ed. by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, pp.30-53; 'Ingredients of Famine Analysis: Availability and Entitlement', *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 96 (1981), 433-64; and *On Economic Inequality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973). These theories, which were pivotal to my research on malnutrition and hunger in African-American literature, were complemented by: Mitchel Dean, *The Constitution of Poverty: Towards a Genealogy of Liberal Government* (London: Routledge, 1991); and Andrew John Hill, *Investigation of Some Short-Term Influences on Hunger, Satiety and Food Consumption*, unpublished Phd thesis, University of Leeds, Department of Psychology, Nov 1986. Foremost among histories of malnutrition in the United States are: Robert H. Bremner, *From the Depths: the Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 1956); Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1962); Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *The New Class War: Reagan's Attack on the Welfare State and Its Consequences* (New York: Pantheon, 1982); and John Spargo, *The Bitter Cry of the Children* (New York and London: Johnson Reprint, 1969). These histories were, meanwhile, supported by perspectives delivered by: Isobel Cole-Hamilton and Tim Lang, *Tightening Belts: A Report on the Impact of Poverty on Food* (London: London Food Commission, 1986); Louis Lowenstein, 'Hungry and Homeless' *New York Review of Books*, 19 November 1998, p.75; Michael Massing, 'The End of Welfare?', *New York Review of Books*, October 7 1999, pp.22-26; and, of course, Gunnar Myrdal, *American Dilemma: the Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1944). Lastly, fusing these disparate together, supplying a cookbook that is also concerned with hunger, is Bobby Seale, *Barbeque'N With Bobby* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed, 1988).

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