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Transforming Naturalist Hunger Through African American Artistry

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Although central to American literary naturalism, the black experience often becomes obscured by a critical emphasis on white-authored writings and social Darwinist discourse. Many associate naturalist narratives with images of physically fit white men asserting their racial and sexual superiority; however, a dedication to social reformism and the immigrant experience also guided this group of authors, as exemplified by Upton Sinclair’s muckraking fiction and Jack London’s socialism. Recently, scholars like Jennifer L. Fleissner, June Howard, Donald Pizer, Jeanne Reesman, and others have drawn attention to representations of racial otherness in naturalist novels. They focus also on the role of women writers, such as Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose contributions to literary naturalism have been overlooked historically by critics. My work on Richard Wright (see Erdheim) contributes to these critical conversations about marginalized identities. This essay is interested particularly in the presence of black voices within literary naturalism. Through an ecocritical analysis of culinary culture in Wright’s African American narratives, I participate in recent efforts to rethink naturalism in terms of race, gender, the body, ethnicity, and class.

Introducing Black Hunger

Shortly before Black Boy leaves the segregated South, he becomes racially marked by a northern white man who identifies the youth’s hunger as a visible source of shame: “I see hunger in your face and eyes.”
(231), the Yankee proclaims, and in so doing drives Black Boy to deny
with pride his desperate desire for a meal. Richard Wright’s protagonist
experiences here what I call a racialized hunger, which causes this con-
fused boy to feel doubly ashamed, of his African American identity on
the one hand and his craving for nourishment on the other. Nevertheless,
this scene marks a turning point in the 1945 memoir, Black Boy (Ameri-
can Hunger).1 Soon after the interaction, Black Boy begins to develop a
newfound hunger for knowledge about his racial roots that he ultimately
fulfills through a commitment to avaricious reading and writing.

Characters in Wright’s works often hunger for something, but rarely
do they find satisfaction through food and drink. Those in the early fic-
tion have a complicated relationship to food, which they fear in some
respects and overly indulge in others. When whites construct black hun-
ger as dirty, African Americans internalize this shame and respond to
food with either restriction and deprivation or gluttony and excess.
Throughout Uncle Tom’s Children (1938), Native Son (1940), and Lawd
Today! (1963),2 blacks perpetuate patterns of disordered eating and
drinking among themselves and within their families. Also within these

1 Wright’s original manuscript currently consists of both “Southern Night” and
“The Horror and the Glory,” which we now identify as Black Boy (American
Hunger), but the two portions were published separately. In 1945, Wright
published the loosely autobiographical “Southern Night: A Record of Child-
hood and Youth,” then simply titled Black Boy, which now constitutes the
first half of this memoir. 1977 saw the publication of American Hunger, his
account of Northern life, which made Black Boy an African American narra-
tive that moves from South to North. For a thorough description of this pub-
lication history, see Jerry W. Ward, Jr.’s introduction to the HarperPerennial
edition of Black Boy (American Hunger) (New York, 1993), xi–xxi, repub-

2 Richard Wright completed Lawd Today! in 1937, one year prior to the publi-
cation of his short story collection Uncle Tom’s Children (1938), and three
years before Native Son (1940), so it officially serves as his first novel, even
though it was not published until 1963. For a fascinating look at how this
early book anticipates the ideas of Wright’s later works, see “Foreshadow-
ings: Lawd Today!” by Edward Margolies. Originally a chapter in Margol-
ies’s The Art of Richard Wright (1969), this piece appeared as an article in
Harold Bloom’s 1987 essay collection Richard Wright, 7–17.
works, destructive practices accompany insatiable appetites and unfulfilled desires.

The impulsive habits of eating, drinking, and sexual activity, so prevalent in Wright’s early fiction, ultimately become replaced by far more fulfilling rituals of reading, storytelling, and writing in the author’s nonfictional narratives and posthumously published poetic works. In addition to Black Boy, Twelve Million Black Voices (1941) and Haiku: This Other World (1998) mark a turning point in Wright’s portrayal of hunger; this transformation echoes the way that African American communities have historically transformed food that whites devalue and discard.

In the following, I will explore African American culinary history through close readings of “Black Confession,” the manuscript for Black Boy, and the memoir itself. I open with illustrations of racialized hunger in Black Boy and Uncle Tom’s Children. From here, I move into Wright’s works of fiction, especially Lawd Today! and Native Son, which depict eating as a degrading and destructive practice among African American individuals, families, and communities. Ultimately, I will demonstrate how disordered eating patterns shift from shameful to soulful in Twelve Million Black Voices, Haiku: This Other World, and Black Boy.

I argue that Black Boy (including its earliest manuscript version, “Black Confession”) functions as a transitional text in which Wright transforms hunger from a shameful racial mark, which prompts a purely physical numbing of the senses through impulsive eating and drinking, into an appetite for literacy, stories, and songs about African American ancestry, community, and identity. This thematic link between scraps of food, knowledge, and land connects Wright to the history of black cuisine, as well as to the 1960s Soul Food Movement, which Wright’s early literature anticipates. Similar to the way that black culture used its inge-

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3 I have located this manuscript in the Richard Wright Papers at Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. As the earliest handwritten document for Black Boy, “Black Confession” exists in Series I: Writings, Box 9, and Folder 1; the call number is JWJMS 3. Several years ago, I received permission from Julia Wright, the author’s daughter who owns her father’s words, to quote two hundred words from the original manuscript; however, here I have paraphrased other portions of the document, which I cite accordingly.
nuity to create quality out of scraps, so too does Black Boy reshape his response to white constructions of African American hunger by refusing to accept his appetite as shameful and dirty. Black Boy ultimately dismisses the leftover food, filth, and knowledge of the white world, and instead hungers for the ability to create and digest his own stories; through the creation of narratives about food, family, and the natural world, Black Boy learns to cultivate a taste for his own cuisine and culture.

Collecting the Scraps

Wright connects the visible markings of race to the physical act of eating by identifying himself as a Black Boy experiencing and eventually overcoming a most profound and painful American Hunger. Divided into two parts, “Southern Night” and “The Horror and the Glory,” this memoir maps out a young black child’s journey toward maturity, literacy, and freedom. In this way, the text incorporates stylistic and thematic features of the slave narrative. Beginning in the turn-of-the-century South, specifically Mississippi, and culminating in mid-twentieth-century Chicago, Black Boy (American Hunger) chronicles pivotal points, some of which are fictional, throughout Wright’s life, from his conversion to Communism to the euphoric writing of his first prose piece. As with other nonfictional narratives, Wright’s memoir has generated much discussion about its autobiographical accuracy and authenticity. Within these con-

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4 For a fascinating look at how Wright’s early fiction and nonfiction share stylistic and thematic traits with slave narratives and plantation tales, see Robert B. Stepto’s “I Thought I Knew These People: Wright and the Afro-American Literary Tradition” in the collection Chant of Saints (1979). Stepto’s piece was republished as an essay in Bloom’s Richard Wright (1987), 57–74.

5 Edward Margolies (The Art), Robert Stepto (“Literacy”), and Lionel Trilling see the ambiguities in Wright’s memoir as indicative of an inaccurate autobiography, whereas scholars such as James Olney insist upon the author’s success at carefully crafting a semi-fictional persona to the complexities of black life in America. For more analysis of this authenticity debate, see Timothy Dow Adams, “‘I Do Believe Him Though I Know He Lies’: Lying as Genre and Metaphor in Black Boy” (1993), 302–15.
versations, however, scholars too often focus on hunger as an abstraction in the narrative and overlook the memoir’s depiction of African American eating and its distinct cultural patterns.

Curiously, few critics have viewed *Black Boy (American Hunger)* in relation to African American culinary culture, which has its origins in slavery and in the leftovers that slaves received following their masters’ meals. Doris Witt affirms this scarcity of scholarship in her aptly titled work, *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America*: “Despite the surfeit of source material, discussion of black culinary practices [have been] largely absent from African American literary studies” (9). Witt acknowledges the centrality of food to African American writing, particularly slave narratives, and she mentions Wright. Yet *Black Boy (American Hunger)* is not granted much attention, and it very well could be. Starting in the early twentieth-century United States, when racial segregation reigned supreme in the South and prejudice ran rampant in the North, Wright’s memoir shows a young boy’s struggle to overcome his reliance “upon the whites for the bread” (*Black Boy* 239) that he eats. Cultural food critic Frederick Douglass Opie traces African American cookery back to the “niggardly rations” that “enslaved Africans” received in the dawning days of Colonial America (10).

Through food imagery and potent metaphors, Wright’s 1937 essay on the “Blueprint for Negro Writing” invokes culinary history. Specifically in this piece about creating a distinctly black literary tradition, Wright articulates his emerging Communist vision through the “few crumbs of American civilization which the Negro has got from the table of capitalism” (1406). Wright’s words draw upon a culinary tradition which would later become soul food to convey class struggle. Like James Baldwin and many contemporary black authors, Wright envisioned literature as inherently social and reformist; in other words, the political could not be severed from the aesthetic, or in this case the culinary. Wright’s essay does not focus directly on food per se; however, this

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6 Witt situates her culinary scholarship in the context of African American literary studies, which she claims has two prevailing critical approaches: Houston Baker’s emphasis on blues and performance; and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s focus on signification and multiplicity of meaning (*Black Hunger* 9). Witt also acknowledges the view of Arthur Schomberg that “textual analysis” can only go so far in regards to eating and food studies (15).
piece sheds light on the way that black communities have experienced eating throughout history. In addition to expressing the author’s Communist sensibilities, this literary treatise reveals how whites have conditioned blacks to feel entitled only to scraps of food, land, and literacy.

Black Boy gradually learns to triumph over the trappings of racial hunger, however, which has made African American individuals and families feel deserving only of pieces and parts (never wholes) of food, intellect, property, and personhood. A desperate desire for scraps becomes replaced by a burning passion for knowledge; the more he understands about his ancestry, which has been historically “handicapped by illiteracy,” the further Black Boy’s determination to refuse “mush and lard gravy” (Black Boy 136–37). Ultimately, Black Boy successfully redefines his appetite, which he transforms from an empty and shameful desire for food and drink into a realizable hunger for stories rooted in black culture and nature. Once he starts to associate his appetite with folk tales and stories, rather than with filth and dirt, Black Boy begins to satiate an American hunger that he has viewed for so long as impure and unclean.

The earliest draft of Black Boy, a one hundred and four page manuscript that he entitled “Black Confession,” deepens our understanding of racialized hunger in the published memoir. Wright describes his growing awareness of segregation in terms of the different ways that blacks and whites experience food and community (14). In a section that does not survive in the published editions of the memoir, Wright explains how racially segregated eating has made black individuals, families, and communities feel undeserving of quality food. Furthermore, African Americans fear literal or physical hunger, leading Black Boy to resort to hoarding (50).

In the published edition of Wright’s memoir, Black Boy becomes physically ill from, as well as emotionally disturbed by, the visible joy that the privileged patrons whom his mother serves display while dining. As a voyeur desiring of pleasure, but unable to indulge in it, he talks about his “empty stomach” paining him to the point of anger. And as a mature narrator looking back on childhood visits to his mother’s place of employment, a racially segregated eating establishment in the turn-of-the-century South, Black Boy wonders why he was forbidden to eat when hungry. Out of this question emerge more philosophical queries about the history of black eating in America: “why did I always have to
“Black Confession” highlights the historical trend of blacks collecting scraps (both of food and knowledge). At certain points throughout this manuscript, Wright mentions how the white world disposes of African American ideas (74). In other portions of the document, Wright talks often about guarding food from others for fear that it will not last. By examining the manuscript alongside the memoir as we know it today, we can see Wright’s original blueprint for the *American Hunger* portion of *Black Boy*, and thus rethink naturalist appetite through the history of African American cuisine.

According to William C. Whit, British colonialists—then American slaveholders—began conditioning blacks to view their food as waste and their waste as food. For centuries, white masters fed scraps to their slaves, which reinforced the idea of blacks as subhuman pieces of property neither entitled to nor deserving of complete meals. When shipped to American shores, enslaved blacks felt equipped with the skills necessary to make use of the ingredients they had collected; therefore, when given what their masters would not eat or did not want, African Americans created for themselves a community centered around their own food. Indeed, American slaves showed remarkable ingenuity by starting to use these leftovers as ingredients for far more delicious dishes, which reflected a combination of European, Caribbean, and American influences. Although not named and established as a movement until the 1960s, soul food had its foundations in the earliest days of the slave trade; moreover, this creative cuisine emerged out of “elements” coming from Africa, the Americas, and Europe (Whit 46).

Defined by Whit as “the African tradition of using spices [and scraps] to make food more interesting” (48), soul food gave generations of American blacks a subversive sort of authority over their owners who in turn felt threatened by the slaves’ superior culinary talents. From the beginnings of colonial America, enslaved Africans in the New World

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acquired a unique knowledge about farming and food that enabled them
to vary the “monotony” of their “assigned” meals (Opie 37). Nineteenth-
century American slaves continued this covert culinary rebellion, which
their African ancestors had begun, by refusing silently to eat the scraps
of “salt pork and cornmeal” that their white masters fed them. Moreover,
slaves spiced up meals by replacing their bland rations with specially
seasoned vegetable plates like the ‘Hopping John.’ According to Opie,
these plates were produced and prepared entirely by America’s earliest
blacks who proved superior to their white masters in food artistry (37).
Indeed, these historical narratives about black culinary culture reflect a
new dimension to the naturalist theme of hunger in Black Boy and
Wright’s various other works.

Hunger certainly figures into the scholarship on Wright’s writings,
but literary critics tend to view appetites as impulsive and animalistic, in
accordance with deterministic readings of literary naturalism. Critical
responses to Native Son in particular have tended toward an urban deter-
minism that renders Bigger Thomas incapable of controlling his exces-
sive desires for food, alcohol, sex, and cigarettes. Arnold Rampersad, for
example, notes that racial and social inequalities “reveal the animal un-
derneath” (xii) marginalized characters like Bigger. While Rampersad
acknowledges Bigger’s oral fixations, his analysis does not account for
the intense fear of hunger that Wright’s protagonist experiences particu-
larly during family mealtime.

From nineteenth-century slave narratives to twentieth-century auto-
biographies, African American authors have illustrated their history of
understanding and experiencing eating in the context and under the con-
ditions of slavery and racism. In his 1845 autobiography, for instance,
Frederick Douglass depicts a childhood of collecting scraps from slave-
holders. Moreover, in Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), Harriet
Jacobs notes specifically how “slaves could get nothing to eat except
what [masters] chose to give to them,” which comprised only “the re-

8 For a further discussion of black culinary creations such as the ‘Hopping
John,’ as well as a look at some of soul food’s most original recipes, see
chapter three, “Southern Foodways in the Nineteenth Century” in Frederick
Douglass Opie, Hog and Homily: Soul Food from Africa to America (2008),
31–54.
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 mains of the gravy and other scrapings” (286). Although expected by whites to consume only leftovers, slaves began to redefine their eating experiences by creating their own cuisine, as well as by reading and writing about these creative approaches to cooking. In a subversive sort of way, this creative cuisine undermines the authority of slaveholders and the power of white masters.

Wright’s writings predate the naming of Soul Food as a movement; however, if “African American food history lies in twentieth-century realities” (Yentsch 60), then we can certainly benefit from a reading of these works in terms of cultural food studies. Over the past fifteen years, this dietary discourse has whet the appetites of scholars in the humanities, as well as the social and natural sciences. Key contributors to this field, Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik attribute the explosion of food studies to a number of key factors; most interesting in the context of this article is the idea that identity politics, feminism, and women’s studies have led to the legitimization of cultural food studies as a respected course of study (Counihan and Van Esterik, Introduction 1–2).

Little scholarship explores Wright’s Twelve Million Black Voices, a non-fictional narrative that demonstrates the national impact of migration on regional eating patterns and African American culinary culture.

Prior to examining American Hunger in Black Boy, exposing a “hunger for fresh land” (27) in Twelve Million Black Voices, and exploring Bigger Thomas’s carnal desires in Native Son, Wright’s autobiographical prose shows blacks seeking scraps of land. In “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow,” which opens Uncle Tom’s Children, Wright’s narrator notes that “nothing green ever grew in the yard” of his racially segregated Arkansas home (225). Confined on one side of the railroad tracks to a polluted “cinder yard,” he can see from afar the “green trees and the trimmed hedges” of the homes belonging to the white diners whom his mother serves (226). Here, the young boy recognizes the cruel irony of his mother’s inability to “feed and clothe [him] on her cooking job” (227). Surely, we see a connection here between nurturing and nutrients, both of which fail in this autobiographical piece and much of Wright’s fiction.

“Down by the Riverside,” which follows “The Ethics of Living Jim Crow” and a tale entitled “Big Boy Leaves Home,” illustrates white constructions of black hunger as something filthy that must be condemned and controlled. Despite efforts to obtain for his desperately ill pregnant
wife a proper medical birth, Brother Mann does not arrive on time for Lulu to deliver her child, resulting in the tragic death of both. As if personal tragedy does not pain him enough, Mann receives the wrath of white men who accuse the “nigger” of having stolen the boat of Heartfield, the Post Master, whom Brother Mann shoots in self-defense. Ultimately, Mann is killed by white soldiers, and the story concludes on a rather pessimistic note. In *Black Boy*, Wright explains how this “tale of a flood” has shaped his aesthetic vision of hunger (341).

Just as Western culture “relates the tales that define blackness” (Reilly 36–37), so also does the white man in Wright’s short story mark Brother Mann’s appetite with racial shame; the soldier offered Mann a sandwich, but prevents the black man from enjoying this food, which is polluted by filthy flood waters:

“Heres a sandwich you can have.” “Thank yuh, suh.” He took the sandwich and bit it. The dry bread balled in his mouth. He chewed and tried to wet it. Ef only that ol soljerd quit lookin at me . . . He swallowed and the hard lump went down slowly, choking him. “Thatl make you feel better,” said the soldier. “Yessuh.” (“Down by the Riverside” 303)

This “hard lump,” polluted by filthy floods surrounding a racially segregated hospital in the World War I South, makes Brother Mann feel as though he is “choking” physically and psychologically.9 Having lost his pregnant wife due to inadequate medical care, Mann can only wish that the soldier would stop glaring at him. Foreshadowing *Black Boy*, the soldier pollutes Mann’s hunger with a white male gaze.

Disordered Eating

The white construction of black hunger as a dirty desire perpetuates itself within the African American communities of Wright’s early fiction. Indeed, brutal violence between men and women often coincide with

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9 See Tracy Webb, “Water Imagery in *Uncle Tom’s Children*” (1998), 5–16. Scholars like Webb have looked at water imagery in this short story, though the flood deserves more attention as both a natural disaster and a racial injustice.
their daily routines of eating and drinking. Impulsive patterns of disor-
dered drinking and mindless eating prevent the characters in Wright’s
first two novels, *Lawk Today!* and *Native Son*, from respecting and relat-
ing to each other. In both books, destructive behaviors rupture bonds
between blacks. Though whites do not play a direct role in *Lawk Today!*,
slavery and racism have created a world where African American men
and women struggle against one another for scraps.

Divided into three parts (“Commonplace,” “Squirrel Cage,” and
“Rats Alley”), *Lawk Today!* tells the tragic tale of Jake Jackson, a labor-
ing postal worker, and Lil, his African American wife; both desperately
seek survival in Prohibition- and post-Depression-era Chicago. As Ed-
ward Margolies notes, *Lawk Today!* has some parallels to James Joyce’s
modernist novel *Ulysses* (1922) in that it takes place over the course of
one day “in the life of a Negro postal worker” (“Foreshadowing” 7).

Jake eats, drinks, smokes, and gambles to forget about the “disgusting
taste” (Wright, *Lawk Today!* 8) that racist whites have put in his mouth.
His toxic behaviors, in turn, perpetuate a vicious circle that culminates
in self-destruction and the ruin of his marriage.

Similar to Black Boy, Jake endures a “sickening hunger,” which can-
not be satisfied by his oral fixations (*Lawk Today!* 8). To highlight the
physical pain generated by Jake’s hunger, Wright’s third-person limited
narrator compares the sensation within this young man’s stomach to “a
vacuum with a black rat gnawing around inside of it” (8). Jake feels
toxic, dirtied by the racial and socioeconomic inequalities of a world
where black men struggle to find their place in an African American
home and by extension a dominant white world. Neither families nor
couples exist as cohesive units in this novel, and these failures of com-

The plot pinpoints an insatiable hunger for something in Jake and
Lil’s torturous marriage, which is characterized by episodes of mealtime
violence. In “Commonplace,” shortly after Lil informs Jake of the oper-
ation she needs to remove her tumor, he can think only about how she
has wasted their money and contaminated their food: “Then she had
gone like a fool and burned up his eggs, eggs that cost cold, hard cash.
And on top of that she goes and gets herself a Gawddamn tumor!”
(*Lawk Today!* 19). The physical torture and emotional torment that de-

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Edward W. Margolies

kitchen, a filthy domestic space where hierarchical gender roles become reinforced. When Jake says to Lil, “‘Tend to your cooking, you slut,’” and commands that she “‘Shut up and cook’” (13), his words imply that females (black women in particular) should prepare rather than enjoy meals.

While Lil feels shame eating in front of her husband within their home, Jake joins a community of men who seek futilely to feed their impulses through food, alcohol, sex, and gambling outside of the house. Male bonds, however unhealthy and destructive, are determined by eating and drinking, as both activities structure the day of Jake and his neighborhood friends, Bob and Al. While indulging in liquor, these men talk openly about their consumption of food, drink, and sex. At one point, Al notes that, despite his having eaten “half a loaf of bread, all toasted golden brown and buttered,” “ten scrambled eggs,” and “a pound of bacon dripping with good old grease,” he still hungry for more (76–77).

In addition to rupturing relationships between men and women, food and alcohol create destructive bonds between communities of black men in Lawd Today! Though Hazel Rowley observes within this novel “a warm and exuberant portrait of black male camaraderie in the South Side” (70), I see these male–male bonds as destructive because they revolve around empty oral fixations and unhealthy habits. As this novel shows, Depression-era issues of scarcity and starvation persist for urban African Americans in Chicago’s Black Belt. The Great Depression, in fact, adds an additional layer of meaning to the American Hunger portion of Black Boy. Moreover, the aftermath of this economic crisis provides the background for Native Son, a novel that shows underprivileged American blacks collecting scraps from Chicago’s dirtiest streets.

For Native Son’s Bigger Thomas, alcohol and sex also serve unsuccessfully to satisfy a desperate desire for pleasure as he journeys tragically through “Fear,” “Flight,” and “Fate.” The story follows a young, underprivileged African American man’s struggle to survive the streets of Chicago’s rat-infested South Side, provide for his family, and uphold his masculine pride as a brother, lover, and son. When Bigger finds work at the wealthy white home of the Dalton family, his downward spiral begins. Bigger murders Mary, the family’s daughter; subsequently, desperation drives him to kill his young black lover, Bessie. Bigger Thomas meets a fate much like Theodore Dreiser’s Clyde Griffiths in An Ameri-
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*can Tragedy* (1925). In both naturalist novels, sexual fulfillment fails and murderous acts lead to the execution of the protagonists.

Insatiable Appetites

Discussions of appetite permeate *Native Son*. Like Black Boy, who feels ashamed of a racial hunger that whites have labeled as such, Bigger often denies his desire for food by insisting that he “ain’t hungry.” While Black Boy’s hunger surfaces as an emotional longing for family, fatherhood, equality, and literacy, Bigger has a vague awareness of his appetites, and he largely lacks control over his physical urges. Wright’s third-person limited narrator expresses Bigger’s desperate and futile efforts to satisfy himself mindlessly through food, alcohol, cigarettes, and sex. Bigger hungers for environments, events, and situations that require neither active will nor purposeful thought: “He wanted to see a movie; his senses hungered for it. In a movie he could dream without effort; all he had to do was lean back in a seat and keep his eyes open” (14). The young man’s approach to smoking seems strikingly similar, as he seeks to satisfy his oral sensations by “puff[ing] silently, relaxed, his mind pleasantly vacant of purpose” (15).

The pleasures of eating and drinking are reduced by food that is literally unclean. Class and gender, as well as race, contribute to the black family’s consumption of food that is not only non-flavorful but in some cases rather rotten. Made to feel ashamed of their appetites, Wright’s fictional characters often perpetuate destructive patterns by playing out power dynamics during family mealtime. Repelled by the nauseating “odor of frying bacon and boiling coffee from behind the curtain” (*Native Son* 10), Bigger Thomas also feels tormented by the constant questioning of his mother: “‘Ain’t you going to eat’” and “‘you going to see about that job?’” (43). Eating and job-seeking become equally burdensome for Bigger. Vera, his sister, adds to these paralyzing expectations to the point that Bigger begins to associate eating with labor and shame rather than leisure and pleasure.

One of *Native Son*’s early scenes captures the complex gender relations occurring during mealtime in the rat-infested Chicago slum that the Thomas family calls home:
“You going to take this job, ain’t you, Bigger?” his mother asked. He laid down his fork and stared at her. “I told you last night I was going to take it. How many times you want to ask me?” “Well, don’t bite her head off,” Vera said. “She only asked you a question.” “Pass the bread and stop being smart.” (11)

The passage above affirms Trudier Harris’s claim that “the black women in *Native Son* are all content to nag rather than to nurture” (65). Responding angrily to his mother’s insistence that he accept that fateful position at the Daltons’, Bigger must interrupt his eating to shield himself from the persistent nudging of his female family. Emasculated by his mother and sister, Bigger also gets framed in animal terms when Vera associates her brother’s male black angst with the most desperate form of primal eating.

The pressure to uphold his masculinity impedes upon Bigger’s ability to derive enjoyment from food. “If you get that job,” his mother said in a low, kind tone of voice, busy slicing a loaf of bread, ‘I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs’" (*Native Son* 11). In “Giving Bigger a Voice,” John M. Reilly describes the African American ghetto as a place so lacking in “health, comfort, convenience, and security” that underprivileged family structures start to erode (38). Rather than receive comfort from community, family, and food, Wright’s protagonist “warms himself with liquor” (*Native Son* 74), “sucks his cigarette” compulsively (143) and has mindless sex with Bessie.

One could say that Bigger Thomas becomes numbed by the emasculating expectations of his mother, sister, and white society at large. Rather than nurture her son, Mrs. Thomas mothers by creating commands that center around food: “Eat your breakfast, Bigger” (*Native Son* 98), she often orders. Although the women in *Native Son* expect Bigger to prove his masculinity by providing for his family, he cannot do so because he lacks nourishment from his own mother. As a member of the black underclass, Bigger has been deprived of his mother’s milk, and he feels undeserving of healthy and enjoyable meals, which he cannot afford anyhow.

Houston A. Baker, Jr. explores the difficulty of black mothering from the perspective of what he calls “placelessness.” Historically, the plantation itself restricted the role of female slaves (“Knowing” 218) who struggled to care properly for their children. Though the plantation exist-
ence may have led to a historical immobilization of women, migratory patterns distanced all African Americans from any sense of rootedness or permanence. Indeed, Bigger and his family experience these effects of the Great Migration to an urban North.

Although many read *Native Son* as a story about the futile quest to satiate uncontrollable appetites, Bigger at times demonstrates immense control while eating. The image of him “[picking] up a piece of chicken and bit[ing] it” (74), but limiting his intake to “three or four bites” (75), illustrates an anxiety about food that a clinician might attribute to an anorexic patient. Rather than label Bigger an anorexic, however, I would argue that dominant white constructions of black hunger perpetuate a pattern of disordered eating among disenfranchised blacks like Bigger and others throughout his family.

Interdisciplinary scholars, like Becky Thompson, investigate the growing presence of eating disorders within marginalized communities. Thompson’s work on black women has particular relevance to the cautious and anxious eating rituals of Bigger’s sister, Vera. Her physical actions at the dinner table express “a fear so deep to be an organic part of her” as she consumes her food in “tiny bits, as if dreading its choking her” (*Native Son* 108–09). Rather than sustain and fulfill her, the dinner makes Vera “shrin[k] from life in every gesture she make[s]” (108). Though Vera hounds Bigger to find employment during *Native Son’s* earlier mealtime scenes, here she expresses a fundamental fear of food.

Black Boy also exercises great caution when eating the fruit that he receives from his family as a Christmas present. In the memoir, Black Boy becomes fearful of sharing his gift, so he stays inside to secure this piece of fruit firmly within his possession. He becomes a sort of hoarder, nurturing an “orange” as though it is his child (*Black Boy* 77). This overly cautious eating stems from fears of physical hunger and anxieties about his blackness. Unlike those characters in Wright’s early fiction who respond to racist constructions of black hunger with overindulgence and gluttony, Black Boy satisfies his hunger for the “inexpressibly hu-
man” (*Black Boy* 384) by heavily monitoring his eating patterns, which begin to coincide with rituals of reading and writing.

According to Jerry W. Ward, Black Boy’s “discipline” enables him to satiate “the peculiar qualities of a hunger broadly described” (98). Moreover, while Wright’s Bigger Thomas self-destructs because he “lacks a certain control of language,” Black Boy constructs himself through a
carefully crafted narrative that displays his “power of language” (98). Rather than continue to view these abilities in relation to some abstract philosophical hunger, I am interested in how Black Boy ultimately commits himself to a regimented routine of eating, reading, and writing. Through his success at “manipulating language and its codes” (98), Black Boy inverts the racial hierarchies so long built by whites into the African American experience of eating and learning.

Bigger, by contrast, tends to numb his fear of food with excessive alcohol consumption. In a 1940 essay published independently of the novel, but incorporated into later editions of *Native Son*, Wright examines the sociological reasons behind alcoholism in underprivileged African American communities. Specifically, he describes a “world in which millions of men lived and behaved like drunkards,” and characterizes Bigger Thomas’s racially segregated environment as one filled with “chronic alcoholics” incapable of quenching their thirst for anything (“How ‘Bigger’ Was Born” 446). Indeed, the “fulfillment” from Bigger’s “stiff drink of hard life” never seems to last, and the “quivering sense of wild exultation” that he receives from brief sexual encounters with Bessie always leaves him with a “dull” and “flat” feeling of wanting more (446).

Despite this desire for more, Bigger seems strangely incapable of simple digestion when eating in the presence of white people. In an instance of “culinary slumming,” as Doris Witt writes in her chapter on “Soul Food and Its Discontents” (*Black Hunger* 79–101), Mary and Jan force Bigger to take them across racial borders to an African American eating establishment. At Ernie’s Kitchen Shack, which one might identify today as a soul food restaurant, Bigger struggles to swallow his food:

> Jan and Mary were eating. Bigger picked up a piece of chicken and bit it. When he tried to chew he found his mouth dry. It seemed that the very organic functions of his body had altered; and when he realized why, when he understood the cause, he could not chew the food. After two or three bites, he stopped and sipped his beer. (Wright, *Native Son* 74–75)

Unlike Jan and Mary’s privileged white eating experience, Bigger here becomes utterly incapable of simple digestion. Though he seeks to fulfill his urges blindly through drink, Bigger still finds his “mouth dry.” The racial shame, which white Americans have conditioned him to feel,
Transforming Naturalist Hunger

along with the pressures from his own community and family to uphold his black masculinity, lead Bigger into a state of mental paralysis whereby he feels “the very organic functions of his body” break down.

We are familiar with the profoundly racist implications that chicken consumption has, and scholars such as Psyche Williams-Forson remind us of that fact. Although the chicken eating scene in *Native Son* portrays patterns of disordered eating among Wright’s disenfranchised urban blacks, the cultural practice of consuming chicken began as a celebratory and spiritual one for West Africans. According to Opie, chicken served significant symbolic roles in the religious rituals of West African communities both before and after their arrival on Colonial American soil. Indeed, “the African American practice of eating chicken on special occasions is a West Africanism that survived the slave trade” (11). Central to African American worship, chicken played a powerful part in the origins of what we now name soul food. The main organs of chickens in fact functioned as “flavor enhancers,” and early American slaves learned from their ancestors how to use these leftover body parts like “hearts, lungs, kidneys, and gizzards” to enrich the taste of soups and stews (11).

Bigger derives no such flavor from chicken here, and denies his hunger more and more as the legal plot unfolds. Right after his lawyer, Max, defends the accused murderer for having only “two outlets” for his uncontrollable appetites, Bigger exercises one of his first bits of self-control by refusing his attorney’s orders to “‘eat something’” (*Native Son* 377). As with the scene at Ernie’s Kitchen Shack, we see here the black man’s intense discomfort while eating and drinking with the white gaze fixed upon him. Even though Max’s communist sentiments make him sympathetic to the young African American’s plight, and he works relentlessly to defend the accused murderer, Bigger still refuses food in front of his advocate. Thus, he rejects the “tray of food” that Max places in front of him, and insists with defiance that he “‘don’t want nothing’”; Bigger even refuses to smoke (377).

As he awaits execution in an Illinois State prison, Bigger Thomas eats by forcing “food down through his throat without tasting it, to keep the knowing pain of hunger away” (418). This “hunger” creates a painful awareness in Bigger of his racial marking by a white man; therefore, he tries to quiet his appetite, of which he feels embarrassed, by eating impulsively, without appreciation for texture or taste. This mind-numbing eating erases from his mind the reality of his blackness, robs him of
any appreciation for his racial roots, and prevents him from experiencing eating as a cultural (and therefore a pleasurable) act. At the same time, the mark of racial shame perpetuates a cycle of insatiable desire by making Bigger feel unworthy of pleasure and by leaving him hungry for something other than food. As Wright’s narrator notes, “Men kept hungry, kept needing” (426). And, although he neither satisfies this hunger nor these needs, Wright’s Native Son begins to desire “a deeper awareness” about himself and the world around him (423).

Food, Farming, & Land

While early novels like *Native Son* (1940) display destructive behaviors that rupture relations between African Americans, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941) shows how centuries of slavery and racism have severed the connection between blacks and their homeland. In this nonfictional narrative, Wright attributes a fervent “thirst” and “hunger” to “the trauma of leaving [the] African home” (15). Furthermore, he explores the damaging impact of forced migration on black identity, since slaves became distanced from a heritage rooted in “folkways and folk tales” (15).

This historical uprooting of African Americans has led them to become further removed from the stories they tell and the food they grow, says Wright. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sharecropping has, like the plantation system under slavery, distanced blacks not only from the pleasures of tasting but also from the pride of cultivation:

To plant vegetables for our table was often forbidden, for raising a garden narrowed the area to be planted in cotton. The world demanded cotton, and the Lords of the Land ordered more acres to be planted—planted right up to our doorsteps!—and the ritual of Queen Cotton became brutal and bloody. (*Twelve Million Black Voices* 39)

Prohibited to plant vegetables and to engage in the art of raising a garden, Southern blacks were long ordered to satisfy the nation’s bleeding desire for cotton. Wright focuses in this passage on how the “brutal and bloody” logic of slavery and the “ritual of Queen Cotton” historically robbed blacks of their autonomy, precluded ownership over their own minds and bodies, and forbade them from possessing their own land.
The failure to find community in food relates closely to slavery’s denial of African American group identity.

At certain points throughout *Twelve Million Black Voices*, Wright collapses eras of African American history to show that slavery’s legacy has endured well into the twentieth century by taking different forms like oppression, racism, and segregation. When referring to his enslaved ancestors in the first person plural subject “we,” Wright includes himself in this oppressed group, which has been “legally bound to plant, tend, and harvest another crop” of the plantation proprietors (38). The nineteenth-century slave laborer, with whom Wright identifies through family and history, and the turn-of-the-century sharecropper, whom he observes as a child in the segregated South, share a common history of providing delicacies for the white masters and slave owners (38).

Although he acknowledges that the horrific historical legacy of slavery has marked the black experience of nature with bloodshed, Wright seems equally interested in how African American families and communities collaboratively carve out sacred spaces for themselves in the wilderness. Hunting and gathering have even served as a subversive response for slaves, plantation workers, field laborers, and sharecroppers alike to reverse their subordinate status within the Western white world. In fact, Opie traces this history of African American hunting and gardening back to Colonial America. Aside from giving early African slaves food scraps and leftovers, British masters granted slaves in southern colonies “the opportunity to cultivate gardens and to hunt fish on Sundays” (19). In *Twelve Million Black Voices*, we see how generations of American blacks begin to use their acquired knowledge of nature to structure their own eating experiences by making the most from scraps (both of land and food) that they have received.

Wright’s rebuilding of folk family, language, and land in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, combined with his redefinition of hunger in *Black Boy*, foregrounds an early twentieth-century characteristic of African American thought that, according to Kimberly K. Smith, connects “nature, human culture, and racial identity” (310). These two texts, which “regenerate” the racially and environmentally damaged spaces of *Uncle Tom’s Children* and *Native Son*, further reflect an evolving “black concept of wilderness” (310).

Although this narrative does not show slaves using their culinary talents to outwit their masters, Wright does indicate that a special knowl-
edge of the land and fresh food has strengthened and continues to reinforce the bond between blacks. “For the most part,” he writes, “our family groups are held together” by the pride of property “ownership” and the cultivation of crops (Twelve Million Black Voices 60). Ultimately, I maintain that Twelve Million Black Voices works to reverse slavery’s pattern of environmental and racial destruction by empowering, through narrative, African Americans to reclaim nature, the land, and food as rich sources of folk identity and community.

Resisting Racial Hunger

While Wright rebuilds cultural and communal identity in Twelve Million Black Voices, Black Boy learns to understand and ultimately overcome the shameful hunger that whites have projected onto him and other African Americans. As a mature narrator looking back, Black Boy mentions two forms of black hunger: one seems purely physical and temporarily satiable by “a crust or two” of bread; the other, which Wright personifies, is more emotional and thus elicits an “angry” and “insistent” reaction. Its “grim,” “hostile” persona surfaces here as a “stranger” whom a young Black Boy often finds “standing at [his] bedside” (Black Boy 14). The image of this “new hunger,” which glares incessantly and intrusively at the small child, signals an African American individual’s awareness of being looked at and gazed upon. In The Souls of Black Folk, which surely shaped Wright’s thinking, W. E. B. Du Bois describes this recognition of the white person’s gaze as an aspect of ‘double consciousness.’ Though Wright does not identify this hunger by race, its voyeuristic glare at Black Boy while he sleeps implies dominant white identity that looks with disgust upon black desire. As he fears displaying his appetite to the white man, the mature narrator acknowledges the shame he long felt hungering for a father figure.

In “Black Confession,” Wright explains how memories of his father almost always involved alcohol rather than food (6). According to Ward, “the absence of a father and food become interchangable for the young boy” (96), and I contend that Black Boy must overcome both of these unhealthy desires by combating them with language. Herbert Leibowitz attributes to Black Boy’s father a sinful sort of “gluttony,” and further identifies him as an “animal without awareness” (334–35). As we have
seen from the orange eating scene in the published edition of the memoir, as well as with the food hoarding that occurs throughout “Black Confession,” Black Boy may engage in a sort of restrictive eating pattern as a way of transcending his unhealthy hunger for false fatherly security.

Yet, there remains an inability to discuss hunger with his female family members; this reality illustrates a silence surrounding food, and thus reveals a lapse in language that Black Boy experiences as he develops a taste for African American cuisine. For example, ashamed that “hunger [is] with [his] family always” (28), Black Boy seems fearful of admitting even to his mother and grandmother that he has an appetite. Indeed, stories about eating fail during the early scenes that Black Boy recounts. The only childhood tales about food involve those that he listens to while spending time with his brother in an orphan home. Reenvisioning this lonely Arkansas environment, which becomes his home after his mother abandons him in Mississippi, Black Boy draws a bleak atmosphere of “children telling tales upon others, of children being deprived of food to punish them” (29). Memories and stories about food signal failure, as he associates them with threats, secrets, punishment, and concealment.

Black Boy’s private indulgence in food and drink, outside of his home and away from his family, characterizes much of the secretive eating in “Southern Night”:

No food that I could dream of seemed half so utterly delicious as vanilla wafers. Every time I had a nickel I would run to the corner grocery store and buy a box of vanilla wafers and walk back home, slowly, so that I could eat them without having to share them with anyone. Then I would sit out on the front steps and dream of eating another box; the craving would become so acute that I would force myself to be active in order to forget. (Black Boy 103)

The wafer’s flavor suggests an ideal of whiteness to which Black Boy has been conditioned to aspire. The young child revels in the rare opportunity to enjoy this treat without “having to share” with family members. Constrained by class, as well as by race, Black Boy can barely afford to purchase these wafers. Fearful of consuming them in front of his family because doing so would violate the dietary rules of his grandmother’s fervent faith, Wright’s mature narrator recalls his efforts to prolong the
pleasure during long walks home. The vanilla wafers become a truly forbidden fruit, as the biblical imagery in this portion of the narrative affirms: “Hate leap out of my heart like the dart of a serpent’s tongue” (103).

This fallen garden imagery, combined with the symbolic significance of wafers, deserves consideration here, since Black Boy starts out by seeing these delicacies as sins against his grandmother’s Seventh-Day Adventist belief in Christ. Despite the guilt that follows his consumption of these treats, Black Boy still enjoys them in secret. Furthermore, with maturity, he begins to view his grandmother’s theological superstitions for what they are. In contrast, at other moments throughout “Southern Night,” even temporary satisfaction from food fails. As a narrator, Black Boy reflects how he “learned a method of drinking water that made me feel full temporarily whether [he] had a desire for water or not” (103). Unable as a child to distinguish between physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual hunger, a more mature Black Boy remembers how for such a long time, food and drink could provide only fleeting fulfillment.

Early on in Wright’s narrative life, anxieties about food and family occur often when Black Boy’s religious grandmother ensures that he has eaten all on his plate. Having internalized her mother’s mandates, the young child’s mother tells him that “it is a sin to throw out molasses like that” (147). At the same time that he sees his appetite as dirty and his food as filthy—he fears consuming spoiled meats and vegetables that are “not even clean” (147)—, Black Boy also spends much of his early life afraid to show his grandmother that he has wasted her food by refusing to eat it. Through a series of narrative recollections, Black Boy recalls for his readers the “stale and hard bread” that he and his siblings have been forced to eat, the dirty “molasses” that they have been obliged to drink, and the “black liquid green and white bits of mold” that appeared on his grandmother’s prepared plates (147). His appetite has been tainted by the white world to the point that he perceives all food, including that of his grandmother, to be polluted by something and/or someone.

Yet Black Boy seems acutely aware, even as a small child, of his grandmother’s religious rigidities and how they impose upon his freedoms. On various occasions, he makes the conscious decision to sacrifice his meals so that he does not have to follow her strict dietary laws. Rather than return home to eat with his grandmother and aunt, Black
Boy often engages in a highly disciplined form of deprivation by feeding himself “mush at eight in the morning and greens at seven or later at night.” In essence, he starts to transcend his “irrational” and unhealthy “hungrers” by willing himself to “forfeit food for twelve hours” and by deliberately “starv[ing] in order to learn about [his] environment” (127).

Indeed, Black Boy shows remarkable self-control by refusing from time to time the scraps of food and knowledge given to him by blacks and whites alike. In their effort to paint naturalist characters as wholly determined by social forces, critics often overlook those moments in the memoir where the narrative protagonist asserts agency. For example, while watching his schoolmates devour stale “loaves of bread” and “juicy sardines,” Black Boy insists that he has no appetite and he thus makes a personal “vow that someday [he] would end this hunger” (126).

As the historical circumstances surrounding his hunger shift in the wake of the Great Depression, Black Boy desperately continues to seek subsistence and sustenance. He spends his days “fig hting hunger” by begging for “bread” on city streets, but the white-imposed guilt associated with eating persists even in the wake of the Stock Market Crash; the idea of entering one of the city’s relief stations “burn[s]” Black Boy with “shame” (299). Still, he continues the pattern of scrambling for scraps and lusting for leftovers. As “the depression deepen[s]” and he fails to “sell insurance to hungry negroes,” Black Boy realizes the new urban reality that for him and his family, there exists “no food for breakfast” (299).

Toward the start of “The Horror and the Glory,” when Black Boy first arrives in Chicago, he finds work as a dishwasher, disposing of the meals left behind by white patrons. Forced to conceal his reading mate- rial both from the whites whose plates he cleans and from those for whom he works in the kitchen, the young man feels as deprived of knowledge as he is of food and drink. When the boss identifies him with contempt as “the colored dishwasher [who] reads the American Mer- cury,” Black Boy resolves to keep his “books and magazines wrapped in newspapers so that no one would see them, reading them at home and on the streetcar to and from work” (274). Here and elsewhere, reading replaces eating as a secretive pleasure.

At this point in the memoir, Black Boy no longer feels subject to the crippling superstitions that made food and drink such guilty pleasures in his grandmother’s home; thus, he becomes determined to “make eating
an obsession” (281) while reading and writing up North. Having long felt robbed of a “past,” a “diet,” and a “hunger,” the young man decides to dull this “sense of loss through reading, reading, writing, and more writing” (281). Though he continues to earn money in Chicago by washing the dishes of white patrons, Black Boy’s eating experiences become enriched by the knowledge that accompanies his consumption of “buttermilk and bananas” (280). As his body reacts “positively to food” and his mind responds favorably to Proust, Black Boy seems to “overcome the lean years” of his Southern existence and to triumph over the “flesh-sapping anxiety of fear-filled days” (282). He has, in some respects, become the consummate hunger artist.

In closing, some central questions remain: why does Black Boy so adamantly refuse food? Does he pride himself in an African American form of hunger artistry? Must he willingly starve himself in order to satisfy his desire for narrative and language? Gavin Jones associates Black Boy’s hunger with an intellectual and artistic sort of striving (141), though he notes that there’s something ironic about African Americans seeking to satiate an appetite that has been subject to racial construction by whites (136). Indeed, through his carefully crafted memoir, Wright claims Afro American “hunger” as something far more complex than the white world has made it out to be. It is not an insatiable or impulsive “physical” drive; rather, it is an “aesthetic,” “cultural,” and “spiritual” desire (114) that, I argue, Black Boy succeeds in satisfying by refusing scraps of food, knowledge, and land that whites have expected blacks to collect.

I first became fascinated by food in Richard Wright’s Black Boy (American Hunger) after reading his daughter Julia Wright’s introduction to Haiku: This Other World. Specifically, I recall her words about how “hunger and beauty” became less “terrifying and ravaging” for her father as he wrote nature poetry that “kept him spiritually afloat” (Introduction xi). As I learned more about Julia’s work, I felt inspired to pursue my own project of launching a journey into her father’s archive. “Black Confession” certainly adds another layer of complexity to the American Hunger portion of the memoir; however, when read alongside Julia’s words about her father’s ability to satisfy his hunger through narrative, readers can pinpoint the purpose behind Black Boy’s hunger artistry: to rid himself of white waste so that he can fill himself with the flavor of a distinctly African American food for thought.
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