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Starving from Satiety: Explorations of Uncommon Hunger in Twentieth-Century African
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By

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Abstract

Starving from Satiety: Explorations of Uncommon Hunger in Twentieth-Century African American Literature

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“Starving from Satiety: Explorations of Uncommon Hunger in Twentieth-Century African American Literature,” is a dissertation that mounts qualitative examination of the critical import of illustrations of alimentation, eating, and hunger in seminal novels of the African American literary canon. Informed by my specialization in interdisciplinary areas of African American Studies, African Diaspora Studies, and Food Studies, “Starving from Satiety” comprises three main chapters that take a range of methodological approaches to analysis of interplays between food and sensory experience in scenes from novels by Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937)), Toni Morrison (*Beloved* (1987)), and, Richard Wright (*Native Son* (1940)).

Largely drawing from approaches in existential phenomenology, post-structuralism, and post-structural literary theory, “Starving from Satiety” explores instances of what I term “uncommon hunger” in novels under review. “Uncommon hunger” refers to occurrences of characters’ odd cravings for and/or interactions with food. Insofar as I closely read occurrences of “uncommon hunger” depicted in scenes from novels supporting “Starving from Satiety’s” explicatory aims, it serves as a unit of analysis to aide theorizations contending that characters’ odd relationships to food are not odd at all when we critically consider how these relationships are conditioned by the equally odd (actually, inhumane) lives that they are portrayed to live.

In other words, selected novels in “Starving from Satiety” share in featuring black or Negro characters living in slave, post-slave, or disenfranchised circumstances in anti-black racist U.S. environs. In different ways, these characters pursue grossly restricted lives where they either do not own, or feel that they do not own their bodies, and, therefore (if you will), their bellies. In this way, I contend that in scenes where Hurston, Morrison, and/or Wright portray characters relating to food in “uncommon” ways, each author provides opportunities to analyze such portrayals vis-à-vis “uncommon hunger.” Correspondingly, my theorizations follow a broadly syllogistic route of probing: If one lives a life that is uncommon, then one’s practices of alimentation, eating, and hungering will be commensurately uncommon.

Hence, my dissertation aspires to stoke interest in exploring explicit reasons that characters conditioned by highly restrictive lives might set conditions for processes of appetite and eating

that are, proportionally, highly restrictive; so much so that in their “uncommon” treatment of food they seem to risk starvation by missing-the-mark of quotidian gustatory consumption/production processes. Yet, it may be the case that characters in novels such as, *Beloved*, *Native Son*, and, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* risk common starvation to gain “uncommon” brands of agency. Or, said differently, vis-à-vis the lens of “uncommon hunger” can we glean the possibility that characters depicted in these novels physically relate to food in odd, ostensibly malnourishing ways to access metaphysical forms of nourishment such as, for example, catharsis, self-determination, or sovereignty that sate them far more than common rations to which they have little to no autonomous access on public/private fronts? Ultimately, “Starving from Satiety: Explorations of Uncommon Hunger in Twentieth-Century African American Literature” seeks not only to explore, but also to redress this question.

CHAPTER ONE

Wind

And neither the teacher in his classroom, nor the priest at catechism will be able to get a word out of this sleepy little nigger, no matter how energetically they drum on his shorn skull, for starvation has quicksanded his voice into the swamp of hunger...(you-should-see-this-little-savage-who doesn't-know-any-of-The-Ten-Commandments)/for his voice gets lost in the swamp of hunger/and there is nothing, really nothing to squeeze out of this little brat/other than a hunger which can no longer climb to the rigging of his voice/a sluggish flabby hunger/a hunger buried in the depth of the Hunger of this famished morne.
—Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*

The Proverbial

Wind designates leitmotifs of “uncommon hunger” in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987); moments of gustatory quiddity; illustrations of complex hungers; portrayals of characters’ odd appetites and cravings—this chapter tracks, traces, and specifies how these and other food-based references recur in the novel to supplement motifs typifying *Beloved*’s neo-slave narrative slant. Undoubtedly, the novel sketches a figural tale permeated with themes surrounding Sisyphean efforts of ex-slaves (living and dead; manumitted and runaway) to reconcile, repair, or resolve a range of psychic and physical wounds wrought by their various experiences of bondage and post-bonded freedom. However, *Beloved* is also peppered with food-based references that surface as thematic addendums to many critical instances of characters’ harrowing attempts to forge new ground in the creation or recreation of each of their lives, or, in some cases, each of their deaths.

For instance, in the final days of her life, stand-out character Baby Suggs (holy) adopts an uncharacteristically hopeless resolve that galvanizes a lethal daisy-chain of events leading to slow suicide supported by an unusual brand of starvation. Proclaiming that, “There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks”, Baby Suggs willfully lays down to die, annexing her formerly selfless “great heart” to a zone of pure selfishness where she appears to not only reject life but also rightful logic deeming food as a vital resource for life. Taking final leave to her “keeping-room bed,” there is little that incites Baby Suggs’ taste for a life that is now death, or, possibly, a death that is now life—little except for an uncommon hunger for foodless chromatic food that she yearns for during dying days and nights in which she is “roused once in a while by a craving for color and not for another thing” (104). Hopeless and dejected due to a laundry-list of reasons depicted in *Beloved* as encompassing the “peculiar” (un)reasoning of *de jure* and *de facto* strains of US slavery, it is, perhaps, no surprise that Baby Suggs starves her life of product-based food by way of replacing it with a process-based chromatic object of relation whose “consumption” will surely hasten physical death for it amounts to the consumption of nothing that smacks of nor promotes traditionally conceived of nourishment.

But, I wonder at and wish to explore throughout *Wind* the potential for conjecture and surprise that derives from reading this character’s anorexia-esque, seemingly suicidal maneuvers

in a different way—rather than starving her life, I contend that Baby Suggs is feeding her death. Put in another way, this character’s inverse, a-consumptive color-craving alludes to Morrison’s use of an inverted representational strategy that pegs Baby Suggs as simultaneously fashioning and following a uniquely subjective diet that instigates the clearing-out or liquidation of a body that if (as she determines) it must die, must do so as self-possessed “flesh” fed and nourished in ways that give it energy enough to meet uniquely subjective terms underlining an afterlife necessitating vigor in maintaining the activity of memory; for, in addition to knowing that “whitefolks” were the world’s source of “bad luck” readers are made aware that, in her final days, Baby Suggs also “knew” that “death was anything but forgetfulness.”

Beloved illustrates Baby Suggs as one whose “intolerable” (4) past and present has sustained the life of a body that has “enjoyed” only an apocryphal brand of subjectivity largely defined by its traction or lack of traction with hegemonic categories of enslaved or manumitted bondwoman. Given this, I venture that Baby Suggs’s consumption of color indicates her counter-definition of this suspect subjectivity vis-à-vis her creation of a radically rogue diet that instigates a clearing-out of her body in order to transform it into a self-determined site that replicates conditions extant in the only territory in the novel where black “flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass” (103) is portrayed to love or claim its *self* in non-categorical, truly free ways: the territory where “she became an unchurched preacher...followed by every black man, woman and child” rendered in *Beloved*’s early-to-late nineteenth century, Cincinnati, OH *habitus*—the territory of the “Clearing.” “Here...in this here place, we flesh,” declares Baby Suggs to congregations in the Clearing comprising primary characters in *Beloved* such as her close friend Stamp Paid, as well as her family members—her son’s (Halle’s) wife, Sethe; their two sons, Buglar and Howard; and their two daughters, baby Denver, and another “crawling already?” baby girl. Whether infant, child, or adult, these characters are made privy to advisories from Baby Suggs that are represented to reverberate throughout the various arcs of each of their lives as “holy,” sanctified words outlining fundamental schematics of danger and safety for black “flesh.” “Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes...No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands...Love your hands! Love them...And no, they ain’t in love with your mouth...What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead” (104).

In the Clearing, Baby Suggs adumbrates the very diet for black “flesh” that she will follow upon her death—a diet that responds to a craving for color that in turn treats color as food-for-thought that starves the body but simultaneously provides satiety to the “flesh” by supplying it with hearty and heartening knowledge that it is ingesting (as one ingests illuminating ideas) an abstract form of nourishment that is impossible to “snatch away” from the mouth. Indeed, this subtle but still poignant allusion to her forthcoming necro-diet witnesses Baby Suggs exposing congregations of routinely racialized bodies that have all been despised, flayed, and harmed to methods of effecting physiological “clearings” that afford black “flesh” cathartic philosophical vistas in which to actuate autonomous experiences of self-reciprocal satiety that do not *have* to stem from cravings, likes, or tastes circumscribed by (or directly against) their categorical status as “ex-slaves”, but rather from tastes that unaffectedly arise as exemplars of inherent inclinations, hankerings, sensibilities, and qualities of distinction that epitomize their *necessarily* disparate existences as humans *being*. In the case of Baby Suggs, her inclinations

and cravings illustrate a sense of self-distinction that is made manifest via dual redefinition and repurposing (very much against dominant logic) of color as a benign foodless food item that she resolves to absorb, delineate, and, “fix on” as “something harmless in this world...that don’t hurt nobody”; to wit, we find an example of this when Stamp Paid critiques her deathbed color craving plans with an incredulous and indicting rhetorical question—“You getting in bed to think about yellow,” he asks—“I likes yellow,” Baby Suggs laconically replies with no compunction or further explanation of her unabashedly sovereign plans or “likes” (211).

In the case of other characters in *Beloved*, however, undertakings of sovereignty via food-based relations arise in sundry ways that, I posit, reflect Baby Suggs’s position as a vital bridge figure (i.e., a figure that builds symbolic bridges between estranged, as well as living and dead characters) from whom a range of characters take instructive import regarding notions of bodily “clearing” *qua* abstract dietary practices even as they extend these notions in practices that do not only occur in morbid instances where the body is causally “cleared” or starved to deliver “flesh” to afterlife in express Suggsian fashion. As stated from the outset, *Wind* is steadfastly invested in tracing leitmotifs of “uncommon hunger” in *Beloved*; but the palimpsest engine that impels such tracing contains a constellation of inklings, issues, and questions surrounding how, why, and in what ways these leitmotifs signify decidedly African diasporic strides toward freedom for the enslaved or so-called free black bodies that are *Beloved*’s concern. In this way, *Wind* is driven to explore how, like Baby Suggs, many of *Beloved*’s characters do not reflexively experience but rather appear to (quite miraculously) deconstruct, defer, or deploy as coping strategies consumptive and/or food-based physiological processes that are commonly understood as both predictable in progression (e.g., *ipso facto*, ingestion *always* progresses to digestion; digestion *always* progresses to voiding) and fundamental to sustenance of biological, cultural, political (etc.) designations of sound body, mind, and soul. I argue that depictions of these coping—really, survival—strategies are critically striking in that they witness Morrison proffering readers a logistical gift that directs them toward approaches to literary analysis that are hard-pressed to ignore a Barthesian sense of the extremely uncommon *punctum* of characters’ practices of consumption when looking to theorize the *studium* of their bearing—particularly their cultural bearing given that gustatory consumptive practices (e.g., common/reflexive acts of hungering, ingesting, masticating, tasting) are, indeed, tantamount to cornerstone biocultural practices that *any*-body (whether living under auspices of *bourgeois*, “lumpen”, theocratic, or tribal formations, e.g.) pursues to “eat to live” and, basically, survive.

Beloved—certainly a *roman à clef*, neo-slave narrative providing “keys” to figurative plot-points dialogically linked to concrete events in African American cultural, political, and social history (e.g., Margaret Garner’s infanticide-for-salvation actions of 1856; US abolitionist agendas and platforms; the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850; Frances Ellen Watkins Harper’s 1859 publication of the poem “Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio”). But also, *Beloved*—a novel dedicated to “Sixty Million and more” African/African descendant *any*-bodies that episodically lived, died, “made generations,”¹ and basically survived through of centuries of combined New World

¹ Note: I’m referencing *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones here to underline how procreation can surface as an unsettling process for peoples comprising African diaspora populations. Main character, Ursa Corregidora’s great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother advise their progeny that her life’s mission is to “make generations” by producing offspring that serve as incriminating

operations (*Asiento*, “enterprises” of human bondage, “seasoning”, Transatlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, “slave-breaking”, slave auction, debt and convict labor, disenfranchisement, and neocolonialism) that initiated on-going forms of hegemonic colonial expansion and globalization vis-à-vis slave vs. indentured labor; vis-à-vis imperialistic ping-ponging of “Dark Continent” peoples from local to global environs; and, vis-à-vis *ad nauseam*, ostensibly teleological exercises of Eurocentrically motivated white supremacist exploitation—in *toto*—of black “sweat equity.” Of great interest to me is the way that *Beloved*’s namesake—i.e., the disarticulated “crawling already?” baby girl turned woman-child Beloved that lives and dies, and then lives and dies again—epitomizes a character whose pervading story exceeds formal limits of the neo-slave narrative as well as the novel insofar as we might academically critique such tomes in strict terms of their genre-bound status as vendible cultural productions, or, to nod to Walter Benjamin, easily consumable “works of art in the age of mechanical reproduction”, seemingly bereft of complex emanations of “aura” that prompt reflection on issues that surpass the political import of topics only germane to, for example, their historicized construction, mass production, calculated use of literary and rhetorical devices, or apposite subject matter.

My point is that *Beloved* spins an immense story centered around aporetic conditions contouring a no-less immense main character whose Lazarus-like traits overflow the representational real estate of a pin-pointed “Tale of Ohio”, or a narrative devoted to designating “peculiarly institutional” happenings exclusive to North American continental terrains, or, for that matter, a novel comprising, for instance, transparent antagonists, protagonists, stock versions of complex (e.g., “conflicted,” “put-upon,” “romantic,” “sympathetic,” “woebegone,” or, “wretched”) characters, timelines, or other literary staples generally esteemed to midwife fictionality. In effect, I believe that *Beloved* stands as a character that both centers and drives start-to-finish aspects of *Beloved* not only by evoking brutal, “hard to swallow” points-of-analysis relevant to her delivered-by-disarticulation proximity to U.S. slavery, but also by bespeaking facets of African diaspora consciousness, experience, and movement that provide optics for food studies-based analysis of theorizable instances of this character’s multiplex proximity to those “*Sixty Million and more*” *any-bodies* that I discussed above.

In ways similar to Ntozake Shange in *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can* (1998), these *any-bodies* crystallize my “visions of Africans...during the Middle Passage” that over-filled the bellies of slave-ships as human “cargo”—as black bodies with underfed bellies that learned “to make manna out of the air to survive” as a means of uncommon but somehow effective foodless food-based subsistence that maintained, as Baby Suggs estimates, “despised” black “flesh” in “yonder” international locales. At once, these visions appear and also speak to me in decontextualized, Janus-faced, metatemporal ways in the manner (so strangely clear because so

“evidence” of “burned” and buried historical records of slavery’s comprehensive brutality. “The important thing is making generations,” says Ursa’s grandmother—a woman who is the black child of white slave-owner, “Old Man Corregidora,” who also fathered Ursa’s mother. She continues, stressing to Ursa that, “They can burn the papers but they can’t burn conscious...And that what makes the evidence. And that’s what makes the verdict.” Gayl Jones, *Corregidora* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), p. 22.

² Note: Ankylosis is an abnormal adhesion of a joint complex sometimes affecting the maxilla or mandible, making it impossible for sufferers of Ankylosis to eat or speak.

muffled; so oddly full because so thin) of “dried voices...like rats feet over broken glass” *à la* T.S. Eliot’s “The Hollow Men”; synesthetically, I hear what I see in these visions of hollow/stuffed slave-ships replete with reedy African “cargo.” And then what I see↔hear articulates *sui generis* accounts of imbricated hopelessness peculiar to *all* humans *being* that callously facilitate or soberly face (via direct or repercussive association) epic, world-wide “falls” of great wars, mass destruction, forced and (especially, contingency driven) unforced migration, and humane social interrelation; one such “fall” being the *Maafa* that destroyed but also developed so many African/African descendent lives comprising the “*Sixty Million and more*” to which *Beloved* is dedicated and with which I believe *Beloved* is connected as representative example of a nameless, here-but-not-here, maybe dead-or-alive *anybody* that could, should, but cannot be unambiguously claimed or named as distant or immediate kin of this proliferating (across space and time) African, “Negro,” African *American*, “black,” corpus—this corpus that, again, in ways similar to Shange, spark my queries of so many critical things concerning *Beloved*’s elucidation of issues such as, how these “black folks” discovered a sense of “plenty” by way of “consuming” highly uncommon “food of a differing nature,” and also “what it means for black folks in the Western Hemisphere to be full” (Shange, 2-3) in situations of “starving from satiety.”

Beloved presents many arresting cases of “black folks” eating “food of a differing nature” that create a wide critical berth to support my analytical intentions for this chapter—*Wind*. Certainly, I will outline such cases, but, by way of concluding these introductory remarks, I must clarify that *Wind* is not as interested in indexing *A-Ha* (!) moments arising via analyses of odd ingredients in foodless food in scenes of “uncommon hunger” as it is in investigating *Beloved*’s revelation of factors that influence characters’ practices of eating odd food as way to symbolically “eat” (i.e., comprehensively digest) odd conditions that plague their experiences of physical being with problems of anatomical antinomy, or, problems where the black body and its black “flesh” seem to constitute various characters’ anatomies but also denote materials in conflict given that, in many instances, liberation of black “flesh” appears to require “clearing,” liquidation, or “starvation” of the (seemingly, because in diverged relation) co-constitutive black body. In other words, this chapter aims to closely read renderings of foodless food as a stepladder to further exploration of how various characters’ consumption of and hunger for Shange’s sense of odd, “air as manna,” “differing” food corresponds/responds, as Kyla Wazana Tompkins states in *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (2012), to their pejoratively conditioned, conflicted situations as “bodies that carry...burdens of difference and materiality” in material experiences of being “hyperembodied...racially minoritized subjects...at times closely aligned with what we might think of as the bottom of the food chain” (Tompkins, 8).

“He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind,” says Proverbs 11:29. But, insofar as the body represents a type of “house”—if a given body is systematically troubled by “burdens of difference” inflected by anti-black racism and racialization; and, if this body indicates an *any*-body hailing from largely untraceable lines of “bottom of the food chain” ancestors with little to bequeath to descendants but windfalls of troubles, broken lineages, suppressed histories, and ethereal trappings illustrative of what Hortense Spillers in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” (1987) describes as “their New World, diasporic plight” that “marked a *theft* of the *body*,” or, more specifically, the “captive body from its motive will, its active desire”

(Spillers, 2006)—then, verily I must say unto the proverbial *you*, that a body like this is not just touched by, but saturated with troubles such that it is reflexively fated to only “inherit” rarefied *things* akin to the airy properties of wind. On the one hand, *Wind* examines troubles that plague a spate of *Beloved’s* characters’ “houses” in instances where they attempt to “inherit” whatever they can in the way of personally meaningful properties (as in assets) that are often only ethereally real, but that they nonetheless recognize as claims that they can, should, or must seize as immaterial materials that are, for better or worse, *theirs*. On the other hand, this chapter explores the pitfalls and perils, unsettling conditions, and troubling nature of processes of what I term “starving from satiety” that given characters’ employ to seize inheritances significant of wind—a force of nature ubiquitously felt, but impossible to claim.

The Troubles

That U.S. slavery has both officially ended, yet continues in many complex forms—most notably institutionalized racism and the cultural denigration of blackness—makes its representation particularly burdensome in the United States. Slavery here is a ghost, both the past and a living presence; and the problem of historical representation is how to represent that ghost, something that is and yet is not.

—Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*

I come up hard baby, but now I’m cool/I didn’t make it sugar, playin’ by the rules/I come up hard baby, but now I’m fine/I’m checkin trouble sugar, movin’ down the line/I come up hard but that’s okay/Cause trouble man, don’t get in my way...I’m ready to make it, don’t care bout the weather/Don’t care bout no trouble, got myself together/Laughin’, no cryin’, my protection’s all around me.

—Marvin Gaye, *Trouble Man*

An array of *Beloved’s* characters represent bodies held “captive” by way of their subjugated positioning(s) in troubling times (1835-1875) and places (e.g., Kentucky, Ohio, and the “River Jordan” Ohio River) that not only set the *mise-en-scène* of the novel’s stylized neo-slave world, but also set-off our recognition of the bare-bones world of U.S. Slavery. And, indeed, Morrison’s depictions of the trials, tribulations, and troubles of characters such as, for example, Baby Suggs, Beloved, Denver, Stamp Paid, and Sethe irrefutably signpost the “New World, diasporic plight” of African/African descendent *any*-bodies (particularly of slaves, ex-slaves, and almost captured “fugitive” slaves) wrestling with past- and/or post-effects of their bodily or by-lawed fractionalization—the substantial or legally substantiated butchery of their persons or personhood—by enactments of *Partus Sequitur Ventrem*, Slave Codes, Three-Fifths Compromise, and Black Codes illustrative of slaughterhouse nationalism *qua* U.S. Slavery. But, even in light of this, I propose that Morrison’s signposting does not necessarily encourage gauging the *gestalt* of characters’ troubles (with carnality, domestic/public life, inheritance, etc.) as only symptomatic of their traumatic reactions to *functional* abuses contiguous to disfiguring and unsettling conditions of slave/post-slave experience in the US. For my purposes, in Morrison’s crafting of many instances where characters attempt to eat conditions that eat away at them in jingoistic, dog-eat-dog types of ways, the author directs readers to gauge their troubles as

stemming from “uncommon hungers” to enact equally “uncommon” processes of consumption to manage *functional* as well as *formal* abuses of essentialization, historicization, and racialization endorsed by what Spillers terms an “American grammar” that deploys gendered and raced nationalist syntax to delimit comprehension of slave/post-slave experience in “official” accounts of U.S. Slavery.

Under auspices of “American grammar,” U.S. Slavery becomes a commonly accepted *master narrative* that recognizes the “New World, diasporic plight” of African/African descendent *any*-bodies only in respect of the way that their “plight” follows the rules of its dominant syntax in being “marked,” defined, or formalized by proxy of successfully communicating a (purported) true story of the “*theft*” of the enslaved “*body*” that underwrites the (alleged) real history of the “*willful* and violent severing” of a monolithically construed, *completely* subjugated, “captive body from its motive will its active desire.” In this way, a uniform narrative of U.S. History spins an imperialistic tale of Slavery portraying the “New World plight” of “captive” bodies as a rhetorical event tantamount to a *signifier* that reflects the *signified* heft of the U.S. to define this “plight” as not only endorsed by authoritative grounds limited to its North American bounds, but also by the “supreme”/supremacist knowledge of a Eurocentric, transnationally collusive *Western* “common historical ground” that Spillers further explains denotes “the sociopolitical order of the New World” that “with its human sequence written in blood, *represents* for its African and indigenous peoples a scene of *actual* mutilation, dismemberment, and exile” (Spillers, 206).

Now, the “New World, diasporic” tale of some number of “*Sixty Million and more*” becomes quite specific in form as *only* a tragic “plight”—an epically sad “scene”—of apathetic bodies and souls, seemingly eviscerated on metaphysical and physical grounds; *actually* empty, fill-in-the-blank identities whose “dismembered” organs, suspended desires, and black skins throw-off the appearance of “primitive” Chaos that offends a “civilized” Western order of power/knowledge that *must* exert “New World” dominance in abridging, disciplining, and revamping such dark disorder. Enter operations of “American grammar” that “*represent* for” this ilk of scattered humanity their neat compositional *place* as unequivocally “captive,” but still, ever-captivating characters that reinforce the historicity of what seems a “white man’s burden” saga that Spillers calls (at least in one sense) the “Great Long National Shame” of U.S. Slavery. Ostensibly “captive” to the lexical thrall of parsing operations of “American grammar” that represent slave/ex-slave bodies as *essentially* tangential (like textual *Partus Sequiturs*) to an account of slavery that is too “embarrassing” to talk about (because, as Spillers quips, non-“backward,” *civilized* “people do not talk that way anymore” about appalling details of slavery (208)), the “New World, diasporic plight” of African/African descendent *any*-bodies becomes *sign* and symptom of a legend of U.S. Slavery shrouded in such rhetorical disgrace—such belletristic and byzantine “Great Long National Shame”—that it begs *formal* idiomatic treatment as a topic encompassing horrific ideas analogous to those rendered in *Beloved* as “unspeakable.”

Long after “the Misery (which is what he called Sethe’s rough response to the Fugitive Slave Bill)” (Morrison, 201), Stamp Paid discerns the “unspeakable” as he approaches the house at 124 Bluestone Road where Denver and Sethe reside with the reincarnated woman-child, *Beloved*. Eighteen years have passed since Sethe’s “rough response” witnessed her disarticulation of her “crawling already?” baby girl, and mangling (to near mangling) of her

other three children—it has been a decade since Baby Suggs’ necro-diet achieved its fatal ends of delivering her to “afterlife.” For “Negroes” in the U.S., it is a nadir moment in the era of Reconstruction as Southern democrats have gained majority control of the House of Representatives with intentions to execute their “Lost Cause,” pro-slavery visions of a white supremacist nation buttressed by federal and state level disenfranchisement of black autonomy, ingenuity, labor, and life. It is “Eighteen seventy-four,” and with 124 in his view, Stamp Paid reckons that, “whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank” (212).

It is a boiling, unpalatable *masala* of reactive sensations that Morrison portrays here in Stamp Paid’s meditations on *de facto* dimensions of post-Slavery’s reprehensible milieu; sensations of sight and smell are joined by those of “unspeakable” sounds that the author describes as arising in the form of “thoughts” that emit from Denver, Sethe, and Beloved’s home. “Thoughts” conveying the discontents of “a conflagration of hasty voices—loud, urgent, all speaking at once” assault Stamp Paid’s hearing with a slew of unintelligible words save for one word that is clearly expressed—“*mine*” (202-203). As do I, so does Stamp Paid venture that these “thoughts” signify a raw, reeking, and anything but formal brand of “American” speech that communicates just claims for THE ubiquitous “*mine*” made by U.S. “Negroes” enunciating “the undecipherable language...of the black and angry dead”—a “language” that permeates *Beloved* in that it conveys “thoughts of the women of 124” that ultimately center the novel’s renditions of “unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” (234-235). In this scene, Morrison depicts a guilt-ridden Stamp Paid attempting to “look in” on Baby Suggs’ family “to get right with her and her kin” (213) to right a wrong that he feels he has committed against “the women of 124” that, like him (though through very different means), are considered “free Negroes.” The Civil War has long ended; Reconstruction Amendments have been ratified; and, yet, the sights, sounds, and stench of unfree, boiling black blood form a “Negro American” *second-class* reality that is operatively ancillary to the “moonlight and magnolia” linguistics of a so-called first-class “American grammar” that succeeds (as Trouillot states in the above epigraph) in making U.S. Slavery’s lingering and “living presence” seem a burdensome “ghost,” haunting a nation with “unspeakable,” and oh so “Great Shame.”

In this “Eighteen seventy-four” scene, we spy (through Stamp Paid’s eyes as he looks in the window of the house on Bluestone Road) one of “124’s women” that is both a “ghost” of U.S. Slavery, and also an in-the-flesh “living presence” of Slavery’s cloying existence in what—as Morrison writes in *Beloved’s* “Forward”—is the “formidable and pathless...terrain” or “landscape” of slave↔post-slave experience. When writing the novel, the author explains that she knew that “To invite readers...into” this “repellant landscape (hidden but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts” (xvii). It is when we readers accept Morrison’s “cemetery” invitation that troubles ensue for those of us seeking to strike critical, detached, or entirely objective relationality with the novel. Further clarifying her intentions for *Beloved’s* receptive impact, Morrison states:

In trying to make the slave experience intimate, I hoped the sense of things being

both under control and out of control would be persuasive throughout; that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead: that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive. To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must get out of the way (xvii-xix).

If we allow that the author brings her aesthetic hopes and intentions to fruition, then it is synecdochically that readers are drawn into the novel's world as part-of-the-whole of Morrison's visions of "slave experience." Our position as distant overseers of the text is thus upended by the author's application of catachresis which, in one fell swoop, moves "language...out of the way," misnames language's *given* ordering function, and compels readers to *make* rather than *take* meaning of/from *Beloved* by means of "personal experience" rather than purely theoretical acuity.

From the novel's first few pages, the "New World" dominance that supports American language in general, and, in relation, Spillers' specific sense of "American grammar's" power to classify, *name*, and revise the *lebenswelt* of U.S. Slavery (as haunted by "Shame") is made to genuflect to the disorderly language comprising Morrison's "Negro American" lexicon of nakedly honest, reeking words and meanings that disturb-the-peace of our common reliance on systematic formalities of mass communication (e.g., print media in the form of hackneyed historical documents, narratives, or novels) that often protect the "quietude" of readers' "everyday" lives by keeping "unspeakable" details of "bottom of the food chain" black lives "unspoken." For example, *Beloved* begins in Cincinnati, OH in the winter of 1873. The woman-child revenant (Beloved) that we later spy through Stamp Paid's eyes in "Eighteen seventy-four" is a poltergeist haunting Denver, Sethe, and "124" with a palpably vicious presence, "Full of a baby's venom" (3) Sethe (whose thoughts serve as narrator in this scene) reflects upon Baby Suggs' erstwhile death-and-dying process where she acted as her mother-in-law's primary caregiver. We are told that, very close to her death, Suggs used "the little energy left her for pondering color," making requests to Sethe for "a little lavender" or "pink" to quell her hunger for malnourishing nourishment—for food in the form of color as opposed to that of commonly recognized rations. Unlike Stamp Paid who, as I stated above, is portrayed as being both incredulous at and upset by Baby Suggs' deathbed color-craving plans, Sethe appears undisturbed by her mother-in-law's uncommon hunger. Indeed, Morrison suggests that Sethe sanctions Baby Suggs' odd cravings when she depicts this character's frustration at her inability to fulfill her mother-in-law's chromatic needs. When Baby Suggs requests color, Sethe does not express irritation at the fact that her patient is hastening death from malnourishment. Conversely, Sethe is irritated by the fact that, "Winter in Ohio was especially rough if you had an appetite for color."

I conjecture that Sethe's use of "appetite" points to Morrison underlining that, in the world of *Beloved*, "color" has the potential to replace food as a critical source of nourishment. Hence, if readers are to understand why Baby Suggs treats "color" as a critical last meal, and, in turn, Sethe validates this treatment with stoic efforts to sate Suggs's idiosyncratic "appetite" (even essaying to *feed* Baby Suggs with colors revealed in "anything from fabric to her own tongue" (4)), we are wont to hunker down into the novel—walk-in-the-shoes of its characters to become "intimate" with the content of its *habitus*—to engage the distinct Rosetta Stone that

affords decryption of its “cemetery” world, as well as its necro-diet forms of sustenance. We pay a price, however, that Morrison (through literary device and deft writerliness) both demands and sets for decrypting, or, *closely* reading the troubles of representative “Negro” characters in U.S. Slavery whose collective history and cultural proximity to “*Sixty Million and more*” African/African descendent, “New World” *any-bodies* is, “hidden but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten”; this price is not set by the author’s expectations of readers’ theoretical purchase of *absolute* knowledge of what *Beloved’s* characters’ acts, cravings, or thoughts mean given that Morrison reveals the presence of these things through a purposely occluded lens that displays their *almost-but-not-really* “hidden,” “buried,” and “herculeanly” forgotten absence.

Perhaps we read *Beloved* while sitting on the Metro on our way to work, or in a library surrounded by the sights and silence of invested sagacity, or from the comfort of our homes in the immediate moment of our respective *now*; we know that this oft-cited and much lauded novel from a renowned Nobel Laureate author is sure to provide a wealth of shocking images encompassing the neo-slave genre. We readers expect, perhaps, to pay a price for what we *see* in the novel as we respond to gruesome figural scenes like those described by Stamp Paid of “Negro” adults and children being fatally brutalized, lynched, raped, and whipped—of distant, imagined images of black blood and skin being burned. But Morrison shows us what we expect to *see* by also compelling us to *hear*, *smell*, and, therefore (because of otolaryngological linkage), *taste* “the chaos of the needy dead” exemplified by figural “Negro” characters that also represent literal historical actors whose stories of ‘bondage and freedom’ are so markedly silenced in relation to trite documentations of U.S. Slavery that the absence of their potential content strikes us as a contemporaneous (following Trouillot) “problem of historical representation.” Suddenly, we pay a price—the “order and quietude of everyday life” *right now* is, in Morrison’s parlance, “violently disrupted” by “intimate” reading of the present needs *versus* the historicized wants of “Negroes” that loom right-before-our-eyes as “needy dead” slaves and ex-slaves. *We the People* realize that we are too often told that “Negroes” in slave/post-slave experience *wanted* things (e.g., food, shelter, and “freedom”) that they received in terms of *master narrative* scripts of U.S. Slavery in the vein of, “Once upon a time, white Unionist government officials thought Slavery was bad. And so, Unionists engaged in Civil War with Confederates to end Slavery. President Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves. And then, black citizens became Constitutionally free. Sadly, the U.S. government’s “hands were tied” in assuaging gross discrimination of black people at state levels. Subsequently, black people *had* to fight for their rights”—THE END.

Morrison reveals to us in *Beloved* the pointed, unreconciled sense of *need* that not just *might* have, but *must* have existed inside of “Negro” wants—supposedly—received. The novel illustrates that slaves and ex-slaves had, for instance, the shelter of slave quarters or a “house on Bluestone Road,” but were plagued by haunted, oppressive, and surveilled experiences of domesticity or *home*; that slaves and ex-slaves experienced “fugitive,” or, manumitted, or *de jure* “freedom,” but did not, for all-intents-and-purposes, have the economic, legal, political, national, or social license to *enjoy* egalitarian liberty; and that slaves and ex-slaves alike had food, but *starved* for autonomy, catharsis, justice, and anything-and-everything that they deemed as *theirs* in the context of their demands for THE ubiquitous “*mine*.” My project here in this chapter, *Wind*, takes-up the critical import of this latter topic of food to supplement literary criticism of *Beloved’s* portrayals of “ghost stories, dreams, signs, and visitations” that are, as Valerie Smith

outlines in *Toni Morrison: Writing the Moral Imagination* (2012), “so vividly evoked” in Morrison’s fiction. Certainly, the novel’s remarkable images of living, dead, mystically dead/living, brutalized, and viciously stalwart characters proffer much for the literary eye to analyze. But I contend that Morrison *hits us in the gut* with her similarly remarkable treatment of food in a way that “never offers an escape from” our immediate recognition of cultural, troubling, and very real food-related “sociopolitical conditions that have shaped the lives of African Americans” (Smith, 8).

For example, Morrison portrays Baby Suggs as feeding with color the *in absentia* presence of her imminent death to nourish the existence of her black “flesh” in “afterlife”; with no compunction, Sethe sanctions Baby Suggs’ actions by supplying her with food in the form of color—yes, a rather mystical scene. However, here, the author also emphasizes the absent-presence of food, food’s literary import, and very real “politics of food” issues in understated but striking ways. In this scene, when food is replaced by “color” its presence surfaces *in absentia* in a way that highlights not only Morrison’s unique choice of “color” as a consumptive dietary source, but also how this choice might best be analyzed in an equally unique manner that resists structuralist consumption/production gustatory logic that necessarily rejects the process-based objectivity of “color” as an adequate replacement for the product-based, material objectivity of food. In this way, neither food, nor (as Sethe calls it) “appetite”, nor color function as items open to interpretive modes that rely upon capitalist economies of reading to ascertain their meaning. In other words, Morrison complicates a path of perceiving these items as begging an interpretive outcome that derives from bureaucratic supply/demand binary analysis enacted in a brand of readerly consumption that would need clear identification of “appetite”, food, and color’s relational *use value* in order to display their *surplus value* as exploited products of knowledge exposed as such, for instance, when one lays claim to the “high” intellectual purchase of proclaiming *absolute* knowledge of what these items mean.

I take this briefly sketched Marxian detour to accent my feeling that Morrison’s depiction of relations between “appetite,” color, and (absently present) food reveals her effective misnaming and re-arrangement of these items as a unique dietary system that falls outside the interpretive bounds of institutional, *bourgeois*-leaning consumption/production discourse. This type of discourse contains dictatorial ideology that frequently informs the polemical basis of Food Studies areas concerning “politics of food” issues that mainly question who or what decides what food *essentially* is; who or what defines what is suitable to eat; who or what forces should claim responsibility for food deficit, distribution, supply, or surfeit; and, finally, what are or are not acceptable or ethical dietary practices in given societies, cultures, or tribes. In short, this food-centric type of ideology circumscribes dietary practice by underwriting *doxa* asserting that “truly” good nutrition is tantamount to a fixed socio-cultural/-political practice where food achieves “rich”/*bourgeois* meaning only when it fulfills some type of institutionally prescribed purpose. In terms of real world (social, national, etc.) situations, this prescribed purpose is evidenced when people that eat “food group” items containing standard, federally regulated measures of caloric/nutrient value become the “normal” majority against which an “abnormal” minority (e.g., *halal*; *ital*; kosher; vegetarian; and, vegan) of consumers is defined. On the other hand, in imagined-world or fictional situations, food and diet can be creatively portrayed to extend beyond regulated definition or prescribed purpose. I contend that through its “uncommon” food and food-related imagery, *Beloved* undeniably reveals extensions into the

unregulated, un-prescribed *beyond* of normative ideas of gustatory consumption/production practices.

As I see it, Baby Suggs and Sethe's color-craving scene witnesses Morrison portraying food and diet in ways that arrest impulses to arrive at binarily prescribed interpretation of their meaning as it bears upon analysis of "the women of 124," or other of *Beloved's* characters' actions, choices, personalities, or tastes. I theorize that this scene provides a representative example of how the novel makes signal-calls to readers to analyze its characters' acts of consuming misnamed, foodless food as suggestive of occasions where slaves/ex-slaves subvert "normal" meanings of food in various attempts to transform it into a malnourishing object that reflects the true circumstances of the malnourishment that they suffer in *starving from the satiety* of "receiving" empty forms of metaphysical nourishment from the *foods* of autonomy, civil liberty, freedom, and justice. Said differently, I surmise that Morrison's references to food and food-related topics direct us to note how the novel's characters engage in acts of uncommon hunger to *make* "normal" food become an object of relation that manifests in ways that are as inherently unjust, uncommon, and troubling as the "unspeakable" conditions that circumscribe their existence in climes inclined toward using "American grammar" to keep their "shameful" treatment "unspoken."

The Clearing

The painterly language of Song of Solomon was not useful to me in *Beloved*. There is practically no color whatsoever in its pages, and when there is, it is so stark and remarked upon, it is virtually raw. Color seen for the first time without its history. No built architecture as in *Tar Baby*, no play of Western chronology as in *Sula*; no exchange between book and "real" life discourse—with printed text units rubbing up against seasonal black childhood units as in *The Bluest Eye*. No compound of houses, no neighborhood, no sculpture, no paint, no time, especially no time because memory, pre-historic memory, has no time. There is just a little music, each other, and the urgency of what is at stake. Which is all they had. For that work, the work of language is to get out of the way.

—Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature"

Cultural identity...is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories...Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialized past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power. Far from being grounded in a mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past.

—Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora"

As discussed in the previous section, *Beloved* confronts us with horrific ideas and images, illustrating tales of slave/post-slave experience that do not obey idiomatic laws of language in the context of Spillers' explication of "American grammar." The novel depicts blood-soaked scenarios that articulate sights, sounds, smells, and tastes exemplary of what Spillers terms a nakedly honest, "human sequence written in blood" that defies monolithic "sagas" of *Western* Slavery and its aftermath in relation to hackneyed accounts of the fates of bonded/post-bonded "Negroes" in US climes. Both *Beloved* and "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" reveal ways that just-the-facts (tipping my hand to Ida B. Wells), "Red Records" of slave/post-slave experience communicate "unspeakable" details of "New World," African diasporic experience. The following outlines correspondences between Morrison and Spillers' exposition of these issues; but I will linger for a time on the latter's work to mount a discussion of how these "Red Records" flout "America grammar" in abstract communiqués that allow candid accounts of the "plight" of African/African descendent slaves and ex-slaves to *speak*.

Though too often esteemed as formally, or, idiomatically "unspeakable," "Red Records" of slave/post-slave experience manage to speak in ephemeral and symbolic ways. Indeed, tales (as abovementioned) of empty-bellied Africans filling the bellies of slave-ships speak; "petrifying" accounts, like those described in Édouard Glissant's, *Poetics of Relation*, of "Africans who lived through the experience of deportation to the Americas" as below-deck human cargo packed in "vomit, naked flesh, swarming lice, the dead slumped" and "dying crouched," that coalesced a "swirling red of mounting to the deck" (Glissant, 5) speak; and, as Olúfemi Táiwò explains in "The African Diaspora and Philosophy," neo-narratives of "diasporic Africans" that "lived with the dread of unfreedom and...had to lay down their lives to have their freedom recognized" to become "more proficient singers of freedom's song than their erstwhile owners" or "descendants" (Táiwò, 180) also speak.

These "Red Records" are not erased; they are, rather, songs, stories, and diachronic acts of *parole* invoked by "diasporic Africans" that are suppressed under the structural decorum that "American grammar" orders for operations of "master class" practices of speech at the synchronic level of *langue*, or, the level of language as social institution. At the level of *langue* in the U.S., it seems a matter-of-course that "masters" do not speak of "unspeakable" details surrounding gory procedures of gross labor exploitation that made the blood-and-guts of "slaves" become, paradoxically, a prime source of the "Grand Ole" nation's despotic power, as well as a key source of its "Shame." Correspondingly, progressive (non-"backward"), *Western* thinkers shudder to be so impolitic in thinking that any one entity (any "white ruling class" or governing body) has the sensorial bandwidth to absorb as *mea culpa* the massively "embarrassing" dimensions of the "plight" of "minority" scraps of black flesh-and-blood. But, flying in the face of formality, "Red Records" of the history of African/African descendent *any-bodies-and-flesh* manage to speak the "unspeakable" by bleeding in, onto, and through the "high" culture discourse of "American grammar." As Spillers avers, "before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography."

For Spillers, "body" and "flesh" are distinct, paralleling "subject-positions" of "captive" or "liberated" entities. Though distinct, bodies held "captive" in slavery and "flesh" privy to "liberated" status are coextensive—these "subject-positions" are tethered by co-constituting one

another through “American grammar’s” binary “ruling episteme” of contradistinction. The “body” as “captive” cannot conceal the “concealment” of the “flesh” that came “before” the dominance of a signifying consciousness fixed the meaning of its “liberated” morphological opposition to “captive” positionality. The “body” as “captive,” and the “flesh” as “liberated” are yoked—the latter grafts onto the former its “undecipherable markings” that “render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color” (Spillers, 207). Yet, these “disjunctures” also cannot conceal even color-blind “concealment” of “high crimes” against the “flesh” in its actuality “before” its bloody, “seared, divided, ripped-apartness” (206) in manhandled bondage *made* it acquire the hegemonically instrumentalized, historicized, and classificatory status of “body” as “captive,” or, “flesh” as “liberated.” After all of this, “Even though the captive flesh/body has been “liberated”...dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it seems that time, nor history, nor historiography...show movement, as the human subject is “murdered” over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise” (208).

It is this “flesh” that I believe *Beloved* reveals in correspondence with Spillers’ deliberations. “Flesh” that, like an Ouroboros, represents a process of self-renewal capable of unifying binarily determined divisions between body/flesh through circular practices of consumption/production. “Flesh” that is immaterial, but yoked to the material body in a way where its adhesive presence designates the potential of a “before” materiality that the unrestricted black body *might have had* had it not been *made* into a *represented for* “captive,” “liberated,” “unspeakable unspoken” *thing*. And, “flesh” that emerges in *Beloved* in instances where black bodies respond to its presence as if it epitomized an object of hunger offering active philosophical freedom as opposed to inert freedom narrowly defined by classifications of “captive,” or “liberated” status. As Baby Suggs asserts to her congregations in the Clearing, “This is flesh I’m talking about here...The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize” (Morrison, 104).

By way of figuratively starving (via giving scant attention to) parts of the body formalized as “free” but non-functional in freedom (i.e., body parts devoid of tangible agency in birthing, breathing, seeing, or walking on legacies/locales of freedom), deeply internalized organs that critically “clear” the body’s bile and move its blood receive a comparative lion’s-share of satiation through attentive “love.” This starving-to-sate process delineates black “flesh” as a “prize” apt to be claimed by affective conferral of *self* (or subjectivity) upon a body that attempts to capture (therefore, clarify “subject” difference from) its perceived object of hunger (“flesh”) as *other*. In other words, I speculate that this “Clearing” scene witnesses Baby Suggs recommending a circular consumption/production process that occasions an Ouroboros-esque outcome of isomorphic self/other and subject/object relations for purposes of self-renewal. The body produces *self* by way of capturing or consuming “flesh” as *other*. But this alludes to a catch-22 operation given that when the body consumes “flesh” from a position of *self* it makes a subjective choice to symbolically ingest the endless potential for unrestricted freedom that “flesh” offers as *other*. The racialized, “bottom of the food chain” *black* body will never cease to

hunger for broad freedoms proffered by this “flesh.” Thus, the body’s production of *self* via consumption of “flesh” places it in a situation where it symbolically ingests an abstract substance that continuously recycles its hunger to, at once, become and (phenomenally) *be like* the “flesh.”

Coterminous to deeply internal offal organs (the “dark, dark liver”; the “beat and beating heart”) that comprehensively cleanse anyone’s body, Baby Suggs’ conception of “flesh” denotes a potential materiality that emerges in a place/time where *Beloved’s* characters have license to occupy phenomenal experiences of *what it is like to be* given their lack of access to *being* on social and/or practical grounds. I view this place/time as a decidedly cultural territory that Morrison depicts as the “Clearing”—a word triply signifying a place, process, and by-product of the liquidation of a terrain for purposes of restoring its ecology to the nascency of what it was “before.” In this way, then, it is in the cultural territory of the “Clearing” that we witness *Beloved’s* characters attempting to abandon (as in *clear*) their earthbound or practical identities. In terms of “holy” proclamations made to congregants in the Clearing, Baby Suggs “did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (103). Producing “flesh” by means of *clearing* (i.e., starving or liquidating the body) in the “Clearing” is the Suggsian demand. Whatever blessings one might gain through bodied, earthly means are secondary to the “prize” or blessed “grace” of imagining, or, as Hall terms it in the opening quote, “positioning” *oneself* into an entity that shares in cultural rituals of weeping, laughing, and dancing “on bare feet in grass” that indicate some number of “*Sixty Million and more*” expressing a distinct sense of African diasporic “identity.” I previously stated that processes of starving the body to sate the “flesh” appear to put *Beloved’s* characters’ in catch-22 situations where they consume “flesh” as an object of hunger that continuously stokes their hunger for unrestricted freedom. At first blush, these catch-22 situations seem vexed; yet, they are apropos of incongruous dynamics of cultural expression contiguous to theoretical dimensions of “African diaspora.”

Táiwò’s “diasporic Africans” that became (and remain) “more proficient singers of freedom’s song” *because* they “lived with the dread of unfreedom”; Shange’s “Africans during the Middle Passage” that survived *because* they “ate air as manna”; Hall’s notion of peoples of the African diaspora that execute *both/and* practices of “becoming-being” to “position” their “cultural identity” *because* “they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power.” These examples demonstrate incongruous cultural expressions of harmonies, sounds, and diachronic acts of *parole* comprising the only things that *Beloved’s* “Negro” characters are represented to have in terms of their ubiquitous “*mine*”; things that Morrison details in the introductory quote from “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” as “just a little music...each other and the urgency of what is at stake.” I am saying that in the novel’s rendered “cemetery” world of “color without its history,” it is in the “Clearing” that we glean particularly keen views of *colored* US “Negro” characters fomenting a sense of both individual and mutual *being* through expressions of fluctuating, but, fluid performative acts (e.g., weeping while dancing; dancing while laughing; starving the body while sating the “flesh”) that indicate their *discrimination* (aesthetic, as well as gustatory) as heterogeneous peoples whose qualitative differences from others cannot and will not be quantified by intersectional (classist, sexist, racist) classifications that define their *being* as

significant of a homogenously “subordinate” racial formation that is (merely) the opposed equivalent of “superordinate” racial formations of white unified “power” across the globe.

These fluctuating/fluid cultural expressions evidence *Beloved’s* characters’ manifesting collective *being* and belonging by engaging in uneven acts of intersubjectivity that exemplify aspects of “African diaspora” that Brent Hayes Edwards elucidates in his essay (2001), “The Uses of *Diaspora*.” Remarking on qualities of unevenness that should be considered in using “African diaspora” as a term for analysis of the imbalance that attends African/African descendent peoples’ forging of mutual “belonging” in conditions of broad spatiotemporal dispersal, Edwards avers:

Like a table with legs of different lengths, or a tilted bookcase, diaspora can be discursively propped up...into an artificially “even” or “balanced” state of “racial” belonging. But such props, of rhetoric, strategy, or organization, are always articulations of unity or globalism, ones that can be “mobilized” for a variety of purposes but can never be definitive: they are always prosthetic (Edwards, 65).

Hall’s explanation of African diasporic peoples “positioning” their “cultural identity” amidst a “continuous ‘play’ of history, culture, and power” strikes an accord with Edwards’ commentary here. This “play” of factors proliferates in harnessing synthetic ideas of *race* and *racial value* to organize, rhetoricize, and strategize apocryphal, but, broadly accepted ideas of “an artificially “even” or “balanced” state of “racial” belonging” amongst peoples of the African diaspora—peoples whose sense of neither individual *being*, nor collective “belonging” is based on valuations or discursive “props” of “racial” ideologies that deem them “inferior” to “superior” white concerns based on specious notions that their blackness diverges from a benchmark, “perfectly clean” whiteness that has not been sullied and/or *colored* by history.

In the “Clearing,” *Beloved’s* characters’ eat-away-at, or, strip “color of its history” by enacting the Suggsian demand to consume “flesh” as an object of hunger that continuously stokes the slave/ex-slave, “Negro” body’s “appetite” to *be* something other than a racially defined *colored* anatomy that physicalizes an “artificial” existence of *essential* inferiority. This, I propose, signifies an imbalanced, uncommon process of consumption/production that nonetheless instigates cooperative “belonging,” “positioning” of “cultural identity,” and self-renewal in-line with meanings, and “uses” of “African diaspora.” Accordingly, then, Morrison’s novel proffers views not only of a people that bear an awful brunt of unfreedom in U.S. history, but also of a people that produce their freedom to *keep hungering* for brands of freedom unique to their “identity” as disparate entities, dually shaped and supported by quite transient, and uneven dimensions of *African diaspora* history. Through the lens of *this* history, we are compelled to eschew the *panoptical* monocle of *Western* logic in order to *watch* rather than *see* “mobilizations” of African diasporic “unity” that are cross-satellited across vast expanses of space and time, but still endure in “positioning” the connected-disconnectedness of linkages between “diasporic Africans.”

U.S. “Negroes”; slaves and ex-slaves; African diasporic *any*-bodies; brothers, fathers, daughters, mothers, sisters, and sons—*Beloved* exposes the destabilized (“no time, especially no

time”) place/time of African diaspora history where these some number of “*Sixty Million and more*” pursue the freedom to sustain their hunger for freedom by consuming “flesh” that stokes the *colored* body’s hunger to consume “flesh” as an object of hunger that stokes the...and on, and on, and on... I believe that in her portrayals of odd food and food-related imagery, Morrison shows us “Negro” characters taking self-excavating stabs at freedom; freedom that is revolutionary, and so requires revolutionary action that creates an outcome for “the man of color” like that described by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967) as “Mankind set free of the trampoline that is the resistance of others, and digging into its own flesh to find a meaning” (Fanon, 9). This radical idea of *colored* women and men “digging into,” or, if you will, consuming their own “flesh” to catalyze freedom ...let’s break this down...

Digestion

You come too late, much too late. There will always be a world—a white world—between you and us...The other’s total inability to liquidate the past once and for all. In the face of this affective ankylosis of the white man, it is understandable that I could have made up my mind to utter my Negro cry. Little by little, putting out pseudopodia here and there, I secreted a race. And that race staggered under the burden of a basic element.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

There are points in Morrison’s novel where the reincarnated woman-child, Beloved, and Sethe share a unified identity in a limbo-like “no time” place/time where they “rememory” one another in attempts to recover both love and kinship proximity. “I am Beloved and she is mine,” says the dyadic daughter and mother. “I see her take flowers away from leaves...I would help her but the clouds are in the way...I am not separate from her...there is no place where I stop...her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too...a hot thing” (Morrison, 248). In this limbo-like place, all of the places that Beloved and Sethe have been in life, as well as in death are present; “in my rememory,” explains Sethe to her daughter Denver, “Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world...you hear something or see something going on. So clear...you think it’s you thinking it up...But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else” (43).

Together, as a co-extensive “hot thing” in a place of “rememory,” Beloved and Sethe look for a “join”—a mode of organization that clarifies and/or *clears* their disconnected-connection as kin—that, I posit, functions as a type of system with the capacity to maintain conflicting dynamics (e.g., death that is alive in the form of Beloved; infanticide that is salvation rooted in a mother’s love; and, memory that is “rememory” which experiences the past in the immediate present) that condition their state of dis-unified unity. I believe that the system that Beloved and Sethe seek is kind of digestive system comprising processes of uncommon consumption/production akin to those that Baby Suggs recommends for “clearing” the “flesh.” In other words, in the limbo-like place, Beloved and Sethe attempt to claim THE ubiquitous

“mine” (as one conjoined “I” that states, “I am Beloved and she is mine”) by way of a system of inter-relationality that sustains their hunger for one another to be unified. In this way, Beloved and Sethe seek a “join” where their hunger, or, desire for one another’s kinship keeps getting re-produced similar to ways that gustatory hunger is never permanently sated with food, but rather re-produced when food is consumed, digested, and voided. Morrison deftly describes this “join” in a passage where Beloved and Sethe simultaneously declare:

I hear chewing and swallowing and laughter...it belongs to me...she is the laugh...I am the laughter...I see her face which is mine...I am looking for the join...I am loving my face so much...my dark face is close to me...I want to join...she whispers to me...she whispers...I reach for her...chewing and swallowing she touches me...she knows I want to join...she chews and swallows me...I am gone...now I am her face...my own face has left me...I see me swim away...a hot thing...I see the bottoms of my feet...I am alone...I want to be the two of us...I want the join (251-252).

Beloved and Sethe “want the join,” but the immediate palpability of their shared “rememory” triply plagues, produces, and populates their conflicted state of being simultaneously (and utterly) connected and disconnected by way of the “Misery” of infanticide—i.e., a massive act of murder that was spawned by an equally massive amount of love on Sethe’s part when she slayed her “crawling already?” baby girl to save her from a life of slavery. To establish “the join,” I propose that Beloved and Sethe engage in a co-“clearing” process that allows them to “digest” one another in the way of “pseudopodia” as metaphorically treated by Fanon.

Pseudopodia are cell membranes that extend like antennae from the body of an amoeba for express purposes of moving and feeding the primary amoeboid body. Pseudopodia catalyze phagocytosis, or, amoeboid eating processes; these vital antennae are considered the “false feet” of an amoeba—depending on their type, pseudopodia die upon contact with other organisms. I believe that Beloved and Sethe engage in a pseudopodic exercise of relationality in efforts to establish a sense of kinship commensurate with their situation in the limbo-like place of “rememory.” In this place that is all places and all times (therefore, an ephemeral terrain illustrative of “no time” spatiotemporality where the past is always present), Beloved and Sethe continually switch positions to become each other’s food source. In other words, at times, Sethe is the main amoeboid body from which Beloved extends to feed and move her mother; at other times, Beloved is the main amoeboid body from which Sethe extends to feed and move her daughter. Given their racialized status as “bottom of the food chain,” *colored* beings, Beloved and Sethe’s execution of phagocytosis aligns with the consumption/production processes of an organism considered to be the lowest order of protozoa—the “bottom of the food chain” amoeba.

Perhaps the “false feet” to which “pseudopodia” refers are analogous to those that an adjoined Beloved and Sethe perceive when they see the “bottoms of feet” that “swim away,” leaving them “alone,” and inciting their hunger for the “join.” Beloved’s “false feet” extend outward to “touch” Sethe; subsequently, Sethe’s antennae extend to “touch” Beloved—in either case, daughter and mother manifest “touch” by “chewing and swallowing” one another until they are each, respectively, “gone”; until they each die upon contact with the organism that is their food source (i.e., each other). Masterfully, Morrison describes what I view as a pseudopodic

process that allows Beloved and Sethe to “liquidate the past” in terms of Fanon’s meaning. The past, for Fanon, comprises outlooks that not only demonstrate the white colonizer’s/oppressor’s antiblack point-of-view, but also function in very real ways that subjugate the “black,” or, the “Negro”:

Since the time when someone first mourned the fact that he had arrived too late and everything had been said, a nostalgia for the past has seemed to persist. Is this that lost original paradise of which Otto Rank speaks? How many such men, apparently rooted to the womb of the world, have devoted their lives to studying the Delphic oracles or exhausted themselves in attempts to plot the wanderings of Ulysses! The pan-spiritualists seek to prove the existence of a soul in animals by using this argument: A dog lies down on the grave of his master and starves to death there. We had to wait for Janet to demonstrate that the aforesaid dog, in contrast to man, simply lacked the capacity to liquidate the past (Fanon, 121).

From this quote, we glean that Fanon’s framing of the “past” critiques the hubris of hegemonic white men that appear to believe that they invented *the* past by proxy of their “late” arrival to streams and traditions of knowledge that preceded their existence.

A “nostalgia for the past” ensues in “such men”; they hold-on tightly (oh so tightly) to a “past” that qualifies their sagacious presence—of course, part of this “past” includes formations of knowledge and power which contend that “the black soul is a white man’s artifact” (Fanon, 14). Negotiating “the other’s total” unwillingness, and “inability to liquidate the past”; uttering his “Negro cry” in the “face of” the “affective ankylosis of the white man,”² Fanon, metaphorically puts out “pseudopodia” to secrete “a race” that staggers “under the burden of a basic element.” This “basic element” is composed of myriad tropes encompassing the *basically* “magical nature of Negro culture” (123), and/or the *basically* talented “black” that white concerns recognize as *acceptable* because they deem them “the finest of Negro singers” or “Negro doctors” like “Cobb” that “invented white blood” (116). For Fanon, pseudopodic processes of “secreting a race” do not “liquidate” the fixed and rigid “past” to which the “white world” clings for dear life. On the other hand, Beloved and Sethe’s engagement in phagocytosis facilitates a “clearing” or liquidation of the past because for them, the past is always present—their pseudopodic actions transcend “the other’s total inability to liquidate the past” because theirs is a past representative of African diaspora history.

Beloved and Sethe follow an odd, imbalanced, and uneven diet that rails against the structural logic of Eurocentric, heteronormative modes of consumption/production that regulate socioeconomic realities of ex-slave (pejoratively classed, raced, and sexed) *being*, as well as economies of eating that “normal” vs. “abnormal” beings pursue. In this way, Morrison renders Beloved and Sethe engaging in a diet that rebels against a prescribed sense of “black,” *colored*, or “Negro” existence in terms of either gustatory, or antiblack, racially *valued* physiological logic. Both the uncommon hungers and idiosyncratic eating processes that these characters pursue suggest their refusal of instituting a sense of their “racial belonging” by way of

² Note: Ankylosis is an abnormal adhesion of a joint complex sometimes affecting the maxilla or mandible, making it impossible for sufferers of Ankylosis to eat or speak.

“balanced” or “even” practices of nurturing, or *feeding* their “join.” Here, Beloved and Sethe’s actions are, as Edwards avers, “Like a table with legs of different lengths, or a tilted bookcase”—they are, decidedly, *African diasporic* modes of consumption/production that endure in providing sustenance to some number of “*Sixty Million and more*” compelled to negotiate experiences of *starving from satiety*.

CHAPTER TWO

Earth

Thing lies forever in her birthing-bed and glories. But hungry Time squats beside her couch and waits. His frame was made out of emptiness, and his mouth set wide for prey. Mystery is his oldest son, and power is his portion.

That brings me before the un-lived hour, that first mystery of the Universe with its unknown face and reflecting back. For it was said on the day of first sayings that Time should speak backward over his shoulder, and none should see his face, so scornful is he of the creatures of Thing.

What the faceless years will do to me, I do not know. I see Time's footprints, and I gaze into his reflections. My knees have dragged the basement of Hell and it has seemed to me that I have licked out all the pots. The winters have been and my soul-stuff has lain mute like a plain while the herds of happenings thundered across my breast. In these times there were deep chasms in me which had forgotten their memory of the sun.

But time has his beneficent moods. He has commanded some servant-moments to transport me to high towers of elevation so that I might look out on the breadth of things. This is a privilege granted to a servant of many hours, but a master of few, from the master of a trillion billion hours and the servant of none.

In those moments I have seen that it is futile for me to seek the face of, and fear, an accusing God withdrawn somewhere beyond the stars in space. I myself live upon a star, and I can be satisfied with the millions of assurances of deity about me. If I have not felt the divinity of man in his cults, I have found it in his works.

—Zora Neale Hurston, "Seeing the World As It Is"

Hungry Time & Time

Nothing is simple when it comes to tracing exegetic terrains mapped-out in writings by Zora Neale Hurston. As a case in point, the lushly treated language of the above epigraph opposes tough topics that it introduces in a chapter entitled "Seeing the World As It Is" from Hurston's (1942) autobiography *Dust Tracks On A Road*. The bulk of "Seeing the World As It Is" witnesses Hurston espousing her exacting views of dubious trends amongst Negroes upholding tenets of "Race Consciousness," and "Race Pride" to resolve dynamics of psychosocial subordination in relation to their perceptions of the "Race Problem" in the early-twentieth century U.S. Even given her extensive anthropological studies of folk customs and practices amongst disenfranchised African descendent cultures in both the U.S. and the Caribbean; and, even given her demonstration (in, by 1942, a series of essays, folklore collections, short stories, and novels) of deep familiarity with deleterious affects of ghettoization,

marginalization, and Jim Crow segregation on Negro life, Hurston saw as specious *seeing* the “Race Problem” as a sociopolitical struggle between blacks and whites apt to be won or lost by either concern. As the author states:

This Race Problem business, now. I have asked many well-educated people of both races what the problem is...I have never had an answer that was an answer, so I have had to make up my own. Since there is no fundamental conflict, since there is no solid reason why the blacks and the whites cannot live in one nation in perfect harmony, the only thing in the way of it is Race Pride and Race Consciousness on both sides. A bear has been grabbed by the tail. The captor and the captured are walking around a tree...The man is scared to turn the bear loose, and his hand-hold is slipping. The bear wants to go on about his business, but he feels that something must be done about that tail-hold. So they just keep on following each other around the tree. So Race Pride and Race Consciousness seem to me to be not only fallacious, but a thing to be abhorred. It is the root of misunderstanding and hence misery and injustice...The only satisfaction to be gained from it anyway is, “I ain’t nothing, my folks ain’t nothing, but that makes no difference at all. I belong to such-and-such a race.” Poor nourishment according to my notion. Mighty little to chew on. You have to season it awfully high with egotism to make it tasty (250).

It is, I believe, something analogous to a rather acerbic mode of humanism that Hurston touts here. Whether black or white, the human is the human, fit for rational assessment with little consideration of conditional factors such as segregationist outcomes of class, race, or sex prejudice categorically prone to, on the one hand, (dis)integrate the Negro’s individualism. Or, on the other hand, tear asunder the Negro’s capacity to *make* autonomous history (i.e., to be one that proactively occupies ones own history), rather than passively *take-on* a sham sense of subjectivity generated by dictates of what Hurston refers to as “hungry Time” (Note: In my estimation, Hurston frames “hungry Time” as akin to historicity in both defining and treating Negroes as temporized historical actors given their seemingly non-proactive, or “nothing” contributions to history. Correspondingly, “hungry Time” perpetually consumes Negroes that defer to its restrictive definitions of their value and/or future potential).

For Hurston, the Negro seeking to gain sovereign satisfaction from “Race Consciousness” and “Race Pride” takes as a jumping-off-point for fomenting agency restoring instead reaping subjectivity *qua* a calculus of racial measurement whose problem-solving techniques stem from ideologies and also methods of Eurocentrically motivated racialization. *Racially* conscious and proud, the Negro that Hurston criticizes here assesses her/his immediate agency as a form of spatiotemporal contiguity that is merely an aftermath quotient of being one that has subscribed to methods of viewing their ancestors (i.e., Negro “folks” that “ain’t nothing” that birthed the Negro “I” that “ain’t nothing”) as having succumbed to manifesting racialized ideologies of their *actual* historical role as *only* subjugated (“nothing”) black “folks” to such extents that said “folks” past subjectivity must be restored as a *necessary* prelude to present realization of modern (Negro) agency, or subjectivity. Hurston rejects such ‘past must always be prelude’ race-based machinations in relation to any-and-all individuals *instantaneously* reaping (instead of temporizing to restore) any-and-all autonomy that she avers is their due as

human beings—whether Negro or not. Piggybacking the previous, I must note that Hurston’s mode of thinking denounces entirely the notion that “race” holds any heft as an organizing term. Of this, Hurston states, “Every tub must sit on its own bottom...why should I be proud to be a Negro? Why should anybody be proud to be white? Or yellow? Or red? After all, the word “race” is just a loose classification of physical characteristics. It tells nothing about the insides of people...Races have never done anything. What seems race achievement is the work of individuals” (249).

Dovetailing from her rejection of “race” as *at all* useful in imbuing Negro existents with wholesome realization of their singular humanity, Hurston takes-to-task what she views as common, highly suspect notions that combined forces of “Race Consciousness,” and “Race Pride” naturally form a cathartic glue prone to bind Negro pluralities in the U.S. with a determined sense of national identity deriving from advocacy of “Race Solidarity.” Outlining key pitfalls relevant to assimilationist consequences of racialized thinking in the context of “Race Solidarity,” Hurston quips:

And how can “Race Solidarity be possible in a nation made up of as many elements as these United States? It could result in nothing short of chaos...Individual ability in any group must function for all the rest. National disaster touches us all. There is no escape in grouping. And in practice there can be no sharp lines drawn, because the interest of every individual in any racial group is not identical with others...Anybody who goes before a body and purports to plead for what “The Negro” wants, is a liar and knows it. Negroes want a variety of things and many of them diametrically opposed...And why should Negroes be united? Nobody else in America is. If it were true, then one of two other things would be true. One, that they were united on what white people are united on, and it would take a God to tell what that is; and be moving toward complete assimilation. Or we would be united on something specifically Negroid, and that would lead to a hard black knot in the body politic which would be impossible of place in the nation (251-252).

Here, Hurston’s declaration of the “chaos” threatening to befall Negroes relying on racial markers of identity to bolster holistic dimensions of their public/private determination merges with my aims for this chapter, *Earth*. Said aims are deeply interested in analyzing how Hurston illustrates in her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Negro characters’ interactions with “hungry Time” and/or, simply, “time.” “Earth” will explicate these aims in subsequent sections that focus on factors such as, for instance, Hurston’s figuration of characters, and methodology of writing to analyze the critical import of the author’s portrayals of interplays between alimentation, identity, hunger, and race. That being said, I must return to exploring Hurston’s outlooks on undercurrents of “chaos” extant in currents of “Race Consciousness,” “Race Pride,” and, “Race Solidarity” in “Seeing the World As It Is.” For, insofar as Hurston frames these currents as indicative of “poor nourishment” and “mighty little to chew on” for Negro souls seeking to realize wholesome agency, they provide a coalescing set of theoretical bases upon which many of my analyses for this chapter will stand.

Hence, I venture that Negroes' essaying to bolster determination via "Race Consciousness," "Race Pride," and/or "Race Solidarity" is merely the tip of a tumultuous iceberg that Hurston infers will infuse "chaos" into their (public/private) lives. Negroes seeking to form a "hard black knot" in the U.S. "body politic" is the issue that I reckon Hurston believes is disposed to do the most damage in disrupting whatever *telos* for experiential determination that Negroes might have. As I read Hurston's words, Negroes attempting to form an exclusive racial enclave in the U.S. is tantamount to their attempting to form a world inside of a world that might serve to territorialize their intentions for "Race Solidarity." It is, for Hurston, one thing (as the saying goes) for Negroes to make such attempts with consciousness that their racially exclusive, enclavish "escape in grouping" would neither preclude their societal interactions with "white people," nor indemnify them in erasing the fact that "white people's" proven power to dually control and construct racial divisions, racial formation, and racism in the U.S. would, inevitably, encumber their essays for racial separatism at national levels. It is, I conjecture, another thing entirely for Hurston that Negroes might make attempts towards racial separatism to concretize "Race Solidarity," unconsciously believing that their "hard black knot" in America could exist as a domestic "body politic" *totally* estranged from "white people's" unquestionably overpowering control of "God only knows what" assimilationist and racially separatist forms of nationalism that systematically surface in the U.S., ideologically, as well as institutionally. The latter case of Negroes' endeavoring to actualize "Race Solidarity" unconscious of hindrances and hierarchical disadvantages that they are sure to incur in seeking to secede from presences/powers of whiteness in the U.S. would risk, so says Hurston, their "complete assimilation" to "being united on what white people are united on" at the very same instant that they believe they are pursuing exclusively black lives as a collection of constituents forming an exclusively black "body politic."

Here is the "chaos" of which Hurston speaks: Negroes exerting the most intense radical political energy in completely *throwing-off the yoke of the Master* by separating from his (abstract and also concrete) racist constructs at national levels would subliminally recapitulate white supremacist methods of constructing "body politic" separatism *qua* national "Race Solidarity" in the U.S. that the so-called Master created in the first place. As Hurston sees it, this would be a self-deception of which Negroes seeking exclusive "Race Solidarity" would be unaware. Such self-deception grossly impedes the experiential progress of "Race Proud" and "Race Conscious" Negroes, throwing into disarray paths to their end-game aims (i.e., aims to bolster public/private determination) by requiring their subscription to a false belief that the shattered nature of their racially subordinate status in the U.S. is healed vis-à-vis a form of separatist "Race Solidarity" that is actually a form of nationalist assimilationist identity formation that supremacist "white people" define, control, and *need* Negroes to personify as, for example, "model minorities," or "melting pot" actors in a commonwealth play where they (either in *diametric* accordance with, or opposition to quotidian white "majority" and black "minority" race relations) portray/counter-portray America's imaginary veneer of being ethnically and racially egalitarian. Thus, of these matters, Hurston flatly claims, "Race Solidarity is a fiction and always will be." And, insofar as Negroes imagine "Race Solidarity" offers an "escape in grouping" into a functionally national ("body politic") world inside of a world, belief in such separatist "solidarity" is, for the author, quixotic. Whether supported by the most earnest, radical communal goals of "Race Solidarity" or not, it is "impossible," Hurston maintains, for any "race" of people "to form a nation within a nation" (252)—especially, in the U.S.

Before concluding these introductory remarks, I would like to clarify that (amongst other disciplinary optics—e.g., existential phenomenology, post-structural literary theory, and interdisciplinary food studies methodologies) I am *closely reading* Hurston’s conceptions of issues encompassing what she terms “Race Problem business” in the U.S. via lenses of African diaspora theory, and diaspora theory in general. Given this, I am treating Hurston’s explicit commentary regarding the “chaotic” risk to the experiential progression of Negroes’ relying on race as a corrective (i.e., a binding agent capable of fixing their shattered individual identities or hobbled national status) as equivalent to commentary that does double-duty in implicitly elucidating how the author perceives Negroes as a cultural group. Simply put, Hurston’s commentary locates Negroes as an African descendent collective that she seems to perceive as a diasporic cultural formation on grounds, I posit, of what she outlines as said collective’s non-amenability to portray/counter-portray U.S. “fictions” and/or “model” roles of “Race Solidarity.” In addition to other “God only knows what” outcomes, these “fictions” strengthen a semblance of America’s status as a homogenous nation-state (i.e., a country, unbiased in absorbing, for example, immigrant, diaspora, or refugee constituents into its state sovereign “melting pot”), rather than what it actually is—a hegemonic country that conquers, marginalizes, and then throws its *racialized* minorities into a xenophobic “melting pot” that is wont to burn these ethnic “non-commoners” alive given that it is really a pot full of seething demands for Anglo-conformity. Amongst her other interdisciplinary vantage points, Hurston’s anthropological eye was expertly trained on Negroes to assess an express sense of their cultural valence. In this way, although the term “African diaspora” was not extant in academic parlance during Hurston’s day, I nonetheless believe that the author’s critique of Negroes (and their adjacent “Race problem business”) accords with themes of remote *self*-location, resistance to national assimilationist norms, and suspended spatiotemporality often taken-up by scholars invested in diaspora studies. Below I will outline the work of one such scholar (historian, and specialist in Cultural Anthropology, Diaspora Studies, and History of Consciousness), James Clifford, as his analyses correlate with Hurston’s in terms of what I posited above is her implicit commentary on Negroes as, culturally, African diasporic.

In “Diasporas” (a chapter from his book, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997)), Clifford discusses ways that the U.S. relies on “minority” groups to uphold its nation-state semblance of commonality, homogeneity, and ‘state’ sovereignty amongst *all* of its citizenry:

The nation-state, as common territory and time is traversed, and to varying degrees subverted by diasporic attachments. Diasporic populations do not come from elsewhere in the same way that “immigrants” do. In assimilationist national ideologies such as those of the United States, immigrants may experience loss and nostalgia, but only en route to a whole new home in a new place. Such ideologies are designed to integrate immigrants, not people in diasporas. Whether the national narrative is one of common origins or of gathered populations, it cannot assimilate groups that maintain important allegiances...to a homeland...located elsewhere. People whose sense of identity is centrally defined by collective histories of displacement and violent loss cannot be “cured” by merging into a new national community. This is especially true when they are the victims of

ongoing, structural prejudice. Positive articulations of diaspora identity reach outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history) of the nation-state (Clifford, 250-251).

Clifford's remarks connote America's significant reliance on "immigrant," and other minority groups to manifest (in sustained civic behavior, e.g.) prescribed roles of "assimilationist national" identity intended to, ultimately, give flesh to the bones of "national narratives" surrounding the country's so-called largesse in its treatment of all individuals comprising its multicultural populace. If "immigrants," and other minorities fulfill these prescribed roles in common, or, normative ways, then they simultaneously reinforce a sense of the moored nature of America's "common territory and time." "Diasporic populations" are not, Clifford states, amenable to such "assimilationist national" shenanigans. As Clifford explains, "diasporic populations" realize their presence in given "new" territories vis-à-vis their absence from various (old), native territories. As well, though these "populations" are, indeed, corrosively "displaced" (often by way of brutal and/or crisis motivated forms of both forced and unforced migration), they "cannot be "cured" by merging into a new national community," as whatever sense of nationalism they might have derives from their disparate, "important allegiances...to a homeland...located elsewhere." Further, as Clifford explains, even in their most basic (e.g., simply surviving), or, their most tactical (e.g., political protest), "positive articulations of diaspora identity," these "populations" "subvert" the "common territory and time" of their various "new" non-homes by living (in a way) here-but-not-here lives; or, said differently, by existing in spans of suspended spatiotemporality that witness them manifesting their insiders' presence by reaching "outside the normative territory and temporality (myth/history)" of various nation-state arrangements. Clifford's (explicit) analysis of features that make "diasporic populations" non-amenable to "assimilationist national" procedures of, for example, molding them into ideal types of U.S. "model minorities," corresponds with Hurston's (implicit) analysis of features that make Negroes non-amenable to living "model" lives that (consciously or unconsciously) reinforce supremacist "fictions" of race, and racial division crafted by "white people." In the case of her analyses in "Seeing the World As It Is," Hurston's various critiques of negative (e.g., assimilationist and/or "chaotic") consequences that she (strongly) suggests would wreak experiential havoc in the lives of her fellow Negroes boil-down to, what is for me, a singular diacritical critique that the author proffers where these matters are concerned: That is, in outlining what she does not endorse for "Race Conscious," or "Race Proud" Negroes, Hurston, at once, and, conversely, delineates what she does endorse for Negroes; particularly, Negroes seeking to fully experience (not "Race Conscious," or, "Race Proud," but, simply) "conscious," and "proud" lives in U.S. environs whose sociopolitical processes are determined to squelch, or, *Jim Crow* such stabs at black determination.

I am saying here that Hurston (through *a contrario*, diacritical means) outlines rather strange, incredibly uncommon paths of existence that she endorses for Negroes living though "Jumpin' Jim" times, and that, in many cases, were born just-shy, or, at the top of times & terrors of what Rayford Logan famously terms (loosely paraphrased), bloody, brutal, horridly "nadir conditions of race relations" in the U.S. In short, Hurston appears to prefer that Negroes living in climes where nearly every aspect of their lives veritably forces them to think of themselves via racial terms—especially, in order to dually navigate and *survive* abysmal ramifications of what malignantly racist "white people" might think of them—avoid living lives under auspices of

brands of racial logic that were/are (damn near) inextricable from the logic of basic survival. As there was (and is) no U.S. *habitus* that could (or can) sustain such racially logic-less lives for unequivocally *raced* black folks, the only thing that I can logic-out is that Hurston endorses modes of existence for Negroes that entail them *being* here-but-here beings; and, *being* absent from unconsciously fulfilling “fictional” roles of mascot as “model minorities” for their U.S. non-homes as a means to be consciously present as masters of more meaningful (lost? everywhere? nowhere?) homes; and, finally, being quite “diasporic” in exercising these forms of *being* in ways that oblige them to bolster “positive articulations of identity” by reaching “outside the normative territory and temporality” of ‘assimilationist national’ (sham) lifestyles, to, in turn, pursue lives involving their limitless ‘reaching’ and, for my purposes, hungering for outer-limits (e.g., unfamiliar/unknown) forms, means, and modes of stoking public/private determination. As I will discuss throughout this chapter, *Earth*, Hurston sketches striking experiential story-arcs for many characters comprising the all-Negro cast of (major) actants featured in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. But, it is the story-arc that Hurston sketches for the novel’s primary character, Janie Crawford, that is most striking in illustrating an actant that seeks to experience *self*-“consciousness,” and “-pride” by approaching existence vis-à-vis uncommon means of limitlessly reaching and hungering for a grand life that transcends common understandings of her limited potential as a *raced* Negro woman.

Stay Hungry

Hurston opens *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with allusions to Janie’s uncommon resourcefulness and steely spirit in having endured undeniably harrowing circumstances. At the “beginning” of this tale, writes Hurston, “was a woman...come back from burying...the sodden...the bloated...the sudden dead” with “eyes flung wide open in judgment.” A Negro woman of the early-twentieth century, Janie is returning to her home in the all-black town of Eatonville, FL to doubtlessly leave behind traumatic vestiges of described funereal pursuits. However, Hurston portrays conditions of Janie’s homecoming as echoing those of her recent past. Janie has overcome experiences in unnamed venues that assailed her with stony gazes of deadened “eyes flung wide open in judgment.” Upon her homecoming, Janie is beset with judgment that is admittedly different than that wrought by the “sodden” and “bloated dead” but is, I venture, equally as unpleasant and powerful. Viciously indicting, and, cruelly perspicacious are not only the eyes, but also the mouths of the townsfolk of Eatonville as they lounge on their porches observing their erstwhile neighbor’s evening return. Hurston portrays the townsfolk as a self-appointed jury of “sitters”; as sun-up to sundown workers eager to recover identity, power, and pride siphoned from them by a long day’s labor rife with dehumanizing tasks:

These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed notions through their mouths. They sat in judgment. Seeing the woman as she was made them remember the envy they had stored up from other times. So they chewed up the back parts of their minds and swallowed with relish. They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. It was mass cruelty. A mood come alive. Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song (Hurston, 1-2).

A kind of alimentary scapegoating is afoot here. To a large extent, the townsfolk's transformation from "tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences" into a hypercritical jury of "powerful and human" sharp-tongued "lords" is nourished by what Hurston depicts as their "killing" ploys of chewing up past recollections of our heroine rendered as presently extant in the "back parts of their minds." As stated, the novel commences with Hurston adumbrating Janie's exceptionally stout and steely spirit. In this way, the author introduces Janie to readers as a rather intrepid character that has achieved classic aspects of a hero's journey in completing unctuous, Odyssean tasks of, for example, "burying the sodden and bloated dead," and also making her return back home to Eatonville. Only a hair's breadth after this, however, Hurston introduces us to Janie as a figure cannibalized by the criticism of "sitters" whose disparaging view of our heroine suggests that her strength-of-character might be held in question as something less than that of an intrepid champion and more of that of a chump that is somehow weak enough to be 'chewed and swallowed' as an alimental object of rapacious ridicule. I am scratching at the surface of a multipart point here relevant to Hurston's figuration of Janie as a character that is striking, not only because of uncommon qualities encompassing her dichotomous heroic bearing, or, grand existential hungers, but also because of what I view as this figure's inherently oppositional persona.

Beyond the oppositional (e.g., champion/chump) way that Hurston introduces Janie to readers when the *Their Eyes Were Watching God* begins, this character endures in exemplifying a figure whose very *being* seems to incite oppositional dynamics amongst herself and a range of other characters, variously depicted as her close (and also, not so close) circle of friends, kin, neighbors, and paramours. Similar to noted interactions between she and the "sitters," Janie is privy to a steady stream of onslaughts of harassment and/or haranguing that appear purposely pulverizing; that appear determined to figuratively eat her alive by 'chewing and swallowing' her up. For instance, in many scenes (that I will detail later on) throughout the novel, Janie's bourgeois status in predominantly Negro, largely proletariat communities arises as an issue that not only sparks the envy of other characters, but also appears to whet their appetites to humiliate her with gnashing criticism. Additionally, other factors over which Janie has no control such as her appearance, innate existential hungers, and inborn self-determination seem to fuel sharpened-toothed desires of other characters to lacerate her with biting words, apparently intended to whittle down-to-the-bone what they only presume is her superior manner. As I see it, instances of these adversarial interrelations between Janie and other of the novel's characters illustrate oppositional dynamics that inevitably arise between Negro actants that either adopt, or abjure methods of cultivating wholesome identity via rubrics of "Race Consciousness," "Race Pride" or, "Race Solidarity" such as those that Hurston outlines in "Seeing the World As It Is." To re-state Hurston's claims in the latter, "Race Pride and Race Consciousness" indicate markers of identity that are to be "abhorred" given that they are "the root of misunderstanding and hence misery and injustice" for conflicted "races," as well as for individuals that rely on "race" as a type of balm for healing conflicted experiences of public/private *self*. Rather than providing sustenance for Negroes living in U.S. environs where pervasive forms of anti-black racism consistently threaten to deplete their determination, "Race Pride," "Race Consciousness," and also, "Race Solidarity" only proffer what Hurston deems as brands of "poor nourishment" for Negro individuals or "hard black knot" collectives that seek to replenish sapping effects of their depleting circumstances. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston crafts Janie as a character

that does not make soapbox declarations abjuring the perils of “Race”-based this-or-that. Janie does, however, illustrate Hurston’s claims regarding these perils by epitomizing a character that *stays hungry* for experiential forms of alimentation that transcend normative dimensions of common rations, or, for that matter, common rationales of classism, racism, or sexism that narrow her aspirations for a broad existence where she can expend her energies as a proactive agent of her own “time,” rather than be expended by living a diminished life where she is perpetually objectified (and, thus consumed) by restrictive demands of “hungry Time.” In this way, Janie operates in the novel as a literary presence whose non-soapbox silence (i.e., undeclared abjuration of “Race Consciousness,” “Race Pride,” & etc.) speaks volumes in telegraphing Hurston’s critiques of “race.”

In terms of apprehending the literary valence of Janie’s presence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, I defer to Henry Louis Gates Jr. in determining that she is a character ensconced within a novel that takes the form of a “speakerly text.” Given this, Janie does not so much represent Hurston’s fictional visions of a Negro woman existing in an era of *Jim Crowed* Negro life, inasmuch as she illustrates the author’s ideological drives to represent expressive aspects of Negro life that designate the facticity of Negro culture. As Gates states in “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text” (1988):

Hurston’s text is the first example in our tradition of “the speakerly text,” by which I mean a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition...The speakerly text is that text in which all other structural elements seem to be devalued, as important as they remain to the telling of a tale, because the narrative strategy signals attention to its own importance, an importance which would seem to be the privileging of oral speech and its inherent linguistic features...a speakerly text would seem primarily to be oriented toward imitating one of the numerous forms of oral narration to be found in classical Afro-American vernacular literature (Gates, 72).

In Hurston’s “speakerly text,” Janie does not operate as immediately representational in an explicitly novelistic sense. Said differently, Hurston does not configure Janie as a *sign* that stands in for a *signified* Negro woman functioning in the novel as a *signifier* that inevitably refers to an actual, living Negro woman, or, for that matter, characterizes a real world individual representing a figurative example of the *gestalt* of what it is to be *Negro*. As Gates avers, Janie’s value as a central character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is reflexively “devalued” by proxy of Hurston’s rather dichotomous methodology of writing in the genre of the novel in a way where her approach to the “telling of a tale” draws more attention to its “narrative strategy” than it does to “structural elements” (e.g., characterizations, key conflicts, plot-points, settings) that advance the “tale” itself. Hurston’s “narrative strategy” is for Gates one that combines “two extremes of narration and discourse, in what we might think of as represented discourse” which “includes both indirect discourse and free indirect discourse.” There is a natural tension between “extremes of narration and discourse” extant in Hurston’s writing. The voice of “narration” in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* conveys a third-person omniscient perspective echoing speech patterns synonymous with those associated with “standard English.” Continuing, Gates further explains that the “discourse” we encounter in Hurston’s novel (i.e., the “discourse” which combines in ‘extreme’ tension with “narration” to produce “represented discourse”) resonates in

the text in first-person utterances of “black dialect.” For example, the voice of “narration” resounds when readers are availed of the “sitters” immediate reaction to Janie upon her homecoming. In this case, we are informed in “standard,” lyrically descriptive fashion that the “sitters” receive Janie with “burning statements” that coalesce in a “mass cruelty” chorus of “words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song.”

On the other hand, Hurston sketches the verbal content comprising the “sitters” chorus of dialect-driven, “words walking without masters” quite differently. As the novel progresses, Janie’s initial homecoming witnesses her exit from the “sitters” field of vision as she eventually passes them, heading to the home that she shared in former times with her second husband, Eatonville’s *dearly departed* Mayor, Joe (Jody) Starks. When Janie is well out of their eye- and ear-shot, Hurston portrays not only the idiomatic content of the “sitters” pejorative “mass cruelty” chorus, but also reveals (at least) some of the reasons for their spiteful “song.” I have already explained that the “sitters” mount a mouthy attack against Janie upon the instant of her return when “seeing the woman as she was” they simultaneously “remember” and also consume (i.e., “chew and swallow”) “envy they had stored up” for her “from other times.” Let me say now that the stockpiled “envy” that the “sitters” have for Janie involves their past-becomes-present (i.e., the “sitters” view Janie in the present through “back parts of their minds” recollections of her) perception of the presumed domination and self-importance that she lorded over them as Eatonville’s bourgeois, mayoral First Lady. The “sitters” mainly remember Janie as a spoiled trophy-wife whose by proxy mayoral power provided her the finest house in Eatonville; the finest baubles, trinkets, and clothes that this proletariat population of Eatonville has ever seen; and, the finest prospects to maintain capital, property, and well-to-do status in (First Lady) widowhood.

We learn of some of the events that precede Janie’s return to Eatonville from the “sitters” slanted, “burning” perspective. In their estimation, Janie made a hussy-like, post-widowhood run out-of-town in fancy clothes and high spirits with a much younger paramour called Vergible (Tea Cake) Woods. Hurston depicts Janie as looking worn-out when she enunciates her into the novel; dressed plainly, and lacking any sense of sartorial or sentient luster, this character throws off the appearance of a figure that is depleted and far from looking *fine* when she first enters the novel. I have beleaguered the point that rather than with empathy, the “sitters” receive a homecoming Janie with a hypercritical chorus of masticating chatter. The below provides an example of the biting “black dialect” (synonymous with what Gates terms the novel’s “discourse”) of which the “sitters” voraciously vernacular “song” consists:

“What she doin’ coming back here in dem overalls? Can’t she find no dress to put on?—Where’s dat blue satin dress she left here in?—Where all dat money her husband took and died and left her?—What dat ole forty year ole’ oman doin’ wid her hair swingin’ down her back lack some young gal?—Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid?—Thought she was going to marry?—Where he left *her*?—What he done wid all her money?—Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain’t even got no hairs—why she don’t stay in her class” (Hurston, 2).

Where the voice of “narration” softens the blow of cutting content comprising the above “burning statements,” Hurston’s exposition of direct “discourse” constituting these statements

does not. As readers, we are hit with conflicting voices of rendition—at once, “narration” shows us the knife while “discourse” cuts us with it—that illustrate Hurston’s deployment of a “narrative strategy” that combines these voices in a way that “signals attention to its own importance, an importance which would seem to be the privileging of oral speech...oriented toward imitating one of the numerous forms of oral narration to be found in classical Afro-American vernacular literature.” In essence, Gates views Hurston’s “narrative strategy” as nothing short of a literary “innovation.” An “innovation” that not only combines, “seemingly opposed modes of narration...in the diction of standard English, and...discourse, which is always foregrounded by quotation marks and its black diction,” but also goes further to resolve these ostensibly divergent voices by unifying them in a textual language that sounds like typical narration, but is not typical at all when one considers the peculiarities (some of which I have already outlined) of Hurston’s methodology of writing a novel in the form of a “speakerly text.”

The resolve that extends Hurston’s innovative “narrative strategy” involves the author’s presentation of analogous subject matter uttered in the novel by respective voices of “narration” and “discourse” at the same time. In many ways, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* encompasses a singular subject matter that dually focuses and shines prismic rays of light on stages of Janie’s personal development, as well as her questing journeys to gain self-conscious agency in a range of pursuits towards holistic, human *being*. In other words, every actor in Hurston’s novel (including Janie) continuously vocalizes thoughts about the novel’s central subject/subject matter—Janie. Voices of “narration” and “discourse” collude and collide in their cutting vs. softer timbre to shape what Gates terms a multi-vocal “narrative commentary” that arises in the text as a peculiar form of “highly “adorned” free indirect discourse” that both contains and conveys significant information surrounding Janie, as well as core literary and “structural elements” such as the novel’s key conflicts, plot-points, themes, tones, and settings. This “highly “adorned” free indirect discourse” seems to articulate the novel’s narrative coherence. In other words, this type of “discourse” appears to locate an omniscient point-of-view belonging to what we might think of as a typical, reliable narrator to whom we should pay special attention to hear it use “narrative commentary” that effectively *speaks* central subject matters in the novel vital to our gleaning of the crux of the story that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* extends. But, Hurston’s application of “narrative strategy” germane to a “speakerly text” deploys this “highly “adorned” free indirect discourse” in ways that draw attention to the fact that whatever narration, or, omniscient “narrative commentary” that it provides is “highly” rhetorical; it is a device-driven, purposely illusive imitation of narration—particularly, “one of the numerous forms of oral narration to be found in classical Afro-American vernacular literature.” Below, Gates clarifies this, outlining various of Hurston’s writerly maneuvers in using “narrative strategy” to combine both modes and voices of seemingly conflicted forms of “narration” and “discourse” to deftly resolve dialogic, discursive, and textual tensions prone to occlude readers’ overall sense of the novel’s narrative coherence. Gates explains that the novel unfolds with Janie as its central subject/subject matter, and/or its “protagonist;” and:

As the protagonist approaches self-consciousness...not only does the text use free indirect discourse to represent her development, but the diction of the black characters’ discourse comes to inform the diction of the voice of narrative commentary such that, in several passages, it is extraordinarily difficult to distinguish the narrator’s voice from that of the protagonist’s. In other words,

through the use of what Hurston called a highly “adorned” free indirect discourse, which we might think of as a third or mediating term between narrative commentary and direct discourse, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* resolves that implicit tension between standard English and black dialect, the two voices that function as verbal counterpoints in the text’s opening paragraphs (Gates, 84).

When our attention is drawn to the novel’s “highly “adorned” free indirect discourse,” we discover a repository of authoritative (e.g., “protagonist” and “narrator’s voice”) speakers that produce this peculiar language of Hurston’s “speakerly text” by relating in distinct, but overlapping (nearly indistinguishable) voices their insider perspectives on causal events that configure the novel’s story. It seems that it is a multiplex “narrator’s voice” whose use of the language of “highly “adorned” free indirect discourse” supports full expository realization of Hurston’s novelistic “telling of a tale” in the form of a “speakerly text.” Yet, this multiplex “narrator’s voice” (inclusive of all the other voices of which it is designed) is exposed as a silent speaker vis-à-vis the very language that it uses. The language of “highly “adorned” free indirect discourse” that we see both in and as the novel’s written text is a by-product of Hurston’s application of “narrative strategy” whose primary objective is to reveal that a typical “narrator’s voice” (AKA—a typical “structural element” that is reflexively “devalued” in a “speakerly text”) functions very atypically in its imitation of other voices associated with traditional forms of African American “oral narration.” Thus, “highly “adorned” free indirect discourse” belongs in Hurston’s novel to a raconteur whose original voice is silenced by proxy of its mimicry of the voices of anonymous, but still source storytellers that appear to engender the overall tale that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells. I believe that this is the point of Hurston’s methodology of writing her novel in the form of a “speakerly text.” The original voice of the multiplex “narrator’s voice” arises as silent; but, its imitation of engendering (and, equally multiplex) (African, African descendent, or) Negro orators produces what Gates calls not a “narrator’s voice,” but rather a “narrative voice” that is the sole (but still multi-vocal) spinner of the novel’s comprehensive tale.

Of this “narrative voice,” Gates says:

The narrative voice Hurston created, and her legacy to Afro-American fiction, is a lyrical and disembodied yet individual voice, from which emerges a singular longing and utterance, a transcendent, ultimately racial self, extending far beyond the merely individual. Hurston realized a resonant and authentic narrative voice that echoes and aspires to the status of the impersonality, anonymity, and authority of the black vernacular tradition, a nameless, selfless tradition, at once collective and compelling, true somehow to the unwritten text of a common blackness. For Hurston, the search for a telling form of language, indeed the search for a black literary language itself, defines the search for the self (75).

For Hurston, this “narrative voice” speaks something quite specific. It speaks the silence of legacies of Negro voices ardently essaying to overcome silence by expressing *griot*-driven modes of “oral narration” found in “classical” forms of Negro folklore; particularly literary forms of Negro folklore such as the sundry Negro folktales that Hurston expertly researched during her interdisciplinary career as an anthropologist, essayist, and novelist. This “narrative

voice” also speaks something quite specific for me relevant to Hurston’s dichotomous framing both of Janie’s oppositional characteristics, and representational valence in the “speakerly text” that is *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. A Negro woman amongst an all-Negro cast of characters, Janie’s “protagonist’s” tales of exploits, journeys, and quests for self-conscious agency form central subject matters comprising the novel’s overarching story. In the novel, Janie’s vocalizations of her exploits fuse with those of a “narrative voice” whose main impulse for storytelling “echoes and aspires to the status of the impersonality, anonymity, and authority of the black vernacular tradition, a nameless, selfless tradition...true somehow to the unwritten text of a common blackness.” In this way, it seems that Hurston mounts *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a “speakerly text” that fuses Janie’s voice with that of its “narrative voice” to outline their isomorphic accord not only in terms of their twofold role as the novel’s recombinant raconteur that tells us of central subject matters that congeal its narrative coherence, but also in terms of their sharing of impulses to convey that the novel’s narrative coherence “aspires,” or, *stays hungry* to, be what is cannot be—i.e., a written story about Negroes that for the author cannot represent the here-but-not-here beings that Negroes are on individual or collective fronts. In terms of the un-representable Negro woman Janie character, she operates in the novel as a twofold, recombinant “narrative voice”/Janie’s voice that is the fused, primary voice of Hurston’s tale. Through imitation, this character utters the novel’s language of “highly “adorned” free indirect discourse” in ways that signpost that the “true” narrative source that engenders its tale(s) is tantamount to an “unwritten text of common blackness” belonging to an *ur*-orator that expresses its striving to be “nameless, selfless,” and impersonal in its *speaking* of “the authority of the black vernacular tradition.”

In essence, it appears that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel that Hurston’s use of “narrative strategy” floods with literary devices akin to conceits—components of the novel’s written structure, as well as other of its key “structural elements,” merely point to its textual imitation of a source, “unwritten text” whose vital commentary cannot be transcribed, but must *necessarily* be spoken; and, even the novel’s most primary character, Janie (whose voice I will consider from this point on as always fused with the novel’s “narrative voice”), functions to indicate that her proximity to a typical narrator’s authority is third-party in the sense that she imitates, employs the language, and also expresses the longings of a “disembodied” source of “true” narration. I am wont to avoid being tautological, but given the previous few sentences, I can only conclude that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel that Hurston constructs to expressly demonstrate that it is not a story about what it seems to about, at least in relation to readers’ first-blush perceptions of its central subject/subject matter, Janie, and/or its other “*devalued* structural elements.” Again, I must say that I believe that this is Hurston’s point in crafting *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a “speakerly text.” The author silences Janie’s original voice in mockingbird relation to a source *speaker* whose parlance through Janie shows her execution of *griot*-styled storytelling that passes-down, voices, and also highlights what for me signifies her diasporic, *cultural* connection to “adorned” dialect that articulates not the achievement, but “the search for a telling form of language” that aligns with “the search for a black literary language” that “itself, defines the search for the self” portrayed in this character’s story-arc of extended longings, hungers, and searches for existential agency.

Hurston outlines Janie’s chief, “singular longing” quite early on in the novel. When Janie returns to Eatonville, she is a thrice-married, twice-widowed, one-time murderess, itching to tell

her tales of life, loss, and love to a genuine listening-ear. Through the device of frame-tale story-form, Hurston depicts Janie's discovery of said listening-ear in this character's best "kissin friend," Phoeby Watson. Phoeby is physically *in* but not philosophically *of* the corpus of "sitters" that sit "in judgment" of Janie upon her homecoming. Concerned for rather than censuring of her best friend, Phoeby breaks from the "sitters" after Janie is out of their view, making a beeline to the backyard of the Starks' mayoral home. Phoeby is itching to hear the stories that Janie is itching to tell; when the two friends meet, their disparate anxiousness to listen and speak is resolved. Hurston notes "That Phoeby's hungry listening helped Janie to tell her story" (10) of her sabbatical from Eatonville; a sabbatical that we discover occurred on the "Muck" of the Florida Everglades where she lived with, loved fiercely, and killed her third husband, Tea Cake Woods. "Ah been a delegate to de big 'ssociation of life," says Janie to Phoeby. Continuing, Janie asserts to her friend, "Yessuh! De Grand Lodge, de big convention of livin' is just where Ah been dis year and a half y'all ain't seen me." Both listener and speaker are enraptured; as Hurston writes, "They sat there in the fresh young darkness close together. Phoeby eager to feel and do through Janie...Janie full of that oldest human longing—self revelation" (6). Here is the "singular longing" that Janie shares with what I have been calling the *ur-orator* of Hurston's "speakerly text"—a longing for "self revelation" demonstrated in the "adorned" language that she *speaks*. And, insofar as this "singular longing" is exemplary of a profound yearning to "search for the self" as (specifically) "a transcendent, ultimately racial self," it shapes the philosophical warp-and-woof of Janie's overall story in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This is what Hurston's novel is truly about—Janie's protracted search for "self revelation" as one that sees herself as nothing less, other than, or short of a *human* being whose sheer existence *should* organically provide a wide-berth for her eventual achievement "of that oldest human longing—self revelation."

Eat or Be Eaten

In "Power, Judgment, and Narrative in a Work of Zora Neale Hurston: Feminist Cultural Studies (1990)," Rachel Blau DuPlessis analyzes the "interplay" of "multiple determinants" that motivate other of *Their Eyes Were Watching God's* characters to treat Janie as something akin to a target for their consumptive attacks. Like DuPlessis, I view these determinants as encompassing Janie's status in terms of quotidian evaluations of traits associated with her race, class, and sex common to the community of Eatonville that Hurston depicts in the novel. DuPlessis notes the scene where upon entering the novel, Janie is submitted to cannibalizing criticism of the "sitters." Of Janie, DuPlessis explains, "She is black, but her...hair operates as a marker of her racial mix...She is all of forty—too old, according to her neighbors...to change, adventure, or express sexuality. And finally, her overalls are a nice bit of cross-dressing, signifying equality and sexuality in gender terms, and in class terms signifying her double class status as property (petty-bourgeois—local notable) annealed to "poverty" (agricultural day worker)" (DuPlessis, 79). Because, for instance, her "hair" is "swingin' down her back like some young gal." And, because she dons manly "overalls" rather than the purportedly softer-sex, womanly garb of a "blue satin dress," the "sitters" assess Janie as wantonly transgressing codes and mores of normative sociocultural standards that secure firm lines of demarcation between things (e.g., aesthetic things; experiential things) that either are or are not appropriate to be overtly expressed inside and/or outside of the "hard black knot" enclave in which they live.

In the “back parts of their minds” resides an image of Janie that the “sitters” prefer as *appropriate*. This image of our heroine harkens back to days when observable aspects of her mien and manner were shaped by the misogynistic hands of her second husband, Mayor Joe (Jody) Starks. As “Mrs. Mayor Starks,” Janie exemplifies a character that Hurston portrays as mainly navigating an existence with Jody where she unwillingly defers to her husband’s demands to work in the town store that he erected not long after the couple’s arrival in Eatonville. For Janie, as Hurston tells us, working in the store “kept her with a sick headache”; the experience was, in her estimation, “a waste of life and time” not only because of the tedious, shopkeeping labor involved, but also because Joe expects her to act as a model wife/worker required to “keep up appearances” of the couple’s influential ilk as Eatonville’s only business owners. In short, Joe is rendered as wanting Janie to simultaneously perform practical work in the store while also toiling to carry what she feels is a heavy burden of representation where she is charged with pretentiously conveying the couple’s privileged social rank as upper-class entrepreneurs set-apart (on high) from the (comparatively low) townsfolk that are their customers. Janie protests to Joe that this multipart (i.e., part-practical, part-representational) work is psychosocially unwieldy; is not at all to her liking; and is a performance of labor that compels the envious ridicule of their clientele. To Janie’s frequent complaints to discontinue this peculiar labor, Hurston writes that, “Joe kept saying that she could do it if she wanted to and he wanted her to use her privileges.”

Strangely, the *bourgeois*-driven politics-of-representation that Joe demands of Janie’s labor in scenes in the novel surrounding the couples’ marital strife in the town store are inflected by Joe’s anxiety-ridden preoccupation not only with what DuPlessis terms the “racial mix” look of Janie’s hair but also with the allure, autonomy, and sensual power that he fears it conveys. Beyond being frustrated by Joe completely missing the point of her protests about working in the store, Hurston renders Janie as equally (if not more) frustrated with her husband’s demands that while using her “privileges” of pretentious shopkeeping labor she must also wear a rather Mammy-esque article of clothing: a “head-rag” that tames his paranoid sense of the erotic agency that his wife communicates to other men in Eatonville (particularly secondary character in the novel, Walter Thomas) via the unreserved looseness of her “swingin’” hair. As we see in the following passage, Janie’s hair is a sharp point of vexation for Joe; alternatively, Joe’s flat-out insistence that Janie must cover her hair is an issue that vexes her to no end:

This business of the head-rag irked her endlessly. But Jody was set on it. Her hair was NOT going to show in the store. It didn’t seem sensible at all. That was because Joe never told Janie how jealous he was. He never told her how often he had seen the other men figuratively wallowing in it as she went about things in the store. And one night he had caught Walter standing behind Janie and brushing the back of his hand back and forth across the loose end of her braid ever so lightly so as to enjoy the feel of it without Janie knowing what he was doing. Joe was at the back of the store and Walter didn’t see him. He felt like rushing forth with the meat knife and chopping off the offending hand. That night he ordered Janie to tie up her hair around the store. That was all. She was there in the store for *him* to look at, not those others. But he never said things like that (Hurston, 51-52).

Similar to the jury of “sitters” that erroneously judge Janie as a disreputable woman—supposedly deserving of their “burning” critique—Joe judges Janie, and makes her pay a steep price for a so-called crime of disrepute of which she is totally unaware. “Without Janie knowing what he was doing,” Walter erotically ‘wallows’ in Janie’s hair in a way where he figuratively consumes her sensual élan via covert contact with her “loose” locks. In this instance, Walter is the only *criminal* that should (by Joe’s own standards) be penalized, as he is the one that transgresses boundaries of our heroine’s personal space, privacy, and marriage. Yet, Joe sublimates the naked rage that he feels towards Walter onto Janie in a way where he makes Janie Walter’s substitute. In other words, Joe *produces* Janie as a *criminal* after Walter consumes her consumption by Walter her and punishes her with a humiliating task of not just covering her hair, but covering-up (i.e., shamefully concealing) the sinful, Jezebel-like carnality that he twistedly surmises it represents.

I would like to interject here (by way of a small but necessary digression) that Hurston avails readers of the fact that Janie is a character deeply cognizant of the intricacies of aesthetic-driven substitution/sublimation ploys to which she is subjected by characters in the novel such as Joe, Walter, and the “sitters.” Early-on in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, we are introduced to Janie as a six-year-old girl living with her grandmother, Nanny, in “a house in de back-yard” of “quality white folks...in West Florida” called “Washburn” (8). An ex-slave, Nanny cares for young Janie while working for the Washburn family in the capacity of an all-purpose maid during closing years of the nineteenth century. Flashback scenes of Nanny’s life (and Janie’s ethnic heritage) prior to living with the Washburn’s shed much light upon complications that pervade Janie’s existence in terms of her “racial mix” appearance. “Nigger, whut’s yo’ baby doin’ wid gray eyes and yaller hair,” exclaims the “Mistis” on the Roberts plantation in a scene that transports us to Savannah, GA, 1864 when, as Hurston relates, “Sherman” has just “takin’ Atlanta” in the Battle of Atlanta during the American Civil War. Nanny (here, a teenaged bondwoman) has given birth to a daughter, Leafy, who is a product of rape considered (in the context of ideologies of hypodescent and miscegenation prevalent in ante- and post-bellum years) to be a so-called half-caste, or, half-breed child. “Look like you don’t know who is Mistis on dis planation, Madam,” bellows “Mistis” Roberts when she barges into Nanny’s slave-quarters, and spies tale-tell aspects of Leafy’s features (e.g., ‘gray eyes’; ‘yaller hair’) that confirm for her that the “week old” newborn is the *bastard* child of her husband, “Marse” Roberts. “Mistis” Roberts harshly interrogates Nanny, asking her, as Hurston emphasizes, “maybe twenty-five or thirty times” why her baby “looks white.” Nanny’s response to her “Mistis”—“Ah don’t know nothin’ but what Ah’m told tuh do, cause Ah ain’t nothin’ but uh nigger and uh slave”—only serves to stoke the latter’s ire. In a fit of fury, “Mistis” Roberts “slaps” Nanny, beating her until her genteel (seemingly, “cult of white womanhood”) hands become “tired and wore out.” The “Mistis” then proceeds to threaten Nanny’s life: “First thing in de mornin’ de overseer will take you to de whippin’ post and tie you down on yo’ knees and cut the hide offa yo’ yaller back...Ah’ll have you whipped till de blood run down yo’ heels! Ah mean to count the licks mahself. And if it kills you Ah’ll stand de loss.” Adding insult to injury, “Mistis” Roberts also vows that she will sell Leafy to another slaveholder when the “brat is a month old” (16-17).

Fearing the repercussions of her “Mistis” threats, Nanny immediately flees the Roberts plantation with Leafy. Mother and daughter become fugitive slaves, hiding-out in swamps and

woodlands before Nanny gets, as she phrases it, “in quotation wid people” willing to shelter her and Leafy until the “Big Surrender at Richmond” in April 1865 foment the end of the Civil War a month later. This is when Nanny commences working for the Washburn’s; at this time, she is cautiously optimistic that what she perceives as the end of the nation’s “fight about slavery” not only supports her newfound freedom, but also represents an eventuality that signposts a life in “West Florida” where she can “work and make de sun shine on both sides of the street for Leafy.” Sadly, Nanny’s ‘sunny’ dreams for Leafy do not come to fruition. The novel takes an unequivocally dark turn when Hurston informs us that at “only seventeen” Leafy’s hopes of becoming an educator are dashed by events tragically similar to those suffered by Nanny. Leafy is raped by the local Negro schoolteacher; gives birth to Janie; and—scandalized by these events—takes “to drinkin’ likker and stayin’ out nights” until she finally abandons her daughter and severs ties of communication with her mother (18-19). When she becomes her granddaughter’s sole caretaker, Nanny projects her (failed) ‘sunny’ dreams for a good life for Leafy onto Janie. But, as a good deal of narrative content in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* illustrates, Nanny’s dreams for a bright future for her grandchild inaugurate much darkness in Janie’s life.

To a large extent, the character arc that Hurston sketches for Nanny witnesses a traumatized ex-slave whose dreams for her kin are not really dreams. Discomfited by slave life; raped in bondage and witness to her daughter’s rape in freedom; ‘yaller’ mother of a ‘yaller’ haired *bastard* daughter and grandmother of the *bastard* daughter of this daughter—Nanny cannot and does not endorse blissful, parental life-dreams for Janie that contradict hard-as-nails experiential conditions that have defined her reality. Nanny’s dreams for Janie amount to plans in the vein of preemptive strikes against ruinous circumstances that she believes will ensue in her misbegotten, miscegenated granddaughter’s life. In essence, Nanny’s dreams occur under auspices of “hungry Time.” Indeed, Hurston’s portrayal of Nanny witnesses this character’s ongoing exposure to acts of victimization and hardship exclusively suffered by Negro women whose racialized no-class (in Slavery) or second-class (in times of Jim Crow) status as U.S. (non)citizens is further enfeebled by broad sexist notions that their female gender reflexively designates them as (biologically, politically, sociologically, e.g.) “lesser” human beings. “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (14) is Nanny’s firm conviction in this regard. Hence, even when Janie is just a six-years-old girl living in “a house in de backyard” of “quality white folks...in West Florida” called “Washburn,” Nanny raises her grandchild in ways that expose Janie’s young, tender mind to hard life-lessons that are beyond her years in terms of assuaging “de mule of the world” fate that Nanny is convinced will befall her “nigger woman” granddaughter in future years. In short, Nanny does what she thinks she must do to provide her juvenile grandchild an education in adult ways of planning against, preempting, and, basically, avoiding a destiny where injurious vicissitudes of life and/or injurious people (as in her case with “Mistis” Roberts) will put her in situations where she must fight threats of having her ‘yaller back whipped till de blood runs down her heels.’

And so, Nanny’s education of her grandchild begins at the Washburn’s; and, in many ways, Nanny’s tutelage illustrates a form of mis-education that makes Janie both overly self-conscious and deeply cognizant not only of her “racial mix” aesthetics, but also of the affect that said aesthetics have upon other characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that seem hell-bent on consuming Janie. After Nanny’s death, Janie relates:

She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after *things*. It was all according to the way you see things. Some people could look at a mud-puddle and see an ocean with ships. But Nanny belonged to that other kind that liked to deal in scraps. Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon—for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you—and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. Most humans didn't love one another nohow, and this mislove was so strong that even common blood couldn't overcome it all the time. She had found a jewel down inside herself and she wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell. Been set for still-bait. When God had made The Man, he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks make them hunt for one another, but the mud is deaf and dumb. Like all the other tumbling mud-balls, Janie had tried to show her shine (85-86).

In the end, Janie grows deeply resentful of Nanny's attempts to diminish her independence in exercising liberal claims to liberal existence in relation to her searches for "self-revelation."

Amid numerous, incredibly important commentators that have provided analyses, reviews, and theorizations of Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* since its publication in 1937, I should like to take-up here criticism from an writer whose work I will explore in the next chapter of this dissertation, *Fire*. A magnificent author, but here, in my opinion, misguided in missing Janie's story-arc of "self-revelation," Richard Wright in his *New Masses* review ("Between Laughter and Tears," 1937) of Hurston's work summarizes the novel as follows:

Their Eyes Were Watching God is the story of Zora Neale Hurston's Janie who, at sixteen, married a grubbing farmer at the anxious instigation of her slave-born grandmother. The romantic Janie...longed to be a pear tree in blossom and have a "dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of the blossom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace." Restless, she fled from her famer husband and married Jody...who, in the end, proved to be no better than her first husband. After twenty years...Janie found herself a frustrated widow of forty with a small fortune on her hands. Tea Cake...drifted along and, despite his youth, Janie took him. For more than two years they lived happily; but Tea Cake was bitten by a mad dog and was infected with rabies. One night in a canine rage, Tea Cake tried to murder Janie, thereby forcing her to shoot the only man she had ever loved (Wright, 76).

Wright synthesizes the involved, sweeping tale that Hurston presents as a rather inane yarn where a hormone-crazy adolescent Janie launches a fruitless search throughout adulthood for vapid romance in the form of finding a “bee” to fertilize her “sanctum” in a series of marriages to relatively useless men. Adding insult to his pretty injurious critique, Wright continues, saying, “Miss Hurston can write; but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley...Miss Hurston *voluntarily* continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro...the minstrel technique that makes the “white folks” laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears” (76).

It is no surprise that staunchly Marxist, social protest novelist, Wright, finds Hurston wanting in portraying what he appears to view as un-politicized, *grey area* Negroes whose “adorned” dialect, and seemingly artless actions illustrate their failure to achieve sharp sensibility in throwing off the appearance of “minstrel” rubes, happy to *stay in their place* of endlessly occupying indeterminate sensorial circuits “between laughter and tears.” It is surprising, however, that Wright gave no consideration to what at the time was Hurston’s well-known dedication to saturating her scholarship (i.e., both fiction and non-fiction works) with exemplars of Negro folk expression that entirely rejected either playing to, or pleasing white readerships. Two years prior to the publication of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston published her widely-read and –reviewed, *Mules and Men*; a collection of Negro folklore that clearly outlines the author’s notions of ways that Negroes insentiently exclude white audiences from intimate understanding of their aesthetic, cultural, and linguistic intelligence. In her “Introduction” to *Mules and Men* (1935), Hurston makes crystal clear the epistemological *veto* certain to befall curious white audiences either raising questions about, or posing questions to Negroes concerning biased conceptions of their “happy darky” folksiness:

The Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, “Get out of here!” We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing...The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries. The theory behind our tactics: “The white man is always trying to know into somebody else’s business. All right, I’ll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind. I’ll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I’ll say my say and sing my song (Hurston, 2-3).

As Hurston’s biographer Robert Hemenway explains in his 1977 tome, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, the author’s empirical acumen in conducting extensive ethnographic explorations of Negro folklore throughout the Caribbean and the U.S. bolstered a case where “Hurston’s research convinced her that the intrinsic beauty of folk expression was by far its most important element. The protest impulse was not subordinated, but stylized so that it could survive” (Hemenway, 222). Like other giants of African American literature and literary

criticism (e.g., Alain Locke and Langston Hughes—incidentally, Hughes refers to Hurston as “a perfect ‘darkie’” in his 1940 autobiography, *The Big Sea*) whose voices prevailed during late- to post-Harlem Renaissance years, Wright appears to entirely dismiss Hurston’s “stylized” representation of Negroes’ rejection of white supremacist misconceptions and violations of their number. I will explicate further in *Fire* how, to some extent, Wright’s outlooks indicate his preference to see the substance of Negroes’ social protest platforms in clearly written words, as opposed to any form of abstracted language. For now, let me say that in Hurston’s estimation, the “stylized” folk language that we spy in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* more than suffices to signal Negroes’ rejection of anti-black white actions and/or concerns. Yes, Hurston’s characters in the novel “eat and laugh and cry and work and kill” as Wright remarks. But I hope that this chapter has thus far demonstrated that these ostensibly simple actions are far more intricate than they seem.

With such nuance, Hurston portrays ‘laughing and crying’ characters in her novel attempting to figuratively eat Janie with killing words, deeds, and other masticating attacks largely because they covet the liberal autonomy that she displays in her questing hungers, and searches for “self revelation.” These characters miss the point, however, that Janie’s searches aim to achieve *human* claims to becoming an “ultimately racial self,” as opposed to claims to selfhood that are *always already* limited by rights to a sham, half-way sense of liberal existence prescribed by the confining terms of her status as a racialized *Negro*. Ever one to merge her anthropological and literary ambitions, Hurston (amongst the many other reasons that I have explained) ensconces Janie in the “speakerly text” that is *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to portray how her “longing” to *be* something more than a monolithic Negro illuminates how things *should* be for Negroes; even those Negroes extant in *Jim Crowed* milieus such as those that Hurston features in the novel *should* (in her estimation) have broad, social, legal, and political largesse to exercise cultural, and, especially, *human* explorations of life. The latter point is what Hurston shows us via “adorned,” abstracted, and “stylized” language, rather than tells us in clearly written words that outline an explicit “protest” agenda attending her depiction of Janie’s searches for “self revelation” in the novel. I dare say that Hurston’s life-long project was to show rather tell (in her interdisciplinary writing of both critical and creative texts) her readerships that Negroes not only *should* but also *would* pursue existence in non-reactive positionality to depreciatory white supremacist actions against or gross regulations of Negro life.

The “grubbing farmer” to which Wright makes reference above (in his scathing review of Hurston’s novel) is one Logan Killicks. A man that Janie’s grandmother Nanny forced her grandchild to marry to avoid becoming a “Negro woman,” facing the certain doom of becoming “a mule of the world” without the “protection” of a husband. Logan greatly displeases Janie. Beyond the fact that he’s quite her senior, Logan wants Janie to repay him with endless kindness and submission for supposedly saving her from his monolithic conception of Janie’s fate (specifically) as a Negro woman with a so-called sordid past. About a year into their marriage, Janie’s temper thins in the face of Logan’s misogynist demands for her constant wifely obedience. Janie confronts Logan one night, “Ah wuz thinkin’ real hard about us; about you and me.” “It’s about time. Youse powerful independent around here sometime considerin,’” retorts Logan to the bride that he clearly views as his property. “Considerin’ whut for instance,” Janie heatedly queries. Derisively, Logan says, “Considerin’ youse born in a carriage thout no top to it, and yo’ mama and you bein’ born and raised in de white folks back-yard.” “You didn’t say all

dat when you wuz begging Nanny for me to marry you,” Janie fires back. “Ah thought you would appreciate good treatment. Thought Ah’d take and make somethin’ outa yuh. You think youse white folks by de way you act” (Hurstun, 29).

Here, Logan perceives Janie as somehow lucky that given her poorly born, Negro woman status, he is willing to “make somethin’ outa” her like an object that it’s his natural right to improve and mold. Logan attempts to subordinate Janie based on aspects of her Negro identity to which she is apathetic. In this way, Logan seeks to consume Janie but is left (figuratively and literally) hungry. In the end, Janie leaves Logan after meeting Joe Starks who seduces her one afternoon while Logan is away running errands. Joe tempts Janie with promises of a better life and time-sensitive plans to runaway with him and leave her unhappy marriage behind. Initially, Janie is uncertain of absconding with Joe. But one morning while cooking breakfast for Logan, Janie contemplates her situation:

She wasn’t even angry. Logan was accusing her of her mamma, her grandmamma and her feelings, and she couldn’t do a thing about any of it. The sow-belly in the pan needed turning. She flipped it over and shoved it back. A little cold water in the coffee pot to settle it. Turned the hoe-cake with a plate and then made a little laugh. What was she losing time for? A feeling of sudden newness and change came over her. Janie hurried out of the front gate and turned south. Even if Joe was not there waiting for her, the change was bound to do her good (31).

We learn that Joe is, indeed, at the gate waiting for Janie as planned. Janie leaves Logan with hugely hurt pride and a meager breakfast burned to a crisp given that she abandons her so-called wifely duties to cook for and coddle a man that thinks he saved her from a prescribed future as a Negro woman. Logan attempts to eat-away-at Janie for reasons to which she is indifferent. And Janie leaves Logan starving for nutrition that never existed in his wife.

Another instance of a character attempting to figuratively eat Janie up occurs after Joe has died, and a married Tea Cake and Janie move to the Florida Everglades to take-up seasonal work on the “Muck.” On the “Muck,” the couple encounters one Mrs. Turner that owns a local eatery. Hurstun makes clear that Mrs. Turner is “color struck”; “Mrs. Turner’s shape and features were entirely approved by Mrs. Turner,” says the author. “Her nose was slightly pointed and she was proud. Her thin lips were an ever delight to her eyes. Even her buttocks in bas-relief were a source of pride. To her way of thinking, all these things set her aside from Negroes. That was why she sought out Janie to friend with” (134). Mrs. Turner views her features as quintessentially white; and she greatly admires Janie for her “white folks” features to the point of worship. Mrs. Turner loathes Tea Cake because, as she sees it, he too black for a white prize in the form of a wife such as Janie. When Tea Cake gets wind of Mrs. Turner’s skewed outlooks on his dark complexion, he advises Janie to give this “color struck” woman the cold-shoulder. Janie tries this, but fails as Mrs. Turner chases her down every time that she sees her, cornering her, and also plying her with unwanted chatter surrounding her praise of whiteness. On an occasion where Janie successfully rebuffs Mrs. Turner’s cornering tactics, the latter assesses the situation thusly:

She felt honored by Janie's acquaintance and she quickly forgave and forgot snubs in order to keep it. Anyone who looked more white folkish than herself was better than she was in her criteria, therefore it was right that they should be cruel to those more negroid than herself in direct ratio to their negroness. Like the pecking-order in a chicken-yard. Insensate cruelty to those you can whip, and groveling submission to those you can't. Once having set up her idols and built alters to them it was inevitable that she should accept any inconsistency and cruelty from her deity as all good worshippers do from theirs. All gods who receive homage are cruel. All gods dispense suffering without reason. Otherwise they would not be worshipped...Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood. Mrs. Turner, like all other believers had built an altar to the unattainable—Caucasian characteristics for all...So she didn't cling to Janie Woods the woman. She paid homage to Janie's Caucasian characteristics as such. And when she was with Janie she had a feeling of transmutation, as if she herself had become whiter and with straighter hair and she hated Tea Cake for his defilement of divinity (138-139).

Mrs. Turner attempts to consume Janie as the wrong kind of "God." Her feeling of "transmutation" is not reciprocated by Janie as this character does not seek a transcendent status based on anything that has to do with aesthetics of her race. Mrs. Turner is left starved by Janie in this way.

And then there is most dramatic case of 'eat or be eaten' dynamics that occurs in Hurston's novel—the case of Tea Cake, and his essays to consume Janie/the case of Janie consuming Tea Cake by (in folk parlance) killing him dead. Among the other slanted ideas that Mrs. Turner has, she has a notion that Janie should leave Tea Cake for her (equally "white folkish" looking) brother. Tea Cake is infuriated by this, and he decides to beat Janie to keep her "in her place," and also let the other men on the "Muck" know 'who is the boss' of the Woods' marriage. "Tea Cake, you sho is a lucky man...Uh person can see every place you hit her" (140), says a friend of Tea Cake's called Sop-the-Bottom when he sees the former's handiwork in *disciplining* Janie on her light, "white folkish" skin. Certainly, when Janie initially meets Tea Cake in Eatonville, their romance is sweet. On the "Muck" their romance turns dark with scenes of domestic violence that get even darker when Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog, begins to act like a rabid dog himself, and is subsequently "put down" by Janie when she is forced to shoot and kill him. Tea Cake is yet another character that attempts to consume Janie with abusive behavior that seeks to take-her-down-a-notch in relation to her broad autonomy and independent spirit. As he is dying from the gunshot wound that Janie delivered, Tea Cake "sinks his teeth" into his wife's arm, biting her as if he wants to eat her alive. Janie leaves all characters that try to consume her hungry. And in some cases, she leaves them for dead.

Their Eyes Were Watching...

As the novel's "narrative voice," I conjecture that Janie functions as the "God" indicated in the novel's title. In *speaking* Negroes' diasporic, cultural histories, she acts as a form of *logos*. As John 1:1 states, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Janie's close cultural proximity to the pure creative source of the language of

Negro folklore transforms her “adorned” words into a story that conveys (or “fleshes out”) her search to become an exalted, “ultimately racial self” that ultimately represents divine aspects of Negro culture. As stated, many characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* essay to figuratively eat Janie, misperceiving the alimentary source that they seek to consume. These characters view Janie as one that imagines herself as exalted or transcendent because of her access to aesthetics and trappings of whiteness. In other words, these characters believe that Janie vainly believes that she is better than other Negroes due to said trappings. Such characters nip and gnaw at Janie to simultaneously whittle-down her presumed egotism and also satiate their sense of power in conquering what they deem a “high-siddity,” bourgeois “*Negro*.” But Janie is indifferent to aspects of her social power and privilege that are contextualized as high- or low-class by strict proxy of her racialized Negro identity. She is as uncaring of her by proxy relationship to being a “*Negro*” *anything* as “the earth which soaks up urine and perfume with the same indifference” (137) as Hurston describes Janie’s disposition in a scene where her constrained marriage to Joe makes her feel like a prisoner of “hungry Time.” Janie’s friends, kin, and paramours suffer harsh consequences in seeking to consume Janie as a means to produce their self-empowerment through such forms of nourishment. Unbeknownst to characters in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* looking to quell their uncommon hungers to consume Janie’s “*Negro*” powers, they attempt to consume a source of alimentation akin to pure cultural creation; akin to the animating spirit of *logos* that conveys even the anonymous, “nameless,” and silent stories that configure Negroes’ cultural histories in the miraculous way of a “God.”

CHAPTER THREE

Fire

His arms and legs were aching from being cramped into a small space, but he dared not move. He knew that they would not care if he had made himself more comfortable, but his moving would have called attention to himself and his black body. And he did not want that. Those people made him feel things he did not want to feel. If he were white, if he were like them, it would have been different. But he was black. So he sat still, his arms and legs aching.

—Richard Wright, (Bigger Thomas in) *Native Son*

Thus, the state of muscle tension, in its inchoate resistance, its mime of unconscious turmoil poised at the lip of consciousness, also trembles at the edge of a future that does not yet, for it, exist even in the manner of futures, since it lacks ideal shape. Still, that *lack* is only comparative; it does not describe a void. As my readings of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty suggest, tense muscles refer the native/black back to *anonymous existence*: they refer him to an indeterminacy which is “freedom” in the form of anguish and (as a physical manifestation) vertigo, as these terms are given substance in Sartrean phenomenological thought...This muscle tension...is what is not void, even in the seemingly fallow fields where the terrible mirage of blackness so obscures reality that a humanist future is vanishingly fragile, and yet somehow a claim is staked to some kind of freedom that is, or can become humanity. To inhabit this state, to plumb the experience of this terror-struck and terror constituted double-body which is inert and moves, rigid with death and with active resistance...is...a practice of disalienation within and underwritten by alienation.

—Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*

“Flesh,” I would contend, is not *quite* the zero degree of “social conceptualization” or subjectivity, for, though denuded almost entirely of subjectivity, flesh is still *alive*. Bare life/flesh is close to the zero degree of subjectivity in that it is defined as readily killable. However, we must remember that, when one kills flesh, it is transformed, it dies and becomes *meat*; meat, one can say, is insensate flesh. And, to the extent that meat rather than flesh is the absolute zero degree of subjectivity, my extension of Spillers’s formulation allows us to define the zone inhabited by “bare life” or the death-bound-subject as that between flesh and meat. Viewed from within the subjectivity trapped in this zone, one needs to stress that bare life always exists as “flesh” that is readily and easily convertible to “meat” and that it is precisely this convertibility, what we might call “negative latency,” between the two that constitutes “bare life.”

—Abdul R. JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death*

Let us see what the meaning is of the demands of a man who is underfed, poorly paid, and hungry. Is he simply trying to avoid a certain discomfort or the fear of dying? Of course, deep down there is that as well but there is also the fear of weakening oneself, to be seen as a weakened man, the rage at being stuck in an impasse, of being hunted down and trapped like a rat. Hunger is precisely in itself the demand to be something other than a belly, to be a man...Hunger, simply hunger...is already the demand of a man who wants to be freed from need, who wants to be freed from whatever prevents him from being a man. Hunger is already a demand for freedom.

—Jean-Paul Sartre, “To Be Hungry Already Means That You Want To Be Free”

He who is full loathes honey, but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet.

—Proverbs 27: 7

It's Like Fire

In Richard Wright's novel, *Native Son* (1940), main character, Bigger Thomas, angrily, resentfully, and unceasingly yearns for inclusive enfranchisement in an early-twentieth century U.S. setting where his blackness assures his disenfranchisement. In many ways, Wright's characterization of Bigger frames him as a site, locating intense hungers for unrestricted self-determination that are impossible to sate. The novel portrays Bigger voicing an index of circumstances that identify what he discerns as bilious barriers to fulfillment of his hungers. For instance, the mere circumstance of his mother, brother, and sister's familial connections to him provokes in Bigger obstructive sensations of *ad nauseam* nausea. Early in the novel, Wright describes acutely limiting conditions in which twenty-year-old Bigger, his mother, and his two younger siblings live. Crammed into a ramshackle apartment in Chicago's ghettoized South Side, too-close physical quarters foster broad emotional distances between members of the Thomas clan. Wright does not spare readers the dirty details when granting us an initial view of the blighted muckiness underlining the Thomas' domestic lives. The grating blare of an alarm clock, and a “surly grunt” that emits from the mouth of Bigger's awakening mother are the stark sounds that introduce us to an innocent image of Bigger as “a black boy standing in a narrow space between two iron beds” (3). Bigger shares one of these “iron beds” with his brother, Buddy. Bigger's sister, Vera, and, his mother separately occupy two other beds comprising the shared sleeping area in the family's one-room abode. Space in the Thomas apartment is so scarce that personal privacy is enacted as a form of avoiding shame. For the Thomas women and men, morning tasks of shedding their nighttime bedclothes are exercises of strained coyness—“the two boys kept their faces averted while their mother and sister put on enough clothes to keep them from feeling ashamed, and the mother and sister did the same thing while the boys dressed” (4). Such is the straightjacketed nature of the Thomas' morning rituals of negotiating sensory and sartorial discomfort.

Yet another mucky morning ritual for the Thomas' involves repeat visits from a tough-as-nails rat. “There he is again, Bigger” (4), screams his now clothed mother when she sees a “huge black rat” (5) scurry from its usual hole, and, subsequently, dash behind a trunk to avoid extermination. Bigger is ready for battle. The rat boldly leaps at Bigger, snags “in its teeth” its human foe's “trouser-leg,” and doggedly endures in “hanging on” (5) to what Wright describes as the twenty-year-old “black boy” that here seems rather constrained to

prove that he is (in some, I speculate, hyperbolic way) the *man*, or, valiant *protector* of the Thomas house. Bigger violently kicks the rat loose from his leg, and then enlists his little brother's help to kill the (once again) skedaddding vermin. "Gimme that skillet, Buddy," requests Bigger. Buddy obeys. Bigger then hurls the skillet at the rat, and misses his target. Dizzy with rage, he tries again. "Bigger aimed and let the skillet fly with a heavy grunt... 'I got 'im... By God, I got 'im.'" With "his clenched teeth bared in a smile," Bigger moves closer to the dead body of the rat. The impetus of overkill appears to permeate this "black boy's" being; seeing his handiwork in successfully killing the rat, Wright informs us that "Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat's head, crushing it, cursing hysterically: 'You sonofabitch'" (6). The terrified screams of his mother, and, sister, Vera, provide a horrible form of ambient noise that backgrounds Bigger's battle with, killing, and frenzied overkilling of the rat. When the Thomas women's screams cease, Bigger appears, somehow, unsatisfied with his victory. His mother and sister's screams signify their immense terror, which further signifies their need for Bigger's (at least as he appears to view these matters) exaggerated *man-of-the-house* brand of protection. The Thomas women's respective silences usurp from Bigger a context encompassing sights & sounds of terror upon which this "black boy" seems to rely to enact brute and defensive behaviors that validate (and then, over-validate via overkilling) the actuality of some sort of what he perceives as his *uber*-shielding presence.

"Usurp" is a strong word, but I use it in the previous sentence decisively, largely because Wright sketches in quite bold fashion how Bigger's post rat-killing actions seek recompense, retaliation, and, I venture, terror-inducing revenge that reestablishes the context that this character needs to support reactive acting-out of his *uber*-manhood. Indeed, his mother, and sister's screams cease, but Bigger notices that the latter has not fully shed the last of dissolving tendrils of her terror in relation to the threat of what we learn is "over a foot long" rat that both of the Thomas brothers deem (*a la* postmortem) a "sonofabitch" whose absurdly long claws and teeth "could cut your throat" (6). Vera jumps on her bed as the rat-battle ensues, and remains there after Bigger annihilates the vermin. Bigger notices Vera's dissolving, but still, cloying trauma. "Please take him out" (7), entreats Vera to Bigger, showing her desperate need to alleviate her fears by having the rat's body not just dead, but dead-and-gone. Bigger does not obey. As Wright outlines, the "black boy" seems hell-bent on both reestablishing and intensifying his little sister's distress. To Vera's repeated pleadings to get rid of the rodent's body, Wright informs us that (upon picking-up the bloody, pulverized carcass), "Bigger laughed and approached the bed with the dangling rat, swinging it to and fro like a pendulum, enjoying his sister's fear" (7). In response, Vera gasps "convulsively," and then screaming and swooning, falls "headlong" on the bed, rolling "limply from the bed to the floor." Bigger's mother is aghast at what we discover is Bigger's routine, bullying behavior. "Boy, sometimes I wonder what makes you act like you do," admonishes Bigger's mother to her tyrant son. "You scared your sister with that rat and she *fainted!* Ain't you got no sense at *all?*" Bigger feigns ignorance; "Aw, I didn't know she was that scary" (7). Needless to say, Wright makes crystal clear that Bigger knows quite well the depths, triggers, and (in terms of satisfying his needs for her terror) tantalizing by-products of his sister's fear.

Bigger chucks the rat's body in the outdoor garbage, and when he returns to the Thomas' ratrap apartment his mother continues to admonish her oldest son. Here, Wright

allows readers' to glimpse other reasons that lend to Bigger's perception that his family robs him of or usurps from him things akin to constitutive elements of his subjective mettle, or, strength of being. Bigger's mother exclaims, "Suppose you wake up some morning and find your sister dead? What would you think then? Suppose those rats cut our veins at night when we sleep? Naw! Nothing like that ever bothers you! All you care about is your own pleasure. Even when the relief offers you a job you won't take it till they threaten to cut off your food and starve you! Bigger, honest, you the most no-countest man I ever seen in all my life!" Annoyed at what proves to be his mother's very familiar diatribe, Bigger retorts, "You done told me that a thousand times" (9). In this instance, Bigger's mother ignores the victory of her son's rat-killing efforts because she relies on him to be the Thomas household's breadwinner. In-and-out of reform school during most of his adolescent and teen years, and, preferring to spend the bulk of his time committing petty crimes with his ne'er-do-well neighborhood friends, G.H., Gus, and Jack (who Bigger calls his "gang"), Bigger's mother expects her son to embody an effective head-of-household role that she thinks he is wantonly shunning by proxy of his constant "no-countest" behavior. Subtextually, Bigger's mother indicts her first-born son as being an enormously epic failure in the explicit text of the haranguing that she fires at him a "thousand times," and, probably, more. Bigger should not be just a rat-killer, but one who is decidedly not "no-countest" in earning an income that illustrates his dual enacting and meeting of responsibilities to create better living conditions for the Thomas' where rat infestation will not even be an issue. Bigger's brother and sister also look to their older sibling to embody an effective head-of-household role. By no means a sensitive character of an empathetic variety, Wright, nonetheless, crafts Bigger as an actant that has a sharply refined sense of his mother, and siblings' breadwinner expectations of him. The following reflects how these expectations strike Bigger. As snippets of commentary from Buddy and Vera intermingle with his mother's unremitting criticism of his shiftless qualities, Wright says of Bigger that:

He shut their voices out of his mind. He hated his family because he knew that they were suffering and that he was powerless to help them. He knew that the moment he allowed himself to feel to its fullness how they lived, the shame and misery of their lives, he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair. So he held toward them an attitude of iron reserve; he lived with them, but behind a wall, a curtain. And toward himself he was even more exacting. He knew that the moment he allowed what his life meant to fully enter into his consciousness, he would either kill himself or someone else. So he denied himself and acted tough (10).

Choosing to deny "consciousness" of himself as a vulnerable, unstructured *self*, Bigger simultaneously denies consciousness of others in the same vein. Spontaneous familial relations necessitating impromptu, reciprocal, or reflexive acknowledgment of others' human exigencies is for Bigger disagreeable to say the least.

Bigger structures relations with his kin only insofar as they are commensurate to the "exacting" proportions of the occlusive structures (i.e., "curtains" or "walls") that he, it seems, hides behind in stony, self-alienating security. In this way, Bigger determines (with iron-clad "iron reserve") not only how he will respond to extemporized expectations, and/or

natural familial needs of his mother, and siblings, but also who, as well as what he and each of these actants' becomes when they play their part under the aegis of the onerous conditions that this "black boy" structures to support interpersonal forms of kinship that ensue in predetermined, rather bellicose ways. In this way, Bigger's mother and siblings become for him monolithic, I dare say, topological renditions of *enemies* that (insofar as Bigger distinguishes them as fulfilling their predetermined roles in his solipsistic arena) stand in relation to what they *make* (in contradistinctive fashion) him become; i.e., a *noble* figure that *must* enact overblown deeds of gallant, hero-worthy *uber*-manhood. Self-sequestered within his "exacting" arena (that forms the overall structure of various systems typifying Bigger's definitions of inter- and intra-personal *self* and also kinship relations) Bigger can, indeed, imagine that he enacts such superhuman deeds because he has license to enact them by express dint of his classification of both the extents and meanings of these deeds. For Bigger, as Wright emphasizes, his rat-battle signifies some sort of Roman coliseum-esque, fight-to-the-death act of heroic magnitudes; with overblown, overkill energy, Bigger vanquishes a mere (albeit freakishly "huge") vermin whose death appears to take-on a meaning for him that obliges "sonofabitch," "By God," and other "hysterical" exclamations of his opponent's defeat. Based upon standards that hold aloft interactions within the skintight confines of Bigger's "exacting" arena, he determines that he has done enough to meet the mark of exalted, magnanimous protection of his family. But, as Wordsworth's words will long ring true, "the world is too much with us"; Bigger is, in this case, irrevocably both *of* and *in* an intimate (e.g., domestic) world that, as expressed by his refined sense of his mother and sibling's continuous expectations of him to be victorious as a breadwinner (rather than as a mere rat-killer), will not verify his "having his cake, and, eating it too" inclinations of meeting others' needs *only* by way of fulfilling idiosyncratic conditions, dynamics, and preset interpersonal transactions that coalesce the physics of the axis around which *his* cosseted version of the world spins.

All of this is to say that Bigger is a character that works quite hard to maintain a "tough" mode of comportment that he urgently wants to be successful as an equally "tough" defense that will serve to keep himself, and (especially) those closest to him in the hierarchical order in which he discerns they belong. Bigger feels "powerless" to help his family—that is, he feels "powerless," specifically, if the event arises that he lets himself "feel to its fullest" the poverty, "shame and misery of their lives." If Bigger feels these things to their "fullest" scope, he suspects "he would be swept out of himself with fear and despair." To avoid feeling "powerless," Bigger must be "tough" in brutishly dominating others as a means to secure all of their disparate places in his skewed vision of a Foucaudian stripe of the "order of things." In overpowering others, Bigger becomes powerful; in thusly becoming powerful, Bigger enjoys a veneer of being a self-determined subject that can distinguish its *self* as such because it stands in (I suspect, vertically hierarchical) contrast to *other* "powerless" object *selves* that it has conquered. But this powerful veneer of subjectivity is, for Bigger, fleeting; he expects the world to rise up (or, possibly, sink down) to meet him, but, as Wright illustrates in *Native Son*'s progression, the world in which he most intimately and irrevocably lives (e.g., closely interacting—even in standoffish, "tough" fashion—with employers, family, friends, lovers) expects that he should rise up (in kind) to meet its expectations, and demands.

Hence, the sheer humanity of others (e.g., inevitable instances of others' mortality manifesting in expressions of human vicissitudes to which he might have to respond in empathetic, immediate, or improvisational ways) imposes itself upon Bigger as a type of force that robs from him (a "thousand times," and, probably, more) delusions of the faculty of the defense that the "walls" of his solipsistic world provide. Particularly, the humanity of others is for Bigger not just any force, but a social force that incessantly imposes needs for reciprocal interactions that Bigger, simply, feels "powerless" to perform. Any meeting of other's needs for spontaneous human interaction would sweep Bigger "out of himself," and compel him to live as one permeated both by and with "fear and despair" not only because he would have to exist in a proverbial brass tacks, *real* world that contradicts his deluded sense of a world that is (absolutely) his own; but also, and most importantly, because he would have to exist as one whose unrestricted acts of human interaction would (quite frequently) be foiled by occurring in a *real* world whose social ordering summarily rejects his humanity as a disenfranchised Negro man. Bigger is not afraid to experience self-manufactured, or, self-referential feelings of "fear and despair" that are logical by-products of his known, walled-in world. But, to be unguardedly exposed to and exploited by to a consistent stream of spur-of-the-moment acts of anti-black aggression, humiliation, and violation of his person (e.g., in attempting to engage in liberal acts of sociality) would fill Bigger with unknown feelings of dread that do not sit well in this "black boy's" (literal or figurative) gut given that, on the one hand, they galvanize his hunger for unrestricted access to forms of sociality and social justice to which he is steadily denied. And, on the other hand (and, conterminously), they incite his recognition that he is "powerless" to overthrow forces that are not only responsible for effecting his social denial, but are also responsible for effecting his acute hunger to overthrow, or, "kill," these very forces that he recognizes are impossible for him to defeat.

Fulfilling his expected role as a stable individual that aides in upholding heteronormative ideals of, for example, the "American as apple pie" social institution of the strong, U.S. family; or, for instance, manifesting the role of a responsible earner, and/or breadwinner that brings to life solid images of the so-called fair benefits and values of the social institution of U.S. labor—these potential eventualities indicate forces that Bigger feels he, at once, cannot defeat, and that, perpetually, defeat him. These forces are synonymous with what I specified at the outset of this chapter as circumstances that Bigger views as bilious barriers to sating his hungers for enfranchisement and unrestricted self-determination. And, though these forces stem from various sources (e.g., Bigger's stilted interactions with family, friends, employers, etc.), Wright elucidates throughout the whole of *Native Son* that they coalesce one primary circumstance that provokes viscerally vexing, often gustatory, *ad nauseam* nausea in Bigger—this primary force is that of hegemonic whiteness. For example, after enduring embattling events that inaugurate their morning, the Thomas' sit-down to eat breakfast, and a discussion of Bigger's potential job, working as a chauffeur for one of Chicago's wealthiest white family's (Real estate moguls, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dalton; and, their twenty-three-year-old daughter, Mary Dalton) begins. Bigger is expected at the Dalton's that evening to interview for a job that he is loath to take. "You know you have to see Mr. Dalton at five-thirty," advises Bigger's mother to her son that she is still loosely haranguing. Angrily, Bigger responds, saying, "I told you last night I was going to take it. How many times you want to ask me" (11).

Again, Bigger's siblings' chime in with two-cents commentary that intermingles with his mother's words. Buddy wants his mother to "lay off" of Bigger. Vera is of a different mind and indicts her oldest brother with failing to be grateful for his prospective job. "Bigger's sitting here like he ain't glad to get a job" (11), charges Vera to the group. Spying Bigger's increasing anger, his mother takes action to ensure that her son does not get so enraged that he will scrap the potential job at the Dalton's entirely. In "a low, kind tone of voice," Bigger's mother appeals to her first-born—"If you get that job...I can fix up a nice place for you children. You could be comfortable and not have to live like pigs" (11). Bigger takes umbrage at what he feels is his family's tirade-like attack upon him in wanting him to secure their wellbeing. He sits seething, trying to eat without letting exasperation overtake him. Then, as Wright details, Bigger considers his mother, and sibling's expressed needs, and, "As he ate he felt that they were thinking of the job he was to get that evening and it made him angry; he felt that they had tricked him into cheap surrender" (12). Bigger's anger boils-over, and after demanding (and receiving) from his mother half of the Thomas family's last money (one of two quarters for "carfare" (12)), Bigger storms out of the house with intentions to meet his "gang" at a local pool hall called, Doc's. Bigger walks towards the pool hall, and very soon happens upon one of his "gang" friends, Gus. Bigger and Gus exchange pleasantries and cigarettes, and then stop to lean "their backs against the red brick wall of a building, smoking, their cigarettes slanting white across their black chins" (15). Though Gus is reticent to do so, he eventually succumbs to Bigger's proposal that they "play 'white'" (17). Incidentally, "playing white" is a game of Bigger, and his "gang's" invention where they take-on roles of figures such as "Mr. J.P. Morgan" (18), the President of the United States, or Army Generals to mime what they regard as the white power of important white figures. Their "white" role-play goes on for some time. But then Bigger stops abruptly; slamming down the "imaginary receiver" of the phone that he has used to order the launching of pretend missiles, and the wire-transfer of imagined millions of dollars, this "back boy" exclaims, "They don't let us do nothing" (19). "Who," Gus queries. "The *white* folks" (19), Bigger bitterly rejoins.

Now, Bigger and Gus' conversation turns ominous. Gus tries to encourage Bigger that it doesn't "help," and that there is "no use" (20) in fixating on the inevitable presence of white people in the U.S. that will endure in oppressing Negroes by never letting them "do nothing." But speaking "with a tinge of bitter pride," Bigger presses his case to Gus. "Sometimes I feel like something awful's going to happen to me," Bigger avers. "What you mean," Gus asks his friend in an alarmed way. Bigger replies, saying, "I don't know. I just feel that way. Every time I get to thinking about me being black and they being white, me being here and they being there ["there" in upper-class conditions], I feel like something awful's going to happen to me" (20). Bigger's voice trails off; he and Gus are then briefly quiet. Consequently, Bigger resumes his incendiary thesis on whiteness, and also "white folks'" unfair control of black housing, labor, and lives. Again, Bigger pursues a pregnant pause that he breaks only to call Gus to attention. "Gus...You know where the white folks live," questions Bigger (21). Gus answers by pointing towards a few wealthy areas of Chicago. "Naw," Bigger corrects Gus. Wright portrays that by way of stressed clarification, "Bigger doubled his fist and struck his solar plexus" to alert his friend to where "white folks" live. And then, Bigger crystallizes for Gus "white folks'" location. "White folks" live, declares Bigger to Gus, "Right down here in my stomach...Every time I think of 'em, I *feel* 'em...It's

like fire” (21-22). Indeed, hegemonic whiteness is the primary force that sticks in Bigger’s craw, rots his gut, and, imposes itself on this character in a multitude of sickening ways. Paradoxically, the nauseating valence of his (obviously black) family’s needs for his “American as apple pie” reciprocity are for Bigger bound up with needs rooted in anti-black, normative standards of whiteness. In less (but not totally) paradoxical ways, this nauseous force imposes itself on Bigger by way of what he deems (rather wrongly) is the totally unchecked hegemony of his wealthy, white employers, the Dalton’s. And, finally, the woman (the Dalton’s daughter Mary) in *Native Son* with whom Bigger shares excruciating connections of *eros & thanatos* imposes upon this “black boy” a twisted, kamikaze-level force of recognition that due to the fact that his sexual desires for her are not (and, inevitably, cannot be) heteronormatively white, they are reflexively made vile by his blackness, and, therefore, must occur in equally vile, violent, and, flatly, “killing” ways.

These examples illustrate circumstances that stoke Bigger’s desires to satisfy familial, labor related, and sexual hungers. But, as these circumstances fill Bigger with noxious dread in compelling him to recognize his powerlessness to satisfy his desires, he pursues ostensibly self-sabotaging actions throughout the novel that appear counterintuitive in sustaining, rather than sating his complex, and certainly, “uncommon hungers.” I am interested in treating in this chapter, *Fire*, Bigger’s counterintuitive (alimentation related) actions as key points, demarcating this character’s persona as one deeply frustrated by physical, as well as metaphysical hungers for everything from intangible phenomena (e.g., emotional; psychosocial), to tangible forms of food. Correspondingly, this chapter traces counterpoints proportional to these key points that I believe are apt in unpacking the intricacies of Bigger’s unfulfilled, and *always already* hungry persona. For example, counterpoints encompassing Bigger’s physical & metaphysical hungers as witnessed in scenes with secondary characters in *Native Son* such as, for instance, the Dalton’s maid (Peggy), and, Jan Erlone (Mary’s boyfriend), will aide in my aims to analyze this dissertation’s broad interests in Bigger’s “uncommon hungers.” Essentially, Bigger is offered food and/or fed throughout the whole of *Native Son*. In this way, this character has every opportunity to satisfy (and thus avoid) physical hunger. But, Bigger is steadfast in often rejecting such satisfaction by sustaining his hungers for incontrovertible circumstances of absolute autonomy that are functionally unavailable in a world in which he feels “powerless” to live. *Fire*, then, mainly argues that a Food Studies focused reading of Bigger’s fictional life allows us to spy (sometimes slight, but, still, decisive) aspects of his fraught existence that lend to theorization of the critical (especially existential, and phenomenological) import of what I contend is this character’s angry, resentful, and, unceasingly, hungry persona.

The Fullness of Emptiness

Based upon the thought of existential phenomenologist, Emmanuel Levinas, I propose that much of what lends to Bigger’s counterintuitive actions to sustain, rather than sate his hungers, arises from his frustration of sensing his inability to distinguish himself as a *self*, or, realized existent. Effectively, Bigger lacks the ability to *enjoy* what Levinas terms “nourishments characteristic of our existence in the world.” In his book, *Time and the Other* (1948) (in a section entitled “Salvation Through The World—Nourishments”), Levinas states:

In everyday existence, in the world, the material structure of the subject is to a certain extent overcome: an interval appears between the ego and the self. The identical subject does not return to itself immediately.

Since Heidegger we are in the habit of considering the world as an ensemble of tools. Existing in the world is acting, but acting in such a way that in the final account action has our own existence for its object. Tools refer to one another to finally refer to our care for existing. In turning on a bathroom switch we open up the entire ontological problem. What seems to have escaped Heidegger—if it is true that in these matters something might have escaped Heidegger—is that prior to being a system of tools, the world is an ensemble of nourishments. Human life in the world does not go beyond the objects that fulfill it. It is perhaps not correct to say that we live to eat, but it is no more correct to say that we eat to live. The uttermost finality of eating is contained in food. When one smells a flower, it is the smell that limits the finality of the act. To stroll is to enjoy the fresh air, not for health but for the air. These are the nourishments characteristic of our existence in the world. It is an ecstatic existence—being outside oneself—but limited by the object.

This relationship with an object can be characterized by enjoyment [*jouissance*]. All enjoyment is a way of being, but also a sensation—that is, light and knowledge. It is absorption of the object, but also a distance with regard to it. Knowledge and luminosity essentially belong to enjoying. Through this, before the nourishments that offer themselves, the subject is in space, at a distance from all objects that are necessary for its existence. Though in pure and simple identity of hypostasis, the subject is bogged down in itself, in the world, instead of a return to itself, there is a “relationship with everything that is necessary for being.” The subject separates from itself. Light is the prerequisite for such a possibility. In this sense our everyday life is already a way of being free from the initial materiality through which a subject is accomplished [*s’accomplit*]. It already contains a forgetfulness of self. The morality of “earthly nourishments” is the first morality, the first abnegation. It is not the last, but one must pass through it (Levinas, 62-64).

Literary and Food Studies theorist, David Goldstein, explicates Levinas’ broad approaches to existential phenomenology, as well as his specific approaches to issues of alimentation, eating, and “enjoyment” in his (2010) essay, “Emmanuel Levinas and the Ontology of Eating.” Goldstein begins at the beginning (as is the expression) in terms of outlining ways that topics surrounding “nourishment” form foundational tenets of Levinas’ approaches to and also critiques of correspondences between ontology and human consumption as treated in canonical currents of Western ontology. Goldstein tells us that, “At every stage of his thought Levinas uses eating—or, to use his favored term, *nourishment*—to address fundamental questions about ethics” (34). For Levinas, eating is synonymous with “nourishment,” which is further synonymous with his philosophical delineation of (as noted in the above quote from *Time and the Other*) sensual/sentient “enjoyment,” or, “*jouissance*.” Levinas posits an explanation of “first philosophy” that parallels existentialism’s central claim

that “existence precedes essence.” In Levinas’ estimation, ethics is “first philosophy.” And, as Goldstein clarifies, “By “first philosophy,” Levinas means that ethics is prior to ontology, to the comprehension of being. We are because we are responsible—responsible to an “other.” How do we know we are in the presence of an “other”? We recognize otherness in the form of a “face” that rears up in front of us demanding in its stern gentleness the burden of our ethical responsibility—a responsibility we cannot possibly discharge because it is infinite...Ethics is the name for this responsibility” (34-35).

Goldstein continues, charting subtle alimentary related topics attending Levinas’ obvious (i.e., obvious in relation to his conception of ontology) break from Platonic thinking. In what he admits are rather “simplified” terms, Goldstein provides a (nonetheless) succinct analysis of Platonic thought as it is germane to “two basic lines of thinking” that we (e.g., we that tend to subscribe to classical claims stemming from analytic modes of Western philosophy) hold “about the body” (35). In this regard, Goldstein notes that “the first” of these “lines of thinking” asserts, “that philosophy consists in the pursuit of truth, which is attained through thinking, and analogous to erotic desire.” The second of these “lines of thinking” premises that “this pursuit is hindered rather than helped by the body and its hungers, both because the body’s requirement for food and drink is merely a need, not a desire, and therefore bears no useful relationship to the pursuit of truth; and because the body’s demands distract from the real work of thought” (35). Furthering his analysis of just how profound is Levinas’ detour from doctrinaire Platonism, Goldstein submits the broad proposition that all of Levinas’ “major works” (to varying degrees) share in proposing that, “the needs of our bodies are hardly irrelevant to philosophy, but instead communicate to us the very fact of our being.” Additionally, Goldstein notes that Levinas’ “major works” also share in witnessing the philosopher’s *adviso* that “we must look to digestive processes to make sense of the existential character of life” (36). Expanding on this (by nodding to & citing Levinas’ *Existence & Existents* (1978)) Goldstein explains, “Levinas seems...to be suggesting that hunger is not a need at all, or not exclusively so. It is also, and perhaps primarily, a desire, a conduit for embracing the world with one’s “joyous appetite for things” (p. 27). Hunger thus cannot be dismissed as a drive entirely separate from the drive for philosophical truth...Secondly, rather than try to ignore hunger and eating as merely physical phenomena, Levinas uses them to articulate just what it means to be a part of the world, to feel oneself into being...Hunger reminds us of our strong, often positive bond to the world...The world is there to be eaten” (Levinas, 1978, as cited in Goldstein, 2010, p. 35).

Turning his attention to *Time and the Other*, Goldstein specifies that “Enjoyment, *jouissance*, becomes the key term for Levinas when describing one’s relationship to eating, and through the term he continues to locate eating at the core of being.” Essentially, Goldstein considers *Time and the Other* as a prime, “major work” wherein which “Levinas develops his ontology of eating by arguing that a gastronomic relationship to the world predates the tool-based system that forms Heidegger’s characterization of the ordinary and ordinary world” (36). Goldstein underlines the significance of key phrases that Levinas extends in the block quote (from *Time and the Other*) that I provided above. It is critical for Goldstein (especially for purposes of mounting his analysis of Levinas’ “ontology of eating”) that we closely read Levinas’ revisionist approaches to Heidegger’s “tool based” conceptions of phenomenological dynamics as they bear upon *self/other*, and also subject/object

formations. Goldstein draws our attention to Levinas' statements that "Prior to being a system of tools...the world is an ensemble of nourishments. Human life does not go beyond the objects that fulfill it." He then goes on to explain these statements in his own words as relevant to his understanding of Levinas' meaning—"But in enjoying these nourishments, the subject doesn't simply disappear into them, nor they into it" (36). Goldstein moves on to elucidate Levinas' divergence from Heidegger as regards the latter's proposal that there is a certain completion in the act of an existent realizing subjectivity vis-à-vis mastery of (i.e., mastery that entails conscious recognition of one's difference from "tools" that become *objects* expressly by way of one mastering them) "tools." Considering this, Goldstein remarks that for Levinas such mastery of "tools" is incomplete in automatically cementing constitutive elements of an existent's *self*. On this account, Goldstein and Levinas' commentaries suggest that the existent's transference from object- to self-hood is not made fluid, but is rather made stuttered and (in a way) severed by proxy of its overcoming of *objects* or "tools." To reiterate Levinas' words (comprising the block quote from *Time and the Other* that I cited above), for the existent, "It is absorption of the object, but also distance with regard to it" that cements (albeit in a rather fungible way) its subjectivity. As Goldstein sees it, all of this indicates that for Levinas, insofar as eating galvanizes anchoring, or solidifying subject/object relations, "eating and other actions that cement the self to the material world also lend the self a detachment from the world, thus demarcating a geography of being in which the subject begins to emerge and know its possibilities...Eating teaches us simultaneously that we are connected to our food and that we are not the same as our food, although we may convert it into ourselves. We are in and of the world, and yet we float apart from it." Beautifully suturing together key points of his theorizations, as well as those encompassing Levinas' supporting analyses, Goldstein further states that, "Eating forms the basis of ethics because food teaches us about our complex relationship to objects, in preparation for an acknowledgement of other beings" (36).

And so, in light of the previous few paragraphs, what becomes of the "complex relationship to objects" of Bigger Thomas, who does not eat "white folks," but, strongly believes (as he expresses to his friend, Gus, with "his doubled fist" striking "his solar plexus") that "white folks live in his stomach"? Well, firstly, "white folks" populating Bigger's belly are very much alive; they exist in Bigger's gut, blazing, "like fire." Wright could not make any clearer that Bigger neither digests, nor voids these "white folks"; this character, unequivocally, "*feels*" the constancy of their *verve* in the deepest parts of his physiology. Secondly, the aliveness of "white folks" in Bigger's belly implies that he has swallowed them (akin to the Biblical whale that swallows Jonah who remains quite alive in its belly), but failed to process them in ways where he might achieve Levinas' sense of a "relationship with an object" that "can be characterized by enjoyment [*jouissance*]" in "absorption of the object" such that this "absorption" might spark recognition of his subjective "distance with regard to it." Finally, Bigger has no "complex relationship to objects" because he squarely eschews "acknowledgment of other beings" to degrees that he cannot enact a Levinasian brand of ethics as "first philosophy"; or, "ethics as being responsible to an other." Bigger, as I have explained, is a character that is in the practice of both avoiding being responsible to others, and also suppressing his hungers to engage in interpersonal relations that might make him feel responsible to or for others in co-relational, "complex" ways. In this case, Bigger discourages his hungers from evolving into interpersonal relations analogous to those epitomizing

Levinas' conception of acts of "eating" that "form the basis of ethics"; especially, as "ethics" is understood as "prior to ontology," or, "prior to the comprehension of being."

In discouraging his hungers, Bigger also, and, at once, discourages his ability to gain "distance" from the food that occupies his stomach—this food being what he identifies as "white folks." Bigger swallows but does not really eat or acquire "nourishment" from "white folks." In missing-the-mark of completing the act of "eating" (i.e., fully "enjoying") his food, Bigger does not experience enough "detachment" from said food to recognize his subjective "distance" from its objectivity. In this way, it escapes Bigger that though he is "connected to" his food, he "is not the same" as his food. And, so, Bigger conflates his food (i.e., "white folks") with himself. Yet Bigger is preoccupied with the fact that "white folks" comprehensively alienate, control, and dominate him; they overlord him in ordering the *real* social world in which he is compelled to live as one that will not, as he tells Gus, let him "do nothing" given his blackness. In short, "white folks" make Bigger feel infinitely objectified, as well as "powerless" to be himself. Accordingly, then, in surmising that his relationship to "white folks" is one where they are (gustatorily) part-and-parcel as/of himself, Bigger feels that he must exercise superordinating power over himself in the same manner as these "white folks," making his route to catalyze his subjectivity that of "killing himself or someone else," or, said differently, becoming a self-alienating, self-immolating tyrant that tries to negate the source of negation that simultaneously stokes and suppresses his hunger to exist as an absolutely enfranchised, non-racialized, free black man. This source of negation is that of hegemonic whiteness. Bigger, however, has no real toehold by which to gain the white power to "kill" his black experience of disempowerment in the *real* world. Hence, this "black boy" is in *Native Son* caught in a nasty loop-of-a-life accented by intermittent hungers to sate his desires to be a realized existent by way of feeling hard-pressed to enact such satiation by grossly suppressing, or, "killing" himself.

But, in coming to the conclusion of "killing" himself to kill his metaphysical hunger to be a realized *self* that he does not "desire" to physically kill, Bigger identifies or, names the absence that his hunger signifies as a sort of fullness. To reiterate Goldstein's framing of Levinasian hunger—hunger is not so much a primitive "drive" as, "It is also, and perhaps primarily, a desire, a conduit for embracing the world...Hunger thus cannot be dismissed as a drive entirely separate from the drive for philosophical truth." This "hunger" is aspirational, yearning, and (potentially) an indicator of positive possibilities for ontological awareness extant in the negative space of one's emptiness. This "hunger" signposts the absence of an embarrassment of rich potentials for *being* that *just might be* tethered to *ex nihilo* objects that either can, or should be present to fill this absence. Finally this Levinasian "hunger" cannot name what is absent that makes it a present sensation of vacuous lack in one's physical or metaphysical composition. But our Bigger Thomas names the vacuous lack characteristic of this "hunger" as the glutting circumstance of "white folks" over-filling him (from the inside out) with impulses of self-alienation and –domination that spur him to slay his black objectivity with forms of white subjective power over which he has no control, and to which he has no access lest this access be the act of "killing himself or someone else." I am saying that in the same way that Bigger misses-the-mark of completing a Levinasian act of "eating" his "white folks" food, he also misses-the-mark of experiencing *this* "hunger" that I have banged-on about (as the British say) in the previous sentences. Fittingly, then, Bigger does

not gain the metaphysical benefits of hungering for his food in the way of a “desire, ” nor does he gain the benefits of experiencing, to re-state Levinas, “the uttermost finality of eating” as an “ethical” act that “is contained in food.” The “finality of eating” (insofar as “eating” is a consumption/production based exchange that mimics conditions of a subject’s co-reciprocity in being ethically “responsible” to an object “other” in interpersonal relations) demarcates a “finality” whose finalization would re-instigate proliferating dynamics of vacuous emptiness and lack associated with the nature of Levinasian hunger. Bigger names this “finality” as the circumstance of “white folks” over-filling his belly with hegemonic, anti-black desires to rectify his hungers to be a realized *self vis-à-vis* “killing” these hungers. In so naming this “finality,” Bigger becomes, I conjecture, full of himself—not only in a colloquial sense of being narcissistic, but in a strict sense of what Levinas frames as *being* a being that is overcome/over-filled by and with “nausea.”

In his earliest “major work,” *On Escape* (1935), Levinas unpacks what he views as the inescapable phenomenon of “nausea” to demonstrate ways that the body’s needs are not merely Platonic “distractions” to human endeavors to achieve ontological awareness, but are rather signs, pointing to *necessarily* boomerang (e.g., philosophically, and, logically rebounding) routes of “escape” from/return to phenomenological cognizance of one’s *being*. Corresponding to this, Levinas says:

Let us analyze a case in which the nature of malaise appears in all its purity and to which the word “malaise” applies par excellence: nausea. The state of nausea that precedes vomiting, and from which vomiting will deliver us, encloses us on all sides. Yet it does not come from outside to confine us. We are revolted from the inside; our depths smother beneath ourselves; our innards “heave” [*nous avons “mal au coeur”*].

When considered in the instant in which it is lived and in the atmosphere that surrounds it, this revolting presence of ourselves to ourselves appears insurmountable. Yet in the conflict and duality thus suggested between us and the nauseated state, we could not qualify the latter as an obstacle. That image would falsify and impoverish the true state of things. The obstacle is outside the effort that surpasses it. When the obstacle is insurmountable, this characteristic is added to its nature qua obstacle, but it does not modify this nature, just as our sentiment of its immensity removes nothing from the object’s externality. We can still turn away from it. Nausea, on the contrary, sticks to us.

...There is in nausea a refusal to remain there, an effort to get out. Yet this effort is always already characterized as desperate: in any case, it is so for any attempt to act or to think. And this despair, this fact of being riveted, constitutes all anxiety of nausea. In nausea—which amounts to an impossibility of being what one is—we are at the same time riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers. We are there, and there is nothing more to be done, or anything to add to this fact that we have been entirely delivered up, that everything is consumed: *this is the very experience of pure being*...However, this “nothing-more-to-be-done” is the mark of a limit-situation in which the uselessness of any action is

precisely the sign of the supreme instant from which we can only depart. The experience of pure being is at the same time the experience of its internal antagonism and of the escape that foists itself upon us.

Nevertheless, death is not the exit toward which escape thrusts us. Death can only appear to it if escape reflects upon itself. As such, nausea discovers only the nakedness of being in its plentitude and in its utterly binding presence (66-67).

Here, Levinas stresses how an existent's sense of being completely "riveted" to its *self* vis-à-vis "nausea" aides in alerting them to the potential of an "escape" from "being" by arising as a repellent "*experience of pure being*" that, ultimately, informs them of the "impossibility of being what one is," and, therefore existentially nudges them toward a rebounding path toward "philosophical truth." "Nausea" forewarns that the "revolting presence of ourselves to ourselves appears" to be, but is not "insurmountable" because it is not (in "nature") an external "obstacle" amenable to be overcome by "effort that surpasses it." "Nausea" is, rather, an internal burden that "sticks to us." And, in a counterintuitive way, "nausea's" stickiness is useful in aiding phenomenological awareness of "*pure being*." Relating this back to the case of Bigger Thomas in *Native Son*, I contend that this "black boy" comprehends the "revolting presence" of himself to himself in the way of feeling nausea as a "limit-situation" that is "insurmountable." Indeed, Bigger's feelings of nausea are synonymous with bilious circumstances that he defines as either that of "white folks" glutting his "stomach," or, by extension, all folks with whom he shares close connections overloading him with expectations personifying those of oppressive whiteness. In this way, this "black boy," again, misses-the-mark of recognizing an "escape" from his circumstances that does not have to be that of "death" but could be, conversely, an "escape" to wrestling with the "internal antagonism" of his "nausea" as a gateway to achieve insight into his potential for "pure being."

Always Eating/Never Hungry/Always Hungry

After Bigger reveals the gastric location of "white folks" to Gus, the two young men walk to Doc's pool hall to find the other members of their "gang," G.H., and, Jack. Bigger, along with G.H., Gus, and Jack have intentions to complete a (far beyond their usual petty-crimes) heist that they've been planning for some time; the cohort aims to spend the latter part of their afternoon robbing a local, white owned deli in their neighborhood called, Blum's. To waste some time before the heist, the "gang" decides to see a film at a local movie theater, the "Regal" (29). Trailers precede the film (*Trader Horn* (29)) that the "gang" wants to see. One of the trailers is a short, newsreel piece surrounding Bigger's future employers, the Dalton's. The newsreel highlights aspects of the Dalton's lives as high-society figures whose philanthropic treatment of black people is unparalleled amongst Chicago's white elite. Mary Dalton features in the newsreel; the commentators paint her as a bit of a wild-child with so-called (especially at the time) traitorous Communist inclinations, to boot. Bigger finds Mary both beautiful and fascinating. The "black boy" wonders what it will be like to meet and work for Mary; he thinks to himself, "Maybe Mary Dalton was a hot kind of girl" (34). The "gang" finishes watching the film, and makes their way back to Doc's pool hall to review their plans for the Blum's heist. But the young men's plans go awry as Bigger (pretending to

be prudent and “tough” in his reasoning, but, truly, terrified at the prospect of robbing a white establishment) backs-out of the intended robbery. Bigger leaves Doc’s after an ugly altercation about the failed robbery transpires between he and Gus, and (indirectly) the rest of the “gang.” Bigger makes a quick departure from Doc’s, feeling pointedly embarrassed at his cowardice. He walks the streets of South Side Chicago for a while, and then decides to head back to his house. Bigger has a bit of time before his interview at the Dalton’s. On his way home, Wright represents Bigger as feeling incredibly defeated and vulnerable. To, perhaps, gain or lose his composure (e.g., as a way to spark his anger; an emotion that appears to be his primary fuel), Bigger begins to meditate on his feelings of self-alienation, as well as his alienating treatment of others. In terms of his relationships with anyone from total strangers, to those closest to him, Wright renders Bigger as of a mind where, “He felt the same way towards everyone. As long as he could remember, he had never been responsible to anyone. The moment a situation became so that it exacted something of him, he rebelled. That was the way he lived; he passed his days trying to defeat or gratify powerful impulses in a world he feared” (42). An internal dialogue such as this recalls my supposition(s) that, in a Levinasian sense, Bigger cannot recognize his ethical responsibility to others in interpersonal exchanges, echoing those of consumption/production-based processes of “eating” as synonymous with “nourishment.” This being said, Bigger cannot achieve either distance from or proximity to his *self* insofar as this *self* arises from a “complex relationship” to an object *other* to whom he fulfills a “responsibility” via metaphorical “eating” as an “ethical” act. Fulfillment of this “ethical” act would sate Bigger by flooding him with the vacuous emptiness of “hunger” as a “desire” that would put him on a path towards “philosophical truth” that would proliferate in continuously re-establishing his hungers to pursue his “desires” for “philosophical truth.” However, Bigger names this hunger as a “finality” that he is obliged (because it arises in himself in/as the “white folks” that he believes dominate the space—his “stomach”—and possibilities of his hunger) to conclude in squelching his “desire” to “hunger” to be an existent that cannot be divorced from the root of his “desire”—i.e., his nauseating circumstance of blackness. Given that Bigger seems absolutely disinclined to be “responsible to anyone,” I am linking my reading of this character’s hunger to Levinas’ conceptions of this term to aver that though this “black boy” is never physically hungry, he is always metaphysically hungry.

When Bigger arrives at his home (after perambulating while pondering topics of alienation) his mother remains resolved to ensure that her son makes a timely appearance for his interview at the Dalton’s. “You going to see about that job,” his mother asks the minute that Bigger steps into the Thomas’ home. “Yeah,” Bigger responds, peeved by his mother’s anxiousness. “Ain’t you going to eat,” his mother asks. “I ain’t got time now,” Bigger retorts, hurriedly heading back to the front door to escape what he fears will be yet another of his mother’s haranguing sessions. Wright relates that Bigger’s mother follows him to the door determined to do all that she can to support Bigger’s support of the Thomas clan by making sure that he eats—“She came to the door, wiping her soapy hands upon an apron. ‘Here, take this quarter and buy you something’” (43). With the last of his family’s money in his hand, Bigger exits his rattrap home, heading to the palatial residence of the Dalton’s to interview for the last job that he will ever have in his life. Upon arriving at the Dalton’s, Bigger is greeted by the housemaid, Peggy, who leads him to the sitting room to wait for his interview with his new employer. Mr. Dalton appears, and suggests that he and Bigger repair to his study to undertake tasks-at-hand. As Bigger and Mr. Dalton walk towards the latter’s study, the

“black boy” spies Mrs. Dalton coming down the hallway; “coming slowly toward” them, “a tall, thin, white woman, walking silently, her hands lifted delicately in the air and touching the walls to either side of her” (46). Mr. Dalton greets his wife without introducing her to Bigger. Mrs. Dalton exits the scene, making her way toward the kitchen, and, employing the same “delicate” hand gestures of feeling the hallway walls. As Bigger observes this, it dawns on him that the “tall, thin, white woman” is blind. Bigger is “amazed” (46) by Mrs. Dalton’s disability given his views of “white folks” as all-powerful abelist entities that grossly circumscribe both his internal and external experiences of being. With lingering “amazement,” Bigger follows Mr. Dalton into his study.

Mr. Dalton offers Bigger a seat in the study, and swiftly informs him that Mrs. Dalton “has a very deep interest in colored people” (47) that foments pro-integrationist, and philanthropic outlooks amongst all members of the Dalton household. Mr. Dalton also mentions to Bigger that his family donates great amounts of money to Negro causes for “colored people’s” betterment; particularly, supporting the “National Association for the Advancement of Colored People” (53). Even given Mr. Dalton’s humanitarian bent, Wright underlines his leanings toward hegemony, noting that he owns the “South Side Real Estate Company” (48) which retains the leases for tenants residing in the apartment building where Bigger and his family live in unlivable, ramshackle, rat-infested conditions. The paradoxical altruist/slumlord, Mr. Dalton, continues, commencing the particulars of Bigger’s interview by posing questions to the “black boy” about his feelings in relation to taking-on the chauffeur’s position. Bigger is polite in responding to Mr. Dalton’s queries, proffering answers that demonstrate his willingness to take the job, as well as peppering these answers with mumbled (Amos & Andy-esque) “Yessuh’s” that he feels obliged (and deeply resentful) to provide in order to confirm to his potential employer a coon-like sense of his *Negro* appreciation, eagerness, and servility. Just as Mr. Dalton concludes questioning Bigger about his troubled past and reform school tenure, Mary rushes into her father’s study. “Oh, Father,” Mary calls-out in a sprightly way as she enters her father’s study in a no less sprightly manner. Mr. Dalton begins to respond to his daughter’s greeting; before he can get a word in edgewise, however, Mary turns her attention to Bigger. ““Is this the new chauffeur, Father?” “What do you want, Mary” (51), Mr. Dalton demands, obviously irritated by his daughter’s impetuosity. While this exchange unfolds between Mr. Dalton and Mary, Wright illustrates Bigger as quite arrested by Mary’s (in-person/off-screen) presence. Rather incredulously, Bigger studies Mary, silently confirming to himself that, “Yes; she was the same white girl he had seen in the movie” (51).

Increasing Bigger’s incredulity, Mary makes a quick beeline towards him; coming “close to him,” and stopping “just opposite of his chair.” In a proximity to Bigger that he finds *terribly* too close, Mary spits out a terribly probing question—“Bigger, do you belong to a union” (51), she asks. Mr. Dalton is not at all pleased with his daughter’s line-of-inquiry; he frowns at his daughter (and her question) in an admonishing way. Mary poses the question to Bigger again. Mr. Dalton’s temper flares. He brusquely instructs his daughter to leave Bigger alone. “All right, Mr. Capitalist” (52) is Mary’s rejoinder to her father’s flare-up. Mary exits the study. Then, Mr. Dalton concludes his interview with Bigger, clarifying that the chauffeur’s position is his. Mr. Dalton stresses that Bigger’s job will be relatively easy; mostly, Bigger is expected to drive Mary to and from the nearby University that she attends.

With the interview complete, Mr. Dalton's rings for the housemaid to come to the study. "Peggy, this is Bigger," says Mr. Dalton when the maid arrives. "He's going to drive for us. Give him something to eat, and show him where he's to sleep and where the car is" (53). Peggy does as she is told, taking Bigger to the kitchen, and also offering to make him a plate of "bacon and eggs" (54). While Bigger eats, Wright portrays him assessing the pro-and-con aspects of the new environment in which he finds himself as the Dalton's employee: "The food was good. This was not going to be a bad job. The only thing bad so far was that crazy girl. He chewed his bacon and eggs while some remote part of his mind considered in amazement how different the girl had seemed in the movie. On screen she was not dangerous and his mind could do with her as it liked. But here in her home she walked over everything, put herself in the way" (55).

Apparently, Bigger distinguishes the very being that is Mary, as well as Mary's very way of *being* as coalescing a type of human force that is, at once, an affront to him and an attack upon him. Mary's presence upon meeting Bigger seems to signify one instantiation of what I termed in prior sections as bilious circumstances that for this "black boy" serve as obstructive limitations to sating both his physical and metaphysical hungers to be a *being* that is not only unrestrictedly enfranchised, but also experientially free. On the one hand, the Dalton heiress enunciates her presence to Bigger far too directly by (sheer) dint of her off-screen, naked mortality—the very sentience of Mary's corporality imposes itself upon Bigger. On the other hand, Mary greets Bigger in a manner whose hyper-directness stokes his hunger to (*very* likely) erotically interact with her on-screen presence (that he can "do with as he likes") off-screen in a *real* world where he feels that his black hunger for the "crazy girl" would *have* to be enacted as a form of white, heteronormative "desire" that he is, of course, "powerless" to complete, unless he achieves such completion by "killing himself or someone else." In Wright's, *Native Son*, Bigger does, eventually, kill Mary; and, as I will discuss later, Bigger enacts this "killing" as a double-murder in dually slaying Mary as one of the "white folks" that is part-and-parcel of/as himself in being undigested food that festers "in his stomach," as well as in "killing himself" by proxy of "killing" a white woman in a Jim Crow U.S. where such crimes (and a slew of proven or unproven lesser crimes) assure the immediate death of any Negro. Picking-up on breadcrumbs that I laid down regarding Bigger and Mary's initial meeting, let me say that the Daedalean way that Bigger apperceives, perceives, and receives the "crazy girl" endures in driving him crazy, and also intensifying his *ad nauseam* nausea in instances where he is pressingly obliged to interact with others in interpersonal exchanges whose machinations mimic those of gustatory consumption/production processes of eating.

An anomaly in Bigger's routine schedule (i.e., of mainly driving Mary to and from University) is that he is tasked with taking Mary to the train station for a weekend trip that she's making to Detroit. Mary is scheduled to leave for Detroit the next morning, and Bigger looks forward to a simple first-night on the job assignment (ordered by Mr. Dalton) of driving the "crazy girl" to University at "eight-thirty" to "wait for her" (54) until her class ends and then bring her home. Still eating his "bacon and eggs," Peggy asks Bigger, if he wants "some more" food. Bigger says he's had "plenty" as he lifts the last of his meal's "bread to his mouth in huge chunks" (55). Peggy begins to index for Bigger factoids regarding her admiration for the the Dalton's. An Irish immigrant, Peggy explains that the Dalton's have

been good to her in being non-biased regarding her ethnic and low socio-economic background. Peggy also specifies to Bigger that the Dalton's are good "Christian people" that "believe in everybody working hard," and that, over the course of her twenty-one years as their employee, they "gave over five million dollars to colored schools" (56). Peggy expresses that she adores Mary. The housemaid underlines that she finds Mary to be a "sweet thing," and that she's known her "since she was two years old." Peggy does advise Bigger, though, that Mary is "kind of wild." Building on this opinion, Peggy continues her treatise on Mary—"Always in hot water. Keeps her folks worried. The Lord only knows where she got her wild ways. But she's got 'em. If you stay around here long, you'll get to know her" (57). Wright represents Bigger as being intrigued with Peggy's analysis of Mary. He is tempted to probe Peggy for more information about the "crazy girl." As Wright relates, Bigger "wanted to ask about the girl, but thought that he had better not do that" (57). Luckily, Peggy snaps Bigger out of his enthrallment with the topic of Mary by getting-down-to-business in apprising him of his duties concerning the furnace. Peggy takes Bigger to the basement and gives him a quick lesson in how to feed and clean the large furnace in the Dalton home. Maintaining the furnace will be one of Bigger's few daily tasks. Bigger's opinion of this task? Wright tells us that Bigger likes the fact that maintaining the furnace would be an "easy" task—"it would be fun, almost" (58).

"Eight-thirty" arrives, and Mary meets Bigger at the Dalton's car. Bigger is nervous but also determined to be composed regarding the prospect of being alone with the "crazy girl" that appears to drive him rather crazy. The two (of course, with Mary sitting in the backseat) make their way toward Mary's University. But after a while, Mary instructs Bigger to re-route. "Turn at this corner and pull up on a side street" (65), requests Mary in her customarily (so says Peggy) "sweet" manner. Bigger is anxious and confused. The street that Mary indicates is nowhere near the University. "I scare you," says/asks Mary asks rhetorically, reading the anxiety on Bigger's face. "Oh no'm," Bigger mumbles, "bewildered." Unbeknownst to Bigger, Mary has steered them to the office of the Labor Defenders, a Communist organization where her boyfriend, Jan Erlone, spearheads activist groups. "You're not a tattle-tale, are you," Mary asks Bigger in a coquettish sort of way that seems intended to doubly invite and implicate the "black boy" in & into some stripe of her playing hooky schemes. Bigger is, again, stultified by Mary's directness and transparency; he is struck dumb, trying to respond, but when he "opened his mouth to reply...no words came." Mary infiltrates Bigger's silence; by way of answering for Bigger while also answering her own question, she states that she believes she can "trust" the "black boy." "Yessum," Bigger agrees in a mode of coon-esque, *Negro* politeness. "After all," says Mary to Bigger after unilaterally confirming their reciprocal "trust" in relation to her schemes, "I'm on your side" (64). Mary leaves the car to meet Jan at the Labor Defenders office. She and Jan return, promptly, and the latter is extremely pleased to meet Bigger. Jan shakes hands with Bigger (who is quite disquieted about engaging in this gesture) when he meets him, and instantly kyboshes any impulse that the "black boy" might have to (subordinately, given that Jan is white) call him "sir." "I'll call you Bigger and you'll call me Jan. That's how it'll be between us" (66), says Jan, definitively. Similar to his first-blush reaction to Mary, Bigger receives Jan as if he represents a bilious circumstance, the imposition of whose directness and "white folks" humanity coalesces a complex force that both affronts and attacks him by concurrently

stoking and squelching (i.e., “killing”) his hunger to *be* or feel free in the context of this interpersonal, interracial, and *real* world social exchange.

Wright illustrates Bigger’s incredibly conflicted feelings during his first interaction with Jan:

He was very conscious of his black skin and there was in him a prodding conviction that Jan and men like him had made it so that he would be conscious of his black skin. Did not white people despise a black skin? Then why was Jan doing this? Why was Mary standing there so eagerly, with shining eyes? What could they get out of this? Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him...He felt he had no physical existence at all right then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to his black skin...He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. At that moment he felt toward Mary and Jan a dumb, cold, and inarticulate hate (67).

Hotly hungering for as well as hating Mary, Jan, and himself, matters are made worse for Bigger when Jan suggests to the “black boy” the following: “Let me drive for a while” (67). Bigger is floored. Already torn with quizzical confusion in terms of frantically wondering whether these “white folks” admire or “despise” him and his “attached black skin”; and, *always already* overly conscious of this “black skin” as seen from the shared third-eye (Cyclops like) perspective of the nauseating triumvirate that he feels he embodies as one that is as/of the unprocessed “white folks” food that rots his gut, Bigger cannot believe that Jan wants to further escalate his distress by, “maybe,” using his white superordinance to subordinate his blackness by staging his “black skin” as an exalted but “amusing” (“amusing” because this would be a cruel, Freak Show-like exaltation/staging of *the* “deformed”) fetishized object. Or, “maybe” (continuing to trace the frenzied thoughts that Bigger has about Jan in this scene), this white man wants to escalate his misery in “putting him down” by “holding him up” via relinquishing his hegemonic white supremacy over his blackness in their salutary/social exchange. In other words, in greeting & treating Bigger as an equal, Jan demonstrates the great faculty of his (experiential & social) power *to choose* to relinquish white hegemony by abandoning standards that generally order racist (subordinate/superordinate) black/white relations in Bigger’s known worlds (i.e., the world that he occupies behind “curtains” and “walls”; and also the *real* social world in which he is obliged to live). By demonstrating this right to choose, Bigger perceives that Jan “puts him down” vis-à-vis shoving in his “black boy” face his exhibition of private/public power to which Negroes have no access. Whereas Jan has the right to enact or not enact social etiquette that signifies his re-ordering of the racist “order of things” in the U.S., Bigger does not—Jan’s frank demonstration (in so directly and obviously treating the “black boy” as an equal when they meet) of his equal (as opposed to separate but equal) rights confounds, confronts, and cuts Bigger in a seismic way that dually shakes him to his core and shakes-off intuition of his own “physical existence.”

As one would expect (as if this “black boy” would deny a white man’s wishes), Bigger accepts Jan’s request to drive. Wright—deftly ratcheting-up the intense discomfort that

already permeates this scene—details that Jan insists (with intentions to be gracious) that Bigger sit in the front seat of the car with he and Mary. He directs Bigger to sit in the middle of this awkward trio. Of this, Bigger thinks: “There were white people to either side of him; he was sitting between two vast white looming walls” (67-68). This begins a scenario where Mary and Jan attempt to befriend Bigger by plying him with information surrounding how their Communist leanings reflexively make them “on his side.” Jan lays it on thick, telling Bigger that, “After the revolution” the world will be “ours...There’ll be no white and no black; there’ll be no rich and no poor” (68). Bigger is unmoved by Jan’s pro-proletariat propaganda; as is his custom with white people the “black boy” supplies a flurry of *stepin fecht* “Yessum’s” and “No’m’s” in response to both Mary and Jan’s comments. Unmoved by Mary and Jan’s manifesto, but moved to desperation because of his seating arrangement between them, Bigger ruminates upon dimensions of his great discomfort in the following (a quote that serves as an epigraph for this chapter, *Fire*):

His arms and legs were aching from being cramped into a small space, but he dared not move. He knew that they would not care if he had made himself more comfortable, but his moving would have called attention to himself and his black body. And he did not want that. Those people made him feel things he did not want to feel. If he were white, if he were like them, it would have been different. But he was black. So he sat still, his arms and legs aching (68).

Here, I must make a necessary detour to take-up literary scholar (and, specialist in African American Studies, African Diaspora Studies, and Modern Thought and Literature), Darieck Scott’s, outlooks on “muscle tension” in his (2010) book *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. *Extravagant Abjection* presents a sweeping project that, as Scott explains, “In the most basic sense...draws on three now-familiar tenets of “identity” analysis: blackness is a construction, not an essence, which serves to shore up white identity and superiority; categories of race are intimately connected to categories of gender and sexuality; philosophy needs literature to embody, and thereby better envision, its concepts” (258). Scott’s notions of “blackness” as “a construction” largely stem from his wide-ranging use of Martiniquan psychiatrist and (revolutionary) philosopher, Frantz’s Fanon’s, framing of “sociogeny.” In his famous, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), the Antillean scholar/activist submits “sociogeny” as an on-going process of the social invention of the racial category “black,” occurring not only at physiological levels of “black skin,” but also at psychological levels of “black” consciousness. “Sociogeny” for Fanon also serves to provide a critical, paradigmatic perspective that he advances in *Black Skin* as far more apt in psychoanalyzing the “individual factor” of socio-physic rupture in black or Negro people (in some cases, black or Negro analysands) than are “phylogenetic” theories, or, views prevalent in psychiatric and/or psychological approaches that rely on a broad sense of “the ontogenetic perspective” (Fanon, 11).

In terms of Scott’s treatment of Fanon’s conception of “sociogeny” in the context of *Extravagant Abjection*’s sweeping goals, he notes that, “Fanon rejects the notion of ontogeny for sociogeny, arguing that all elements of the human being are created in the social world, essentially without fundamental attributes. This is demonstrated by the fact that each black person can, through a *traumatic* encounter with the blackness that his social indoctrination has

taught him to hold in contempt, become conscious of the *imposition of blackness* upon him...the ramifications of Fanon's sociogenic understanding of blackness...uncover what, in the process of being made black, of being blackened, can be seen to evince the power, pleasures, and freedom that blackness was created to deny its bearers" (25). Here, Scott avers that it is possible to gain "power" via one's consciousness of "*the imposition of blackness*"; this "power" is, paradoxically, a form of "abjection." Scott avoids being too *critical* in his treatment of "abjection." "For," as he clarifies, to enunciate the properties of abjection from the standpoint of critical knowledge...is to alter the object that is defined and constituted by the fact that it slips over the fictive ramparts of ego and "I" and, thus, of knowing and asserting. Often this abject is understood...as an affront to personhood, an experience of terrible suffering. But while this affront and suffering cannot be avoided, what my reading suggests is that within the black abject—within human abjection as represented and lived in the experience of being-black, of blackness—we may find that the zone of self or personhood extends into realms where we would not ordinarily perceive its presence; and that suffering seems, at some level or some far-flung contact point, to merge into something like ability, like power (and certainly, like pleasure) without losing or denying what it is to suffer" (15). I conjecture that to *not* "deny" and/or *not* "lose" one's consciousness of an experience of (in this case, "black") "suffering" as an "ability" akin to (again, in this case, "black") "power" is "black abjection."

In this way, I venture that Scott's "black abjection" in relation to Fanon's "sociogeny" as a condition necessitating "the effective disalienation of the black man" aggrieved by an "inferiority complex" that "is the outcome of a double process: —primarily, economic; —subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority" (Fanon, 10-11), suggests that there is potential in *not* "denying" that there is vast potential in harnessing by-products of "*trauma*" and "suffering" that stem from one's social alienation or social denial as one ensconced in continuous processes of "being blackened." There is an emergent latency that "black abjection" connotes that is similar to Levinas' conception of "nausea"—to re-state the philosopher, "In nausea—which amounts to an impossibility of being what one is—we are at the same time riveted to ourselves, enclosed in a tight circle that smothers. We are there, and there is nothing more to be done, or anything to add to this fact that we have been entirely delivered up, that everything is consumed: *this is the very experience of pure being.*" "Black abjection" like "nausea" does not suggest the possibility of a happy escape from one's "riveted" existential *situation* of *being* (like Wright's Bigger Thomas) in a conscious (as opposed to self-conscious), inescapable state of "being blackened"; rather, it suggests a point-of-departure for escape to forms of freedom and (black) "power" that have no names, and are beyond instinctual "qualification." As Jean-Paul Sartre states in *Being and Nothingness* (1956), "the *situation*, the common product of the contingency of the in-itself and of freedom, is an ambiguous phenomenon in which it is impossible for the for-itself to distinguish the contribution of freedom from that of the brute existent. In fact, just as freedom is the escape from a contingency which it has to be in order to escape it, so the situation is the free coordination and the free qualification of a brute given which does not allow itself to be qualified in any way at all" (627). What I called the emergent latency of "black abjection" signifies anxious, anticipatory energy that motivates one to *brace themselves* in constant preparation for the "other shoe to fall" in terms of being aware of "being-black" as a state that can, indeed, "evince power, pleasures, and freedom"

that their consciousness of “being-black” makes them recognize their “blackness was created to deny its bearers.”

In my estimation, Scott extrapolates the dormant, roil-and-boil energy illustrative of “black abjection” to his analyses of frequent metaphors of “muscle tension” in both Fanon’s *Black Skin* and in his (1963) classic, *The Wretched of the Earth*. Of this, Scott remarks: “While the particular meaning of muscle tension gets tweaked in each of Fanon’s references, tense muscles in general in the texts represents the state of unconscious or undeveloped reaction to colonial domination...The muscles, in contraction or tension, are a metaphor referring to some reservoir of resistance to the colonizer’s acts of subjugation and enslavement” (64-65). Let me say that when in *Native Son* the “black boy,” Bigger Thomas, sits “cramped into a small space” between Mary and Jan in the Dalton’s car, he experiences his “muscles, in contraction or tension” in such ways that they represent “some reservoir of resistance to the colonizer’s acts of subjugation and enslavement.” In this instance, Bigger feels that Mary and Jan are either “putting him down” to “hold him up,” or “holding him down” to “put him up” as an object that (in either case) their whiteness allows them to control. Apropos of the Communist atmosphere that Wright sketches in this scene, Bigger views Mary and Jan as colonizers whose direct and frank attempts at interacting with him displace him from his job (given that Jan offers/demands to play chauffeur), and also displace him from awareness of his very “physical existence.” Drawing from the quote from *Extravagant Abjection* that I used as an opening epigraph to this chapter, Bigger is here experiencing, as Scott writes, a “state of muscle tension” that “in its inchoate resistance, its mime of unconscious turmoil poised at the lip of consciousness, also trembles at the edge of a future that does not yet, for it, exist even in the manner of futures, since it lacks ideal shape. Still, that *lack* is only comparative; it does not describe a void.” There are no words, there are no names or (Sartrean) “qualifications” with which Bigger as a poor, poorly educated, early twentieth-century “black boy” is familiar to describe the “unconscious turmoil” of his questioning of either his physical discomfort, or his metaphysical distress in struggling to understand the motivations of his (“Maybe they did not despise him?”) white companions/“colonizers.” Yet similar to his naming of interpersonal circumstances that biliously circumscribe him, and also similar to his naming of the revolting emptiness that he feels as a Negro whose “nausea” is *expressly* caused by “white folks” living “in his stomach,” Bigger names the “lack” that he feels in the car with Mary and Jan as a definitive “void” that will (as *Native Son* unfolds) end in the self-fulfilled prophecy of his death as indicative of his failed attempt at discovering (Levinas’) “*pure being*.”

With Bigger suffering increasing misery, he Mary and Jan drive Chicago’s North Side streets for awhile, and the following ensues, ““Say Bigger,” asked Jan, “where can we get a good meal on the South Side?” “Well,” Bigger said reflectively. “We want to go to a *real* place,” Mary said, turning to him gaily. “You want to go to a nightclub?” Bigger asked in a tone that indicated that he was simply mentioning names and not recommending places to go. “No; we want to eat.” “Look, Bigger. We want one of those places where colored people eat, not one of those show places.” What *did* these people want? When he answered his voice was neutral and toneless. “Well, there’s Ernie’s Kitchen Shack” (69). The trio arrives at Ernie’s Kitchen Shack much to Bigger’s horror. The “black boy” tries to stay in the car to avoid being seen with Mary and Jan in a place that he frequents with his other Negro friends,

as well as his girlfriend, Bessie. Simply, Bigger is mortified at the prospect of this awkward dining venture. Mary and Jan (having downed several drinks) spill out of the car. When Bigger remains in the car, the couple tries to coax him into joining them: “‘Aren’t you coming with us, Bigger?’” Mary asked in a sweet tone that made him want to leap at her. The people in Ernie’s Kitchen Shack knew him and he did not want them to see him with these white people. He knew that if he went in they would ask one another: *Who’re them white folks Bigger’s hanging around with?* “I—I...I don’t want to go in...” he whispered breathlessly. “Aren’t you hungry?” Jan asked. “Naw; I ain’t hungry” (71). Bigger continues to protest entering Ernie’s with Mary and Jan. Mary becomes quite upset at Bigger’s presumed snub and begins to cry. Wright describes the “black boy’s” reaction: “Bigger heard her sob softly. Good God...He felt ensnared in a tangle of deep shadows, shadows as black as the night that stretched above his head. The way he had acted had made her cry, and yet the way she had acted had made him feel that he had to act as he had toward her. In his relations with her he felt that he was riding a seesaw; never were they on a common level; either he or she was up in the air” (72).

After Mary’s crying-jag ends, Bigger (very) begrudgingly agrees to join Jan and Mary. The three enter Ernie’s. Bigger sees a few of his friends, including his girlfriend, Bessie. He is flooded with conflicting emotions to the extent that once he sits down at Ernie’s with Mary and Jan, he cannot eat. As Wright describes, “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...” “Eat your chicken,” Mary said. “It’s good!” “I ain’t hungry,” he mumbled” (73-74). Wright does not make explicit the “cause” of Bigger’s loss-of-appetite. I speculate, however, that in the instant Bigger feels his very “organic functions had altered,” he feels overtaken by the “white folks” food that is of/as himself that burns in his belly “like fire.” It seems to me that this exchange with Mary and Jan alerts Bigger to the couple’s “colonization” of something akin to the last vestige of anything that he feels is unrestrictedly his own—his taste for tasty food, and, therefore, his ability to come somewhere that is even close to a Levinasian sense of “enjoying” this food.

Flesh and Meat

In Abdul JanMohamed’s (2005) book, *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death* the literary theorist traces, as he states, the “archaeology of what I call “the death-bound-subject,” that is, of the subject who is formed, from infancy on, by the imminent and ubiquitous threat of death. The death-bound-subject is a deeply aporetic structure to the extent that he is “bound,” and hence produced as a subject, by the process of “unbinding.” The processes through which that aporetic subject is produced by the threat of death constitute the fundamental object of this study” (2). Along the way of tracing the figure of Bigger Thomas as one instance of a representational embodiment of the “death-bound-subject,” JanMohamed takes-up post-structural literary critic, Hortense Spillers’ theorization of distinctions between “body” and “flesh” in her (1987) essay, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” I discussed in detail Spillers’ “body” and “flesh” exegesis in *Wind* (i.e. the first chapter of this dissertation). Hence in brief, JanMohamed’s

analyses (for my purposes) correspond with those of Spillers at a juncture of “Mama’s Baby” where the latter makes the claim: “before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography” (Spillers, 207). In this way, JanMohamed revises to supplement Spillers’ suppositions as a means to his further delineate contours & contexts of the “death-bound-subject.” Drawing from the text that I used as an epigraph to introduce this chapter, JanMohamed says:

“Flesh,” I would contend, is not *quite* the zero degree of “social conceptualization” or subjectivity, for, though denuded almost entirely of subjectivity, flesh is still *alive*. Bare life/flesh is close to the zero degree of subjectivity in that it is defined as readily killable. However, we must remember that, when one kills flesh, it is transformed, it dies and becomes *meat*; meat, one can say, is insensate flesh. And, to the extent that meat rather than flesh is the absolute zero degree of subjectivity, my extension of Spillers’s formulation allows us to define the zone inhabited by “bare life” or the death-bound-subject as that between flesh and meat. Viewed from within the subjectivity trapped in this zone, one needs to stress that bare life always exists as “flesh” that is readily and easily convertible to “meat” and that it is precisely this convertibility, what we might call “negative latency,” between the two that constitutes “bare life” (10).

I opine that Bigger cannot distinguish between the “convertibility” of his own or of others’ (Sartrean) “situation” as either, “flesh,” or “meat” in JanMohamed’s framing of these terms. We see this most clearly in the scene in *Native Son* where Bigger murders Mary, and in so doing, accomplishes his dark premonition that his fate will be one where he “kills himself or someone else.”

After their crushingly uncomfortable visit to Ernie’s, Bigger drives Jan to his home, and continues to the Dalton’s to take (a very drunk) Mary back to her house. On this drive, Mary makes Bigger feel painfully confused, and, deeply disquieted. The “wild” and “crazy girl” flails about, becomes even more direct in interacting with Bigger, and drunkenly flirts with him. When they arrive at the Dalton’s, Bigger cannot wait to get Mary out of the car, and into her home. But Mary proves to be difficult to control; she passes-out, and Bigger is terrified at the prospect of having to get her to her room. Essentially, Bigger does not know whether helping or not helping Mary would put him jeopardy as a Negro that might be caught touching and/or carrying a white woman. Bigger decides to help Mary to her bedroom. With Mary moving in-and-out of consciousness, Wright portrays Bigger’s actions and thoughts here: “He tried to stand her on her feet and found her weak as jelly. He held her in his arms...listening in the darkness. His senses reeled from the scent of her hair and skin...Her face was buried in his shoulder; his arms tightened about her. Her face turned slowly, gently; it was as though she had given up. Her lips, faintly moist in the hazy blue light, were parted...her face came toward him and her lips touched his, like something he had imagined” (84). Bigger persists in kissing Mary; she responds to Bigger erotically under auspices of being completely inebriated. Bigger appears to be unaware that he is sexually exploiting Mary; he is, effectively, violating her in a vile way as if he feels that this is not just his desire,

but also his duty as a Negro whose eroticism *must be* as violent and vulgar as it adjudged by his of/as “white folks” gastronomic circumstance.

Mary follows a series of actions where she responds to Bigger’s erotic advances/assaults, passes-out, and then reawakens, speaking in drunken, loose, and loud tones. Bigger’s greatest fear (of being caught in this type of scenario) comes to fruition when Mrs. Dalton hears her daughter’s antics, calls lightly to her, and heads to her bedroom door. Mrs. Dalton knocks on her door and then steps into Mary’s room, calling to her again. Suddenly, Mary snaps awake. Bigger fears that Mary will resume her loud, drunken rhetoric. He is standing stock-still at Mary’s bedside. He takes his hand, covering Mary’s mouth to drown-out her voice. Wright tells us that “Mary mumbled and tried to rise...Frantically, he [Bigger] caught a corner of the pillow and brought it to her lips...Mary’s fingernails tore at his hands and he caught the pillow and covered her entire face with it, firmly” (85). The smothering continues with Mary fighting a “fingernail” war for her life to no avail. Bigger smothers Mary to death. When Mrs. Dalton steps closer to Mary’s bed her daughter is already dead. But Mrs. Dalton does not discover this; she smells the alcohol coming out of Mary’s pores (as it were), and chastises her dead daughter—“You *stink* with whiskey” (86) she exclaims. Mrs. Dalton leaves her daughter’s room, figuring that her “wild” daughter must sleep-off her deplorably drunken state. Bigger is left with Mary’s body; sitting a grotesque form of truncated *Shiva* for a while. “Then, convulsively, he sucked his breath in and huge words formed slowly, ringing in his ears: *She’s dead*...He was a murderer, a Negro murderer, a black murderer. He had killed a white woman” (87). Anxiety-ridden and terrified, Bigger decides that he must destroy evidence of Mary’s body. He decides that he must burn Mary—the “white woman” who has burned him from the inside-out “like fire.” He decides that he must take Mary to the basement to burn her remains in the furnace that looked forward to maintaining as part of his duties because he reckoned it would be “almost fun.”

Bigger puts his plans into action. He takes Mary to the basement, then tries and fails to burn the “crazy girl.” Mary’s body is just too large. He devises a new plan:

He *had* to burn this girl. With eyes glazed, with nerves tingling with excitement, he looked about the basement. He saw a hatchet. *Yes!* That would do it. He spread a neat layer of newspapers beneath the head, so that the blood would not drip on the floor. He got the hatchet, held the head at a slanting angle with his left hand and, after pausing in an attitude of prayer, sent the blade of the hatchet into the bone of the throat with all the strength of his body. The head rolled off...Quickly, he wrapped the head in the newspapers and used the wad to push the bloody trunk of the body deeper into the furnace. Then he shoved the head in (92).

Circling back to JanMohamed’s conceptions of “flesh” and “meat,” I believe that when Bigger burns Mary, he thinks (at least for some time as the novel progresses) that he has made her equivalent to the “meat” that he feels he is as one that lives passing “his days trying to defeat or gratify powerful impulses in a world he feared.” In this way, he does not free himself from Mary by cremating her; rather, in treating her like “meat”—“meat” that he meticulously butchers and appears to pray over—Bigger cooks Mary. But this is an act of incomplete cooking because Bigger lacks the subjectivity to “enjoy” his hunger, food, or

Levinasian “desire” for food insofar as this “desire” is analogous to an existent being willing to be a *being* that engages in “ethical” exchanges of co-responsibility that unceasingly rebound them back to producing conditions of their “desire” to hunger in the vein of hungering for “philosophical truth.” Therefore, Mary’s presence as a form of “white folks” food “in his stomach” is amplified rather than diminished by proxy of Bigger’s lack of alimentary “enjoyment.” Mary becomes yet another form of food that Bigger definitively names as a circumstance that limits his “desire” to “hunger.”

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