"Terror Cut Through Me; I Swallowed It Down": Dreadful Dining in Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black*

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Abstract: This essay analyzes food-related passages in Esi Edugyan's 2018 novel *Washington Black* through the lens of multiple scholarly sources that approach food and its prevalence beyond satiety in human societies, primarily through psychoanalytic research, as well as folkloric and socio-cultural studies. By doing so, the unique relationship between the titular character and food can be understood to mirror his traumatic early life experiences as a child born into slavery, his maturation, and finally, his reclamation of his freedom and his individual self-actualization.

As an enslaved person on a plantation that produces sugar, a lucrative ingredient intended for consumption, *Washington Black*'s titular character grows up in an environment heavily dependent on food and its production. Esi Edugyan refuses to let the reader forget the importance of food in Washington's life, often employing culinary metaphors to describe various locations, atmospheres, and objects. However, gastronomic references often accompany a sense of terror and discomfort for Washington and result in his avoidance of consuming food at an early age. To his mother, Big Kit, this behaviour is reprehensible, and she scolds him by telling him: "Don't you never not take what yours…. You was promised that food. So you take it" (Edugyan 28). Washington rejects this advice and instead internalizes his food-related trauma: his subconscious fasting appears to correlate with multiple harrowing experiences from his life, whereby a variety of unpleasant, often violent events coincide with shared meals or even the mere presence of food. Spilled

claret resembles "blood, seeping outwards" (23); his visit to Bridge Town "stink[s] of overripe fruit … and of immense slabs of tuna starting to turn in the heat" (73); Philip's demand for sandwiches results in Wash's facial disfigurement, which in its healing process "felt like meat … [and had] a strange white patch marbled with pink, like a fatty cut of mutton … [and] clots pale as boiled oatmeal" (88). Thus, using theories on various gastronomic attitudes to examine episodes of food and disgust in *Washington Black* allows us to understand the potential origins of Washington's disdain for eating as it relates to his identity, interpersonal relationships, and self-actualization.

Few scholars deny the prevalence of food in constructing social boundaries, its common association with the perception of the self, and its ability to transgress its material form. For instance, in paraphrasing Roland Barthes, Edwin characterizes gastronomic practices as "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour" (40). Additionally, those who study the social aspects of food related experiences often adhere to the idea that our ability to endow them with metaphorical and moral qualifications is one of the main aspects that sets humans apart from less sophisticated animals and "leads to the attainment of self-consciousness" (Christou 67). As Moraru suggests when analyzing the role of hunger and satiation in identity formation, eating acts "as a staging area of the cogito, as bodily protocol of self-perception, self-evaluation, and self-identification … an affective space where we come to terms with ourselves" (12). Subconsciously or otherwise, characters in *Washington Black* similarly use the gastronomic stage to communicate social boundaries and, especially in the case of Washington, to process personal identity and values through both food-related rejection and acceptance.

Many of Washington's early eating experiences demonstrate food's intimate role in power dynamics. Notably, Big Kit, Washington's mother, dominates the enslaved persons' food-sphere by "forcibly t[aking] food from a strong smith's apprentice each morning and night … [eating] it in front of

him, scooping with her fingers from his bowl, until some understanding was reached between them" (Edugyan 7). Later, she uses those same fingers to "hold out the last scoop of her breakfast to [Washington] … [who] would eat it from her hand, like a tamed creature" (53). By using food as a tool to garner respect from the other enslaved persons, Big Kit cements her status as their female figurehead and forces them to recognize the extent of power she can claim in that position. Incidentally, however, her intimidating demeanour seems to intertwine with the concept of satiation in Washington's subconscious adolescent mind and thus subjugates him to another subordinate position alongside the lack of selfhood imposed on him as a boy born into slavery. When Washington eventually escapes from Faith Plantation, he sees this as an act that frees him from the supremacy of white enslavers who influenced his negative relationship with food during his formative years; yet, his escape from the plantation means that, by way of physical distance, he also becomes divorced from Big Kit's maternal authority, which she used to manipulate his childhood eating practices—though through a notably different and familial degree of power, as opposed to an enslaver's violently oppressive one. Interestingly, Washington eventually realizes with horror in his adult life that he had abandoned Big Kit at the plantation "in favour of Titch" (345). Although his attachment to Titch could suggest that he simply replaced one enslaver's oppressive gastronomic influence for another's, it is worth noting that Titch stands out as a white figure of authority who perpetuates the correlation between food-avoidance and morality. For instance, he instructs Washington to use liberal amounts of the "many spices from [his] journeys into the East" (40) with "one restriction ... that is, [he is] never to use sugar" (41). Since Titch's refusal of sugar, a product "which shifted [Barbados] from a population that was predominantly European in origin and free to one that was predominantly African in origin and enslaved," stems from his desire to dissociate from the inhumane use of slavery on plantations, Titch and Washington's imbalanced yet affectionate relationship does not necessarily correspond with

Washington's anxieties around food and control (Smith and Watson 64).

Notably, Washington's repudiation of food bears some resemblance to manifestations of the eating disorder anorexia nervosa, which often stem from the lack of autonomy generally associated with childhood, especially a traumatic one. Moreover, the tension between the "lived self" and the "ideal self" caused by a young person's unfulfilling environment can provoke their desire to "re-establish close control over a part of their existence: food, body appearance and ultimately "one[s]-self" (Scodellaro 22–23). In Washington's case, his adolescent eating experiences are informed by his reliance on what his enslavers decided to provide for him, Big Kit's assertions of authority, and the conflation of gastronomy with morality through Titch. Thus, the subjugation and oppression that the experiences in childhood seems to instigate his development of avoidant food behaviours as a means to establish self-reliance, autonomy, and even physical safety. For instance, when Washington first learns that the slave catcher Willard, employed by Erasmus Wilde to find him and abduct him "Dead or Alive" (162), has come to Nova Scotia in search of him, Washington "star[es] nervously out the window" and dejectedly "eat[s] a quick meal of boiled eggs," (251) before "[he] r[uns] out of food and stay[s] the next two days together in bed, fasting" until "[his] head beg[ins] to spin and [his] muscles to shiver" (252). Only once his body suffers immediate and unbearable pain that outweighs the potential for external danger does he force himself to leave his home in search of food. Washington's food-avoidance may also relate to his transition from slavery to freedom, as requiring less food could allow him to feel like a more self-sufficient person—that is, less reliant on racialized power structures like those on the plantation. In fact, Titch states that he chose Washington to aid in his scientific work when Washington was only twelve because "[he was] precisely the size for [his] Cloud-cutter" (44), an experimental gas-powered air balloon of Titch's design. In this case, Washington's body becomes valued specifically for being unimposing and leads to his ability to access

the airborne vehicle that he uses to escape from slavery. This event further establishes a correlation between food, power, and autonomy that informs Washington's attempt to create a life for himself outside of Faith Plantation while adhering to certain behaviours of food-avoidance in individuals with eating disorders.

Keeping in mind the dynamic interplay between power structures and food in Washington's life, food-avoidance allows him to silently oppose the power others hold over him by rejecting their control over his satiety. Additionally, it enables him to establish an independent sense of self on his own terms by exercising judgement over which aspects of the material world he allows into his internal, psychological being. Notably, Rozin emphasizes the complex and intimate act of eating, since it requires "taking matter from outside the self and putting it inside," a practice that Washington could see as hindering his ability to detach himself from the inequality and danger of the world (Rozin, "Why We Eat" 28). Washington mediates the oppression and violence that he comes to associate with eating-focused experiences through food avoidance, but he also seems to adopt a mindset similar to Rozin's theory of contamination, which refers to the perception that an edible material becomes distasteful once "an item we consider disgusting … touches a piece of food" (39). By refusing the second-hand food of Erasmus and adopting morally charged eating practices as informed by Titch, he "protect[s] the 'psychological' body from harm" (Davey 3454) and sends products of "moral offense … from out of mouth to out of mind" (Rozin, "Food is Fundamental" 26–27).

Additionally, the fact that many of Washington's most memorable instances of culinary repulsion relate to death or near-death may insinuate that food-avoidance functions not only as a rejection of oppressive structures and communication of his moral code but also as a way to remain vigilant against the ever-present threats to his life. Just as Davey notes how food-based disgust has been associated with the desire to "protect the 'psychological' body from harm by providing reminders of our own mortality" (3454), Wash-

ington's interpretation of food as unsettling tends to present itself in instances when he experiences distress or anxiety about his safety. His meal with Edgar Farrow, for example, is fraught with anxious undertones since it takes place alongside the unsettling knowledge that pickled corpses litter the man's home (Edugyan 171). When Washington "picture[s him]self being cut down by the master's hands … a taste like unripe apples filled [his] throat" (126). Titch, however, rejects the association between death and food by communicating his distaste towards the gastronomic preferences of his mother and brother who support the institution of slavery, which suggests the possibility of moral expression through food avoidance. As Titch's protégé, Washington absorbs Titch's belief that selective consumption communicates moral values, especially considering he had already begun to consider the connection between moral contamination and ethical consumption during Erasmus Wilde's violence towards Big Kit at a dinner. After Erasmus brutalizes Big Kit for attempting to clear a blood-like wine stain out of a tablecloth, Washington "lose[s his] enthusiasm" for the scraps of "half-eaten food" (27) leftover from the Wildes' dinner even though he had earlier reflected on "lick[ing] the plates … in wonder" (19).

Just as these instances demonstrate the relationship between violence and dining, food and gastronomic metaphors continue to find their place alongside certain characters' attempts to display their dominance over or distaste with Washington, be it through physical abuse or psychological oppression. For instance, during his voyage to Nova Scotia "a wrinkled-faced sailor … hefted [him] up with his thick, bread-like hands … [and] danced, taunting [him], until [he] agreed to stand treat a quart of rum" (228). Later, when Willard viciously attacks Washington, he does so in a dark alley and Washington notes "his milk stink of sweet unwashed skin and whisky" (298). In a more psychological act of violence, Titch's mother refuses Washington and Tanna, the mixed-race daughter of Mister Goff, a meal by claiming that she "would have offered a lunch, but [she] did not know if [they] enjoyed English food" (332). While the for-

mer two incidents indicate a threat to Wash's physical body and thus mortality, Mrs. Wilde perpetuates Wash's social exclusion by reinforcing staunch cultural boundaries between her 'civilized' English background and his perceived lack of civility, since "[d]ifferences in food culture are … seen by the antagonists … as indicators of moral difference" (Ojwang 80).

All these experiences result in damage both to Washington's material and psychological being and further cement the connection he makes between food and oppression. Arguably the most horrific and symbolic evidence of food and terror occurs during Titch and Washington's visit to Mister Edgar Farrow at St. John's parish. Farrow's interest as a "necropsocist," or a "scholar of human decay" (Edugyan 161) blurs the distinction between the human body and commonly employed gastronomic terms in a way that reads as cannibalistic. For instance, the body Washington finds in Farrow's home appears "very white and bulbous, the flesh swelling" and is bathed in a liquid with a "strange pickled smell" (170), summoning the image of a jar of fermented meat. Shortly after Washington contains his horror at the corpse and the three men dine, Farrow violently "cut[s] at his pork with great energy, then stab[s] the meat and start[s] to chew" (172). The jarring proximity between the description of the corpse and Farrow's voracious appetite for the ham allows images of animal meat and human flesh to combine with one another, making the boundary between the two nearly indistinguishable. If Washington's rejection of food and meal-sharing stems partly from a desperate attempt to separate himself from the lack of bodily autonomy he experienced through Erasmus' treatment of enslaved persons, his non-consensual inclusion in the sexton's grotesque blurring of animal and human flesh ravishes his newly acquired degree of agency. This incident could be partly responsible for his terror and anxiety during his stay at Farrow's, especially considering that his interest in studying the body after death (a stark reminder of Washington's own mortality). Interestingly, Titch partakes in a type of fleshly consumption when he later "star[es] at his father's letter with grimness

about his mouth, [and] chew[s] at the inside of his cheek" (175). While Washington's bodily autonomy requires constant consolidation, the privileged white characters do not recognize the symbolic unity of flesh-types, representing their relative security (their bodies do not exist under the threat of violence).

Although Washington's revulsion often results from hateful or harmful characters and their culinary practices, the gluttonous Philip prompts him to more complex ruminations over the relationship between morality and material consumption. At their first meeting, Washington reacts to Philip's appearance with confusion, for "All [Titch and Erasmus'] talk of eating had given [him] to think he'd be gargantuan. He was not even half of Big Kit's girth. His arms, awkwardly thin, folded oddly out from his body" (75). As Washington comes to know him, he discovers that Philip "had little hunger but much appetite" (79). Philip rarely seems to enjoy his food and instead complains about its insufficient preparation and unpleasant flavours. For instance, after a enslaved person prepares his food, Philip "sp[its] out the first dish she had made" (95), pushes his food from the plate onto the table in disgust during another meal, and complains that the "Mussels were a tad overdone" while at dinner with Erasmus and Titch (95); yet, he never fails to continuously gorge himself. He excessively consumes products of slave labour and mistreats enslaved people, yet he appears to suffer no physical nor psychological ramifications. Thus, Philip becomes a symbol for the complacency and needless excess of the white gentry, who were responsible in part for Washington's violent childhood.

Yet, Washington finds Philip a fascinating study for drawing: "he'd lie, his mouth slackening back to reveal a dark-pink gullet, wheezing out the smell of sweet milk" and this gluttony-induced incapacitation produced "some of the softest [sketches Washington] ever drew … strangely vivid, underlit with a tenderness [he] did not understand" (Edugyan 81). Just as his distaste for the Wilde brothers transforms after he bonds with Titch, Washington's strange appreciation for Philip seems a step towards "reversing an

innate aversion" (Rozin, "Why We Eat" 35), a phenomenon wherein the disavowal of certain foodstuffs or food practices that were once deplorable become palatable and even enjoyable. Consequently, Washington's fixation with Philip may mark the beginning of his transition from a preoccupation with self-preservation to a more direct and concrete desire for self-enhancement, emphasizing the empirical and involving "positive self-evaluation … [and] achieving tangible success" (Sedikides and Gregg 102). It is helpful to understand that self-enhancement also only tends to occur when the subject begins to transition from prioritizing their basic needs for survival to focusing on more introspective practices (103), which Titch's interest in Washington initially instigates but which begins to take its final form when Washington separates from Titch and independently establishes interpersonal and professional relationships.

Thus, even though Philip engages in thoughtless and harmful excessive behaviours, Washington's strange fixation with him may indicate that Washington's self-enhancement stems from the idea that "identity matters in itself whether or not it is positive or realistic, because having a coherent self-view affords a satisfying sense of prediction and control in the interpersonal sphere" (Sedikides and Gregg 109). In other words, though Philip's actions undeniably perpetuate aggression towards enslaved people, Washington's dynamic perception of Philip is prompted by disgust and delight on his own terms. Unlike Kit's opinions on food-scraps and Titch's beliefs regarding the consumption of sugar, Washington's fascination with Philip is unmediated by an external authority. His drawings of Philip are a form of self-expression focused on individual betterment that suggest a process of self-discovery beyond his childhood experiences of subordination at the Faith Plantation. While Washington's tolerance of Philip does not necessarily indicate a shift towards 'positive' growth since Philip contributes to white domination through a mixture of apathy and aggression and therefore places Washington in a perilous position by overlooking his privilege, it nonetheless reflects how Washington's perspective on food-related subjects continuously

evolves with many of his life experiences. Whether these experiences are individual or interpersonal ones, they mark how his aversion to commensality and common gastronomic practices relates to his desire for the 'ideal-self' and increased opportunities for self-enhancement.

Another occasion when Washington begins to process his trauma in a more positive way surfaces through his choice of occupation after having fled the Barbados plantation, first becoming a member of a small-scale fishery and then a prep cook. His position at the fishery symbolizes a transition from enslaved boy to working man and thus represents a step closer to self-actualization. However, this position still makes him feel "everywhere uneasy in [his] skin … [as] kidnappers generally roamed the coast" (Edugyan 229), and therefore continues to make Washington feel physically vulnerable. His later job as a prep cook reveals that "[he] had a gift for [cooking]" (230) and advances the consolidation of his autonomy through skill building, but this experience unfortunately preserves his social exclusion as "[he] cooked always behind a curtain, unseen, [his] scarred face being, the owner feared, repugnant" (230). Though these culinary experiences ultimately come to perpetuate racially motivated prejudice and complicate Washington's ability to ensure his physical security, they nonetheless allow him to establish himself as an increasingly independent and self-sufficient member of society and represent positive growth in how Washington experiences food-related environments.

Moreover, his ability to reverse the innate aversion he feels in food-related situations secures the sanctuary he finds in the company of the Goffs: to exercise his passionate love of marine life and to reclaim the attention of Tanna, Washington accepts their invitation to an afternoon of "a rowboat and a good lunch" (257) and regularly takes part in their picnics and home-cooked meals. While Washington continues to form a bond with the Goffs that often includes their engagement in shared meals, his apprehension towards commensality still occasionally evokes grotesque imagery or feelings of discomfort. For instance, during a win-

ter picnic organized by Mister Goff, Washington "taste[s] nothing, feeling [him]self entirely elsewhere, absent" (357) until finally his anxiety dwindles as the end of the meal arrives and "Goff smile[s] all about, chewing his food, happy" (359). Although characters like Erasmus or Philip with their unabashed appetites usually unsettle Washington and denote their apathy towards the moral implications of consumption, when Washington gazes at Mister Goff's "bright chewing face, [he] realize[s] how profoundly [he] likes him" (262) in spite of the striking and violent way he "gobble[s] up his fish in quick, rabbit-like bites … [with] the flesh of the mackerel flashing in his small, bright teeth" (280). On these occasions, "Context … determines content; that is, circumstances affect whether or not meaning emerges … and which messages are conveyed or inferred" and thus does not confer the same categorization of terror that was present during the earlier experiences in his life since he now exercises an increased degree of agency (Jones 138). Despite his sporadically recurring associations of food with terror, Washington's ability to engage in pleasant meal-sharing with the Goffs with increasing frequency indicates positive progress towards a relationship mostly devoid of inequality (an impossible feat during his friendship with Titch) and secures an environment where he can convert his initial rejection of food during adolescence into wholesome and mutual satiation. Additionally, these conflicting experiences highlight Washington's transition from discomfort to security as a non-linear and complicated process that runs parallel to his burgeoning individual freedom.

Alongside the research of scholars like Rozin, Scodellaro, Sedikides, and Gregg, who offer insight into food-avoidance, disgust, and other problematized eating behaviours, we can recognize that the relationship that Washington has with food is integral to his understanding of violence, power, and oppression, informing the cultivation of his identity and interpersonal bonds. By analyzing the relationship between food-related passages and gastronomic metaphors in *Washington Black* and their ability to evoke various dynamic emotions from fear to familiarity, one can see Washing-

ton's development as reflective of the dynamic intervention between food, terror, and the human experience. Furthermore, Washington's progression through life alongside his treatment of food demonstrates a constantly evolving perception of his environment—one that reflects back onto his psyche and often prompts avoidance and anxiety, but eventually allows him to progress towards self-actualization. Ultimately, Washington's increasing involvement in positive dining opportunities comes to represent just one of the many ways he achieves agency on his own terms in spite of the prior food-related experiences that perpetuated his subjugation.

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