

Hunger, Thirst, Folklore, and Fat in *The Planet of Junior Brown*

Authors frequently employ food and its surrounding rituals to construct the identities and agency of the children and adolescents who populate their work. In the chapter entitled “Molasses” in her book *Consuming Agency in Fairy Tales, Childlore, and Folkliterature*, Susan Honeyman explores gastronomic utopias in African-American folklore in literary contexts, turning to Brer Rabbit tales to explore how food informs the ways black adolescent protagonists navigate power and oppression (111). Virginia Hamilton’s *The Planet of Junior Brown*, employs the complex morality of Brer Rabbit tales to demonstrate how its characters assert power, resist oppression, and form community. By crafting a text that aligns a homeless, food insecure young man with an obese, mentally ill musical prodigy, Hamilton’s narrative also offers a pluralistic, resistant vision of black masculinity.

In Hamilton’s text, Buddy Clark develops an alternative set of food rules and rituals which, like Brer Rabbit’s, are grounded in self-reliance and fear of privation, as a housing and food insecure adolescent responsible for training communities of boys to live for themselves, not one another. Buddy’s careful rationing of bottled water, a precious resource during winter when public water fountains are shut off, exemplifies the extremity of his privation as well as his pathway towards agency (Hamilton 77-78).

In addition to Susan Honeyman’s scholarship on the intersections between food, folklore, and the portrayal of black adolescence in recent literature, I will draw from Carolyn Daniel’s *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children’s Literature* to explore the connection between food, water, agency, and the ways in which Hamilton’s text disrupts literary traditions which pit hungry and obese children against one another. I will also engage with Naomi Lesley’s paper, “Solar Systems and Power Systems: Decentering the Naturalized Universe in Virginia Hamilton’s *The Planet of Junior Brown*,” to interrogate how Hamilton depicts a plurality of black masculinities via Buddy and Junior’s comradeship. Ultimately, this paper will demonstrate how Hamilton utilizes folkloric notions of power and transforms them, supplanting self-reliance with community.

Daniel, Carolyn. *Voracious Children: Who Eats Whom in Children’s Literature*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Hamilton, Virginia. *The Planet of Junior Brown*. New York: Simon and Schuster Books for Young Readers, 1971.

Honeyman, Susan. “Molasses.” *Consuming Agency in Fairy Tales, Childlore, and Folk Literature*. Routledge, 2009, pp. 111-139.

Lesley, Naomi. “Solar Systems and Power Systems: Decentering the Naturalized Universe in Virginia Hamilton’s *The Planet of Junior Brown*.” *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2011, p. 124-146.