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Antonia Purk

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## 1. Introduction

- 1 Food and its consumption pervade Richards's poetry and song lyrics. Cake is eaten, the sweetness of apples is appreciated, mango tea is guzzled. Eating is a recurring theme just as being eaten is a returning punch line in texts that undoubtedly seek to entertain. A good hundred and thirty years after their publication they do not fail to make readers smile for their whimsical rhymes and funny character names that leave one's tongue in knots with their uncommon combinations of vowels and consonants. At the same time, these short texts for children are also educational. A few of them explicitly include a moral at the end of the poem that warns of untoward social relations or conduct.<sup>1</sup> Enjoyable as they are, the poems still seek to impress "proper" behavior on their young readers (and listeners).
- 2 This essay investigates the link between education and entertainment with a specific focus on foodways. By reading the poems "Bobbily Boo and Wollypotump," "Seven Little Tigers and the Aged Cook" as well as "The Polar Bear's Party or The Mannerless Musk Ox," and "The Poor Unfortunate Hottentot," I seek to show how in Laura Richards's children's rhymes, the desire to eat is met with regulative forces that communicate social boundaries and racist sentiments. Eating too much ("Bobbily Boo and Wollypotump"), being unhappy with offered dishes (as the tigers and the musk ox are), or simply wishing for a nourishing meal (in the case of "Hottentot") is framed as excessive, unmannered, or as disregarding ascribed social positions.

- 3 Often overlooked as mundane, “food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilizations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts. Food is fundamental to the imagination, because food is fundamental to culture” (Keeling and Pollard, “Introduction” 5). Food practices often serve to signify processes of inclusion and exclusion in and from a community—be it that of upper-class society; racial, ethnic, or national community; or even humanity (Keeling and Pollard, “Utilizing” 201; Vallone 57; Daniel 12). In the case of the poems discussed in this essay, I argue that the protagonists only appear to be punished for food-related misbehavior, but the physical consequences depicted here point to underlying educative instructions that speak to classist and racist notions, when punishments for misbehavior are meted out on bodies that are unlike those of American white middle-class children for their different origins, species, or ethnicity.

## 2. Food Excess and Nonsense

- 4 In Laura Richards’s nursery rhymes, food poems occur in two categories, as might be differentiated by the texts’ protagonists. The foodways of the white middle- to upper-class child vastly differ from those who reside in the lands of nonsense, from animal characters, and racial Others. This is easily evident in a contrasting reading of “The Egg” (*In My Nursery* 84) and “Bobbily Boo and Wollypotump” (46). The former features a speaker, who is a child, ungendered, living on a farmstead, having just been sent out by their grandmother to bring a “nice little new-laid egg” from the barnyard. The speaker is young enough to lack the knowledge how and where to find an egg and starts to pay visits to all the farm animals to ask for an egg. Cow, dog, horse, pig, and turkey unfortunately are decidedly unhelpful in this quest. While the little protagonist grows increasingly cranky with their lack of success in their interactions with the animals and admonishes Piggywig for “that impudent quirk in [their] tail” (l. 20), and calls the turkey cock a “stupid old thing” (l. 23), the poem inherently maintains order.
- 5 In ballad stanzas, each of the quatrains relates the visit to another animal, the ABCB-rhyme scheme maintaining a steady pace of the trip around the farmyard. The setting of the poem is just as ordered. The child willingly follows their grandmother’s instruction, the family is affluent enough to own several farm animals. The frustrating egg hunt ultimately finds a happy end, when the speaker “found—not one egg, but ten! / And you *never* could guess where they all were hidden,— / Right under our old speckled hen!” (ll. 30–32). Together with the poem’s protagonist, we learn about the origins of eggs. While playful, this food poem educates its readers (or listeners) about the world and provides practical information.<sup>2</sup>
- 6 Although the child needs to learn how to navigate it, this world is ordered. The protagonist’s lack of knowledge leads to a little odyssey that yet ends in success. If we, as readers, already know about the origin of eggs, the child’s quest might amuse us. Asking the pig about eggs might appear absurd. Yet, these domesticated animals present no threats to the child who wanders around the yard by themselves. The poem thus also teaches about human-animal relationships, when it presents the animals as providing for the humans—even abundantly, as the hen lays ten eggs at once. The child learns not only how and where to gather eggs, but also that animal products are theirs for the taking.

- 7 “Bobbily Boo and Wollypotump” features protagonists who significantly differ from the child in “The Egg” in that they live in the land of nonsense instead of a relatable space, such as a farm. Their made-up names with playful assonances already signal a light-heartedness to the events that will unfold throughout the poem. The first two lines of the poem introduce Bobbily Boo by his title and his food habits: “Bobbily Boo, the king so free, / He used to drink the Mango tea” (ll. 1–2). As this occurs in the realm of nonsense, Bobbily’s kingship of an unnamed country is less of a serious matter, than it contributes to his comical characterization. His preference for Mango tea highlights the distance of the average American to the exotic king, as Bobbily drinks not regular black or green tea, but prefers a more extravagant, sweetened version, flavored with tropical fruit.<sup>3</sup>
- 8 The following line adds that he drinks “coffee, too” (l. 3). Though in itself not an outrageous act, the simple addition (“too”) gestures toward excess, when Mango tea apparently is not enough to satisfy Bobbily Boo. The suspicion that it all might be a bit “too” much is confirmed in the final line of Bobbily’s stanza: “He drank them both till his nose turned blue” (l. 4). Wendy Katz points to the explicit link of food, excess, and an emphasis on the physical body: “The plenitude of food in children’s books is directly related to the essentially comic spirit of children’s literature. The characters of comedy, like the characters of children’s literature, are quintessential earthlings, fleshly and vulnerable” (199). As is the case with Richards’s Bobbily Boo. The hyperbole of his color-changing nose emphasizes his physical body, which is to be laughed at. Bobbily knows no restraint and might just be a little too “free” as a king (l. 1). He pays for his alimentary excess with physical repercussions.
- 9 The second stanza repeats the escalation towards excess by the example of “Wollypotump.” As Bobbily Boo is royalty, so is she—“the queen to high” (l. 5). The poem here moves from drinks to solid foods, when Wollypotump eats both “Gumbo pie and Gumbo cake” (l. 7). Gumbo may be as foreign and exotic to a New Englander (such as Laura Richards) as mango tea. While gumbo pie might still be conceivable with the traditional Louisianan stew acting as filling to a savory pie crust, Gumbo cake appears rather absurd. Wollypotump eats both. This doubling of food dishes repeats Bobbily Boo’s indulgence with two types of drink.
- 10 The consequence of Wollypotump’s Gumbo consumption is not just the color change of a body part, but the destruction of one: “She ate them both till her teeth did break” (l. 8). Etti Gordon Ginzburg, in her essay on Laura Richards’s nonsense poetry, notes that in the poem of Bobbily Boo and Wollypotump, “causality is odd: drinking tea and coffee turns the king’s nose blue, and crying brings about his (and his wife’s) annihilation” (“Lady” 176). I agree that causality here is odd, it is, however, not absent, but the king and queen’s physical demise is the direct consequence of ingesting too many food and drink items. What ultimately leads to their deaths, however, is not excessive consumption, but a moral reprimand thereof.
- 11 In the final stanza Bobbily and Wollypotump “[e]ach called the other a greedy frump” (l. 10). I read the greed admonished here as referring to the royals’ excessive food intake in the previous two stanzas. Finally, “when these terrible words were said, / They sat and cried till they both were dead” (ll. 11–12). The poem’s final line brings about the death of its two protagonists. The description of the insult “greedy frump” as “terrible words” suggests that Bobbily and Wollypotump’s crying is caused by their mutual name-calling. While it remains unclear which is worse—overeating or name-

calling—the poem nonetheless links gluttony to unacceptable social behavior beyond the act of eating itself. Death as the ultimate punishment then follows the twofold scandal of being the perpetrator and the victim of an insulting slur.

- 12 While the fatal end of *Bobbily Boo* and *Wollypotump* might be shocking, the text established its characters as not to be taken too seriously. As X. J. Kennedy points out, “Laura E. Richards’s king and queen who weep themselves to death [Kennedy here refers to *Bobbily Boo* and *Wollypotump*] are, as the absurdly musical language of the poem makes clear, not persons we will ever meet in reality” (32). Similarly, Gordon Ginzburg argues that “[a]lthough the poem ends violently, it does not arouse any emotional response; instead it creates a detached universe that is apart from the real world” (“Lady” 179). Unlike the young speaker of “The Egg,” these protagonists are also not offered for identification to the poem’s readers through shared characteristics. The physical damage to the two royals’ bodies then has no implications for the world of the reader, since “a nonsense poem may be rife with violence, but from the start, it alerts us to its harmlessness,” as Kennedy emphasizes (32).
- 13 Yet, at the same time, the poem advocates moderation, both in terms of food intake and social interaction. Etti Gordon Ginzburg notes that reading Laura Richards’s poems solely as nonsense can be misleading. Often enough Richards depicted the trifles of motherhood and childlife, which for Victorian sensibilities were too disturbing to read as anything other than nonsense (Gordon Ginzburg, “Genre” 151). Gordon Ginzburg’s insightful observation emphasizes that while the nonsense of “*Bobbily Boo* and *Wollypotump*” expels any seriousness to the violation of its protagonists’ bodies through exoticizing distance and absurd hyperbole, the poem still conveys a sober message of cautioning its readers to mind their manners.

### 3. Suffering Animals

- 14 Another set of bodies easily brutalized in Laura Richards’s poems are those of animals. All kinds of animals feature throughout Richards’s oeuvre, but while the familiar farm animals in “The Egg” remain peacefully untouched, others may indeed fall to peril. In conjunction with manners and food, this is the case for instance in “The Seven Little Tigers and the Aged Cook” (*Nursery* 143–144). This six-stanza poem starts off innocently:
- Seven little tigers, they sat them in a row,  
Their seven little dinners for to eat;  
And each of the troop had a little plate of soup,  
The effect of which was singularly neat. (ll. 1–4)
- 15 The little tigers present a picture of “neat” order and cuteness, they are “little” tigers after all, they sit in a “row” and are all matched up with “little” plates of a most unassuming dish—“soup.” The setup might remind of a tea party with dolls and stuffed animals. However, it becomes clear that this neatness is but a performance and one that is doomed to fail for the inherent un-neatness of the little tigers.
- 16 At closer observation, the little tiger scene rather resembles a circus act than a display of domesticity. They were sat in a row for the effect of neatness, i.e. they did not come to the seating arrangement themselves, and are dubbed a “troop,” as a group of performers. With this the picture of cuteness begins to disintegrate. This is also reflected in the illustration printed at the top of the poem’s page in Richards’s *In My*

*Nursery*. Seven tigers are portrayed, sitting in a row, steam wafting up from the plates in front of them. Yet, all but one seem rather uninterested in the dishes. Tigers Two and Four appear to be bickering over the head of Tiger Three whose head is bent towards their plate with an expression of weary dislike. Tiger Seven eyes his peers from the side, as if wondering about the purpose of their setup.



- 17 Figure 1: From *In My Nursery*. by Laura E. Richards, illustrator unknown. copyright © 1890, 143. Public domain.
- 18 The tigers' discontent is explained by the poem's second stanza, which relates that they are feeling "cross" for an absence of "sauce" in their dishes (l. 5). They decide to kill the cook in retaliation, which is a rather inordinate punishment for having forgotten about a condiment. With this, the second quatrain quickly escalates the violence of the poem, which might be expected from tigers, but which was initially concealed by their seeming participation in the dinner party arrangement. The innate predatory nature of the tigers is further exposed, when they declare that they intend to not only kill the cook, but to have him for their supper instead of the meal he provided.
- 19 The display of animality is complicated by the human characteristics of the tigers: They intend to prepare the cook in a frying pan, which hints at human sensitivities and customs. They also put forth their desire in rather civilized manner: "Mr. Sparrow-piper Tup, we intend on you to sup!' / Said the eldest little tiger very sweetly" (ll. 13–14). The tiger's use of human language here, however, does not count towards their humanization. Instead, it adds to the absurdity of the tigers' behavior. Carolyn Daniel notes: "Talking animal characters in children's literature problematize [...] Western cultural food rules [...] They often evoke a sympathetic identification with the reader, and break down the opposition between animal/human, object/subject, and eaten/eater. An important determinant of subjectivity [...] is the capacity for language" (29). In this sense, the talking tigers in Richards's poem add to the progression of chaos, when they blur the oppositions that Daniel identifies. Escalating the little tigers from cute pussy cats to angry predators this quickly, the poem now is set in a world that is marked by inversions. Initially, the tigers, of whom danger might be expected, behave as tamed circus animals, which subordinates them to human rule. When they show their wildness in their desire to devour the cook, they do so in the most civilized fashion—by informing the cook politely. The lines between animal and human, savageness and civilization are thus effectively blurred.
- 20 The suspense finds its climax in the cook's unexpected shrewdness which matches that of the tigers, when, all of a sudden, he "[c]hopped the little tiger's head off very neatly" (l. 16). The poem's logic of inversion thus turns back on the murderous tiger. The lines are accompanied by a drawing, printed in the center of the page between the poem's final stanzas, which depicts the moment of chopping. The little tiger on the left is standing on his hind legs and reaches the same height as the human cook to the right.

The man is smirking, and his gaze is directed not at the tigers, but at the readers, which includes us as the audience of the cook's actions. His smirk almost seems to angle for applause for his feat. The cook swings the enormous knife that is just beheading the tiger, the severed head still hovering over the body, the open neck wound spurting blood. To the right, the other little tigers still sit in a row, looking on. Drawn in profile, the mouth of the first is gaping as in an expression of shock. The severed head in the air and the spray of blood visually emphasize the climax of shocking grotesquerie.



- 21 Figure 2: From *In My Nursery*. by Laura E. Richards, illustrator unknown. copyright © 1890, 144. Public domain.
- 22 The final two quatrains then resolve the tension of grotesque brutality: The cook declares that “a tiger’s better eating than a man” (l. 18), and prepares the eldest, now-dead, little tiger for the six others, who without qualms consume their brother’s flesh in an act of cannibalism and are delighted with the taste. They are so happy, indeed, that to keep the cook, they ask him to take the dead brother’s place in their family. Ostensibly, with this meal of fried tiger and a brother’s killer as an acceptable replacement for him, the poem continues with the cumulation of outrageous incidents. However, the frying of the dead little tiger solely repeats the original plans of frying the cook. The tiger thus pays for his revolt against the cook in the way of his own intended crime, which might be read in terms of poetic justice and returns the situation to a condition of order. At the same time, in carrying out the tiger’s intention, the cook reveals that he himself is a dangerous creature—equal to the tiger. With this inversion of human and animal, it is unsurprising that the cook would be accepted as one of the tigers’ own.
- 23 The cannibalistic devouring of the family member might be the most shocking turn of events in its disregard of ethical and moral limits. After the consumption of human flesh is successfully averted in the poem, the eating of a speaking animal would usually present an ethical problem. Carolyn Daniel explains that “when we give fictional animals language, we accord them full subjectivity. [...] Because talking animals are subjects, their flesh, like human flesh, is neither morally nor ethically edible. Children’s

stories that feature talking animals tend to uphold [...] a vegetarian diet” (29).<sup>4</sup> Laura Richards’s little tiger, however, can be maimed and be eaten without misgivings. I argue that the justification for this lies in the poem’s ontological conception of the tiger’s body as one to be violated. He is eaten by his brothers, who are linked to him both based on shared species and kinship. The cannibalism of the remaining six little tigers marks them—and by extension also the dead seventh—as morally corrupt. The tigers’ morally reprehensible behavior ultimately punishes the seventh brother for his attempted killing of the cook. The poem thus presents the death of the tiger and cannibalism among the wild beasts as tolerable, while the cook is saved. Human life remains untouched, regardless how animalistic the human behaves.

- 24 Through violence and inversions, “The Seven Little Tigers and the Aged Cook” teaches about manners. We could interpret the moral of the poem as a warning not to complain about one’s dinner (here the absence of sauce) and not to rebel against the cook or one will end up as dinner oneself. Yet, amidst all this violence, the poem remains funny and unthreatening, precisely for its overabundance of brutality, as it tips the events into the absurd. As readers, we are not in any danger to end up like the little tiger, in their moral depravity they are too distant from a possible readerly self-conception. We could not be like the tigers if we tried. Exaggeration presents the death and consumption of the little tiger as so unrealistic that it cannot threaten the bodies of the readers.
- 25 Less brutal, and only ostensibly more obvious with its clearly stated “Moral” at the end (*Tirra Lirra* 20), the longer, narrative poem “The Polar Bear’s Party or The Mannerless Musk Ox” (17–20) appears to teach about politeness when partaking in a shared meal. At the same time, the animal poem provides instructions about race relations by depicting the failure of the polar bear’s attempt to include the musk ox in his own community. The polar bear, who is introduced as gregarious and as having hearty sentiments, decides to invite a musk ox to his party, despite the ox living on land unlike his other guests, walruses, and seals, who like the bear live “upon the floe” (l. 6). The poem describes this inclusion of the musk ox as a “burst of friendliness” of the polar bear (l. 7). In his cordiality, the polar bear seeks similarity in their difference—while the ox might live on land, he likes it cold, has thick fur, and is never sick. “I think I’ll make so bold,” he decides (l. 12). The poem, however, immediately warns that the differences between the species might be greater than the polar bear himself realizes: When the musk ox is addressed as a “neighbor,” the term is marked with an asterisk, and a footnote is added: “\*Not a very near neighbor, but I’d just as lief be a hundred miles from the Pole as close to it, would n’t you? Or *would n’t* you?” (*Tirra* 17; emphasis in original). The footnote interrupts the flow of the poem and for a moment shifts both speaker and addressee, as it is inserted in the direct speech of the polar bear, who at this moment invites the musk ox. In the footnote the readers (or listeners) of the poem are addressed by the speaker of the poem, who for the length of the footnote leaves their rhyming form to comment on the polar bear’s invitation.
- 26 The insertion initially emphasizes the distance between polar bear and musk ox as not very near neighbors, to then question the relevance of this distance, to finally passive-aggressively demand a reply from us with “Or *would n’t* you?” (*Tirra* 17; emphasis in original). In this, the footnote makes plain the program of the poem—it is concerned with the direct address of its listeners, who are to realize the distances and differences between supposed neighbors.



27 The invitation of the musk ox turns out a mistake. While the other guests are delighted by the “lovely feast of blubber strips [...], / A puffin pie, a stuffin’ pie, / And boobies of the best” (ll. 17–20), they tuck in and have a good time, the musk ox does not participate in this merriment:

All, all except the Musky Ox!  
 He sat beside the board;  
 He did not eat, he did not drink,  
 He did not speak a word. (ll. 24–28)

28 His indifference is soon noticed and being asked about it, the musk ox “very rudely” (l. 36) replies, “I don’t like blubber, you ursine lubber” (l. 35), which he follows up with an gustatory insult, when he states:

‘Your puffin pie, your stuffin’ pie,  
 They fill me with disgust,  
 Bring me, old hoss, some Iceland moss!  
 You will, you shall, you must!’ (ll. 37–40)

29 Not only does the musk ox here express his revulsion towards the offered feast, but he also demands a specialty fare that is foreign (Icelandic) to the polar bear and hardly obtainable on his floe.

30 The other party guests promptly berate the musk ox as a “rude unmannered beast” (l. 46), and they physically drive him away—“to the shore” (l. 50)—back to the land he came from, where he “wallop[s] o’er the snow, / Hungry and tired and cross” (ll. 53–54). The “Moral” (*Tirra* 20) at the end of the poem appears to condense the narrative to a message to its readers:

Eat what is set before you,  
 And don’t be rude or cross,  
 And when you dine with Polar Bears,  
 Don’t ask for Iceland Moss! (ll. 63–66)

31 The clear instruction on table manners is paired with a final blow towards the musk ox. Continually ostracizing the musk ox throughout the poem, the text does not offer the reader to identify with him. The punchline would thus rather be an invitation to laugh at the musk ox, who is punished for his ill-advised behavior.

32 However, if the poem was to instruct solely on table manners, the musk ox’s fate still would seem rather excessive. Politeness on the guest’s side is more valued than on the host’s, as the polar bear did his best in providing a feast. While one could ask why the polar bear did not consider the ox’s vegetarian diet, he does not need to, as he presents the preferences of a majority. That the ox is “bundled” and “trundled” (l. 51), and that the other guests roar loudly and angrily in reaction to the musk ox’s refusal to partake, indicates that the food scene really is not just about sharing a meal, but about participating in cultural norms and integrating oneself into an existing society. I argue that the poem, then, is less concerned with food than with discussing racial or ethnic difference by way of food.

33 Having driven the musk ox away, the polar bear, walruses, and seals call him “old Double-Toe” (l. 59), which links the ox’s rudeness to a physical and visually perceptible difference. Had the polar bear initially looked for commonalities between the species, the crisis in social behavior now leads them back to physical difference and different origins. Reading this as a thinly veiled allegory in a highly racialized society in the United States at the turn of the century, the spat between polar bear and musk ox over

blubber and moss, i.e. over different food habits, becomes a warning of racial and ethnic others. The poem's message then is not directed at the musk ox and his unmannered behavior, but it is for the polar bear, who made the grave mistake of inviting a foreigner to his table. The implicit moral then warns to invite those of a different species/race/ethnicity/nationality, as difference cannot be overcome. Niceties and good intentions cannot bridge the divide and any attempt to do so will lead to disappointment. Indeed, the outcome in the polar bear and musk ox's case should have been clear from the start, based on their external differences, the poem suggests. As such, while appearing funny and entertaining and as carrying a message on rather minor behavioral rules regarding food and politeness, Laura Richards's poem here participates in reinforcing racial prejudice and social division.

#### 4. (Not) Eating and Being Eaten

34 Finally, one of Laura Richards's ditties makes the link of food and race especially obvious. In "The Poor Unfortunate Hottentot" (*Hurdy-Gurdy* 4-7),<sup>5</sup> the protagonist's quest for food eventually leads to his death, when the desire for a good dinner transgresses boundaries of race and class. The main character of the text is termed a "Hottentot," which already points to the racist notions of Africans with which Richards's rhymes operate. In *The Hurdy-Gurdy* (1902), the text is accompanied by three illustrations, the first of which represents the eponymous character, who stands besides an empty pot and scratches his head with a sheepish look on his face. The figure looks rather grotesque, as he is short but long-limbed, lean but with bulging eyes and a bulging stomach over the skirt-like cloth he wears. This caricature takes up the racist imagery of Africans in the late nineteenth century (see Lindfors) and signals that the misfortune is rather something to be amused by than to evoke sympathy for this character.

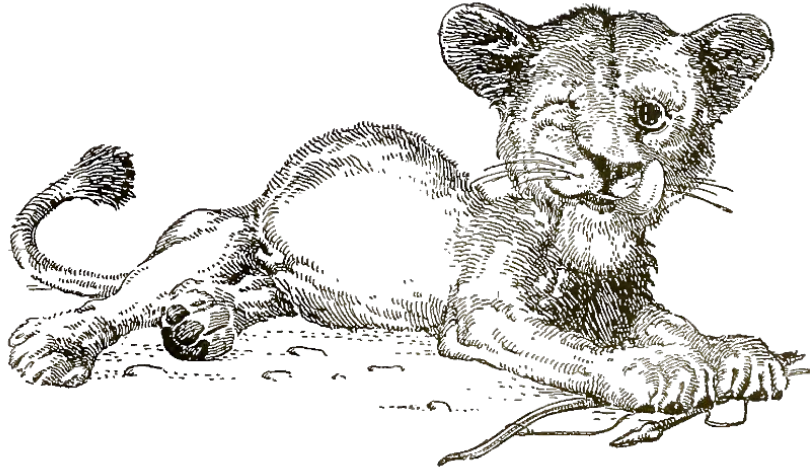
35 The first stanza then presents the absence of food, as also indicated by the empty pot in the illustration, as a moral consequence:

This poor unfortunate Hottentot  
He was not content with his lottentot:  
Quoth he, 'For my dinner,  
As I am a sinner,  
There's nothing to put in the pottentot!' (ll. 1-5)

36 What defines the Black person as a sinner remains unclear—it might be his Blackness,<sup>6</sup> or his discontent with the situation, or a different reason altogether. Bahar Gürsel reads this sinfulness as a marker of distance and inferiority, when she notes that "[e]ssentially, he is a figure who lives beyond the borders of the 'civilized' world that Richards repeatedly defines as superior in her works" (144). The destitution of the "Hottentot" is presented as self-imposed, which in turn posits his unhappiness with the situation as downright greedy. The hungry man then decides to take fate in his own hands and, in order not to starve, he picks up his bow and arrow to hunt for an antelope to "elope" with (l. 8). While eloping provides a perfect rhyme to the desired antelope, it also implies that this African character seeks to evade responsibility—here from starvation, which apparently should be his lot. While one could applaud him for his self-sufficiency, Richards's text does not, but condemns him for trying to change his situation in his desire for basic nutrition.

- 37 The quest for an antelope has to remain unsuccessful of course. In the next stanzas, the protagonist encounters a poisonous snake, which leads him to rather return home “to his grottentot” (l. 27). The description of the African character’s housing as a grotto, i.e. a cave-like dwelling, here adds to the racist portrayal of Africans as uncivilized. On his way home, “a lioness met him, / And suddenly ate him, / As penny’s engulfed by the slottentot” (ll. 28–29). The suddenness of this death does not actually dramatize it. On the contrary, the death of the text’s main character surprisingly lacks graphic violence with its comparison to a penny being swallowed by a machine’s slot. The simile rather evokes a sense of rightness in these events, as the slot is where the penny goes. The comparison of being eaten by a wild animal with a slot swallowing a penny provides normalcy to the narration of an event that might be shocking, had the text not already posited its main character as unworthy of readerly compassion.
- 38 Indeed, the death of the “Hottentot” resolves the tension of the racialized character’s attempt to better his own situation, of which the text disapproves, as the “Moral” makes clear (*Hurdy* 7):
- This poor unfortunate Hottentot  
Had better have borne with his lottentot.  
A simple banana  
Had staved off Nirvana:  
But what had become of my plottentot? (ll. 31–35)
- 39 Had the African character been satisfied with fruit, one that moreover associates the Black man with a monkey in a racist insult, he would have lived to see another day, Richards’s song seemingly teaches us.
- 40 While the punishment—death—seems excessive for the crime of wanting more than a banana, really the “Hottentot” is being punished for transgressing racial and social boundaries in his wanting. Presenting the hope for a meat dish as unreasonable for a Black man, links the consumption of meat with Whiteness through an association of meat with prosperity (Wallach 145), also considering that before the abolition of slavery, the fare of enslaved Black people often was based mainly on cornmeal rather than on animal protein (Wallach 40–41). Wanting to eat better food then implies the aspiration to racial equality, as foods perform a key part in practices of racial formation (Tompkins 2). This would present a disturbance to a white racist worldview. Richards’s song text presents how this disruption is put to rights when the lioness eats the man. As an agent of the animal world, she restores an assumed natural order, which the Black man’s desire for betterment had unsettled.
- 41 After trying to eat an animal, the “Hottentot” is now being eaten by an animal. His body is thus turned from human flesh to meat in the lioness’s jaws. Kyla W. Tompkins emphasizes the following:
- Those that are eaten are not persons but things, and their thingness is the result of a system of social degradation. For a human to take the place of an animal means becoming the object of a similar social degradation. To be socially degraded, then, to be completely other with relation to the human, is one of the conditions of being edible. (30–31)
- 42 Richards’s Hottentot then loses not only his life, but also his humanity when he is devoured by the lioness.
- 43 The accompanying drawing next to the poem’s “Moral” illustrates how this is an assumed return to order (*Hurdy* 7), when the lioness winks at us while licking her lips.

She lazily lies on her side, now it is *her* stomach that bulges—with a man inside. Her paws rest on the discarded bow and arrow, almost as if claiming them as trophies. Her winking directly at the beholder of the image creates a proximity between lioness and audience that firmly positions the animal on the side of rightness. She has committed no crime and seems rather pleased with a job well done.



- 44 Figure 3: From *The Hurdy-Gurdy*. by Laura E. Richards, illustrator unknown, possibly J. J. Mora. copyright © 1902,7. Public domain.
- 45 The only question that remains now is “what had become of my plottentot?” as the final line of the poem asks (l. 35). The speaker’s concern with their own text rather than the death of a human being once more emphasizes how inconsequential the demise of the “Hottentot” is here. After his removal from the world and from the poem, he is utterly forgotten in the speaker’s return to themselves.
- 46 Ostensibly, by the example of desire for food, Richards’s song instructs its readers and listeners to be content with what they have. Should one try to move away from one’s station, one will be punished. With the rhymes, the African setting and the lioness as executing the punishment, however, the serious warning to behave well remains humorous. White American readership is not in danger of being devoured by an African predator, not only for the geographical distance, but also because they would hardly conceive of themselves as sinners or as socially degradable. In this logic, the “poor unfortunate Hottentot” can be eaten precisely because he is a Black African character.

## 5. Conclusion

- 47 While the poems discussed in this article appear preoccupied with eating and being eaten, ultimately engagements with foodways are vehicles to address issues beyond food. Anthropologist Mary Douglas regards food as a “code:” “[T]he messages it encodes will be found in the patterns of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries” (61). This is indeed the case in Richards’s children’s poems, when behavior focused on food and eating really speak to social positions. Reading Richards’s texts through the lens of food reveals the serious matters that lie beneath Richards’s funny rhymes and nonsensical fancies. Excessive punishments for

misbehaving are inflicted on bodies that are distanced from the reality of the poems' addressees—be it through poetic forms of nonsense, absurdity, or geographic distance to fantasy lands or far-away countries, or the distances of speciesism and racism. The bodies that can be brutalized in these texts significantly differ from those of their readership so that the excess of violence would not threaten a white American child's body. Instead, by performing absurdity and excess, I conclude, Richards' s texts through humor reinforce the rigid order of a racialized world.

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## NOTES

1. See, for instance, "The Three Little Chickens Who Went Out To Tea, and the Elephant" (*Nursery* 119–121), or "Belinda Blonde" (*Nursery* 70–71) in which the protagonists pay with their lives for affections for the wrong partners.

2. For instance, “Jamie in the Garden” (*Nursery* 94–95) or “Alice’s Supper” (*Nursery* 42–44) work similarly with reasonably well-behaved children who learn about food sources.
3. Flavored tea punches and especially iced tea were common in the United States in the nineteenth century, particularly in the Southern States (Hoh and Mair 208). Mango was introduced as a crop to Florida in the second half of the nineteenth century (Ledesma). Its Southernness—gesturing from Florida to its earlier cultivating grounds in Cuba and its origins in Southern Asia—signals exoticism.
4. Daniel here refers to Peter Singer’s work: “In *Animal Liberation* Singer argues that the capacity of animals to experience pleasure and suffering implies that they have their own interests that should not be violated. Therefore, he believes, they should not be beyond the realms of moral and ethical consideration. He argues that to inflict suffering on animals, including killing them for food, is a form of ‘speciesism’ that parallels racism and sexism with human relationships. The utilitarian principles, he claims, demand the adoption of a vegetarian diet” (29).
5. This text is but one in a line of poems and song texts by Richards that represent racial Others, often not too kindly either in the poems or stereotyping illustrations. See, for instance, “Notes on the North American Indian” (*Piccolo* 61–63), “A Ballad of Yucatan” (*Piccolo* 37–39), or “Geographi” (*Sundown Songs* 16–18). See also Bahar Gürsel, “Delineating Stereotypes for Children: The Discourse on Race, Ethnicity, and Otherness in the Works of Laura Elizabeth Howe Richards.” Moreover, a number of Richards’s poems delight in the perceived absurdity of foreign countries and cities. Their strangeness provides the ideal setting for nonsensical events. Such is the case, for instance, in “Tropical Cities,” “In Foreign Parts,” or “A Brief Ballad of Araby” (*Tirra* 104, 137–138, 177).
6. See, for instance, Nyasha Junior, “The Mark of Cain and White Violence,” on nineteenth-century discourses linking skin color with assumptions of sinfulness and moral inferiority by reference to the biblical marks of Cain and Ham.

## ABSTRACTS

Food and eating are recurring themes throughout Laura Richards’s children’s poems. This essay examines how several of Richards’s poems bring together food and education, specifically in conjunction with excess, grotesquerie, and otherness. Reading foods as gesturing beyond themselves and as signifying on social relations, I argue that excessive food consumption and the ingestion of “wrong” foods are tied to a warning of greed and over-indulgence and to discouraging ambitions to transgress social boundaries in terms of race and class. By discussing choice poems, I show how the excesses of food, physical violations of bodies, and nonsense allow the poems to issue racist and classist warnings without unleashing the possibility of violence into their white readership’s reality, when they dissolve the chaos of excess in and on the distanced body of the animal or the racial Other.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** literary food studies, nonsense, manners, animals in children’s literature, racial Other in children’s literature

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