Black Migrant Foodways in the “Hog Butcher for the World”

Many African American migrants who streamed into Chicago between the world wars traveled on the Illinois Central Railroad from southern states like Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Tennessee, arriving on the city’s near South Side. Even shorter journeys took several hours, and many migrants packed food along with all their worldly possessions. Perhaps anxious about how they would feed themselves and their families in a strange land and, more broadly, sensing just how radically altered their connections to nature might be upon arriving in the nation’s second largest city, many brought more food than necessary to sustain them for their train ride alone. As Isabel Wilkerson notes in *The Warmth of Other Suns*, migrants carried with them “all kinds of things, live chickens and rabbits, a whole side of a pig […] jars of fig preserves, pole beans, snap peas, and peaches, whole hams, whatever the folks back home were growing on the farm,” clinging to comforting elements of the South they left behind, many for good. ¹ Nearly a quarter-million black Chicagoans undertook similar journeys in the interwar era, when the city’s black population grew more than six-fold to almost 280,000, more than quadrupling African Americans’ share of the population to 8.2 percent.²

The very same train lines that brought those thousands of black migrants to Chicago continued to connect them to Southern environments, even years after they settled into routines of eating at South Side restaurants and, more commonly, buying food from grocers, peddlers,

---


and butchers for home cooking. Timuel Black, who migrated to Chicago as a small child in 1919, recalled that his uncle who remained in Alabama was convinced that “his poor brother was starving to death” in Chicago, in large part because he “couldn’t imagine not having a garden, not having in the back a chicken roost and all that.” So Black’s uncle sent live chickens by freight train to his brother’s family on the South Side, and when he visited them in the city, “he still couldn’t believe that we didn’t need something to eat. So he brought some chickens with him and raw eggs.” Jimmy Ellis, whose parents migrated to Chicago in the 1920s, similarly recalled that his grandfather, a farmer who stayed behind in Alabama, sent “pecans and peanuts and molasses.” Far from uncommon, sending Southern foods to relatives in Chicago helped maintain cultural and familial ties. But they would not have been nearly enough to sustain a family. What did Black, Ellis, and thousands of other migrants eat in this bustling city far away from the home they knew? How different were those foods from what they had consumed in the South, and what does that tell us about their connections to nature during the Great Migration?

To an extent that may be surprising given how dramatically other aspects of migrants’ lives changed—and was no doubt surprising to the migrants who traveled with southern foods as well as the relatives who continued to send food North—migrant foodways actually remained largely unchanged in Chicago. This was true for three reasons, all of which speak to the extent migrants had already been integrated into and exploited by regional, national, and even global industrial networks that transported foodstuffs, collapsing distinctions between very distinct

---

3 Although restaurants represented important sites of cooking and eating on Chicago’s South Side, this essay focuses on home-cooking and eating because working-class black migrant families ate at restaurants relatively rarely simply to save money. See, for instance, Davis and Durham, interview with the author, January 20, 2010. More broadly, see Turner, How the Other Half Ate, 59-85. On black Chicaagos and restaurants, see Grossman, Land of Hope, 150-155; Poe, “Food, Culture, and Entrepreneurship,” 33-73; Turner, How the Other Half Ate, 73-74; and CCRR, The Negro in Chicago, 309-316.


5 Timuel Black, interview with the author, January 21, 2010.

6 Jimmy Ellis, interview with the author, July 26, 2010.
environments. First and most important, whether they lived in the North or the South, low wages combined with high food prices to restrict what working-class African Americans could buy. The women who generally controlled household budgets spent the vast majority of their family’s income on necessities and stretching tight budgets meant a heavy reliance on cheaper food staples. Second, modern transportation networks made familiar, affordable foods available to migrants in Chicago. The same rail lines that brought relatives’ shipments of southern foods to Black’s and Ellis’s families transported food to urban markets and groceries on a much grander scale. As Wilkerson notes, migrants “could be assured of finding the same southern peasant food, the same turnip greens, ham hocks, corn bread in Chicago as in Mississippi.” In large part that familiarity stemmed from those distribution networks operating both ways: for decades black Southerners had consumed foodstuffs from across the country, including meat from Chicago’s packinghouses. With the same foods available North and South, recipes and cooking methods that Southern black women developed over generations translated easily to Chicago’s kitchens. Third, as those well-developed transportation networks suggest, diets remained fairly constant because women responsible for balancing family budgets and cooking meals purchased most food on the market. In the urban North, limited space and cultural taboos worked against keeping small livestock or cultivating a garden, and the women who likely would have tended to such sites of domestic production often took on work in the city’s laundries, kitchens, and factories instead. Similarly, while livestock and small gardens were more common in the urban South, they generally did not produce enough to sustain families. In the rural South, meanwhile,

---

7 This essay adds to the growing body of food studies scholarship that uses “food as a way to articulate spaces and relationships of power” and answers Nicolaas Mink’s call to “begin in the belly” by “pursu[ing] the role of consumption [rather than production] in environmental history.” Robert N. Chester III and Nicolaas Mink, “Having Our Cake and Eating It Too: Food’s Place in Environmental History, A Forum,” *Environmental History* 14 (April 2009), 311; Nicolaas Mink, “It Begins in the Belly,” *Environmental History* 14 (April 2009), 314, 318.  
the main impediment was a tenant farming system that effectively coerced entire families into producing a cash crop that left little time or autonomy for cultivating substantial food crops or raising livestock.

Like most working-class families throughout the interwar era, black Chicagoans devoted a substantial portion of income to food purchases. The poorer you were, the higher proportion of your income you needed to spend on food, and most black migrants were among the poorest of the poor.\(^9\) Observing a trend that held throughout the interwar era, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations (CCRR) found in the early 1920s that food was the single largest monthly expenditure for virtually every working-class black family in Chicago, easily outpacing rent and other necessities, and sometimes exceeding half of the family’s income.\(^10\) So while black migrants tended to enjoy higher wages in Chicago than in the South, higher prices meant that they still devoted substantial income to food.\(^11\) Many black Southerners had hoped to escape these exploitative economies that pushed some families to the brink of starvation—one prospective migrant in rural Mississippi wrote that, “Wages is so low and grocery is so high untill [sic] all I can do is to live” and another in rural Louisiana said similar conditions there meant that “thousands of us can bearly [sic] keep body and soul together,” for example.\(^12\) But for many migrants, moving to Chicago did little to resolve that fundamental economic tension. One migrant mother believed that living in Chicago was actually harder than sharecropping in rural

---


Georgia, observing, “In the South you could rest occasionally, but here, where food is so high and one must pay cash, it is hard to come out even.”13 Another black mother faced similar challenges, telling a Chicago interviewer in 1929, “my children would eat between meals if they had something to eat, but I cannot afford any more meals. I have 3 meals a day and I divide what there is between them.”14

All consumers faced high food prices, but black Chicagoans’ food budgets were further constricted by race discrimination that depressed wages, confined families to segregated neighborhoods where landlords charged extortionate rents, and forced wives and mothers to work outside the home to supplement their husbands’ meager incomes.15 To cope, black migrants often took in lodgers—whether extended family members, friends, or strangers—who received a room and often home-cooked meals in exchange for paying a portion of the monthly rent.16 The couple who had been Georgia sharecroppers, for example, lived with their grown daughter and her husband as well as a nephew; all of them contributed to rent and took meals together.17 Home cooking was also a prominent feature of “rent parties,” in which renters opened their homes to all comers for a night, charging a small admission fee for a night of food and entertainment—all in order to make rent that month. Native Son author Richard Wright recalled that at rent parties in Chicago he “drank home-brewed beer, ate spaghetti and chitterlings, laughed and talked with black, southern-born girls who worked as domestic servants in white middle-class homes.”18

---

15 See Houghteling, The Income and Standard of Living, 25; chapter VIII in CCRR, The Negro in Chicago; and chapter 9 in Drake and Cayton, Black Metropolis.
18 Richard Wright, Black Boy (New York: HarperCollins Perennial Classics 1998 [1945]), 278. See also Wilkerson, The Warmth of Other Suns, 277; Opie, Hog & Hominy, 90; and Davarian Baldwin, Chicago’s New Negroes:
Even as their husbands’ low wages meant that they increasingly worked outside the home, black women largely adhered to longstanding gender norms and cooked virtually all the food served in their homes, rent parties included. Consistent with Wright’s recollections, nearly half of the black mothers surveyed in 1927 worked outside the home, most commonly taking on domestic labor like cooking, cleaning, or sewing for white families.19 In some cases, women worked explicitly to help feed their families. One migrant mother, the matriarch of a farming family that came from rural Alabama, took up “housekeeping to reduce the food bill,” even as her husband and son worked in the stockyards and her daughter worked in a laundry.20 Women’s wage labor outside the home meant that other family members sometimes needed to pick up the slack at mealtime. The CCRR found, for instance, that, “when the mother is away all day the food is hastily prepared, which usually means that it is fried. The girl who gets home from school before her mother has finished her day’s work usually starts the dinner, or brings something from the delicatessen.”21 Perhaps that was why the Chicago Defender, the nation’s premier African American newspaper, published a regular column aimed specifically at girls that featured easy-to-make recipes for dishes like spaghetti, chili mac, and grilled cheese.22 The Defender may have


20 CCRR, _The Negro in Chicago_, 96. See also ibid., 170-171.

21 Ibid., 264. See also Turner, _How the Other Half Ate_, 83-84.

22 The regular column initially appeared in 1922 under the title “How to Make”; it ran until 1929 before being replaced by “Bud’s Little Girl Cooks,” which ran until the mid-1940s. See, for example, “How to Make,” _The Chicago Defender_ November 4, 1922, 14; and “Bud’s Little Girl Cooks,” _The Chicago Defender_ October 12, 1929, A3. These and all subsequent Defender citations refer to the National Edition.
catered to that working-class reality, but it also fostered middle-class uplift: the same year the CCRR issued its findings, a column in the “Junior” page for boys and girls stated its aim was “to instill into the minds of our girls to become good cooks first of all. Be better than the average. Let your cooking be such that everyone in your home and in your vicinity can brag about it.”

By the same token, the Defender regularly featured recipes on the “Womans Page” in the early 1920s, encouraging contributions from “housewives who have dainty or sensible recipes they use [which could] give other women the benefit of discoveries made in your own home.”

The poverty of the Great Depression only further challenged mothers trying to provide for families, however. At Chicago’s first Bud Billiken Day picnic (an annual event created by the Defender in 1930 as the Depression deepened), the newspaper wrote that, “Mothers will be asked to bring along an old fashioned basket filled with goodies […] but] Because so many of the children will be without the food, Bud is planning to have ‘eats’ for them” including free hot dogs and ice cream.

Free food for children remained a staple of the celebration: in 1935, for example, the Defender noted, “The park was filled with picnickers—large baskets were uncovered and huge mounds of food lifted out. There was no selfishness shown and the spirit was beautiful. The few unfortunate children not having parents or guardians able to fix them a lunch, were gathered to the breast of some other good mother who could fully appreciate the little child’s feelings, and each was fed until satisfied.”

The Defender’s annual picnic symbolized the way black Chicagoans came together to support one another amidst adversity, but the longer history of reformers urging the working classes to rectify dietary insufficiencies reveals the sometimes tense intraracial class politics

---

24 “The Defender Cook Book,” The Chicago Defender April 9, 1921, 5.
underlying migrant foodways. A doctor who wrote a regular health column in the Defender, for instance, exhorted his readers to “buy more fruits and less meats. We should use more fruits in our diet than we do, especially during [the summer], because they contain great nutritive properties.”

Several years later, upon observing a woman who regularly bought pork neck bones at the butcher, the columnist similarly reflected that, “Our diet should be a well-balanced one. It is not a good thing to eat at all times neck bones or pork chops, potatoes, bread and gravy.” These were the most affordable foods, however, particularly in times of economic distress. Reformers rightly believed in the health benefits of a diversified diet, but they also highlighted the marked class divide between the few black Chicagoans who could afford fruits and vegetables and the many who could not. Urging migrants to abandon a diet heavy in meats, fats, and starches was rooted in a desire to distance black Chicagoans from foodways redolent of the South that were often deemed less respectable and even embarrassing by the black middle- and upper-classes.

At other times, however, reformers acknowledged that a balanced diet was an ideal perhaps unattainable—or even inadvisable—for manual laborers who needed to consume a lot of calories on a tight budget. After the influx of migrants began in 1917, the Defender columnist maintained that, “People should learn to use more vegetables, cereals, corn meal, cane sugar foods.” But he qualified that assertion by acknowledging that, “The fellow digging in the ditch, mauling rails, loading and unloading freight—or, in other words, the fellow

---

27 Dr. A. Wilberforce Williams, “Keep Healthy,” The Chicago Defender Jul 26, 1913, 4.
doing hard, long, laborious work, requires a more stimulating and proteid or meat diet than the individual doing clerical, indoor or sedentary work. People should buy that kind of food that is within their means, and that has the most food value at the lowest rates.”

While restaurants, picnics, rent parties, and other community gatherings reveal that meals could be pleasurable leisure experiences for black migrants, constrained economic circumstances meant that more often than not food was a matter of basic sustenance. Despite the _Defender_’s uplift aspirations and migrants’ substantial expenditures on food, most researchers considered black Chicagoans’ diets woefully inadequate. Surveys of black migrants’ nutrition in Chicago invariably relied on the self-reporting of women—mostly mothers—because they were the ones almost always primarily responsible for purchasing and preparing food. One such late 1920s survey of African American families in Chicago—nearly ninety percent of whom had been born in the South—found that fewer than one-fifth of those studied “had adequate food.” It was a scenario all too familiar for many migrants who found themselves locked into a different iteration of the same discriminatory and exploitative systems in the South that they had tried to escape. In his study of the rural South in the 1920s, for example, the historian Carter Woodson found that African American sharecroppers “live[d] on such food [that was] supplied to them by the plantation commissary and their inadequate income together with the terrorism in vogue makes it impossible for the majority of such persons to improve their daily


31 On food as pleasure versus sustenance, see Nancy Shoemaker, “Food and the Intimate Environment,” _Environmental History_ 14 (April 2009), 341.

32 Houghteling, _The Income and Standard of Living_, 25, 186-217.

33 See Boggs, “Nutrition of Fifty Colored Families in Chicago,” 4-5; and Houghteling, _The Income and Standard of Living_, 89, 137, 142. The same was true outside Chicago, North and South. See also Edwards, _The Southern Urban Negro_, 54; and Kelsey B. Gardner and Lawrence Alfred Adams, _Consumer Habits and Preferences in the Purchase and Consumption of Meat_, Vol. 1443 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1926), 2.

fare. Long accustomed to meager meals in the South, most migrants transplanted their food culture to urban metropolises like Chicago whether they wanted to or not: low wages inevitably led to diets heavy in low-cost staples like salt pork, potatoes, greens, and cabbage. The wife in the migrant family of sharecroppers from Georgia, for example, prepared meals consisting mainly of “greens, potatoes, and cabbage” along with homemade bread, though families ate milk, eggs, and cereal occasionally and “meat [was] eaten about four times a week.”

Meat undoubtedly became more of a luxury during the lean years of the Great Depression when thousands went hungry in Chicago, but in general meat—and especially pork—was the most consistent element of migrants’ diets in large part because, as Carl Sandburg famously wrote, Chicago was the “Hog Butcher for the World.” As early as the 1890s, many southern farmers quit producing their own meat because buying it was cheaper, more convenient, and often dictated by labor demands that left them little time or money to raise enough livestock to support a family. Booker T. Washington lamented in 1903, more than a decade before the Great Migration began in earnest, that “In a country where pigs, chickens, ducks, geese, berries, peaches, plums, vegetables, nuts, and other wholesome foods could be produced with little effort,” black Southerners were “eating salt pork from Chicago and canned chicken and tomatoes

sent from Omaha.” Washington was right about the Southern environment’s capacity to produce natural abundance, but in promoting his brand of race uplift he greatly minimized the constrictions imposed on southern black workers. Whether they worked in Mississippi Delta cotton fields or Birmingham steel mills, black Southerners ate meat slaughtered and packed in Chicago not only because the city’s packinghouses had extended their reach across the nation, but also because discriminatory and exploitative labor conditions demanded black workers find the most affordable sustenance. Ironically, black Southerners’ reliance on cheap salt pork from the South Side’s stockyards may have helped frame Chicago as the most promising migration destination. The CCRR argued that “Chicago was the logical destination of Negroes from Mississippi, Arkansas, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas” in part because “the city had become known in these sections through […] the Stock Yards, and the packing-plants with their numerous storage houses scattered in various towns and cities of the South”: the very same rail lines that shipped meat from the city’s South Side brought black migrants there during the interwar years. Low wages continued to restrict African Americans’ access to high quality meat in Chicago, however, having a negative impact on nutrition. As one 1929 study of black Chicagoans concluded, the consumption of “meat increases with the income as does adequacy of the diet.”

41 Boggs, “Nutrition of Fifty Colored Families in Chicago,” 27.
Nevertheless, black Chicagoans may have consumed more fresh meat than they had down South. Having migrated to the nation’s meat processing hub, many gained easier access to fresh meat still subject to spoilage on long journeys despite advances in refrigeration. The high cost of other foods also pushed migrants toward consuming fresh meat: the Georgia sharecropping family, for instance, ate more fresh meat in Chicago “because of the lack of garden space and the high cost of green vegetables.” While the stockyards focused their operations on slaughtering and processing pork and beef, fresh-killed chicken was another relatively affordable option. It was not until after World War II that chickens arrived at many Chicago markets as cuts of meat rather than as live animals; as Charles Davis recalled, chicken coops were a “common sight in front of markets” all around the city during the Depression. As a young man, Black worked at a market where he learned how to take a live chicken from one of these coops, wring its neck, defeather it, and break it down into cuts of breast, leg, and back meat. Another South Side resident similarly recalled that during the Depression her mother often sent her to a chicken market where, “The man would put that chicken down, and that chicken would flutter all around and scare you half to death!”

---

44 Davis and Durham, Interview with the Author. See also Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 285. Some migrants had enough room adjacent to their homes to keep small livestock like chickens, but this was more the exception than the rule. Davis and Durham, Interview with the Author; Black, Interview with the Author; Abbott, *The Tenements of Chicago*, 123, 178-179; Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns*, 269. Beyond Chicago, see Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 19, 69. More broadly on the complex significance of chicken in the African American community, see Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs*.
45 Black, Interview with the Author.
46 Timuel Black, *Bridges of Memory: Chicago’s First Wave of Black Migration* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 244.
While consuming fresh meat may have become more common in Chicago, families forced to rein in food costs often went without fresh produce, North and South alike.\(^{47}\) In the Mississippi Delta, fruits were “unaccustomed luxuries” bought at the store with the money gained from a cotton harvest, and one study found that children longed for bananas and apples their parents oftentimes could not afford.\(^{48}\) Fresh fruit may have been somewhat more affordable in northern cities, but it was often still too expensive for parents to buy for their children.\(^{49}\) As one Chicago mother told an interviewer, “They all like fruit, but it costs so much to live and fruit is high.”\(^{50}\) When a 1930 study of kindergarten students in one of the poorer sections of Chicago’s Black Belt asked what they wished for the most, many children responded that they yearned for toys or candy, but wishes for foodstuffs were also quite common—especially for fruits like oranges, peaches, bananas, grapes, and apples. A boy born in Memphis, for example, whose father was a porter and mother a domestic laborer, wished for milk, cabbage, and an orange; a girl born in Arkansas whose mother was a laundress wanted oranges and peaches.\(^{51}\) A scene in Lorraine Hansberry’s play A Raisin in the Sun (based on Hansberry’s experiences growing up on the South Side in the 1930s) similarly indicates just how rare fruit was for many black Chicagoans. When Ruth Younger tells her son that they simply do not have the fifty cents he needs for school that day, to Ruth’s exasperation her husband almost immediately contradicts her. Ruth’s husband gives the boy a whole dollar, telling him to use the extra fifty cents to, “Buy yourself some fruit today—or take a taxicab to school or something!”—both options equally extravagant.\(^{52}\) Indeed, one study of the Black Belt found that “families whose expenditures were

\(^{47}\) Houghteling, The Income and Standard of Living, 171, 178, 186-217.
\(^{48}\) Cohn, God Shakes Creation, 44; Dickins, “A Nutritional Investigation,” 35.
\(^{49}\) Sterner, The Negro’s Share, 115.
\(^{50}\) Boggs, “Nutrition of Fifty Colored Families in Chicago,” 24.
\(^{51}\) “My Report to the White House Conference” (Box 80, Folders 3-5: Ernest Watson Burgess Papers, University of Chicago, 1930).
far below standard, for the most part, selected the cheaper cuts of meat, plain breads, and the cheaper green vegetables but omitted fruit” and another noted that, across the board, “The lack of fruit in the diet was outstanding.”

Vegetables beyond relatively affordable greens and cabbage were similarly rare, both in the South and Chicago. In the South, one study found that “the majority of negro families would serve turnip greens, cabbage or collards daily if they had a convenient supply on hand,” but many simply could not even afford those staples; another similarly found that “A large number of families […] did not eat vegetables in either winter or summer.” Despite longstanding efforts by Washington and others urging sharecroppers to grow more of their own food rather than purchasing a diet high in salt pork and cornmeal, most were locked into the cash crop economy. As Woodson observed in 1930, “The soil is rich enough to produce vegetables in abundance, but the time of the laborers is required in the production of cotton or sugar, and these things must be imported or foregone.” While cotton cultivation kept many close to the land, black Southerners mostly relied on the same food distribution networks as black Chicagoans. Indeed, when urban migrants ate vegetables, they were often canned: more reasonably priced and

---


sometimes even tastier than supposedly fresh vegetables, they were available year-round in a Midwestern climate that could not support much local produce in the winter months.\textsuperscript{57}

The occasional fresh fruits and vegetables purchased by Black Chicagoans usually passed through the city’s large markets that sold agricultural produce from surrounding Midwestern farmlands and beyond, way stations in the broader food aggregation and distribution system that also spread the stockyards’ salt pork across the country.\textsuperscript{58} These networks meant that, in some cases, it was easier and more affordable for African Americans to obtain some fresh produce—just like fresh meat—in Chicago than in the South, despite the South’s climatic and agricultural advantages. Throughout the interwar era, enterprising black entrepreneurs brought produce from these markets, loaded it in pushcarts, and sold it door-to-door.\textsuperscript{59} In the late 1920s Timuel Black and his brother purchased fresh produce from the 71\textsuperscript{st} Street market, transported it several blocks north, and sold it off a pushcart on the South Side’s streets and alleys; many other black Chicagoans did the same.\textsuperscript{60} The markets supported selling and trading on an even smaller scale, too: one black woman who was clearly adept at stretching her family’s budget remarked that “you can always get something to eat at the market like a basket of beans or tomatoes and potatoes for a dime, before they are graded. If you get more than you can use yourself, you can always sell or trade what you don’t want.”\textsuperscript{61} Such entrepreneurial opportunities may have been more limited down South, but if black Chicagoans had migrated from an urban area similarly

\textsuperscript{57} Opie, \textit{Hog & Hominy}, 57; and Vileisis, \textit{Kitchen Literacy}, 142-143.
\textsuperscript{58} City and country, Chicago and its hinterlands, were still as inextricably linked as they were in the nineteenth century, the former depending on the latter for commodities, the latter depending on the former to distribute and sell its wares. See Cronon, \textit{Nature’s Metropolis}.
\textsuperscript{60} Black, \textit{Bridges of Memory}, 24, 282, 286; See also Black, Interview with the Author; Ellis, Interview with the Author; Davis and Durham, Interview with the Author; Grossman, \textit{Land of Hope}, 154-155; Michelle Obama, \textit{American Grown: The Story of the White House Kitchen Garden and Gardens Across America} (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 12.
\textsuperscript{61} Drake and Cayton, \textit{Black Metropolis}, 579. Peddling food purchased from these markets benefited both buyer and seller, particularly amongst the working-classes, regardless of race. See Chicago Municipal Markets Commission et al., \textit{Report to the Mayor and Aldermen} (Chicago: H.G. Adair, 1914), 51.
integrated into these national food networks, odds were that these pushcarts filled with produce would have been a familiar sight. In addition to pushcarts, consumers sought fresh produce at an array of groceries that dotted Chicago’s South Side: other than barbershops and beauty parlors, grocery stores were the most numerous black-owned businesses throughout the 1920s and 1930s, offering significant opportunities to entrepreneurs. It may have been easier for migrants to open a grocery in the North, but black-owned groceries were a familiar sight for those who had spent time in the urban South: indeed, these groceries were often information hubs where prospective migrants gathered news about cities like Chicago. Whether black- or white-owned, Chicago groceries were important because, as the CCRR explained in 1922, they meant that migrants no longer had “to buy groceries at plantation stores where they felt they had been exploited.”

Assessing the Great Migration in his introduction to St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton’s *Black Metropolis*, the landmark sociological study of black Chicago, Richard Wright argued that, “The advent of machine production altered [humans’] relationship to the earth,” and with “their kinship with the soil altered, men became atoms crowding great industrial cities.” Later on, Drake and Cayton offered a slightly different perspective: in Chicago, they wrote, “Over 65 per cent of the Negro adults earn their bread by manual labor in stockyard and steel mill, in factory and kitchen, where they do the essential digging, sweeping, and serving which make

---

63 CCRR, *The Negro in Chicago*, 140-141. The extent to which low wages limited the affordability of dining out was reflected in there being nearly twice as many black-owned groceries (many by migrants) than restaurants in 1938. Drake and Cayton, *Black Metropolis*, 438, 454. See also Black, *Bridges of Memory*, 151-152.
metropolitan life tolerable […] still betraying their southern origin, [they] were toilers, working close to the soil, the animals, and the machinery that undergird Chicago’s economy.” 67 Both close to the soil and far from it: although somewhat paradoxical, both perspectives were accurate, and both speak to how and why migrant foodways remained largely static as thousands settled in Chicago. Although migration to urban centers perhaps represented the final, dramatic act in humans’ distancing from nature, machine production and industrialization altered “kinship with the soil” long before migrants left more rural, agricultural lives behind. For most black Chicagoans, separation from the land that provided their food was something to which they had become accustomed in the South. By finding working-class jobs, making homes, and building lives in the city that Sandburg also called a “Player with Railroads and the Nation’s Freight Handler,” black Chicagoans simply moved nearer the heart of networks into which they were long integrated. 68 In particular, the railroad transportation networks central to these economies of scale facilitated both migration and the homogenization of foodways, flattening environmental differences between North and South and alienating people from the animals and plants that industry turned into food. 69 Chicago was the epicenter of this alienation from nature, but the ways the food industry increasingly obscured connections between city and country, humans and nature, were already characteristic of both North and South prior to the Great Migration. While migration to a northern city like Chicago undoubtedly forced African Americans to adapt to different environmental conditions and behavioral expectations than what they had become accustomed to in the South, persistent economic marginalization and these already expansive industrial networks meant that migrants’ connections to nature through food remained largely unchanged in the interwar years.

67 Drake and Cayton, Black Metropolis, 523.
68 Sandburg, Chicago Poems, 4.