



UNIVERSIDADE  
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**NYAM: (RE)CLAIMING AFRICAN CULINARY HERITAGE TO  
CREATE AN AFRICAN – AMERICAN CULINARY IDENTITY  
AND (RE)STOR(Y)ING AFRICAN DIASPORA FOOD  
MEMORIES**

Dissertation/Internship Report/Project to Universidade  
Católica Portuguesa to obtain a Master's Degree in Master in  
Culture Studies, Management of the Arts and Culture

By

Akinyemi A. Akinola

Faculty of Human Sciences

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Under the supervision of Prof. Diana Gonçalves and  
Prof. Verena Lindemann Lino

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## **Abstract**

Food is one of the many mechanisms by which identity is created (Wallach 2019, 5). For African Americans food is fraught with tension as it connects with a history of pain and suffering from previous and current generations (Gray et al. 2022, 8). From the Transatlantic Slave Trade to present day, the relationship that African Americans have with food is a contentious one; forced relocation, chattel slavery, and inequalities intermingle to build a compounded complexity by which the root of a culinary history is often hard to ascertain and untangle. In America, food is also connected to power, race and class (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013, 112). As food is a source of identity, certain ingredients and dishes signify that identity and those within the group and also for those outside of the group (Albala 2015, 823). Inside and outside of the African American community, soul food is attached to unique Black culinary tradition that is evident through dishes and foods that are synonymous with Southern heritage (Wallach 2019, 162). For African Americans, foodways serve as a connection to America and their nationhood i.e. their second-class status, but foodways also serve to connect to other Americans of African descent (Wallach 2019, 5). Many African Americans have used food as a way to exhibit their racial and national identities (Wallach 2019, 5, 13). Therefore, this work explores the themes of African American identity, African Diaspora and their food cultures, and memory. The purpose of the work is to investigate how African culinary heritage, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, chattel slavery, the Civil Rights movement and other historical events helped to create the invention of soul food a distinct African – American culinary genre. The research question for the dissertation is: how have African Americans reclaimed African culinary heritage to create soul food, an African – American culinary identity? Sub research questions are: is there a relationship between soul food and African American identity? Which emotions and values do African Diaspora food cultures symbolize? And how are the African Diaspora, African Diaspora foods and memory connected? The methodology employed to answer the research questions are theoretical research and conceptual approach of interviews and food memories from people of the African Diaspora.

## **Key Words**

African Culinary Heritage, African American Culinary Identity, African American Identity, African Diaspora, African Diaspora Food Memories, Soul Food

## **Resumo**

A comida é um dos muitos mecanismos pelos quais a identidade é criada (Wallach 2019, 5). Para os afro-americanos, a comida está repleta de tensão, pois está ligada a uma história de dor e sofrimento de gerações anteriores e atuais (Gray et al. 2022, 8). Desde o comércio transatlântico de escravos até aos dias de hoje, a relação que os afro-americanos têm com a comida é controversa; a realocação forçada, a escravatura e as desigualdades misturam-se para construir uma complexidade agravada pela qual a raiz de uma história culinária é muitas vezes difícil de determinar e desembaraçar. Na América, a comida também está ligada ao poder, à raça e à classe (Counihan e Van Esterik 2013, 112). Como a comida é fonte de identidade, certos ingredientes e pratos significam essa identidade tanto para quem está dentro do grupo como também para quem está fora do grupo (Albala 2015, 823). Dentro e fora da comunidade afro-americana, a soul food está ligada à tradição culinária negra única, que é evidente através de pratos e comidas que são sinônimos da herança sulista (Wallach 2019, 162). Para os afro-americanos, os hábitos alimentares servem como uma ligação à América e à sua nacionalidade, ou seja, ao seu estatuto de segunda classe, mas os hábitos alimentares também servem como uma forma de ligação a outros americanos de ascendência africana (Wallach 2019, 5). Muitos afro-americanos usaram a comida como forma de exibir as suas identidades raciais e nacionais (Wallach 2019, 5, 13). Portanto, este trabalho explora os temas da identidade afro-americana, da diáspora africana e suas culturas alimentares e da memória. O objetivo do trabalho é investigar como a herança culinária africana, o comércio transatlântico de escravos, a escravidão de bens móveis, o movimento dos direitos civis e outros eventos históricos ajudaram a criar a invenção da comida soul, um gênero culinário afro-americano distinto. A questão de investigação da dissertação é: como é que os afro-americanos recuperaram a herança culinária africana para criar soul food, uma identidade culinária afro-americana? As questões da subpesquisa são: existe uma relação entre a comida soul e a identidade afro-americana? Que emoções e valores simbolizam as culturas alimentares da diáspora africana? E como estão ligadas a Diáspora Africana, os alimentos e a memória da Diáspora Africana? A metodologia empregada para responder às questões de pesquisa é a pesquisa teórica e abordagem conceitual de entrevistas e memórias alimentares de pessoas da Diáspora Africana.

## **Palavras-Chave**

Herança Culinária Africana, Identidade Culinária Afro-Americana, Identidade Afro-Americana, Diáspora Africana, Memórias Alimentares da Diáspora Africana, Soul Food

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother Angela Nixon and my grandmother Eloise Swinson.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

### Historical Context

It was not until 1441 that the institution of chattel slavery was introduced by the Portuguese who took sub-Saharan Africans from the continent to be sold in European markets. As Imani Perry stated, “the sovereign entitlement — to a piece of land or chattel — was based in theft of life and indigeneity” (Smallwood 2019, 413). When Spain established settlements in the Americas, it was decreed that only Blacks born in Spain or Portugal could be imported into the colony to be enslaved. This decree was eventually abandoned when enslaved Africans and Indigenous Native Americans worked cooperatively to revolt. As the Spanish colonies grew in the Americas, so did their need for free labor, therefore regular traffic to enslave Africans to the Americas began in 1519 (Harris 2011, 27). It is believed that the first direct voyage from Africa to the Americas was in 1526 (Etlis 2007, 4). Chattel slavery and the conquest of land in the New World works to frame the ideology of colonial dominion throughout the Americas because human beings, and African beings particularly were thought of as nothing more than property (Smallwood 2019, 413). A century later in 1619, nineteen Africans bound for Cuba arrived on a captured ship to the Jamestown colony of Virginia.

For ship captains and their crews, the complex voyage with the potential for large profits. Typically commencing in Northern Europe (during this period), ships equipped with alcohol, gunpowder, textiles and beads made their way to Africa, where the enslaved were purchased. There was also a “second trade” for the necessary foods and other provisions for the enslaved and the ship’ crews. As profit was tied to the amount of living bodies that made it through the voyage, captors studied West African cultures and diets and sought foods that were sufficient, nutritious and familiar to the captives and that would last throughout the long and arduous journey.

In America, there were three food crops that corresponded to three foods that were endemic to West Africa, these were rice, corn, and yams (Harris 2011, 31). While corn was not native to West Africa, it arrived during the Columbian Exchange and became one of the core foods for those who lived along the African coast from the Gambian River to Angola (by the time of the Transatlantic Slave Trade) (Harris 2011, 31). African rice (*oryza glaberrima*) was grown near the Gambian and Senegalese rivers and near the Gold Coast of Ghana, while yams were

grown from the Ivory Coast to Cameroon. It was not coincidental that African bodies were taken from these regions as the enslaved from the Senegambia were often transported to Charleston, South Carolina where they produced what was later dubbed “Carolina Gold” rice, through a uniquely African agricultural system.

Many accounts attest that the enslaved, unaware of their fate, had a great desire for sustenance and survival embedded in their beings, and brought along with them seeds in their hair; whether this is culinary fiction or not is hard to ascertain. As foodstuff, seeds and knowledge made their way across the Atlantic Ocean, so did cooking techniques like boiling, baking, roasting, grilling, steaming in leaves and frying as well cooking using live fire, charcoal and ash. And it was this African culinary heritage that served the foundation for Africans in American and their descendants, African Americans to create a food culture and culinary identity of their own.

### Problem Statement

Food is one of the many mechanisms by which identity is created (Wallach 2019, 5) (Wallach 2019, 5). African Americans have a particularly complex connection to food, and a culinary history that is an admixture of Africa, Europe and the Americas. Forced relocation, chattel slavery, disenfranchisement, migration and racism intermingle to build a compounded complexity by which the root of a culinary history is often hard to ascertain and untangle. Investigating the relationships between the Transatlantic trade, the migration of foods and knowledge across the Middle Passage, provisions during chattel slavery, means for creating self-reliant foodways and the invention of soul food as a distinct African – American culinary genre and cultural phenomenon allows for a more holistic understanding of the contested culinary history, heritage and identity of African Americans.

### Primary Research Question

How have African Americans reclaimed African culinary heritage to create soul food, a uniquely African – American culinary identity?

### Secondary Research Questions

Is there a relationship between soul food and African American identity?

Which emotions and values do African Diaspora food cultures symbolize?

How are the African Diaspora, African Diaspora foods and memory connected?

### Research Statement

Just like many other cultural markers, food plays a central role in one's sense of identity (Koc and Welsh 2001, 1). As one learns what to eat and how to eat it, they are also learning culture, norms and values (Koc and Welsh 2001, 1). Sociologist Claude Fisher stated, "the way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy, organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and otherness of whoever eats differently" (Wallach 2019, 5). Nineteenth century writer, lawyer and politician Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin is responsible for the popular adage "tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are"; but how does this apply to African Americans whose identities, culinary and otherwise are a mixture of Africa, Europe and the Americas?

From the Transatlantic Slave Trade to present day, the relationship that African Americans have with food is a contentious one; a relationship that is fraught with histories of forced relocation, chattel slavery, disenfranchisement, migration and racism. In America, food is also connected to power, race and class (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013, 112).

Primarily rooted in the dire circumstances of slavery and the need for sustenance, African used their knowledge and embedded memories as exchanged foods and food habits with Europeans (and their American descendants) and Native Americans to create a culinary identity of their own. This was evident on plantations where undesirable meats and meager rations were used to feed entire families and supplemented with small gardens where staples like root vegetables, leafy greens and melons (foods similar those found on the African continent) were grown. This was also evident on the streets and in markets in towns and cities where enslaved men and women bartered, traded and hawked foods (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013, 109).

Post-slavery and post-Civil War, African American Southerners migrated to the North, Midwest and West during the Great Migration and brought along foodways Southern heritage foodways. (Tipton-Martin 2015, xiv). Their acts were similar to the acts of other migrant groups, they established an ethnic identity based in heritage cooking around the symbols of

their rural culture, cooking foods that helped to satiate their homesickness (Tipton-Martin 2015, 79). By the 1960s the term soul food became a cultural marker for food that was created in the American South by those who were formerly enslaved. Soul food had its roots in Southern cuisine and was part and parcel of a rice Southern culinary tradition (Tipton-Martin 2015, 80). In *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (2015), Toni Tipton-Martin writes:

Like jazz, [soul food] was created in the South by American Negroes, and although it can safely be said that almost all typically southern food is soul (up until World War II nearly all the better cooks in the South were Negro), the word soul, when applied to food, means only those foods that Negroes grew up eating in their own homes; food that was cooked with care and love—with soul—by and for themselves, their families, and friends. (Tipton-Martin 2015, 80)

Nevertheless, what soon became clear was that a distinction was made between soul food and Southern food. The word Southern became coded as White and was associated with the foods that White Americans ate, while soul food was coded as Black and became associated with the foods of African Americans (Counihan and Van Esterik 2013, 113). For some soul food signified “slumming it” (Tipton-Martin 2015, 80). While soul food became a cultural phenomenon, one with dual attachments to Blackness and American-ness, Southern food critics, chefs and the like began to assert Southern cuisine as devoid of African and African American influences. Food became one way by which White Southerners held onto their way of life (Counihan & Van Esterik 2013, 113).

In *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American History in the Old South*, (2017), Michael W. Twitty writes:

Soul Food (or African American heritage cooking) and its umbrella cuisine, Southern food, are the most remarked and most maligned of any regional or indigenous ethnic tradition in the United States...The connection between and heritage of both Southern and soul cuisines is hotly debated and arouses old racial stereotypes, prejudices, and cultural attitudes and intercultural misunderstandings. It's an easy metaphor for the “two” Souths—one black, one white—intertwined and complicated (Twitty 2017, 23)

Although soul food was not brought over from Africa, there is a clear connection between the cooking techniques and dishes of Africans and the foods of their descendants in America.

African Americans were able to use their ingenuity and resourcefulness to use “un-promising” foods to create a distinct cuisine and culinary identity (Tipton-Martin 2015, 81).

### Hypothesis

By using African culinary heritage, memory, knowledge and entrepreneurship, African Americans have created a distinct American culinary identity. This culinary identity incorporates indigenous African knowledge like methods of growing and cooking food and employs foods common to the African continent and their counterparts in America. While the origins and value of African American heritage cooking, i.e. soul food is often contested, its influence on Southern and American food culture is irrefutable – soul food is a byproduct of African experiences situated in an American context.

### Relevance

This work is inspired by and expounds on previous contributions by primarily Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) authors, scholars, culinary historians, chefs and cultural theorists in discipline of food studies and specifically Diaspora foodways. While European culinary history and cuisines (French, Italian and Spanish) are often romanticized and have been positioned as the hegemonic model for culinary genres around the world, marginalized peoples (i.e. migrant groups, those whose origins are in countries that have been colonized or imperialized etc.) have developed culinary identities and genres of their own. These culinary identities reflect not only their voluntary or involuntary movements but also their interactions with and the influence of other cultures and a spirit of innovation and ingenuity. Understanding the historical context of these food innovations and their functions in the contemporary allows for an inclusive perspective on modern food culture. Recognizing and validating diversified contributions to the culinary canon promotes progress and allows for a more honest and viable conversation towards sustainable food futures.

### Positionality

The author positions himself as an insider (as a member of the African Diaspora) and as outsider (observing and researching the topic in the context of a Portuguese University).

## Theoretical Framework, Methodologies and Description of Chapters

The dissertation titled “Nyam: (Re)Claiming African Culinary Heritage to Create an African – American Culinary Identity and (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories” is divided in two sections. Section I: “(Re)Claiming African American Culinary History” and Section II: “(Re)Storing and (Re)Storying African Diaspora Food Memories”.

The etymology of the word nyam is linked to the African languages including Wolof, spoken by the peoples of Senegal and Gambia and the Fulani people of the Sahel; it is also commonplace in Ghanaian Pidgin English, Jamaican Patois, Surinamese Creole and in the South Carolinian Gullah dialect. Meaning “food” and “to eat” there is an unequivocal connection between the meaning and the use of this word in African languages and later by peoples of the African Diaspora in the Americas; in turn, the word is one of lineage and acts as a bridge between the Motherland, mother tongues and the New World.

(Re) in the title of the work is stylized to pay homage to the many authors, scholars, culinary historians, etc., that have spent decades studying and unpacking African and African American culinary lineage. Authors and the works that have served as inspiration include but are not limited to: Psyche Williams-Forsyth's *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power* (2006), Jessica B. Harris's *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (2011), Ntozake Shange's *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can* (1998), Diane Spivey's *At the Table of Power: Food and Cuisine in the African American Struggle for Freedom, Justice and Equality* (2022), and Michael W. Twitty's *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (2017). This dissertation is informed by their thought-provoking theories and contributions to the canons of African American and American culinary history at large.

Section I: “(Re)Claiming African Culinary Heritage to Create an African - American Culinary Identity” is reverence to the relationship between the Transatlantic Slave Trade, chattel slavery and the movement of people, foods, and technologies; modern African American foods are byproducts of enslaved African ancestors. This also serves as an assertive political statement; African Americans indeed do have a culinary history and heritage, and while both history and heritage in the American context are rooted in slavery, ways and means of cooking

were not mere instinct, enslaved cooks employed memory and oral transmission as technologies. Embedded in their DNA were ways and means of sustenance; ancestors stewed, grilled, fried, and pounded long before arrival in the New World and used these techniques to create a distinct culinary identity, one that is an admixture of Africa, Europe, and America, and uniquely African – American.

Through a linear narrative starting in chapter one, “The Migration of People, Knowledge, Technologies and Foods from Africa to the Americas”, historical context is set by detailing the migration of people and foods from the African continent to the Americas, evident first in the transport of African bodies and enslavement through the commodifying enterprise and institution of chattel slavery. Along with the forced movement of peoples was the transport of invaluable knowledge on seeds, planting, growing and harvesting foods; knowledge served as the foundation for a culinary heritage that was also transported across the Atlantic Ocean. This chapter also highlights foods essential to the African and later African American diet; these are watermelon, okra, and the black-eyed pea.

Chapter two “An African – American Culinary History” explores a culinary history by which enslaved people found ways and means to procure food and food stuffs while living on plantations, oftentimes making meals from their own gardens. Furthermore, the relationship between the enslaved cooks and their enslavers is discussed as Black cooks were often uncredited for their contributions to early cookbook recipes and their recipes were stolen. This chapter also highlights the agency and entrepreneurship of Black women like the waiter carriers of Gordonsville, Virginia who used food (and chicken in particular) as a means of cultural production.

In chapter three “The Politics of Black Food”, food and are explored through food stereotypes where misguided beliefs on African American’s fondness for watermelon and fried chicken are unpacked. Advancing the discussion is an investigation on the caricatured Black figure Aunt Jemima, a subject simultaneously parodied and commodified. This chapter also discusses feeding and eating during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the role that the Black Panther Party played in practicing resistance.

Chapter four, “Soul Food: An African – American Culinary Identity” is an investigation of soul food as a culinary movement and distinct American cultural phenomenon. In the late

1960s and early 1970s “soul” became a cultural signifier associated with Black American culture in music, film, the arts and food. Foods like fried chicken, black eyed peas, collard greens, macaroni and cheese and cornbread became synonymous with soul and soul food; but many have questioned whether such foods were an unhealthy extension of the foods the enslaved ate or a quintessential marker of African American and/or Southern cuisine.

Section II: “(Re)Storing and (Re)Storying African Diaspora Food Memories” has dual meaning and reflects both restoring and re-storying memories. In chapter one, the author uses theories to understand the meanings of identity and diaspora and makes connections between those terms. Furthermore, the author uses theories on memory to understand how recipes and the practice of preparing and cooking food are used as cultural and historical information passed down from one generation to another and serve as conduits to maintain, sustain and preserve traditions.

In chapter two, “Re-Stor(y)ing Narratives”, re-storying memory speaks to the agency to rewrite African American culinary narratives from a modern perspective, as bold declarative statements. In chapter three “(Re)Storing African Diaspora Food Memories” interviews are employed as a methodology. The author conducts interviews with two subjects of the African Diaspora to better understand the relationships between the African identity and food memories; as well as to explore which values (if any) African Diaspora food cultures symbolize. The interviews add to the research as they substantiate the theoretical frameworks presented in previous chapters through conceptual frameworks. The author uses content analysis, transcription of content analysis, and thematic analysis to analyze the interviews. In chapter four “(re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories”, the author solicits food memories from eight subjects of the African Diaspora. First theoretical terms are defined, then questions/analytical keys are employed and after food memories are divided by the theoretical terms and questions/analytical keys to analyze the food memories.

### Key Terms

Many key terms are used in repetition throughout the dissertation; some of these terms have both implicit and explicit meanings, and others may be used to generalize. Nevertheless, there is a specificity in which all key terms are used in context of this work. It is important to provide definitions of key terms so that the reader understands the ways and means in which

the author uses them (especially when the author is not using theories or quoting others' works).

African American / Black / Black American / African – the author uses the definition provided by Diane M. Spivey in *At the Table of Power: Food and Cuisine in the African American Struggle for Freedom, Justice and Equality* (2022):

African Americans (Africans brought to the Americas as slaves) [...] “Africans in America,” “African Americans,” “Blacks,” and “Black Americans” [...] are used interchangeably, and the term “African” is used frequently because it is the correct racial/ geographical heritage of Blacks in America, and because, based on their treatment, there was never a time in the history of this country [the United of America] when Africans, brought to the Americas in chains, were allowed to forget that they were exactly that. (Spivey 2022, 16)

America / American – America is primarily used to signify the United States of America, however more generally it relates to the North American continent. Americans are peoples whose nationality or birthright allows them to identify as American.

Blackness – the author references Michelle M. Wright's work In the *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (2015), for the definition of Blackness she states the following: “The only way to produce a definition of Blackness that is wholly inclusive and nonhierarchical is to understand Blackness as the intersection of constructs that locate the Black collective in history and in the specific moment in which Blackness is being imagined— the “now” through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated” (Wright 2015, 14).

Culinary heritage – the author uses culinary heritage to denote food knowledge and culinary traditions that are transferred from one generation to another; the preservation of culinary heritage takes form through the transference of knowledge (recipes) and skills (cooking). Culinary heritage may represent race, ethnicity, community, culture and region and is attached to traditional foodways. It can be argued that culinary heritage is embedded through memory and exists psychically in one's being.

Culinary history – the author uses culinary history as described by *The Cambridge World History of Food* (2000) (website version): “Culinary history studies the origins and development of the foodstuffs, equipment, and techniques of cookery, the presentation and

eating of meals, and the meanings of these activities to the societies that produce them. It looks at practices on both sides of the kitchen door, at the significance of the food to the cook and to those who consume it, and at how cooking is done and what the final product means”.

Culinary identity – the author refers to culinary identity generally as flavors and cuisines that signify and can be attributed to a particular race, ethnicity, or community of people; culinary identity is often intertwined with social, cultural, historical, political and economic contexts and includes customs and etiquettes.

Culinary tradition – the author uses culinary tradition to refer to customs, recipes, practices, methods and techniques of cooking associated with a particular race, ethnicity, community or culture; culinary traditions may be specific to regions or geographies.

Enslaved – the author uses enslaved rather than slave or slaves, when referring to African bodies brought to the Americas against their will and forced into the institution of chattel slavery. Ghetto Gastro’s *Ghetto Gastro Presents Black Power Kitchen* (2022) provides further examination: ““A person is not born identifying as a slave and does not choose the life of enslavement...In saying ‘enslaved Africans’ or ‘enslaved Black people,’ we bring awareness to the constant presence of white oppressors who remain unaccountable for their acts of terror and violence in any meaningful systemic way””(Grey et al. 2022).

Diaspora – the author uses Diaspora in relation to people of the African Diaspora. In the article, “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity and the Challenge of *Changing* the Same” (1991), Paul Gilroy defines the Diaspora as: “Diaspora can also be employed to project the rich diversity of Black cultures in different parts of the world in counterpoint to their common sensibilities – both those features residually inherited from Africa and those generated from the special bitterness of New World racial slavery” (Gilroy 1991, 112).

Foodways – the author uses foodways as defined by Merriam Websters Dictionary as “the eating habits and culinary practices of a people, region, or historical period”. Building on this definition is the concept presented by Ilaria Porciani in *Food Heritage and Nationalism in Europe* (2019): “food-ways constitute an organized system, a language that – through its structure and components – conveys meaning and contributes to the organization of the natural and social world” (Porciani 2019, 3).

Identity – The author uses this term to denote how individuals or groups of people self-identify or are identified by others intra community or extra community. Identity may be represented by race, ethnicity, gender, religion, class, social groups or communities, and geographically/ by region (among other identifiers). Often shared identity is formed by shared/familiar experiences or through cultural interests including music, clothing, food, religion, education, etc.

Memory – the author uses Astrid Erll’s work to define memory. In the article “Traveling Memory” (2011), she writes: “memory involves knowledge, repertoires of stories and scripts, implicit memory and bodily aspects such as habitus” (Erll 2011, 14).

South / Southern / American South – the author uses the term South to refer to the American South i.e. the Southern states of the United States of America. In *The Aunt Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (2015), Toni Tipton-Martin states: “the South’ denotes a generalized geographic region between the Potomac [River] and the Pedernales [River], loosely linked by such cultural markers as music, religion, race, family, and food” (Tipton-Martin 2015, ix).

## **Section I: (Re)Claiming African Culinary History & Heritage**

### **1. The Migration of People, Knowledge, Technologies and Foods from Africa to the Americas**

#### **1.1. A Culinary Past: African Cooking Techniques and Technologies**

One of the first accounts of the food of sub-Saharan Africa was by Abdalla Ibn Battuta, a Tangerine traveler during the fourteenth century. In 1532, Battuta was charged by the sultan of Morocco to travel to Bilad al Sudan – the kingdom of Mali, as it was one of the primary destinations of Berber trade caravans. Battuta produced a written record of his two-year journey, and often wrote about the food he encountered, with his work becoming one of the earliest records of the foodways of Africa.

In some of his most notable accounts Battuta wrote about the dates of northern Mali and claimed that they were some of the sweetest that he had ever had; and in his trek across the Sahara with trade caravans he visited salt mines where he noticed that the salt deposits were reminiscent of huge tablets. It is also striking that he spoke of calabashes, which were used as eating and storage vessels and the intricate designs by which they were decorated. Ibn Battuta's is important when reflecting on the origins of African American foods and foodways because it was nearly seven hundred years ago when he noticed some of the elements of African foodways that existed in cooking techniques and a women driven marketplace (Harris 2011, 11).

Africa's culinary history starts with a plethora of ingredients that were derived from agriculture, hunting, gathering and herding (McCann 2009, 22). Battuta's records substantiate and reinforce that Africa had a culinary past, one predating exploration, discovery or colonialism, and it was on the African continent that various cooking techniques and technologies were found. To that end, many tribes were adept at not only creating innovative cooking techniques, but also hunting, gathering, fishing and metallurgy.

For example, West Africans, such as the Wolof people of the Senegal and Gambia regions were known to grind the abundant crop, mil or pearl millet (similar to maize) into flour; this flour would be added to oil and liquid (Spivey 2022. 27). This batter was often baked and

would be made into cakes, breads or dumplings. This form of corn was also used in soups and stews, as well as to brew beer and wine. Another multipurpose African indigenous food crop was sorghum (known as guinea corn as it is often confused with a variety of maize). Sorghum grain was pounded into flour and mixed with liquid to create a batter then fried in groundnut or palm oil, resulting in a pancake. Certain varieties of sorghum were also popped to create popcorn, and sorghum beer was developed as an alcoholic porridge, or as a fermented pito with the sediment removed. Nevertheless, West Africans were familiar crops like maize, corn, sorghum, and even rice long before they were enslaved in the Americas (Spivey 2022, 28).

Africans were not only agriculturalists and pastoralists, they were also expert fishermen. The Senegal River was the site of deep-sea fishing vessel building and many varieties of catch were found in oceans, rivers, streams and lagoons by “fisher folk” throughout West Africa like the Twi of Ghana and the Muslim Bozo tribes who fished and managed boat trade on the Niger and Bani Rivers. A variety of catch could be found in these bodies of water including crab, lobster, cod, mackerel, sole, alligator, pike, prawn, gilthead, eel, shrimp, sprat, flounder and carp. And there were many methods for preparing fish, whether raw, pickled, fried, boiled or used as a main ingredient for gumbo. Fish was dried and salted or smoked for preservation and to sell at markets in interior regions (Spivey 2022, 29). And dried shrimp and crayfish were used in stews and sauces, often combined with coconut milk and other ingredients. In *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (2011) Jessica B. Harris writes, “from Morocco in the north to South Africa, from Kenya in the east to Cameroon in the west, the continent's traditional dishes tended to be variations on the theme of a soupy stew over a starch or a grilled or fried protein accompanied by a vegetable sauce and/or a starch” (Harris 2011, 11). Africans were also master hunters and found their prey along the natural prairies of the Senegal River (among other locations), where cows, sheep, goats, and fowl of many kinds including partridges, guinea fowl, wood pigeons, sea birds and migratory birds could be found.

To that end, a discussion of Africa’s culinary and agricultural civilizations has to also include the skilled metallurgists (Spivey 2022, 28). It is believed that the archaeology of metallurgy was more advanced in sub-Saharan Africa than in many other parts of the world at the time (Childs and Herbert 2005, 276). There were blacksmiths, coppersmiths, horseshoe makers, goldsmiths, silversmiths, and arms makers who were responsible for making knives, hatchets,

axes, and blades of iron. The metals usually worked with in sub-Saharan Africa were iron, copper, and gold (Childs and Herbert 2005, 281). Africa's iron mining industries produced mining tools that not only greatly impacted and led to agricultural advancements but also produced household and kitchen utensils. To that end, the technology of the West African iron industry was also used to help evolve agriculture. (Spivey 2022, 29).

## **1.2. The Transport of People and Chattel Slavery**

Before slavery was part and parcel of the American project it was first evident in Roman times when Slavic people of middle Europe were captured and sold at markets alongside prisoners of war; etymologically, the origin of the word slave is tied to those Slavic peoples. Almost every civilization in the world experienced slavery (Morgan 2005, 51). To that end, Europeans did not introduce slavery to Africans; Africans enslaved their opponents, those who were prisoners of war and debtors, often for a specified period, in a system similar to indentured servitude. At first indigenous slavery was similar to European serfdom, it later became brute force and control over human property, which was a distinguishing factor in chattel slavery (Carney 2001, 70).

It was not until 1441 that the institution of chattel slavery was introduced by the Portuguese who took sub-Saharan Africans from the continent to be sold in European markets. As Imani Perry stated: “the sovereign entitlement — to a piece of land or chattel— was based in theft of life and indigeneity” (Smallwood 2019, 413). When Spain established settlements in the Americas, it was decreed that only Blacks born in Spain or Portugal could be imported into the colony to be enslaved. This decree was eventually abandoned as enslaved Africans and Indigenous Native Americans worked cooperatively to revolt. As the Spanish colonies grew in the Americas, so did their need for free labor, therefore regular traffic to enslave Africans to the Americas began in 1519 (Harris 2011, 27). It is believed that the first direct voyage from Africa to the Americas was in 1526 (Etlis 2007, 4). Chattel slavery and the conquest of land in the New World works to frame the ideology of colonial dominion throughout the Americas because human beings, and African beings particularly were thought of as nothing more than property (Smallwood 2019, 413). A century later in 1619, nineteen Africans bound for Cuba

arrived on a captured ship to the Jamestown colony of Virginia. The humiliation and dehumanization that was associated with chattel slavery was attached to Blackness in the New World (Morgan 2005, 53). Therefore, race became one of the most distinct components of slavery in the New World (Morgan 2005, 53).

To arrive on the shores of America, millions were trafficked from Africa across the Atlantic Ocean, through the Middle Passage. The Middle Passage was a central to a complex three-part voyage between ship crews first departing from Europe with provisions including alcohol, gunpowder, beads and cloth, then capturing and purchasing bodies in Africa to transport to the New World (the middle leg of the journey), and finally returning to Europe with sugar, tobacco and other products. While the enslaved were exported from Africa, trade goods were imported into the Americas, as well as the stations of the crews (Solow 2001, 12). Outside of race, another distinct feature of North American slavery was its commercial character (Morgan 2005, 54). The Transatlantic Slave Trade was linked to the demand for labor in the Americas and the amount of crops and profit that plantations could produce (Etlis 2007, 2).

In the Americas, there were ports throughout various regions that were associated with the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Etlis 2001, 35). In a period of around three hundred and fifty years approximately twenty-seven thousand Transatlantic trips were made with the purpose of transporting Africans to the Americas for enslavement. In *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (2011), Jessica B. Harris writes:

The litany of ships and their names seems endless. On September 13, 1693, the Hannibal left Gravesend, England, for the African coast. On January 13, 1698, the Albion Brigate sailed from the Downs, on the English Channel, to the African coast. On October 25, 1773, Adventure cleared Newport, Rhode Island, for the Atlantic coast. On November 22, 1806, the Tartar, owned by Frederick Tell of Charleston, South Carolina, headed out of Rhode Island bound for Rio Pongo in Guinea. The Nancy left Charleston for Senegal on June 1, 1807. The trips continued clandestinely after the Transatlantic Slave Trade was outlawed in 1808; in 1845, the Spitfire sailed from New Orleans and was captured and found to be transporting 346 individuals. The Wanderer left Charleston flying the flag of the New York Yacht Club with false papers claiming it was sailing for Trinidad but in reality set course for the Congo, completed its journey successfully, and returned to the Georgia coast on December 1, 1858. Virtually all the nations of northern Europe engaged in the trade. Eventually they were joined by the northern and southern ports of the colonies that became the United States. (Harris 2011, 28)

From the 1600s to the 1800s, numerous captor crews were present on the West African coast, all with the goal to stock their ships with food and bodies. As previously stated, the Transatlantic Slave Trade was tied to profit and therefore was conducted through a system of price and markets (Solow 2001, 11). It can therefore be stated that this type of commodification implied dehumanization (Solow 2001, 10). This was evident as ship captains tricked and bribed African rulers, traded with middlemen and purchased items from locals as they waited to fill their holds to the brim with human cargo. They often remained on the African coasts for months at a time, sailing from one port to another, for upwards of four months.

As those who would be enslaved were acquired, their bodies were examined throughout: from their eyes for blindness, to their genitals, all body parts were checked to determine their age and health (Harris 2011, 29). If they were deemed of adequate condition they were bargained for and once negotiations were completed, the captives were branded by iron with the company's mark and taken by canoe to the ships that awaited departure. Throughout this process many were despondent, some compliant and others defiant, committing suicide by throwing themselves overboard. Ships were supplied with shackles and other equipment to traffic African bodies to last the duration of the journey.

Upon boarding the ships, the enslaved were fastened together, two by two with handcuffs at the wrists and shackled at the ankles, they endured the journey below decks and were positioned so that they were confined to lying on their sides, with not enough room to stand upright. The conditions on the ships made it evident that the enslaved would be facing a treacherous route and also forebode their fates (Etlis 2007, 7). The conditions below deck were deplorable, buckets served as toilets, and many relieved themselves on themselves or their neighbors. Alexander Falconbridge, a ship's doctor who sailed with the slavers in the eighteenth century, reported that the decks of the slave holds were covered in blood and mucus and concluded that "it is not in the power of the human imagination to picture a situation more dreadful or disgusting" (Harris 2011, 29).

Olaudah Equiano, an African later became a writer and abolitionist who had experienced the Middle Passage firsthand recounted:

The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each scarcely had room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. (Harris 2011, 30)

An article on the middle passage and transatlantic slave trade depicts the image of the lower deck of the British ship *Brooks* where over 400 enslaved adults and children were positioned onboard.

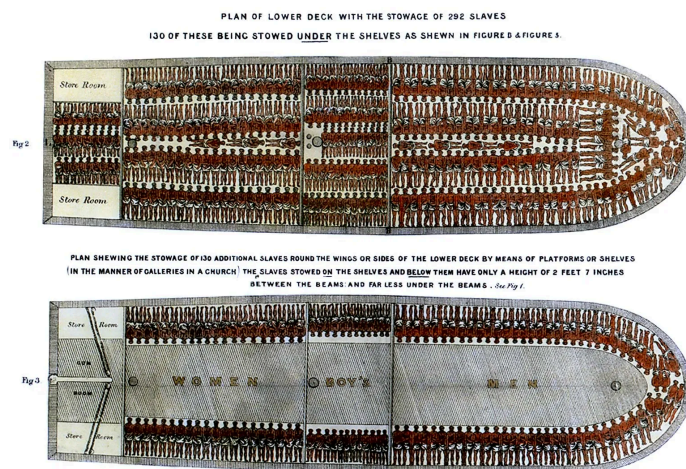


Image 1: British Broadside ship *Brooks* circa 1790, Source: Encyclopedia Britannica

While ships typically left from Europe throughout the year, some British ship crews estimated their expeditions with the goal of arriving in the American South between the months of May and October during the growing season when selling African bodies yielded more profits. To that end, the institution of slavery was one of economics and aligned to capitalism. In lieu of such, captors greatly considered how to inexpensively provide the necessary diet for the enslaved, one that would ensure their survival through the Middle Passage. During the Transatlantic Slave Trade captors knew where certain foods were grown as well as where to find food in surplus (Carney 2001, 12). Traders studied West African cultures and diets, using

this knowledge to provision the necessary food stuffs for the journey, of utmost importance was food that was long lasting and multiuse.

The amount of food needed for the journey had to be sufficient to feed crews of approximately thirty, as well as up to four hundred Africans, who came from different regions and had different diets. Slave-ship provision lists from Royal African Company records from 1682 to 1683 include such items as stockfish and beef, beans, salt, flour, and brandy, which was both a provision and a trade good (Harris 2011, 28). Therefore, Transatlantic Slave Trade was marked not only by the selling of African bodies but also a second trade of essential food items for the arduous journey (Harris 2011, 30).

The Middle Passage as it was described was the route (or routes) taken from Africa to the Americas. And there were three food crops in particular that were integral to the West African diet and were the foundation for the sustenance throughout the Middle Passage. These were corn, rice, and yams. Indian corn arrived on the African continent during the Columbian Exchange and became one of the core foods of the West African diet by the time of the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Harris 2011, 31). Corn was provided to captors and ship crews by Akan merchants of the Gold Coast region who were able to procure the large amounts needed, approximately fifteen to twenty stalks per day were necessary to feed an adult captive, so the amount to feed hundreds of captives for months was ample. For captives from the Senegambia and rice growing regions rice was a dietary staple. African cultivated rice (*oryza glaberrima*) was grown near the Gambia and Senegal rivers and as far west as Ghana (Harris 2011, 31). Captives from the Gulf of Benin were familiar with yams as they were grown from the Ivory Coast to Eastern Cameroon. Yams were the primary crop for traders of present-day Nigeria where their yam is harvested towards the end of the summer.

While North American captors commonly fed the enslaved rice and corn, both of which could be obtained on the African and North American continents, they also feed them black-eyed peas; British captors fed the enslaved fava or horse beans brought from England. On most British vessels, the enslaved were fed two meals a day; the first meal consisted of simply rice, corn or yams. The afternoon meal consisted of boiled horse beans and a sauce made of old beef and rotten salt fish.

### **1.3. Indigenous African Knowledge for Cultivation and Agricultural Innovations in the United States**

Enslaved Africans were transported to regions throughout the Americas and specifically to the United States with due consideration; just as their bodies were transported, so was their knowledge of agriculture and cultivation. Throughout slavery, this knowledge was overlooked but it was not lost; seemingly lost; instead, the enslavement of Africans dehumanized them and disparaged their prior achievements in agriculture and technology in Africa and in America (Carney 2001, 12).

Three crops – cereals, rice and yams – distinguished the areas from which enslaved Africans were brought from; different parts of Africa were familiar with cultivating each and used some sort of starch in traditional dishes. Those from rice growing regions were transported early on and brought along with them knowledge of rice cultivating techniques as well as their “memories of rice-based cuisine” (Harris 2011, 10). Those from yam regions arrived later as ships moved from the coast of Senegal to Ghana, Benin and beyond (Harris 2011, 10). It is likely that those who were enslaved from cereal growing regions lived inland and subsisted on millet and fonio, traditional crops that did not greatly influence American tastes, as a similar crop, corn, already existed in the New World.

Rice cultivation was and is essential to cultural food identity throughout West Africa (Carney 2001, 31). Ships carried rice seed and Africans with knowledge on rice cultivation to many sites, including New Orleans, Louisiana which housed the largest market of enslaved peoples; eventually over one hundred thousand were sold or purchased here. Approximately two-thirds of Africans brought to Louisiana by the French had origins in the Senegambia region of West Africa; this region set between the Senegal and Gambia rivers is one where the production of rice was historically successful. It was this region that was one of the first reached by Europeans (Carney 2001, 13).

Nevertheless, long before the arrival of Europeans, West Africans had already developed and established complex systems of rice cultivation (Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson 2007, 1333). However, when Europeans believed that the systems encountered there that irrigated rice along the West African Coast, were not their own but instead a transfer Asian technology (Carney 2001, 12). Given this scenario, Etlis, Morgan and Richardson (2001, 1335) argue that

“the African contribution in the development of American rice cultivation therefore merits further investigation”.

African rice (*Oryza glaberrima*), for example, was domesticated in West Africa thousands of years ago before Asian rice (*Oryza sativa*) (Spivey 2022, 26). Therefore, African rice (*Oryza glaberrima*) was domesticated independently from Asian rice and other rice varieties (Cubry et al. 2018, 2274). As previously mentioned “In Africa, early agriculture was associated with the cultivation of African rice (*Oryza glaberrima* Steud.) and a few other cereals, including sorghum and pearl millet (Cubry et al. 2018, 2274). Paddy rice, for example, was grown along the Upper Guinea coast while both wet and dry rices were well developed and already largely cultivated throughout the Senegal Valley (Spivey 2022, 26). Those residing along the Gambia River in the sixteenth century also grew rice in alluvial soil by using a dikes system (Spivey 2022, 31). Additionally, most households along the Gambia River had rice nurseries of their own by the end of the seventeenth century. Lastly, the Diola of Guinea-Bissau converted most of the mangrove swamps along their rivers into a network of rice paddy fields (Spivey 2022, 26).

In slavery in New Orleans, Africans employed complex methods and technologies to convert swamps and tidal wetlands into rice paddies, using memory and skill to adapt to the terrain of Louisiana, one similar to their homelands. When rice for seeding was brought to Louisiana, along with people (Africans) who understood how to work with it and what to do with it, it was soon “growing in great abundance all along the Mississippi River; and within a few years, rice was exported to the French colonized West Indies” (Spivey 2022, 31). The production of rice in Louisiana was an overwhelmingly abundant and a “cash crop”, this very much due to the tutelage of the enslaved.

In her cookbook and culinary history work, *At the Table of Power: Food and Cuisine in the African American Struggle for Freedom, Justice and Equality* (2022), Diane M. Spivey writes:

With all of its problems in agriculture and food production, it is easy to see why France, along with the rest of Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, embarked on a poverty reduction program by sending its people to colonize areas outside of their borders, in addition to jumping headlong into colonialism and imperialistic endeavors in wealthier nations. Clearly, the difference between what

Africans brought to Louisiana and America in general, compared to the French, speaks volumes. Africa is not only the home of humankind and important technological innovations developed in the ancient world of early human prehistory, it is also home to one of the major agricultural complexes to have evolved in the entire course of human history. (Spivey 2022, 38)

To that end, Louisiana was only one of many states where African hands were integral to rice production. South Carolina legend states that rice first arrived in the colony on a ship from Madagascar, but many believe that “Carolina Gold” as it has been called also has roots in the Senegambia region (Harris 2011, 71). Regardless where its African origin, South Carolina rice was produced by a distinct African system of agriculture (Harris 2011, 71). From familiarity with the flooding alluvial plains, to the construction of dikes and sluiceways, to efficient ways of working with methods of distinct tasks for farmers, Africa’s handprint is evident in the Carolinas rice cultivation. The knowledge and the skill set to adapt cultivation to land in the New World and make it a dietary staple proved to be a useful possession for the enslaved who came from rice growing regions (Carney 2001, 97). Africans from Senegambia and the Grain Coast brought this knowledge with them in the slave ships and because of such were sold at a premium in the markets all throughout the Carolinas (Harris 2011, 71). In South Carolina, masters vied for bodies from the Senegambia as well as the Windward Coast of West Africa (present-day Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Ivory Coast) whose heads and hands had the expertise to maintain and grow their monetary and land wealth. The transfer of rice cultivating knowledge and techniques shows dependence on Africans knowledge (Carney 2001, 105). Rice was integral to the economics of South Carolina, and therefore so was the knowledge the Africans brought with them (Carney 2001, 78).

The methods and techniques that became part and parcel of the Carolina colony are emblematic of West African systems that existed long before the Transatlantic Slave (Carney 2001, 142). It is therefore obvious that enslaved Africans had a hand in rice growing in the New World (Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson 2007, 1335). African practices were impacted deeply the New World rice-growing techniques, from land preparation to sowing, weeding irrigating and cooking (Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson 2007, 1333). Nevertheless, Africans and the enslaved were not given credit for their knowledge and methodologies as part and parcel of the Transatlantic Slave Trade was a system of Western supremacy which conditioned the European mindset on African rice systems (Carney 2001, 49).

Outside of rice growing, it is important to acknowledge the breadth and depth of other agricultural productions brought from Africa. Farming in West Africa took into account ecology, the environment, the larger agricultural networks of communities and even the types of tools that were used (Spivey 2022, 25). Farmers in West Africa employed varied combinations of land use which allowed for differentiation in categories of farming. These variations included upland cultivation, valley cultivation, uncultivated land, and well as techniques for grasslands, and forests i.e., many different types of terrains (Spivey 2022, 25).

In addition to agricultural innovations, Africans were also familiar with plant cultivation and grew many types of foods. In Senegal, there was a variation of corn, mil which was grown in two forms, as gros and petit. There were also several types of peas and in the lougans (fields) corn and melons were also grown. Additionally, there were other multi use crops like tobacco, indigo and cotton (Spivey 2022, 27). Furthermore, salt was produced and traded at mouth of the Senegal River.

Many regions of Africa were once viewed as bread baskets as they sufficiently supplied both the continent and other places in the ancient world like Rome. To that end, there are roughly two thousand crops indigenous to Africa and probably many more on the continent in the past. An abundance of food translates to a high quality of life and, in Africa, abundance reflected and represented diverse cultivation and agricultural innovation. African's agricultural techniques precede European contact and to that extent contact with many other civilizations (Spivey 2022, 26). However, literature dealing with African agriculture more than often does not recognize that agriculture was independently developed in Africa and not brought in by outsiders from Europe or Asia (Spivey 2022, 26).

According to Carney, enslaved Africans were the group of settlers that came to the Americas for most of the eighteenth century (Carney 2001, 106). As migrants, "their presence in the early settlement history of the Americas profoundly influenced the development of agricultural technology in ways yet to be examined (Carney 2001, 106).

#### 1.4. Transnational Foods: Okra, Watermelon and Black-Eyed Peas

Many accounts attest that the enslaved, unaware of their fate, had a great desire for sustenance and survival embedded in their beings, and brought along with them seeds in their hair, those too traveling across the Middle Passage and later transplanted in the New World; whether this is culinary fiction or not is hard to ascertain. African seeds did not arrive easily, just as African bodies did not (Harris 2011, 30). Many common American foods are indigenous to Africa, these include yams, watermelon, pumpkin, and okra, which were found on the African continent as early as 4000 BC (Covey and Eissach 2009, 41). There are three foods in particular that were transplanted from Africa to the Americas which became emblematic of the struggle and survival of enslaved Africans and their descendants, these are okra, watermelon and black-eyed peas (as mentioned above).

Okra is not very well known outside of African American and Southern communities (Harris 2011, 17). Okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*), also called *guibo* and *guimyombo*, or *quingombo* from the Bantu language is native to geographical area of Ethiopia (Covey and Eissach 2009, 85). Okra's connection to Africa is obvious because of its name and also due to the fact that it is often used in stews (Harris 2011, 17). Okra was likely introduced to the continental United States during the 1700s from the Caribbean. Colonial Americans ate it, and it was popular in Philadelphia during the colonial era in a dish called pepper pot which was a stew mixture (Harris 2011, 17). While it was first thought to have grown in gardens of the enslaved, by 1806 okra was in widespread use and botanists were familiar with its many varieties. The French word for okra, *gombo*, is highly associated with the gumbo dish, having origins in Louisiana where a creolized population of French, Indigenous and African peoples is indicative of the stew's mixture of ingredients. Many Louisiana natives don't consider gumbo "proper" unless it includes okra - an ingredient which is often excluded in the gumbos of other regions.

It is likely that watermelons arrived in the continental United States during the seventeenth century. It is believed the fruit originated in Africa as images of watermelons appear in Egyptian tomb paintings. In Southern Africa watermelons have been a part of the diets of the Khoi and San of the Kalahari Desert for centuries (Harris 2011, 17). New cultivations of

watermelons were developed for climates like in the United States where the enslaved often ate the fruit during the hot summers as it is comprised of more than ninety percent water and is therefore good at regulating body temperatures, critical for the enslaved who worked in the heat for long periods of time. Just like okra, watermelon is connected to African Americans (Harris 2011, 17).

Black-eyed peas, a legume, are among the world's oldest crops; they too have been found in Egyptian tomb paintings, as well as in passages in the Bible. The black-eyed pea is a bean that is native to Central Africa (Harris 2011, 18). Black eyed peas are best known in the South Carolinian dish "Hoppin' John", which includes Carolina gold rice or pilaf and the legume. Black-eyed peas are thought to bring about luck in many West African cultures. While black-eyed peas did not bring luck for those captured and sold into slavery, it is eaten by African Americans on New Year's Day as a celebration food and is thought to bring good fortune (Harris 2011, 18).

## **2. An African – American Culinary History**

### **2.1. On the Plantation: Ways and Means of Procuring Food**

On plantations, the enslaved were dependent on those who they were indebted to (masters) for the necessities of life including shelter, clothing and food. Feeding the enslaved required consideration as the enslaved not only produced cash crops, but also grew the food that would be consumed by the entire plantation; therefore, enslavers had to reconcile the economic viability of both producing crops and feeding those who produced said crops. Enslavers settled on providing slaves with rations. Rations had to nourish the enslaved to work but also had to be within reason and cost effective (Harris 2011, 95). To that end, on most plantations there were typically two systems of food distribution, the first where the enslaved were fed from a centralized kitchen, and the second, where they were provided with rations on a specified day and time and allowed to prepare their meals themselves, whether in their cabins or through a communal system. In some cases, rations were so scant that the enslaved nearly starved starvation (Harris 2011, 95). As the enslaved found their food rations to be minimally

dispersed they often found new ways to acquire food (Williams-Forson 2022, 32). The enslaved supplemented the rations by growing their own vegetables as well as by hunting and fishing (Covey and Eisnach 2009, 20). Therefore, the enslaved supplemented their rations through whatever means they could.

One of the means of procuring food outside of rations was gardens. Some enslavers distributed seeds to allow the enslaved to grow vegetables on their own time, under the guise, that the more food the enslaved grew themselves, the less their masters needed to provide. Some of the plants such as okra and watermelon were reminiscent of African tastes (Harris 2011, 84). Others food planted were American variations of foods that were familiar like European collard greens, sweet potatoes, and chiles. In *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South* (2017), Michael W. Twitty states that “the wild nature of early slavery, where Blacks in lean-tos and makeshift shelters had to create the infrastructure around themselves, lends credence to the idea that early enslaved people were not only coerced to feed themselves, they understood it as a right” (Twitty 2017, 319).

The enslaved also foraged or explored nearby grounds in search of other food sources and hunted and fished. Given that the rations were so insufficient on some plantations many looked to others means for sustenance (Covey and Eisnach 2009, 31). For some, that meant stealing from their enslavers or the enslavers of others (Harris 2011, 85). Again, highlighting that the enslaved employed all means to feed themselves.

Literature on the foodways of the enslaved often suggests that their diets were relegated to only food scraps and the undesirable offal of throwaway meats, which diminishes and discounts their inventiveness in acquiring food, making meals and moreover sustaining themselves, their families and their communities. Williams-Forson has found in her investigation that, while enslaved Black did not eat grand meals, most of what was pulled together from many different sources i.e., rations, gardens, discarded foods and the scraps of certain animals like hogs (2006, 171). Even though the diets of the enslaved are often reduced to eating meat scraps, it was never that simple (Williams-Forson 2022, 33). As the experience of slavery fractured the culinary experiences of the African enslaved, and their descendants,

African Americans, new ways of creating and practicing food cultures were developed (Williams-Forsen 2022, 33).

## **2.2. By Any Entrepreneurial Means Necessary**

The enslaved also exemplified an entrepreneurial spirit and such was evident in their abilities to trade, barter, hawk and sell crops or cooked foods in various settings. First, starting at the plantations on which they lived, the enslaved would sell surplus produce, poultry and other foodstuffs to their enslavers. Masters often purchased surplus goods from their own slave's gardens, paying them with cash, trade goods, or bartered privileges like passes to visit relatives, a commercial symbiosis between master and enslaved that seemingly contradicted the conditions of enslavement (Harris 2011, 84). In *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey From Africa to America* (2011), Jessica B. Harris affirms that the first President of the United States, George Washington, purchased hunted games and fish from those that he enslaved, while the third President, Thomas Jefferson purchased cucumbers, sweet potatoes and squash from those that he held captive. In this manner, even the President and others were aware that the items that the enslaved grew were theirs and therefore had to be purchased outright (Harris 2011, 84).

There are accounts where the enslaved like Samuel Chase of Natchez, Mississippi raised poultry and grew vegetables and was given permission by his mistress to sell these products from a wagon. A wagon, or "garden truck" as it was sometimes called, allowed the enslaved to sell or barter for other items. The money that Chase earned was his own to keep and in rare cases where enough money was earned, the enslaved were able to purchase freedom for themselves or their loved ones.

As early on as the colonial period, women of African descent had taken over the street-food market, selling goods produced with homegrown ingredients. It was quite normal to see a Black woman sitting on a small stool selling sweets (Harris 2011, 125). Culinary know-how after all was mark of the African population and many of the enslaved were food vendors (Wilson 2007, 52). Street vendors in Northern and Southern urban areas kept some of the cultural and culinary connections alive by selling snack foods that were American variants of

African delicacies (Harris 2011, 130). Cala, a fritter was often found on the streets of New Orleans and available in two versions, as rice or as black-eyed peas. Both versions originate the West Africa, the rice version in Liberia and the black-eyed pea version in Nigeria (Harris 2011, 129). Therefore, both types of cala fritter have a throughline and were street foods sold by African American vendors and the culinary connection was from a continent that by this time, many were unfamiliar with (Harris 2011, 129).

For many enslaved Africans, selling chicken was also a profitable enterprise and allowed them to enter the commercial economy (Williams-Forson 2006, 17). More surprising though is the fact that the enslaved maintained and patronized their own markets (Harris 2011, 84). The idea of buying and selling and a market was not new for the enslaved as markets are traditional in African societies (Covey and Eisnach 2009, 75). These markets existed throughout the South with the knowledge and sometimes approval of enslavers (Harris 2011, 84). Participating in the market economy allowed the enslaved to supplement the meager food that was provided to them by plantation owners, provided the opportunity to obtain additional necessary goods, and allowed for a sense of agency, responsibility and self-determination. Such also allowed the enslaved to exercise autonomy and have a miniscule version of economic success (Williams-Forson 2006, 17). This does not suggest the beneficence of enslavement but instead reflects the material and economic transactions that surrounded some plantations (Williams-Forson 2006, 17).

Market entrepreneurship further suggests that although enslaved Africans and in later generations, African Americans were captive by their circumstances, there were instances where they were able to successfully practice autonomy and independence. Black women and men were not mere victims of their circumstances, but instead had some opportunities to be enterprising and entrepreneurial (Williams-Forson 2006, 14). By replicated an African market structure in America, some of the enslaved were able to better their material lives (Williams-Forson 2006, 16).

### 2.3. Black Cooks in Big House Kitchens

Even before arriving on American shores, African women were integral to the feeding of captives and crews on ships. The skills of cooking, serving and cleaning were transferred to the plantation where African and African American women typically undertook the role of cook.

The “Big House” plantation cook was typically an enslaved man or woman who was responsible for preparing meals (Harris 2011, 104). This role was a favored one as it wielded a bit of power and was relatively comfortable considering the context (Harris 2011, 104). Usually under the direction of the mistress of the property, he or she was in charge of all food preparation for the enslavers and those that were enslaved – in the instances when the enslaved were provided meals rather than rations.

The meals made by enslaved cooks were praised by their masters, mistresses and plantation visitors. Combining new ingredients and an African affinity for spices, enslaved cooks made delicious meals that were enjoyed by Whites (Covey and Eisnach 2009, 211). Oftentimes these meals were compared with those of high-culture cuisines. In *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (2011), Jessica B. Harris quotes R.Q. Mallard who stated “French cooks are completely outdistanced in the production of wholesome, dainty and appetizing food; for if there is any one thing for which the African female intellect has a natural genius, it is for cooking” (Harris 2011, 104).

Throughout the period of enslavement, Black cooks slowly began to have a small amount of autonomy in cooking and the dishes they made that conjured Africa became an established part of Southern culinary identity (Harris 2011, 105). Black cooks moved in and out of their comfort zone, creating their cuisines of their own based on their own preferences of flavor combinations (Twitty 2017, 313).

Stereotypes of the time suggested that Blacks were born cooks, and some believed that for Blacks, cooking was a racial talent (Harris 2011, 105). Louisianan historian, attorney and enslaver Charles Gayarré oncewrote in *Harpers Magazine* “the Negro is a born cook. He

could neither read nor write, and therefore he could not learn from books. He was simply inspired; the god of the spit and the saucepan had breathed into him; that was enough” (Harris 2011, 105).

Although the comparison has been made that “pots are to African and African Diaspora mythology what bottles are to genies in the Middle East”, enslaved cooks often employed memory and oral transmission as technologies. Using creativity in cooking was a part of a tradition that Black women were familiar with as it was typically an oral or practical tradition, rather than a written one (Tipton-Martin 2015, 40). Underneath in this creativity were “important African techniques that the slaves brought with them to plantation kitchens” (Tipton-Martin 2015, 5). These proficiencies included the knowledge of practical things like food safety and hygiene as well as artistic sensibilities in garnishing and decorating dishes (Tipton-Martin 2015, 5). These cooks were also familiar with mixing high- and low-quality ingredients, regional items and “exotic” heritage foods (Tipton-Martin 2015, 5). The knowledge of the Black cook could also be associated with “transcribability” meaning experiential knowledge versus a “culinary aura” (Tipton-Martin 2015, 7).

#### **2.4. How the South Was Stolen: Black Cooks, White Mistresses and Stolen Recipes**

While enslaved Black women were often responsible for feeding entire plantations, the advent of cookbooks saw the proliferation of many recipes by which these women were usually uncredited. The hegemonic mindset to substantiate the theft of recipes was “she who owns the cook, owns the recipes”. This worked to create the stereotype of the illiterate cook, someone who had the ability to cook but could not do much more as he or she could not read or write (Tipton-Martin 2015, 23). However, “to judge the black cook by a lack of schooling rather than as a miracle of memory and oral transmission is to miss what was truly accomplished: excellence across a range of skills” (Tipton-Martin 2015, 23).

In *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (1978), David M. Katzman retells the story of a Northern mistress, Antoinette Hervey who attempts to follow a recipe told to her by her servant Katherine, who recalled the recipe by memory.

Although Katherine was able to cook well, for Hervey and Southern women like her, it was believed that the Black cook was “too ignorant to translate that experience into scientific formulas, much less into print”(Tipton-Martin 2015, 40). Anecdotes like this exposed a frustration that many enslavers had, they held contempt for those they enslaved but were dependent upon them. To that end, Southern cookbook authors of that time also resorted to using “condescending language and disparaging images when mentioning to black women” (40), asserting their racial authority to create a “Southern caste etiquette” that would dictate that Blacks were never to be control in the kitchen or in any other space. This made it easy for Black cooks to be taken advantage of and for their recipes to be stolen.

There are recipes published in cookbooks of the 1800s like *The Virginia House-Wife* (1824) by Mary Randolph and *The Kentucky Housewife* (1839) by Letice Byran whereby the influences of enslaved African and African Americans cooks are indisputable. In *The Virginia House-Wife* (1824), recipes call for field peas, okra, and black-eyed peas, all of which have origins in Africa; but there are two recipes in particular that are quite similar to dishes found in Africa, one, a fried black-eyed pea fritter and the other boiled okra. The *Kentucky Housewife* (1839) includes recipes for okra soup and watermelon rind pickles.

In the book, *At the Table of Power: Food and Cuisine in the African American Struggle for Freedom, Justice and Equality* (2022), Diane Spivey writes:

Many of us are aware that numerous cookbooks were compiled and published by southern White women after the end of the Civil War. The recipes in these cookbooks were hailed as the creations of the White women who had them published. The recipes were actually collections of the creations of the African women and men who served the Whites, creations that the White women wrote down and then had published in their own names as authors. Some of these books contained a rare reference to a Black cook. They were easy to spot; these cooks were always called by their first names or the first name was preceded by the term “Aunt,” “Uncle,” or “Mammy.” The identities of the actual enslaved African cooks who created these recipes and all references to them were, in this way, marginalized and effectively erased from history. This was the means to an end because the end of the Civil War (White society blamed the war itself primarily on Africans in America) fostered the attempt to forge White southern nationalism, and in this case southern nationalism centered around food. (Spivey 2022, 20)

And in the foreword for Toni Tipton-Martin' *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (2015), John Egerton writes “in hindsight, we might conclude that nothing good and lasting could have come from the arbitrary confinement of Black women and their white governesses to the southern kitchen and, we might be almost entirely right about that: nothing good-except the fusion of European and African foodstuffs and culinary skills” (Tipton-Martin 2015, x). Egerton goes on to state:

Nevertheless, the proximity of whites and blacks in the South, their isolation from mainstream America, and the centrality of women to the region's foodways made Afro-European cookery an existential reality almost from the beginning. Long before the South or the nation as a whole got around to debating the deeply fraught social issue of racial integration, the South had thoroughly and indivisibly integrated its food. This was not done with foresight or intention; it simply happened in the prescribed course of events as the black minority did most of the work and the ruling white majority took most of the credit. (Tipton-Martin 2015, x)

Nevertheless, many historical accounts about the foundation of America's cuisine excludes the role of Black cooks and their dominating presence in American kitchens from the time that they arrived (Spivey 2022, 11). As previously stated, White often stole recipes from African Americans and renamed them, making the actual originators of said recipes obsolete (Spivey 2022, 20). It is evident that African American contributions have been purposefully erased from American culinary history (Tipton-Martin 2015, xv).

## **2.5. Waiter Carriers of Gordonsville, Virginia and Food Vendors of Harlem, New York**

Post emancipation, during the Reconstruction era, advances in the railroads of the South saw African American men migrating to towns like Gordonsville, Virginia where they secured employment putting down tracks and servicing trains. African American women, like their ancestors before them, peddled various foods outside the train tracks as they were unable to obtain licenses to sell food like the nearby taverns. These women who became known as waiter carriers primarily sold fried chicken as it traveled easily. Women cooked foods like fried chicken, biscuits and desserts and sold them to train passengers through open windows (Godoy 2015). For the waiter carriers, their livelihood relied strongly on selling chickens, constituting financial and social fulfillment (Williams-Forsen 2006, 61). With the money of

these sales of the foods, the women would create a better life for themselves and their families (Williams-Forson 2006, 32). The waiter carriers were a part of a tradition of African American women who became economically independent through cooking (Godoy 2015). More than a financial resource, cooking and selling chicken was indicative of community cultural work (Williams-Forson 2006, 33). When there was leftover food the waiter carriers fed children throughout the neighborhood.

In *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food and Power* (2006), Psyche Williams-Forson writes:

There are a number of points to be gleaned from this one case study example of early African American female entrepreneurship. In addition to en-meine in commercial activity for themselves, these women also participated at times in aspects of cultural work, using food as their source of production. Second, the ways in which [...] waiter carriers used chickens for economic gain, as opposed to solely a food source, illustrate how people make meanings of their material world. (Williams-Forson 2006, 33)

Throughout Reconstruction and into the twentieth century Black women cooked out of necessity, and they participated in an economic system that historically excluded them; they continued to employ means by which they were familiar to provide a livelihood for themselves and their families and to build their communities; food often serving as conduit for such.

Later, by the 1910s, the Great Migration saw Black Americans migrate to the Northeast, Midwest and West in search of employment and opportunities. Most Black Americans migrated to cities or urban centers and found work as domestics and day laborers. With low pay and competition for jobs with immigrant populations, Blacks sought additional sources of income. As Black neighborhoods began to form in cities like New York, their entrepreneurial spirits reemerged. In Harlem, for example, there were cook-shack, pushcart and horse-cart vendors, who sold familiar comfort foods that Southerners craved like pigs' feet and fried chicken. African Americans sold items that they were most familiar with, many of which harked back to days of enslavement (Harris 2011, 177). This was evident with vendors like Patsy Randolph who used discarded foodstuffs to create sauces, spices, relishes and pickles. Randolph received permission from produce street stand owners to collect the discarded

watermelon rinds from bins, later, she prepared pickled watermelon rinds in fruit jars and sold them throughout the community to those who sought this “down home” dish as a snack or as a relish for meats. Her profits on this Southern delicacy amount to something well over ninety-five percent because the rinds cost her absolutely nothing (Harris 2011, 175).

Another example of industriousness was found in Lillian Harris Dean, then known as “Pig Foot Mary”, who was one of Harlem’s most successful food vendors. Dean arrived in Harlem in 1901 from the Mississippi Delta, she first worked as a domestic and used her pay to purchase pigs’ feet and sell them in a makeshift cart. Her hot pigs’s feet were an immediate success, and she remained at her stand, located for sixteen years (Harris 2011, 178). Eventually, her enterprise grew, and Dean purchased a more formal cook cart, went on to marry a newsstand owner and purchased real estate throughout the Harlem neighborhood. Illiterate and initially alone, she had amassed a small fortune selling pigs’ feet, chitterlings, and other black Southern classics like fried chicken, yams, and roast corn (Harris 2011, 178).

In this and many other ways, the food vendors were direct descendants enslaved cala sellers and others (Harris 2011, 177). In creating small enterprises, they employed the same resourcefulness that had enabled generations before them to survive enslavement (Harris 2011, 175).

Southern Black migrants found themselves in the company of Black immigrants who also sought opportunities. These immigrants were from countries including Jamaica, Montserrat, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Aruba. And they too vended their foods. Alongside yam sellers and cobbled-together cook stands selling pigs feet and fried chicken, Caribbean street vendors also hawked tropical fruits with their multilingual calls (Harris 2011, 179). In addition to street vendors, Harlem also had markets that were a melting pot of foods of the African diaspora; foods like tania, eddoes, cassava, chayote and African yams could be found alongside American fruits and vegetables. This neighborhood found itself as not only a culinary melting pot but also a “cosmopolis of colored culture, of gaiety, of art, and the capital of Negro cookery” (Harris 2011, 179).

### **3. The Politics of Black Food**

#### **3.1. Black Food is Political**

Food is one of the many mechanisms by which identity is created (Wallach 2019, 5). Food is often not thought of as being political, but it is, and can be utilized as a tool of opposition rather than simply a necessary substance (Williams-Forson 2006, 117). African Americans food is fraught with tension as it connects with a history of pain and suffering from previous and current generations (Gray et al. 2022, 8).

African Americans have long faced tensions involving food, race and identity (Williams-Forson 2013, 108). Throughout history, African Americans have used food to demonstrate, challenge and articulate their beliefs in relation to the United States (Wallach 2019, 13). Food habits are a means to explore the relationship that African Americans have to the United States as well as to a larger, borderless Black community (2). For African Americans, foodways serve as a connection to America and their nationhood i.e. their second-class status, but foodways also serve to connect to other Americans of African descent (Wallach 2019, 5). Food decisions, therefore, are among the most pressing concerns for African Americans and have been one way by which they have explored personal identity and group identity (2).

To that end, food habits are also a means to construct racial identities (Wallach 2019, 11). Many African Americans have used food to align their racial identity, national identity and political ideals, as well as transform their bodies (13).

An ever-present theme in African American history that is not often acknowledged is the tension that exists to control Black bodies for the benefit of White supremacy, this erases the attempts African Americans have made to assert ownership and autonomy over their bodies at the individual and collective levels (Wallach 2019, 13). Emphasizing food and food expressions allows a distancing from race-makers who diminished African American bodies in order to develop faulty evidence of inferiority, but instead allows African Americans their own perspectives (13).

In *Every Nation Has Its Dish: Black Bodies and Black Food in Twentieth Century America* (2019), Jennifer Jensen Wallach writes:

The process of identity construction and the related question about national identification as they unfold at the African American table are dialectical issues. In 1903, Du Bois encapsulated the conundrum of black identity in his famous discussion of double consciousness. He summarized what he regarded as the central problem in the psychic quest to construct a stable African American identity, writing, “One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” The tension between the oppositional positions of identifying as “an American” or as “a Negro” is evident throughout African American food history. An examination of the attempts to resolve this central tension through bodily, culinary discipline yields insights into how black Americans coped with the dilemma of living in a nation that would not grant them full citizenship rights. Sometimes African Americans prepared and ate foods designed to demonstrate their worthiness and interest in full inclusion to the U.S. body politic. Sometimes they ate foods designed to reject the country that had spurned them and to create an alternative black national identity. And sometimes they ate foods that reflected competing national affiliations at the same meal. (Wallach 2019, 13)

### **3.2. Food Stereotypes: Fried Chicken and Watermelon**

Having suffered to loss of free labor with the end of the Civil War and migrations of Black Americans to the North, Midwest and West, the South found itself in a precarious situation. The loss of control over Black people was so impactful to White Southerners that they used technologies of the time to reassert their control with the goal of reclaiming and maintaining power (Williams-Forson 2013, 111). These technologies took form through visual images including cartoons, advertisements, postcards, trading cards and novelty items.

During slavery, some enslaved Africans were granted permission to sell goods including fruits and vegetables from their gardens, baked goods and chicken (as previously mentioned). Some of very activities have formed the basis for stereotypes that involve African Americans an imagined affinity for chicken (Williams-Forson 2006, 38). An example can be found in the film *Birth of A Nation* (1915) where in one scene White actors wearing blackface portray

African Americans members of the Negro party who take control of the State House of Representatives and are on the house floor eating chicken during a session.

Many of the depictions of African Americans during the Reconstruction era worked to perpetuate the belief that Black people were chicken-loving savages (Williams-Forson 2006, 64). Interestingly, it wasn't until Black folks began navigating their supposed freedoms – applying to schools, looking for paid work, seeking housing – that cartoonish, offensive images of Black folks eagerly consuming chicken or stealing chickens began to appear in essays, comics, advertisements, and postcards, in perpetuating a narrative by white society that Black people and were subhuman and needed to be controlled, policed, and locked out of mainstream opportunities (Gray et al. 2022, 148). Exacerbated by the deep White resentment of Black people's increasing social and political mobility (this period saw the largest representation of Black people in Congress than any time since), the idea took root that being Black meant that you loved fried chicken so much that you couldn't resist it (Gray et al. 2022, 148). The fact that chicken is a utilitarian object makes it a unique device for unpacking the stereotypes that are attached to it (Williams-Forson 2006, 92).

Fried chicken is a Southern food that has imbedded racial complexities as it is one of the foods that is blurred by “symbolic separations of those who prepare the food and those who consume it” (Williams-Forson 2013, 113). Again, as fried chicken is associated with Southern cooking, for many Blacks and Whites this meant that the food was also associated with slavery. Even though most of the enslaved did not have a chance to eat fried chicken often, it became a very powerful signifier for racialized eating (Wallach 2019, 40). The associate between African Americans and fried chicken has persisted and exists in the modern day where African Americans are still often made to be attached to the “Gospel” bird (Harris 2011, 178).

In the article “More than Just the ‘Big Piece of Chicken’: The Power of Race, Class, and Food in American Consciousness” from the book *Food and Culture: A Reader* (2013), Psyche Williams-Forson writes:

Chicken, for example, which was once championed as a celebrated food of the South prepared by some of the best culinary talent turns into an object of ridicule and defacement. Chicken — both the bird

and the food — is fraught then, with paradoxes in the contexts of the historical and economic circumstances of the South. On the one hand, black consumption of chicken was seen as normative; on the other hand, this consumption was also perceived as negative. The issue is made more complex when we read chicken — the food — as a cultural text (Williams-Forson 2013, 113).

In *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America* (2022), Psyche Williams-Forson examines the perpetuation of the stereotype of African Americans and fried chicken in modern day imagery. The author writes:

We saw this issue regarding African American stereotypes around chicken [...] play out further when Barack Obama was first elected president of the United States. Associations of President Obama with chicken were everywhere – on banners and awnings, in store windows. According to the New York Daily News, two fast-food restaurants, one in Brooklyn and another in Harlem, began calling themselves “Obama Fried Chicken.” One restaurant began advertising the “Obama Chicken Lunch Special” for \$6.99 alongside breakfasts that included eggs, grits, turkey bacon, and scrapple. From China to Germany, foods like “Obama-[Chicken]-Fingers” — one German ad read, “Fer-tig gebraten, mit curry dip” (Ready fried, with curry dip) — were suddenly available for purchase. At times these references seemed to have been made in homage to the nation's first African American president. Nonetheless, they caused a great deal of consternation and ire because they reflected a racial stereotype that is very much present, although many want to believe it is in the past. And these restaurants were not alone. Several businesses rebranded themselves in this way without regard for the negative connotations, in an effort to profit off the newly elected U.S. leader. While many of these establishments may have argued against the stereotype, they would have been hard-pressed to explain why this particular dish was named for the nation's first African American president. (Williams-Forson 2022, 81)



Image 2: Packaging of Obama Fingers, circa 2009, Source: The Spokesman  
Review

Psyche Williams-Forson further unpacks how stereotypes persist in the media and other mediums:

A lot of people in the world are unaware of how cultural traditions vary among and between racial and ethnic groups. At the heart of much food shaming and attempts at regulating is a lack of awareness and understanding of cultural differences. For African Americans, popular culture serves as a primary vehicle for flattening this awareness about our culture. Movies, television shows, stand-up comedy, and some music regurgitate images of Black people eating stereotyped foods like fried chicken [...] (Williams-Forson 2022, 99).

Watermelon is another food that is stereotypically linked to African Americans. Watermelons arrived in the continental United States during the seventeenth century from Africa was cultivated in mass as it was adaptable to cooler climates (Harris 2011, 17). The stereotype of Blacks's fondness for watermelon also became prevalent post-Civil War, i.e. during Emancipation and emerged for a specific historic reason and to serve a specific political purpose, reasons were to oppose African American emancipation and economic self-sufficiency.

In the article “How Watermelons Became Black: Emancipation and the Origins of a Racist Trope”, published in the *Journal of the Civil War Era* (2018) William R. Black writes:

White southerners created the racist trope after emancipation in direct response to freedpeople’s actions. Freed people grew watermelons on their own land, ate them to celebrate their freedom, and sold them in the public square; in short, they used watermelons in ways that signified their claims to citizenship. White southerners were threatened by these claims and therefore transformed the fruit into a symbol of black people’s unfitness for citizenship (Black 2018, 65).

Again, depictions of African Americans eating the watermelon, became prevalent specifically through postcards and novelty items that illustrated Blacks as big-lipped, wide-mouthed and watermelon-eating; invoking the trope of Blacks as watermelon-loving “coons”. This trope was also present in sheet music with titles like “Gim Me Dat Sweet Water-melon”, “Melon Time in Dixie Land”, “Dere Aint Gwine to Be No Rine” and “Plant a Watermelon on My Grave and Let the Juice Soak Through”.



Image 3: Postcard depicting a caricatured Black boy eating watermelon, circa 1909  
Source: Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture

Later during the Jim Crow era this troupe re-emerged. It is not surprising that such stereotypes became prevalent again during a time when anti-Black racism was legitimized. Now, in modern days, former President Obama is the source of ridicule in the perpetuation of stereotypes (as stated above). In *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America* (2022), Psyche Williams-Forsson writes:

President Obama was also not spared from the racist stereotypes associating Black people with watermelon. One postcard that began circulating, showed a well-trimmed lawn littered with watermelons. In the background were neatly planted red rosebushes, manicured hedges, a sprinkler, and the White House. Dean Grose, mayor of the small Southern California town Los Alamitos, left his post after calls for resignation abounded following his sending the image via email. Grose apologized, saying he wasn't aware of the racial stereotype that blacks like watermelon (Williams-Forsson 2022, 83).

It is evident then that food has not been spared in visual media and perpetuates messages about African Americans eating chicken and watermelon (Williams-Forsson 2022, 40). And these negative stereotypes are multilayered as they depict Black people as watermelon addicts, chicken thieves, lazy and irresponsible (Lemons 1977, 111). These stereotypes work to reduce Black people, diminish their humanity and perpetuate the notion of Black inferiority, which by doing so advances White supremacy (Williams-Forsson 2022, 32). Many people are apt to buy into these single narratives and beliefs about Black culinary cultures because, absent knowledge to the contrary, these mistruths seem plausible (Williams-Forsson 2022, 37).

Foods habits and behaviors are significant for people individually and collectively as groups (Williams-Forsson 2022, 26). When we consider food from this point of view, then maybe we can understand why people feel as if they have been infringed on when their food is taken away and their food-ways are disrespected, minimized, and ridiculed (Williams-Forsson 2022, 26).

### **3.3. Aunt Jemima on the Pancake Box: From Mammy to Aunt Jemima**

It is not surprising that early advertisements depicted African Americans in demeaning and derogatory manners (Kern-Foxworth 1994, xviii). From the end of the slavery to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, advertising artifacts illustrated Aunt Jemimas

(xviii). Characters such as Aunt Jemima (pancake mix) serve as reminders of the servant positions Blacks have been positioned in for years (xviii). These portrayals serve the same purpose as shackles did during slavery, but instead of enslaving the body, these portrayals imprison the mind (xviii).

Aunt Jemima was first popularized during the 1880s by White vaudeville actors who wore blackface (Tipton-Martin 2015). Created soon after Emancipation, this caricature was made to represent formerly enslaved Black women domestics who were once “mammies”, responsible for chores like cooking, cleaning, and raising children. Aunt Jemima was depicted as a heavysset Black woman who was non-threatening and humorous (Tipton-Martin 2015, xi). She helped to assure mothers that she would take care of the house and specifically the kitchen (Tipton-Martin 2015, xi). Aunt Jemima was a rendition of the Mammy troupe who was an enslaved care giver. Expect this time she was put on bags of pancake flour (Manring 1995, 22).

The physical attributes of the early versions of Aunt Jemima were the opposite of White hegemonic beauty standards (Kern-Foxworth 1994, 87). As previously stated, she was a heavysset Black woman who wore a headscarf and a white apron (Williams-Forsen 2006, 147). Aunt Jemima was also dark skinned and had broad features, she was the opposite of the Barbie beauty standard that was advertised for decades (Kern-Foxworth 1994, 87).

The Aunt Jemima troupe worked because she was indicative of a Black servant and Black servants were not only a part of American history, at the time they were also a part of the American present. She was in perpetual human bondage and her job was to cook good for and facilitate White leisure (Manring 1995, 38). To that end, Aunt Jemima’s cooking skills help to sell the myth that Black women were natural cooks, and therefore they were meant to be cooks (Williams-Forsen 2006, 150). The Aunt Jemima troupe finds Black women’s character being signified on and reduced to labor which was common during this time (Williams-Forsen 2006, 150).



Image 4: Anna Robinson as Aunt Jemima, holding two boxes of Aunt Jemima pancake mix, date unknown, Source: Picturing Black History

### **3.4. Food as Resistance: Feeding and Eating During the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements**

American food became important symbols for the large-scale direct-action protests that emerged during the 1960s. These protests were initially conducted by student protestors at lunch counters throughout the South, as they wanted equal access to foods (Wallach 2019, 156). The protests depended on organized Black communities and leaders who were interested in bringing attention to the inequities that Blacks in the American South faced as well as the need for racial equality nationwide. Students found inspiration in the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks and others who led protests including the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Activists met at restaurants including Paschal's in Atlanta and Dooky Chase in New Orleans, as well as in private homes and also utilized a network of Black churches.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), a loose confederation of churches, community organizations, and Civil Rights groups, was formed, and it started to gain prominence and the support of liberal Whites North and South (Harris 2011, 203). SCLC pushed the movement ahead, but more importantly, it trained Black students on Southern college campuses; these students advanced the movement, but most important, SCLC

provided the next wave of protests (203). Sit-ins began in Greensboro, North Carolina when students from North Carolina's Agricultural and Technical College sat at a Woolworth's lunch counter and requested service. Blacks were able to shop in the store and indeed had worked behind the lunch counter serving food; however, they were not able to sit down to eat at the establishment (203). Again, as Black people were seeking equal access to dining in spaces that served quintessential American foods, there was a particular type of humiliation that developed, one was a reminder of their second-class citizenship (Wallach 2019, 156). Although they waited until closing, the students were not served; but their actions motivated female students from nearby Bennett College to join them the next day. Soon thereafter hundreds of students joined the sit-ins.

In *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America*, Dr. Jessica B. Harris (2011) writes:

The sit-ins galvanized the country, demonstrations were staged in more than one hundred cities in the South and the North, and the lunch counter rapidly became a national symbol of the South's inequalities. The images of the well-dressed college students quietly sitting and the humiliations that they suffered as they remained impassive and dignified transformed the country, and the campaign soon spread nationwide. Blacks and whites in the North and West picketed large chains that had segregated facilities in the South, while in the South sit-ins spread rapidly to Nashville and Atlanta, where the campaign was broadened to include the desegregation of all public facilities as well as equal access to education and employment. (Harris 2011, 203)

It was during this time that department stores like Woolworths and popular restaurants like McDonald's held a greater meaning. These places not only sold cheeseburgers and Coca-Cola, but they were also battlegrounds during a revolution (Wallach 2019, 156). These sit-ins made the reality of Black American life clear to those inside and outside of the United States (Harris 2011, 203).

Activists found allies in Black culinary workers who helped to financially fund the Civil Rights Movement and provided food to sustain those on the front lines. One such culinary worker was Georgia Gilmore, who was a cook and author who embodied nonviolent social change. She and other Black cooks encouraged others to promote non-violence. The work of

activists motivated others to do a simple but meaningful task: cook (Tipton-Martin 2015, 67). Furthermore, their efforts expanded to include community cultural work in the domains of education, financial literacy and ownership. Therefore, Black culinary workers too were activists. While their work was situated in the kitchen, they too were up against fire hoses, ferocious dogs, bombs, police brutality, discrimination, prejudice, racism and White supremacist hate crimes. But they persisted, by cooking food for clandestine meetings, teaching others food safety and preservation and other actions. They promoted equality and democracy, celebrated culinary skill and expressed a humanitarian spirit by giving whatever they could to advance the movement (Tipton-Martin 2015, 67).

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, African Americans throughout the United States were redefining what it meant to be Black by claiming a particular social, cultural, and political identity that directly invoked their collective African roots (Williams-Forsen 2022, 123). It was also a time when strong Black ideologies were being espoused by many groups, but perhaps most visible were the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Black Panther Party (BPP) (Williams-Forsen 2022, 123). For the younger generations, the Civil Rights Movement was soon eclipsed by the Black Power movement as there was a growing pride in all things Black and in the people and the culture that had survived and outlived slavery.

Founded in 1966 in Oakland, California, the Black Panther Party for Self Defense was the arguably the most influential Black militant organization of the time (Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture 2020). Founding members included Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver and Bay Area community members. The Black Panther Party's primary focus was human rights. Contrary to popular beliefs and misrepresentations, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale developed the objective of the BPP early on when they created the organization. The goal was to "promote the achievement of all our human rights" (Meredith 2016, 8). For the BPP human rights were economic but also social and sought to address the discrepancies in housing, education, healthcare and unemployment (8).

One of the fundamental and most impactful programs that the BPP created was the free breakfast program. The program began January 1969 in West Oakland, California. The

breakfast program developed beginning with a few churches that opened their doors, to community centers, and even folk's homes (Gray et al. 2022, 203). The Panthers, along with people in the community, would get up at two or three in the morning and fix breakfast for the kids before they went to school (203). Of the many initiatives that were launched the Panther free breakfast and later free food programs spoke to an organizational commitment to Black neighborhoods where poverty and hunger were rife and worked to maintain a Black underclass (Potorti 2017, 86). In this way, the Panther food programs were sites that served dual functions; to feed the practical needs of the people and to promote the political ideology of the Party (86). Therefore, Black Panther Party food programs empowered Black Americans physically and politically (86).



Image 5: Black children at the Black Panther Party's Free Food Program, circa 1972

Source: Smithsonian National Museum of African American History & Culture

## **4. Soul Food: An African – American Culinary Identity**

### **4.1. The Origins of “Soul”**

Beginning in the nineteenth century, African American preachers often used the term “soul food” to refer to faith and the term was attached to spirituality through and tenets like prayer or religious instruction (Wallach 2019, 162). This ideology coincided with the midpoint of the

Civil Rights Movement of the early 1960s when uplifting religious practices were most closely associated with “soul”. During that time, “soul” was part and parcel of many forms of Black cultural expression and was often employed to designate in the words of William L. Van Deburg, the “essence of the separate black culture” and “in-group cultural cachet” (Wallach 2019, 162).

Nevertheless, it is possible to find traces of the the history of the idea of “soul food” at least a century before the concept was popularized (Wallach 2019, 145). As explained by Wallach soon after “the Civil War, African American food writers began looking for ways to define their relationship to southern food traditions” (Wallach 2019, 145).

In *High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America (2011)*, Jessica B. Harris writes:

The word “soul” was at first used among blacks to establish a cultural community, as in “soul brother” and “soul sister”. It was initially used to denote kinship in the struggle, in much the same way as the terms “brother” and “sister” had been honorifics in the black church for generations. However, as with many other African American cultural innovations, the term was rapidly coopted by the mainstream, and soon there were soul combs on the market along with soul T-shirts, soul hairdos, soul handshakes, and certainly soul music. The term “soul food” harks back to this era, when everything that was black and of the moment had soul, and the word's use signaled a change in attitude toward the food of the African American South. (Harris 2011, 207)

The phrase soul food first began appearing in Black press in the early 1960s, in quotation marks, as a descriptor for Southern foods that were prepared and eaten by Black Americans. In this context soul food was used to denote actual foodstuffs that fed the body and soul. Soul food was a set of foods that were believed to spiritually connect the cook, the eat, and the Black community to African and African American culinary culture and history (Wallach 2019, 162). Food therefore became a space whereby cultural nation building took place and soul food was a distinct Black cultural creation as it was a unifying cuisine (162). Soul food was an amalgamation, a hybrid cuisine and genre that drew upon Southern traditions and new culinary ideas (136).

Soul food as a concept is meaningful, metaphorical and symbolic. Soul food exhibits pride in the ancestors and longing (Harris 2011, 208). For many African Americans born before the 1960s food was not just food but instead it was Black cultural production and a source of great pride (Wallach 2019, 138). It was during this time that the history of African Americans began to be rewritten and detached from enslavement and disenfranchisement; soul food became a mantra for living as much as a diet (Harris 2011, 208). Soul food was a cultural product with a deep historical lineage (Mitchell 2009, 19).

By the mid-1960s, many Black activists began to realize that the promises of the Civil Rights Movement were not being realized fast enough. Some began to think that maybe their food culture was uniquely Black and not so American after all (Wallach 2019, 145). The popularity “soul food” was in tandem with these disappointments (137). Some Black culinary nationalists sought separation from what had become traditional American fare and to that end, a national American identity. These black culinary nationalists began to revive, invent and adopt new ideas about ways of eating that were not connected to American identity (11). Food reformers celebrated eating foods that were based in plantation staples or foods that the enslaved once ate. These foods were the backbone of a Southern diet (145). Again, rejecting foods and food practices that were clearly American was one way that African Americans could also reject the flawed promises of equality. Soul food became its own racialized culinary identity (11). The Soul Food period (1950s – present) therefore illustrates how traditional Southern food converged with racial politics (Miller 2013, 7). Soul food was an assertion of African Americans humanity (9).

Many believed that it was marginalization that led to the creation and preservation of a distinctive Black culture. The same energy of the Civil Rights demonstrations that was channeled into the arts like music, literature and fashion, was also channeled into food (Wallach 2019, 162). “Soul” became synonymous with Black dignity and pride (Tipton-Martin 2015, 79). It went together with the desire to learn more about previous Black experiences and create new Black experiences. It also helped to create a feeling of solidarity among Black people (Harris 2011, 207). Therefore, soul food was an appropriate symbol for Black cultural revolution (Mitchell 2009, 19).

Soul food gave a name to a culinary tradition that existed before. Soul food was African American heritage cooking. African American heritage cooking sees a throughline between Africa and America and therefore notes the history of Blacks in America (Mitchell 2009, 1). Author Masco Young once wrote in the *Cleveland Call and Post* “we’ve been eating soul food all our lives. It’s just that the other folks just now catching on to how good this jive is.” Soul food was linked to Black culinary tradition and dishes that originated in the South (Wallach 2019, 162). Soul foods included stewed chicken, fried chicken, rice, gravy, collard greens, turnip greens, ham hocks, black-eyed peas, pork chops, chitterlings, catfish, cornbread, sweet potatoes, and many others (as referenced in the image below). These were “down home” comfort foods that were familiar to Black Americans and were often on the table for dinner.



Image 6: Traditional soul food meal consisting of fried chicken, collard greens, candied yams, cornbread muffins, fried catfish, okra, corn and tomatoes

Source: Laist.com, February 2023

In *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (2015), food journalist and author Toni Tipton-Martin highlights the work of author Bob Jeffries who wrote:

Like jazz, [soul food] was created in the South by American Negroes, [...] the word soul, when applied to food, means only those foods that Negroes grew up eating in their own homes; food that was cooked with care and love - with soul - by and for themselves, their families,

and friends. This, of course, included [...] dishes such as Deep-Fried Chicken, Spareribs, and Country Ham, but it was also much more. (Tipton-Martin 2015, 80)

While there is a throughline between Africa, enslaved Black cooks and the invention of soul food, some culinary historians often make the distinction that the culinary identity was not brought over on ships from Africa and instead developed on American soil and therefore is positioned in an American context. The food celebrated as Southern soul food was part of the culinary heritage of the descendants of enslaved Africans living in the United States (Wallach 2019, 173).

Toni Tipton-Martin highlights the work of Eugene Walter, a native of the American South (Mobile, Alabama) who attempts to explain the cuisine's relationship to enslaved Africans and the American South. Tipton-Martin writes:

[Soul food] was not brought over from Africa, but Africans had contributed their ingenuity and resourcefulness, turning "un-promising" foods that were available to them into a highly distinctive cuisine; was created by women who earned high praise for their artistry in plantation records; includes pork in all its ramifications, chicken fried in every way and everything on earth that can be made with cornmeal; encompasses catfish, black-eyed peas, beans, sweet potatoes and a wide variety of greens, as well as molasses and the spices originally brought over from Africa; and also includes the magic potion known as "pot likker," the rich, nourishing liquid that remains after the greens and a slab of pork have been cooked together. (Tipton Martin 2015, 81)

While soul food was typically defined as traditional African American food of the South, it transcended ingredients and dishes. There was often memory and a magical quality around these foods which made it hard to define exactly what soul food was difficult (Mitchell 2009, 19). The earliest attempts to define soul food found African Americans trying to connect the term to dishes, recipes and ingredients (Wallach 2019, 166). But soul food could not be described only in words or recipes that were rooted in Southern heritage cooking, as stated above there was a hard to describe quality to these foods (Wallach 2019, 169). For example, some believed that a certain lived experience allowed one the ability to cook soul food (169).

Which would mean that soul food was a metaphor for the experience of being Black in America (169).

To that end, soul food and “soul cooking” were often attributed to the cook. And the practices inside the soul kitchen could be defined either narrowly to refer to southern cooking or broadly to include nearly anything prepared or eaten by a “soul person” (Wallach 2019, 169). Actual material food was significant, but specific ingredients and techniques did not themselves create “soul” (169). The primary marker of authenticity inevitably became the racial identity of the cook or the eater, or both (169).

African Americans also had a desire to connect soul food directly to the foods of the African continent or to the foods of the African diaspora at large. Cultural nationalists thought of people of the African Diaspora as members of a borderless nation with shared cultural connections (Wallach 2019, 173). These culinary nationalists wished to create and advance a cultural citizenry that extended beyond the United States and was rooted in a shared food culture rather than one that was confined geographically the American South (Wallach 2019, 173). Helen Mendes, author of the pioneering *African Heritage Cookbook* (1971), proclaimed, “soul food unites African Americans not only to their people's history, but with their contemporary Black brothers and sisters around the world” (Mendes quoted in Wallach 2019, 173).

In *Vibration Cooking: Or the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* (1970), Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor shares an anecdote of a chance meeting with a Senegalese woman in a Parisian market where they exchange recipes. Smart-Grosvenor was surprised to find similarities in the shared recipes and inspired to learn more about the African antecedents of dishes she was familiar with like sweet potato pie. African Americans often found that shared culinary traditions were transnational and global rather than fixed to one location.

Some African Americans continued to seek connections to the African Diaspora through food and focused their efforts on creating a type of soul food that had more African rather than American leanings. It can then be said that Black nationalists who ate African influenced soul food were participants in the cultural construction (Wallach 2019, 173). For Black food

radicals, the invention of a Diasporic food tradition served to meet the needs of disassociating from slavery and connecting to Black people around the world (173). The concept of Diasporic soul food could help fulfill the ideological need of a universal Black identity (173).

#### **4.2. Differing Perspectives on Soul Food**

As soul food had its roots on the plantation, there were differing opinions as to whether this culinary genre was an appropriate marker of African American identity. And the divide was most evident between working and middle class African American communities. Soul food was perceived as poverty cuisine of the formerly enslaved in the rural South. As a result, soul food became a signifier for “slumming it,” which illustrated the chasm between Black American middle and lower classes (Tipton-Martin 2015, 80).

Within African American culture there are many differing and competing discourses about soul food (Williams-Forson 2022, 76). These discourses span from social and political positions that simplify soul food as enslaver versus enslaved or even bourgeoisie versus ghettoite (76).

In *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America* (2022), Psyche A. Williams-Forson, unpacks the idea of “gastronomic surveillance” which is a type of food policing and food shaming by most often acted out by those outside of the cultural group or but is also evident intra-culturally. She writes:

There are multipronged issues related to food shaming and food policing, or what Vivian Halloran calls “gastronomic surveillance”. For Halloran, gastronomic surveillance refers to “the observation and policing of a person's eating habits to ensure conformity with an assumed norm”. Most often, this regulating and surveilling - by other groups and even within a group - is frequently undergirded by xenophobia, racism, socioeconomic bias, and other prejudices. (Williams-Forson 2022, 8)

For many African Americans food reformers, the table was a metaphorical space, and a communal setting by which differences about race were not discussed and soul food was

inherently about race. It was hard for some “respectable” Black eaters to unpack soul food and its relationship to slavery (Wallach 2019, 101). These folks were more interested in an inclusive American cuisine rather than a cohesive racial heritage cuisine (169). For this group, food expression was a means by which they demonstrated physiological equality to White by refuting stereotypical ideas about a Black diet (169).

Then there were those who enjoyed the diet that the enslaved once ate (Harris 2011, 208). These were mostly African American who were a part of the Great Migration and had Southern roots who were of the working class (Wallach 2019, 101). Some Southern migrants were focused on keeping regional food preferences as it worked to remind them of their Southern heritage (151). As members of this group ate foods that were deemed undesirable like offals and other meat scraps, they directly confronted ideas about proper food behavior (151).

There were also African Americans who believed that identification with soul food often dismissed the variation in Black culinary traditions. As Adrian Miller points out, “early soul food boosters glossed over the rich and varied culinary traditions within the black community” (Wallach 2019, 169). Chef, teacher and author Edna Lewis subscribed to this perspective as well. Historian Jennifer Jensen Wallach writes:

Lewis was a proponent of what she regarded as the living custom of southern food, regarding soul food as “hard-times in Harlem—not true Southern food.” Instead, Lewis emphasized the diversity of the cuisine of her southern childhood, saying, “We ate bountiful foods—vegetables, fruits, grains, beans, and more fish than meat.” For Lewis, soul food constituted a limited and static rendition of the southern food of her childhood [...] (Wallach 2019, 166)

Lewis’s belief resonated with others who believed that soul food did not include country cooking from farm folk who made dishes that based on fresh fruits and vegetables and milk from the family cow. Lewis’s assertion, to some extent, correlates to a popular argument many have made about soul food – that it is not nutritious. This argument is hard to counter and unpack (Miller 2013, 2). Soul food often makes one think of foods that are excessive, excessively fried or excessively sweet (2). But soul foods are actually quite nutritious (98). What is absent from these arguments is consideration of the larger American diet that is

affected not only by food but also cultural, social, emotion and physical well-being, and how these factors greatly affect Black people as they are often facing various level of disenfranchisement (Williams Forson 2014, 70).

While soul food proponents had a sense of cultural pride in their cuisine, viewed as a symbol of survival, detractors continued to connect it to foods of the enslaved and unhealthy eating habits (Wallach 2019, 142). The Nation of Islam (NOI), a religious and political organization that was formed in 1930 and gained prominence in the 1960s under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, also questioned the impact of soul food and the diet and health of African Americans and even disparaged it. Muhammad greatly opposed the traditional African American diet, or “slave diet,” as he called it (Harris 2011, 210). In *High on the Hog: How African American Cuisine Transformed America* (2011), Jessica B. Harris writes:

Elijah Muhammad enjoined his followers: Do not eat the swine—do not even touch it. Just stop eating the swine flesh and your life will be expanded. Stay off that grandmother's old fashioned corn bread and black-eyed peas, and those quick 15 minute biscuits made with baking powder. Put yeast in your bread and let it sour and rise and then bake it. Eat and drink to live not to die. (Harris 2011, 210)

Muhammad published the books - *How to Eat to Live* (1967) and *How to Eat to Live, Book 2* (1972) where he continued to emphasize the harmful effects of what had become traditional African American diets. The refusal of the traditional African American diet was also an acknowledgment of its cultural resonance, even if the foods were rooted in slavery (Harris 2011, 210).

To that end, seeing that the Nation of Islam had connections to the Islamic faith, even though pork was one of the few and healthiest proteins that African Americans once had access to, it was forbidden among NOI members. Pork was core to the soul food diet therefore the refusal of such differentiated members of the NOI from other African Americans (Harris 2011, 211). The ideas that the Nation of Islam espoused a shift in what was a traditional African American diet and denoted a compounded personal identification with religion and the role particular diet played in creating food taboos. Foods consistently and across time have been wielded as symbols of shame and therefore a means of controlling some social behaviors and consumption habits of African Americans (Williams-Forson 2022, 47). These shifts note ideas

about what is pure and impure and therefore how people should or should not interact with certain foods (47).

#### **4.3. “What’s in a Name?”: Southern Versus Soul**

Food was one of the many factors by which Whites attempted to maintain their way of life (Williams-Forsen 2013, 113). This was evident as early as the end of the Civil War when Southern Whites began to redefine their heritage (arguably due to their defeat in this war). The “Lost Cause,” or Southern White elite's efforts oddly enough was focused on food (Williams Forsen 2006, 169). As previously mentioned, White mistresses often stole recipes from enslaved Black cooks, and by doing such cooking and cuisine were made to be Southern, with Southern being a euphemism for White and devoid of any African or African American influence. In an attempt to promote Southern White culture and exclude African Americans from Southern culinary heritage, the concept of “Southern cooking” started out as “Whites Only Cuisine” (169).

The emergence of soul food saw many White Southerners distancing themselves from the culinary genre.: “For them, regional home-style southern cooking was more desirable than ghettoized soul foods and new southern cuisine was more sophisticated” (Tipton-Martin 2015, 159). The idea of a Southern cooking hierarchy reinforces the notion that soul food is “the lowest rung of cuisine, and therefore anyone who prepares it [...] operates in the menial category of cooking” (Spivey 2022, 23).

In the food memoir *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American History in the Old South* (2017), culinary historian, educator and performer Michael W. Twitty writes:

Soul Food (or “African American heritage cooking) and its umbrella cuisine, Southern food, are the most remarked and most maligned of any regional or indigenous ethnic tradition in the United States. The connection between and heritage of both Southern and soul cuisines is hotly debated and arouses old racial stereotypes, prejudices, and cultural attitudes and intercultural misunderstandings. It’s an easy metaphor for the “two” Souths—one black, one white—intertwined and complicated. (Twitty 2017, 6)

The idea of Southern food having exclusively White contributions is faulty, as Black cooks were part and parcel of the creation of Southern cuisine. Black cooks helped to develop Southern cuisine as they were first enslaved and worked in kitchens, and later railroad carts and boats. And through their cooking they developed techniques and flavor, and they called it great Southern food (Spivey 2022, 256). They truly produced the only regional cuisine in this country (256). Furthermore, there are notable and popular Southern foods like Louisiana gumbo that are antecedents of African cuisine. While gumbo has become a symbol of Cajun and Creole cuisines, as previously stated gumbo's base is African okra.

In *At the Table of Power: Food and Cuisine in the African American Struggle for Freedom, Justice, and Equality* (2022), Diane M. Spivey unpacks White American denial of African contributions, she writes:

White America has constantly denied ever having learned anything of value from Africans, whether Africans were in front of the stove, in the fields, or in the classroom. Africanisms, or African cultural retention and continuity, can be observed in, and permeate, not only African America's culture but White America's as well by virtue of the black hand in virtually every aspect of American culture (Spivey 2022, 256).

Spivey goes on to highlight the work of Melville Herskovits and the 1935 article "What Has Africa Given America?". She writes:

He [Melville Herskovits] concludes that Africanisms are present in many aspects of life of the White population of this country, particularly in American music, speech, manners, religious expression, and certainly cooking. Regarding the African contribution to the cuisine of the South, Herskovits states, "it may be objected that there is no such thing as a Southern cuisine," because, he continues, "it must nevertheless be realized that the cuisine of Richmond is no more merely a modification and adaptation of that of England than the dishes served at New Orleans are those of France". The examples presented in this treatise leave no doubt as to the extent to which the cultural elements of descendants of Africans brought to the Americas - North America, South America, Central America, and the Caribbean - have retained Africanisms varying in intensity. Nor there any doubt regarding the dependence of White America's rich and powerful, and of America in general, on the cooking and cuisine of Black cooks. (Spivey 2022, 256)

Despite efforts to separate African Americans from Southern cuisine, the Black hand was always in the pot. It was the Black hand that made the pot, carried the pot, emptied the pot, filled, cooked and served from the pot in the first and last place (Spivey 2022, 256). By the 1980s American food writers began to write about Southern food as modernized fare. In *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (2015), Toni Tipton-Martin highlights a 1985 Cook's Magazine article, by food editor Anne Byrn Phillips, who wrote:

The cookery of the South has become lighter, fresher, and more colorful while holding fast to many of its traditional roots. Frying remains the only acceptable way for Southerners to cook crab cakes or chicken, but other dishes are often broiled, grilled, or even stir fried. We're blanching quickly, not boiling forever, and shifting from fatback to fresh herbs. We are relying as always on native ingredients - oysters of Apalachicola and Bon Secour bays, shad roe from the Ogeechee River, quail of South Carolina, and Vidalia onions from southeast Georgia - to accompany those new creations. But we're using less lard, butter, and oil, less of the salty, smoky ham for which Virginia and Kentucky are famous, more lemon juice and herbs. (Tipton-Martin 2015, 159)

Typically, these types of articles would implicitly differentiate Southern food from soul food by opposing methods, techniques, or ingredients that were often found in the latter. Other articles would discount African American contributions to Southern food as a whole by characterizing Southern cuisine as “an amalgam of French cooking, of Italian cooking, and gleaned from a hundred sources and blended with our current affection for American regional food” (Tipton-Martin 2015, 159). In these types of articles, the concept of a master narrative was ever present. This concept is based on the assertion that all history (culinary history included) has typically been the story of conquerors. The culinary master narrative boldly continues to uphold that anything attributed to Africans had to have started with, or was improved upon, by Europeans (Spivey 2022, 256). The culinary master narrative also adopts a dissociative and therefore hegemonic agenda and underscores the positions of some food writers, authors, critics and historians as it relates to Southern food, soul food, African and African American contributions. The agenda of writers on the subject does truly represent “colonial objectives” and a colonial mentality that “serves to falsely justify the right of colonial powers to dominate historical accounts” (256). A “sophisticated system of control over African culinary traditions is thereby created that serves the political, economic, and

ideological objectives” of those who have decided that they oversee all culinary history, especially African/African American. (256).

In disassociating soul food from Southern food, the White authority also continued to perpetuate stereotypes of African American contributions to the Southern culinary genre as minimal and designated to foods like fried chicken, black-eyed peas, watermelon and sweet potatoes. This mindset articulated that the only type of food that Blacks had knowledge of and the ability to cook was soul food – another farse. Pigeonholing Black folks in to only soul food cuisine means that African American contributions have never been validated as they have been responsible for many types of culinary creations (Spivey 2022, 23).

However much the White authority has attempted to rewrite culinary history and perpetuate a culinary master narrative, soul food and Southern cuisine are inextricably linked as they are rooted in the subjugation of Black bodies and Black servitude. Aspects of so-called soul food may have been conceived in the economics of survival, using resourcefulness and ingenuity to extract the maximum from what was available; however, “Southern Cuisine” is what Black cooks and chefs in the American South created for themselves and everybody else (Spivey 2022, 23). Both are the products of African culinary cultural methods (23).

#### **4.4. Post Black Expression and the Culinary Contemporary**

Soul food and Black American food at large have shifted and for many chefs, culinary artists, culinary historians, etc., they are now positioned as a part of “post Black” expression. The term post Black has been used to characterize the experiences of a generation of African Americans who were born after the Civil Rights era. This generation is marked by the distance from its Civil Rights antecessors even though they have materially and socially benefited from the work of activists (Ahad 2016, 6). However, the most distinguishable factor about this generation is its desire to live outside the “racial box” so to speak and its expectations (6). Post Black artists (including culinary artists and chefs) are adamant about not being labeled as African American artists, as the goal of their works is to redefine complex notions of Blackness. In fact, they desire that concepts like intersectionality and multiculturalism mark them (6). The “post” in this instance of post Black therefore is not

indicative of transcendence but rather distancing from the historical baggage of race (12). Soul food is also part of a change in identity in the Black community and therefore it too relates to the concept of post-Blackness (Miller 2013, 263).

During the 1980s food writers began to write about what they called fusion cuisines which were an admixture of various cuisines from various places. And with that, Black cooks were free of the baggage that came with soul food. The pull of fusion cuisines and a more diverse cooking scene new and improved cooking techniques to image. Soul food too was innovated and improved and began to emphasize health and new ingredients (Tipton-Martin 2015, 109). Soon, fusion cuisine a commingling and cultural blending that combined European and African techniques with ingredients Indigenous to the Americans came to prominence.

In *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (2015), Toni Tipton-Martin highlights a 1993 New York Times article that focused on the role of African Americans in fusion cuisine. She writes:

In a 1993 report, the New York Times food columnist Florence Fabricant observed the sophistication of African American fusion cooking. From interviews with black head chefs at fine restaurants in San Francisco, New York, and Washington, D.C., she determined that blacks were ascending to the top ranks of restaurants in non-racialized kitchens and were cooking culturally neutral food. Black cooks were still preparing the soul food and barbecue that epitomize cultural-heritage cooking, she wrote. Black chefs took cues from heritage cooking and from classical French dishes and techniques, such as blancmange and making good stock. “For hundreds of years there have been black cooks in America. Now there are also black chefs. In the past few years, more blacks have begun achieving prominence and recognition as professionals in fine restaurants, diversifying a field that was once almost exclusively white, male and, in the most prestigious restaurants, European,” she observed. “At the same time, this generation of chefs is also turning out food that tends to be colorblind”. (Tipton-Martin 2015, 220)

As awareness continues to increase among African American food artists on the multiplicity of their identities, Black food is transforming. Through an elastic construction of racial, ethnic, and cultural subjectivities, Black food artists exist in spaces in which they have greater agency in self-defining and self-identifying with an expanded version of Black food. And the skills and techniques they employ solidify their multicultural and inclusive perspectives.

Through multicultural sensibilities, chefs of the modern-day emphasize flavor. “Flavor” appears as something more local and distinctive, especially when contrasted with “taste,” (Ahad 2016, 11). Allen Weiss describes taste as the “sense by which we distinguish flavors; the discriminative activity according to which an individual likes or dislikes certain sensations; the sublimation of such value judgments as they pertain to art, and ultimately to all experience; and, by extension and ellipsis, taste implies good taste and style, established by means of an intuitive faculty of judgment” (11). This is a smart choice as flavor allows for creolization and exploration. By not accenting taste, Black chefs disassociate from categorizing their food and therefore disassociate with aligning it to either high or low culture. The present climate allows for fresh and innovative approaches to appeal to new audiences and to fashion a breadth of progressive culinary sensibilities. And doing so reflects alternative formulations of Black subjectivity that are not defined by region or geography.

From Black foodways, Black culinary experiences and Black food work has become more vast and more expansive (Terry 2021, 144). And this genius is found in many forms. Whether through the work of Ghetto Gastro, a New York-based culinary collective that fuses and experiments with food, fashion, music, art, and design, or the honest food critiques of social media influencer Keith Lee. They (and many others) are contributing to and creating Black food futures in the contemporary.

The Bronx, New York-based culinary collective Ghetto Gastro defines themselves as “storytellers, food enthusiasts, vibe curators, activists, artists, historians, entrepreneurs and everything in between the lines” (Ghetto Gastro n.d.). Ghetto Gastro’s work as multidisciplinary artists with food as their medium bridges the Black Power Movement and the Black Panther Party of the 1970’s to the contemporary. Through their experimental and experiential meals, events and products they champion race, identity, community building and financial empowerment. And while the word “ghetto” often has negative or even pejorative connotations for them it means innovation; the word is a reminder of why they do what they do, and who they do it for, which are underrepresented and marginalized Black and Brown communities. In many Black and Brown neighborhoods food is a reminder of class and status; for some it denotes what they cannot have due money or access (Gray, Serrao, and Walker

2022, 13). Food is weaponized against people in the ghetto when they only have foods that are unhealthy available to them (13). Ghetto isn't just about struggle and disenfranchisement even though it is often perpetuated as such (13). In one of their most recent works, the cookbook and manifesto *Ghetto Gastro Presents Black Power Kitchen* (2022), they use immersive storytelling and striking images to provoke larger conversations about race, history and food equality and position food as a tool for self-empowerment. The book weaves through recipes and anecdotes that connect the Black American experience to Africa and the Caribbean and links foods like sorrel, dasheen, yam, sweet potato, and others to the Diaspora. One recipe finds the national dish of Trinidad and Tobago, callaloo, fused with crab, okra, pumpkin, peppers and shallots. In *Ghetto Gastro Presents: Black Power Kitchen* (2022), the collective does cultural work that reflects Black history, Black contemporary and Black food futures (Gray, Serrao, and Walker 2022 8).



Image 7: Ghetto Gastro Collective, February 2023

Source: Variety.com (Variety Magazine)

Food influencer Keith Lee has helped to redefine and reimagine food critiques in the digital age. Through his video content, Lee reviews meals at mom-and-pop restaurants throughout the United States. He visits restaurants often unannounced and spontaneously as his objective is to eat unpretentiously without adding pressure to the restauranteurs. And this honest approach, in part, has helped him amass upward of 16 million TikTok followers. Lee takes a

soft approach and is kind in his critiques (Jones 2024). His viral food reviews exemplify community, and the democratization of the food space (CBS Mornings 2024). Lee himself describes what has been dubbed “the Keith Lee” effect as “a catalyst, a spotlight for those places that don’t have the spotlight, it’s a marketing platform for absolutely free” (CBS YouTube 2024). Lee does not have previous experience as a food writer, chef or culinary artist, he was previously a professional mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter, and it is this lack of traditional experience along with the catchphrase “I got it, let’s try it, and rate it one through ten” that adds to his credibility as the “everyman voice” of food TikTok or FoodTok. In an interview with CBS News, Lee was asked “what makes his videos so different?” To that he answered: “expanding the horizons of the locals and the businesses that have great food and great customer service [...] that’s my biggest objective” (CBS Chicago, YouTube 2024). Lee has not ascended the ladder of established national food writers, nor does he review Michelin-star, fine dining restaurants, instead, he focuses on under-publicized Black and Brown owned or operated eateries. Lee’s reviews have helped to mobilize communities and neighborhoods by motivating eaters to try places nearby that they haven’t before (Jones 2024). As a Black food influencer, Keith Lee’s take on modern eating and foodie-ism cuts through the noise and incites positivity and Black boy joy at a time when anyone with a smartphone and a social media app can post their perspective.

## **Section II: (Re)Storing and (Re)Storying African Diaspora Food Memories**

### **Chapter 1. Food, Identities and Memory**

#### **1.1. Food, Identity and Nationhood**

Food habits are one of the markers of cultural identity that are rarely disposed of (Williams-Forsson 2014, 71). Food, just like other culturally defined materials works to solidify group membership through inclusion and set groups apart through exclusion (Mintz and Dubois 2002, 109). Food therefore serves as a marker, and food is often a factor in determining whether one is included or excluded.

Individual food choice relates to the many layers of identity which are situated in physical and social environments (Burt 2022). Our identities are developed through many means of

information that are received consciously and subconsciously (Burt 2022). To that end, there are two types of information that shape personal identity; implicit information and explicit information. Implicit information stems from internal information sources including assumptions, biases, values and personality traits, while implicit external information takes shape through social norms, policies, practices and messages received through the media. To that end, explicit information is formed through internal information sources including choices and conscious thinking, while explicit external information stems from familial norms, news information and research findings.

Identity formation then is the process of understanding oneself as well as others in the larger collective (Dusselier 2009, 334). Therefore, identity is also concerned with the ways that people imagine and create groups and to that end, groups belonging (Bennett, Grossberg and Morris 2005, 173). In the case of collective identity, unity is the basis for foundation for group, as is continuity (173). The group is created by homogeneity and acts as a community of shared substance where diversity may create internal fractures; most of the prevailing images of collective identity can be attributed to family and nationality (173). Through collective identity groups maintain their culture and characters through shared heritage, traditions, values and memories and even through character and personality (173).

With that said, “cultural identity” is rooted in “one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self,’ hiding inside of the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history, and ancestry hold in common” (Hall 2000, 22). Following this definition, “cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes that provide us as “one people”, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning (22). Cultural identity in another sense is also related to “becoming” and “being (23).

Many believe that African American identity is shaped by African American society, culture, and religion (Appiah 1994, 125). “It is dialogue with these black others that shapes the black self; it is from these black contexts that the concepts through which African Americans shape themselves are derived” (125). But African American identity is also shaped by the outside American society and institutions, therefore African Americans cannot solely construct their

own identities (96). This because African American culture cannot be understood without reference to the larger American racial identities that it exists in (96).

As previously stated, food is one way by which people assert their identity. The multitude of layers of identities give unique meaning to food in particular and help to create a collective food culture (Burt 2022). Food, therefore, clearly permeates people's lives and how people position themselves and others and serves a function as more than nourishment (Albala 2015, 823). It is appropriate then that food traditions, choices and preferences are tied to identity (823). And for cultures by which food is a major source of identity, certain ingredients and dishes have become signifiers for group membership (823).

For African Americans food has acted as a means to explore national, diaspora, and personal identity. Part and parcel of the African American experience exists in tension with a national American identity. Although full national and citizen rights have been given to African Americans through the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, they also have had to confront the historical experiences that they have had in America and have realized that certain “inalienable rights” are reserved for a group that they are racially exclude from (Wallach 2019, 11). Faced with this paradox, African Americans have had to shift their ideas on national identification and their place as Africans in America.

In lieu of national identity, food also acts as a means for constructing racial identity. The creation of soul food as a culinary genre is one way in which African Americans have been able to assert a racialized culinary identity. Therefore, soul food through its embedded meanings mirrors the journey of Africans in America and particularly highlights their identity and its articulation, i.e. Blackness in America. Situations of everyday life reinforce the terms of shared experience that is Blackness, and this therefore creates a sense of solidarity among those who identify as or are identified as Black (Mercer 1987, 47).

In the *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (2015), author Michelle M. Wright, states the following:

The only way to produce a definition of Blackness that is wholly inclusive and nonhierarchical is to understand Blackness as the

intersection of constructs that locate the Black collective in history and in the specific moment in which Blackness is being imagined—the “now” through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated. (Wright 2015, 14)

As the existence of Africans in America (and especially in the United States) are rooted in the labor the source of Blacks in America was enslavement which has played a crucial role in shaping their cultural and social history, as well as American history at large (Okpewho 1999, xiii). Some believe that Black culture has largely influenced *American* culture in U.S. and Black presence cannot be separated from the American experience (Okpewho 1999, xiii). As Blackness in America has its foundation in chattel slavery; it is situated in this context and has persisted through shared experiences linked to Jim Crow laws, segregation, discrimination, disenfranchisement, racism, inequality, and inadequate access to public resources like education and healthcare. For example, opportunities for upward mobility are determined by one’s ranking on the racial scale and for African Americans even if they have wealth, education, and other forms of class status, they cannot mutate the less easily changeable elements of Blackness (Mercer 1987, 36). The outcome then is a paradox by which Blackness appears as a disqualification from membership in the national community that is America (Gilroy 1990, 114).

There is an opportunity to unpack the facticity of Blackness, i.e., how certain groups became Black, and through which means (Weheliye 2014, 6). In *The Fateful Triangle* (2017), Jamaican British sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall defines Black as a political and sliding signifier, he writes:

“Black” was a political signifier because its narrative of identification suggested that the similarity that unified these groups who took it on as a “badge”, as Du Bois would put it - who identified with it as a signifier of the experience of racial oppression and exclusion on the basis of color, and who expressed their political opposition to marginalization on the grounds of race - was greater than the difference that tended to divide them, whether morphology, language, history, custom, or religion. (Hall 2017, 96)

People of African descent have been identified and identified themselves in many ways over the course of American history (Mitchell 2009, xiv). “Black”, “African”, “African

descendant” and “of African heritage” are just some of the ways Africans and Africans of the Diaspora describe themselves (Falola and Hoyer 2017, i). Following the badge of color, from “African” to “Negro” to “Colored Race” to “Black” to “Afro-American” to “African American” traces the history not only of a signifier, a label, but also a history of its effects (Appiah 1994, 104). As previously above, these effects are connected to chattel slavery, Jim Crow laws, segregation, discrimination, disenfranchisement and racism. Nevertheless, African Americans, Black Americans, Africans in America and others of the African Diaspora, or of African descent most often identify or are identified as Black in the United States. Black conveys a scale of ethnic and international diversity embodied by people of dark complexions in the United States (Mitchell 2009, xv). People with different with different socioeconomic, religious, educational, and political backgrounds, and from different countries of nationality can be described as Black Americans (Mitchell 2009, xiii).

As previously stated, African American heritage cooking illustrates the historical trajectory of Blacks in America (Mitchell 2009, 1). Soul food was created as a cultural product, and it is symbolic of a deep historical lineage (19). The African American culinary identity of traditional heritage foods and even contemporary captures the story of Blacks in America (1). Soul food, therefore, acts as a mediator of African American nationhood, identity and race. To that end, soul food connects American history to the African continent, and the African Diaspora.

## **1.2. Food, the African Diaspora and Black America**

According to Stuart Hall, “Diasporas are composed of cultural formations which cut across and interrupt the settled contours of race, *ethnos* and nation” (Hall 2017, 172). Diasporas are made up of many histories, cultures, and narratives, do not belong to just one home (Hall 2017, 172). This would then mean that to be a part of a Diaspora means to have not just one place of belonging (Hall 2017, 172). The concept of “diaspora consciousness” then has been developed out of this specific awareness and is an in between state so to speak of people ‘living’ here and relating to a ‘there’ (Baumann 2000, 324). Diaspora then offers a way to focus on the contours of identity in Black culture (Gilroy 1991, 112).

Diaspora can also exemplify the rich diversity of Black cultures all around the world and their shared common sensibilities, many of which were inherited from Africa and those generated in chattel slavery throughout the Americas (Gilroy 1991, 112). Slavery and other terrorist acts are part and parcel of the being of many Diasporas, although many of the Diasporas often try to focus less on a sorrow filled history and more on memory (Gilroy 1994, 207).

In *The African Diaspora and the Disciplines* (2010), Kim D. Butler writes:

The modern African diaspora, at its core, consists of the millions of peoples of African descent living in various societies who are united by a past based significantly but not exclusively upon “racial” oppression and the struggles against it; and who, despite the cultural variations and political and other divisions among them, share an emotional bond with one another and with their ancestral continent; and who also, regardless of their location, face broadly similar problems in constructing and realizing themselves. (Butler 2010, 31)

In *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities* (1999), Maureen Warner-Lewis writes:

But unlike the continental African, the Africans of the West Atlantic embody intimate or distant relationships from miscegenated fragments of earlier African ethnic cultures. These various ethnic cults have been hegemonized by others. Fragmentation implies that elements of a putative whole may have been erased and lost, but the surviving fragments have been reconstituted into modalities which are peculiar to each diasporic location, modalities which themselves continue to renegotiate their relationship to each other. But the reconstituted elements of African cultures in the West Atlantic are also renegotiating their relationships to non-African ethnic discourses and matrices of power given their complex multiethnic environments, and over they continue to respond to the pressures and innovations produced by immigration, out-migration, and modernization. (Maureen Warner-Lewis 1999, 23)

Previously, the word Diaspora was typically used in reference to the one-way movement of Black people out of Africa (Okpewho 1999, xiv). However, currently, long established ‘Black communities’ outside of Africa have been renamed as Diaspora (Baumann 2000, 322). Given the fluidity of movement of people and ideas, the Diaspora represents a global space, where the motherland is never far away even if her offspring have been in the throgs of an unkind

history (Okpewho 1999, xiv). Many of the African Diaspora believe in the ideology of united-Africans, which hopes to emphasize the racial distinctiveness of Africans, despite their disparate locations throughout the world, as they believe in unity among all Black people (Iyana 2017, 12).

Food works to construct notions of a culinary system and a social group (Lupton 1996, 25). Food often serves as a conduit to connect African Diaspora communities. “Chasing flavors” then is the pursuit of exploring collective cultural, ethnic, and racial experiences (Ahad 2016, 7). Whether designated as African immigrants, American Africans, African transnationals, hyphenated African-Americans, or Africans of the new Diaspora, new communities of Africans have emerged in the post-slavery and more recent post-colonial era, joining older African American populations in the United States (Walker 2001, 232). It can be the case the descendant of enslaved Africans and newly arrived migrant, both who appear to be Black, can both enjoy the culinary and political tradition is a soul food dinner (Mitchell 2009, xiii). The meal, with decades of varied symbolism and meanings is an opportunity for those who are connected to the foods to share memories and even recipes and pass them on (xv). It is believed that this type of exchange of symbolic food and stories will foster deeper and more meaningful cultural connections (xv). Soul food and other cuisines of the African Diaspora can be employed to help welcome people into the dynamic cultural community that is African American (xv).

Generally, food of the African Diaspora is memorable because of the flavor profile (Mitchell 2009, 35). A typical dish, practically anywhere in the Diaspora would be a well-seasoned dish and a mixture of sweet, salty, spicy hot, and vinegary tangy flavors (35). Texture and density enhance the sweet, hot, and salty flavors that characterize the foods that emerged from the African Diaspora (35).

Interestingly, variations of many dishes of the African Diaspora exist transnationally. “Hoppin’ John” a soul food dish of Carolina rice and black-eyed peas that have origins in Africa (with the main ingredients, rice and black-eyed peas native to the continent) finds commonality with a “rice and peas” a traditional Caribbean dish consisting of pigeon peas or kidney beans and rice. Rice and peas can be found on the menu in Caribbean restaurants or

the dinner table, just like Hoppin' John. Gumbo is another example of a transnational dish having roots on the African continent where one main ingredient, okra, is native to. Gumbo, a variation of an African stew, was fully realized in the Southern United States (Louisiana in particular) and has Indigenous, French and Spanish influences, through the combination of tomatoes, sausage, shrimp, bell peppers, and sassafras tree leaves.

Africans and the African Diaspora have created a culinary revolution, genre and identity that has impacted almost every cuisine in the Americas (The Diaspora Collective 2024). And the food of the African Diaspora is significant as it works to create, maintain and preserve African and African Diaspora cultural sustainability.

### **1.3. (Black) Food and Memory**

For Black folks soul food serves as an archive of memory (Gibbs 2022, 19). On one end, modern memories of soul food or African American heritage cuisines are linked to family, love and community. On the other end hand, soul food is linked to the various unkind memories Black people have faced including slavery, post slavery disenfranchisement, Jim Crow laws, racism, and discrimination (nettlles 2007, 108). These memories then, have solidified Black people's relationships with one another in the face of a multitude of injustices (nettlles 2007, 108). Therefore, memory helps to acknowledge that many of the 'hard facts' like those previously mentioned, as well as other 'soft factors' that are grounded in care (Erlil 2011, 5).

Nevertheless, memory is not static, it is dynamic. Memory does not stay put but instead it travels and migrates (Bond, Craps, and Vermeulen 2017, 1). Memory then, is a process that is continually at work and continuously in progress (Bond, Craps, and Vermeulen 2017, 1). Memory also helps to make sense of the different ways by which people handle time (Erlil 2011, 5).

Diasporic experiences are integral to understanding and unpacking memory. This is because Diasporas, just like memories travel. Memories travel, migrate and transmigrate across the globe and across different peoples (Erlil 2011, 12). The African Diaspora is a practical model

by which to better understand how memory interacts with food. With that said, African Diaspora foods and soul food in particular acts as a container for memories.

African American communities, as most communities, have recipes that are a device for sharing information, history, values and identities (Eves 2005, 283). Recipes are typically passed down through an oral tradition and rely heavily on bodily memory when cooking (Gibbs 2022, 19). Memory is invoked on many levels as one carries out the instructions for a recipe (Eves 2005, 287). Some of the associations are cognitive, like remembering an individual or occasion that is connected to said recipe or food (Eves 2005, 291). However, one of the reasons that food memories (including those memories invoked through recipes) are so memorable is due to the fact that cognitive memory is enhanced by physicality and spatiality (Eves 2005, 291). Habitual movements, which are the body's ability to conjure an action without prompt, constitute body memory (Eves 2005, 291). This kind of bodily memory and knowledge of cooking is particularly significant in African American cooking traditions (Eves 2005, 291).

With a small amount of this ingredient and a handful of another, Black foods have deeply rooted physical elements that are present during the inception and execution of a dish (19). Cooks of soul food recognize that exact measurements are not necessary nor are precise ingredients for every dish; part of creation of the soul food is based on feeling. To the end, a reliance on sensory perception (which may be connected to bodily memory) was first evident during slavery and is part and parcel of African cooking traditions (Gibbs 2022, 19).

It is worth stating that observation is also an integral part of the cooking experience. For many African Americans learning to cook from elders, observation was key throughout the journey from purchasing fresh ingredients to cutting to the act of cooking. Those in the process of learning often observed the movements of the cook or elder and would go on to mimic these movements themselves, therefore mimicry was also part of the cooking experience.

With that said, memory moves from one generation to another (Bond, Craps, and Vermeulen 2017, 2). Elders are significant to the cooking process for African Americans as there is a history of oral tradition where knowledge is imparted to younger generations; they are carriers

of memory. Carriers of memory are those people who share past histories and who can draw from explicit and implicit knowledge (Erll 2011, 12). Knowledge transfer was especially helpful and useful in the transmission of recipes for African Americans. Knowledge and knowledge transmission are especially important when considering many African American recipes are not written down; they are part of an “unwritten Negro cookbook” (Gibbs 2022, 19). This unwritten book too was part of an African oral tradition (19). Every time a food memory is narrated whether it be in oral, written or performative form it acts an embodied experience (Abarca and Colby 2016, 7). Memories from recipes then can work to create a collective memory that helps to influence what it means to be an African American (Eves 2005, 287).

Food creates a space to exchange and pass down familial stories (Erdinc 2001, 98). Food memories for African Americans and people of the African Diaspora conjure recollections of joy and community but also scarcity and violence. Many people of the African Diaspora are reclaiming the histories associated with those negative memories and are re-creating new memories with care. Now, food memories make space for diversity and a multiplicity of experiences as they relate to Blackness - just as Black food is varied so are food memories. To that end, food memories act as a transmission of folklore and history from one generation to another, each generation building upon and creating new narratives.

## **2. Re-Stor(y)ing Narratives**

### **2.1. Re-Stor(y)ing Narratives**

It is paramount for Africans and African Diasporans to tell their own stories and to see themselves through their own eyes, without others as either models or figures of authority who define their realities for them (Walker 2001, 24). Doing such is a solution to the problem W.E.B. Du Bois identified as “looking at yourselves through the eyes of others” (Walker 2001, 24). By looking at themselves through the eyes of others African Americans internalize their existence through the prism of “the revelation of the other world” that “yields no true self-consciousness” (Walker 2001, 24). In the contemporary post-Black setting, the African

Diaspora has greater agency to not only narrate their own stories but to also deconstruct and dispute stories that were created and perpetuated via a colonial mindset.

In *African Roots / American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas* (2001), Sheila S. Walker writes:

Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly. We are also insisting upon seeing and portraying ourselves through the revelations of our own experiences and interpretations, as opposed to through the revelations of others based on their experiences and interpretations that are usually different from and sometimes antithetical to our own. And we are claiming the authority to be “voices of our own authority” speaking of and for the cultures that our communities have authored. (Walker 2001, 24)

The process for African Diasporans of telling their own stories requires such struggle because doing so involves changing the versions of the past and present of the Americas that others had an interest in fabricating and have an interest in maintaining (Walker 2001, 28). To that end, African Americans and others of the African Diaspora recount histories that, from their perspectives exist in opposition to the projects of colonization and imperialism; re-stating their histories themselves distorts the hegemonic Eurocentric cultural lens.

Nevertheless, extreme force is necessary to battle vast untruths, especially in the context of the contributions that those of the African Diaspora have made. The idea that Africans and African Diasporans may have contributed little, or nothing is a logical and empirical contradiction (Walker 2001, 28). This probable misinterpretation resulting from the use of a Eurocentric cultural lens and this trivializing highlight the obvious value of using an Afrocentric perspective in interpreting cultural expressions of African and African Diasporan people (Walker 2001, 26).

To that end, there is also risk in a single, undisputed, popularized narrative. In the TED Talk titled “Danger of a Single Story” (2009) delivered by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, she speaks directly to the narratives mediated by the West about Africans. She states:

This single story of Africa ultimately comes, I think, from Western literature. Now, here is a quote from the writing of a London merchant called John Lok, who sailed to West Africa in 1561 and kept a fascinating account of his voyage. After referring to the black Africans as “beasts who have no houses,” he writes, “They are also people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breast [...] But what is important about his writing is that it represents the beginning of a tradition of telling African stories in the West: A tradition of Sub-Saharan Africa as a place of negatives, of difference, of darkness, of people who, in the words of the wonderful poet Rudyard Kipling, are ‘half devil, half child’ [...] So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become (Adiche 2009).

Initial contact with Africans lead Europeans to disparage Africa as the “Dark Continent” where people were barbaric and less than human (Skinner 1999, 28). This was due in part to the Eurocentric values that Europeans held and their belief that Africans had no culture or civilization (Mercer 1987, 41). Philosophers like Hume and Hegel substantiated those assumptions, when he too characterized Africa and its peoples as savages (Mercer 1987, 41). Many Black people internalized these notions of themselves and accepted the superiority of the Western world (Skinner 1999, 31).

With that said, dominant ideologies such as White bias do not just become dominate by ‘universalizing’ the values of hegemonic groups; instead these ideologies become accepted when they are normalized and reproduced (Mercer 1987, 36). The way in which the hegemonic system upholds these ideologies insidiously transfers to othered peoples and it becomes part of how they construct their own personal identities (Mercer 1987, 36). That is the way racism works; it encourages the devaluation of Blackness by Black subjects themselves (Mercer 1987, 36). As imperial Europe used a settler colonial ideology to remake the world in its image it distanced Africans from their own selves (Skinner 1999, 28). It was not surprising then, that Africans who traveled to places where they were in the minority did not value or celebrate their traditions and histories; including food traditions (Skinner 1999, 28). The determination of African peoples to disassociate themselves from White hegemonic systems and to restore their self-image is an imperative for the twenty-first century (Skinner 1999, 28).

It is important for the stories and contributions of the people of the African Diaspora to be unburied and re-constructed. New narratives must be positioned in truth, told from a diversity of perspectives and methods. Many contemporary African Diasporans authors, cultural theorists, academics etc., are working towards denouncing old narratives and creating new narratives.

In this context of the food memories in this work, author conducts interviews and solicits food memory submissions to better understand the relationship between the African Diaspora, their identity, and their connections to food. To that end, by the subjects telling and writing narratives from a first-person point of view, what is evident is that their experiences are authentic and varied; there is no one singular or overarching food memory or food experience, just as there is no singular African Diaspora experience. The narratives of the subjects counteract the misguided notion the Blacks have only one experience (Womack 2010, xv).

### **Chapter 3. (Re)Storing African Diaspora Food Memories**

#### **3.1. (Re)Storing African Diaspora Food Memories: Interview Methodology**

The author conducted two interviews; the purpose of the interviews was to better understand the relationships between the African Diaspora, identity and food memories; as well as to explore which values (if any) African Diaspora food cultures symbolize. Furthermore, the interviews add to the research as they substantiate the theoretical frameworks presented in previous chapters through conceptual frameworks.

In preparation for the interviews, the author (interviewer) created ten interview questions (see annex). The interviews were initially structured by these ten questions, however the author asked additional probing questions, therefore the interview could be categorized as semi-structured. Generally, the questions were focused on familial migration, food memories, cooking experiences, traditional African American foods, and African American culinary identity. These questions relate to the research questions as the author sought to understand how African Americans created a distinct culinary identity, the relationship between soul food and African American identity and the relationships between the African Diaspora, identity and food memories; as well as to explore which values (if any) African Diaspora food cultures symbolize (as stated above).

The first interview with Phylista Sutton was conducted in person in August 2024 in Atlanta, Georgia. Phylista Sutton, age sixty-one, was born in San Diego, California and grew up there. In 2023, she relocated to Atlanta, Georgia. Her family has roots in Texas and Kentucky. She is a retired educator having worked as a primary school teacher for over twenty years. Sutton was chosen as a subject because of her age, she is nearly elderly therefore the author assumed that she would have many memories associated with food, and food experiences. Additionally, Sutton's family history and migratory patterns are unique, which the author assumed would add an authentic perspective as it relates to African American identity.

The second interview with Candie Kennedy Nixon was conducted in person in August 2024 in Gainesville, Florida. Candie Kennedy Nixon, age fifty-five, was born on Long Island, New York, she currently lives in Gainesville, Florida. Her family has roots in Florida. She has worked professionally in the public sector for over two decades, first with the Agency for Children Services and now with the Office of Veteran Affairs, where she advocates for fair housing for veterans, homeless and transient populations. Kennedy Nixon was chosen as a subject because of she was raised in New York but has familial roots in the South, therefore the author assumed that she was familiar with African American heritage cooking and food culture as well as African American migratory patterns. Additionally, Kennedy Nixon identifies as African American and part of the work is positioned in African American identity. The interviewer received permission from the subjects to record the interviews as they would later be transcribed.

For the methodology to analyze the interviews, the author first completed a content analysis whereby he identified similar words, expressions and ideas used by the two interviewee subjects, he then counted how many times those words, expressions and ideas were mentioned by the interviewees. Secondly, he identified the themes that emerged from the words, expressions and ideas and completed a thematic analysis to identify how the subjects referenced those themes. Thirdly, he connected those themes to one another (when applicable), to the interviews, and the theoretical framework. Additionally, he sought to uncover new insights into the topic.

### **3.2. Content Analysis**

#### **1. African American (in relation to African American Culinary Identity)**

The term African American was mentioned twelve times by the interviewees (between both interviews).

## 2. Food, Types of Food and Soul Food

The words food and foods were mentioned sixty times (between both interviews).

The term soul food was mentioned four times (between both interviews).

In total, between both interviews, rice is mentioned eight times, beans is mentioned eight times, biscuits are mentioned eight times, greens (presumably collard greens) is mentioned seven times, chicken is mentioned seven times, and particular offals (including chicken back, fat back, neck bones and ham hocks) are mentioned seven times, and the term “scraps of meat” is mentioned four times.

## 3. Learning to Cook through Observation

The idea of learning to cook through observation was mentioned by both interviewees.

The word observation is mentioned three times between both interviews.

The word observing is mentioned twice between both interviews.

## 4. Measurement

Both interviewees shared that exact measurements of ingredients for dishes were not particularly important.

The word measurement is mentioned once between both interviews.

The word measuring is mentioned once between both interviews.

## 5. Emotions Related to Food

Both interviewees shared emotions of love, joy, enjoyment, fellowship, family, togetherness, and sharing related to cooking and food.

The word love was mentioned eight times between both interviews.

The word together was mentioned five times between both interviews.

The word fellowship was mentioned three times between both interviews.

The word joy was mentioned twice between both interviews.

The word enjoyment was mentioned once between both interviews.

The word enjoyable was mentioned once between both interviews.

The word share was mentioned once between both interviews.

The word sharing was mentioned once between both interviews.

The word togetherness was mentioned once between both interviews.

## 6. Family

References to family members (whether by specific name i.e. Aunt Ocie or by relation i.e., cousin, etc.) were made thirty-seven times between both interviews.

The word family was mentioned fourteen times between both interviews.

The term family dynamics was mentioned three times between both interviews.

The term family experience was mentioned once between both interviews.

Category	Word/Term	Interview 1	Interview 2
African American	African American	3	9
Food, Types of Food and Soul Food	food(s)	16	44
	soul food	3	1
	rice	2	6
	beans	2	6

	biscuits	2	6
	greens	5	2
	chicken	5	2
	offals	1	6
	scraps of meat	0	4
Learning to Cook through Observation	observation	0	3
	observing	2	0
Measurement	measurement	1	0
	measuring	0	1
Emotions Related to Food	love	3	5
	together	1	4
	fellowship	0	3
	joy	2	0
	enjoyment	0	1
	enjoyable	1	0
	share	0	1
	sharing	0	1
	togetherness	1	0
Family	references to family members	31	6
	family	2	12
	family dynamics	0	2
	family experience	0	1

### 3.3. Transcription of Content Analysis

#### 1. African American (in relation to African American Culinary Identity)

The term African American was mentioned twelve times between both interviews (as previously stated), it was typically used in reference to African American culinary identity.

Sutton stated: “I do believe we have a culinary identity. Because when you hear when somebody say African American food or whatever, you automatically think what I just mentioned previously.”

Sutton stated: “I do not think we get the recognition that we should for our foods, because I do believe a lot of other cultures have African American influence in their dishes”.

Sutton stated: “Watching the shows about African American food and our journey from our ancestors, it’s just, I don’t know. It’s because I’m sixty-one and I should have paid attention earlier, but I did not.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “One, it was a financial thing. I think African Americans had to make, learn to make food good, because it was a financial thing.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “And I think the thing that makes it African American, one, of course, is the spices.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “If you look at fried chicken, which is closely associated with African Americans, right, that’s something that came out of Africa.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “I think the thing that makes it an African American food, because there is something as much as people try to imitate it and cook it, they can’t, because it goes beyond the food.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “There is importance in African American food and family.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “We do our holiday season just as everybody else but I think Thanksgiving, Christmas, those things take on a different meaning for African Americans, especially in regards to our relationship to food.”

The term African American was used once in reference to migration.

Kennedy Nixon stated: “Yes, typical story of African Americans in the South, in the late 1950s and 1960s, Southerners migrated to the North for employment opportunities. And so that is what my mother did when she was a teenager, she migrated to New York.”

## 2. Food, Types of Food and Soul Food

As previously stated, the words food and foods were mentioned sixty times, and the term soul food was mentioned four times (between both interviews). Foods that both interviewees mention include chicken, greens, rice, beans, biscuits, scraps of meat, specific types of offals (including chicken back, fat back, neck bones and ham hocks), and pork chops.

Sutton stated: “And I remember as a child, it’s like it was such a just a fun atmosphere, and the food was just plenty.”

Sutton stated: “But I find that in the foods that I cook, it’s always something from my past that I bring into the dish.”

Sutton stated: “Generational food wealth. Generational food wealth exactly because it was passed down from our ancestors.”

Sutton stated: “What I grew up on was fried chicken, fried pork chops, greens, cabbage, neck bones, red beans and rice and fried okra [...] Chicken, rice, biscuits, green beans, those were all in rotation.”

Sutton stated: “Soul Food, to me, supersedes macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, greens, everything that I mentioned.”

Sutton stated: “I know people think automatically fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, yams, greens, all that sort of thing.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “Just biscuits, but they were homemade biscuits. But they were big and so because they were big, the name cathead biscuits. Served with molasses syrup, thick molasses syrup that was very dark and with either a fat back, bacon or sausage.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “In childhood it would have been food that would have been considered the scraps of meat. It wasn’t such a heavily meat-focused diet and when we did it

would be things like the chicken back, like the fat bat, any part of any animal, but definitely pork and even the scraps of beef.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “I don’t think we own them now. I think what we own is the way that we process them. Greens, any type of leafy green, beans, meats, like the scrap of meats, and taking those scraps and making something out of them. Like I said, the bacon, or the neck bones, or what now they call pork belly those type of things.”

### 3. Learning to Cook Through Observation

As previously stated, the concept of learning to cook through observation was mentioned by both interviewees.

Sutton stated: “I guess I would say I was taught by observing. My mom could cook, my aunties could cook, and just watching them and trying to navigate myself in the kitchen to replicate what they made and then put my own little spin on it.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “So it’s just that it was expectation that you knew how to cook, and a lot of it came from observation, but observation being involved in the kitchen.”

### 4. Measurement

As previously stated, both interviewees shared that exact measurements of ingredients for dishes were not particularly important.

Sutton stated: “Measurement wasn’t a big deal with my mom and my aunties. There’s a little bit of this, a little bit of that, especially my Aunt Ocie she was the cook in the family, and she would just tell you, just put a sprinkle of this or dash of that, or she’ll eye it or pour it in your palm or whatever, but observing how they did things, and kind of taste it when you finish it and see what it what it tastes like.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “You learned not necessarily by measuring cups, they took the palm of your hand.”

## 5. Sentiments Related to Cooking and Food

As previously stated, interviewees shared sentiments of love, joy, enjoyment, fellowship, family, togetherness, and sharing related to cooking and food.

Sutton stated: “And I love to cook, I do.”

Sutton stated: “You solved your problems, you listened to problems, you had, your joys and your trials and your tribulations around this pot of food, and you raise families on this pot of food, and it’s generation to generation to generation.”

Sutton stated: “But I know now the importance of that family, soul searching, togetherness around a pot of food.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “I think the secret ingredient that Nanny taught me about food is really love. And I think love is what makes you prepare it, right? So for me, watching my mother prepare by scratch, which I know today, is a big feat. Love to feed 10, 11, people.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “So those, I think the thing is, the foods may have changed a little bit, but I think the fellowship of food, like food and fellowship go together, right? Even if we do it at a restaurant. But it’s all about the fellowship of us.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “But the enjoyment she got from doing it that she kept doing it, and indeed, she did pass it on to us.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “Like I said, even just sharing. Sharing, whatever comes out. We all share, so things like that.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “Even as big as our family was, the first tradition was that we all sat at the table, all together.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “I think food and family go together.”

## 6. Family

As previously, references to family members (whether by specific name i.e. Aunt Ocie or by relation i.e., cousin, etc.) were made thirty-seven times between both interviews. Furthermore,

the word family was used multiple times and so were the terms family experience and family dynamics.

Sutton stated: “And then when my aunt and uncles would come over, and cousins and the music playing and everybody’s laughing, having a good time, it would be about three o’clock in the afternoon, people wouldn’t leave to like, one in the morning, because that would lead to a card game, or them reminiscing and laughing and doing whatever.”

Sutton stated: “Yes, I have passed down recipes that I put together, that I tweaked from growing up, and I passed, passed it down to my daughter, and I told her to keep it close to the vest and to only pass that down to somebody who’s worthy of it.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “You know, that was family time, that was talk time, laughter time, discipline time, but it was all centered around food.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “Just being in the kitchen, always in the kitchen, and allowing the family dynamics to flow from that kitchen in the process of cooking food, talking to your children, be it doing homework, talking to children, laughter, music, playing music while you’re cooking.”

Kennedy Nixon stated: “And food wasn’t something that was set aside. It was just part of the family experience, the family dynamics and the family dynamics occurred around you making that food.”

### **3.4. Thematic Analysis of Interviews**

#### **1. African American Culinary Identity and Soul Food**

As previously stated, food and identity are connected (Albala 2015, 823). For people who are of cultures where food is a source of identity some dishes are signifiers of group membership (Albala 2015, 823). Inside the African American community, soul food is a set of foods that are rooted in Black Southern heritage cooking (Wallach 2019, 162). Foods like stewed chicken, fried chicken, rice, gravy, collard greens, turnip greens, ham hocks, black-eyed peas, pork chops, chitterlings, catfish, cornbread, sweet potatoes (and others) act as signifiers of African American culinary identity. Both Sutton and Kennedy Nixon identified many of the foods previously listed as typical soul foods. Furthermore, Kennedy Nixon believes that

African Americans do not own these foods, but “I think what we own is the way that we process them”. She goes on to state: “And I think the thing that makes it African American, one, of course, is the spices.” To that end, they both believe that soul food and therefore African American identity has influenced other food cultures, but African Americans have not received credit for such or their “just due”. Sutton stated: “I do not think we get the recognition that we should for our foods, because I do believe a lot of other cultures have African American influence in their dishes.” Kennedy Nixon stated: “Nowadays, these foods are being highly prized by mainstream chefs, and it’s just foods that we ate every day, but somehow, now that the mainstream society have gotten it, you know, mac and cheese it’s been catapulted, now every restaurant sells it.” It is evident that African American culinary contributions have been undervalued and even dismissed (Tipton-Martin 2015, xv).

Kennedy Nixon also stated “Our food was originally a rejected food, right? It was criticized for being not nutritious, right? Criticized for being refused. It was a food that certain classes wouldn't eat. People would be embarrassed to eat it, and things like that, right? And now it's something that's being lauded everywhere.” Kennedy Nixon identifies the chasm that has existed for many African Americans as it relates to soul food. Many African Americans have a tense relationship with soul food as it is a reminder of slavery and many soul foods and closely related to the foods the enslaved once ate (Wallach 2019, 101). Kennedy Nixon reinforces the tension that Black Americans have faced with soul food's origins in chattel slavery in her statements above. Additionally, Kennedy Nixon shared the foods that her family typically ate, she stated: “In childhood it would have been food that would have been considered the scraps of meat. It wasn't such a heavily meat-focused diet and when we did it would be things like the chicken back, like the fat back, any part of any animal, but definitely pork and even the scraps of beef.” One could infer how Kennedy Nixon's family created these food habits. Kennedy Nixon stated: “...in the South, in the late 1950s and 1960s, Southerners migrated to the North for employment opportunities. And so that is what my mother did when she was a teenager, she migrated to New York.” It can be inferred that her mother brought along with her Southern food habits. Many Southern migrants were intent on sustaining their food preferences, even when they lived in cities in the North, West and Midwest (Wallach 2019, 151). Foods like chicken back, fat back, pork and scraps of meats were typical of foods that the enslaved ate; therefore, there is also a throughline between the eating habits of the

enslaved and the eating habits of Kennedy Nixon's family, generations later. Soul food then is a cultural embedded and has a deep historical lineage connection to Africans and their descendants in America (Mitchell 2009, 19). To reinforce the concept of eating foods that were eaten in previous generations, Sutton stated: "And here we are, 2024 still making these same dishes, tweaked here and there."

Sutton and Kennedy Nixon believe that African Americans have created a culinary identity, associated specific foods i.e. soul foods to African American culinary identity, and shared their beliefs on the influence African American culinary identity has had on other food cultures. To that end, both subjects also desire greater recognition of African American culinary contributions.

## 2. Learning to Cook Through Observation, Carriers of Memory and the Transmission of Recipes

One of the many skills that the enslaved employed during cooking were sensory perception (Gibbs 2022, 19). Sutton and Kennedy Nixon both stated that they learned to cook through observation. Sutton stated: "I guess I would say I was taught by observing." Kennedy Nixon stated: "So it's just that it was expectation that you knew how to cook, and a lot of it came from observation, but observation being involved in the kitchen". Relying on sensory perception and utilizing memory as a device in cooking is evident through Sutton and Kennedy Nixon's statements. Part of the reason that food memories are so potent is because cognitive memory is attached to physicality (Eves 2005, 291). Therefore, habitual movement allows the body to remember specific behaviors without prompting (Eves 2005, 291). This kind of bodily knowledge has been very important to African Americans and is part and parcel of their cooking traditions (Eves 2005, 291).

Both subjects also highlight that they learned to cook from elders. Sutton stated: "My mom could cook, my aunties could cook, and just watching them and trying to navigate myself in the kitchen to replicate what they made and then put my own little spin on it." Kennedy Nixon stated: "When I was about eleven, my sister said, "go cook these beans". I never cooked them before. She said, "I'm gonna tell you how to do it." I did it, black eyed peas. Aunt Diane, fifth grade." As previously stated, elders are significant to the cooking process for African Americans as there is a history of oral tradition where knowledge is imparted to younger generations; they are carriers of memory. As carriers of memory, elders share past narratives

like family histories and recipes and can also draw from explicit and implicit knowledge (Erl 2011, 12).

Elders or ancestors also carry what was described by Sutton as “generational food wealth”. Sutton stated: “Generational food wealth exactly because it was passed down from our ancestors. And here we are, 2024 still making these same dishes, tweaked here and there.” Memory moves across generations (Bond, Craps, and Vermeulen 2017, 2). Both of the subject’s accounts reinforce the relationship between generational food wealth, elders or ancestors acting as carriers of memory and the transmission of recipes. Knowledge transfer from one generation to another was integral in the transmission of recipes. And recipes were passed down orally but relied heavily on bodily memory (Gibbs 2022, 19). It can be said then, that the transmission of knowledge and recipes between generations is one way by which family culture is passed down through food (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2).

### 3. Measurements and Memory

The lack of measuring ingredients in a precise manner emerges as a theme in both interviews. Sutton stated: “Measurement wasn’t a big deal with my mom and my aunties. There’s a little bit of this, a little bit of that, especially my Aunt Ocie she was the cook in the family, and she would just tell you, just put a sprinkle of this or dash of that, or she’ll eye it or pour it in your palm or whatever...” Kennedy Nixon stated: “You learned not necessarily by measuring cups, they took the palm of your hand”. Cooks of soul food recognize that exact measurements are not necessary nor are precise ingredients for every dish; part of creation of the soul food is based on feeling. Which relates to the concept, previously stated, that there was is a sensory element that African Americans rely on when cooking and this element was utilized by the enslaved (Gibbs 2022, 19). With a small amount of one ingredient, and a dab of another, these types of physical elements are also used to execute a dish (19). It can be said then that soul food cooking draws on ritualistic customs and bodily memory (19). Both subject’s accounts reinforce the connections between African American heritage cooking and bodily memory.

### 4. Emotions Related to Food and Family

Food helps to reinforce the bonds of family relationships (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 1). In the interviews both subjects correlated family to food by using words including family, love,

fellowship, enjoyment, share, sharing, together and togetherness, terms like family experience and family dynamics and referencing family members by name or relation. With that said, food can communicate affection and family culture (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 1). The way in which food is made or how it is share helps to build family relationships and develop family culture (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 1).

For the use of the word family, Sutton stated: “But I know now the importance of that family, soul searching, togetherness around a pot of food. You solved your problems, you listened to problems, you had, your joys and your trials and your tribulations around this pot of food, and you raise families on this pot of food, and it’s generation to generation to generation.” When referencing family, Sutton stated: “And then when my aunt and uncles would come over, and cousins and the music playing and everybody’s laughing, having a good time, it would be about three o’clock in the afternoon, people wouldn’t leave to like, one in the morning, because that would lead to a card game, or them reminiscing and laughing and doing whatever.” Kennedy Nixon uses the word family, she stated: “Even as big as our family was, the first tradition was that we all sat at the table, all together.” Kennedy Nixon also stated: “You know, that was family time, that was talk time, laughter time, discipline time, but it was all centered around food.” Kennedy Nixon also uses the terms family dynamics and family experience, she stated: “And food wasn’t something that was set aside. It was just part of the family experience, the family dynamics and the family dynamics occurred around you making that food.”

In relation to other key words identified, Sutton stated: “I get into the recipe, I want the end result to be enjoyable for people. Put a smile on your face, fill your belly, and you just feel good, because that’s how I felt when all that food was on the table and everybody was over and we ate and, you know, go get another plate.” As stated above, Sutton also references family and uses the phrase “laughing, having a good time”, which correlates to the word enjoyment. Kennedy Nixon stated: “I think the secret ingredient that Nanny taught me about food is really love. And I think love is what makes you prepare it, right?” Food, then, is a medium to express emotions (Laine 2005, 106). And soul food in particular serves this function. The word soul, when applied to food, is only related to the foods that African Americans cooked for themselves and those dear to them and they cooked these foods with care and love (Tipton-Martin 2015, 80).

Family meals are opportunities for connection and also help to create a family identity and culture (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2). Family mealtimes promote connection and community (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2). Food is emotion (Murphy 2018, 95). In addition to expressing love, sharing food also serves as a metaphor for other types of support that could be offered (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2). Food illustrates love through emotional support (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2). This is evident when Kennedy Nixon stated: “I think the secret ingredient that Nanny taught me about food is really love. And I think love is what makes you prepare it, right? So for me, watching my mother prepare by scratch, which I know today, is a big feat. Love to feed 10, 11, people.”

Furthermore, when a family gathers for a meal, it allows space for important discussions. This is evident when Sutton stated: “You solved your problems, you listened to problems, you had, your joys and your trials and your tribulations around this pot of food, and you raise families on this pot of food, and it’s generation to generation to generation.”

Family meals are shaped by family held traditions (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2). This is reinforced by the statement that Kennedy Nixon makes, she stated: “We do our holiday season just as everybody else but I think Thanksgiving, Christmas, those things take on a different meaning for African Americans, especially in regards to our relationship to food.”

Food can also be a tool to strengthen and restore familial bonds (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2). Kennedy Nixon stated: “If anything, I hope I pass it on to somebody, fix the food that people love, bring them together, whether we are getting along at that moment or not, we ain’t got to be able to get along, just eat the food and take a plate to go. So that is what I hope is passed on.”

Therefore, a correlation can be made with emotions of love, joy and enjoyment (and the others listed above), food and family connections; the author did not anticipate that this theme would surface from the interviews. Such offers new insights into the topic as it relates to African American identity, family relationships, emotions and food, and the connections between those.

## **Chapter 4: (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories**

### **4.1. (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories: Methodology**

The author solicited “food memories” from eight subjects of African descent. Individuals were selected on their nationality, how they identify themselves, their place of birth, the region in which they currently live and their age. These subjects are from Nigeria, Trinidad and Tobago and the United States and identify themselves as Nigerian, African, Trinidadian, Caribbean, West Indian, Black or African American. The intention was that the food memories would share the experiences of various peoples of the African Diaspora. The submissions add to reflection of the topic and build upon the theoretical approach relating to memory, African American food memory, African American culinary identity, and Diaspora. Furthermore, the food memories relate to the research question on the connection between food, memory and the African Diaspora. The author chose to collect submissions in written form as it allowed subjects to reflect on their food memories and create narratives in their own words, rather than that of White hegemonic structures; there is importance in the stories and contributions of the people of the African Diaspora to be unburied and re-constructed (as previously stated).

In order to collect the food memories, the author first developed a prompt/instructions that he shared with participants via SMS (text) message (see annex). Sharing the prompt in this way allowed for an ease of communication, to that end participants could respond by submitting their writing via SMS Text Message, Microsoft Word or Google Docs, again to allow for ease of communication. The author asked subjects for their participation as early as Spring 2024 and shared the prompt with participants in August 2024. The original deadline for submission was September 4, 2024, the author extended the deadline until September 8, 2024, to allow participants additional time to complete and submit the prompt.

The participants were as follows:

Akinyemi Akinola was born in Ibadan, Nigeria and currently lives on Long Island, New York. Akinola is of Nigerian descent and was born and raised in Nigeria, where he lived until the late 1970s. From Nigeria, Akinola studied in Yugoslavia and later moved to New York to continue his education in the early 1980s, he has lived in New York since then.

Amanda de Geneste-Archer was born in Trinidad and Tobago and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York. She is a retired law enforcement professional and operates a non-profit organization in memory of her late husband; additionally she has written a book. She is of Caribbean descent.

Tiffany Archer was born in Brooklyn, New York and currently resides in Miami, Florida where she works in the hospitality industry and designs swimsuits and athletic apparel. Archer identifies as African American, and is of Panamanian, Puerto Rican and Jamaican descent.

Enola Bartholomew was born in San Diego, California and currently resides in Atlanta, Georgia, she is a working professional in the telecommunications industry where she leads marketing strategy. Bartholomew is of African American descent and her family has roots in the states of Texas and Kentucky.

Cara Brown was born in the Bay Area, California where she currently resides. Brown is of African American descent and is a working professional in the technology industry and in her spare time makes jewelry.

Alfie Nixon (A. Nixon) was born on Long Island, New York and currently resides in Gainesville, Florida. She works as a traveling nurse and focuses on providing care to the imprisoned. She is of African American descent and her family has roots in North Florida.

Staci Nixon (S. Nixon) was born on Long Island, New York and currently lives in Gainesville, Florida. She works as an advocate for farmers in North Florida and helps them gain access to government grants. She is of African American descent and her family has roots in North Florida.

Traci Nixon (T. Nixon) was born on Long Island, New York and currently resides in Gainesville, Florida. She works as a healthcare professional, and she is of African American descent; her family has roots in North Florida.

For the methodology of analyzing the food memories the author first defined three key theoretical terms, identity, African Diaspora, and memory. Second, he developed a set of

questions/analytical keys to guide the analysis. Third, he divided the food memory analysis into the three theoretical terms and connected them to the theoretical framework/authors previously presented.

## 4.2. Definitions of Theoretical Terms

### 1. Identity

In *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005), Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris define identity as the following:

Identity is to do with the imagined sameness of a person or of a social group at all times and in all circumstances; about a person or a group being, and being able to continue to be, itself and not someone or something else. Identity may be regarded as a fiction, intended to put an orderly pattern and narrative on the actual complexity and multitudinous nature of both psychological and social worlds. The question of identity centers on the assertion of principles of unity, as opposed to pluralism and diversity, and of continuity, as opposed to change and transformation. (Bennett, Grossberg and Morris 2005, 172)

### 2. African Diaspora

In *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005), Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris define African Diaspora as the following:

One of the most vocal, dynamic, and influential diasporic movements in the past few decades has been the black African diaspora, comprising people who are descendants of victims of the African slave trade and now live dispersed across the countries on both sides of the Atlantic including the Americas, the Caribbean, the UK, and Western Europe. Arguably, Alex Haley's hugely popular book and TV series *Roots* in the 1970s, which told his family history from when his ancestor Kunta Kinte arrived as a slave on a ship in Maryland in the C18, played a key role in the formation of a diasporic consciousness among many African-Americans. In the 1990s, an alternative, more postmodern vision of the African diaspora— that of a Black Atlantic — was developed by influential black British cultural theorist Paul Gilroy (1993a). Here, “diaspora” signifies the constant renewal of identity through creative hybridity and transformation under the very conditions of dispersal and difference, rather than the need to return to one's “roots.” In other words, in the postmodern meaning of

“diaspora,” the organic link between peoples and homelands has been severed. (Bennett, Grossberg and Morris 2005, 84)

### 3. Memory

In *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (2005), Tony Bennett, Lawrence Grossberg and Meaghan Morris define memory as the following:

Memory is an indispensable condition of effective human life, and – consequently – an essential part of human thought, from the earliest myths to the most advanced forms of contemporary neurological science. Not only does the question of memory span the entire history of human thought: from our own late modern, or postmodern, perspective, troubled by the seeming impossibilities of remembering, we seem ever more eager to center the operations of memory. At the very dawn of the modern age, for John Locke at least, memory functioned as the necessary adjunct to reason. Memory, Locke believed, contained “the storehouse of our ideas”; through the workings of memory an idea could “be made actual again,” in the sense of coming fully into consciousness. (Bennett, Grossberg and Morris 2005, 216)

#### 4.3. Questions/Analytical Keys

Is there a relationship between soul food and African American identity?

Which emotions and values do African Diaspora food cultures symbolize?

How are the African Diaspora, African Diaspora foods and memory connected?

#### 4.4. Theoretical Terms and Food Memories

##### 1. Identity

Is there a relationship between soul food and African American identity?

A. Nixon’s food memory is a recollection from childhood and her mother baking cathead biscuits. A. Nixon stated: “My favorite was her cat head Biscuits which were homemade, from scratch. It is a southern style baking of bread.” It is often hard to differentiate between which foods are traditional Southern foods and which are specifically soul foods. This was

evident also in Sutton's interview where she stated: "Greens, yams, okra, fried chicken, ham hocks, neckbones, pork chops, cornbread, biscuits and gravy, I think that's more of a southern thing, I don't know if that's exactly soul food." S. Nixon also described traditional soul foods made for Thanksgiving dinner in her food memory where she shared a story of the preparation for a Thanksgiving meal. She stated: "I looked around the kitchen and dining room to see where I could jump in and help with preparing the Thanksgiving meal. Someone was picking the greens, another had potatoes, another had string beans. Cakes and pies, you name it." Food was a factor by which Whites attempted to hold on to their way of life and practice control (Williams-Forsen 2013, 113). Southern Whites unsuccessfully promoted "Southern cooking" as "Whites Only Cuisine" (Williams-Forsen 2006, 169). The idea of Southern food having exclusively White contributions is faulty, as Black cooks were part and parcel of the creation of Southern cuisine.

In the food memoir *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American History in the Old South* (2017), Michael W. Twitty writes:

Soul Food (or "African American heritage cooking) and its umbrella cuisine, Southern food, are the most remarked and most maligned of any regional or indigenous ethnic tradition in the United States. The connection between and heritage of both Southern and soul cuisines is hotly debated and arouses old racial stereotypes, prejudices, and cultural attitudes and intercultural misunderstandings. It's an easy metaphor for the "two" Souths—one black, one white—intertwined and complicated. (Twitty 2017, 6)

Despite efforts to separate African Americans from Southern cuisine, the Black hand was always in the pot. During slavery, the "Big House" enslaved cook was responsible for overseeing and preparing meals for their White masters and mistresses and sometimes for the entire plantation, and Black women were usually the cooks. Throughout the period of enslavement, Black cooks employed African techniques and combined new ingredients to create the Southern culinary genre (Harris 2011, 105). It was the Black hand that made the pot, carried the pot, emptied the pot, filled, cooked and served from the pot in the first and last place (Spivey 2022, 256). Therefore, there is a connection between soul food and African American identity as it was enslaved Blacks cooks who first helped to create Southern cuisine and it was their descendants who later created soul food; soul food then is connected to

African American identity and it is of the unique experience of Africans (and their descendants) in America.

## 2. African Diaspora

Which emotions and values do African Diaspora food cultures symbolize?

In Akinola's food memory, he attended the wedding reception of a Nigerian couple, he wrote: "The food was so delicious and brought back memories of similar events held back home years past. This occasion created such a mental and emotional connection with home and I sure enjoyed the food and the people that were present." Memories, while individual and unique to each subject are culturally and socially grounded (Abarca and Colby 2016, 5).

Akinola goes on to write: "The local food that stood out to me and my choice was popular and peculiar to the Yoruba tribe of the newlywed couple (my tribe as well), Fufu with spinach stew." Food, like all other culturally defined materials helps to maintain social relationships and is a marker of group membership. (Du Bois and Mintz 2002, 109). Therefore, the dishes Akinola ate, acted to solidify his tribal membership as Yoruba and his national membership as Nigerian. It is likely that the reception attendants varied in age, race, ethnicity and tribe (considering it took place in cosmopolitan New York City), nevertheless, the dishes Akinola ate acted as a device to establish familiarity and a sense of belonging. Foods are deeply embedded with meaning (Marshall 2020, 73). Therefore, a sense of belonging also acts as a foundation for Akinola to be included in a community; African Diaspora food culture symbolizes belonging and community.

Brown's food memory also connects to community though in a different way. She wrote: "Most weekends I spent the night at a friend's house. This particular weekend I was with my bff [best friend forever], Alexandria, abuelita's house in East Oakland for a few hours. She was from Honduras and spoke only broken English. Alexandria spoke Spanish and English so she translated. She was also looking after Alexandria's younger cousins." Brown is being cared for a Honduran grandmother who she warmly calls "abuelita" and is fed as her best friend and the other children are, it can be inferred that even though Brown is not a blood relative to this family she is treated as such. Part and parcel of the Diaspora experience is to have no one exclusive home (Hall 2017, 172). Diaspora cultures are not separatist (Clifford

1994, 308). Therefore, Diasporas often build relationships and communities with other ethnic groups for as means of survival; in Brown's case she had a professional working mother and often spent time with her friends and their families – therefore one can assume a “village” and to that end a Diaspora village helped to raise her (this assumption can also be linked to the fact that Brown wrote of East Oakland, California where Latino and Asian populations comprise a large percent of the demographics).

Brown's food memory highlights Diasporas, more generally, and how they challenge traditional narratives by valorizing an implicit conception of supra-national kinship and an explicit discomfiture with nationalism (Gilroy 1994, 210). Diaspora are channeled through roots and routes that create community consciousness and solidarity to maintain identities outside of the national order (Clifford 1994, 308). Therefore, Brown's food memory more generally speaks to her connection to those of another Diaspora community (Honduran), the ways by which community is formed between multiple Diaspora groups and food as device for shared multi-ethnic and multicultural communal and community experiences. Brown wrote: “Alexandria's Abuelita warmed up corn tortillas on a skillet, rubbed butter on them, rolled them up and gave us each one. I was skeptical. As a California native I LOVE Mexican food, but I had never had tortillas like this. I tried it, they were delicious and ended up eating like 3.” Food, therefore, allows for a cross-cultural exchange. Sharing food between groups is important because there is significance in food traveling from one's hand to another's body (Weiss 2019, 30). Again, food functions as a means of binding communities and in Brown's food memory, different Diaspora communities; the author did not anticipate that the theme of food as a device to connect racially different Diaspora communities would surface from the interviews.

At the start of her food memory, Archer wrote: “From a young age, food has been a love language of mine, unknowingly altering my mood and associating itself with moments and places in time.” She went on to write: “Typically, my mom does all the cooking—I'm a bit spoiled in that sense. When I go home for a short visit, it's nice to have my mom take care of me. It reminds me of when I was a kid, enveloped in her love and the comforting warmth of her kitchen.” In Bartholomew's food memory, she wrote: “Flash forward to 2023, my first experience making an African dish with my first African love. WE took time prepping and

planning the ingredients. Nutmeg, cinnamon, onions, were just a few and love and intent, were others. I felt happy, grateful.” As previously stated, food is emotion (Murphy 2018, 95). In addition to expressing love, food symbolizes the type of support that is available, especially emotion support (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2). Both Archer and Bartholmew’s food memories symbolizes the emotion of love, Archer’s from her mother’s actions of cooking for her, and Bartholomew’s in the communal action of cooking with her partner; therefore, African Diaspora food cultures symbolize love.

T. Nixon’s food memory depicts cooking Thanksgiving dinner as a teenager with other family members. When they were finished cooking Nanny who is later revealed to be T. Nixon’s mother ask them to wrap the food up, the group was shocked and asked their mother why, to which she responded they would take the food to feed the homeless. T. Nixon wrote: “When all of the food was cooked and prepared, Nanny said “ok let’s wrap everything up”. Of course we were perplexed (confused) and of course we asked why. Her answer was “because we are taking it feed the homeless”. The question was asked, “Mom why you didn’t tell us?” And her response was - “Would you have made it with the same love if it was going to the less fortunate versus family?” As previously stated, food functions as a medium in and of itself: food serves to express emotions (Laine 2005, 106). Food can create and share meanings including rituals, beliefs, values and traditions with others (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2). T. Nixon’s mother used food to express her belief in sharing through the act of charitable giving. As previously stated, the sharing of food between people is important (Weiss 2019, 30). The act of T. Nixon and her family reflect the acts of others African Americans like waiter carriers of Gordonsville, Virginia who fed leftover chicken and other foods to neighborhood children, and the Black culinary workers during the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, T. Nixon’s food memory substantiates the idea that African American food culture symbolizes charitable giving.

### 3. African Diaspora and Memory

How are the African Diaspora, African Diaspora foods and memory connected?

The African Diaspora, African Diaspora culinary identity and memory are connected through nostalgia. Memory involves knowledge, implicit memory and bodily aspects (Erll 2011, 14). Nostalgia is about memory which ‘appears to be the “reliving” of the individual’s phenomenal experience during an earlier moment (Howard 2012, 1). Nostalgia is among those emotions which necessarily have cognitive content: rough the implicit or explicit thought that the object of one’s episodic memory both unrecoverable and desirable (Howard 2012, 1). In De Geneste-Archer’s food memory she wrote about the hurricane season in her native country Trinidad and Tobago and the dish that her mother and sister would prepare during this season, ground food soup. She wrote: “Smelling the soup boiling would be the only thing that might encourage me to stay awake and make me want to get up from under the comfort of my blanket.” There is affective value of food and smells, in the process reflecting the nostalgia structuring memories of home for the immigrant subject (Mannur 2007, 12). Nostalgia is always already predetermined - indeed over determined - in scripting immigrant attachment to the past (Mannur 2007, 12). De Geneste-Archer’s food memory also connects with Akinola’s as he wrote: “The food was so delicious and brought back memories of similar events held back home years past. This occasion created such a mental and emotional connection with home and I sure enjoyed the food and the people that were present.” Nostalgic invocations of food become the medium through which, in these cases, racial and ethnic identities are forged, reimagined, and remixed (Ahad 2016, 10).

In the article “Migration, Food, Memory, and Home-Building” (2010), Ghassan Hage writes:

Nostalgia is nothing more than a memory of a past experience imagined from the standpoint of the present to be homely. Clearly, nostalgic feelings abound not only in migrant life but in everybody’s life. They guide home-building in the present because one seeks to foster the kind of homely feeling one knows. And nostalgic feelings are invariably those homely feelings one remembers having experienced in the past. Thus, when one yearns for a communal life, one’s understanding of such a life is guided by the kind of communal feelings one remembers having had in specific situations in the past. This is why this yearning for homely communality translates into an attempt to build the past conditions of its production. (Hage 2010, 420)

Later in her food memory, De Geneste-Archer wrote: “Although it is sometimes hard to find the eddoes in the area I live in Brooklyn; I do now, as an adult cook this for my family during

heavily, snowy and rainy days. The similarity in taste and the nostalgia that comes with the memories are so dear to me; it brings my mom back to me, if only for moments. I hope my children enjoy it enough and it will do the same for the generations to come.” Memory, then, is presently conceptualized as something that does not stay put but circulates, migrates, travels (Bond, Craps, and Vermeulen 2017, 1). Therefore, just De Geneste-Archer and Akinola have migrated, so have their memories. Furthermore, homemade food in particular tends to bring up past memories and experiences of consuming the food and of family members who prepared the food, which become family narratives that become a part of a family’s identity (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2).

“Desire of the Diaspora, is closely intertwined with the collective yearning for an authentic tradition or pure place of origin” (Mannur 2007, 22). This authentic tradition is exhibited by Geneste-Archer as she attempts to find eddoes, a vegetable native to her homeland of Trinidad and Tobago in Brooklyn, New York. Migration leads to adaptation and substitution from another context encountered in Diaspora (Parveen 51, 2016). In De Geneste-Archer’s case she adapts the recipe for ground food soup based on the available ingredients where she currently lives. Furthermore, while some Diasporic culinary practices now differ from identical recipes in the homeland, the changing nature of recipes reflects the dynamic nature of the genealogical line even in Diaspora (Parveen 54, 2016). With that said, it is nostalgia that prompts De Geneste-Archer to cook ground food soup for her family, and it is nostalgia that connects the African Diaspora, African Diaspora food cultures and memory; the author did not anticipate that the theme of nostalgia would surface from the food memories.

## **Conclusion**

Even before arriving on American shores, African women were integral to the feeding of captives and crews on ships. African women were needed to prepare food on those ships and the skills of cooking, serving and cleaning were transferred to the plantation where African and African American women typically undertook the role of cook. Africans brought along with them memory, knowledge of agriculture and cultivation skills, this was evident when they were enslaved in Louisiana and South Carolina and employed complex methods and technologies to convert swamps and tidal wetlands into rice paddies. The enslaved were integral to the cultivation of rice and many other crops. On plantations, the enslaved supplemented their meager rations by growing their own vegetables, foraging, hunting and fishing. It was also on plantations where enslaved cooks were trusted to feed their enslavers. Throughout the period of enslavement, Black cooks gradually had their way with their master's palates, and dishes that had the mark of the cabin and of Africa, whether through ingredients or method, became an established part of the Southern culinary lexicon (Harris 2011, 105). Black cooks moved in and out of their comfort zone, creating their own cuisines based on flavors and combinations that might be deemed too plebeian for their slaveholders (Twitty 2017, 313).

Many of the enslaved also traded, bartered, hawked and sold crops or cooked foods on the streets and in markets. Culinary know-how was still a mark of the African population, and many of the enslaved were noted street vendors (Wilson 2007, 52). As early on as the colonial period, women of African descent had cornered the street-food market, selling goods that they'd created from homegrown ingredients. A Black woman sitting on a small stool selling sweetmeats or savories was a ubiquitous sight (Harris 2011, 125). The street vendors in the country's Northern and Southern urban areas kept some of the cultural and culinary connections alive by purveying snack foods and fried tidbits that were New World variants on classic African culinary atavisms (Harris 2011, 130). Food like cala fritters were a direct connection between Africa and America (the United States of America that is). Market entrepreneurship suggests that enslaved were enterprising.

Post emancipation, during the Reconstruction era, Black women in Gordonsville, Virginia would cook up fried chicken, biscuits, pies and other tasty goods and sell them from the train platform, passing the food over to passengers through the open windows (Godoy 2015). Later, by the 1910s, the Great Migration saw Black Americans migrate to the Northeast, Midwest and West in search of employment and opportunities. As Black neighborhoods began to form in cities like New York, their entrepreneurial spirits reemerged. In Harlem, for example, there were cook-shack, pushcart and horsecart vendors, who sold familiar comfort foods that Southerners craved like pigs' feet and fried chicken. African Americans did just as their enslaved ancestors and made a living selling food on the street and in markets (Harris 2011, 177).

During the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement protests depended on organized Black communities and leaders who were interested in bringing attention to the inequities that Blacks in the American South faced as well as the need for racial equality nationwide. Activists found allies in Black culinary workers who helped to financially fund the Civil Rights Movement and provided food to sustain those on the front lines. Black culinary workers too were activists. It was also during this era that the Black Panther Party formed and developed a breakfast program for Black inner-city youth. But what is most profound during this time in regard to African American food culture is the popularization of the term soul food. Soul food was a symbolic cultural product that was embedded with meaning and had a deeply historical lineage (Mitchell 2009, 19). In during the 1960s, that the history of African Americans began to be rewritten with pride for their cultural productions instead of with the shame that they were plagued due to experiences like enslavement; soul food was as much as a mantra for living as it was a diet (Harris 2011, 208). Soul food gave a name to a culinary tradition that existed before. Soul food was African American heritage cooking. Soul foods included stewed chicken, fried chicken, rice, gravy, collard greens, turnip greens, ham hocks, black-eyed peas, pork chops, chitterlings, catfish, cornbread, sweet potatoes, and many others. These were “down home” comfort foods that were familiar to Black Americans and were often on the table for dinner. It was this style of eating that was also connected to foods that the enslaved ate. While there is a throughline between Africa, enslaved Black cooks and the invention of soul food, some culinary historians often make the distinction that the culinary identity was not brought over on ships from Africa and instead developed on American soil

and therefore is positioned in an American context. Soul food was rooted in Southern regional cooking and was specific to the experiences of African Americans (Wallach 2019, 162).

Soul food was a food of resistance. Some Black culinary nationalists sought separation from what had become traditional American fare and to that end, a national American identity. By rejecting American food practices these culinary nationalists also rejected the unfulfilled promises of American ideals like equality. Soul food was a response to racial caste system that diminished African American humanity. Therefore, it can be said that African Americans have reclaimed African culinary heritage through the use of African agricultural knowledge and cultivation skills, enterprising market entrepreneurship, activism and acts of resistance to create soul food, a uniquely African – American culinary identity.

There is a relationship between soul food and African American identity as throughout the period of enslavement, Black cooks used their African Indigenous knowledge in the New World to create a Southern culinary identity (Harris 2011, 105). Despite efforts to separate African Americans from Southern cuisine, the Black hand was always in the pot. It was the Black hand that made the pot, carried the pot, emptied the pot, filled, cooked and served from the pot in the first and last place (Spivey 2022, 256). Therefore, there is a connection between soul food and African American identity as it was enslaved Blacks cooks who first helped to create Southern cuisine and it was their descendants who later created soul food; soul food then is connected to African American identity and it is of the unique experience of Africans (and their descendants) in America. This idea is substantiated through the interviews conducted with Sutton and Kennedy Nixon.

African Diaspora food cultures symbolize emotions and values. Food functions as a medium to express emotions (Laine 2005, 106). This was exhibited through the food memory submissions. Both Archer and Bartholmew's food memories symbolize the emotion of love, Archer's from her mother's actions of cooking for her, and Bartholomew's in the communal action of cooking with her partner; therefore, African Diaspora food cultures symbolize love. Food exhibits love and emotional support (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 2).

T. Nixon's mother used food to express her belief in sharing through the act of charitable giving. Sharing food is important as it is one way to exhibit kindness. The act of T. Nixon and her family reflect the acts of others African Americans like waiter carriers of Gordonsville,

Virginia who fed leftover chicken and other foods to neighborhood children, and the Black culinary workers during the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, T. Nixon's food memory substantiates the idea that African American food culture symbolizes charitable giving.

Food creates an open space for family relationships. In the interviews both subjects correlated family to food by using words including family, love, fellowship, enjoyment, share, sharing, together and togetherness, terms like family experience and family dynamics and referencing family members by name or relation. With that said, food can communicate affection and family culture (Teoh Synn Ee 2023, 1). The way by which food is made and enjoyed is integral in building and sustaining familial bonds. Therefore, African Diaspora food cultures symbolize family and family values.

Food is embedded with meaning. Brown's food memory highlighted her connection to those of another Diaspora community (Honduran), the ways by which community is formed between multiple Diaspora groups and food as device for shared multi-ethnic and multicultural communal and community experiences. For Akinola's food memory helped to connect him to others of his tribe and nationality. The sense of belonging also acts as a foundation for Akinola to be included in a community; African Diaspora food culture therefore symbolizes belonging and community.

The African Diaspora, African Diaspora foods and memory are connected through nostalgia. Nostalgia is memory that is a re-living of an earlier experience. There is value in food and its smells, in the process of reflecting nostalgia and structuring memories of home for the migrant subjects. De Geneste-Archer's food memory, she wrote she recalled the smell and comfort of ground food soup. De Geneste-Archer's food memory also connects with Akinola's as recalled memories of similar events at home in years past. Nostalgic experiences with food are a medium through which racial and ethnic identities are forged and reimagined. Therefore, it is nostalgia that connects the African Diaspora, African Diaspora food cultures and memory.

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## **Annexes**

### **A. Interview Questions**

1. Where is your family originally from (city or state)?
  - a. Do you know the story of how your family migrated from that place of origin to where you grew up?
2. Take a minute to think about a fond memory you have that includes food and walk me through it.
3. What are some foods your family traditionally cooks (whether for holidays or on a consistent basis)?
4. Did someone teach you to cook or did you learn to cook independently (i.e., from cookbooks, television shows etc.)?
  - b. If someone taught you to cook, who were / are they?
  - c. What do you recall about those cooking experiences?
5. Does your family have any food traditions?
6. Are there any recipes or food traditions you have passed down to your own child / children?
  - d. If so, what are they?
7. When you think of the term African American heritage cooking, what comes to mind?
8. Are there any foods that you associate as being African American or Black foods?
  - e. If so, what are they?
9. Do you think African Americans have created a culinary identity in America?
  - f. If so, what would you describe this culinary identity as?
10. Is there anything else you would like to share?

### **B. (Re)Storing African Diaspora Food Memories: Interview with Phylista Sutton**

For transcription purposes the interviewer Akinyemi A. Akinola will be noted as AAA and the interviewee Phylista Sutton will be noted as PS.

AAA: Where is your family originally from (city or state)?

PS: My mom was originally from Amarillo, Texas, and my dad from Louisville, Kentucky.

AAA: Do you know the story of how your family migrated from that place of origin to where you grew up?

PS: From my understanding, I believe my mom came to San Diego first, and her sisters followed. The story gets distorted and it's a shame that it really wasn't passed down like it should have been. But, her and all of her sisters, her brothers, there were six of them ended up in San Diego, and everybody stayed within a certain radius of each other. And then my dad, he was in the military, so I think he went in at 17, it could be 18, but that's how he met my mom in San Diego.

AAA: Take a minute to think about a fond memory you have that includes food and walk me through it.

PS: I just remember one of my fondest memories was the fish frys we used to have. My dad and my mom would go fishing early in the morning to catch their catfish and bluegills and all of that, and come back. And my dad was fileting in the in the garage, and then they just get on the phone "We got some fish", and before you know it, cousins were coming over, and aunties and uncles were coming over, and my mom was in the kitchen seasoning fish and cooking fish, and sending us to the store to get items for potato salad and greens and cornbread. And then when my aunt and uncles would come over, and cousins and the music playing and everybody's laughing, having a good time, it would be about three o'clock in the afternoon, people wouldn't leave to like, one in the morning, because that would lead to a card game, or them reminiscing and laughing and doing whatever. And I remember as a child, it's like it was such a just a fun atmosphere, and the food was just plenty. That was one thing about my parents. It was just plenty. They rather have too much than too little.

AAA: What are some foods your family traditionally cooks (whether for holidays or on a consistent basis)?

PS: What I grew up on was fried chicken, fried pork chops, greens, cabbage, neck bones, red beans and rice and fried okra. Every meal for some reason, my dad had to have a slice of tomato and a slice of onion. My mom's salad was iceberg with some dressing on top that she gave my dad. All the little fixings that we have now, that's what we grew up on, hamburgers and hot dogs, budget friendly meals. Chicken, rice, biscuits, green beans, those were all in rotation.

AAA: Did someone teach you to cook or did you learn to cook independently (i.e., from cookbooks, television shows etc.)? If someone taught you to cook, who were / are they?

PS: I guess I would say I was taught by observing. My mom could cook, my aunties could cook, and just watching them and trying to navigate myself in the kitchen to replicate what they made and then put my own little spin on it. And then I graduated to cooking shows and kind of still putting my spin on it. But I find that in the foods that I cook, it's always something from my past that I bring into the dish.

AAA: You said you learned to cook through observation, what do you recall?

PS: Measurement wasn't a big deal with my mom and my aunties. There's a little bit of this, a little bit of that, especially my Aunt Ocie she was the cook in the family, and she would just tell you, just put a sprinkle of this or dash of that, or she'll eye it or pour it in your palm or whatever, but observing how they did things, and kind of taste it when you finish it and see what it tastes like. Take it from there. It wasn't like it is now where you cook, and you have to make a sample and this and that. It wasn't at that time. I believe the mindset was that somebody could have had that, so don't waste.

AAA: Does your family have any food traditions?

PS: I guess we do, I'll pick one cornbread dressing. It has to be made a certain way, in certain order, and cooked a certain time frame. Don't add anything extra. It has to be the corn bread, the bread, the seasoning, the this, the that, if it's off by a little bit, then now you've messed up the whole meal. But sad to say, a lot of that is probably lost now, this generation, even visiting my cousins, I don't see a lot of the foods that we grew up with, really.

AAA: That's a good segue. Are there any recipes or food traditions you have passed down to your own child? If so, what are they?

PS: Yes, I have passed down recipes that I put together, that I tweaked from growing up, and I passed, passed it down to my daughter, and I told her to keep it close to the vest and to only pass that down to somebody who's worthy of it. Now we're just talking about a dish, but still it's special to me, and to this day, she has a couple that she will not let people in the kitchen to see how she makes it. And then I passed down some that I found in my mom's recipe to my daughter. A recipe that's passed down is an ice cream recipe that my mom made. My mom

made ice cream from scratch. And I remember as she used to have the crank ice cream maker, and we would have to take turns turning it.

AAA: When you think of the term African American heritage cooking, what comes to mind?

PS: Soul Food. Soul Food, to me, supersedes macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, greens, everything that I mentioned. Soul food to me is when you get in that kitchen and it's just a soulful thing for me, it comes from within. Because number one, I want it to taste good. I get into the recipe, I want the end result to be enjoyable for people. Put a smile on your face, fill your belly, and you just feel good, because that's how I felt when all that food was on the table and everybody was over and we ate and, you know, go get another plate. I know people think automatically fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, yams, greens, all that sort of thing. And it is, but it's a little deeper for me.

AAA: Are there any foods that you associate as being African American or Black foods? If so, what are they?

PS: Greens, yams, okra, fried chicken, ham hocks, neckbones, pork chops, cornbread, biscuits and gravy, I think that's more of a southern thing, I don't know if that's exactly soul food.

AAA: Do you think African Americans have created a culinary identity in America? If so, what would you describe this culinary identity as?

PS: I do believe we have a culinary identity. Because when you hear when somebody say African American food or whatever, you automatically think what I just mentioned previously.

AAA: How do you think that has come about?

PS: Generational food wealth. Generational food wealth exactly because it was passed down from our ancestors. And here we are, 2024 still making these same dishes, tweaked here and there. And depending on where you go, can be very expensive, and depending on who's making it, it could be budget friendly. I do not think we get the recognition that we should for our foods, because I do believe a lot of other cultures have African American influence in their dishes.

AAA: Is there anything else you would like to share?

PS: Watching the shows about African American food and our journey from our ancestors, it's just, I don't know. It's because I'm sixty-one and I should have paid attention earlier, but I did not. But I know now the importance of that family, soul searching, togetherness around a pot of food. You solved your problems, you listened to problems, you had, your joys and your trials and your tribulations around this pot of food, and you raise families on this pot of food, and it's generation to generation to generation. I just wish more people understood that. And I love to cook, I do. I didn't at first. I did not at first, but I love to cook. I have found that when I don't feel good, I cannot, and my daughter would not let me in the kitchen if I don't feel good. But the past three years, I found solace in cooking. I would cook and take this stuff to work. It got me out of my head. Yeah, absolutely doing the baking and the cooking. I would take it for my coworkers, and I found joy in a very painful time.

### C. Description of the Interview with Phylista Sutton

The interview starts with Sutton sharing that she was born and raised in San Diego, California and that her mother is originally from Amarillo, Texas and her father from Louisville, Kentucky. In regards to how her parents arrived in San Diego, Sutton states that her mother first migrated there, followed by her sisters and brothers; there were six siblings in total that relocated to San Diego. Sutton's father was in the military as a teenager and met her mother in San Diego.

Sutton goes on to share a fond food memory that revolved around fish fries. Her parents would go out fishing and would prepare the catch for a gathering of family members. Food eaten during the gathering included fried fish, potato salad, greens, and cornbread and, although attendees would arrive in the afternoon, they would not leave until late at night as they would enjoy each other's company with music, card games and laughter.

Some of the traditional foods that Sutton's family ate included fried chicken, fried pork chops, greens, cabbage, neck bones, red beans and rice and fried okra. Other foods that were eaten consistently were rice, biscuits, green bean. She also highlights that her family ate budget-friendly meals of hot dogs and hamburgers. To that end, Sutton learned to cook through observation as she would watch her mother and aunts and she would replicate what they made and remake it to her preference; she would later watch cooking shows on television and would do the same – remake foods to her preference. When asked about what she recalled from observing she answered that measurements were not exact but instead ingredients were

added as “a sprinkle of this or dash of that”. When asked about food traditions Sutton shares that her family makes cornbread dressing in a particular way and that a lot of food traditions have been lost, as when she visits family, she does not eat the same foods that she grew up eating. Nevertheless, Sutton shares that she did pass down her mother’s recipe for homemade ice cream to her child and recollects the manual process of making ice cream from scratch.

Sutton thinks the term African American heritage cooking relates to soul food and supersedes foods like macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, and greens. She states: “Soul food to me is when you get in that kitchen and it’s just a soulful thing for me, it comes from within”. She also describes foods like “Greens, yams, okra, fried chicken, ham hocks, neckbones, pork chops, cornbread, biscuits and gravy” as being associated with Black or African American foods. To that end, Sutton believes that African Americans have created a culinary identity and that has come about through generational food wealth. Furthermore, she states: “Generational food wealth exactly because it was passed down from our ancestors”. She goes on to say: “I do not think we get the recognition that we should for our foods, because I do believe a lot of other cultures have African American influence in their dishes”.

Sutton adds: “I know now the importance of that family, soul searching, togetherness around a pot of food”, where joy, trials and tribulations, and families were raised around a pot of food and that it is passed from one generation to another. She also shares that she now loves to cook although she did not initially and that she cannot cook if she does not feel good. To that end, she has found solace in cooking as it has gotten her “out of her head” and helped her to find joy in painful times.

Sutton’s interview highlights the importance of food in family gatherings and the sharing that would take place between her parents and other family members; their home was a communal setting where events like fish fries took place, and attendees would spend hours eating and enjoying one another’s company. The interview also alluded to the closeness of Sutton’s family whether in proximity or otherwise, as she stated that her mother and all of her mother’s siblings relocated to San Diego and stayed within a close distance of one another. One could infer that this closeness allowed the family members to sustain bonds.

Sutton also described traditional African American dishes that her family ate like fried chicken, greens, and cornbread dressing, as well as budget friendly items. Sutton was taught to cook through observation and emphasized the intuitive cooking methods passed down from

her elders; she too was not taught to cook using precise measurements. Sutton recognizes that some of her family's food traditions have been lost as the foods she grew up eating are not the foods she eats in the present day when she visits family. Nevertheless, she has passed down a recipe for homemade ice cream to her own child. This signifies the importance of tradition and the upkeep of such when possible.

For Sutton, soul food supersedes the foods themselves and is much more meaningful; she mentions the significance of soul food and defines it as a deeply emotional and communal experience. She later shares how cooking has helped her through difficult times and that she cannot cook if she does not feel well. This connects to the belief that one has to be present, in good spirits, and cooking with intention while making soul food as the energy from the food will transfer from the cook to the pot to the eater. Sutton also shares that an African American culinary identity has been created by what she calls "generational food wealth", as dishes (or variations of dishes) have been passed down from one generation to another. Sutton also speaks to the pot of food as site where families were raised, dealt with trials and tribulations and experienced joy and that there is importance in family and togetherness; seemingly, Sutton is reconciling her own experiences growing up and keeping traditions with the present day where traditions are not emphasized as much. Nevertheless, she has regard for traditions and understands the importance of passing them on to younger generations.

#### D. (Re)Storing African Diaspora Food Memories: Interview with Candie Kennedy Nixon

For transcription purposes the interviewer Akinyemi A. Akinola will be noted as AAA and the interviewee Candie Kennedy Nixon will be noted as CKN.

AAA: Where is your family originally from (city or state)?

CKN: High Springs, Florida.

AAA: Do you know the story of how your family migrated from that place of origin to where you grew up?

CKN: Yes, typical story of African Americans in the South, in the late 1950s and 1960s, Southerners migrated to the North for employment opportunities. And so that is what my mother did when she was a teenager, she migrated to New York.

AAA: Take a minute to think about a fond memory you have that includes food and walk me through it.

CKN: So I would say my first memory of food would be cathead biscuits.

AAA: What are cathead biscuits?

CKN: Just biscuits, but they were homemade biscuits. But they were big and so because they were big, the name cathead biscuits. Served with molasses syrup, thick molasses syrup that was very dark and with either a fat back, bacon or sausage. Homemade biscuits were a labor, we used to love it, and as opposed to having it for breakfast we would often have it for dinner.

AAA: What are some foods your family traditionally cooks (whether for holidays or on a consistent basis)?

CKN: In childhood it would have been food that would have been considered the scraps of meat. It wasn't such a heavily meat-focused diet and when we did it would be things like the chicken back, like the fat back, any part of any animal, but definitely pork and even the scraps of beef. And usually involved some kind of smoked meat cooked inside beans. The beans and that meat would comprise a full meal. That was your meal with a little meat, the beans and rice and a pan of cornbread, cooked in a black frying pan.

AAA: Did someone teach you to cook or did you learn to cook independently (i.e., from cookbooks, television shows etc.)?

CKN: Never, ever, ever, from a cookbook or television show. That would have been my mother and sisters just part of the learning process.

AAA: What do you recall about those cooking experiences?

CKN: I think there was an expectation that you knew how to cook even without cooking. So somehow, I knew how to cook rice, very good at a very early age. So, I can remember, I say nine, but it probably being younger that I was responsible for cooking rice for the family dinner all the time. And the thought was because my father loved rice, that somehow I inherited that. But rice is also my favorite meal, right? So rice, always having to cook that. When I was about eleven, my sister said, "go cook these beans". I never cooked them before. She said, "I'm gonna tell you how to do it." I did it, black eyed peas. Aunt Diane, fifth grade. It came out a little watery. She said, "that's alright next time you got it." So it's just that it was

expectation that you knew how to cook, and a lot of it came from observation, but observation being involved in the kitchen. So, if they were cooking potato salad, you had to peel the potatoes, you had to cut the pickles, back then we didn't use relish. You actually sat and cut the pickles and stuff up. So, you know, you learned how to cube, you learned how to do sizing. You learned not necessarily by measuring cups, they took the palm of your hand. So, observation, and then you just applied what you observe, and they trusted you. It wasn't like today, when people are fearful to let kids go to kitchen.

AAA: Does your family have any food traditions?

CKN: Even as big as our family was, the first tradition was that we all sat at the table, all together. That was Nanny thing. So that was one, the other tradition was like everybody cooked, even the boys learned how to cook. So, everybody was expected to know how to cook. Because we had a working mother, you had to learn how to be self-sufficient. So, we all learned how to cook. I think we all had a part. When she bought fish, we learned how to scale it, learned how to prep it, didn't necessarily know how to cook it until you got of age. I think it was a progression of cooking. We all got in as a family. You know, that was family time, that was talk time, laughter time, discipline time, but it was all centered around food. So I think that most important was to be around the table. And food wasn't something that was set aside. It was just part of the family experience, the family dynamics and the family dynamics occurred around you making that food.

AAA: Are there any recipes or food traditions you have passed down to your own child / children? If so, what are they?

CKN: If anything, what I call Table Talk. Just being in the kitchen, always in the kitchen, and allowing the family dynamics to flow from that kitchen in the process of cooking food, talking to your children, be it doing homework, talking to children, laughter, music, playing music while you're cooking. I think the family foods that we passed when I think about Thanksgiving, for me, everything that my mother did was handmade from scratch, like pies weren't from Betty Crocker. They were actually made from scratch. And I knew every holiday, we was going to have a coconut, and we was going to have a homemade lemon meringue pie. We was going to have homemade sweet potato pies, chocolate cake, strawberry cake, vanilla cake. So those, I think the thing is, the foods may have changed a little bit, but I think the fellowship of food, like food and fellowship go together, right? Even if we do it at a

restaurant. But it's all about the fellowship of us. Like I said, even just sharing. Sharing, whatever comes out. We all share, so things like that.

AAA: When you think of the term African American heritage cooking, what comes to mind?

CKN: I think of greens, things that were cultivated. I think of more cultivated food, grown food than food that was purchased. Because that's what we did when we was younger. You had the people either grew it and gave it to you. It was a lot more, what we don't have now, leafy vegetables. There's a lot more familiarity with the food, if not picking it, cleaning it, shucking. A lot more intimacy with the natural state of food, which is what we don't have now. And just good food. You had to have good food. People who didn't know how to cook didn't mess with food. One, it was a financial thing. I think African Americans had to make, learn to make food good, because it was a financial thing. We didn't have money to waste our food, you couldn't waste food. So when you think about your foods like fat back and all those things, those are all foods that could be salted and preserved, beans and all that, even cathead biscuits, that was a bread that you could sit aside for a couple days.

AAA: Are there any foods that you associate as being African American or Black foods?

CKN: I don't think we own them now. I think what we own is the way that we process them. Greens, any type of leafy green, beans, meats, like the scrap of meats, and taking those scraps and making something out of them. Like I said, the bacon, or the neck bones, or what now they call pork belly those type of things. Organ meats because that was big, we ate a lot of organ meats back in the day. So to me, it's been to take the scraps of unwanted what typically people would not want, and take it and make something. And I think the thing that makes it African American, one, of course, is the spices. But I think the thing that makes it a culture food is taking a refused food and making it into a delicious, delicious meal that you use to celebrate. Instead of a meal of defeat, it is a meal of victory. Because it shouldn't have been food that was good. It shouldn't have tasted good. It should not. Nowadays, these foods are being highly prized by mainstream chefs, and it's just foods that we ate every day, but somehow, now that the mainstream society have gotten it, you know, mac and cheese it's been catapulted, now every restaurant sells it.

AAA: Do you think African Americans have created a culinary identity in America? If so, what would you describe this culinary identity as?

CKN: Indeed, indeed. If you look at fried chicken, which is closely associated with African Americans, right, that's something that came out of Africa. The chicken back in the day was something, when I say back in the day, talking about during slavery time was an animal that others were not accustomed to eating. And again, we took it and we took our spices and made it, and now it is so widespread, right? Soldiers during the Korean War, serving in Korea, they introduced fried chicken, and now it's one of their biggest things. So definitely, our food is identity, and our food is not only such an identity, again, mainstream has begun to profit from it. Our food was originally a rejected food, right? It was criticized for being not nutritious, right? Criticized for being refused. It was a food that certain classes wouldn't eat. People would be embarrassed to eat it, and things like that, right? And now it's something that's being lauded everywhere. People are trying to do twists on it, chefs are doing it. I think the thing that makes it an African American food, because there is something as much as people try to imitate it and cook it, they can't, because it goes beyond the food. I think it goes in to the soul of the people and you can't imitate a soul.

AAA: Is there anything else you would like to share?

CKN: I think food and family go together. There is importance in African American food and family. Even if you are alone if you make certain foods, it can evoke certain emotions, right? It can transcend you back to a place and a time. Like anything good food is a comfort food, right? It's a reminder of our heritage. We do our holiday season just as everybody else but I think Thanksgiving, Christmas, those things take on a different meaning for African Americans, especially in regards to our relationship to food. The seriousness, you can't mess it up, because you can destroy the whole family vibe. I think the secret ingredient that Nanny taught me about food is really love. And I think love is what makes you prepare it, right? So for me, watching my mother prepare by scratch, which I know today, is a big feat. Love to feed 10, 11, people. That's an all-day process, right? But the enjoyment she got from doing it that she kept doing it, and indeed, she did pass it on to us. If anything, I hope I pass it on to somebody, fix the food that people love, bring them together, whether we are getting along at that moment or not, we ain't got to be able to get along, just eat the food and take a plate to go. So that is what I hope is passed on.

E. Description of the Interview with Candie Kennedy Nixon

The interview starts with Kennedy Nixon sharing that she was born and raised on Long Island, New York but her family has Southern roots as her mother is originally from High Springs, Florida and as a teenager her mother was a part of the Great Migration whereby, she traveled North to New York for employment opportunities. When thinking about fond memories of food, Kennedy Nixon recalls cathead biscuits which were large biscuits, made from scratch (homemade) and usually served with molasses and a meat like pork fat back, bacon, or sausage. Additionally, she recalls the foods the family typically ate, which included scraps of meat or smoked meat cooked with beans, rice and cornbread. She attests that her family did not eat a diet where meat was at the center of the plate. Kennedy Nixon learned to cook by observation and participation in the kitchen, with her mother and sisters teaching her various cooking skills. From a young age she was responsible for cooking dishes like rice, and later graduated to foods like beans under the instruction of a family member. She also states that measuring cups were not used and that through observation and participation she gained other's trust in cooking.

Kennedy Nixon goes on to highlight traditions that her family has around food and states that one of the first of these traditions is to sit at the table together. The table served as a place for family dynamics and conversation, discipline and laughter. She goes on to state that another tradition was that one knew how to cook even if they were not directly taught, and this expectation was also transferred to her male siblings as the idea was that cooking for oneself allowed for self-sufficiency. When reflecting on what she would like to pass on to her own children, she states that the family dynamics around the table is one such thing. She also mentions that sharing and fellowship are part and parcel of the food experiences of a family.

When Kennedy Nixon is asked about her thoughts on the term African American heritage cooking, she thinks of foods that were cultivated and foods that are in their natural state. She also thinks of foods that could be salted and preserved, as food was not to be wasted. Furthermore, when asked about foods that she associates with African Americans or Black foods, she speaks to the way various foods are processed or cooked for example with spices. She also highlights the use of offals or cuts of meats that would typically be discarded and using refused foods to make delicious meals; instead of being meals to defeat, they were meals of victory.

When asked if she thinks African Americans have created a culinary identity, Kennedy Nixon believes that this is the case and uses chicken as an example, stating that it was a meat that non-Blacks did not often eat during the time of slavery; but later, during the Korean War, African American soldiers stationed there seemingly shared their recipe for fried chicken and it has become popularized as Korean fried chicken. To that end, she states that mainstream has profited from African American foods, and foods that were once criticized as being not nutritious are being lauded and chefs are doing their own take on African American foods. She states that, even though this is the case, “as much as people try to imitate it and cook it, they can’t, because it goes beyond the food. I think it goes in to the soul of the people and you can’t imitate a soul”.

Kennedy Nixon finishes the interview by sharing that she believes certain foods can evoke emotions and she believes the secret ingredient to food is love, as that is what makes one prepare it. To that end, what she hopes to pass on is bringing people together to share the food that they love.

Kennedy Nixon’s interview highlights various recurring themes as they relate to African American migration and food culture. She shares that her mother migrated from Florida to New York seeking employment opportunities and therefore was a part of the Great Migration, as stated above. When reflecting on the foods that she and her family ate, they were typically foods that were hearty and filling and had the ability to be preserved as she had ten immediate family members. She spoke of cathead biscuits and other foods that her mother made from scratch (including cakes and pies during the holidays), as well as having a diet that was not meat-heavy. However, when meat was used it was either smoked or consisted of offals like chicken back or pork fat backs, as stated above. These types of foods were typical of foods that the enslaved ate; therefore, there is a throughline between the eating habits of the enslaved and the eating habits of Kennedy Nixon’s family. One can infer that due to the amount of people in Kennedy Nixon’s family (eleven in total), and the cost of food, these foods were the most cost-effective to feed a large group, as well as the most familiar considering they had been eaten for generations and were foods traditional to people who were from the South (i.e., Kennedy Nixon’s mother brought some aspects of Southern food culture along with her to the North).

Kennedy Nixon learned to cook from other family members at a young age and was responsible for cooking dishes like rice, as she was not only fond of the dish but also cooked it well. She goes on to share that a lot of her learning to cook took place through observation and later participating in small tasks like peeling potatoes. She also stated that measuring cups were not used and that she was trusted: according to her, back then, there was no fear in allowing children in the kitchen to cook. In terms of food traditions, Kennedy Nixon shares that sitting down as a family was one food tradition that she grew up with and another was that all family members helped out and cooked together, adding that her male siblings also learned to cook as cooking became an act of self-sufficiency, as stated above. One could infer such self-sufficiency and agency were important tenets during the time that Kennedy Nixon grew up, as her age attests that she was born during the American Civil Rights Movement by which African Americans sought to abolish disenfranchisement, racial segregation and discrimination.

When sharing traditions that she would like to pass down to other generations she shares the table as a site for family dynamics, one in which conversations, discipline, laughter, teamwork, sharing, and fellowship all take place. When reflecting on the term African American heritage cooking she thought of foods that were grown rather than purchased, this answer is indicative of someone who has Southern roots as from the Reconstruction through Jim Crow eras people in the South typically ate what they or others around them grew, which therefore connects to heritage foods and heritage cooking. Furthermore, Kennedy Nixon associates the processing or seasoning of foods as Black or African American as well as taking cuts of meats or undesirable foods and “taking a refused food and making it into a delicious, delicious meal that you use to celebrate”. She speaks of Black foods as foods of victory rather than defeat. She also believes that African Americans have created a culinary identity that others have been able to profit off of and uses dishes like fried chicken and macaroni and cheese as examples. She states: “Our food was originally a rejected food, right? It was criticized for being not nutritious, right? Criticized for being refused. It was a food that certain classes wouldn’t eat. People would be embarrassed to eat it, and things like that, right? And now it’s something that’s being lauded everywhere. People are trying to do twists on it, chefs are doing it. I think the thing that makes it an African American food, because there is something as much as people try to imitate it and cook it, they can't, because it goes beyond the food. I think it goes in to the soul of the people and you can’t imitate a soul.” Kennedy

Nixon finishes the interview by sharing that love is the secret ingredient in cooking and that food and family go hand in hand and that her mother found enjoyment in feeding their family which is what she hopes to pass on.

#### F. Food Memories Prompt / Instructions

The message read as follows:

#### Food Memories Prompt / Instructions

Share a memorable experience you've had with African cuisine, African American heritage cooking (Soul Food) or African Diaspora foods (Caribbean, Brazilian, etc.).

\*The African diaspora are people originally from Africa who have been moved involuntarily or voluntarily.

Incorporate some of the five senses when writing about the experience. Think about the following:

What did you see?

What did you hear?

What did you smell?

What did you touch?

How did you feel (physically, mentally or emotionally)?

And of course, how did the food taste?

The experience you journal may include family or friends (like celebrating a holiday) or be more personal (like cooking a recipe yourself for the first time). Any meaningful food memory will suffice.

Requirements:

Include your name, age, the city you were born in, and where you currently live (in the same format as if you were writing a letter)

Please write at minimum five sentences, if the spirit moves you feel free to write more.

Submit via: SMS Text Message, Microsoft Word or Google Docs

Deadline: Wednesday, September 4, 2024

The author asked subjects for their participation as early as Spring 2024 and shared the prompt with participants in August 2024. The original deadline for submission was September 4, 2024, the author extended the deadline until September 8, 2024, to allow participants additional time to complete and submit the prompt.

G. (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories: Akinyemi Akinola

Submission from: Akinyemi Akinola

Akinyemi Akinola

Place of Birth: Ibadan (Western Nigeria)

Place of Residence: Hempstead, New York, U.S.A.

Date: September 7, 2024

TITLE: Food Memories.

It was a gathering of friends, relatives and well-wishers that attended the reception of the wedding Ceremony of the Alukos, from the Yoruba tribe of the Western Nigeria, held at a Nigerian owned restaurant in Manhattan, New York, a few weeks ago. There we were treated to delicious Nigerian Foods of different varieties and flavors.

The local food that stood out to me and my choice was popular and peculiar to the Yoruba tribe of the newlywed couple (my tribe as well), Fufu with spinach stew.

Fufu is made of Yam tuber made into flour, mixed with boiled water to make a smooth, light and solid substance that draws when scooped by hand and dipped into the spinach stew for an easy passage to the stomach.

This food was well prepared and flavored good that approaching the dining area, the smell and the aroma of the seasoning was mouthwatering. The Fufu was specially flavored by mixing the yam flour with sweet potato flour to enhance the taste and the spinach stew was

packed with smoked fish, shrimp and grounded dried melon seeds all cooked together in red palm oil to make it very inviting to taste, it was seasoned good that I was sweating at the first bite.

The food was so delicious and brought back memories of similar events held back home years past. This occasion created such a mental and emotional connection with home and I sure enjoyed the food and the people that were present.

#### H. Description of Akinyemi Akinola's Food Memory

Akinola writes about his experience attending the reception of the wedding ceremony of the Alukos of the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria and the experience that he had eating at the ceremony. At the ceremony there were many Nigerian foods to choose from and he ate fufu and spinach stew, dishes that are familiar and traditional to the Yoruba tribe. The fufu was made of pounded yam flour and sweet potato flour – the latter being an American addition and highlighting both the similarity in taste between the African yam and its American counterpart the sweet potato, as well as the evolution of a traditional Nigerian (and West African) dish in an American setting.

Akinola also writes about the spinach stew that the fufu is dipped into. Stews of various kinds can be attributed to Nigeria and many have a base of vegetables (like spinach) or fruits (like tomatoes) and additions usually include proteins of poultry, beef or seafood. The spinach stew that Akinola ate also contained smoked fish, shrimp and grounded melon seeds which added to the seasoning of the stew and made it “very inviting to taste” and “mouthwatering”. Red palm oil was also used in this dish and is often used in many Nigerian dishes; using this type of oil instead of a substitute alludes to the cook's inflexibility with certain ingredients, especially those that are native to Nigeria and West Africa and although somewhat difficult to procure, necessary to maintaining tradition and flavor. Akinola also writes about the spiciness of the stew. Many Nigerian foods are spicy and chilis and other spices are staple ingredients in many foods. Akinola writes that the dish was “seasoned good” and that he was sweating on the first bite.

At the end of his entry, Akinola writes about how the food he ate at the wedding reception “brought back memories of similar events held back home years past”, this nostalgia could be

in part because of the food he ate and could also be due to the setting or the event and its participants. Akinola was attending a reception of a newly married Nigerian couple in Manhattan, New York. It is highly likely that although attendants of the ceremonies varied in age, race, ethnicity and tribe, Akinola found community and familiarity among the group, especially among those who were of the Yoruba tribe or from the same region as Akinola. To that end, Akinola's food memory speaks to the continuation of tradition among the Nigerian and Yoruba Diaspora in New York with the wedding ceremony, reception and food representing family, home, community, mobility, and realized dreams. Nigerians hold traditions dear and the continuation of those traditions in America is of importance as it serves as a connection to home and also to others of the Diaspora in their new home. Akinola "sure enjoyed the food and the people that were present".

#### I. (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories: Tiffany Archer

Submission from: Tiffany Archer

Tiffany Archer

Born in Brooklyn, New York

Currently living in Miami, Florida

Age: 36

From a young age, food has been a love language of mine, unknowingly altering my mood and associating itself with moments and places in time. One such moment was the one-year anniversary of my adoption, which I chose to spend with my adopted mother, who was born and raised in Trinidad but was currently residing in New York. I vividly remember the smell of curry as I exited the elevator. It was a Wednesday morning, and as I got closer to Mom's apartment door, I happily thought to myself, "Mom is cooking!" Upon entering the house, the smell rushed me, with all the spices seeping into my clothes and hair. I had just arrived from the airport, and my mom stood in the narrow kitchen, stirring away at all the flavors and shrimp in her cast iron pot. To my left, I could see medium-sized dough balls covered with a moist hand towel. "Wow, she's making roti!" I thought.

Roti is a round, unleavened flatbread made from flour, water, salt, and oil. Often eaten with curries and dal (chickpeas), it's one of my favorite dishes and a true Caribbean staple. It has a pungent smell of cumin, garlic, and onions, and if not careful, it can stain anything it touches.

Typically, my mom does all the cooking—I'm a bit spoiled in that sense. When I go home for a short visit, it's nice to have my mom take care of me. It reminds me of when I was a kid, enveloped in her love and the comforting warmth of her kitchen.

I gave my mom a kiss and asked if she needed any help. In her very heavy accent, she shoed me away and pointed at my shoes, which I was still wearing. I looked down, quickly kicked both shoes off, and made my way to the sofa. Finally, lunch was ready! My mom handed the warm plate to me, and I could see the steam from the curry rising into the air. I took a seat and went to town, leaving no crumbs, using the roti dough to sop up all the curry juice and shrimp. The room was quiet except for the sound of me swallowing—I was in heaven! Moments later, I finished, and my mom looked up at me from her seat and said, "Either you were really hungry or you really enjoyed the food." I laughed and replied, "I didn't come to play," and we both burst into laughter.

#### J. Description of Tiffany Archer's Food Memory

Archer's food memory details the experience she had in commemorating the anniversary of her adoption, which she celebrated by visiting her mother who lives in New York, but is originally from Trinidad and Tobago. Before she describes the meal she ate, she speaks to the importance that food has played in her life and she calls it a "love language" which she associates with moments and places in time – these can be inferred to be memories. Archer goes on to share how her senses, specifically smell, were first engaged, she states "I vividly remember the smell of curry as I exited the elevator", which led her to think that her mother was cooking. The meal that Archer's mother cooked was a curry that included shrimp and roti, a flatbread. Archer writes "it's one of my favorite dishes and a true Caribbean staple", these dishes highlight the fusion of Caribbean food as both curry and roti are originally from India and are thought to have arrived in Trinidad and Tobago when Indian indentured laborers arrived around 1845, making both curry and roti transnational dishes that have evolved with Caribbean and in this case specifically Trinidadian influences. Again, these dishes highlight how people of the African Diaspora have created and evolved their own food cultures in lieu of participating in and being inspired by that of others.

Archer's food memory also details the relationship between her and her mother. She writes of love, warmth, affection and laughter; "It reminds me of when I was a kid, enveloped in her love and the comforting warmth of her kitchen", "I gave my mom a kiss and asked if she

needed any help”, and “I laughed and replied, ‘I didn’t come to play,’ and we both burst into laughter”. One could infer that Archer and her mother have a strong bond and a relationship of mutual respect; Archer’s mother does all the cooking and although Archer is aware that her mother prefers her not to help, she still offers, even as she is “shooed” out of the kitchen. Later as Archer finishes the meal, she and her mother share a joke which alludes to Archer’s hunger and the tastiness of the food, and they laugh with one another.

There are also two other “customs” that Archer writes about, one evident and the other more hidden. Archer writes about her mother pointing at her shoes, where Archer “quickly kicked both shoes off” as it is a custom for many people of the African Diaspora to take off their shoes upon entering their home or anyone else's as a sign of respect and cleanliness. Another custom that is evident in Archer’s food memory is the idea of chosen family, for many people of the African Diaspora family is not confined to blood relations but instead includes a community or “village” of people who act as a support system; Archer’s adoption as an adult, and the bond with her mother illustrated through her food memory prove such.

L. (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories: Enola Bartholomew  
Submission from: Enola Bartholomew

Enola Bartholomew / 37 yrs / Born in San Diego / Current residence ATL

Thanksgiving, late 90’s. That was my first time experiencing how preparation and intent were as much a part of the meal as the actual Ingredients. I smelled sweetness. Cinnamon and nutmeg, steamed sweet potatoes and marshmallows. I saw green and white, which were the onions that went into the scratch made dressing. Football was on. And my grandmother and mother watched intently but never stopped tearing bread for the dressing, cutting onion and eggs for the gravy, or watching the yeast rolls on top of the refrigerator rise. I felt, happy. I was too young to know what it meant to have 3 generations in the kitchen, together, planning, preparing, but old enough to know it was a moment and energy that was intentional.

Flash forward to 2023, my first experience making an African dish with my first African love. WE took time prepping and planning the ingredients. Nutmeg, cinnamon, onions, were just a few and love and intent, were others. I felt happy, grateful. This time old enough to know the significance, and aware enough to know I had done this before. The spices weren’t new, the

feeling wasn't new, and the intent wasn't either. Him sharing this experience, this recipe with me, felt like it brought me home, and gave me a direct connection to my roots. And for the first time in a while. I felt seen.

#### M. Description of Enola Bartholomew's Food Memories

Bartholomew highlights two separate food memories but draws a connection between both. In the first, she shares a memory of preparing food for a Thanksgiving meal during the late 1990s. She recalls ingredients like cinnamon, nutmeg, sweet potatoes, onions and eggs, as well as a smell of sweetness and a feeling of happiness. Bartholomew also writes about having three generations working together to prepare the meal, her, her mother and her grandmother, and being too young to understand the significance of the three of them cooking with one another, but at the same time recognizing "energy that was intentional". It is interesting that Bartholomew writes such as for people of the African Diaspora cooking is often attached to spirituality and the energy and intentions that one uses to prepare a meal, often correlates to how the food will be received or how good (or bad) it will taste. Bartholomew also alludes to her mother and grandmother preparing the food by memory as her "grandmother and mother watched intently but never stopped tearing bread for the dressing, cutting onion and eggs for the gravy, or watching the yeast rolls on top of the refrigerator rise" all the while watching football. Again, Bartholomew's first food memory alludes to foods that are traditional soul foods specifically eaten for Thanksgiving, like sweet potatoes either for a pie or side dish, dressing and yeast rolls. This food memory also suggests a familial love.

Bartholomew's second food memory is more recent (2023) and suggests an intimate love, one between herself and a partner from Africa. In this memory they are preparing an African dish, and Bartholomew capitalizes we in the sentence "WE took time prepping and planning the ingredients", the capitalization of this we may symbolize unison and partnership. Here she writes that love and intent were some of the ingredients of the meal and feelings of happiness. She also speaks to a recalling of this experience and connecting it to previous ones as she writes "This time old enough to know the significance, and aware enough to know I had done this before. The spices weren't new, the feeling wasn't new, and the intent wasn't either." Bartholomew connects this second memory with the first i.e. the spices "weren't new ... and the intent wasn't either" and alludes to a spiritual realm or a past life as she states "the feeling wasn't new", which could be inferred as having had the same feeling previously either in her

current being or in a previous incarnation, again there is a spiritual undertone in Bartolomew's food memories. Bartolomew continues in the second food memory by writing "Him sharing this experience, this recipe with me, felt like it brought me home, and gave me a direct connection to my roots", as Bartolomew identifies as African American and her partner as African, it seems that she finds belonging in the cooking experience she has with her partner and it helps to connect her to her African heritage. She ends the food memory by writing "And for the first time in a while. I felt seen".

N. (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories: Cara Brown

Submission from: Cara Brown

Cara Brown

8 yo

San Francisco, CA

Oakland, CA

Growing up my mother owned a catering company. She had a wealthy client that had an annual summer party. This one particular year the theme was Caribbean. She made all Caribbean cuisine and recreated his mansion into a Caribbean escape. My mother would study cookbooks and books on culture so the dishes she made were not the typical, more familiar dishes. I remember everyone trying the different dishes asking "Oooh, whats that?". Even still, everyone raved about her jerk chicken wings. What made took the experience to the next level was the dancers. I was standing at the food tables by the pool. All of a sudden a line of Dancers in traditional Carnival costumes came sashaying down the pathways from the house on either side and performed a 3 or 4 minute routine. It was truly a culture rich experience, grounded in the food.

What did you see?

Decorated tables with hors d'oeuvres on tiered platters, tropical color pallet, frilly decorations, beautiful black dancers, sunshine, a white mansion, my mom running around in black jeans and a grey T shirt with her catering company logo and name on the front, my own hot orange shorts and pink tank top.

What did you hear?

Steel drum band and

What did you smell?

Fresh air and chicken roasting on a bbq pit

What did you touch?

Pineapple leaves, metallic table cloths with a foil-y texture, ceramic serving trays

How did you feel (physically, mentally or emotionally)?

Happy.

And of course, how did the food taste?

I wasn't allowed to taste it! LOL. I had some fruit. It was delicious.

Most weekends I spent the night at a friend's house. This particular weekend I was with my bff, Alexandria, abuelita's house in East Oakland for a few hours. She was from Honduras and spoke only broken English. Alexandria spoke Spanish and English so she translated. She was also looking after Alexandria's younger cousins. We were running around playing tag and doing 10 yo stuff...and of course we got hungry. Alexandria's Abuelita warmed up corn tortillas on a skillet, rubbed butter on them, rolled them up and gave us each one. I was skeptical. As a California native I LOVE Mexican food, but I had never had tortillas like this. I tried it, they were delicious and ended up eating like 3.

What did you see?

Project apartment buildings, with dirt front yard.

What did you hear?

Cars, kids yelling, Spanish language

What did you smell?

What did you touch?

Warm, white corn tortilla

How did you feel (physically, mentally or emotionally)?

Curious

And of course, how did the food taste?

Simple, fluffy and surprisingly moist.

#### O. Description of Cara Brown's Food Memories

Brown writes about two distinct food memories that she recalls from childhood. In the first, Brown is about eight years old and she attended an annual event catered by her mother. The theme of the event was Caribbean, and her mother made food that fit the theme. Brown writes that her mother studied cookbooks and other books on Caribbean culture in order to prepare for the event, one could infer that Caribbean culture was not Brown's or her mother's and due to such Brown's mother wanted to make the experience as authentic as possible, hence she served some dishes that may not have been popular or familiar to the attendees. Brown also recalls the dancers dressed in traditional Carnival costumes who performed at the event and the shock and surprise attached to their performance. She highlights that overall, it was a truly culture rich experience grounded in food. Brown goes on to write that she recalls seeing decorations of a tropical color pallet, hors d'oeuvres on platters, and her mother managing the event. To the end, she heard a steel drum band and smelled chicken roasting on a barbecue pit and that she felt happy. Lastly, she writes that she wasn't allowed to taste the cooked food but enjoyed eating fruit.

A major takeaway from this food memory is that Brown's mother studied Caribbean cookbooks and other materials in order to provide a memorable experience to guests. This speaks to Brown and her mother's identities as African Americans who live in the Bay Area, California where there is a smaller Caribbean community than in cities like New York or Miami, therefore providing an authentic experience was a responsibility and the event served as a conduit for the guests to participate in Caribbean culture (through food and dance), a culture that may have been unfamiliar to many.

This food memory (and the next that Brown writes), also allows one to infer that Brown's mother is a working parent who juggles professional life and raising a child, and due to such Brown is often attending the events her mother coordinates or is being cared for by the family of friends. It is also possible to believe that Brown has a smaller immediate family and due to such she attends the events her mother manages. To that end, Brown's upbringing seems to be somewhat strict as Brown was not allowed to eat the cooked dishes, this again alludes to her mother managing being a working professional and parent as well as potentially speaks to Brown's mother's demeanor as meticulous and stern.

Brown also implicitly highlights her family's socioeconomic status which is a throughline in both food memories as she writes of her mother's "wealthy client" in the first food memory and in the second "East Oakland" and the "Project apartment buildings, with dirt front yard" (which will be analyzed in the debrief of the second food memory).

The second food memory Brown writes about has her visiting a friend's grandmother's (abuelita) house in East Oakland one weekend. Brown was around ten years old at the time, and typically spent the weekend at a friend's house. This friend, Alexandria is of Honduran descent and her grandmother spoke broken English. Additionally, there were other children present, Alexandria's cousins who the grandmother was also caring for. When the children became hungry, the grandmother warmed corn tortillas on a skillet, using only butter, rolled them and gave them to each of the children. Brown was skeptical at first as she had not had tortillas made that way before but enjoyed the tortillas. Brown found comfort in this simple but traditional dish.

Brown writes that as a California native she loves Mexican food, and writes the word "love" in all capital letters, possibly to emphasize her enjoyment of Mexican cuisine. Mexican food is popular in California in part due to the large Mexican and Mexican American communities but also because California was once Mexican land until it was ceded in the Treaty of Hidalgo in 1848. Even still there is a large Mexican influence in the culture of California and that influence permeates into other communities, in Brown's case into the African American community through food. To that end, although tortillas are often thought of as a Mexican food, the origins are in Mesoamerica which is a historical region and culturally stretches from

Mexico through Central America; tortillas are a cornerstone of Mesoamerica cuisine in general.

This food memory again highlights Brown's socioeconomic background as she in the East Oakland neighborhood of Oakland, California, where the community consists of largely Black and Latino populations and she recalls seeing "Project apartment buildings, with dirt front yard". Project apartments are government subsidized housing for people of lower socioeconomic status. Nevertheless, what is more significant here is the sense of community; Brown is being cared for a Honduran grandmother who she warmly calls "abuelita" and is fed as her best friend and to other children are, it can be inferred that even though Brown is not a blood relative to this family she is treated as such. Again, highlighting the idea of adopted families and the sense of community that ethnic groups create with one another, where the entire "village" helps to raise children.

P. (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories: Amanda De Geneste-Archer

Submission from: Amanda De Geneste-Archer

Amanda De Geneste-Archer

Brooklyn, NY

Born: Trinidad & Tobago, West Indies

As a child growing up in Trinidad for the first 9 years of my life, I can remember the rainy days of the hurricane season in the month of August, so vividly. Usually, the rain came for days at a time and one of the wonderful, comforting dishes my mom and my sister would prepare was, ground food soup. This soup was called, ground food because most of vegetable ingredients used in the soup were actually dug out from the ground. Vegetables such as; Eddoes, Maraski sweet potatoes & Carrots were freshly gathered from the backyard. This soup also included a protein (chicken, beef, salted pig tails or king fish cubes), carrots, yellow split peas, home-made flour dumplings and half ripened plantains; not quite yellow to its fullest, not soft and not hard. Seeing them peel the vegies, fruit and herbs, and cutting them into cubes always excited me during the storm of that season. Smelling the soup boiling would be the only thing that might encourage me to stay awake and make me want to get up from under the comfort of my blanket. This soup, was always so tasty and comforting to the whole family. Sometimes, I volunteered to cut up the herbs so they can season up the soup

because the relaxed therapy I got from the feel and the aroma of the Spanish thyme always made me want to forever be close to that particular herb, even to this day! After the soup was cooked, they would set the bowls full, at the table and the entire family would sit and enjoy it together. It is the best I have had each time I have it. The variety of textures in the soup (heavier than broth) plus the slightly sweet and salted tastes, all blended together is a one-of-a-kind eating experience. Although it is sometimes hard to find the eddoes in the area I live in Brooklyn; I do now, as an adult cook this for my family during heavily, snowy and rainy days. The similarity in taste and the nostalgia that comes with the memories are so dear to me; it brings my mom back to me, if only for moments.

I hope my children enjoy it enough and it will do the same for the generations to come.

-Amanda De Geneste-Archer

#### Q. Description of Amanda De Geneste-Archer's Food Memory

De Geneste-Archer food memory highlights the hurricane season in her native country Trinidad and Tobago where she grew up until the age of nine and the dish that her mother and sister would prepare – ground food soup. The soup contained ground vegetables including sweet potatoes, carrots, yellow split peas, plantain and eddoes which to many are known as taros and are very similar to yams. To that end, plantains are native to tropical climates like that of Trinidad and West Africa (where they are also found in many dishes). One could infer that De Geneste-Archer and her family had a garden or a farm where they would grow vegetables as she writes that the vegetables were “freshly gathered from the backyard.” Having a garden or growing vegetables is also very typical of peoples of the African Diaspora as growing food one's own food is a means of self-sufficiency. Additionally, the soup which she stated had a texture “heavier than broth” included a protein like chicken, beef, salted pig tails or king fish cubes. Seafood of many kinds tend to be a core protein in many West Indian dishes due to the proximity to water but pig tails once considered an offal are included in found in many soul food dishes – it is interesting to see this protein included in the ground food soup as well and showcases another way that a less desirable part of the pig is utilized in a dish by Black people outside of the United States. De Geneste-Archer also highlights the

sweet and salty tastes of the dish as foods of the African Diaspora are recognized for the amalgamation of flavors and taste profiles.

De Geneste-Archer also illustrates the roles that various family members played in preparing the meals; this performance so to speak included her volunteering to cut up the herbs, Spanish thyme that she is fond of, and the relaxing nature, the feel and aroma that the herb embodied. To that end, De Geneste-Archer's mother and sister had other preparation and cooking duties, and it seems that she was among the youngest of the group having less responsibility. She also illustrates the roles other unnamed family members had in the experience “After the soup was cooked, they would set the bowls full, at the table and the entire family would sit and enjoy it together”, therefore other family members took part in communal aspect of eating and enjoying together, as the meal was “comforting to the whole family”.

De Geneste-Archer's food memory speaks to nostalgia in many forms. She starts by describing the hurricane season during the month of August (which acted as a motivator for cooking the soup), the duration of the rain, and the excitement derived from family members peeling and cutting the fruits, vegetables, and herbs, as if the soup has a direct correlation to the hurricane season for her. She also writes “Smelling the soup boiling would be the only thing that might encourage me to stay awake and make me want to get up from under the comfort of my blanket”, again speaking to the nostalgia associated with the soup, its smells and the comfort it brought her during the storms. It is this nostalgia that she has carried along with her to Brooklyn, New York where she currently lives and as an adult, and cooks this soup for her family on rainy or snowy days. Nostalgia also morphs into tradition as again, De Geneste-Archer cooks this soup during inclement weather and hopes that her children will “it enough and it will do the same for the generations to come”. Here, De Geneste-Archer suggests keeping this tradition alive for future generations; as previously stated traditions are important to peoples of the African Diaspora as they connect the past and their home country with their present state and setting in current residences.

R. (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories: Alfie Nixon (A. Nixon)

Submission from: Alfie Nixon

Alfie Nixon, 57, born in East Meadow, NY. Presently living in Gainesville, Florida.

My mother was by no means a professional chef, but to me she was the best cook as far as the from the taste of her food that I've eaten. My favorite was her Cat Head Biscuits which were homemade, from scratch. It is a Southern style baking of bread. She would start with a medium/ large bowl to incorporate her ingredients of: self-rising flour, Crisco oil (the solid kind), sugar and whole milk in that order. There were no measurements, only what the ancestors recommended!

She would then take a dinner fork and blend the contents until a solid odd, shaped ball was made. She was certain to scrape the sides of the bowl and apply a nice amount of flour to her hands. She then would pick up a certain amount of the dough, place it in the center of her palms and rotate with the other palm and fingers to make a solid ball. She would roll and shift again until the ancestors told her to stop! Each ball she made, she would place them on a greased line pan with the Crisco solid oil that was used as an ingredient. The dough balls would be placed snugly in the pan not touching until they were all in place. At which time she would apply pressure using her fingers to press them down and all corners touching like a bed of pillows. She would then preheat the oven to bake at 350 degrees prior to placing them in the oven which allowed them to rise some. Once the oven reached 350 degrees, she would place the pan on the bottom oven rack, with there being two racks in the oven. She would bake them for maybe 10-15 minutes (2 pans at a time). She was feeding a family of 11 which included herself and her 10 children. I always expected a pan to be solely mine! She would allow me to peer into the oven and watch them rise. The smell alone in the baking would cause my tummy to growl in anticipation. Once the bottom of the biscuits were browned, she would then place them on the top rack in the oven and place the oven on broil. While on broil, you dared not move from the oven door. You would remain in place less the biscuits had a chance of burning; I learned that only once. While glancing in the glass oven door you would see the once pale white top turn to brown; then it was time to remove this succulent, hot, soft delicacy from the oven with mitts.

They would be placed atop the stove smelling the way I imagine Heaven to smell. We would have these along with bacon be it for breakfast or dinner. This would be topped off with syrup.

Not just any syrup and never jelly or honey either but with a brand of syrup named Aguar, it was more like molasses and not a breakfast syrup like Aunt Jemima or Log Cabin - those we used on pancake, waffles or French toast.

What a childhood memory of being 9 years old baking in the kitchen with my mom. It reminds me of Spring or Fall, just a cozy warm breezy day. I must confess as often as I have attempted on many occasions, I cannot get my hand to move and shape the dough as she did, hence my biscuits were never Cat Heads, large soft and fluffy! Delish!! Eating them were fine as well: placing the biscuit on a plate or bowl, applying the syrup on the plate, not on top but near the biscuit. Picking off a piece with your fingers while dipping it into the syrup and sopping it up into your mouth!!

#### S. Description of Alfie Nixon's Food Memories

A. Nixon's food memory is a recollection from childhood and her mother baking cathead biscuits. These biscuits were homemade using ingredients including self-rising flour, sugar and whole milk and are described as a "a southern style baking of bread". A. Nixon illustrates how her mother blended the ingredients to shape the biscuits as well as how her mother configured them in the pan to bake, the temperature of the oven and how long the biscuits took to bake. To that end she also recalls her younger self watching the biscuits rise through the glass oven door and how the smell of the biscuits baking would cause her stomach to growl in anticipation. A. Nixon imagines the smell of the biscuits to be what she expects heaven to smell like and the feeling of this memory reminds her of "Spring or Fall, just a cozy warm breezy day". A. Nixon goes on to share when and how the biscuits were eaten, for breakfast or dinner, with bacon, and with a particular type of syrup, one with a consistency similar to molasses.

A. Nixon's food memory illustrates the type of food a mother of ten would make to feed her family, during the 1960s (when A. Nixon was a child), this meal of biscuits, bacon and molasses syrup has Southern roots and for many are soul food staples, to that end these foods similar to those that many formerly enslaved and later newly free peoples ate as it includes the "three Ms of meat, meal and molasses", white sugar and white bread. As A. Nixon alludes to the baking of biscuits with simple, easy to find, and relatively cheap ingredients allows her

mother to feed eleven in total, therefore this is a cost-effective food. At the beginning of the submission A. Nixon shares that she was born in New York, one could assume that she grew up there, so this meal may also highlight a family that is connected to the Great Migration or one that simply enjoys Southern cooking.

A. Nixon also writes that there were no measurements used, highlighting that the measurements would have either been recalled by memory, by sight, or by a more psychic ability or feeling; she writes “There were no measurements, only what the ancestors recommended!” and “She would roll and shift again until the ancestors told her to stop!”. Here, again she suggests that there was a psychic or spiritual element to making the biscuits, one by which the ancestors were involved. The two themes of cooking from feeling i.e. without exact measurements and with the help of the ancestors are core to cooking soul food.

Furthermore, A. Nixon uses punctuation to exaggerate her memory writing “I must confess as often as I have attempted on many occasions, I cannot get my hand to move and shape the dough as she did, hence my biscuits were never Cat Heads, large soft and fluffy! Delish!!” and “Picking off a piece with your fingers while dipping it into the syrup and sopping it up into your mouth!!” Overall, A. Nixon’s memory is one of nostalgia; she recalls being nine years old and baking with her mother as well as her attempts as an adult to recreate these memories by baking the cathead biscuits herself and perfecting the shape of the dough the way her mother did.

T. (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories: Staci Nixon

Submission from: Staci Nixon

UNITY

Psalm 133:1 Behold, how good it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!

“Got it, Ma!”

“Took you so long, I started to think you wouldn’t have been able to find them. You got 4 of em?”

“Yup. Had to go to three stores, and I got extra for Christmas next month. That way we won’t

have to worry about it then.”

“Well let me go ahead and finish this dressing and stuff the turkey and put it in the oven. I don’t know how it would’ve turned out without the Bell seasoning!”

I looked around the kitchen and dining room to see where I could jump in and help with preparing the Thanksgiving meal. Someone was picking the greens, another had potatoes, another had string beans. Cakes and pies, you name it. The scent of my favorite foods filled the air. For two days we hadn’t had a hot dish for there was not a place on the stove that could be used other than for cooking the Thanksgiving meal. My 2 year old son came and said to me “Aunt Staci, I’m hungry”, he was my first born and called me Aunt like everyone else did. Then I remembered the bread and set up a sandwich making station. I called on the older kids to help me because it was a houseful of children and a lot to be done. They worked together to make the sandwiches, while the others bathed the littlest ones. The boys made the pallets on the floor and got the movies together that we’d watch. Some did their hair, as we laughed, talked and played. When the little ones slept, we’d get up and clean the house and bathe. We didn’t have a washing machine at that time, so off we went to the all night laundromat; the place was practically empty which made for a quick laundry run. When we got back home there were pans and dishes set out on the hutch and dining room table, cakes and pies too. The only light on was the one above the stove in the kitchen. All the trash was taken out and the house was spotless. I went to Mommy’s room where she was fast asleep with gospel music playing from her little radio on her bedside table. But she wasn’t the only one in her room, it was full of her favorite people, her grandchildren. Oh, some were in the bed with her and some on the floor. I grabbed a blanket for the ones who were uncovered and some fresh bottles for the babies that were there. “Rest up” I thought to myself, “tomorrow there will be a feast!” In attendance will be the beloved of this family. An old friend may come calling, catching you up of what’s happening in the old neighborhood. Someone will come bringing a stranger with him. Some will come with dishes, most will leave with a plate of food. Most important is that they are here. Looking around and seeing all who are in attendance causes me to rejoice on the inside. I am Thankful. God has made my joy full.

Psalm 133:3

For there the Lord commanded the blessing!

#### U. Description of Staci Nixon's Food Memories (S. Nixon)

S. Nixon's food memory is that of the preparation for a Thanksgiving meal, where she first returns from buying ingredients to cook a dish for the meal and then helps with various duties. She highlights foods like turkey, dressing, greens, potatoes, string beans, cakes and pies, as well as the many activities going on in the home i.e. tasking the older children with making sandwiches, smaller children being bathed, and space being made to watch movies. She also writes about going to a laundromat later in the night to wash clothes, and returning to the home being clean and the prepared dishes laid out on the dining room table. When S. Nixon peers into her mother's room she finds her asleep along with many of her grandchildren, and gospel music playing. She also writes about what she anticipates will happen on Thanksgiving day, stating "An old friend may come calling, catching you up of what's happening in the old neighborhood. Someone will come bringing a stranger with him. Some will come with dishes, most will leave with a plate of food." S. Nixon ends the food memory by highlighting feelings of joy, and thankfulness.

S. Nixon's food memory starts with the word "unity" written in capital letters and a scripture from the Bible "Psalm 133:1 Behold, how good it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" and ends with the scripture "Psalm 133:3 For there the Lord commanded the blessing!", it can be assumed that she practices Christianity as she also ends her submission by stating "I am Thankful. God has made my joy full." This style of writing, using Bible scriptures in text, is popular among many African Americans who are of Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and Church of God in Christ (COGIC) (and many other) denominations, especially those from or living in the South, therefore one can also assume that S. Nixon has some connection to Southern Christian heritage. This could further be substantiated as she writes "I went to Mommy's room where she was fast asleep with gospel music playing from her little radio on her bedside table." Gospel music derivative spiritual hymns sung by the enslaved with soul and blues influences, also sung in church settings.

S. Nixon's memory describes the many activities and to that end the production that creating a Thanksgiving meal is; some actors are cooking, some are making a snack, some are tending to younger children, in preparation for a large meal to be shared among family and friends. Therefore, one could also state that there is a performative aspect to preparing for and partaking in a Thanksgiving meal. As stated above, S. Nixon also highlights some of the foods, all of which are traditional soul foods typically eaten on Thanksgiving Day. Furthermore, this memory speaks to togetherness, community, and family; again, she writes, "Some will come with dishes, most will leave with a plate of food", denoting that most of the attendees will leave with some type of memento from the gathering. She ends the memory by writing about rejoicing, feelings of thankfulness and joy, as the "beloved of this family" and friends gathered and shared a feast with one another.

#### V. (Re)Stor(y)ing African Diaspora Food Memories: Traci Nixon (T. Nixon)

Submission from: Traci Nixon

Traci Nixon, age 52. I was about 15 years old at the time living on Long Island, NY.

One Thanksgiving - Nanny, Aunt Candie, Missy, Staci and I cooked Thanksgiving dinner. It included roasted turkey with homemade cornbread dressing, collard greens, macaroni and cheese, candied yams, potato salad, sweet potato pies, lemonade cake, etc. When all of the food was cooked and prepared, Nanny said "ok let's wrap everything up". Of course we were perplexed (confused) and of course we asked why. Her answer was "because we are taking it feed the homeless". The question was asked, "Mom why you didn't tell us?" And her response was - "Would you have made it with the same love if it was going to the less fortunate versus family?" Needless to say - we had pizza and went to a movie that night for Thanksgiving.

#### W. Description of Traci Nixon's Food Memories

T. Nixon's food memory depicts cooking Thanksgiving dinner as a teenager with other family members. They prepared many traditional soul food staples including "roasted turkey with homemade cornbread dressing, collard greens, macaroni and cheese, candied yams, potato salad, sweet potato pies, lemonade cake, etc." When they were finished cooking Nanny who is later revealed to be T. Nixon's mother ask them to wrap the food up, the group was shocked

and asked their mother why, to which she responded they would take the food to feed the homeless. When asked why they weren't told ahead of time, a question was posed in response "Would you have made it with the same love if it was going to the less fortunate versus family?" The memory ends with the group going to a movie and having pizza for their Thanksgiving dinner.

T. Nixon's submission suggests the teamwork and cooperation that went into cooking the meal and later reveals her mother's agenda, she had her children prepare the meal as if they would eat it themselves, when instead her plan was to give to food to others who were less fortunate instead. This story depicts an African and African American tenet of hospitality, especially regarding food, where one tends to serve others before themselves. As the author's mother wanted the group to prepare the food with care, she did not disclose that they would not be eating the food themselves as she wanted the same amount of love to go into the food. Again, the theme of love in the preparation and cooking of African Diaspora foods and soul food re-emerges here; preparing food with love is part and parcel of the responsibility of the cook and many believe that soul food tastes better when love is included and is a necessary ingredient. The sacrifice of time, effort and money is also evident here as it would have been costly to cook that amount of food and give it to charity, nevertheless, that does not seem to be a concern, the intent and act of giving are seemingly more important.