

# Black Women's Food Work as Critical Space

**Abstract:** Black American women have long sustained a complex relationship to food—its production, consumption, and distribution within families, communities, and the nation. Black women, often represented in American culture as “natural” good cooks on the one hand and beset by obesity on the other, straddle an uncomfortable divide that is at the heart of contemporary debate about the nature of our food system. Yet, Black women as authorities in the kitchen and elsewhere in matters of food—culturally, politically, and socially—are largely absent, made invisible by the continued salience of intersecting vectors of disempowerment: race/gender/class/sexuality. In this dialogue, we bring together a variety of agents, approaches,

explorations, and examples of the spaces where Black American women have asserted their “food voices” in ways that challenge fundamentally the status quo (both progressive and conservative) and utilize the dominant discourses to create spaces of dissent and strategic acquiescence to the logics of capital ever-present in our food systems.

**Keywords:** Black women and food, cookbooks, African American, foodways, Black women chefs, food and power, food shaming, food voice

BLACK AMERICAN<sup>1</sup> women have long sustained a complex relationship to food—its production, consumption, and distribution within families (both their own and others), communities, and the nation. Black women, often represented in American culture as “natural” good cooks on the one hand and beset by obesity on the other, straddle an uncomfortable divide that is at the heart of contemporary debate about the nature of our food system. At the 2013 American Studies Annual Meeting, a panel of “sister scholars,” all of whom work in some capacity with food, came together to talk about, ponder, and share our experiences as community activists, academics, and chefs navigating “the good, the bad, [and] the unforgivable” elements of carving out our own critically creative spaces vis-à-vis food.<sup>2</sup> In this roundtable dialogue, we brought together a variety of approaches, explorations, and examples of the spaces where Black American women assert their “food voices” (Hauck-Lawson 2004), often in ways that challenge fundamentally the status quo (both progressive and conservative).<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Black women utilize the dominant discourses to create spaces of dissent against and strategic acquiescence to the logics of capital ever-present in our food systems. In the literary world, much has been written about the ways that Black women and men “talk back” (bell hooks), “worry the line” (Cheryl Wall), signify (Henry Louis Gates), and testify (Geneva Smitherman) when expressing voice. Far less has been written on the ways that these tropes apply to Black people’s engagement with food, culture, and society. And yet, they do apply.

Writing of the complex subjectivity of Black women with regard to discourse, Mae G. Henderson (2014: 62–63) states:

[T]hrough the multiple voices that enunciate her complex subjectivity, the black woman writer not only speaks familiarly in the discourse of the other(s), but as Other she is in contestorial dialogue with the hegemonic dominant and sub-dominant or “ambiguously (non)hegemonic” discourses.... It is the complexity of these simultaneously homogeneous and heterogeneous social and discursive domains out of which black women write and construct themselves (as blacks and women and often, as poor black women) that enables these women writers authoritatively to speak and engage.

A similar argument, I think, can be made about engaging food work. Multiple voices constantly enunciate Black women’s complex subjectivity. From the first lady Michelle Obama being represented in the media as the “food police” or the modern-day “Sapphire of the kitchen” (Swindall 2013)<sup>4</sup> to Black women being scrutinized and called hypocrites when they advocate healthy eating but sometimes consume fast food, to Black women/people being associated with the “obesity epidemic.” Black women straddle an uncomfortable divide that is at the heart of contemporary debate about the nature of our food system. Thus, the Black woman food writer, activist, researcher, chef, cook, and consumer not only *must* speak “familiarly in the discourse of the other(s),” but as the Other she is often “in contestorial dialogue with the hegemonic dominant and sub-dominant or ‘ambiguously (non)hegemonic’



FIGURE 1: Ad for Aunt Jemima pancake flour, from the November 7, 1909 edition of the *New York Tribune*.

"NEW-YORK TRIBUNE, NOVEMBER 07, 1909, PAGE 20, IMAGE 44 AUNT JEMIMA" IS IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN.

discourses," sometimes simultaneously (Henderson 2014: 62-63). Black women perpetually seem to be paying a debt on a food loan that they did not knowingly incur.

Regardless of her individual expertise with food, a Black woman cook is still saddled with the collective image of and her connection to the buxom, aproned, spoon-wielding, idea that she is not only a "naturally" good cook (as if she is incapable of being a professionally trained chef) but also that she only has one culinary trail—soul food. Black women are not seen as authorities in the kitchen or elsewhere in matters of food—culturally, politically, and socially—and when she dares to be, she may be described in reviews as "angry" or "not angry enough." She is rendered absent, and made invisible by the continued salience of intersecting vectors of disempowerment: race/gender/class/sexuality. Or in the absolute worst cases she is confronted—face-to-face and in social media outlets—with a "how dare she" attitude because she does not, will not, cannot conform to a prescribed role of Black women who work with, as banal as it sounds, food.



FIGURE 2: Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972).

ALTHOUGH "72 AUNT JEMIMA" IS SUBJECT TO COPYRIGHT, ITS USE IS COVERED BY THE U.S. FAIR USE LAWS BECAUSE IT ILLUSTRATES AN EDUCATIONAL ARTICLE ABOUT THE ENTITY THAT THE LOGO REPRESENTS.

But Black women do talk back in the kitchen! Since time immemorial she has been worrying the line, signifying, talkin' and testifyin', puttin' her foot up on folks when it comes to food. The essays below speak to this by explicating and sharing examples of spaces where Black American women have asserted their "food voices" in ways that fundamentally challenge the status quo, the hegemonic dominant and subdominant discourses. They talk about the spaces of dissent and strategic acquiescence that Black women have deployed, are deploying, will deploy, as we move in and about multiple food systems. The academic and food practitioner scholars whose voices are shared in this essay are not providing answers to hard questions. Rather, they are offering initial thoughts and reflections about where they see themselves and their work in this cultural moment. They are raising more issues for us to think about. They are challenging us to ask why we are comforted seeing Black women and food in particular ways and uncomfortable seeing them in others.

Gillian Clark, for example, reflects on how society seems more comforted by the smiling Black “cook” rather than the serious-looking, contemplative chef. Not fulfilling this expectation that she perform her professional role with a happy, smiling countenance has earned her the label of a “sourpuss chef.” Clark resists any attempts to define her in particular (and especially stereotypical) ways. She is not alone. Chef Tanya Holland engages in her own political self-fashioning. Holland is described as a cultural worker by Kimberly Nettles-Barcelón, reviving African American food cultures in the constantly evolving West Oakland, California, by using a variety of media to promote a consistent narrative of Black progress and futurity, informed by histories of Black life, culture, and community.

These histories are dynamic but often accompanied by a veneer of shame and abjection. Jessica Walker encourages us to start from this place of deficit and then see Black food culture as “a discursively formed cultural production birthed from deficiency.” Walker wants us to interrogate the assumptions we make about Black people’s food consumption even as we explore incidents like “pumpkin pie gate”—the belief that all African Americans prefer the taste of sweet potato rather than pumpkin pie. Courtney Thorsson takes up this mantle with her argument that contemporary Black women’s writing uses the recipe form to suture itself to and split from Black cultural specificity. With improvisation, recipes force us to confront the variations of Blackness.

These variants are exactly what Black women have tried to emphasize in their past, present, and future relationships to food. Blackness cannot be boxed, homogenized, streamlined, or reduced to a particular set of food practices, tastes, and/or skills. Rather, what these authors showcase and argue are the many ways in which they (or those about whom they write) are working with a sense of compulsion against stereotypes and media hype to be creative with food in the ways that best define who they are and not who people expect them to be.

— Psyche Williams-Forson

### Gillian Clark

There are certain expectations of a Black woman in the kitchen; I am often told how I should behave, what I should be cooking, what I should call myself, and how much I should charge.

Frequently, I’m told I should smile. Why is it so important that I smile when at work? Servile cheerfulness and huge, goofy smiles are hallmarks of one type of racist imagery. Aunt Jemima is always smiling. She’s never brooding or perhaps pensively concentrating. A smile is an easy answer of happy



FIGURE 3: Chef Gillian Clark, window of Colorado Kitchen.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALLISON SHELLEY © 2006

servitude. When a smile is not present questions arise. But as a Black woman it couldn’t possibly be something deep like thought or concentration. It is automatically considered aggression. Behaviorists and social scientists conclude that White women smile more than White men, but African American men and women smile equally. They also note that when occupying similar work, power, and social roles, the gender differences in the rate of smiling disappears or is minimal. As they rise up the career ladder, the rate at which women smile therefore is in line with their male counterparts. Still, research suggests that people appear less powerful when they grin, and that a scarcity of smiles is associated with aggression.<sup>5</sup> My not smiling while at work in my open kitchen became a huge issue that I found myself having to defend. I was called in the local food media “the sourpuss chef” (Sugarman 2010, 2011). To smile, as Aunt Jemima would, while cooking shows that I’m simply happy to serve, no need to concentrate because my talent at the stove is

natural, instinctual, and hereditary. There is nothing individual, unique, thoughtful, or cerebral about what I do.

I made the mistake of thinking in public—like a slave making eye contact. I wrote a letter to the local food critic explaining why some chefs don't make substitutions or exceptions on menu items. This relates specifically to things that a Black woman chef is not allowed to do. A chef of European descent is expected to uphold a certain standard and most customers would not have the audacity to challenge seating policy or what is on the plate. However, my food was there to be altered...certainly it could not be taken as seriously. My letter expressing an opinion and the lack of a constantly smiling countenance was a turn off.

It turned the tide against me.

Along with our strict seating policies at Colorado Kitchen this solidified my bitch reputation. I was now a chef under a microscope. I was known for “testy interactions with customers,” “rough and tumble relationships with customers,” and was called the “Chef who mistreats her customers” although no actual incidents were reported. All I thought I needed to do was what every chef I've worked under did. Create a menu; execute it well in a nice room. I didn't know my behavior and facial expressions were so important to some. Imagine Aunt Jemima telling you she's not going to make a grilled cheese sandwich for your kid. It was clear that I was not viewed as a culinary professional; I was viewed as a domestic.

Nonetheless, I ran the busiest brunch in town, and with forty-eight seats in a transitioning DC neighborhood Colorado Kitchen generated close to half a million in sales and caught the attention of the Food Network, *New York Times*, National Public Radio, and a devoted following of customers. But the attention brought on greater scrutiny.

**POSTED BY: PASTRAMIONRYE JUN 30 2004,**  
08:06 AM

does it come across as arrogant to anyone else that gillian refers to herself as Chef?  
i mean c'mon, lighten up, lady!  
you can have your fellow cooks call you “Chef” if you want, but to go signing newsletters and such with “Chef” is just a tad bit arrogant...not even Chef Gillian, or Chef Clark...  
just my .02\$

This comment appeared in response to an email on the eGullet Forums where I detailed the featured items of a new menu. No criticism of the food, just of my salutation. Notice the poster calls my staff my fellow cooks. I'm not the leader... can't call myself anything to differentiate myself from the crew. Customers having eaten a great meal ask to see me,



FIGURE 4: A rare quiet moment in the dining room of Colorado Kitchen.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALLISON SHELLEY © 2006

“Are you the cook?” They can't bring themselves to call me chef. A chef is a leader, a creator, and a thinker.

I am not considered an “authority in the kitchen.” Not in the same way as a White male chef. Not viewed as a culinary professional...who loves to talk about food—I'm a domestic. This was written about my appearance on the Food Network by Tim Carman of the *Washington City Paper* column “Young & Hungry” (October 21, 2010): “In case you missed it last month, ...during which the General Store owner spilled the secrets to several of her best dishes, as if helpless against the spiky haired, bro-centric charms of Guy Fieri. She even gave the dude a demo on how to make her famous fried chicken.” Could it be that I love to share and talk about food and the process? There are chefs who talk about and demonstrate their food for countless numbers of food journalists and during cooking shows (this was my tenth appearance cooking on TV) but I am the only one doing it from a position where I “am powerless.”

What I hear when I am explaining to someone about my new restaurant—traditional classic American food: “Why would you do that? Why wouldn't you have a soul food restaurant?” It is as if all Blacks have the same experience and that cooking outside of this box is a stretch for me. Surely, it is assumed, I work from recipes that have been passed down by former slaves in my family. But I had to learn how to fry chicken. And I do it well, but the baggage that came with serving chicken almost made me reluctant to put it on my menu.

“I have this fantasy that you learned to cook at your grandmother's knee on some huge porch in the Deep South,” she pleads, her hands clasped together so tightly her knuckles are white. “Sorry,” I have to disappoint her, “but my grandmother

was all evening gown and cigarette holder,” I can hear the sharp crackle of her bubble bursting, “not apron and skillet.” I’ve become accustomed to that hopeful face. After a good deal of simple food—creamy mashed potatoes, buttery green beans with crisp-skinned roasted chicken—a customer’s mind can wander—surely I learned to cook from the long line of domestics in my family. It is hard to believe that I learned to cook like many of my colleagues from hard work and study at an accredited institution of higher education.

I cannot go along with the fiction and must pull that stabilizing block of wood out of the tower. “No, I’m not from Georgia,” I repeat to the woman who has money riding on it. “Actually, I grew up in New York,” I say to the frowning man. There’s no question that I take pleasure in telling folks the truth. I want them to accept the real me, not the chef they’ve created through the filter of required fifth-grade reading assignments and bad television sitcoms. The fact that I want them to love me...not that woman...that culinary blow-up doll that is whoever they want her to be. I don’t want a false history to speak for me. And I want the evening-gown Nana to live on forever—that her need to get dressed to the nines and give everyone the impression that her life couldn’t be better, was, for Daisy Barnes, one step closer to getting there. I want as many people as I can tell to know that she had ambition, dreams, and drive to make a little empire of her own out of nothing. Those dresses and cigarette holders were evidence that Daisy Barnes would not be domesticated.

I’ve been caught Cooking While Black. It’s different for me than everyone I’ve worked with, worked for, gone to cooking school with. I am the only Black woman among my peers. I graduated from cooking school and was one of only three graduates from my class who stayed in the business, moved up through the ranks, and became an Executive Chef. I’m the only Black woman. For years, I was one of only two Black women leading kitchens in Washington, DC. There are more now. But at the time you really could count on your hand the number of Black women chefs who were being followed by the food media.

I was once contacted by a journalist interviewing Black women chefs for an article. After she completed her questions I asked, basically because curiosity had gotten the better of me, “Who else are you talking to, because for the life of me I don’t know who else is going to be in this article?” She told me she had only one other chef on her list. She had talked to this woman and both had concluded cooking for a living is so closely related to domestic work that Black women chasing higher degrees and more professional status were not interested in “going backward” and are also discouraged by their families.

This was more than ten years ago and a lot has changed... as has the perceived status of chef-ness and cooking in general. While young Black women have changed their perceptions about cooking for a living, the rest of the food community (diners, journalists, other chefs) may not have.

Still, it is not very common to see a Black woman Executive Chef. Hopefully, the years will turn this around, but it is going to take an equalization of the playing field with regard to perspective. Black women in chef coats have to be viewed through the same lens. Chefs all engage in very similar behaviors; however, what I have found as a Black woman in a chef coat is that Black women are not allowed to have the so-called chef’s attitude. It is contradictory to the always smiling, always pleasing Aunt Jemima.

It was not long before my food stopped being the topic of conversation once my restaurant achieved a certain level of popularity. My facial expressions, my handling of my dining room, became the focus. It was as if I was not permitted to dominate the building like the White male chefs around me did. It’s impossible to do this work if one does not believe in oneself. A chef must exhibit nothing but confidence and certainty. Without this steely resolve and belief in my food, I would never have put food on a plate as a line cook or have been able to create a menu and put prices on it as an Executive Chef. You have to have 100% confidence in what you’re doing.

I’ve often compared it to the criticisms of Muhammad Ali. Growing up a big fan of his, I found myself arguing with the White kids in the cafeteria who said that he talked too much. They much preferred the comparatively silent Joe Frazier. No one ever criticized his boxing style. It was his attitude, his personality, that was the problem. He didn’t have the “aw shucks” country-boy mystique of a man who boxed because it is what came naturally for him to do—make it out of the ghetto or the rural community with his brains, not his fists. He represented something very significant for the Black community and Black men in sports. Shouting him down did nothing to refute the facts: Yes, indeed, Ali was “still pretty.”

I find I face a similar challenge. I am college educated and choose to cook. If any of my personality leaks out, it must be stomped on and stuffed back in. I am maligned for expressing myself.

### Kimberly Nettles-Barcelón

Chef Tanya Holland opened her restaurant, Brown Sugar Kitchen, in West Oakland, California, on January 15, 2008.<sup>6</sup> Since that day, the restaurant has become a community hub



FIGURE 5: Poster displayed at the launch of the *Brown Sugar Kitchen* cookbook.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIMBERLY NETTLES-BARCELÓN © 2014

and Chef Holland's local and national visibility as a chef, restaurateur, and force within the city has skyrocketed. I became aware of Chef Holland in the fall of 2010 and visited Brown Sugar Kitchen to eat and think about her food work. Initially, I was drawn to her notion of "elevating" soul food within the rich and complicated landscape of Oakland, California (Nettles-Barcelón 2012).<sup>7</sup> Oakland is a place where a bevy of competing narratives about farm-to-fork, the local food movement, urban farming, food insecurity, obesity, diet-related disease, and so-called food deserts coexist. Indeed, Chef Holland's food work illustrates how these issues often intersect and collide.

As I have continued to observe and contemplate her food work, I see it as rooted within narratives of Black women as cultural workers who use their talents to create spaces of possibilities for themselves, their families, and their communities (Johnson Reagon 1986, Williams-Forsen 2006, 2007). I am also reading Chef Holland as part of the creative class (Florida 2003a, 2003b, 2012)<sup>8</sup> of multiracial, middle-class new settlers who are

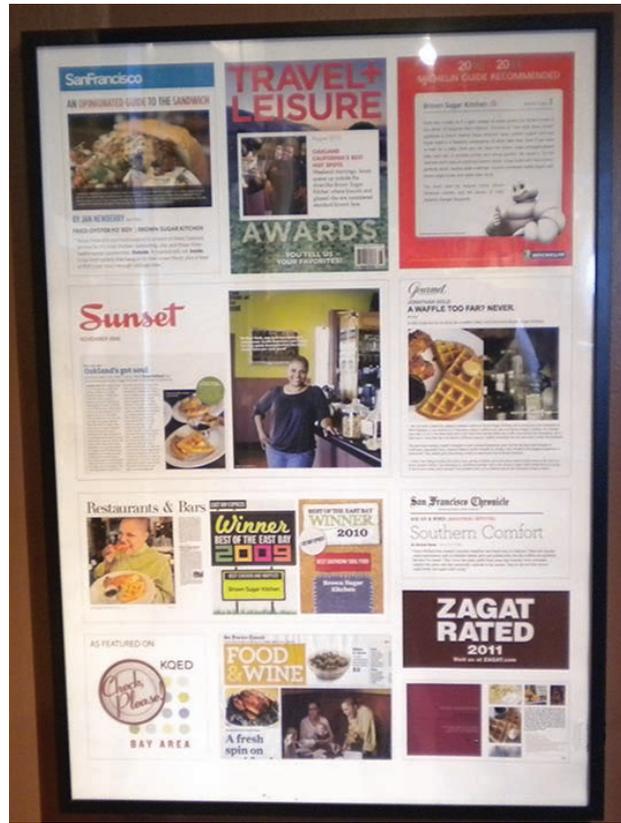


FIGURE 6: Framed collage of recent press coverage, inside Brown Sugar Kitchen.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AARON BARCELÓN © 2011

working, along with certain segments of longer-standing residents, to transform West Oakland. Her food work resonates at the scale of the local as it is imbricated within regional and national conversations about race, urban renewal, food access, and social change.

This work is done in the kitchen, to be sure, but it is also enacted in Holland's skillful use of food media. She works to document and promote her creation of a particular food space, one that is highly racialized but also post-racial in its orientation. Through her restaurants, Brown Sugar Kitchen and B-Side Baking Co., and community performance space B-Side Barn, Chef Holland is drawing upon nostalgic histories of Black life and Black community in Oakland, and West Oakland in particular; a history of it as a vibrant community for African Americans in the 1940s (Tramble and Tramble 2007).<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Chef Holland links her work and promotes contemporary narratives of progress, change, and a necessarily uneven gentrification (Stuhldreher 2007); a place where the "new" multicultural Oakland is becoming. This is a key trope that we see played out continuously in the vast media representation of Chef Holland's work.



FIGURE 7: View of Brown Sugar Kitchen from grassy median on Mandela Parkway.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIMBERLY NETTLES-BARCELÓN © 2010



FIGURE 8: Customers waiting to enter, enjoying coffee and piano music.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIMBERLY NETTLES-BARCELÓN © 2010

She has been everywhere. On her monthly e-mailed bulletin, we see photos and links to her appearances on shows like *The Chew*, *The Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, and stories in magazines like *Food and Wine*; *O, The Oprah Magazine*; local and national newspapers; and restaurant guides. Her cookbook, *Brown Sugar Kitchen: New-Style, Down-Home Recipes from Sweet West Oakland*, was published last year by the highly regarded *Chronicle Books*. In many ways, it is the culmination of the message of her work—beautifully photographed with intricately woven narratives of food, people, and place.

Brown Sugar Kitchen, located on Mandela Parkway, is in an industrial area that has seen the recent growth of loft developments, local artist spaces, artisanal coffee roasters, and urban farms. Chef Holland and her husband moved there a few years prior to opening the restaurant—lamenting, as they report many in the community did, the lack of a place to go and get a good cup of coffee. She is promoting, through her restaurant work and her positioning of self within the landscape, a narrative of progress and change of the gritty wasteland of West Oakland (Thelin 2012).<sup>10</sup> Her food work simultaneously calls upon old memories of West Oakland as a particular sort of Black space while reimagining (enacting) its transformation.

A recent *Food & Wine* magazine article written by author Novella Carpenter (also a new transplant to West Oakland)<sup>11</sup> describes the transformational significance of Brown Sugar Kitchen (Carpenter 2013).<sup>12</sup> The scene below depicts a Thanksgiving holiday meal prepared by Chef Holland:

Among the regulars at Brown Sugar Kitchen are the novelist couple Michael Chabon and Ayelet Waldman. Chabon even had the party there for his latest book, *Telegraph Avenue*, a big-hearted portrait of intertwining black and white families in Oakland.



FIGURE 9: Brown Sugar Kitchen.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AARON BARCELÓN © 2011

This year, Chabon and Waldman invited Holland to cook Thanksgiving at their Craftsman house near the foot of the Oakland Hills. Other guests included Holland's husband, Phil Surkis, R&B singer Ledisi, and Cherie Dyson, director of programs at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora.

Combining all her culinary influences in one dish, Holland served bisque as a starter. She loaded it with Dungeness crab, one of her favorite West Coast ingredients, and spiked it Creole-style with Tabasco and cayenne. For her bronzed, gorgeously lacquered turkey, she chose a free-range bird from a local farmer and brined it overnight, then glazed it with bourbon and brown sugar, a nod to the importance of sugar plantations in African- and Caribbean-American history....

Ten years after [we] moved to West Oakland, the food landscape is unrecognizable. I can now ride my bike to a Montreal-style bagel shop or a tapas bar. Or I can go to B-Side BBQ, which Holland opened in 2011.<sup>13</sup>

At Brown Sugar Kitchen, the restaurant that inspired other chefs to take a chance on the neighborhood, I'm warmly greeted by a hostess who lives nearby. As I finish the best pork hash I've ever had, I feel comforted—like I finally found my home (Carpenter 2013: 102).

The folks gathered and the food prepared for this story link Holland to a community of creatives who draw from a difficult history to posit a present and future ripe with improvisation, beauty, and possibility. Similarly, Holland's new cookbook posits the restaurant as a beacon in the city: "Brown Sugar Kitchen is more than a restaurant. This soul-food outpost is a community gathering spot, a place to fill the belly, and the beating heart of West Oakland, a storied postindustrial neighborhood across the bay from San Francisco" (Holland 2014, inside front cover).

Narratives of home and place like those represented in the *Food and Wine* article and the *Brown Sugar Kitchen* cookbook are central to Chef Holland's public persona.<sup>14</sup> There is a quiet insistence on her food work as professional and as part of an economic process that uplifts her restaurant, her staff, and the community at large. So while Chef Holland is reluctant to define her food work as political, when you consider how she has crafted a particular representation of herself, soul food, and West Oakland, we can see the ways she is resisting the grand narratives of Black women as simply natural cooks, soul food as unhealthy, and Black communities as unsafe places.

## Jessica Kenyatta Walker

Many years away from the height of popularity of the Aunt Jemima icon, it would still seem that there is a material and ideological investment not only to connect Black women to the practice of cooking but to make this connection innate, expected, and uncomplicated by culinary diversity. I see these ideas proliferated in news segments, films, TV and reality TV shows that, while not wholly reinforcing reductive stereotypes of the Black female cook a la mammy, certainly use our collective investment in her to articulate a particular expectation around Black women's relationship to food. She remains a pervasive icon on the pop culture battleground—a lingering image that simultaneously celebrates the deficiencies of Black womanhood while also desiring the goods she creates.<sup>15</sup> But the popular always lies in a dialectical relation with everyday practices. So I'd like speak on recent experiences that I think typify what we can learn if we view food itself as a discursively formed cultural production birthed from deficiency. Doing so helps us to interrogate assumptions we make about the relationship between Black women and food—mainly that the association is natural, expected, and not vexed or unfamiliar. It helps us see how Blackness and



FIGURE 10: *Pumpkin Pie? Sweet Potato Pie?*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JESSICA KENYATTA WALKER © 2013

womanhood *attach* themselves to the production of certain foods and how these attachments are contested and reconfigured in our messy everyday lives.

So with that I have a confession—I like pumpkin pie.

I went to the home of a friend who had recently lost a family member. Knowing how hectic a period of mourning can be, my partner and I decided to prepare some homemade enchiladas for the friend and his wife. This would be the first time we co-created a dish that really served to reify my partner's Mexican heritage and family traditions. Now, the first time I saw her make enchiladas I was extremely confused because she fried tortillas in hot oil, grabbed them piping hot with her bare hands, dipped them in sauce, and then rolled cheese and chicken into them. At around the third or fourth "ouch" or "Shit! Shit! Shit!" I quietly informed her that she could, ya know, use a pair of tongs or something. And her response has always stuck with me. She said, "If it's not painful you're probably not doing it right." As we're making the enchiladas for this friend, I wasn't about to touch the hot tortilla so I just fried them. But as someone whose work is constantly trying to denaturalize the safe and comfortable

feelings assumed from the practice of cooking, this stood out as an autoethnographic moment of realization that indeed in the kitchen pain can be a part of the pleasures of tradition. And that maybe discomfort in creating food that speaks to one's ever-changing identity might not be so rare.

This notion would resonate once again that same night as I delivered the fresh hot enchiladas to my grieving friend. He and his wife are an upper-middle-class African American couple, members of Black sororities and fraternities, attend a Baptist church, and are the epitome of southern hospitality. After my initial greetings and condolences were offered we stood in the kitchen chatting about this and that until settling into a discussion of the impending Thanksgiving festivities. When invited to their turkey day, I sarcastically asked how they could celebrate a holiday mired by genocide and colonialism. I then enthusiastically said, "Yes, of course, and I'll bring pumpkin pie." Then, a beat of silence from the wife, "Pumpkin pie? That's White people food. White people eat that. We eat sweet potato pie."

Discomfort turned to shame that my knowledge of Black tradition was deficient in the moment—I quickly changed my contribution to sweet potato pie—a safe choice? But safe for whom? Or rather what is the risk in me presenting pumpkin pie? I really like pumpkin pie, sometimes more than sweet potato! In that moment, however, even my taste preferences—which is an embodied knowledge—were deemed incompatible with my racial, gendered, and classed performance. This is even more complicated when I note that the woman who said that is Ghanaian-American, forcing us to consider how these moments of discomfort, tension, and what I call "nervous kitchen spaces" articulate how imagined and real Black food traditions, and their often oversimplified representations, circulate in non-Black communities or have the potential to be appropriated by anybody.

Resonances of what I am now calling "pumpkin pie gate" rang even louder when the next day on my Facebook feed I stumbled upon this conversation on the wall of a middle-class African American woman who reposted from a friend:

Anonymous confessions of a black woman that loves pumpkin pie: "I don't have the audacity to ask my mother to cook a pumpkin pie, so I buy my own, and sit in a corner, eating it while I ridicule the other followers for their adherence to convention." This the BEST post EVER! LOL, LOL, LOL!

The "Anonymous" friend then responds to the repost with:

Hello my name is Sandra and I Am a Black girl who LOVES ANYTHING PUMPKIN. Growing up it was the sweet potatoes pie it wasn't until my adulthood I learned about this great type of squash. My love for pumpkin is deep I wish I can have it all year long. Who else can confess of their love of pumpkin? Thank[s] Renisha for sharing your voice on your love for pumpkin.

Strangely enough I actually get excited about embracing a logics of debt when it comes to food, and this is not because I am unaware of how in relation to African Americans and people of color more broadly there is always an assumption of deficiency in all realms of life: work, family, leisure, education, and food. I am also aware that these rhetorical gestures toward deficits or risk often mask how positive relationships and empowering lifestyles can flourish in some communities of color. But far from being in support of these logics, or in support of an entirely transformative narrative when it comes to food, I am more concerned with the idea of embracing deficiency as a characteristic of the culinary quotidian. Like my inability to "food pass" in pumpkin pie gate, or even my deficient understanding of the role of pain in expressing food traditions. Then we reveal how the consumption of food is interpersonal and how failure in these interactions renders that kitchen space an inherently political one. Indeed there is an uneasiness with which we need to conceive of food.

What happens if we start from food as power or anxiety or shame or guilt as the norm and the polite feelings of nostalgia and warmth and comfort as the outlier within a food system whose normal operations serve to hide its dependence on the abject? And what happens when representations of the Black female body and her everyday practices are caught up and complicit in this discomfort?

Michelle Obama is a good place to start. The use of deficiency in her Let's Move campaign as a way to shame the "inactive" child is sold to us as a form of misdirection. It interestingly enough serves to depoliticize food production that has become increasingly industrialized by moralizing food consumption, which has always been racialized. But shame also serves as a tool for intra-racial class distinctions. These distinctions sometimes seem like the least penetrable border between upper-class and lower-class taste when it comes to Black cultural authenticity.

What we get to in conclusion is the complication of American Black and White food desires through the normalizing of deficiencies. It is complicated for Black people because of their own desire for a deficient model of Black womanhood and food—the stereotypical mammy. Whether through purchasing and preparing Aunt Jemima mix or by participating in versions of Black food traditions recapitulated on cooking competition shows or food reduced through predictable dishes in our school or work cafeterias in February, these versions of Black tradition seem to embrace the deficiencies necessary to neatly contain difference in schemes of multiculturalism.

## Courtney Thorsson

Contemporary Black women writers use culinary discourse and the recipe form to describe, theorize, and demand specific ways of performing racial and gendered identities in cookbooks, poetry, and fiction. Foodways are a central formal and thematic trait of African American literature, particularly as a space of authority for women. This means that scholars must study cookbooks as an important genre in the African American literary tradition. Living in the overlap of public and private, African American foodways writing transmits and represents the physical, learned, intimate work of cooking. The formal and thematic presence of food requires the same careful attention scholars have given to uses of music. Close study of foodways texts illustrates that Food Studies can, as Jazz Studies has, deepen and broaden the ways scholars write about and teach African American literature. Just as we have learned to identify Sterling Brown's use of work songs and Langston Hughes's use of the blues, we must learn to spot the recipe in Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Possum" (1898), make a diasporic journey through produce with Claude McKay's "The Tropics in New York" (1920), and unpack the critique of capitalist racism in Lucille Clifton's haunting, first-person "Aunt Jemima" (2008).

In collaboration with the important work that others in this essay are doing on the page and in the world, I turn to culinary discourse and the recipe form in literature to make race, class, and gender central to the growing field of Food Studies. Food Studies addresses subjects including environmental issues, food systems, and hunger. Foodways, on the other hand, focuses on paths and practices. Foodways literature engages with travel and migration, the routes that foodstuffs travel. Foodways also refers to ways of preparing and consuming food. The term insists on mobility and multiplicity. Food Studies gives us tools to see how food operates in literature. Literature gives Food Studies narrative, context, and racial specificity.

Simultaneous efforts to describe and demand practices of identity shape much African American literature, but take on increasing stakes in the post-Civil Rights and post-Black Arts era. Erica Edwards argues that twenty-first-century African American writers "have articulated black writing as both a suturing to black cultural specificity and a splitting from it" (Edwards 2014). The recipe form is especially suited to this work of "suturing" and "splitting." Recipes are didactic (they tell us how to prepare a dish), function on linear time (we must follow the instructions in the right order to get edible results), and are printed explicitly for repeated reproduction beyond the page. The formal conventions of the recipe invite the reader to perform the text. The recipe is textual instruction

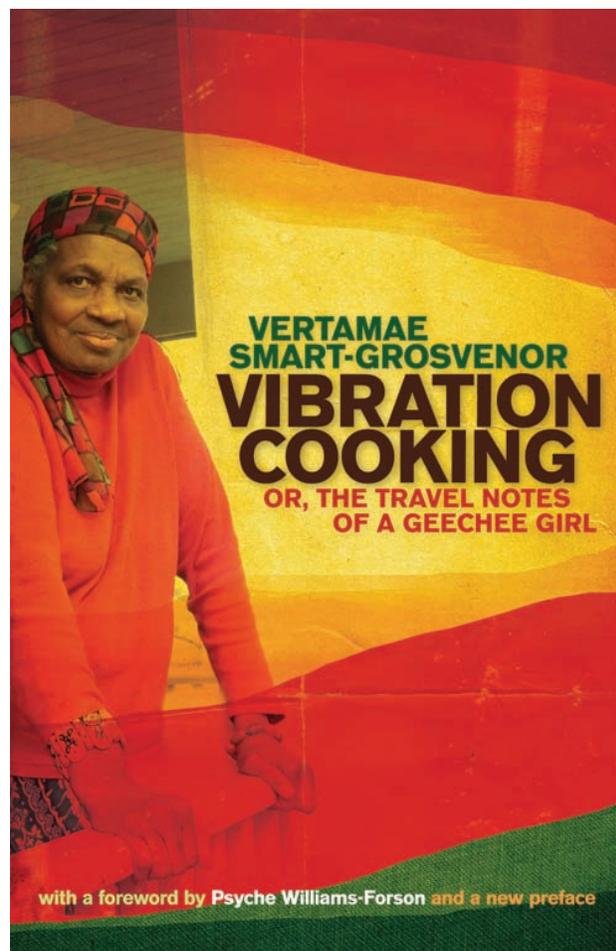


FIGURE 11: *Vibration Cooking, or the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* © 2010.

IMAGE USED COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

for action before and after Black Arts Movement (BAM) authors claimed this as an explicit goal. Foodways literature sutures contemporary writing to its BAM predecessors and invites the splitting inherent in the repetition with difference that is necessary to follow any recipe. From slave narratives that inspired abolitionists to Black Arts poets who wrote to foment revolution and Toni Morrison's notion that her readers should "fulfill the book" (Ruas 1994), the recipe joins a tradition of African American writing that makes real demands of readers. The recipe both describes and demands work.

Recipes circulate in print, oral, and embodied forms through repetition and performance. Foodways literature of the late twentieth century joins African American women's novels in offering a Black feminist revision of BAM and other Black Power groups (Foster 1973; Thorsson 2013). Partly because culinary labors are historically cast as women's work, the recipe form is crucial to this Black feminist critique.

From 1970 on, Vertamae Grosvenor and other radical Black culinary writers use foodways to maintain gender and racial difference while resisting oppression based on that difference. In other words, radical Black culinary writing refuses the metaphor of melting pot (ingredients blend beyond recognition) in favor of gumbo (each ingredient is distinct).<sup>16</sup>

Cookbooks can, for example, correct the archive, as in Grosvenor's *Vibration Cooking* (1970) in which a correspondent of Grosvenor's sends her a recipe for "Nat Turner Apple Pork Thing." The letter reads, in part, "I did a bunch of reading on Nat Turner and that man (Styron) has told a big lie. A flagrant low-down dirty lie against one of our heroes" (Grosvenor 2011: 170). Grosvenor's correspondent amends the archive, wresting narrative control of Turner's legacy from the pen of William Styron with a recipe for a necessarily imagined version of Turner's last meal. This suggests the power of culinary discourse. Rather than write a nonfiction history of this leader of a 1831 thwarted slave rebellion, Grosvenor offers private correspondence that uses culinary instruction to claim Nat Turner as a "hero" rather than the sensationalized subject of Styron's bestselling novel *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967). In locating the authority to narrate history in a recipe, Grosvenor models a practice of archive that every reader is meant to follow in her own kitchen.

In addition to revising historical records, foodways literature also describes and prescribes practices of US Black identity in relationship to the African Diaspora. Ntozake Shange's travelogue with recipes, *If I Can Cook / You Know God Can* (1998), theorizes identity in recipes that ask readers to practice diaspora, to do everyday culinary work as performance of a transnational Black identity. In twelve chapters, *If I Can Cook* loosely maps forced and voluntary migrations of people of African descent from Africa to the Caribbean, to Britain, Brazil, and the American South, and then west and north across the United States. Each chapter includes personal narrative, historical context from scholarly sources, and several recipes. *If I Can Cook* is a direct descendant of *Vibration Cooking*. Shange builds on Grosvenor's genre experimentation, Black liberation politics, and transatlantic reach, using food not only to archive Black history or build community, but also to expand and interrogate the borders of that community.

For example, Shange's Trinidadian recipe for "Cousin Eddie's Shark with Breadfruit" theorizes the difficult practice of diaspora with instructions for boiling breadfruit: "Don't be afraid when it changes to a blood red color, that's the mourning of our ancestors, hungry for us to live now" (Shange 1998: 30). The first-person plural, always mutable in *If I Can Cook*, coheres around "our ancestors," who are nearly bleeding into the food. The gothic turn of "blood red" and "mourning"



FIGURE 12: *Ntozake Shange*.  
 "NTOZAKE SHANGE, REID LECTURE, WOMEN ISSUES LUNCHEON, WOMEN'S CENTER, NOVEMBER 1978" BY BARNARD COLLEGE IS LICENSED UNDER CC BY 3.0.

disrupts a standard recipe lexicon, inserting sorrow, violence, and death into culinary instructions. The collective voice in this recipe is that of people who satiate the appetites of ancestors "hungry for us to live now" by cooking foods saturated with "mourning," by eating the past in the present. Because breadfruit can be poisonous if not ripe or not cooked enough, failure to bring forth the "blood red" of mourning is literally deadly. The "us" here is not just any collection of cooks, but those who take the risk of dining on history. This recipe troubles the possibility of reading *If I Can Cook* as an invitation to a diasporic feast because cooking can demand travel and engagement with suffering. We cannot simply take a specialty from Trinidad and import it whole to the United States; recipes, like people, change in the course of crossing water. Shange pushes the cook to experience the place where this recipe originates, "mourning of our ancestors" and all, in a recipe that demands not just shopping, marinating, grilling, and simmering, but also confronting the history of slavery. "Shark with Breadfruit" is a culinary ritual "to live now" while sincerely acknowledging, but not getting lost in, the "blood" of "ancestors" shed during the transatlantic slave trade. In other words, Shange, like many African American foodways

writers, tells us that recipes can teach us much more than how to cook.

### Afterword: “We Are Here”

In late spring of 2014, Creative Time presented the first large-scale public project by Kara Walker, one of the most important artists of our era. Sited in the sprawling industrial relics of Brooklyn’s legendary Domino Sugar Factory, Walker’s physically and conceptually expansive installation—a massive, sugar-coated “sphinx-turned-mammy”<sup>17</sup>—responded to the building and its history. As is her custom, the artist gave this work a title that is at once poetic and descriptive:

At the behest of Creative Time Kara E. Walker has confected:

*A Subtlety*

or the *Marvelous Sugar Baby*

an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant<sup>18</sup>

It is reported that more than ten thousand people visited this exhibit daily.<sup>19</sup> Like all of Walker’s work, this installation was provocative, thought-provoking, infuriating, beautiful, and terrifying. I found the intensity of the exhibit, the space, and the smells propelled me both backward and forward.

Before grappling directly with issues of Black women and food work, as a graduate student in the early 1990s I gathered life histories of African and East Indian Guyanese women involved in the Red Thread Women’s Development Organisation (Nettles 2008). When I walked into the Kara Walker exhibit, the acrid smell of sugar took me back to my first moments in Guyana, when while standing on the tarmac at Timehri airport I smelled that sickly fermented sweetness for the first time. Even then, though I was not explicitly engaged in thinking through the complicated ways in which Black women work with food, food—particularly the political relationships shaped by the production and consumption of specific commodities—was at the root of my work. Indeed, the Red Thread women had come together initially out of a protest about the lack of accessibility of foodstuffs. When, in the 1980s, then President Forbes Burnham banned the importation of basic food items like cooking oil and wheat flour, it was women who engaged in practices both culturally transformative/disruptive (using cassava or rice flour to make



FIGURE 13: *A Subtlety*, outside Domino Sugar Factory.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIMBERLY NETTLES-BARCELÓN © 2014

bread) and illegal (creating a black market for desired banned products) to prepare and secure food. When the Red Thread women developed small business ideas as a way to earn much-needed income to support their families in an economy strangled by the legacies of colonialism, contemporary government corruption, and later structural adjustment, many turned to the production of food stuffs to sell. And, of course, their very existence in Guyana was tied to their labors as enslaved and indentured food workers in sugar cane and rice fields.<sup>20</sup> All of those thoughts came rushing to me as we entered that abandoned-refinery-turned-exhibit-space and were greeted by the first “sugar baby” disintegrating into his own pool of brown sugar and molasses.

The spectacle of the sphinx loomed ahead as we made our way into the exhibit, taking photographs, recording digital “movies,” and talking to the Creative Time volunteers who served as informal docents.<sup>21</sup> My iPad mini took photos of the sugared mammy as a ghost-like, glowing image and I kept trying to focus it, to zoom in, to get her in crisp clarity. But I could not ... and this is where I stand now as I reflect on our collective conversation from the American Studies Association meeting. How do we navigate the ghosts of this past? How do we understand and



FIGURE 14: *Sugar Baby*.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIMBERLY NETTLES-BARCELÓN © 2014



FIGURE 15: *Sugar-coated Sphinx-like woman*.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIMBERLY NETTLES-BARCELÓN © 2014

engage with the multiplicity of expression of Black women’s food work? How do we hold in our thoughts both the centrality of food work in the creation of certain limiting ideas about (and realities for) Black women *and* the potential for food work as a productive site for our creative and political expressions? The participants of the ASA roundtable provided their own unique insights and provocations to each of these questions.

The professionalization of Black women in the kitchen space is something **Gillian Clark** considers in her work. Clark writes through four seemingly innocuous phrases—“Smile,” “Don’t Speak,” “Be Simple,” and “Fit the Stereotype”—which have served to discipline her public expression and her food work. As a much-acclaimed chef and restaurateur in the Washington, DC area, Clark was known for her exquisite take on American Classics. But, as she recounts in her poetic musing, the figure of Aunt Jemima and romantic notions of learning her food craft in the rural southern United States at the knee of a mammy-like grandmother belies her urban, middle-class upbringing and her formal culinary training. Her “failure” to perform a particular cooking self—of being kind, loving, and warm in the kitchen—translated into a loss of revenue and the businesses themselves. Clark is continuing to create, to envision

her food work, and to write back within a different performative mode as part of her political project. Refusing to acquiesce to the racialized and gendered expectations that as a Black woman doing food work she is more domestic than Executive Chef, she is providing a space of alterity.

Similarly, as I (**Kimberly Nettles-Barcelón**) think through the food work of Chef Tanya Holland we see the call for “elevation” as an effort to understand our food and our food workers as artisanal, complex, and imbued with the histories of where we have been and what we are striving to become. Like Clark, Chef Holland has sometimes been limited by the expectation to do “soul food.” She works to broaden that repertoire and to locate it within a California vernacular with tinges of Europe and the Caribbean. I argue that Chef Holland’s food work is also about (re)creating a community that is steeped in the negative stigmas associated with Blackness, poverty, and crime and also awash in the contemporary politics of food—obesity, food deserts, food insecurity, and the like. Chef Holland becomes a cultural worker who uses the space of the restaurant (and representations of it in various media outlets) to envision a West Oakland that she and others can call home.

The home that Chef Holland signifies is one that softens the edges of pain and discomfort. When **Jessica Kenyatta Walker** draws us into “pumpkin pie gate,” we laugh along with her mirthful tale. But lurking just below the surface are the ways in which pain and discomfort often accompany the food work we do in our homes with and for others. Walker’s work pushes us to “get a bit more theoretical with kitchens.” She asks how a space becomes social. How is Black women’s subjectivity made through the kitchen? How do we engage the materiality of the kitchen for everyday Black women? Using reflexive ethnography in this piece, Walker uncouples those easy associations—particularly in terms of certain culinary traditions tied to assumptions about African American identity. Picking up a thread that runs through the roundtable, Walker pushes us to consider the model of deficiency imbued in public discourse surrounding Black people’s food consumption. What unfolds, she argues, is a moralizing narrative which fails to recognize the plurality of food traditions within Black communities and across class locations. And, perhaps more importantly, does not allow us to foreground the economic relations imbedded within food production—globally, nationally, locally in our communities and in our homes. Or, how Black women continue to work with food fundamentally and creatively while under duress.

It is squarely in this realm of the creative that we end with **Courtney Thorsson’s** exploration of foodways and African American literature. Thorsson’s reading of Ntozake Shange and Vertamae Grosvenor illuminates the range of culinary discourses present in the literature. In the works of these writers, food work is conservative and radical, nourishing and oppositional, expansive and limiting. In recipes and culinary discourse, these authors engage and resist the ways culinary discourse has been used to obscure economic and racial dynamics. From Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima, corporate uses of mythic familial terms to gloss over actual economic relations including slavery and servitude, to contemporary films like *The Help*, which can imagine Black resistance only through the voice of a White interlocutor, foodways are the long-standing battleground on which a struggle over the representation of Black women is waged. But, as Thorsson argues in her analysis, it is often through complex renderings of foodways where Black women writers create spaces of power and authority denied them in the world.

In the professional kitchen, in the kitchens of their homes, on the page, in everyday conversation, and in myriad other places Black women assert food voices that speak on multiple levels. We hope you will continue, with us, to listen, interrogate, and find pleasure in this elemental work. ©

— Kimberly Nettles-Barcelón

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Chef Gillian Clark would like to send a “thank you to the chefs that saw, not the stereotype, but my raw talent.” Kimberly Nettles-Barcelón would like to thank Chef Tanya Holland for the generous sharing of her time and food and to her co-authors/interlocutors for answering the call to come together for the discussion at the ASA. It was truly a memorable and thought-provoking session. She also thanks Rosalinda Salazar and Amie “Breeze” Harper for their background research; and especially Salazar’s ongoing discussions about Black women chefs. Thanks to Joseph Barcelón for his technical assistance with the photos for this piece and Aaron Barcelón for his love and encouragement—always. Courtney Thorsson is grateful to her co-authors of this piece for the collaboration and inspiration. Jessica Kenyatta Walker sends out a thank you to Cristina Jo Pérez, Paul Saiedi, and “those who let me tell their food stories.” She also offers special thanks to the audience and co-presenters at the American Studies Association annual meeting for their feedback and deep engagement. And finally, we would all like to thank the editorial board at *Gastronomica* for their work in bringing this piece to fruition.

## NOTES

1. The authors use Black in its capitalized form throughout the essay (except in direct quotes where the original text uses the lower case form). The choice to capitalize Black is a political one which emphasizes the degree to which Black identity in America does not simply connote color, but is more importantly an often contested reference to culture, ethnicity, or group of people. See Tharps (2014) and Pitner (2014) for insightful discussions on the politics of naming.
2. The full title of our roundtable was “The Good, The Bad, The Unforgivable: Black Women’s Food Work as Spaces of Dissent and Strategic Acquiescence.” The roundtable was sponsored by the American Studies Association Food Culture Studies Caucus.
3. In addition to the voices represented in this essay, the panel included vegan activist and writer Tracey Lynn McQuirter, MPH (author of *By Any Greens Necessary: A Revolutionary Guide for Black Women Who Want to Eat Great, Get Healthy, Lose Weight, and Look Phat*). Professor Jill Cooley was also slated to be on the panel, but was unable to attend. Cooley’s expertise and viewpoints were shared by the panel’s moderator, Professor Psyche Williams-Forsen.
4. This reference is to Swindall (2013). An expanded version of Swindall’s conference paper appears in Wallach (2015).
5. Marianne LaFrance, Professor of Psychology and Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Yale University, has explored the gendered differences in the roles that smiling and non-verbal communication play in everyday interactions (LaFrance 2013). See also Melissa Harris-Perry’s (2011) exploration of the imagery of “Sapphire,” the angry Black woman myth, which is always just beneath the surface of entreaties for Black women to smile.
6. Chef Holland (2014: 24) points out that opening her restaurant on Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday proved a rather “auspicious day for a start.”

7. After earning a BA in Russian Language and Literature from the University of Virginia, Chef Holland went on to receive culinary training at La Varenne cooking school in France. She lived there for two years, returned to work in restaurants in New York City, and then moved to California. In all of that movement, she was not doing soul food. When I asked her if she felt she had to do Brown Sugar Kitchen with a focus on soul food, she said that while Black male chefs have been more able to work outside of the soul food vernacular, Black women have been less able to do so. But she knew that she wanted to do for soul food as a cuisine what we see in other cuisines: to allow for a more cosmopolitan understanding of Black culinary traditions.

8. Although Florida does not specifically name chefs as part of the “creative class,” I seek to expand it by including chefs, artisanal food producers, and food entrepreneurs working within the new economy.

9. For example, in the Trambles’ celebratory pictorial documentation of West Oakland they argue: “This is a story of a people, having found themselves freed of a horrid slavery system in 1865, who by the late 1800s had created a social enclave in West Oakland from which blossomed an African American dreamscape. Black West Oaklanders found a non-extinguishable and stable source of income to build their life in California as Pullman Company employees. ... African American men and women molded their environment of family values and dreams into a community that included all the tangibles—a sense of self-appreciation, a safe haven in which to raise families, an opportunity for property ownership, desire to enter various occupations, business ownership, and leadership roles in community building” (Tramble and Tramble 2007: 7). See also Self (2003) for a more complex reading of the time before and after World War II.

10. Thelin’s article ran under the title “Feeding the Soul” in the print edition of the *Oprah Winfrey Magazine* (June 2012). The online version was titled with the subheading from the print version: “The Restaurant That’s Changing the Face of Gritty West Oakland.” The text of both versions is identical.

11. Carpenter’s memoir chronicles her efforts to build an urban farm in an abandoned lot next to her house (Carpenter 2009). On her Amazon.com page, she is described in this way: “Novella Carpenter has a farm on a dead-end street in the ghetto of Oakland, CA. On GhostTown Farm, she has raised vegetables, chickens, rabbits, ducks, goats, turkeys, pigs, and bees” ([www.amazon.com/Novella-Carpenter/e/B001K8J69C/ref=sr\\_tc\\_2\\_0?qid=1431988069&sr=1-2-ent](http://www.amazon.com/Novella-Carpenter/e/B001K8J69C/ref=sr_tc_2_0?qid=1431988069&sr=1-2-ent)).

12. In addition to Chef Holland, Sang Yoon, a Korean American chef based in Los Angeles, is also featured (text of story written by *Food & Wine* editor Daniel Gritzer). Holland is on the “Love It” column and he is on the “Hate It” column in terms of how they do Thanksgiving.

13. In 2014 B-Side BBQ was closed, and in its place B-Side Baking Company opened. Next to the bakeshop is B-Side Barn, an events venue for the community (<http://bsidebarn.com/>).

14. Holland is very careful about the image that she is creating and, consequently, there is a great deal of consistency across and within the various stories about her food work.

15. I read how each of these representations is structured on limiting common knowledges about Black women and food that shape our popular expectations of that relationship in everyday life. *My Momma Throws Down* is a cooking competition featuring amateur Black female chefs, *Welcome to Sweetie Pies* is a reality TV show about a Black female soul food chef, and *The Wieners Circle* is a hot dog stand in Chicago’s Lincoln Park neighborhood that features Black female servers who engage in racist and sexist dialogues with customers. These depictions are important reminders that food and race work through the tense interactions between

customers and cooks, tradition and health, and gender and class, to name a few. See Walker, 2015a and 2015b.

16. A number of authors consider gumbo a more apt culinary metaphor than melting pot for US identity. Gumbo is a crucial metaphor for identity in Ntozake Shange’s *If I Can Cook* (1998). Harryette Mullen (2000: xii) asserts that writers, during and after BAM, “helped to redefine the culture of the United States as a hybrid multicultural gumbo rather than a white monocultural melting pot.”

17. Creative Time Chief Curator, Nato Thompson, refers to the sphinx in this way in his “Curatorial Statement” [creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/curatorial-statement/](http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/curatorial-statement/).

18. See [creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/](http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/) for details, descriptions, and images of the event as well as critical essays by writers and scholars. The title of this subheading is drawn from an event organized by Ariana Allensworth, Taja Cheek, Sable Elyse Smith, and Nadia Williams in response to the often lascivious and sexualizing images circulated on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter by some who viewed the exhibit. The “We Are Here” event was a call to increase the participation of Black folks, a commentary on the significance of Black women as both subjects and producers of art, and a push to increase critical dialogue about the difficult race and class histories (and present) embedded in the exhibition. See Goodman (2014).

19. The installation was open for viewing May 10 through July 4—Friday, Saturday, and Sunday only.

20. See the foundational work of Mintz (1985) and Carney’s (2008) gendered revisiting.

21. I talked to Creative Time volunteer Robert Shelton for nearly two hours about the exhibit and his work (1984–2004) as an employee at the Domino Sugar Refinery. Mr. Shelton spent many hours during his weekends volunteering for the exhibit in conversation with professors, reporters, and everyday folks about his work and his thoughts on the race and class politics of sugar, gentrification, and the continued struggle for a decent living wage and affordable housing for working-class people. See Yee (2014).

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