

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:           NERVOUS KITCHENS: CRITICAL READINGS OF BLACK  
  WOMEN'S FOOD PRACTICES IN THE SOUL FOOD  
  IMAGINARY

Jessica Ann Walker, Doctor of Philosophy, 2016

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*Nervous Kitchens* intervenes in the story of soul food by treating the kitchen as a central site of instability. These kitchens reveal and critique their importance to constructions of Black womanhood. Utilizing close readings of Black women's culinary practices in popular televisual kitchens and archival analysis of USDA domestic reforms, the project locates sites that challenge how we oversimplify soul food as a Black cultural product. These oversimplifications come through what I term the soul food imaginary. This term underscores how the cuisine is tangible (i.e., how dishes are made) but also the ways that histories of enslavement, migration, and domesticity are disseminated through fictionalized representations of Black women in the kitchen offering comfort through food. The project explores how images of these kitchens adhere to and diverge from the imaginary's four conventions: (1) Soul food originates in enslavement where master's scraps became mama's meal time; (2) Soul food is not healthy food; (3) Soul food moves South to North uninterrupted during the Great Migration and is evidence of

and fuel for struggle, survival, and transformation; and 4) Black women cook it the best, naturally, and alone in the kitchen.

NERVOUS KITCHENS: CRITICAL READINGS OF BLACK WOMEN'S FOOD  
PRACTICES IN THE SOUL FOOD IMAGINARY

by

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## **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to Dr. Sonji Imani Kenyatta. I love you more than life itself. And to her other side, my grandmother, Arnell Hendricks, for a carefree Black girlhood.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my sister Danielle Kenyatta Walker, father, Allen Walker, and grandmother Arnell Hendricks, for their generous support and encouragement throughout this process. This project would not exist without the guidance, mentorship, and brilliance of Psyche Williams-Forsen. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Mary Corbin Sies, Dr. Sheri L. Parks, Dr. Augusta Lynn Bolles, and Dr. Michelle V. Rowley for their time, dedication, and critical feedback. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to utilize resources in both the American Studies and Women's Studies departments at the University of Maryland, College Park. Many thanks to Julia John, Betsy Yuen, and Cliffonia Royals Pryor for their patience and assistance in facilitating access and information to these resources.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

As our gaze sneaks up on the Black woman seated in Annie Lee's *Sixty Pounds* we quickly notice the richness of the material objects that surround and embrace her: watermelons, pots and pans, laundry, buckets, brown bags, slippers, a broom (figure 1). Most prominently, bright red buckets of chitterlings rest by her feet and on top of the kitchen sink where she sits comfortably, fully engaged in the task at hand. As is the signature of Annie Lee's work, she is depicted without a face, which allows viewers to impose themselves into the scene while also emphasizing the role of the body in cooking practices. She is alone and faceless, centered in the frame as subject in reverence, haloed by aloe (a healing plant) and by a crossed window pane (resembling a crucifix). Her body, though in a reverent position, is hunched over, and the work she is assumed to be doing — cleaning pig intestines — not only takes a certain amount of skill and practice, but is also time consuming. Both her solitude, in what is often figured as the domain of Black women, along with her technical ability to clean chitterlings, mark her as a maker and consumer of soul food. The association between Black womanhood and soul food is made through intangible notions of comfort and nostalgia alongside tangible dishes like chitlins. Yet, sometimes these associations can occur when cooking becomes uncomfortable and unnerving in the supposed solitude of the kitchen.



Figure 1: Annie Lee. "Sixty Pounds." Digital image. Accessed from Avisca. 2013. [http://www.avisca.com/Sixty\\_Pounds\\_by\\_Annie\\_Lee\\_p/aw\\_al?sixtypounds\\_453.htm](http://www.avisca.com/Sixty_Pounds_by_Annie_Lee_p/aw_al?sixtypounds_453.htm).

Entertainer Pearl Bailey published “an extraordinary cookbook” titled *Pearl’s Kitchen* in 1973 (figure 2). Recipes from her upbringing in Philadelphia live alongside recipes acquired in her worldly travels. As an autobiographical cookbook that was written at her kitchen table, Pearl reflects on how “childrearing, entreating, [and] housekeeping” have her “thinking of yesterday and cooking for tomorrow.”<sup>1</sup> Bailey understands cooking as an expression of love and her kitchen as a ritual space filled with material objects. Her kitchen is a functional place where one can meditate while being surrounded by a dense material scene echoing *Sixty Pounds*: clown figurines, cheap paintings, pictures of Mama, dollar posters, a calendar with poems, a needlepoint of the Ten Commandments, a family work chart, and a phone.

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<sup>1</sup> Pearl Bailey, *Pearl’s Kitchen: An Extraordinary Cookbook* (New York: Harcourt, 1973), second cover.

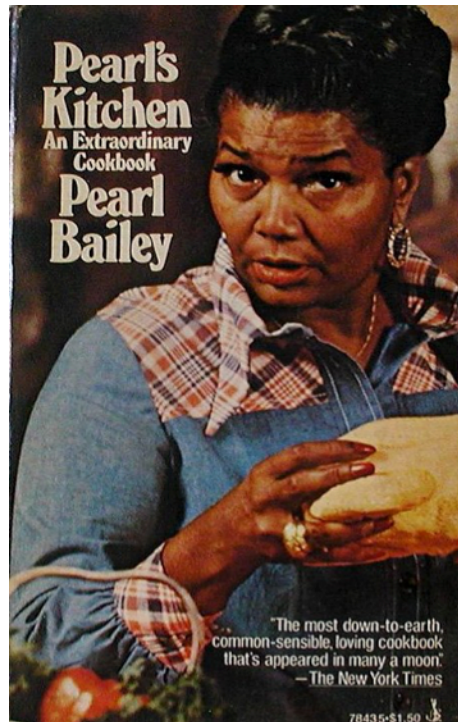


Figure 2: Cover of Pearl's Kitchen: An Extraordinary Cookbook (1973) by Pearl Bailey.

Bailey's culinary origin story titled "Mama Looking Over my Shoulder," explains how her Mama does not like company in the kitchen unless she is going to teach someone how to cook. Mama is in command of the space, and thus Bailey had to watch and not interfere, thereby learning from looking instead of doing. Pearl Bailey writing in a materially dense space sets the stage for the nostalgic connections between soul food and motherhood. Although she does not call herself a soul food chef, her mother prepared stereotypical soul food dishes like chitlins, pig's feet, potlikker, sweet potato pie, and fried chicken. However, as a newlywed, Bailey's mother did not know how to cook fried chicken for her expectant husband. When Bailey's father requests the dish, her mother dutifully places the entire bird, feathers and all, in the oven. This trial and error approach does not phase the mother as she eventually learns how to prepare fried chicken although Bailey can not remember how. But she does recall that it was



always fresh and moist because the birds were killed the same morning they were cooked.

Bailey's culinary origin story centers a Black mother who, although was not born knowing how to cook iconic soul food dishes like fried chicken, learns to proper preparation. Yet, this story of her positive and nostalgic mothers relationship with soul food is contrasted with a story of her mother's everyday consumption practices. Although the children are in charge of setting the table, mother always insists on having her place set with a small portion of fat placed on a small tea saucer. Her mother's body continues to "swell," perplexing a young Bailey, as she never *saw* her mom eating with them at the kitchen table. One morning Bailey chases down her mom after noticing she left without her daily lottery ticket. Knowing her mother's devotion to playing the numbers every morning, Bailey rushes after her only to find that she is deeply engaged at a local restaurant. In front of her mom are stacks of pancakes, sausage, potatoes and a cup of coffee. Bailey immediately recognizes the embarrassment and discomfort on her mother's face. Ultimately, her mother is so shaken at being found out she is forced to change the restaurant where she secretly eats. Bailey ends the description of her mother's kitchen practice with a scene of discomfort that echoes her mother's failed first attempt at fried chicken. But her mothers' embarrassment and ambivalent relationship to everyday food she cooks, contrasts with the mother who warmly cooks the best soul food. In this way Bailey's oscillates between locating her primary knowledge of soul food in tense or nervous kitchen scenes and those nostalgic experiences that reinforce an expected image of a Black female cook.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bailey, *Pearl's Kitchen*, 3-9.

The scene Bailey constructs typifies some of the tensions inherent in Black women's kitchen practices. These include the desire to locate warmth, skill, and comfort in culinary origin stories even while remembering one's mother and her dissatisfaction with cooking and eating within the home. The tension between providing food and consuming it reinforces the need for soul food to be understood in a way that imbricates Black womanhood in a web of providing satisfaction for others while simultaneously revealing her discomfort with cooking, eating, and consuming the very same foods. Scenes such as the one recounted by Bailey and that illustrated in Annie Lee's *Sixty Pounds* are ripe sites for unraveling how variables other than food—such as discomfort, satisfaction, and longing—also help to shape soul food.

This project is guided by two questions: (1) What role does the Black female cook play in our cultural definition of soul food? (2) How does the imagined and real physical space of the nervous kitchen influence the production and consumption of soul food? In order to investigate these questions, I use close visual analysis to critique popular representations, describing the politics of representation inherent in their production. I perform discourse analysis on popular media such as network television, film, radio, and illustrations in Black lifestyle magazines. My concern in these realms is explaining how Black women's performances in representational kitchens can be understood to interact with the materiality of that space. The result communicates a not “already made” association between soul food and Blackness. Images are historically contextualized around the public conversations relating to domesticity and Black womanhood in order to situate the current significance of the mammy icon in the American imagination. I also read archival photographs and political films from The

United States Department of Agriculture for how they visualize Black domestic citizenship. I will read the multiple layers of meaning in political images conveyed through composition, oppositional gazes of figures toward the camera, desired audience, practices and activities figures are engaged in, and the relation between the figures and material objects.

### **Defining Soul Food Imaginary and Nervous Kitchens**

*Nervous Kitchens* is an interdisciplinary study of tension-filled kitchen interactions exemplified by Bailey and Lee that serve to map the contested landscapes of soul food's definition. Soul food is understood as a catch-all term for African American cuisine and is therefore subject to debates over authenticity common with any discussion of a cultural product. This project mines the discursive sites of soul food's creation and re-creation through analysis of popular and archival representations of Black women's kitchens. It argues that popular manifestations of soul food have created an imagined cultural cuisine that attempts to erase over tensions or conflicting ideas about health, gendered divisions of labor, and authenticity.

In order to mine these tensions, this project works from two interconnected concepts I developed: the *soul food imaginary* (SFI), and *nervous kitchens*. These concepts serve to trace the movement of ideas about soul food's past, the expectations those ideas impose on Black women, and the constraints and opportunities that shape the kitchen space of the foods' articulation. This project is significant because it helps theorize a long established observation about soul food's malleability. By developing two terms I argue that this shape shifting actually occurs within the conceivable frames and restrictions of conventions.

## **Soul Food Imaginary**

The first concept, termed the soul food imaginary (SFI), accounts for the multiple images, cookbooks, products, historical material record, and anecdotal information that comprises the way soul food is popularly conceived in the contemporary imagination. I theorize that the past, present, and future conceptions of culturally authentic Black food arise in response to the soul food imaginary. The soul food imaginary is a dialectical cultural imaginary in that it connects the nonmaterial values and beliefs of a cultural group with their everyday rituals, which then solidify that practitioner's belonging in that cultural group. I further argue that the figure of the Black woman is integral to the perseverance and relevance of this imaginary. The soul food imaginary is defined through the performance, contradiction, reinforcement, and adaption of four conventions (details to which I will return). These include:

- 1) Soul food originates in enslavement where master's scraps became mama's mealtime.
- 2) Soul food moves South to North uninterrupted during Great Migration and is evidence of and fuel for struggle, survival, and transformation.
- 3) Soul food is not healthy food.
- 4) Black women cook it the best, naturally, and alone in the kitchen.

Nervous kitchens are the material outcome of the SFI and where we can most readily see Black women push back against these conventions.

## **The Nervous Kitchen**

The second concept, the nervous kitchen, acts as an analytical lens, or a tool for sussing out how these ideas from SFI materialize in the representative and real kitchens of Black women. Nervousness as an analytic privileges and highlights uneasiness that

occurs when imagined and invented traditions come up against actual practice or representations of that practice. Nervous kitchens are the material and representational product of the soul food imaginary in action. Drawing from literature that theorizes how racially segregated spaces can be made nervous by acts that transgress those boundaries, I use the term to help us understand those kitchen performances that transgress the hegemonic boundaries of SFI conventions. By noting when Black women dismiss convention in the kitchen space, the term also reveals the boundaries of those very conventions.

Nervousness is used to describe an interaction of discourses as contradictory and dynamic, as a verb to claim when I as a researcher deploy it, and as a noun to explain what it produces. In noun form, “nervousness” is the product of when the soul food imaginary meets everyday life to mark conflicting ideas and desires that generate a non-hegemonic origin to soul foods’ story. Nervousness can also be a verb that reveals two or more dynamic discourses interacting as opposition. And this indicates the presence of third discourse, usually the kitchen spaces’ hegemonic logic, which is made nervous because of the presence of the two discourses that contradict it. Ultimately nervous kitchens are about both describing what discourses influence a cultural landscape and pointing to how the nervousness generates a new meaning to that cultural landscape. As the dominant discourse that I take up, I am seeking to understand how describing the relationship between conventions through nervousness (primarily as tension and discomfort) is also what allows these discourses to produce new understandings of space.

Cultural imaginaries like SFI operate through and between conventions.

Sometimes they operate, alone, in combination, or simultaneously within the cultural practice of cooking. To watch these operations unfold, let us return momentarily to the story that starts this manuscript, Bailey's discovery of her mother in the restaurant. When imagining Bailey and Lee's nervous kitchens we can see the second and fourth conventions at work: the solitude of the Black woman laboring in the kitchen space and the nostalgic investment of archetypal dishes like fried chicken and chitlins that signify southern origins via migration. The dialectal movement of the soul food imaginary starts with a thesis that argues that mammy or Big Mama is an important and central figure in the cooking of soul food. The antithesis then is Bailey finding out her mother has a tenuous relationship to cooking soul food. The reaction within the story is the convention that insists, in the way the narrative is framed, that this one moment of discomfort toward cooking the cuisine does not take away from her status as a Black woman cook. Conventions, always grounded in common sense, are the reactions that help smooth over contradictions within the dialectic.

This project argues that SFI and nervous kitchens exist in a dialectical relationship with the everyday performances they attempt to depict. Central to this formulation is how both represented and real space-making practices within discourses of soul food allow Black women to claim subjectivities, subvert and maintain dominant soul food conventions, and perform cultural authenticity.

Nervous kitchens highlight the wealth of interpersonal interactions in the spaces that determine the hegemonic rules and behaviors of the space. It reveals the unpleasant feelings, histories, and performances that often interact in kitchens where food is used to express identity, intimacy, and desire. By acknowledging the possibility for multiple,

contradictory, and shifting associations between the food performances we see in media and the actual food practices of Black women, I trouble not only the compulsory association between object (food) and subject (Black women) but also the very terms themselves. This dissertation seeks to conceptualize Black women's cooking practices away from predictable stereotypes that reaffirm deviancy. Rather, it moves toward a more nuanced reading of everyday practices and popular representations. It argues that these practices and representations are political spaces of Black women's expression and creativity.<sup>3</sup>

These two terms—soul food imaginary and nervous kitchens—serve as an important contribution to any field of study interested in theorizing the relationship between imagined cuisine and its often-uneasy material articulation. Few scholars of food and food spaces approach the kitchen with a desire to map out how discourses like race, class, nostalgia, and taste interact. Nor do most consider the mapping of these relationships of space to be tied to any historical, cultural, or social phenomena. While work has been done on the evolution of the modern American kitchen, this work usually focuses on the white female middle class subject and is concerned with normative ideas of femininity within discourses of American domesticity.<sup>4</sup> Grounded in

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<sup>3</sup>See Patricia Hill Collins, *Fighting Words* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), and *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1999), for Black feminist approaches that value Black women's standpoint as uniquely positioned to speak to oversimplified representations of race and gender. Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) engages in feminist methodologies that denaturalize emotion — tracing the genealogies of happiness that orient us toward a certain type of living. This approach is used to understand how nostalgia and comfort in associations with Black womanhood and food orient practices and perceptions of her domestic space. In understanding the political stakes of food as a cultural symbol, I utilize Richard Iton's *In Search of The Black Fantastic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 5, who writes: "the negotiation, representation and reimagination of black interest through cultural symbols has continued to be a major component in the making of black politics."

<sup>4</sup> See Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998); Catherine Beecher,

both the contemporary and historical field of visual representation, my project works through multiple sites to explore the possibility of Black women disrupting and shaping kitchen landscapes.

### **Literature Review**

There are two sets of scholarly conversations that form the theoretical and methodological bases for the soul food imaginary and nervous kitchens. Framing the SFI relies on the relationship between historical African American foodways and common sense narratives of those historical facts, which create a cultural imaginary. Defining the nervous kitchen utilizes theories of space that emphasize the production of social identity. I also review literature about the ideological development of American domesticity, understanding it as one of the discourses that shape the materiality of the modern kitchen.

#### **African American Foodways**

Early material culture scholars noted the importance of utilizing objects like food to interpret and not simply supplement understandings of history. These works serve as an important basis for historicizing African American foodways.<sup>5</sup> Their work, along with Dell Upton's concept of invented traditions, emphasized dynamic, multiethnic, and power laden contexts from which cultural objects are made.

Additionally, Henry Glassie connected folk and everyday understandings of cultural

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*A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), and Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Jules Prown "Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method," *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 1-19; and E. McClung Fleming's "Artifact Study: A Proposed Model," in *Material Culture: Research Guide*, ed. Kenneth L Ames and Thomas J Schlereth (University Press of Kansas, 1985), 1-34. Both served as a standardized way for museum professionals and preservationists to objectively assess an object's historical importance. They are helpful in that they critically consider how and why objects like food are produced and consumed within a system of human meaning.



life to the making and meaning of objects that would influence how the subfield of African American material culture develops.<sup>6</sup> Scholars in this field had the hard task of understanding the material past of ethnic cultures while not always having the benefit of large artifact collections, which are the result of dedicated preservation efforts. This “partial transcript,” as Paynter and McGuire note in *Archaeology of Inequality*, meant that the field of material culture needed new frameworks to interpret artifacts like food that are the result of asymmetrical power relations.<sup>7</sup> These approaches urged implementing methods that accounted for dynamic social power in foodways artifacts for the field of archaeology. They emphasized the dialectic between domination and resistance, whose material manifestations offer evidence from which to extrapolate soul food’s beginnings.

Interpretation of early African Americans’ material record established that slave communities developed food practices unique to their social, ecological, and geographical context.<sup>8</sup> Early African Americans created a unique cuisine through how

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<sup>6</sup> Henry Glassie’s *Material Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1999) argues for the importance of ethnographic analysis of vernacular objects in elucidating cultural fact. Work grounded in a folkways approach to everyday artifacts highlights how use of those artifacts can also be negotiation of power structures. Glassie’s work in folklore studies made it possible to name food as one of these important cultural objects.

<sup>7</sup> In “Struggling with Pots in Colonial South Carolina” from the Randall H. McGuire and Robert Paynter collection, *The Archaeology of Inequality*, (Cambridge, Mass: B. Blackwell, 1991), Leland Ferguson argues that domestic pottery made by slaves in colonial South Carolina exhibited a social practice of “unconscious resistance.” The absence of utensil marks, and emphasis on one-pot meals indicated how early African Americans utilized foodways in resistance to dominant white aristocratic materials, etiquette, and aesthetics.

<sup>8</sup> Anne L. Bower’s edited volume, *African American Foodways: Explorations of History and Culture* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), is pivotal foundational as the first edited collection to deal with both the historical and social evolution of African-American foodways. Essays like Robert Hall’s “Food Crops, Medicinal Plants, and the Atlantic Slave Trade” and William Whit’s “Soul Food as Cultural Creation.” trace the origin of African American cooking to an innate afro-centric heritage. Yet both underestimate how the acculturation process is a two-way street whereby African American foods influenced what we come to know as Southern food. In his essay, William Whit implies that enslaved Africans had priority in which foodstuffs they consumed in plantation societies. Food here is situated in a

they produced, harvested, stored, preserved, distributed, prepared, consumed, and disposed of foods. This early version of the cuisine was made in conversation with multiethnic societies, producing “ethnically driven derivations” within the community.<sup>9</sup> We know from the material record that early African Americans used diverse procurement and preparation styles within different systems of labor to create hybridized culinary creations.<sup>10</sup> Given the realities of the archeological record when it comes to African American foodways, it is difficult to nail down dishes that are native to one group over another.<sup>11</sup> Given this diversity and inability to claim an “original,” how do we demarcate one cuisine as authentically African American over another?

#### Building from these archaeological insights, Psyche Williams-Forsen

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slave lifestyle that is painted as overwhelming, domesticated, and somehow primal, where connections to the earth and sense are innate. In these strictly historical methodologies it becomes harder to read fluidity and heterogeneity in the social lives of early African Americans in the United States.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Yentsch, “Excavating African American Food History” In *African American Foodways: Explorations of History and Culture*, ed. by Anne Bower (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007) 59-98.

<sup>10</sup> Yentsch sites archeological evidence that suggests slave communities utilized a communal hearth, which is commonly used in West African traditions. Also, historian Frederick Opie’s *Hog & Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) notes how certain West African crops like yam, peanuts, and cow peas were used along with New World foodstuffs like corn, collards, and preserved fruits to produce innovative dishes within the constraints of a Plantation system. The methods of food production speak to the hybridity of this nascent cuisine as well as to the struggles to sustain and nourish families with limited access to food resources. Based on region, food in slave communities was produced under differing conditions of labor and access to certain food resources. Furthermore, some early African Americans were brought to specific parts of the United States based on their agricultural and/or harvesting expertise of certain West African crops. This means enslaved peoples came to the New World with certain concepts of food production that had to be creatively adjusted in light of violent changes in the conditions of production. For example, rice cultivators were enslaved in the similar marshy soil of South Carolina Sea Islands while fishing experts were brought to the marine rich ecologies of the Chesapeake Bay. Indeed, by garnering this information from the archaeological and historical record, scholars reveal that the material world of early slaves was defined by ingenuity and hybridity. Also see Jessica Harris’ book, *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), for a conservative account of African American foodways.

<sup>11</sup> Psyche Williams-Forsen. “More than Just the ‘Big Piece of Chicken’: The Power of Race, Class, and Food in American Consciousness, in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2008), 342-353. Williams-Forsen writes, “Given the mass exchange of foods and food habits that occurred between early Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans it is almost impossible for one group or another to claim any recipe as original or native to their culture.”

approaches the history of African American foodways with a multi-method approach that understands how foodstuffs like fried chicken are also understood and circulated in conversation with stereotypical images and folk understandings of African Americans themselves. Key to this project is how gender demarcates who cooks what and for what cultural value. She coins the term gender and culinary malpractice to call attention to the ways that both Black women and the oversimplification of African American food as scraps have been intentionally misrepresented.<sup>12</sup> Her work shows the importance of understanding African American foodways as both material artifact and as cultural narrative. These narratives include how the origins and significance of foodways are mediated through visual representation, oral traditions, and archival materials saturated with power inequalities.

*Nervous Kitchens* is not the first to try to account for the history of soul food, nor the first to notice that the cuisine is as imagined as it is real and material. Yet, there are no studies specifically on soul food that attempt to define the major tendencies in how these imagined connections are popularly articulated.

The soul food imaginary is a cultural imaginary because it serves to connect the nonmaterial values and beliefs of a cultural group to the everyday practices that make those cultural characteristics knowable. This conception of a cultural imaginary that works to shape social practices borrows from Benedict Anderson's term imagined communities. Anderson writes that "members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of

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<sup>12</sup> Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*.

each lives the image of their communion.”<sup>13</sup> The imagined community is what coheres nations of disparate languages, traditions, religions, and histories in service to a powerful origin narrative of collective practices and rituals. In the cultural period of soul food’s branding (early 1960s), there were efforts to unify the disparate music, fashion, and language of the African diaspora into a collective Black nation.<sup>14</sup> Soul food becomes another cultural product conceived through attempts to gain legitimacy for African American traditions that were often marked as primitive in contrast to dominant American culture. Traditions shaped through migration, intermarriage of regional ethnicities, and varying agricultural resources are cohered through affective ingredients like love, nurturing, or ancestral knowledge. Yet, there is also a tension that develops between the food’s imagined origin and its historical foodways. Theoretically a cultural imaginary helps mark an investment in an invented tradition and imagined collectivity within soul food discourse. It further suggests a methodological approach to defining soul food that places more emphasis on the power of “origin” narratives in defining food instead of the appearance of the food itself. Where we don’t see soul food in the following chapters is an intentional approach that pushes back against centering an iconic dish, restaurant, region, or chef in the search for authentic ethnic cuisine.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Here the “fellow members” of the Black nation that we will never meet include deceased ancestors.

<sup>15</sup> Arjun Appadurai, “How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30, no. 1 (1988): 3-24, argues that the Postcolonial Indian middle class is constructing the “national” cuisine from complex regional food practices that are tied to morality and medicine and resist the national standardization of foodways. I am also reminded of Richard Wilk’s “Learning to be Local in Belize: Global Systems of Common Difference,” in *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the Prism of the Local* (1995): 110-33). Wilk argues that the construction of a national Belizean cuisine reflects the nation’s long history of colonialism.

That search will ultimately fail as soul food is also a floating signifier and therefore it is helpful to follow the meaning that coheres and makes sense of its seemingly endless signifying chain of food objects.

As an important cultural practice, cooking connects the imagined home place or origin place to the physical tangible space of social interaction even if participants have not physically occupied that origin space. SFI is used to highlight the “inner world” of individuals navigating their sense of the diaspora in order to find cultural practices that resonate with a particular version of Blackness. Bailey may imagine her mother’s failed attempts at fried chicken as she cooks it herself. Others may continually visualize the cooking practices of loved ones long gone as they try to recreate dishes in the present. These daydreaming like behaviors influence how social actors come to “know” and feel the origins of cultural practices.<sup>16</sup> However, as embodied as cooking practices may be, soul food also coheres as a unique product of African American culture because of the moniker “soul,” which lends validity to its social value and cultural meaning. It is within imagination that convention operates to attach cuisine to certain groups and not others. As the dominant scripts that shape soul food, conventions reduce the complexity of race, gender, and class, but do so in order to support a common sense notion of African American community.

### **Soul in Soul Food**

American popular media circulate a commonsense notion of African American history and tradition. Part of this history is the traditional cooking practices and

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<sup>16</sup> John Caughey’s *Imaginary Social Worlds: A Cultural Approach* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 10, argues that behaviors like daydreaming influence how social actors come to “know” the origins of cultural practices. According to Caughey, “home” groups rely on “individual imaginary experiences” that are necessarily “connected to recognizable patterns in cultural systems.”

techniques associated with “soul food,” a catch-all term for African American cuisine. Literary scholar Doris Witt rightfully describes how definitions of African American cuisine, although variable, denote a central set of familiar tropes.<sup>17</sup> Soul food cookbooks, for example, reinforce images of the magical cooking of Black women whose recipes induce feelings of comfort, nostalgia for the rural south, and unmatched spiritual pleasure. A Louisiana resident quoted in Jimmy Lee’s *Soul Food Cookbook* notes that what distinguishes soul food from other cuisines is that wealthy people ate “food for the body” while “poor folks ate food for the soul.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, the lack of social mobility and working class values are often figured as inherent to the making of soul food because they show continuity between imagined traditions of slave ancestors and post-emancipation iterations of the cuisine. In her cookbook memoir, Shelia Ferguson reminisces about the women who cooked her favorite Deep South dishes. Ferguson notes that soul food is a cuisine passed down through word of mouth (bad news for those trying to imitate the style through reading her book). When women make these dishes it looks more like “sleight of hand” than laborious kitchen work, an indication of their skill and mastery. Throughout, Ferguson gushes with pride about this Black cultural product that *made* it from “slave’s rations” to “the cuisines of the American dream, if you like. Because what can’t be cured must be endured.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Doris Witt *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of US identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1999). She draws from Jimmy Lee’s 1970 *Soul Food Cookbook*, Ruth Gaskin’s work on status among African American Christian women, Amiri Baraka’s 1962s essay, “Soul Food,” and articles from *The New York Times*, *Ebony*, and *Essence* Magazines.

<sup>18</sup> Jimmy Lee, *Soul Food Cookbook* (New York: Award Books, 1970), 8.

<sup>19</sup> Sheila Ferguson, *Soul Food: Classic Cuisine from the Deep South*. Grove Press, 1993, vii. Also see Toni Tipton-Martin, *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks* (Austin: The University of Texas, 2015). Tipton-Martin utilizes cookbooks to emphasize the labor and expertise that Black women deployed to shape the cuisine.

Attempts to define the soul of soul food often negate the many dimensions to the architecture of the cuisine. As African American foodways scholarship shows, this already-fusion cuisine was named “soul food” only in the late 1960s when Black cultural arbiters vied “for the containment of racial meanings” around Black cultural products like music, clothing, and language.<sup>20</sup> Although conceptions like Jimmy Lee’s and Ferguson’s are historically incorrect, this popular narrative of soul food’s origin still have significant individual, social, and familial meaning, shaping traditions and strategies of survival.

The soul food imaginary is a nostalgic investment in a singular Black food tradition and is an overwhelming ideology that structures conceptions of what Black people eat in the present. Narratives of overcoming poverty, enslavement, or destitution through the magical cooking of a Black woman dominate the story of soul food. Yet, it obfuscates differences based on class, region, and gender. As Witt surmises there are “contradictions inherent in maintaining the fiction of soul as ‘a sum of all that is typically or uniquely Black’ in the face of black geographic and economic diversity.”<sup>21</sup> However, the contradictory nature of its history and definition has not hindered the term’s ability to satisfy cultural desires for its consumption. Soul food, and the Black female figure imagined to prepare it, have a lasting cultural significance indicated by soul food’s use and travel across borders of class, race, nationality, and region.

The trouble with somehow validating one cultural product as authentic over another is the problem with culture itself. It is ever changing, dynamic, and does not

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<sup>20</sup> Doris Witt, *Black Hunger*, 98.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 97.

follow a coherent and concise rubric. Scholars looking at the material record of soul food's varied origin often note frustration with how these historical interpretations do not always make their way to popular conceptions of the cuisine. David Lyonel Smith utilizes Gramsci's ideology of common sense to explain what may bind the representational version of soul food found in popular media with the archaeological version found in academic texts. Smith writes, "common sense is not critically self-conscious and its function is to facilitate conformity and adaptation to familiar circumstances."<sup>22</sup> In relying on feeling for instances to "know" what music is or is not Black, common sense is a powerful "mix of habit, superstition, fact, [and] hearsay."<sup>23</sup>

When it comes to soul food there seems to be no impetus to analyze the way common sense notions of Blackness as feeling or knowing keep most from accessing a complex and ever-changing conception of the cuisine. The concept of soul is often "uncritically embraced as the essence of Blackness."<sup>24</sup> When attached to food, the concept of soul forecloses on a more dynamic understanding of the food's relation to Black experiences. However, the experiences of Black male cultural arbiters like Amiri Baraka and Dick Gregory infused 1960s debates over the health of soul food, making it a medium through which to "revalue or reconstruct black manhood."<sup>25</sup> As with the concept of the soul food imaginary, we cannot take for granted the "dialectic between soul food and selfhood." Exploring this dialectic reveals how common sense might operate in the desire to simplify soul food as an already made cultural product. Witt, for

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<sup>22</sup> David L. Smith, "What is Black Culture?" *The House That Race Built*, ed. Waheneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon, 1997), 181.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Witt, 82.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 81.



example, writes, “We need to understand, in other words, not just why soul food is more complicated than we have thought, but also why it has been so easy to think that it is less complicated than it is.”<sup>26</sup>

The cultural significance of the term “soul” eases part of this complication, standing in for the indescribable yet tangible feeling of racial kinship that the cuisine signifies. In *The Soul Food Cookbook*, Jim Harwood writes “Soul food takes its name from a feeling of kinship among Blacks. In that sense, it’s like “soul brother” and “soul music”— impossible to define but recognizable among those who have it. But there is nothing secret or exclusive about soul food.”<sup>27</sup> One would be hard pressed to find attempts to define or describe soul food without mention of family or religion. Ann Bower notes, “A term like soul food continues to be a powerful way to signify something African Americans share throughout and beyond the United States.”<sup>28</sup> Food journalist Donna Pierce notes that soul food “can still bring black people in the United States together, no matter what their line of work, level of education or place of birth.”<sup>29</sup> But the attachment of “soul” to “soul food” occurs at a very specific socio-cultural time, and it relies heavily on the convention of uninterrupted South to North movement, with the South standing in as an imagined landscape of suffering and oppression. So while new arrivals to northern cities had their cuisine disparaged as “slave food,” it would be this very association between enslavement and poverty that

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Jim Harwood and Ed Callahan, *Soul Food Cookbook* (San Francisco: Nitty Gritty Books, 1969), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Telephone interview with Donna Pierce May, 1, 2002, in Ann Bower, “Introduction: Watching Soul Food,” from *African American Foodways: Explorations of History and Culture*, ed. Ann Bower (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 8.

lends the cuisine its authenticity when branded in the 1960s.

It would be Amiri Baraka's 1966 "Soul Food" essay that transformed "slave food" into soul food.<sup>30</sup> The dishes that Baraka names, including macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, and sweet potato pie, set the stage for modern soul food discourse. The very context of the term's creation represents its ability to demarcate legitimate African American experiences of food. Baraka writes his essay in reaction to an *Esquire* article written by a black man who questioned the very existence of a unique Black culinary style. As a Gullah chef who cooked for the Black Panthers, advocated for African diasporic cuisine, and conceptualized her kitchen as a "world," Grosvenor becomes a lone but integral female voice in this period's articulation of soul food.<sup>31</sup> Grosvenor's *Vibration Cooking*, both in form (autobiographical moments interspersed with unscientific recipes) and content, emphasized the uniquely Black ability to infuse food with intangibles like hospitality and comfort. Yet the conception of soul food as made from the entire body and being of the cook (she put her foot in it) is grounded in Black women's use of food as medicine or even poison. The magical Black woman cook trope may serve to mask the more complicated historical uses of Black women's knowledge to heal bodies and sustain life through early medicinal materials like plants, roots, and herbs. Although the magic Black cook is an oversimplification, there is a disruptive power in how we can read "soul" as a trace of this non-western and

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<sup>30</sup> Psyche Williams-Forsen notes the importance of Baraka's "Soul Food" in her forward to Vertamae Grosvenor's reissue of *Vibration Cooking*. A similar reference to Baraka is made in Toni Tipton-Martin's *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015 .

<sup>31</sup> Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking*.

formalized approach to healing with food.<sup>32</sup> Still, as a masculine dominated discourse, Baraka's version of soul food pays little service to Black women's mythological and spiritual relationship to food, but set a different standard for cookbooks that followed. These standards tend to ennoble Black lower class identity born from the Great Migration in order to defend and define the cuisine as authentically Black within the political context of the Black Arts movement.

One of the foundational considerations of the soul in Black culture is the cool aesthetic theorized by Robert Farris Thompson in his 1973 essay "An Aesthetic of the Cool." In it, he contends that the cool aesthetic serves a metaphorical and social function. Coolness expresses a mastery over self by achieving a "transcendental balance."<sup>33</sup> When one "loses their cool" they are severing their connection to this raised consciousness and "interiorized nobility" which "means a person quite literally lost his soul."<sup>34</sup> In *Yo Mama's Disfunktional!* Robin Kelley gives an explanation of how the term "soul" and "cool" were manipulated by urban ethnographers to exhibit an "authentic Black urban culture," that was inherently masculine. Soul is explained either as a coping mechanism for the stressors of urban life or a lynchpin of a masculine,

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<sup>32</sup> The use of apothecary in lieu of magician helps to highlight the co-construction of food and body as well as the systems of knowledge and signification that operate in the sensuality of the cooking process. Suddenly, the Black woman cook is engaging in a signification that implicates process of healing through, in lack of a better word, medical technologies. Her cooking becomes chemistry. She embodies a disruption of western conceptions of authority as she conflates the scientific with the subjective. What is most intriguing about this shift in understanding the healing nature of Black women and food is the possibilities it has for conceptualizing a shift in power relationships. In *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture*. (New York: One World/Ballantine, 2013) Sheri Parks writes, "it is important to establish the ongoing historical presence of the Sacred Dark Feminine in America — how she has been seen and revered — because the beliefs and practices form the basis by which black women continue to be interpreted." The Sacred Dark Feminine in the Black female cook is one of an apothecary and that this new image opens the possibilities for a new "basis by which black women continue to be interpreted." This is especially so in representations around soul food and Black women.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, "An Aesthetic of the Cool." *African Arts* 7, no. 1 (1973): 41.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 42.

heterosexual, Black Nationalist discourse. In this, it was further distanced from the aesthetics, style, art and performance of Thompson's cool.<sup>35</sup>

However, Mark Anthony Neal notes how soul is also located in the projects of Black nation building. From 1963-1978 these projects signified the “radical reimagining of the contemporary African American experience, attempting to liberate contemporary interpretations of that experience from sensibilities that were formalized and institutionalized during earlier social paradigms.”<sup>36</sup> Essentially, the soul aesthetic valued those Black cultural expressions overlooked or not legitimated by the thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance. However, these aesthetics also served to foreclose on the possibilities of multiple forms of Black expression. In order to build a “nation within a nation” as well as avoid FBI surveillance and state sanctioned violence, “Blacks rigorously closed ranks around common notions of black identity, even if such homogeneity was a fictive gesture.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, Blacks engaged in what can be read either as strategic essentialism to speak to their own or a universalizing project that offered little critique of the master narrative. This text shows how this conception of soul reflected a very specific political Black consciousness. The term soul food was birthed in this culturally specific time as Amiri Baraka famously defended soul food as a uniquely Black cuisine. Therefore, the soul referenced in soul food is not only the intangible spirit of Black cuisine (comfort, nostalgia, love), but also, as the soul food

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<sup>35</sup> Robin D. G Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon, 1997), 31,32. “By... reducing the cool pose to a response by heterosexual black males to racism...[the authors] reinforce the idea that there is an essential black urban culture...but ignore manifestations of the cool pose in public “performances” of black women, gay black men, and the African American middle class.”

<sup>36</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 3.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

imaginary serves to show, a discursive formation.

Key to the longevity of this formation is how Black food gets represented in the post-soul (after 1978) aesthetic. Many scholars read the 1997 feature film *Soul Food* that centers on a Black family divided through various crises. The unifying character is a Black “Big Mama” whose magical Sunday dinners bring everyone together. The masculine nostalgia of director George Tillman oversimplifies the role of Black women in the kitchen. The death of Big Mama due to diabetes is foreshadowed in a kitchen scene where she is unaware that her arm is being burned over a stovetop. This is a symbolic mourning of Black patriarchy in the family threatened by the increased professional success of Black women.<sup>38</sup> This is especially true as the kitchen is figured as a space where women like Big Mama can “salve their wounds” to develop “the level of tolerance for pain and disappointment needed to maintain patriarchal norms as they exists outside the kitchen.”<sup>39</sup> Tillman recreates Black patriarchy through how he imagines Black women to give their actual lives to kitchens, a space to which he admits he had little access.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, reading kitchens in this way suggests that the imagined practices of Black women in this space are rich representational sites to understand how gender and domestic space produce meanings of soul within soul food.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Neal writes, “Big Mama” has to be nostalgically recouped in death to allow the continued flourishing of patriarchy within the black community, particularly in an era in which the professional success of black women outside the domestic sphere and the black community, and various forms of black feminist thought, have challenged the logic of the black community’s continued embrace of patriarchal norms,” 91

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>40</sup> In *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, Williams-Forson notes the absurd contradictions of Big Mama as soul food savior and martyr; “for all of her knowledge and wisdom, she is either unable or unwilling to care for herself. She is, in fact, dying for some soul food.” 189

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 191-193. She reads the film as a contested site for Black women’s self-representation through both gendered and culinary malpractice. By equating a gender identity that is willing to literally die for what is portrayed as scraps the film also affirms how “soul food has also become a term of convenience.

## Nervousness in Black Women's Kitchen Space

Social spaces can be sites of anxiety, happiness, calm, and excitement.

However, few, if any, scholars of food and food spaces approach the kitchen with a desire to map out these affective characteristics. Nor do most consider the mapping of these relationships of space to be tied to any historical, cultural, or social, phenomena. By centering performances of Black women's food practices in the kitchen, this project disrupts the use of white, middle class, consumer identities in theorizing the social and cultural significance of the kitchen space.<sup>42</sup> This makes work like "The Kitchen Door Swings Both Ways" by Mary Titus an important theoretical touchstone for the historical explanation of racial tensions in kitchen spaces. Focusing on the antebellum and post-bellum southern domestic ideology, Titus notes that by 1852 the kitchen played an important role in the material divide between the Black cooks and servers and the white masters and guests. What resulted was a tenuous, or, I would argue, nervous, relationship between the civility of an elegant dining service and the assumed primitivism of the servers and cooks. This made the kitchen space one of the few spaces where significant and sensual interracial interactions were sustained.<sup>43</sup>

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It has become comfortable simply to use the term to describe everything from food to feelings." 197.

<sup>42</sup> For work that also approaches the kitchen in this way see: Rebecca Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens: Domestic Workers in the South, 1865-1960*, The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Sharpless accounts for the many obstacles women as young as 13 had to confront in order to find work in the homes of wealthy white and Black families. She provides a nuanced historical reading of Black female domestic worker that highlights the ways they maintained personal power and self-definition in horribly oppressive working environments. This leads us to reframe housework or domestic labor as survival work imbued with agency and pleasure. Additionally, Williams-Forson illustrates this point in "Other Women Cooked for My Husband: Negotiating Gender, Food, and Identities in an African American/Ghanaian Household," *Feminist Studies* 36, no. 2 (2010):435-461. Williams-Forson notes how social actors "negotiate the roles of domesticity and simultaneously try to create connections to a homeland--both real and imaginary."

<sup>43</sup> Mary Titus, "The Dining Room Door Swings Both Ways: Food, Race, and Domestic Space in the Nineteenth-Century South." *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts* (1997): 243-56. Titus writes, "

Historically the Southern kitchen space epitomized racial tensions when the food served up confirmed a “white family’s position in the hierarchical order of the plantation.”<sup>44</sup> However, these ideologies would eventually come into conflict with emerging abolitionist rhetoric that pointed out the hypocrisy of claiming the civilized nature of domestic service when it necessitates limiting the civil liberties of others in the name racial “purity.” These scenarios of historical nervous kitchens reveal that the soul food imaginary glosses over how the sometimes rival discourses of class mobility, health, and cultural authenticity become definitive characteristics of the kitchens from which soul food is created by Black women.

I draw on understandings of nervousness derived from work on cultural landscapes, domesticity, and spatial theory. Denise Byrne brings attention to the spatial consequences of racial segregation that leave unmarked and marked borders. He focuses on the colonial spatial systems in Australia that restricted Aboriginal communities into fenced in reserves. But as Byrne notes, this was not without Aboriginal people resisting and subverting markers of racial segregation by poaching on restricted lands, and removing or tampering with physical border makers like fences. Byrne seeks to engage in a spatial nervousness where a minority group transgresses colonial systems of racial segregation. The use of nervousness is to get us to think of racial segregation not so much in terms of physical infrastructure but in terms of how it is a “spatial order governed primarily by behavioral convention and coercion.”<sup>45</sup>

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“The threshold between kitchen and dining room represents a crucial margin across which food passes; we could name this threshold the locus of the second most intimate possible relation between blacks and whites.”

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 245.

<sup>45</sup> Denise Byrne, “Nervous Landscapes: Race and Space in Australia,” *Journal of Social*

Byrne offers the idea of nervousness as a symptom of a dysfunctional hegemony. A properly functioning hegemonic system thrives on sharp clarity, or the opposite of nervousness. The African American example of Byrne's use of Aborigines' use of nervousness would be recent uprisings by Black Lives Matter activists on the streets of Baltimore, Maryland, Ferguson, Missouri and Cleveland, Ohio. By continuing the Black radical tradition of disrupting sporting events and evening commutes, these mostly Black bodies unnerve the "spatial order" that dictates they stay segregated and out of the way of the city's normal functioning. Another example specific to the kitchen space is Black women's relationship to the white, middle-class, and female model of proper American domesticity. Whether through signifying, talking back to employers, or burning and poisoning food, Black women unnerve the racialized spatial order of the kitchen that dictates that their behavior be all nurturing, passive, and joyful. Therefore, Byrne's concept of nervousness is applied to the cultural landscape of the kitchen whose systems of demarcation are found in the conventions of the soul food imaginary.

Understanding space as the "origin and source" of human activity or practice — rather than the result of an action, quality, or product of man — is central to the concept of the nervous kitchen. Space, then, is shaped by the nature of the interactions that happen within it while representations of those interactions are shaped in turn by the space.<sup>46</sup> Although this concept of space being socially reproduced is attributed to Henri Lefebvre, I use Vertamae Grosvenor's theorization of space in "Kitchen Crisis" as an

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*Archaeology* 3, no. 3 (2003): 170.

<sup>46</sup> Henri Lefebvre. *The Production of Space* Vol. 30 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 171. Lefebvre writes, "The formal relationships which allow separate actions to form a coherent whole cannot be detached from the material preconditions of individual and collective activity."



earlier, racially and gendered specific conception of social space.

In this “rap,” Grosvenor complains that modern kitchens are shrinking and producing only instant foods. She blames white women, or “Missy,” who have apparently yet to recover from the post-emancipation crisis of the lack of domestic work.<sup>47</sup> She wags her finger at anyone who doesn’t acknowledge the long, complex, and creative Black culinary history in the United States, who doesn’t take time to cook, or to have a good “food consciousness.” A good kitchen space does not have to be ornate, large or have high-tech appliances. What makes a good meal is the right “vibrations.” “You can’t eat with everybody” Grosvenor notes. Some people just have bad kitchen vibrations and one shouldn’t share anything, especially food, with these people. Accordingly Grosvenor urges the reader to “PROTECT YO KITCH’N” from the static of friends and family. Therefore Grosvenor pinpoints the spatially specific production of social value in the Black kitchen: what is perceived to happen in the space (hospitality based on race), what happens in the space (generosity), and how that space is re-made (through vibrations).

Grosvenor shows how space is inherently social — what Lefebvre would call the “coherent whole” of our separate actions — and therefore imbued with all the distinctions, hierarchies, and norms of social differences like race, class, and gender.

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<sup>47</sup> Vertamae Grosvenor, “Kitchen Crisis” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Signet, 1970), 119-23. The slaves, according to Grosvenor, were the ones who beat pound cake for 800 strokes, toiled in the fields for foodstuffs, and created and perfected various methods of food preparation. Because of emancipation, white women are now left to do all that work on their own, but they of course don’t know how and their “lily white hands” are unaccustomed to labor. In fact, Black people have had a long culinary tradition of whipping up delicacies like terrapin long before white folks did, but some refuse to acknowledge this fact. Included in this group are “so called enlightened people” who will speak for hours on “Jean Paul Sartre, campus unrest, the feminine mystique, black power, and Tania, but proudly exclaim “I’m a bad cook...I can’t even boil water without burning it.” Grosvenor’s response to these people, presumably black intellectuals, is “That is a damn shame.”

But perhaps what is most key to the theories of spatiality that inform my definition of nervousness are the dynamic interactions between what people do in the space, what people perceive others are doing in the space, and the representation of the space.

I aim further to understand how perceptions of space through ideologies like American domesticity produce social practices that then reproduce social meaning. The perception of a “normal” domestic space, for instance, is always shifting, often right along with corresponding social practices and ideologies. Specifically, this project is concerned with examining ideologies around race, gender, and domesticity that permeate our popular conception of Black women in kitchen spaces.

Scholars who trace the histories of non-white women in the kitchen often analyze the roles and images of domestic labor.<sup>48</sup> As an icon of this labor, the mammy remains the go-to referent for conceptualizing Black women in a kitchen for diverse audiences. Her persistence in the popular American imaginary, and in the soul food imaginary, more specifically, raises her to level of myth and in doing so begs for the development of terms that understand her as not entirely stereotypical.<sup>49</sup> In her study, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory*, Kimberley Wallace Sanders suggest that there are more ambivalent readings of the figure especially if we consider the erasure of practices that show how she maintains her own domestic life.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See work like the “Making a Living” section of Gerda Lerner’s *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage, 1972), 227-234; Elizabeth Clark-Lewis’s *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic Workers and the Great Migration* (New York: Kodansha International, 1996); Susan Tucker’s *Telling Memories among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and Their Employers in the Segregated South* (New York: Schocken Books, 1988); Alice Childress, *Like One of the Family: Conversations from a Domestic’s Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986); and Phyllis Palmer’s *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920-1945* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

<sup>49</sup> Parks, *Fierce Angels*.

<sup>50</sup> Kimberly Wallace-Sander, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann

The complex social relationships and cultural values that construct the kitchen space remain under-theorized and under-examined if we misjudge the complexity of a stereotype. Scholarship on Black women's domestic lives tends to miss out on an opportunity to theorize social relationships through conceptions of space that would ask: What are our expectations of a kitchen space? How do our bodies respond to these expectations? How do stories about such spaces affect our physical interactions with them? When we bring these questions to bear on the everyday space-making practices of Black women's kitchens, we see that the icon of the Black female cook is an important figure in the historical evolution of domestic ideology in American culture. But we also see that the performance of subjectivity in the ritual of cooking contains ambivalences with political stakes, constituting a way of knowing and moving through the world.

Black feminist scholarship helps to tease out how we understand Black women's space-making practices in relation to informal and formal political investments. Angela Davis reminds us that Black motherhood in a community of slaves was much more than cooking; it was also about maintaining cultural traditions through social ritual. At the height of Black feminist scholarship aimed at refuting the Moynihan report, which manufactured a crisis of Black family blamed entirely on the masculinization of Black women, these insights were timely and instructive.<sup>51</sup>

However, the figure of the Black woman cook is utilized almost exclusively in this

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Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008).

<sup>51</sup> Angela Davis, in "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" *The Black Scholar*, 3, no. 4 (1971) notes that preparation of one-pot meals was the centerpiece of communal living. This indicates how Black female slaves embraced domestic labor because it benefited the larger community.

way, shouldering a great deal of burden as the imagined translator of African American culinary practice. The Black woman in a kitchen has served as Black feminist icon of communal living, domestic resistance, other mothering, and creative work. Because the subject-hood of Black women is so intimately tied to the space of the kitchen, closer attention must be paid to the conditions of soul food's making through a Black feminist lens. Tracing how this convention is deployed and resisted will help to address why, over a hundred years after Aunt Jemima's debut, the large Black woman cook is still "resonating in our visual imaginations."<sup>52</sup>

The work of Rebecca Sharpless and Alice Childress show, in fact, that Black women's historical relationships to the domestic spaces are more fraught than adherence to the convention of solitary cooking and North to South movement would lead one to imagine. Tracing the shifts in domestic labor in the South between 1865-1950, Sharpless recounts the employment of teenage Black girls who were unskilled in domestic work labor. These girls make mistakes and have to quickly learn on the job. While in the modern era, Childress writes candidly using wit, sarcasm, and signifying to resist everyday oppression of white female employers.

These complex insights into the dual nature of complicity and resistance in domestic spaces for Black women beg further questions. Is it possible that the reductionist image of the Black female cook can be allowed the contradiction of being a great cook while also failing at cooking? When we complicate the context of the cuisine's production—what we imagine to be involved — which influences we imagine the cook to reference, the gradual acquiring of skills — perhaps we also complicate the

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<sup>52</sup> Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*.

subjectivities associated so intimately with its making.

### **Methodology**

Conventions serve as indicators that tell me as a researcher what to look for in hegemonic narratives of the soul food imaginary. They are also interdependent guidelines that set the table for soul food consumption both real and imagined. What melds the real and imagined in this project's approach is performance.

Performance studies scholar Diana Taylor calls performance an “episteme” and “a way of knowing.”<sup>53</sup> *Nervous Kitchens* argues that the historical tropes of Black women cooks are characters interacting, through performance, with the present practices of Black women in the kitchen. In this sense the kitchen is a scenario within which different scenes of Black women's domestic identities in relation to SFI conventions get performed. Taylor's notion of the scenario serves to “frame and activate social dramas”; it encompasses plot, narrative and non-reducible things like behavior and tone. The scenario also forces us to deal with “the social construction of bodies in particular contexts.” But perhaps most importantly, it allows “us to keep both the social actor and the role in view simultaneously, and thus recognize the areas of resistance and tension.”<sup>54</sup> The social actor is woman in her kitchen space. The role she is always in conversation with and performing in relation to are the conventions of the soul food imaginary. The way that soul food gets embodied and enacted in everyday life is important to understanding the interaction between historically discursive uses of the term soul food and Black women's subjectivities that are shifting, nuanced, and

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<sup>53</sup> Diana Taylor, *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2003), xvii.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 28-30.

always in process. We must look at where the archive of soul food's past meets up with present uses of the term for identity construction. I argue that when the archive and the everyday meet we find nervous kitchens that push at the boundaries of SFI's four conventions. Objects taken up in this project are analyzed for how they adhere to these conventions as an indicator of soul foods' presence.

***Convention 1): Soul food originates in enslavement where the master's scraps are transformed into savory and fulfilling dishes.***

This convention circulates popularly around two central ideas. The first is that African Americans' struggle to develop the food is equivalent to the struggle of Black existence in the face of constant disempowerment. The second is that the origin of soul food as scraps demotes it in the larger formal American culinary landscape. Sites that maintain this convention are usually grounded in the need for suffering to constitute African American identity. This convention imagines the origin of soul food through cooking techniques that transformed the meager rations of slaves into satisfying and savory dishes. This is despite foodways scholarship that tells us that provisioning happened in a number of ways that complicate the sole reliance on rations. This convention, however, emphasizes the present iteration of soul food as "signs of the culture's durability and capacity for adaptive responses." It is an instance where "southern ancestors" used what "came to hand to prepare nourishing and delicious dishes."<sup>55</sup> Inherent in this ability to transform few and raw foodstuffs into delicious meals is the belief that the preparation techniques themselves (cooking in large cast iron pots, sifting rice in baskets, long cook times under low heat) reflect the retention of

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<sup>55</sup> Bower, "Introduction," 5.

West African culinary knowledge. These ‘Africanisms’ are cited by foodways scholars as that which makes soul food inherently unique to American cuisine broadly and southern cuisine in particular. In defining soul food, some historians argue that along with African, planter elite, folk culture, and spirituality, soul food can be defined by putting a premium on suffering, endurance, and “surviving with dignity.”<sup>56</sup> This convention works by constantly reaffirming the association between suffering and survival in “authentic” soul food.

As an authenticating discourse, this convention becomes the hallmark of the cuisines’ branding in the 1960’s recuperation as working class and rural Black iterations of the cuisine are cited as the most authentic.<sup>57</sup> This convention that soul food originated in enslavement and derived from scraps stands as one of the most powerful in that it names survival as an intangible element of cultural pride. Simultaneously, it imagines soul food made in the present as evidence of survivability. However, in both tracing when and how this convention is deployed, it also tends to romanticize enslavement so that procurement methods like hunting, selling at market, and trading are erased for a more predictable social imbalance between master and slave.<sup>58</sup>

This convention is also a form of what Williams-Forson calls culinary

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<sup>56</sup> Opie, *Hog and Hominy*, 137. Similar arguments can be found in Jessica Harris’ *High on The Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

<sup>57</sup> In Amiri Baraka’s “Soul Food,” the deployment of soul onto food relates to this convention because the impoverishment of migration is implied as the root source of the cuisine’s best Harlem restaurants. Baraka names these “shacks” and “joints” of working class Blacks while simultaneously saying that a Black man who goes to Harvard simply does not have access to the same food identity. The repercussions of investments in this convention from the post 1960s branding of the term is to reinforce the cuisine’s imagined ability to demarcate difference based on class.

<sup>58</sup> Williams-Forson, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, 20. In the food provisioning landscape of 18<sup>th</sup> century plantations some early African Americans had access to chickens, and thus to trading. Some free and enslaved Blacks visited the marketplace and were not as confined as we popularly think. This is even in light of white spatial and social domination.

malpractice. That is when a rich, complex, and technical food tradition, usually from groups at the margins of history, gets reduced to scraps and therefore not granted the full culinary capital reserved for ‘proper cuisine.’<sup>59</sup> Something similar happens to soul food in mainstream food studies scholarship where it gets demoted to a variation of southern food and thereby not a cuisine within its own right.<sup>60</sup>

***Convention 2): Soul food moves uninterrupted during the Great Migration from South to North, and is further evidence of and fuel for struggle, survival, and transformation.***

This convention feeds into the predominant idea that there was not very much alteration in soul food as African Americans moved from rural South to the urban North, West, and even East. Although authors may note the variation that occurs when early African Americans met and exchanged culinary ideas with others, there is still a dependence on a homogenous southern region from which soul food comes. This includes an erasure of migration to the northeastern and western United States, and an over emphasis on large industrialized cities as the landing sites for slave food. And “slave food” is exactly the disparaging term that met recent arrivals from rural Southern cities as they encountered social networks that preached a Black politics of respectability.<sup>61</sup> This community, entrenched in the women’s club movements and progressive era politics of Black respectability, looked down upon Southern food and the bodies that brought it north. The Black female cook and her kitchen magic, once

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Naccarato and Kathleen Lebesco *Culinary Capital* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing), 7-8.

<sup>60</sup> Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, 193, and John Egerton *Southern Food: At Home, on the Road, In History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 170.

<sup>61</sup> In “The Origins of Soul Food in Black Urban Identity: Chicago, 1915-1947.”

*American Studies International* 37, no 1 (1999): 4-33, Tracy Poe notes that even before the “Great Migration” the “native” Black urban community felt overwhelmed by the newcomers from the South. They had already “settled” having built churches, grocery stores, political networks, and class hierarchies.



prized in aristocratic white homes, were now “not considered refined by an urban clientele.”<sup>62</sup> The large migration of people northward and other places was not an uninterrupted translocation of soul food’s creation but in fact African American families were being taught, trained, and encouraged to adopt white middle class domestic practices pre and post-migration.<sup>63</sup> By obfuscating this historical reality, this convention solidifies the making of food with the bodies that create it. When these bodies migrate, so must the food, creating a sense of cultural continuity and belonging within the group.

***Convention 3): Black women cook it the best, naturally and alone in the kitchen.***

The figure of the Black female cook magically concocting soul food is a lasting convention in the American cultural imagination. African American foodways scholar Jessica B. Harris, actress and singer turned cookbook author Pearl Bailey, and many others cite a grandmother, aunt, or mother from whom they learned the craft of cooking soul food. However, when these family traditions meet oversimplified versions of these practices we end up with the Big Mama figure. Big Mama from the film *Soul Food* (1997), as Ann Bower and others have noted, is imagined nostalgically for the food she cooks every Sunday. Through these magical meals, the family finds common ground. Yet these same foods, and her assumed lifestyle, are the reason for her diabetes and ultimately her death. How, in the face of changing attitudes toward the health of soul food can African Americans still rely on this icon of Southern cooking and how does her imagined singularity, both in terms of working alone in the kitchen and in the things

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>63</sup> This narrative of an unbroken chain from South to North mimics, in some ways, the desire to find Africanisms in current iterations of soul food. Each speaks to the value in cohering cultural ideas tightly to the bodies that practice them even as those bodies move, transform, and shift.

she creates, become a defining characteristic of soul food? In order for this convention to hold water it has to erase historically and representationally the presence of any other bodies in the kitchen space.

The Black female body is one of the few that can contain contradictions.<sup>64</sup> To that end, this convention limits the ability to read Black women represented alongside soul food as complicated subjects that are in the making. A nervous kitchen approach means privileging women that learn how to cook late in life, fail and burn dishes a lot, rely on men and children for guidance or assistance, and use cookbooks or follow cooking television shows while also claiming the kitchen as their sole domain.

***Convention 4): Soul food is not healthy food.***

Adrian Miller's *Soul Food* is a love letter to the "unsung" American cuisine. He approaches this task with the romantic passion of a salvage anthropologist posturing to save a dying language. Soul food in his estimation is in danger of going extinct because there are not enough people connected to the specifically southern cooking techniques that make this a part of a unique American culinary tradition.<sup>65</sup> Miller presents his journalistic account of soul food restaurants across the south to reclaim the bad rap the cuisine has gotten for being unhealthy. Indeed, this characterization of soul food dates back to the 1960s when Dick Gregory vehemently opposed what he understood as fat laden slave food "as an unclean and/or unhealthful practice of racial

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<sup>64</sup> Sheri L. Parks, *Fierce Angels: The Strong Black Woman in American Life and Culture* (New York: One World/Ballantine, 2013), 4.

<sup>65</sup> Adrian Miller, *Soul Food: The Surprising Story of an American Cuisine, One Plate at a Time* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 225. Kindle edition. It is important to note that Miller is one of few African Americans to win a James Beard award for this book. The James Beard Foundation can be considered the gatekeepers for what counts as American cuisine.

genocide.”<sup>66</sup> A slew of educational literature on nutrition that emphasizes substitution would become a part of soul food’s iteration in the 80s and 90s, but like the Black club women of the progressive era, it also took on a high-class tone whereby healthful cooking was equated to knowledge about nutrition.<sup>67</sup>

These efforts react to a common sense understanding that soul food is made with heavy salts, grease, and all things bad for you. This is because of the first convention that imagines the ingredients of soul food to be the least nourishing as they were from the master’s scraps. All of these ideas rely on an oversimplified conception of plantation life whereby all slaves engaged in similar work and had access to fatty meats like swine.<sup>68</sup> The gospel of substitution (swap smoked turkey for hammock) through programs like Black Churches United for Better Health, tend to ignore the changes in the United States agricultural system. These changes literally transformed the nutritional value of certain foodstuffs; yet this convention misplaces the blame onto Black communities for their lack of nutritional knowledge. The contemporary movement seeks to reclaim African American vegetarian and vegan traditions, which, although figured as a corrective to soul food, are not foreign to how African Americans have fed themselves. In masking over these complexities this convention figures the Black woman’s kitchen space as one that is constantly intervened upon as deficient and therefore the bodies she feeds and maintains also fall short. As Williams-Forsen notes,

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<sup>66</sup> Witt, *Black Hunger*, 80.

<sup>67</sup> Heavily funded projects from the American Heart Association pushed food nutrition programming into the African American community through churches. This was echoed by similar initiatives like the Black Churches United for Better Health funded by the National Cancer Institute and The American Cancer Society.

<sup>68</sup> William Whit alludes to a common logic that fuels this convention whereby early African Americans were able to eat high calorie foods because they burned so many calories laboring for free.

this “reductionist view of black food consumption as unhealthy makes it difficult not only to accept any variation on this theme but also to see when black women’s creative cooking abilities are being exercised.”<sup>69</sup>

Miller argues soul food has six dominate themes: “the centrality of pork, the low social status of blacks, racial stigma, resourcefulness, ingenuity, and communal spirit.”<sup>70</sup> His goal is to test these wisdoms against real life in order to gauge their accuracy. In a deviation from this line of thinking, this project understands conventions as located in a process of dialectical meaning-making where the inaccuracy of practiced conventional wisdom does not signal an erasure or extinction of soul food, but instead its evolution. The approach this project utilizes also emphasizes how gender should not only be considered a conventional wisdom of African American food traditions but also a social category inherent in its reproduction. The relationship between conventions can sometimes seem contradictory, but dialectical cultural imaginaries need not resolve but simply move and process information into common sense in order to maintain integrity.

### **Tools for Reading the Soul Food Imaginary and Nervous Kitchens**

This project reads against the tendency to specialize rather than generalize, and to underestimate the influence of race, gender, and class in food studies. This approach is exemplified in the work of Psyche Williams-Forsen, who carefully interweaves oral histories, film, stereotypical iconography, archival images, television shows, songs, and laws into a holistic interpretation of cultural meanings in historical foodways. Utilizing an intersectional lens, she argues for a consideration of African American women's

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<sup>69</sup> Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, 171.

<sup>70</sup> Miller, *Soul Food*, 9.

cooking practices as a constant negotiation between somewhat “expected” gendered labor, social disciplining, and survival.<sup>71</sup> The goal of Williams-Forson’s interdisciplinary methodology from which this project is modeled, is to “illuminate the politics of gender, food, and race” through myriad texts and objects that connect present iterations of oversimplified African American foodways to their historical roots.

In this work, I privilege the visual as a primary medium of communicating common sense notions of food, gender and race. Central to this is the perseverance of the mammy trope. I use methods of close visual and material culture analysis along with historical contextualization to situate the current significance of the mammy icon in the American imagination. Nostalgia for the antebellum South, reification of class distinctions through servitude, and participation in mass consumption via packaged goods all characterize the mammy trope.<sup>72</sup> I critique popular representations of Black women and food to urge a greater specificity with which scholars of foods studies, American studies, and African-American studies talk about the materiality of Black

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<sup>71</sup> Psyche Williams-Forson, “More than Just the ‘Big Piece of Chicken’: The Power of Race, Class, and Food in American Consciousness.” In *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York, Routledge, 2008), 342-353.

<sup>72</sup> For work on the evolution of the mammy trope see: Karen Jewell in *An Analysis of the Visual Development of a Stereotype: The Media's Portrayal of Mammy and Aunt Jemima as Symbols of Black Womanhood*, Diss, The Ohio State University, 1976. Ohio Link ETD. 1976. The Ohio State University. Nov. 2008, Marilyn Kern-Foxworth and Alex Haley. *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (New York: Praeger, 1994), and Maurice Marning’s *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998). Alice Deck’s “Now Then--Who Said Biscuit?: The Black Woman Cook as Fetish in American Advertising, 1905-1953.” In *Kitchen Culture in America : Popular Representations of Food, Gender and Race*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (New York: University of Pennsylvania, 2000) stands out for its close reading of advertisements in a historical assessment of the rise of Aunt Jemima products from. Deck’s piece serves as great example of reading material objects in visual culture in order to gain insights into how ideologies of race, gender, and domesticity circulate through the mammy trope. Important also is how the same image can be embraced by black consumers and claimed by artists to empower and re-imagine Black womanhood. After her debut at the 1893 Worlds Columbian Exposition in Chicago that the popularity of Aunt Jemima is due to the fact that white middle class Americans were nostalgic for the antebellum South where Black servitude was a norm.

life. This matters because the histories of what constitutes Black food are obfuscated, making the kitchen space an under examined site for processes of racialization that Black folk, and especially Black women, have always been responding to and cooking against. My collection of methods seeks to construct a methodology that reveals the intimate workings of hegemonic ideologies within the kitchen spaces of Black women. Each method describes three mechanisms to the functioning of the imaginary in everyday kitchens, these include: (1) the racialization and gendering of domesticity; (2) destabilizing the Black female cook trope as the benevolent, nurturing, sassy, and magical creator of soul food; (3) and analyzing the kitchen as the primary space through which these affective, material, and ideological dimensions are cohered.

*Nervous Kitchens* diverges from previous work on race, gender, and food because it collects objects and methods that best illuminate the ways the conventions of the soul food imaginary are made and maintained, as well as what and why kitchens are made nervous when these conventions are subverted or resisted. Methods that help me achieve this include textual and discourse analysis of popular media such as network television, film, and radio. My concern in these realms is describing how the performances of Black women in televisual (kitchen sets made for television) or representational kitchen spaces can be read along with the materiality of that kitchen space for communicating a not “already made” association between food and Blackness.<sup>73</sup> Here, I utilize Herman Gray’s approach, understanding Blackness as a

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<sup>73</sup> Herman Gray, *Cultural Moves: Blackness and The Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2005) and *In Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2008), 273. Fabio Parasecoli explains how images of food practices might come to influence individual lived experiences. He writes, “Pop culture happens to be the arena where new narratives, changing identities, and possible practices becomes part of a shared patrimony that participates in the constitution

quality that attaches itself to the visual field through the politics of representation that guide the television industry at a particular moment.

I also read archival photographs and political films from The United States Department of Agriculture's Negro Extension service from the early to mid twentieth century. Shawn Michelle Smith notes how photography of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century formalized the association between "the representation of self" and "the presentation of a knowable truth about gender, race, and class."<sup>74</sup> Images of domestic interiors became an especially salient way to communicate this.<sup>75</sup> A visual archive of poor rural Negro women learning to change their domestic spaces is imbued with the goal of promoting domestic citizenship. Yet, I speculate on how both moments in these films and in the narrative reports of home demonstration agents, make nervous the power of the representation to communicate normative domestic ideologies. The methods I will use to analyze these still images include describing the symbolic and literal actions in the scenes depicted for what common knowledges they draw from to make and circulate meaning. Drawing from Barthes' notion of denotation and connotation, I will read the multiple layers of meaning conveyed through composition, oppositional gazes of figures toward the camera, practices and activities figures are engaged in, and the relation between the figures and material objects. Williams-Forsen analyzes similarly posed Farm Security Administration images, establishing a set of methods for "revealing the power dynamics that inform food preparation, presentation, and

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of contemporary subjectivities."

<sup>74</sup> Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>75</sup> Kyla Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012) notes how an ideological transition from the outdoor kitchen or hearth to the interior middle class kitchen also signals symbolic shift movement from primitive to civilized.

consumption.” Contextualizing the historical moment of the images’ development requires knowing the photographer’s identity and their objective in taking the photograph, and understanding the goal and sites of the images’ circulation, all contribute to my ability to name what “historical and social memory (is) preserved in these images.”<sup>76</sup>

The methods of Black feminist cultural criticism are extremely useful in analyzing images of Black women and their material lives. Barbara Smith, one of the first to coin the term, argued for dismissive (often white and male) literary critics to take Black female cultural productions like literature seriously. According to Smith, doing so would illuminate “Black women’s existence and culture, and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these”<sup>77</sup> Literary scholars like Jacqueline Bobo have extended the scope of Black feminist cultural criticism to include the world of visual culture, spoken word, material culture, music/sound, and art. Although the methods used to analyze these expressions of Black women’s subjectivity are somewhat traditional (historiography, textual/discourse analysis, oral histories), they approach Black women’s cultural products (film, quilts, literature) as political statements. Black women’s cookbooks for instance, are archives of family tradition, the movement of culinary ideas, and the autobiographical.<sup>78</sup> My project follows this

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<sup>76</sup> Psyche Williams-Forsyth, “The Dance of Culinary Patriotism: Material Culture and Performance of Race with Southern Food,” in John T. Edge, Elizabeth SD Engelhardt, and Ted Ownby, eds. *The Larder: Food Studies Methods from the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013) 318.

<sup>77</sup> Barbara Smith, “Toward A Black Feminist Criticism,” in *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 140.

<sup>78</sup> Scholarship that works to mine the intersection of self-identification, race, and gender in the writing of cookbooks includes: Rafia Zafar, “The Signifying Dish: Autobiography and History in Two Black Women’s Cookbooks,” *Feminist Studies* 25, no. 2 (1999): 449-46, Hasia Diner *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish foodways in the age of Migration* (Boston: Harvard University Press,



methodological consideration by approaching Black women's food work as a cultural product that can speak back to hegemonic discourses that undermine the merits of Black women's creative work. This is done through a pointed focus on advancing the intellectual life of women of color, contextualizing the conditions under which knowledge is produced, and being in conversation with multiple fields to intervene strategically on dominant discourses that perpetuate myths of Black womanhood.<sup>79</sup>

But as bell hooks notes, those who make these images are guarded by political and institutional power, which scholars must seek to infiltrate. hooks argues for a radical intervention, expressing her Black feminist politics in terms of liberation and self-determination that extend beyond the "good" and "bad" image and critically interrogate our political investments prior to the construction of the image. For hooks, the "context for transformation" must be the transgressive image: one that criticizes dualistic notions of white and Black and works toward significant political and social justice.<sup>80</sup> Theoretically, Black feminism's main priority in image production and representation is to recognize all depictions of Black womanhood as ideological in nature. Therefore there are distinct political arguments in representations that do or do

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2001), Courtney Thorsson's *Women's Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African-American Women's Novels* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2013). Also, from *African American Foodways: Explorations of History & Culture*, ed. Ann Bower (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2007) comes Doris Witt's "From Fiction to Foodways: Working at the Intersections of African American Literary and Culinary Studies," and Ann Bower's "Recipes for History The National Council of Negro Women's Five Historical Cookbooks."

<sup>79</sup> I look to the following works for definitions of Black womanhood: Jacqueline Bobo, ed. *Black Feminist Cultural Criticism*, vol. 3 (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001); Barbara Thompson, ed. *Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body* (Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2008); Beverley Guy-Sheftall, ed. *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought* (New York: New Press, 1996 (sections 1-4); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 22.

not reflect Black women's standpoint.<sup>81</sup>

## Chapter Overview

Chapter two begins with a close reading of domestic science circulars, narrative reports, and propaganda film from mid-twentieth century United States Department of Agricultural (USDA) Maryland Extension programs archives. While influencing African-American food traditions, the domestic reforms brought on by federal agricultural extension services tend to be absent from the ways we imagine soul food's journey from the rural south outward to the urban north and the west. I explore USDA films, *Making the Negro and Better Farmer and Housewife* (1921) and *Henry Browne e, Farmer* (1942) for the way they visualize the inherent white paternalism of extension work. I read the films in conjunction with reports of female Negro Home Demonstration Agents who are tasked with implementing grand ideas of domestic citizenship depicted in these films. The chapter considers how the politics of respectability, citizenship, and modern materiality (including counter tops, refrigerators, pressure cookers, and electrical outlets) can be read as a necessary but occluded archive of the soul food imaginary.

Chapter three considers what the imagined successful outcome of any Home Demonstration Agent working would be in the early 1950s. Here, I examine the 1950s situation-comedy series *The Beulah Show* (1952), in which the main character, played by Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers, is a sassy, big-breasted African American domestic working for a white middle class family. I explore the performances by

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<sup>81</sup> Patricia Hills Collins's standpoint theory notes that Black women have unique and similar ways of interpreting their experiences because of their position within hierarchies of "supremacist capitalist patriarchy,

Beavers and McDaniel for the ways they exceed the familiar mammy trope, innervating the televisual kitchen space of the middle class white family by claiming ownership of it. Centering the enactment of Beulah and the material culture of the kitchen using Nicole Fleetwood's terms of excess flesh and visible seams, I analyze Black newspaper articles written in response to the show, domestic reform materials of the time, and McDaniel's own life. I argue that this excessiveness is an issue to dominate conventions of the Soul Food Imaginary, specifically the convention that Black women cook naturally the best foods and they do so alone, in their kitchens. Here, ambivalence, abundance and excess are thought about as pre-conditions for soul food's making.

Building on socio-economics, chapter four explores *The Jeffersons* (1975) and *Good Times* (1974) for how the concept of "soul" is used in relation to class mobility in the televisual kitchen. Whether it is Louise's anxiety about abandoning her roots or Florida's concern over her husband's hypertension, nervous kitchen scenes in both shows are read alongside cookbooks and a 1968 *Ebony* op-ed. Here, I think about how each makes an argument for how class, health, and gender roles should operate in defining what African-Americans eat. These nervous kitchens affirm the SFI convention that soul food is not healthy but in doing so reassert the ideological operation of the imaginary's claim to Black authenticity.

Chapter five explores contemporary popular televisual kitchens in the amateur cooking competition show, *My Momma Throws Down* (2012). Featuring two Black mothers squaring off in cooking challenges the show argues for a convergence of class status with efforts to "save" soul food by making it "healthier." I pinpoint how material objects like cast iron skillets and performances like signifying work alongside the

mammy trope to authenticate the food being produced as African-American.

I conclude with a consideration of how this project was inspired by a desire to question, and not condemn, the cultural relevance and perseverance of the mammy trope in the popular American imagination. In asking why she is still around, I found various conceptions of African American food identity invested in her. I consider how soul foods' reliance on an idea of the African diaspora for authentication can benefit from Michelle Wright's conception of the dialogic process of subject formation within the African diaspora. The African diaspora as a dialogic formation means we understand that "many subjectivities exist that cannot be organized into thetical and antithetical categories."<sup>82</sup> Away from the dialectical movement the SFI and nervous kitchens, a dialogic movement urges a relationship between ideal, material, and subject that is complex, cross-cultural, and always in the making. This dialogic movement is best seen in the Black feminist counter discourses that view Black women's kitchens as the world, ritual space, and incomplete.

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<sup>82</sup> Michelle Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 13.

## **Chapter 2: Please Whitewash Your Cornbread, Mrs. Browne: Domestic Citizenship In The Home Demonstration Work of Rural Negro Kitchens**

A 1936 issue of *The Farmer's Wife* (figure 3) is an early consumer guide for the savvy homemaker. It advertises everything from dairy equipment and tulips, to maternity outfits, blemish cream and “superior” stainless steel ovens. A poem titled “A Prayer for American Homemakers” by Adah Ayers Pilgrim appears on page twenty-seven of the magazine, to the left of actress Carol Lombard’s soap ad:

Dear Lord give us the strength and  
wisdom to carry on  
In this time of unrest and ever changing ideals.  
Grant us, we ask, the power to guide our loved ones in the  
Path of sane and careful thinking,  
Swerving neither to right nor to left.  
May the right to have and to hold our  
own homes ne’er be violated.  
And to our children, may the same measure of freedom and liberty be given as  
we their forebears have enjoyed  
In this our own well loved America.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adah Ayers Pilgrim “A Prayer for American Homemakers” *The Farmer's Wife*, October 1936, 27.

*A Prayer for American  
Homemakers*

*by Adah Ayres Pilgrim*

DEAR Lord, give us the strength and  
wisdom to carry on  
In this time of unrest and ever changing  
ideals.  
Grant us, we ask, the power to guide our  
loved ones in the  
Paths of sane and careful thinking,  
Swerving neither to right nor to left.  
May the right to have and to hold our  
own homes ne'er be violated.  
And to our children, may the same mea-  
sure of freedom and liberty be given as  
we their forebears have enjoyed  
In this our own well loved America.

Figure 3: "A Prayer for American Homemakers" by Adah Ayers Pilgrim

The poem stresses the sanctity of the private domestic space as an articulation of American ideals. As a citizen, the American homemaker is obligated to approach the domestic site with a type of scientific objectivity ("path of sane and careful thinking") while also protecting it from violation. Two years after its publication, the poem, written for a white female audience, appears in the 1939 instructional materials for African American homemakers' clubs in Prince Georges, St. Mary's, Montgomery, and Charles counties in Maryland (figure 4). These clubs take up the call of Pilgrim's poem, engaging in major plans for domestic improvement with demonstrations and discussion of vegetables and flower gardens, flowerbed arrangement, salads, summer drinks and desserts, installation of new flooring, and good health habits and sanitation among other things.

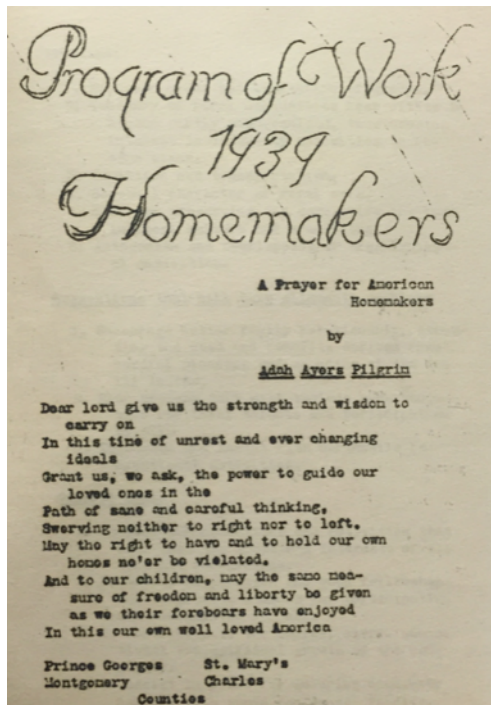


Figure 4: Pilgrim's poem in "A program of Work 1939 Homemakers"

The homemakers in these clubs are following a model of "racial uplift" pioneered at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Established in 1894, the institute set the standard for dispensing a character-building "education for life" curriculum in rural Negro communities.<sup>2</sup> Using Tuskegee as a model, in 1902 the United States General Education Board started agricultural programs for Negro men that would eventually become the United States Department of Agriculture Cooperative Extension Service programs.<sup>3</sup> It wouldn't be until the Smith Lever Act of 1914 that extension programs for Negro families would receive the same amount of funding and organizational

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<sup>2</sup> Leedell Neyland, *Historically Black Land-Grant Institutions and The Development of Agriculture and Home Economics 1890-1990* (Tallahassee: Florida A&M University Foundation, Inc, 1990), 11.

<sup>3</sup> Carmen Harris, "Well I just generally be's the president of everything": Rural Black Women's Empowerment through South Carolina Home Demonstration Activities," *Black Women, Gender & Families*, 3, no.1 (2009): 91-112.

support as white extension workers. In the state of Maryland, early extension work was carried out by county agents, but the emphasis was on helping farm families improve agricultural methods and upgrading equipment. It would not be until the 1920s that Maryland saw the first county agents trained by nearby Black land grant institutions like Maryland State College for the specialty of home demonstration work.

Homemakers' clubs, 4H clubs, and county women's clubs pooled resources in conversation with county extension agents. Demonstrations were used as a key activity of domestic education and reinforced the general goal of creating fellowship, "to contribute to the social, civic, and educational and spiritual growth of the community."<sup>4</sup>

The kitchen space is not neutral and this chapter looks at how ideology manifests itself in the material kitchens of Black women historically, to pose the question: why does the SFI want to invest in the neutrality of the kitchen that glosses over the production of the space and the practices Black women use within it? Part of soul foods' past is in the often-occluded histories that deeply shaped what the looks like and who it is we imagine cooking it. In this chapter, I consider those kitchen spaces that are influenced by one of these occluded histories—the formal ideological apparatuses of state domestic reform. In order address these questions I use the annual reports of Maryland home demonstration work as a case study to be read along side two USDA propaganda films on the goals of this work.<sup>5</sup> I use these reports to argue the actual domestic prescriptions given and taught by Black women sometimes contradict how the

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<sup>4</sup> 1939 Annual Report of Negro Home Demonstration Agents for Maryland Southern Counties, 1939, Box 65, The University of Maryland County Extension Service Archives, University Archives Special Collections at The University of Maryland Hornbake Library, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>5</sup> Extension work occurred in many southern states. The archives at Maryland are used as the official record of both the challenges and outcomes of extension work that is somewhat sensationalized in the political films.



films represent the desired outcome of these prescriptions. Whether through film or in reports a politics of respectability characterized domestic education. Thus, when poor Negro families are represented to acquiring, and maintaining proper domestic habits this is equated with proof that they can assimilate into white mainstream society. How Black female agents and homemakers negotiated politics of respectability is an idea that became a necessary but forgotten archive for the soul food imaginary.

Soul food's genealogy must change if the starting point is at the intersection of citizenship and consumption. I read the nervous kitchens in propaganda films and those described in extension reports as disturbing the second, third, and fourth conventions. The first is that soul food did not change before the Great Migration from South to North and that while in the South, African Americans romantically cooked with few material resources and limited techniques. Read through the third convention, both films and narrative reports show how ingredients like lard and milk, foods that we now know are not entirely nutritious, were recommended as nutritionally superior. This pushes back against the idea that soul food is unhealthy because of lack of nutritional knowledge and instead highlights how our notion of nutrition in The United States varies with different historical and cultural contexts. Lastly, these images speak to the fourth convention that Black women cook alone in their kitchens by positioning home demonstration agents as social actors influencing and being influenced by the kitchens of Black women.

I also consider the pre-reformed home of the rural Negro as a type of early template for current spaces of soul food's articulation—the modern kitchen. The presence of this once remarkable space that is now standard in many homes is owed to

the class-infused reforms of this time. Indeed, where would the soul food of today be without an oven, cabinets, multiple countertops, and canned or boxed goods? What implications are embedded in this alternative genealogy to soul food's unencumbered South to North trajectory? I argue it lends itself to thinking of both the theoretical and material importance of the kitchen space in contextualizing the bodies that invented and tweaked soul food before its 1960s branding.

This period of domestic reform also serves as the vehicle for soul food's legibility. In order for soul food to be legible as a Black cultural production in the present, the influence of citizenship rhetoric through domestic reform has to be erased. Nervousness as an analytic reveals this notion of domestic citizenship within the cuisine's making because it was an important vehicle for Black women's education, self-reliance, and class identity while also augmenting the very tools, techniques, and raw materials of African American foodways. Importantly, it is not merely its evolution from meager scraps of sharecroppers to savory fare, but also citizenship that is enfolded into the development of the cuisine.

The chapter begins with a close reading of how USDA propaganda films, made for and shown to mostly white audiences at fairs and White land grant universities, narrate the work of Negro home demonstrations agents. I then juxtapose that narration with the on-the-ground experience through a case study of demonstration work in Maryland. The tensions between the two are read as nervous. Nervousness here describes how lofty ideas of domestic citizenship translate to the lack of funding and resources available for Negro agents to see this form of citizenship materialize in their communities. Finally, the chapter ends with a second USDA film that emphasizes how

prescriptions about nutrition and health from extension agents have always been an erased but important part of soul foods imagined past.

Understanding the spaces from which soul food is created is important because spaces are social; they gain their meaning as they gain their architectural structure through the values and needs of the society that creates them.<sup>6</sup> For the kitchen, the proverbial heart of the home, an ideology of American domesticity is born out of the need to distinguish the foreign during the Manifest Destiny period of American expansion.<sup>7</sup> I understand activities of domestic citizenship as those that teach proper ways to perform national belonging and empower civic participation through the maintenance of a clean, whitewashed, and technically efficient kitchen. The desire to achieve domestic citizenship is exemplified in the criteria for how “To Make The Best Better.” This “credo” cites vision, tact, sense of humor, good nature, unquenchable optimism, strong belief in the “the importance of the farm family to the commonwealth,” and “grim determination to see the work put through to the end.”<sup>8</sup> Proper citizenship is reproduced through a domestic ideology in which simple hard work and dedication can transform the inadequate space of the “foreign” into the deserving space of the productive farm family. Yet, in reviewing literature on United States domestic education Elias quotes the foundational work of historian Carmen Harris, in noting that more needs to be done to “investigate how racial ideologies

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the relationship between managing space and domestic architecture colonial Virginia, see Kelley Deetz “When Her Thousand Chimneys Smoked: Virginia’s Enslaved Cooks and Their Kitchens,” (Dissertation thesis, The University of California at Berkeley, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> From 1830-1850 Manifest Destiny spurred the violent expansion into First Nations territories and into Mexican national territories at the southwestern borderlands. These groups were the foreign bodies that concepts of domesticity at this time did not include unless as a foil to proper modes of domestic belonging.

<sup>8</sup> USDA 1939 Annual Report.

shaped and were shaped by mainstream definitions of domesticity and home economics education.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Helping The Negro become a Better Farmer and Homemaker**



Figure 5: “etc Helping The Negro Farmer (1921)

The film *Helping The Negro become a Better Farmer and Homemaker* (1921) epitomizes the ways racial ideologies are foundational to domestic reforms of the time. This USDA silent propaganda film tells the story of how the Collinses, a Negro farming family, rely on the help and expertise of white and eventually Negro extension service agents. Driven by 73 inter title cards, the story begins with images of the family’s destitute lifestyle typical of sharecroppers— shack-like dwelling fronted by unsafe and rickety steps upon which the littlest of three Collins children, referred to as “etc.” happily eat watermelon. We are shown a typical day in which the family hoes the field only to take a break dancing to a fiddle. Rube Collins, patriarch of the family, is

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<sup>9</sup> Harris quoted in Megan Elias, “No Place like Home: A Survey of American Home Economics History,” *History Compass* 9, no. 1 (2011): 99.

perplexed at what to do in face of a boll weevil infestation of his cotton crop. Along with a neighbor, he mounts a horse and heads to town to consult his landlord who then consults the white agent. The agents advise tactics that a title card assures worked well. So well, in fact, that a “local Negro agent to assist the white county agent has become necessary.” The viewer is then met with landscape view pan across the Tuskegee Institute. We are told the story of how Booker T. Washington, along with USDA representatives, agree that the extension service should employ Tuskegee-trained Negro agents. Visually the Tuskegee is situated as a grand institution boasting 114 buildings on more than two thousand acres of land. However, we see few Black faces representing the actual instructors of Tuskegee. Rather than being presented as instructors, female Negro agents are shown being taught by “experienced white agents.”



Figure 6: White female experts demonstrate for Tuskegee students. From *Helping The Negro Farmer* (1921)

The majority of the film focuses on how white extension service agents recruited and sent out male Negro agents in order to gain support from the federal government in expanding operations to rural Negro families. The Jessup wagon (later named the Knapp wagon), a mobile school with literature and equipment to facilitate demonstration, was one such boon to the Tuskegee program. The wagon allowed agents to reach rural families like the Collinses.

As the film demonstrates, improvements in agricultural mechanics like crop terracing and cholera vaccinations for hogs, were given more screen time over demonstration work. However, a scene in the film shows how the USDA shaped public perception of the ways information on domestic reforms was transmitted to rural Negro families. In what Winn notes is a whitewashed account of early Negro involvement in innovating domestic sciences, the film depicts Negro women, students of Tuskegee, learning from white female experts.<sup>10</sup> An inter title card superimposed onto a group of Black women dressed in white and staring straight ahead reads, “Later on, a local home demonstration agent is employed and receives training at Tuskegee Institute.” The next title reads, “Practical field instructions are given by experienced white women agents.” The scene is staged with an overwhelming whiteness as six Negro female pupils wearing white dresses and shoes are seated upon a white sheet. They give their attention to a white female instructor who in the staging of the scene we assume has just demonstrated something when she calls one of the Black women

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<sup>10</sup> Emmett Winn, “Documenting Racism in an Agricultural Extension Film,” *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 38, no. 1 (2008): 33-43.

forward. Two other white women sit off to the side, one dressed in white, and another in a black long sleeved dress. The pupil who was summoned to the front goes off frame to return with a white cloth covering a tray of unknown goods. The Tuskegee student removes a tray and approaches her classmates, encouraging them to inspect the mystery objects (figure 6). Reactions are favorable. Although domestic science and agricultural innovation had been a part of Tuskegee instruction for years before the staging of this demonstration, the film works to insist that white women remain the experts of the domestic space.



Figure 7: Female community members of all ages learn how to set a table. From *Helping Negroes become better farmers and homemakers* (1921). USDA film archives. Washington, DC: NARA.

After gaining support from the local preacher, and agreeing to host the movable school at Rube's home, the Tuskegee trained agents arrive and unload their wares for the community. We see a female home demonstration agent dressed in all white demonstrating nursing techniques, making fly paper, shining shoes, and mending

furniture to a captive audience of about five to eight women and girls. All of these demonstrations occur outdoors, including learning to set a table. With a large crowd surrounding a table dressed in a white cloth, the participants hurriedly place white ceramic plates saucers, and coffee cups in their proper place while the agent watches and then gives critiques.

After a few more watermelon eating scenes for good measure, the film concludes with, “Thus Collins and his neighbors learn how to improve their homes.” We see the home transformed into a white glistening property (figures 7, 8). Women dressed in all white and men in their Sunday best emerge from a car that comes down the road toward the house. The littlest Collins (“Etc.”) is transformed into a productive and vigorous butter churner (figure 9). And the title card shows the music for Sewanee River as Rube sits contentedly surrounded by family, thankful for the “prosperity” the extension service brings.





Figure 8: The Collin's home before improvements. From *Helping Negroes become better farmers and homemakers* (1921). USDA film archives. Washington, DC: NARA.



Figure 9: The Collin's home after improvements. From *Helping Negroes become better farmers and homemakers* (1921). USDA film archives. Washington, DC: NARA



Figure 10: “etc.” turned useful butter maker. *Helping the Negro Farmer* (1921)



Figure 11: Community members say "Good-Bye" to the movable school as it departs. From *Helping Negroes become better farmers and homemakers* (1921). USDA film archives. Washington, DC: NARA.

### **Speculating on Nervous Kitchens in “Helping The Negro”**

The very genre of this representation and that of, *Henry Browne Farmer* (1942) provide both the official narrative of how extension service uniformly helped Negro

farm families as well as glimpses into the possibility of speculating about ambivalence, misuse, or refusal of this agricultural reform rhetoric.

In his analysis of *Helping the Negro* Emmett Winn notes that political films at this time were used to assure white southerners that although Negroes were being assisted by the federal government it was not Negroes themselves who were responsible for creating, implementing, or following up on the programs of social improvement.<sup>11</sup> The narrative centers white extension agents and not their Black counterparts as saviors of the Negro tenant farmer. The Collinses and their neighbors are characterized as the infantilized recipients of the white agents' expertise while dancing to fiddles and eating watermelon. Winn concludes that these images only serve to concretize racial hierarchies by making the actual improvement of farmers' lives secondary to showcasing the knowledge of "the dominate white population."<sup>12</sup> The USDA considered these films costly and experimental, yet they were shown at USDA offices, state colleges and universities, larger cities, fairs, and exhibitions. This series draws from choreographed lived narrative to construct an ideology of racial difference and domesticity that for many was abstract.<sup>13</sup>

Because "Form and technique reveal how an ideology is constructed," it is instructive to notice that farm improvements are more frequently depicted than is home demonstration work.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, major focus on early extension work was on male-centered labor, like containing the boll weevil outbreak, and region specific issues such

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. The length of scenes, camera movement, and text all shape how the ideology is received by the viewer.

as vaccinating hogs against cholera. What the scenes and narratives of this film introduce is the ambivalent contexts within which demonstration work was carried out, and aside from stereotypical representations of watermelon eating, I wish to extend Winn's critique to understand the complicity of the negro "actors" in the film as a form of strategic complicity—one does not know what they were offered in exchange for their participation in the program and so labeling the representation stereotypical seems too simple. The stakes of interpreting the film through this simplistic lens is taking for granted how complicity and resistance can work side by side in the production of Black women's food identities.

Toward that end, the staging of the kitchen demonstration outdoors invites a speculative reading. Power differences are most saliently seen between the white female experts and their Negro counterparts positioned as pupils. Yet, the performances in the scene are heavily scripted with predetermined outcomes of the interaction between teacher and pupil. The mystery product revealed from a tray covered by a white tablecloth was technically already made, the reaction to which is favorable. And although one could speculate that the Negro pupils prepared the product demonstrated by the white female teachers as well as their own test versions, the viewer is assured that female Negro agents are the passive recipients of domestic education, reinforcing the top-down movement of information. The Black women engaging in the choreographed dance between objects and human appear to be aware of the scripts they are to follow—where a favorable reaction to whatever is being made is the only outcome. So too is favorable and positive domestic citizenship the only outcome of embracing the science of better homes. Does knowing, making the props for, and

performing the script give these female pupils a sense of strategic essentialism within the scene? Are they leveraging their assumed ignorance for visibility, fun, or obligations of race pride? Are they aware of their own subjugation?

As an historian of Afro-American South Carolina home demonstration agents, Carmen Harris argues demonstration work may have empowered communities toward self-determination, giving women in particular a sense that they had some say in how they lived their everyday lives. This cannot be discounted. However, these domestic prescriptions can also be read as another scene of Black subject making, reaffirming the abject personhood in need of cleaning, saving, and feeding. Sadiya Hartman argues this point in her review of domestic reforms that pre-date those of the USDA. In pamphlets like Brinckerhoff's "Advice to Freedman," Negroes were instructed on "cultivating those graces and manners and habits which distinguish cultivated and refined society."<sup>15</sup> In specifically advising Black families on "taking meals together," the kitchen in domestic space nurtures both intimate feeding practices and the status those practices are meant to communicate — that is, "that repartitions lines of the public and private for the purposes of securing the public good—the health, safety, and morality of the people."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the public interests of the USDA literally come to the doorstep of the Collins's home, as it is the staging ground for domestic intervention. As the now trained Negro female agents go about reforming the women and girls of the community, we see the same possibility for scripted performances as speculation about the propagandistic tone of the film. When community members set the table the viewer

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<sup>15</sup> Sadiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

is unsure if the plates and saucers are placed in the ‘right’ configuration. It is unclear whether the women attending to the bed and furnishings are polishing, repairing, or simply pantomiming each activity for the camera.

Taking a speculative read of archival materials, I describe the processes through which race is applied to the domestic life of rural negro women, finding in some cases familiar ideologies toward health and home. Diverging from Harris and Winn’s readings, I suggest that the visualization of these ideologies is not entirely stereotypical or empowering. Instead, these outdoor domestication scenes in *Helping The Negro* have the potential to be read for the ambivalence extension agents and community members feel undergoing a process of domestication that is racialized. In this ideology the domestic space is racialized so that cleanliness, whiteness, health and purity stand in for each other, complementing “a politics of contagion that eventually serves to justify segregation and license the racist strategies of the state in securing the health of the social body.”<sup>17</sup> USDA propaganda films like this one play on the assumed unruly and unclean Black domestic space in desperate need of intervention. However, actual Negro women participated, perhaps ambivalently, in the production of these images through scripted performances of domestic citizenship. One wonders how an investment or refusal in “the health of the social body” by demonstration agents and their pupils changes the physical space of the kitchen and therefore the food that is a product of it.

### **Politics of Respectability and Home Economics in the South**

The dismissal of a complex engagement with early domestic reforms presented in films like *Helping The Negro* is critical to maintaining the convention that soul food

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 159.

existed in its purest form in the south and then moved north, unchanged, as African Americans made their way there for jobs and opportunities during the Great Migration. This convention undergirds the survivalist quality to the cuisine and often does not consider how the food practices of African Americans changed while in the south. In disrupting how the South is imagined as a cultural and social monolith, Marcie Cohen Ferris constructs historical narratives of how such changes took place. The rise of mechanized farming, home economics, African American industrial schools and the decline of farm laborers, reformulated Black southern foodways from 1930-1950.<sup>18</sup> However, as both Ferris and historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham note, Christian Black and white women's clubs predated formalized domestic and home economics training. These early twentieth-century clubs served as templates for the tenor of moralizing that brought racial uplift through scientific management into the household.<sup>19</sup> In describing Black women's creation of counter publics within the Black Baptist tradition, Higginbotham notes the early presence of social service activities that were geared toward temperance, home skills, and mother training. Although these practices would forge a community that would command whites' respect" it also had the effect of revealing "class tensions among blacks themselves."<sup>20</sup> Home reform materials for Black women were saturated with what Higginbotham calls the politics of respectability. The politics of respectability "demanded that every individual in the black community assume responsibility for behavioral self-regulation and self-

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<sup>18</sup> Marcie Cohen Ferris, *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 110. Ferris cites Ellen Richards and "race improvement" as fueling the advent of domestic science as a term.

<sup>20</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous discontent: The women's movement in the Black Baptist church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

improvement along moral, educational, and economic lines. The goal was to distance oneself as far as possible from images perpetuated by racist stereotypes.” As demonstration grew from the industrial schools of the South it would grow with these politics in mind.

### **Rise of Extension Work in Black Communities**

The Tuskegee Institute served as an important laboratory for various educational interventions into Black life. Most important for rural communities was the invention and implementation of the movable school, which was designed to teach those immobile poor families in need of assistance.

The screen time of movable schools in *Helping The Negro* emphasizes how much clout and importance both leaders at Tuskegee and in the federal government had in the project’s potential. In 1927, Booker T. Washington, the founder of Tuskegee Institute, emphasized the necessary ingenuity of this new tool by saying, “I am extremely anxious to try out this new plan for the benefit of the masses of rural people, because it is evident that we must, in a larger measure, take most of the information to their doors if they are ever to get it.”<sup>21</sup> A mobile demonstration resource that began as a wagon and became a truck meant that agents could reach the most rural areas with the tools, guides, and interpersonal rapport needed to change the lives of the people they encountered.

This outreach program, pioneered at Black land-grant institutions like Tuskegee and Hampton University in Virginia, was integrated into the national expansion of extension services. The 1914 Smith Lever Act made this integration possible. The

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<sup>21</sup> T.M Campbell, USDA 1927 Yearbook of Agriculture, 1927, 475-479.



extension services were administered through Black and white land grant Universities with the intent of disseminating information on cutting edge technologies, agricultural engineering, and home improvement skills. This would make farm and home life symbiotic and more efficient, helping farms produce more and better while beautifying homes, inside and out.

The early implementation of the program was rocky. Negro agents struggled due to lack of funding and racial discrimination while attempts to deploy white agents in Negro communities was met with little success. Many counties went understaffed when it came to Negro agents, let alone female agents, who were often but not exclusively tasked with working with local women to create beautiful exterior and interior living spaces. However, it was not until 1917 that the War Program called for an expansion of home demonstrations for colored citizens, increasing the amount from single digits to thirteen by 1918.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, both inter war periods saw an expansion of services, as wartime provisioning meant American farms were tasked to produce more. Not only did the program expand citizenship to pupils receiving the education but also bolstered access to citizenship for teachers.

Yet it is safe to say that Black land grant as opposed to White land grant institutions — each of which administered home and agricultural demonstration work — suffered from constant readjustment of the curricular scope of programs in relation to unreliable funding due to racial discrimination. Importantly for my research is the form these discourses of citizenship married with notions of cleanliness take in the images and pamphlets that circulated to redefine the Black female cook. In opposition

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<sup>22</sup> Harris, “Well I just Generally bes the President of Everything,” 93.

to the subsistence living of the assumed scraps of sharecroppers, the Black female cook becomes the guardian of nutritional science who can make both her and her family more productive and prosperous.

### **Developing Extension Service In Maryland**

Using the state of Maryland's extension service archives as a case study, I explore how the use of the kitchen space is framed through the logics of domestic science, specifically how Negro agents had access to and deployed this domestic information. The Maryland state university was segregated. Therefore, as the white land grant institution, The University of Maryland worked with Maryland State College (later University of Maryland, Eastern Shore), the Black land grant institution, to develop training materials for their county demonstration agents. My interest in those Negro women teaching demonstration work is two-fold: to understand first where they received the information they prescribed, and whether or how this information differed between Negro and white agents. Annual reports of work plans, outcomes, pamphlets, and testimonials serve as an interesting juxtaposition to USDA propaganda films because they show the shortcomings of extension service while also exhibiting how Negro female demonstration agents, although possibly utilizing the science of white female experts, did so in conversation with the specific needs and feedback of their communities. As the poem that opens this chapter indicates, it is possible to read a strategic use of white women's domestic sentiments toward strategies of racial uplift.

Although not the earliest program, the Maryland state Extension Service archive offers an idea of how home demonstration as a priority shifted over time. This is based not only on counties that had families who served, but also on wartime crisis

responses to blight and diseases, and who had access to the latest best practices for domestic education. Although between 1922 and 1936 there was no specialist for home management work in Maryland, Negro agents may have been trained through short courses held at other institutions.

The short course is a multi-day course initially designed at Tuskegee for poor families who often had a hard time getting to the institute during the winter months. They would learn important skills like new soil conservation techniques or about new kinds of seeds to plant. However, in the state of Maryland, short courses were run from the white land grant institutions, often making them inaccessible to Negro agents.<sup>23</sup> In 1931 Negro agents complained that this limited access to information prevented the female agents from learning practices of home demonstration work. Venia M. Keller, the state home demonstration agent for Maryland Extension Services, addressed this information and access problem by suggesting that local agents be designated local district agents because:

At the summer school there is a certain info and instruction given out to other states through their Local District Agents which Maryland, or the colored farmers of Maryland do not get [to] because the meetings, or conferences where this instruction or info is given out, the local agents are not invited to attend...The info is given to their Local District Agent and the local district agents hand this out to their local agents.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> USDA 1939 Annual Report.

<sup>24</sup> Venia Keller, *Negro County Agents Annual Reports* — Somerset and Wicomico Counties, 1931, Box 61, The University of Maryland County Extension Service Archives, University Archives Special

This meant that female Negro agents were not receiving and dispensing information about new domestic practices at the same rate as their white counterparts. Instead, the economic depression of this time, along with the main concerns of hog cleaning, heat, poultry, feed, horses, and soil conversion by the extension services, meant that circulars and bulletins were used for home making if agents themselves couldn't perform the demonstration.<sup>25</sup>

In the state of Maryland, the Home Economics Department, established in 1917, would have been the main clearinghouse for information on kitchen improvements; while the Maryland agricultural college, the state's Black land grant institution, would be the clearinghouse for more agricultural engineering information like turkey coop construction, crop rotation, and of particular interest, poultry health and sciences. Home demonstration work varied by state and the interests of community members in each county. But generally county agents were concerned with a commonsense approach to teaching men to farm and women how to be homemakers. This approach created the expectation that one could develop "good men and women and children."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the Collins family — from the littlest "Etc." transformed to a butter maker, to the patriarch — are constructed as the grateful beneficiaries of this expectation. A scene from the film that shows this is when the movable school truck leaves the town winding down a road lined with waving community members (figure 10). As the official word of the USDA the film also serves as visual template for how to

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Collections at The University of Maryland Hornbake Library, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>25</sup> Annual Report of J.F. Armstrong, Negro Agent for Southern Maryland, 1931, Box 64, The University of Maryland County Extension Service Archives, University Archives Special Collections at The University of Maryland Hornbake Library, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Negro county agents narrate the importance of their work when completing annual reports. This is evidenced in how, eleven years after its circulation, a southern Maryland Negro county agent would use a similar image in his annual report with the caption “Western Short Course Delegates Leaving Camp” (figure 11).



Figure 12: “Western Short Course Delegates Leaving Camp” from J.F. Armstrong’s 1932 annual report on extension service in Maryland’s Southern counties.

James F. Armstrong’s 1932 report shows how, in doing so, agents themselves may have maintained the narrative of extension service assisting helpless Negroes. However, the use of this image and testimonials supposedly written by grateful pupils, were also utilized to argue for why Negro agents needed the same access to resources as white agents. These resources included fair wages and money to attend training programs. This makes me speculate on how agents may of gone about their domestic interventions with an ambivalent or contradictory understanding of the ideology that was used to justify these interventions in the first place.

The 1920s saw a growth in home demonstration work in particular. By 1923 there were 294 agents in 16 states, with most supervisor agents located in state Negro Agricultural & Mechanical colleges. Of this number, 100 were female agents, half of whom worked in four major southern states: Georgia, Mississippi, Texas and Arkansas. The express aim of home demonstration agents was to reach Negro farmers and their families and to influence them to adopt better farm practices, to help them to increase their earning capacity, and to improve their living conditions; and also to interest Negro boys and girls in farm activities, and to train them in the use of improved methods in farming and home making.<sup>27</sup>

A 1927 USDA circular breaks down the state of Negro demonstration work. These USDA-generated documents were of course self congratulatory newsletters ripe with propaganda, but they were often informed by the narrative reports of Negro supervisors, also present in instances where the failings of the federal funding for these interventions truly impeded all agents' ability to reach the counties they needed to reach, particularly with the proper resources and training. But agents made do, especially the early female agents who were often spread thin throughout counties during this time. The circular boasted of a community kitchen that was fitted with all the "right furnishings" — providing the template for households to renovate their spaces and thereby their cooking practices. The year saw 158 pressure cookers, 1,080 kitchen cabinets, and 655 fireless cookers installed in 2,100 homes, along with new technologies like power vacuum cleaners, wheel trays, and ice-less refrigerators.

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<sup>27</sup> "Extension Work Among Negros," Department Circular 255, U.S Department of Agriculture, Washington, DC: USDA, 1923, 3. From Library of Congress, Prosperity and Thrift: The Coolidge Era and the Consumer Economy 1921-1929. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/coolhtml/coolhome.html>

Agents also worked outside the home on horticultural projects like “vegetable gardens, market gardening, truck and canning crops, planting and care of tree fruits, small fruits, and grapes, and beautification of home grounds.” Better food at this time meant whole breads, fruit, vegetables, milk and dairy, pork, fish, and unrefined cereals. The emphasis during wartime would always be to replace the nutritional value of costly foods with cheaper and more abundant foods that packed the same nutritional value like cereals, grains, and lard.

Of note were whitewashing campaigns recorded in the Extension service archives for the state of Maryland as a part of the State Health Department Clean Up for National Negro Health Week in 1928. The campaign meant to literally paint the exterior and interiors of homes white, establish white picket fences or garden boxes around the home, and ensure these spaces were clean. Emphasis was not only on making these darker spaces whiter, but also making these darker bodies cleaner and more hygienic. Similarly, in the late 1930s, 28 women in Greenville county remodeled kitchens in the community, with one beneficiary noting that another participants’ kitchen space “used to be as Black and dirty as mine.”<sup>28</sup>

This same desire to transform the kitchen space was reflected in annual reports from home demonstration agents in Maryland. The 1939 annual report describes how kitchens and the foods within them may have changed based on prescriptions. Major changes happening within the home were the addition of large appliances like iceboxes, pressure cookers, as well as entirely new kitchen cabinets, counters, and electrical outlets. The innovations in the material objects within the kitchen were also

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<sup>28</sup> Harris, 102.

accompanied with techniques for boxed and canned goods. The homemakers club from Spencerville provided ideas for preparing: creamed soup, mackerel cakes, oatmeal cookies, seed cookies, stuffed celery, open-faced BLTs with cheese, stuffed celery, chicken salad with grapes and pineapple, cream cheese with preserved ginger, beets with mayo, sour milk, and boiled halibut. Practical advice included how to keep cheese moist, turn a bushel of pears into fifteen quarts of halves, integrating prunes into salads and breads, and transforming leftover toasted cake with a grape juice and pineapple sauce mixture. Tips also included non-nutritional uses of food. One could learn how to make baking powder from cream tartar and baking soda, break a fever with crushed onions on hands and wrist, silence a squeaky oven door with lard, prevent rust in “new iron ware” with potato peelings, and use coffee grinds to repel house plant insects.

Practices in this report show how extension work was usually done in conversation with already established homemakers and 4H clubs. Ideas for foodstuffs followed nutritional guidelines but also might reflect individual taste and preference. Importantly though, as the tools within the kitchen shift, food is used to feed bodies but also to maintain these tools (ovens, iron ware). The dishes being traded are not what we might think of as soul food. Yet the desired kitchens they come from are absolutely integral to how we imagine the current iterations of soul food. In contrast to the outdoor kitchen demonstrations seen in *Helping The Negro*, as home demonstration programs grew in the state, so did the expectations of the population they served. Another aspect of the report archives that contrasts with the USDA propaganda films is the inter-group class differences that required adjustments to the instruction methods for poor and rural versus suburban or urban Black communities.



The 1956-57 annual reports show how suburban and urban families had to be treated differently from rural and non-farm rural families. Agents found themselves struggling with a population that had a wide variety of interests, limited available leadership, difficulty in using group methods, full time employment of women away from home, low educational and economic level, lack of knowledge concerning the extension program, and a necessity for extensive night work.<sup>29</sup> Adjustments to plans of work also reflected shifts in consumer identities. Community members wanted assistance with time and money management, consumer buying, and meal planning and preparation. Home demonstration agents put a large emphasis on individual home visits, circular letters, and news releases in order to reach suburban and urban populations. These adjustments call attention to both the growth of extension work in the state by the late 1950s and to the ways developing consumer identities became an explicitly goal for work plans. As with other extension work, this pushes at the second convention: consumer identities in suburban and rural areas were changing the Black kitchens of the Great Migration.

A goal of female agents was to instill a sense of “house consciousness” for the spaces they lived in everyday along with with the foresight and understanding that a clean and efficiently functioning home also contributes to a highly functioning husband and provider. Instilling this everyday awareness emphasizes the domestic space’s

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<sup>29</sup> Ezelle M. Hawkins, 1957 Annual Report of The State Supervisor Project 4-Home Demonstration Work Part II, November 1, 1956-October 31, 1957, Box 49, The University of Maryland County Extension Service Archives, University Archives Special Collections at The University of Maryland Hornbake Library, College Park, Maryland. “It has been necessary to adjust the schedule of field work to provide time for meeting with groups at night. As problems are objectively evaluated, it becomes apparent that more emphasis must be placed on work with urban, suburban and rural non farm families.” What is the source of this quote?

ability to communicate social status. As the change in space implied, a change in the character of the bodies moving through that space would follow. This means the kitchen is a socially constructed space that is the origin and not the product of the activities that occur within it. Order is restored to the home and land through the logics of domestic citizenship that were reaffirmed through the circulation of films like *Henry Brown, Farmer*.

### **Henry Browne, Farmer**

By the time *Henry Browne, Farmer*— a 10-minute 1942 propaganda film — was produced, the extension services had been working for 20 years on reforming the rural Negro family. Key to the interwar revving up of work on the home front to assist the front line, these images show what a kitchen space before the desired domestic science reform might look like. Yet, the success of the Negro family it depicts is still maintained through the nutritious food the Black mother and daughter serve to the workingmen in the family.

The film's narrator, Canada Lee, opens with a patriotic cry for the continued reinforcement of the "battlefront of democracy to secure a better world for all." Importantly, the "soldiers of production" will also help win the war, especially those who produce the "vital raw materials" for a productive and victorious nation. As we see the black and white image of a tall Black man running an ox and hoe up a winding field situated between hills rolling in the distance, Lee pronounces, "this is the story of one such American farmer." The next establishing shot is the exterior of the Browne family home. A dark structure with a gabled roof encircled by a fence in need of repair, the camera pans right to reveal the other smaller structures on the land — a chicken coop?

An outhouse?

We learn that Browne farms forty acres, and as the film cuts from him washing the sweat of his labor from his face, his son, young Henry, is depicted on a milk stool tending to what will undoubtedly be “the best calf in the county.” We enter the home to join young Henry as he sits with the family for breakfast. As her son takes a seat next to his father and across from his younger sister, Mrs. Browne, holding a frying skillet, circles behind her son and prepares to serve them. Just before she serves the son the eggs fresh from the skillet, she is intercepted by the forearm of her son who, as if not rehearsed, reaches for the large pitcher of milk and pours himself the glass [see figure 2.11] Mrs. Browne waits patiently for the son’s activity to quiet as she serves herself some eggs first, and then the son while they cut to the sister. Lee explains:

Milk for breakfast [as son pours] and eggs too! Sister’s raising 20 hens — most all good layers. Those that aren’t good layers will make good eaters she says. Last year there was just the same old corn bread and fat back for breakfast. [It] fills you up all right but didn’t really build strong healthy bodies. Young Henry grows like Johnson grass, but even so he’s still already begun to fill out.



Figure 13: Mrs. Browne waits, frying pan in hand, to serve young Henry eggs for breakfast. From *Henry Browne, Farmer (1942)*. USDA film archives. Digital copy. Accessed from Prelinger Archives. <https://archive.org/details/HenryBro1942>

The kitchen space does not contain the sleek modern counter tops, new cabinetry and pressure cookers that home demonstration agents sought to bring to remodeled kitchens. Indeed, the Brownes eat within what was probably just a space within a larger common area of the home. About a dozen washbasins, cast irons, sifters, and saucepans are mounted on a wall opposite a modest (wood?) oven with a range. Atop the range, one of the few visible surfaces in the space besides the dining table itself, is another cast iron skillet and a teakettle. A dustpan rests next to the oven, against the wall between the pots and the stove.

In the above image we see what can be considered the “before” picture of domestic reform. The progressive ideals still hit this family though as we see that practices for soil conservation and raising livestock have been integrated into the male labor roles in the family. Yet, there is a lack of whitewashed interiors and exteriors that could also mean they are in transition. Nevertheless, the Brownes are certainly on the

right track to becoming contributing citizens to their local and national community.

*Farmer Browne* presents the desired albeit fantastical outcome of home and agricultural demonstration work. These images work in concert with the above ideologies to reinforce in visual language the stakes of turning away from house consciousness. The film also penetrates the soul food imaginary's fantasy of what would be considered staple dishes like cornbread, written out of these images of Black success and transformation. The dismissal of cornbread and fatback in favor of the dad growing peanuts and soy and the family eating more eggs and dairy is an important fulcrum upon which the family's nutritional citizenship balances. This shows how nutrition as an ideology infiltrates the space. The materiality of the kitchen, even if it lacks the desired "whitewashing" of Negro demonstration work, still communicates a class performance in which the white china, table cloth, milk, eggs, and even oven range are standing in rhetorically for whiteness as an ideal to measure success against. This propaganda shows how the dominant scripts of domesticity are written into representations of Mrs. Browne and her daughter in the kitchen. Although downplayed in propaganda material over the influence on production (because of wartime) these women's roles in the space necessarily get taken up with the culinary and domestic traditions that came before the war and reform. The film then points to a lot of silences around how families reacted to and were influenced by demonstration work while still positing the image of respectable domesticity as a desired part of Black womanhood and girlhood.

In reading the narrative reports of on the ground work by female home demonstration agents with and against the way their work was projected for a general

audience, I uncover the sometimes competing tensions between citizenship, class, health, and race undergirding domestic reforms in the South. As African American women were directed toward ergonomic and efficient kitchens, they also participated in laboratories of American progress. White middle class identity is represented in texts like *The Farmer's Wife* to reaffirm a social position that afforded the ability to consume the “right” products at the right time. This made that which the nation provided them to consume the primary mode through which to signify a positive relationship to the nation. Home and garden bulletins, pamphlets of new agricultural processing techniques, and suggestions on how to organize kitchen appliances, constitute a body of literature grounded in the official dictates of the nation. These materials also visualized Kaplan's manifest domesticity in that the intention is to iron out all ethnic and religious cooking idiosyncrasies for the new kitchen of the nation, which is a sanitized, technological wonder that democratizes the good life. It would be the discourse of imagined American community that infiltrates and alters the expectations around Black women's practices within the kitchen.

The nervous kitchen of Mrs. Browne reveals the artifice of these USDA prescriptions while those of demonstration agents show how translating the lofty ideas of domestic citizenship came upon challenges with limited resources and sometimes unwilling community members. These sites show how an investment in the convention of an unchanged and unadulterated Southern-originated soul food is actually in investment in erasing the complex ways Black women negotiated these changes in their kitchens. This is an important period where the tools of soul food are altered because the use of kitchen tools like serving dishes, counter tops, electrical outlets, and pressure

cookers is wrapped up with American exceptionalism.

Ultimately, the goals of Negro Extension work are thought to have gone unachieved because they did not fulfill the myth of Black self-sufficiency due to the ideology of Black self-sufficiency. Black self-sufficiency was claimed as the key to successful and profitable farming life, while in actuality the nation was moving toward industrializing agriculture, rendering obsolete these small and medium-sized farms tended to by large families.<sup>30</sup> This is a period of much gain but long-term loss. Perhaps that's why its massive impact on Black women's kitchens of today within the SFI has been forgotten.

As the late 1950s extension reports indicated, more women were working outside the home, and time constraints as well as understanding consumer buying became priorities over canning techniques, shoe shining, and pressure cooker meals. This shift represents the ubiquity of the modern kitchen in the American domestic landscape within which Black women played a significant representational role.

In the next chapter, I read the performances of a Black female domestic named Beulah within the frame of a desired outcome of any home demonstration agents' plan of work—the modern kitchen of a white middle-class family. A nervous kitchens approach resists naming the early Negro demonstration agents or women like Mrs. Browne as either victims of racial hierarchies or embracing a sure route toward self-determination. I resist reading Beulah as a mammy character and instead seek to understand how her performance makes the scientific logics of the modern kitchen a

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<sup>30</sup> Earl Crosby, "The Roots of Black Agricultural Extension Work." *Historian* 39, no. 2 (1977): 228-247.

challenge to SFI conventions. This analysis specifically addresses the fourth convention, i.e., that the Black woman cook is alone in her kitchen and soul food moves South to North uninterrupted even as the space of its articulation is modernized.



### **Chapter 3: Beulah's Nervous Kitchen: Excess Flesh in the Modern Kitchen**

The eponymous character in the 1950s television series *The Beulah Show* has had many bodies. Beulah is an eternally helpful African-American maid for a white middle class family, the Hendersons. Each episode finds Beulah in a scheme to resolve a problem for the Hendersons. The character was played over time by several actors, the first being Marlin Hurt, a white male who gave voice to the character in the original CBS radio show and who died six years after the show's premier in 1940. The role was then taken over by a series of talented actors such as sisters Amanda and Lillian Randolph, Ethel Waters, Louise Beavers and Hattie McDaniel. McDaniel, who by this time was famous for her Oscar winning performance in *Gone with The Wind*, attracted large audiences as the radio show saw a boost in ratings.<sup>1</sup> Because of this success, Roland Reed Productions picked up the program as a situation comedy that would air on the American Broadcasting Company in 1950.<sup>2</sup>

Premiering in the context of a racially segregated public sphere, *The Beulah Show* was the first television show to feature an African-American female lead character. Unfortunately, a lot of the early footage from the first seasons of *The Beulah Show* is lost and what circulates today are a few of the six episodes featuring Beavers

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<sup>1</sup> Carlton Jackson. *Hattie: The Life of Hattie McDaniel* (Madison Books, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Angela Nelson, "America, You Know What I'm Talkin' About!": Race, Class, and Gender in Beulah and Bernie Mac," *CELT: A Journal of Culture, English Language Teaching and Literature* 12, no.1 (2012): 60.

and McDaniel, filmed and aired between 1951 and 1953. Lauded by the NAACP as groundbreaking but also marked as offensive and banned on the Armed Forces Network, the show remains contentious. On the one hand, McDaniel demonstrated that Black women were capable of producing and not just being the butt of comedic scenes. Yet the portrayal of Beulah is limited by a focus on a submissive Black woman whose sole purpose is to care for and protect a white family in spite of her own. Indeed, the maid role was and remains a tired archetype for Black female actors, but it also provided McDaniel with the financial resources that helped her raise and educate her actual children.<sup>3</sup>

The character of Beulah serves as a way to access the imagined product of the previous chapter's extension service reforms. At the time of the show's premier these were still in operation in some states and robust in other counties. That is, we can speculate that Beulah may have been the recipient of domestic education given through Negro home demonstration agents. As we follow her North to her new employer we also have to consider how new skills, anxieties, and appliances altered her production of soul food. The production and acting within the show are read for these possibilities that are often erased in the uncomplicated South to North trajectory of the cuisine.

I will return to the show, but first I explain the importance of material objects in the televisual kitchen that actors like McDaniel navigated in their performances. As suburban domesticities and their material trappings exploded across the post-war United States, they simultaneously set new standards for how to perform inside the home, reinforcing distinctions based on race and class. In "Toward a Performance

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<sup>3</sup> Jackson, *Hattie*.

Theory of The Suburban Ideal” Mary Corbin Sies notes that the suburban ideal “addressed the social aspirations of a particular stratum of urban society during a period of intense urban development.” The goal of larger homes, organized around the social space of the living room, hygienic and technologically savvy kitchen appliances, and green space, helped to “rationalize modern life...and engineer the socialization of everyone else.”<sup>4</sup> An early 1950s General Electric ad helps to visualize the role Black female domestics were thought to play within this suburban ideal (figure 14).



Figure 14: Advertisement for a late 1950s model General Electric Sink

Bifurcated horizontally with image on top and text on bottom, the colorful ad features a large breasted, heavysset Black woman in a pink and white maid’s uniform. Her walnut brown skin in this bright pink pop out from the yellow walls of the kitchen

<sup>4</sup> Mary Corbin Sies. “Toward a Performance Theory of the Suburban Ideal, 1877-1917.” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, 4, (1991): 205.

she occupies. It seems as if we have caught her in the middle of tending to her new appliance, a shiny white GE sink with chrome accents that is both a dishwasher and food waste disposal. Wearing a bright white smile, she stands in front of the sink that sits below a window dressed in dark green curtains with white frill. A speech bubble protrudes from her lips revealing the reason behind the grin, she exclaims, 'I'se Sure Got a Good Job Now!' The ad further clarifies, "housework now becomes easier for both women with servants and those without help."

Beulah is a character operating in a similar context to the nameless woman above. She works in a white middle class aesthetic that purported to show a new "more is better" suburban ideal grounded in shiny, chromed out appliances, big cars, and big yards.<sup>5</sup> As the objects against which modern middle class comforts were constructed, the Black female domestic occupies the awkward position. She is both subordinated through reductive images plastered over various consumer products, yet integral to how the suburban ideal is visualized as white via these products. I take the stereotypical nature of the character seriously as one that, written by a mostly white male writing team, could not possibly reflect the dynamic status of being a Black female domestic laboring in the home of white folks in the era of Jim Crow.

As the suburban space becomes furnished with the tools of convenience, the need for domestics decreases. This is highlighted by the fact that the text of the ad offers "services" for pennies and "small cost." Yet Beulah, like the woman in the GE ad, is a testament to her persistence in helping to represent white domestic spaces that

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<sup>5</sup> Shelley Nickles, "More is better: Mass consumption, gender, and class identity in postwar America," *American Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (2002): 581-622.

solidify a white family's status on the right side of the segregation line. In other words, the Black maid serves as more than just a status symbol for the white upper class, but also as a trophy of racial privilege. By the time *The Beulah Show* hit the airwaves domestic work was on the wane.<sup>6</sup> However, historical circumstances made the relationship between this 1950s domestic, the kitchen space she works in, and her white family more dynamic, even contentious. Domestic workers were sometimes at the wrong end of abuses and they were coerced into working at tasks they either had no prior experience doing or simply no desire to do.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that the nuanced performances of the Black women actors in the show captured some of these historical contexts for domestic work. Ultimately, the way Beulah was written along with how it was enacted by Beavers and McDaniel might reflect more of the dynamism, antagonisms, and anxieties faced by actual domestics of that time. This situates her televisual nervous kitchen in juxtaposition to the convention that Black women are alone and content in the space and that soul food moved South to North unencumbered. Soul food here is indexed by the implied specialty of the Black domestic. Even if they didn't acquire the skills, young Black girls looking for work in northern homes were prized for their assumed knowledge of venerated Southern cuisine. Indeed, the pilot for the series, titled "Beulah's Southern Cooking," indicates further a pre-existing assumption that she

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<sup>6</sup> Sharpless, *Cooking in Other Women's Kitchens*, 179. Sharpless points to domestic work as a viable source of employment for African-American women in the South was declining at the time *Beulah* aired. By 1940 the percentage of African-American women holding jobs outside of domestic or agricultural service went from 27% to 50%.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

cooks soul food, the politically branded term for Black Southern cuisine.<sup>8</sup> However, instead of affirming the common inclination to reduce Beulah to a mammy figure, I focus on the complex enactments of the character by the actors McDaniel and Beavers. Enactment—or the specific intonations, movements, proximity to a character and objects—by McDaniel and Beavers thicken the layers of her character, so much so that we cannot simply call her the “M” word. Doing so not only discounts Beaver’s and McDaniel’s art but also takes for granted how she moves through and relates to the televisual space. Specifically, it is the space of the modern kitchen of the early 1950s housewife, an enduring standard for nostalgic American images of belonging that hides within it the objects and foodstuffs of distinction and otherness based on race, gender and class.

Centering the enactment of Beulah and the material culture of the kitchen, I analyze Black newspaper articles in response to the show, domestic reform materials of the time, and McDaniels’ own life. I argue that the excessiveness of Beulah’s performance is an issue that dominates conventions of the SFI. The kitchen is cast as a character with which McDaniel and Beavers can play, as they both were massive icons in their time. Their iconicity attracts an impulse to over-determine them as mammy figures, yet it also makes their popular performances productive sites for the making of Black female subjectivity. With sleek, clean whiteness covering the oven, walls, counters, and curtains of her kitchen, the set is also representative of the desired results of domestic reforms performed by agents of the USDA extension service. Taking into account how the use of kitchens like these was attached to the everyday practices of

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<sup>8</sup> A number of early *The Beulah Show* episodes are lost. Unfortunately, the pilot is one of them.

citizenship, Beulah finds herself in what is imagined to be both the classless and raceless answer to the good life—productive home through efficiency, the aesthetics of “more is better,” and the staving off of foreignness (dirt, food, bodies) to sustaining the nuclear family within its walls.<sup>9</sup>

### **Historical Context for The Show**

Both the radio and television versions of the program existed within a complex television landscape under the shadow of McCarthyism, the exiting Jim Crow era and the emerging Civil Rights movement. Social upheaval of civil rights via the new educational entertainment aspects of television served as a the backdrop for the increasingly popular situation comedy as a American art form that closely follows American tastes and sensibilities. Sitcoms like Beulah, in the social upheaval of a post-war America began to take on issues of race, social class, and gender with irreverent humor.<sup>10</sup> Humor allowed McDaniel’s subversion—introducing provocative ideas with an ongoing audience that came back week after week, compared to the single film.

Beulah also aired in a time when McCarthyism overwhelmed public conversation on American identity, as proper citizens must fight the communist threat within its borders. Later in the decade, the 1958 kitchen became a site for cold war politics. Debates between U.S. President Nixon and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev about the availability of affordable, modern, efficient, and hygienic kitchen technology for each nation’s citizens only reiterated the kitchen as important site of national belonging. Black actors in Hollywood fought to make artistic decisions that insisted on

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<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity.”

<sup>10</sup> Parks, *Fierce Angels*, 120.

the humanity of their often-stereotypical Black characters in the context of a nation looking for images that reassured them of the potential for racial belonging not reminded them of Blackness as difference. These politics of the representation are best seen through Hattie McDaniel's conflict with the NAACP. Although the organization gave her an image award for her performance as a maid in *Gone With The Wind* (1939), they rebuked her performances in *Beulah* as a tired trope. This went as far as a West Coast reporter allegedly falsifying reports that Black GI's were offended by the show, leading to its removal from the armed forces radio network. The NAACP's use of soldiers—patriotic men beyond reproach—as outraged stakeholders in how Black life was represented may have been a move made in relation to anti-communist sentiment sweeping the country. The association launched a campaign to take down *Beulah*, through the soldiers' outrage, in order to form an image of a respectable national citizen that, like the modern kitchen and the race to space, was civilized, advanced, and deserving of inclusion.

### **Methods of Excess Flesh, Visible Seems, and Non-Iconicity**

In *Troubling Vision*, American Studies scholar Nicole Fleetwood argues that the visual logics that allow us to recognize Blackness in art, film, and photography also reinforce the problems representation seeks to correct. We want images of Blackness to “do something to alter a history and system of racial inequality.”<sup>11</sup> The tools with which to do that are made from the same visual discourse that represents that problem. Fleetwood elaborates by saying that “seeing Black is always a problem in a visual field

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<sup>11</sup> Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1-32.



that structures the troubling presence of blackness.”<sup>12</sup> The process of interpreting representations of Blackness relies on racial discourses that assume a knowable subject. Her emphasis then is not on Black icons to carry the burden—not the appearance and reappearance of certain tropes and stereotypes—but on how “the visual sphere is a performative field where seeing race is not a transparent act; it is itself a “doing.”<sup>13</sup> In *the Beulah Show* racial discourses of the mammy icon and joyful subservience can overwhelm interpretation’s meaning we can miss out on more complex nuances of characters enactment.<sup>14</sup> The following scenes of *The Beulah Show* are read through Fleetwood’s concepts of non-iconicity, excess flesh, and visible seams in order unnerve the mammy iconicity of the performance.

Non-iconicity relieves the image of its responsibility to stand in for all the dynamic cultural processes that produce it. In the case of Beulah, the absence of iconic soul food dishes alongside Beulah as subject urges a non-iconic reading. This approach shifts the focus from viewable, knowable Blackness to the production of blackness through discourse.<sup>15</sup> We are directed to what is being performed in the space of the kitchen instead of assuming we know what kind of Blackness is produced when we see fried chicken, collard greens, and ham hock. An important part of how we read Beulah as a producer of soul food is in her excess.

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<sup>12</sup> Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 3-7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 7.

<sup>14</sup> See Nicole Man, “Performing Cultural Authenticity in CBS’s *Good Times*,” in *The Paradox of Authenticity In A Globalized World*, ed. Russell Cobb (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 55.

<sup>15</sup> Fleetwood notes we must “probe the space between subject and object, between instantiation and affect, to show how visualization works in the production of blackness as that which is viewable and as discourse.”<sup>15</sup> The discourses and tools we have to “see” are indeed the trouble with vision. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*, 9.

Excess flesh refers to the “ways in which black female corporeality is rendered as an excessive overdetermination and as overdetermined excess.” Excess flesh is rendered through Beulah’s corporeal size a la “mammy” (Beavers struggled to gain weight for the role); her hypervisibility as the only African American lead actress on a sitcom, and her performance of excessive domestic labor. However, Fleetwood also offers the term “visible seams” to interpret “technique and discursive intervention” that can “reveal the gaps, erasures, and ellipses of dominant visual narratives.”<sup>16</sup> In previous comedic portrayals of mammy, McDaniel was noted to employ a technique that highlighted the “grotesque extremes” of the caricature.<sup>17</sup> I wonder how these approaches may have influenced the enactment of signifying and Beulah’s double takes, as a “technique” to speak back to the overdetermined excess framing the narrative.

The performances of McDaniel and Beavers stitch together and thereby challenge the disparate discourses of white middle class aesthesis of the suburban ideal and the innate cooking abilities and down home Southern hospitality assumed to reside in the body of the Black woman domestic. I read the kitchen as a space where the domestic can get the upper hand and teach white folks a lesson. This nervous kitchen casts doubt on the viability for the top-down USDA prescriptions explored in the previous chapter. Beulah claims the modern kitchen, the desired result of home demonstration work, as her own domain, but enacts strategies that question the space’s advertised ability to civilize and save time.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 179.

<sup>17</sup> Jillian Watts, *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 40.

These methods, applied to Beulah and her televisual kitchen, unnerve the SFI conventions of a solitary Big Mama and pure Southern origins. They challenge the simplicity of the mammy trope while also arguing that the modern kitchen doesn't just contain the Black domestic, but rather becomes an important stage for the reciprocal movement of ideas, materiality, and narratives that influence present articulations of soul food.

### **Beulah's Modern Televisual Kitchen**

In the eleventh episode of Season two, "New Arrival," we find Beulah (Beavers) exclaiming ownership of her domain—the modern kitchen. The premise for the show is that Beulah helps the family she works for, the Hendersons, get out of jams in which they find themselves. Alice Henderson is a contented homemaker while her husband Harry is the somewhat ill tempered breadwinner. Little Donnie rounds out the Henderson clan as the sometimes-mischievous young son who perhaps seeks Beulah's council the most. Beulah's boyfriend Bill, a slothful handyman, and her best friend Oriole, a fellow domestic, provide counsel and added comic relief to assist in Beulah's problem solving. "New Arrival" does not diverge from this story line as Beulah finds herself in the middle of a misunderstanding between Alice and Harry. The kitchen serves, in this episode and others, as a staging ground for the start and even resolution of these misunderstandings. Donnie has the great idea to use his parents' store credit in order to purchase a baby buggy. He needs the wheels for a go-cart he is building. A sweeping fade from Donnie's schemes in town reveal Beulah perplexed as she lifts brown paper wrapping to expose the buggy sitting confidently in the kitchen. A series of misunderstandings has Beulah believing that Alice is hiding a pregnancy from Harry

while Alice is actually hiding his birthday gift—a new BBQ grill.

The arrival of Harry's brand new grill allows Alice to explain she is not pregnant. When asked why she thought Alice was expecting Beulah says:

**Beulah:** Well it's all on account of the baby carriage you bought and hid, Miss Alice.

**Alice:** Baby carriage? I didn't buy any baby carriage

**Beulah:** [standing upright stern and maybe a bit frustrated with her hands on her hips] Well that wasn't no convertible [head shakes down to emphasize the word convertible] they left in *my kitchen*.

Donnie rolls in with his assembled go-cart, sporting the baby carriage wheels, and the entire mystery is solved as Beulah says, "I'm beginning to see the light."

In the above dialogue Beulah claims ownership ("my kitchen") over the kitchen space. Yet, the material trappings of the space represented a white middle class standard of living typified by the USDA's U-shaped step saving kitchen (figure 14). This design is the result of scientific measurement of ergonomics applied to the construction of space in order to make the homemaker's movement in the kitchen more efficient. When home demonstration agents were focused on provisioning basic necessities through canning and other techniques, they were utilizing the latest and greatest from home economics specialists located at state flagship universities. The state of Maryland was no different when head home specialist Helen Irene Smith built recommendations for U and L shaped kitchens into training materials for white and Negro home demonstration agents the same year this episode aired. She cites the design's ability to minimize walking between counter tops, reach between tasks and to

better accommodate “two or more people” working.<sup>18</sup> The majority of these white women benefited from federal funding streams in order to hash out the science of the modern woman’s kitchen. In the case of Smith, the science of the U-shape was developed at the USDA’s Beltsville facilities just down the road from her offices at The University of Maryland, College Park. In saving the homemaker time between tasks, the implementation of scientific and hygienic standards also had the goal of creating a “therapeutic environment.”<sup>19</sup> Save for a few adjustments to facilitate the positioning of the camera, the televisual kitchen of *The Beulah Show* reflects the specifications of the U shape kitchen: storage of spices and objects one might need above the range, lots of storage, deep sink facing the window and looking outward, cabinets to the left of the sink, and a mixing or dishwashing center (figure 3.3).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Annual Report of Helen Irene Smith Home Management Specialist November 1, 1951 to September 15, 1952

<sup>19</sup> Sies, *Toward a Performance Thoery*, 205.

<sup>20</sup> “A Step-Saving U-Kitchen, *United States Department of Agriculture Home and Garden Bulleting No. 14*, Formerly Miscellaneous Publication No. 646. Washington, DC: Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics Agricultural Research Administration. November 1951. From Natural Agricultural Library Digital Collections. The unbroken U shape was chosen for arranging equipment because it forms a compact dead-end work center through which household traffic cannot pass. It also allows the dining corner to be planned and decorated as a separate center.

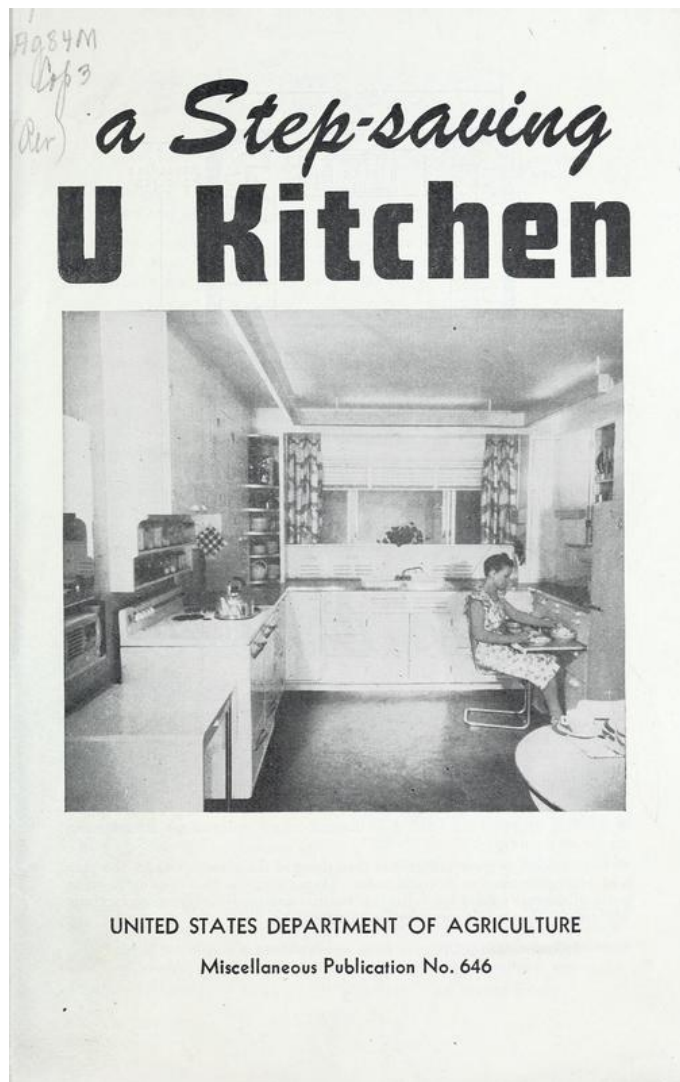


Figure 15: Front cover of bulletin explaining how to transform a kitchen into a step-saving U-kitchen. *USDA Home and Garden Bulletin No. 14*. November 1951. National Agricultural Library Digital Collections.

## Mixing Center

Mixing jobs go quickly when supplies and utensils are within easy reach and the work space is adequate, as in this mixing center. The refrigerator is conveniently placed at the right end of the work counter.

Corner cupboards with revolving shelves above and below counter level tie in with the mixing center.

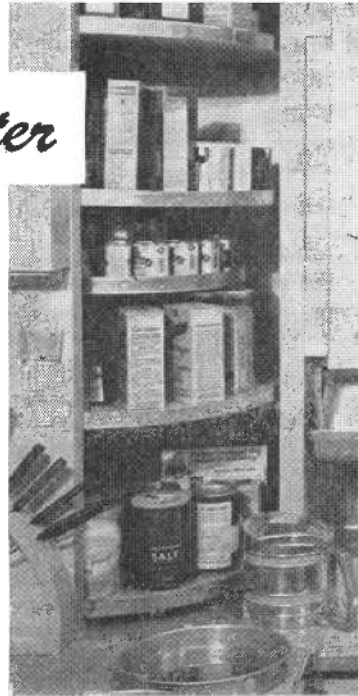


Figure 16: Mixing Center from Beltsville Kitchen pamphlet

The proximity of appliances in relation to the sink also matches up with the desired kitchen space of the day. The Beltsville kitchen description reads, “the three key pieces of equipment are brought within easy reach of each other—sink at center of U, refrigerator and range at ends. Other arrangements of these pieces in a U or an L might be equally convenient.”<sup>21</sup> In *Beulah*, the set design reflected an “L” shape with the range at the shorter end and the sink, window, storage, utensils, and prep stations on the longer side.

The kitchen’s design, although not intended for Beulah’s consumption, nonetheless becomes her domain through her enactments. She eschews the logics of the

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<sup>21</sup> The U as shown here, while compact, is large enough to give two women comfortable working space. There is also ample storage to accompany the activities usually carried on in a farm kitchen when there is a separate laundry workroom (Beltsville 3).

therapeutic and ergonomic by over-extending herself on behalf of the Hendersons. Rarely do we find the white family, and only occasionally Bill and Oriole, lingering in the space. I read the scenes of Beulah in the Hendersons' kitchen as a dance.<sup>22</sup> The modernity the kitchen is meant to signify is juxtaposed with the excess iconicity of mammy's down-home, pre-modern aesthetic. I argue that soul food evolves within this juxtaposition, yet we imagine it does not in part because the nostalgia of mammy over-determines how we might read oppositional or ambivalent exchanges within the kitchen.



Figure 17: Beulah dancing in front of the long side of her adapted U-shape kitchen. From the episode *The Waltz* (1952), digital copy, Roland Reed Productions. Accessed from the Prelinger Archives: [https://archive.org/details/The\\_Beulah\\_Show](https://archive.org/details/The_Beulah_Show)

The excessive nature of both Beulah's self-sacrificing character, and the kitchen as a space that could make a nation pure, clean, and productive, are iconic ideas that, in

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<sup>22</sup> Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things Material Culture and the Performance of Race." *Social Text* 27, no. 4 101 (2009): 67-94.



their largess, become defaults that are often overlooked. However, each has something to tell us about the other if we embrace the nervous tension that their co-mingling interjects: Beulah's body must be "low" for the space she's in to be "high" (down home/upper crust, simple/complex). As Amy Kaplan notes, American domesticity is sister to notions of Manifest Destiny that make the private home a space of American exceptionalism, but only as a foil to the foreign other.<sup>23</sup> This discourse is materialized in the modern kitchen space and is not meant to include Beulah in its logics. Yet, Beavers and McDaniel utilize the visible seam of their enactment to tell a different story—a story that in which they take ownership of the space.

### **Beulah Can Do It All**

"Beulah Goes Gardening" debuted in the summer of 1952 and displayed the post WWII domestic obsession with efficiency as Harry declares the family is to economize. The first thing to be cut is the gardener and the family is tasked with taking over his duties.

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<sup>23</sup> Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity."



Figure 18: Hattie McDaniel performs “I’m the girl who knows all the answers” opening quip from *The Beulah Show* (1951). Digital copy. Accessed from the Prelinger Archives: [https://archive.org/details/The\\_Beulah\\_Show](https://archive.org/details/The_Beulah_Show)

The episode features McDaniel in the main role and opens with the sharp quip: “Everyone says I’m the girl that knows all the answers, the only trouble is no one ever asks me the question.” Here we see McDaniel’s impeccable and subtle ability to color a statement of inferiority with hints of knowing sarcasm. As McDaniel delivers the line she looks mischievous as she glances downward, seemingly defeated upon the delivery of “the only trouble,” just to look up straight at the camera from this downward position, head tilted to the side revealing a daring smile after “asks me the question” (figure 3.6).



Figure 19: Beulah signifies on Miss. Alice. From the episode *Beulah Goes Gardening* (1951). Digital copy. Accessed from the Prelinger Archives: [https://archive.org/details/The\\_Beulah\\_Show](https://archive.org/details/The_Beulah_Show)

Her episodic quips are always followed by an “Iris in circle fade,” a transition technique where the picture is blacked out leaving only Beulah’s face as it slowly closes in on the image into black. The mask or part of the frame that is not blackened is an important editing choice as that shot draws the viewer’s attention to whatever the subject is seeing.<sup>24</sup> In this case it’s Beulah herself, we are she, and she is us. As the lead in the show both Black and white viewers were encouraged to empathize with Beulah’s “values and experiences” as a character. But beneath this likability, which can be interpreted as the “happy Negro trope,” McDaniels’ enactments and professional relationship with the production of the show allowed her to challenge stereotypes “from the inside.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, as a popular actress and Oscar winner, McDaniel had some

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<sup>24</sup> Karen Shepherdson, *Film Theory: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*. Vol. 4. Taylor & Francis (2004): 119.

<sup>25</sup> Mack Scott. “From Blackface to Beulah: Subtle Subversion in Early Black Sitcoms.” *Journal of*

control over the language in the scripts. While organizations like the NAACP targeted her for the use of “outmoded dialects” she was actually able to tell producers her character should “speak good English,” and she had the ability to hire or fire anyone in the cast.<sup>26</sup> McDaniel’s guiding hand in the production of the show upsets not only the segregationist racial politics of the day, but also asserts her authority over the narrative.<sup>27</sup>

These contexts make the subtle enactments in the opening quip and later in episode exemplary of the image’s ability to embrace the contradictions of “subservience as well as empowerment, stupidity as well as guile,” and “vulnerability as well as strength.” By not just relying on the excessive overdetermination to read Beulah as mammy, a nervous kitchen analytic seeks to understand how these seemingly contradictory embodiments of the character might also lends themselves to domestic space that is less of a modern utopia than it is a battleground over signifying complex Black womanhood in the kitchen.

Harry announces economizing plans finds Beulah seated in the kitchen with Bill. As in the previous episode, the kitchen is often the set that opens and closes the shows central plot. As Bill goes for a lump of sugar to put in his coffee, Beulah smacks his hand. “What’s the matter baby?” says Bill, “We got a new thing around here,” she snaps back. “Economy.”

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*Contemporary History* 49, no. 4 (2014): 743-769.

<sup>26</sup> “Hedda Hopper on Hollywood: Her Own People Balk Negro Oscar Winner”

The Sun Dec 14, 1947 ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Baltimore Sun. Hattie McDaniel is “Whole Cheese” on Beulah Show. Dolores Calvin Atlanta Daily World Jan 5, 1950 ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World pg. 6

<sup>27</sup> Nelson, “America You Know What I’m Talking About.”

Beulah insists that everyone fall in line with Harry's plan to economize because she knows it is coming from a place of love, and, pointedly, because he is "holding the money to keep the family going." Even though Harry only mentions firing the gardener, Beulah transfers the directive to the kitchen, admonishing Bill's sugar consumption as they are somewhat conversely surrounded by well-to-do trappings of the modern consumer. Indeed, a box of opened cereal, coffee percolator, sugar dish, coffee cup with matching saucer, and standing mixer all dot the scene as actors in Beulah's domain. As the episode moves along, it becomes clear that each member of the family, having agreed to pitch in with gardening work, somehow finds themselves otherwise obligated, and then leaves Beulah to take on the labor.

Donnie is the first to skip out on his work. Beulah quickly catches on as Donnie is the first to pitch her a "sly foxy round-about scheme" to go hiking with his friends in order to get out of helping with the gardening. Moments later, McDaniel performs an artfully enacted double take when Donnie says, "You know Beulah? I'm turning into the most terrible little liar." A cut to a head and shoulders shot emphasizes her big reaction as her body takes up the frame. The sincerely concerned, if not disturbed, look on Beulah's face urges us to resist the icon of mammy whose own children are said to be neglected on account of loyalty to her charges. Instead an interpretation of non-iconicity through the tactic of the double take (a comedic tool) provokes the following questions: Is she worried about how she *raised* him? Is she surprised or worried? Remember, the confessions of her white charge happen within *her* kitchen. In feeding others, how are the techniques of the Black domestic different from feeding her own? Another scene, too, allows a potential reading not only for ambivalences with her white

employers, but for strategic commentary on uneven labor dynamics. In this episode Beulah's overwork goes hand in hand with economizing, so that the labor she produces is re-directed toward Mr. Harry's savings account.

### **Trouble in the Garden**

Like Donnie, Alice also has other obligations that arise, keeping her from watering the plants so she asks Beulah to do it instructing her to pay special attention to Harry's beloved rose bush. Seated near the garden bed and with a hose in her hand Beulah looks up to speak with the otherwise engaged Alice, who says how wonderful Beulah is for stepping into this cost-saving work of maintaining the yard. In a subtle enactment that speaks back to Alice's white female authority in the household, Beulah looks briefly at Mrs. Hendersons' white-gloved hand as it touches her shoulder. Alice says, "Good, see you later" as she makes this gesture, the gloves becoming another material barrier between the bodies of these two women. As she turns away to walk toward her shiny automobile, in her perfectly tailored dress, hat, and gloves, Beulah says, "You look might smart in that new hat you have," waving her hand limply from the wrist—a unenthusiastic and sarcastic wave more shoulder and wrist than elbow. Then, in a instant mood change she looks down, face away from the camera and asks, "Everyone keeps telling me I'm wonderful today. I wonder why?" before continuing with her gardening work.

Harry is the last to abdicate his lawn mowing duties to Beulah whose body language indicates she is not simply acquiescing to his request. McDaniel interprets the exchange by meeting Harry's request with an authoritative stance and a look directly into his eyes. Indeed, Harry seems to have gotten the message as he walks away, head

down, insisting that golfing is important for business. Her willingness to stand up to this white patriarch is balanced with the final scene in the episode that has her at once embracing the arduous role of cooking in abundance while also reflecting on the consequences of being overworked.

The next scene finds the entire Henderson clan seated at the dining room table awaiting dinner. The table is set: all three plates in front of Mr. Henderson, cutlery and stemware at each setting, napkin holders and serving dishes in the middle of the table. We do not see Beulah but instead hear pots crashing—judging by the families’ reaction—a sound that is not often heard during meal preparation and therefore an indication that something is amiss. The entrance to the kitchen is centered in the frame as a gruff Beulah enters.

Beulah enters and in a gruff manner places a hunk of charred meat presumably a roast, on the table in front of Mr. Henderson and exclaims, “It’s spoiled, but don’t blame me, it was prepared by a field hand, not a cook.” She limps back through the revolving door to her kitchen domain, but not before giving Mr. Henderson an annoyed glance.

Noticing her changed manner, Mr. Henderson resolves that Beulah has “a right to be upset.” When Beulah comes back into the dining room with a bowl of what looks to be mashed potatoes, Harry declares a solution to her being overworked from gardening. He states, “From now on, on Saturday nights we’ll have cold cuts for dinner.” Alice, almost without hesitation, agrees that it is a good idea. Beulah, outraged exclaims, “Cold cuts! Mr. Harry, I’ll dig the yard if I have to, I’ll lay a brick wall for ya, but I’m not going to serve my family no cold cuts on Saturday night.”

Unbeknownst to Mr. Henderson, Beulah's gardening duties have left his beloved rose bush in poor shape. A weight is on her mind as she converses with her friend Oriole in the kitchen over the telephone. She laments, "It's not the work so much as the nerve strain." Her weariness is accentuated by her posture: seated and facing the camera with her large figure taking up most of the frame. When Oriole tells her not to work too hard she says:

**Beulah:** I'm going to rest tomorrow [her face turns fully to the camera, and eye contact is made with viewer] and I'm going to take it easy all week and then when Saturday rolls around I'll be all ready to ruin myself again [slight pause] bye.

Her last words, said with a dejected tone, almost sound like a question as if to say: will I see you again? Beulah then opens the kitchen window, her flashlight cutting through the darkness to illuminate the dying rose bush. She says, "Bush, you look as bad as I feel" — a moment of affinity with an object as ruined as she is. Yet Beulah rallies and schemes and goes to visit the local nursery in order to get Mr. Henderson a new rose bush.

A series of mishaps at the nursery finds Mr. Henderson's rose bush has been accidentally sold. Beulah brought it in to be diagnosed but the nursery attendant mistakenly sold it. In a conversation with the man who bought the plant and who is unwilling to sell it back, Beulah learns that his domestic recently quit. She resolves to trade the man a fully cooked meal for the bush.

### **Too Many Turkeys In the Kitchen**

Returning to her domain, Beulah opens the over door to baste a large turkey



(McDaniel pantomimes this act) with a large silver spoon. Alice enters her kitchen:

**Alice:** Beulah do I smell a turkey cooking?

**Beulah:** Yessumm.

**Alice:** Oh it's beautiful! And lemon meringue pie!

**Beulah:** And creamed onions and fresh peas.

**Alice:** I don't remember ordering all of those things.

**Beulah:** Oh you didn't, I got Bill to get them for me.

**Alice:** Oh, Beulah with all your gardening how did you manage?

**Beulah:** Well when you have to do a thing you just do it.

Mr. Henderson and Donnie present the same enthusiasm when they enter her kitchen and smell the turkey. When the man of the house asks how Beulah managed, she reiterates, "Oh, I just did."

The Hendersons simply cannot wait for their coming meal but the presence of Bill and Beulah walking out the door with turkey and pie raises questions. Beulah finally confesses about the deal she has made to get the rose bush back. Undeterred, Miss Alice asks. "but what about our dinner?" Beulah, pressed for time, assures them that dinner is already on the table.

What's for dinner? Cold cuts. Disappointed, the family is still tempted by the turkey — they can still smell it in the house. Lead by their appetites and curiosity as to the origin of the scent, Harry and Alice head to the kitchen where Beulah appears, almost magically, from the back laundry room.

**Alice:** Well Beulah you're back already?

**Beulah:** Yessum, did you eat your dinner?

**Alice:** No. I couldn't eat those cold cuts after I saw that turkey.

Beulah, I think you did this on purpose, just to teach us a lesson.

**Beulah:** [looking down and away from the couple] Well...

**Alice:** Beulah, why do I still smell turkey?

**Beulah:** Oh, I almost forgot.

As she walks with high tempo to the stove and opens the oven door, and we hear the “cling” of the oven rack as she pulls out a large brown turkey perfectly cooked in a black roasting pan. A cut from meaty turkey that overwhelms the frame relative to Beulah, pictured from the breast up, wide-eyed saying, “I cooked two of them (holding up two fingers). I told you I wasn't going to feed my family cold cuts on a Saturday night!”



Figure 20: Beulah has cooked two turkeys. From the episode *Beulah Goes Gardening* (1951). Digital copy. Accessed from the Prelinger Archives: [https://archive.org/details/The\\_Beulah\\_Show](https://archive.org/details/The_Beulah_Show)



Figure 21 Beulah reveals her work in the excessively large, glistening turkey. From the episode *Beulah Goes Gardening* (1951). Digital copy. Accessed from the Prelinger Archives: [https://archive.org/details/The\\_Beulah\\_Show](https://archive.org/details/The_Beulah_Show)

This episode shows the excess of Black womanhood that bursts through the modern kitchen, revealing its civilizing discourses and reliance upon modern appliance. Economizing for the Henderson's means more work for Beulah. This highlights the hidden cost of efficiency and economization in this period that often may of meant more labor for domestics. One of the many forms of racial tensions between employee and employer emphasizes the extent to which Black women were expected to have or attain different skills whose time to acquire would of course effect her ability to maintain her own home.<sup>28</sup> Beulah does everything related to the home and still has time to cook two large turkeys. There is literally not enough time with access to only one oven to prepare such ornate meals. An explanation is that Beulah actually extends the

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<sup>28</sup> Sharpless, *Cooking in other Women's Kitchens*.

limits of time and physical labor in order to restore both to the white home. The figure of mammy is thought both corporeally and emotionally to be excessive while also containing an interesting contradiction. The sass and comfort of mammy and her down home Southern cooking are longed for, while her position within a racial and gender hierarchy makes her undesirable and susceptible to daily discrimination. Yet, McDaniel's subversive performances of the double take, her reflection on how this labor is ruining her, and her signifying to both Harry and Alice exceed mammy iconography. These actions, I argue, characterize the modern kitchen as a perpetual battleground for enacting these ambivalences. Beulah is a co-created character, not a static stereotype ventriloquized with white hands. McDaniel herself, along with demanding to be paid \$2,000 a week "had written into the contract that she was to speak no dialect, and demanded and got the right to alter any script that did not, for any reason, dialect or otherwise, meet with her approval."<sup>29</sup> The staging and action in and around the kitchen suggests it is Beulah's televisual domain where plans are hatched, conferred upon, and resolved. I contend that enactments of Beulah argue for making a home for Blackness in the modern kitchen whose suburban ideals are based upon exclusion of the other.

In utilizing Fleetwood's concepts of excess flesh, non-iconicity, and visible. it seems that we learn that there is more than mammy making Blackness viewable on *The Beulah Show*. Mainly, her interactions with and within the modern kitchen space are made nervous when understood through SFI conventions. Two conventions that appear and are pushed back against via the nervous kitchen analytic include the Big Mama

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<sup>29</sup> Jackson, *Hattie*, 151.

figure that magically cooks delicious meals alone in her kitchen, and the uninterrupted South to North movement of soul food. In cooking an impossible amount of turkey in one evening, Beulah would seem to adhere to the first convention, while the title of the pilot episode (Beulah's Southern Cooking) and her refusal to make cold cuts, also implies adherence to the latter convention. Yet it is an erasure of complicity with the ideology of domestic citizenship (economizing, dominion over a U-shape kitchen) that becomes apart of how soul food is imagined to represent an authentic Black identity. Resonances of George Tillman's 1997 film, *Soul Food*, echo in the attire and corporeality of Beulah. This affirms how these characters are understood in the performative recurring scenario of the lone Black female cook in her kitchen. The film *Soul Food*, Tuskegee trained reformers, and Beulah's domestic duties all become scenes within the scenario of SFI conventions.

Soul food is said to be about time; soul food is slow food. Indeed a lot of the techniques employed to cook such conventional dishes require a long simmer — the breaking down of flavorful meats into tough root vegetables, for instance. Here though, in Beulah's kitchen, time literally stops, disappears, and re-emerges as the bounty of two large formal turkey meals. The SFI convention pushed up against in this episode is the notion of the intrinsic Black female cook who magically prepares food without recipe. The nervous televisual kitchen shows that her time and where and how it is spent are calculations; and that when exploited, she knows it, and makes note of the white families material excess in the face of her abundance. Ultimately, I see this as mockery of the modern kitchens time saving logics. The appliances do not save the domestic, but these become tools in her methods of subversion.

## Chapter 4: Cross Town Traffic and Hypertension: Gender, Class, Status, and Health in *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons*

The discursive origins of soul foods' branding developed against the background of the Black cultural battleground of the mid to late 1960s and circulated with and among a group of heralded Black men.<sup>1</sup> This period would define for decades to come the cuisine's canonical dishes. It would reinforce the idea that soul food was a unique cultural product of African-Americans. Its roots would come to be located in both the agricultural abundance of 18<sup>th</sup> century West Africa and the poverty of Southern sharecropping. Foremost of these Black male thinkers is Amiri Baraka. In his 1962 essay, "Soul Food," Baraka listed the dishes most popularly associated with soul food from an authority grounded in his experiences of working class Harlem. The short essay abounds with associations between soul food authenticity and poor or lower class food "shacks" and "joints." Simultaneously, it devalues those food experiences of, for example, "a Negro going to Harvard."<sup>2</sup> This sentiment is echoed in the *Soul Food Cookbook* published just seven years later by Jim Harwood and Ed Callahan. The first line of the introduction reads, "If everyone in the world were born rich, maybe Soul Food wouldn't exist."<sup>3</sup> This statement raises an interesting tension that comes with soul food's formalization as a Black cultural product and what is a necessary contradiction

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<sup>1</sup> In a tradition that permeates to this very day, the definition and cultural meaning of soul food is usually mediated popularly by Black men. This is even though Black women are understood or imagined to cook it the best. In this case I am thinking of Amiri Baraka, Dick Gregory, and Elijah Muhammad.

<sup>2</sup> Amiri Baraka, "Soul Food" in *Home: Social Essays* (Akashic Books, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Harwood, *Soul Food Cookbook*, 1. On soul food's inability to be defined: "Impossible to define but recognizable among those who have it. But there's nothing secret or exclusive about Soul Food."

of the SFI. Specifically, that by virtue of the fact that soul food emerged from Black experiences of poverty and survival, it is affectively attached to Black bodies. At the same time, because Harwood places these recipes in a cookbook, he also suggests that soul food could be made by anyone.

Another contradiction arises as soul food cookbooks often highlight their inability to define the cuisine before proceeding to define it. Yet, despite these tensions, soul food also became commodified as the advent of the term opened the door for another cookbook publishing market. Jimmy Lee's *Soul Food Cookbook*, published in 1970, reiterates the un-definability of soul food, but cites religion, time for preparation, and humble origins as soul food's definitive traits. In the introduction, Lee quotes a "former resident of Louisiana" saying that "Down South they used to say that rich folks ate food for the body while poor folks ate food for the soul."<sup>4</sup>

As the food becomes tied to a conventional representation mediated through cookbooks, magazines, and television shows, the conventions become hard set facts: soul food is unhealthy, has its origins in U.S. enslavement, and is the stuff of survival. Although Black masculinity shaped and continues to shape this discourse in the public sphere, it would be Black women's televisual and representational kitchens that displayed the many layers involved in soul food's branding and the soul aesthetic. Foremost of these layers would be the intersections of class and upward mobility, health, and gender roles of social reproduction. Whether it's Louise's anxiety about abandoning her roots, or Florida's concern over her husband's hypertension, nervous kitchen scenes in the televisual kitchens of both *The Jeffersons* (1975) and *Good Times*

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<sup>4</sup> Lee, *Soul Food Cookbook*, 8.



(1974) are analyzed here. Taken alongside cookbooks and an *Ebony* op-ed, I consider how each text makes an argument for how the discourses of class, health, and gender roles should operate in defining what African-Americans eat. These nervous kitchens affirm the SFI convention that soul food is not healthy. But in doing so, the ideological operation of the imaginary's soul nourishment, is reasserted. These representations demonstrate that these conversations are not new. In fact, the narratives of health and soul food in *Good Times*, for instance, set the ground for current moves to reform. However, these nervous kitchens also challenge how we conceptualize the period of Black power rhetoric influencing African-American foodways. They introduce elements of soul food's narrative that smooth over the irregularities of intra-group distinction within this Black cultural expression.

Appearing in what is thought of as the golden age of the African-American sitcoms, both *The Jeffersons* (1975) and *Good Times* (1974) are hallmarks of Black popular culture. Both shows broached hot button issues of the day, such as interracial dating, Black Nationalism, welfare, and public housing policies. In the premier episode of *The Jeffersons*, class and the anxieties of upward mobility — a foundational category of difference that undergirds those hot button issues — would be taken up through a series of incidences gesturing toward what Psyche Williams-Forsen describes as “gender malpractice.”<sup>5</sup> This calls for attention to the way gender infuses instances when black “women have been intentionally misrepresented by white people and ambiguously misrepresented by blacks.” The use of gender malpractice helps to

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<sup>5</sup> Williams-Forsen, in *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs*, explains that gender malpractice calls for a critical examination of moments where gender malpractice is at play, highlighting the complexities inherent in the production of cultural artifacts, particularly those surrounding black people.” 166

interrogate the assumptions about domestic lifestyle (scripted by whites but enacted by Black women) that occur between Black women in the show. These moments fuel a reification of SFI boundaries. In other words, these are disciplining narratives about authentic Blackness, survival, and the fear of not being recognized as Black through the things you make. Following Herman Gray's notion that Black television is a "discursive site where contests over the *meaning(s)* of blackness are waged," I read scenes in popular Black television, taking the televisual kitchen as specific discursive site whose discourses of gender, class, and materiality interject into the meanings of soul food. In grappling with the health effects of soul food, *Good Times*, and a 1968 *Ebony* op-ed, I disrupt the imaginary through gendered interpretations of how race and nutrition coalesce around soul food.

### **Historical Context for *The Jeffersons* and *Good Times***

Both of these television shows emerged during a crisis of the Negro family grounded in access to housing. This crisis was spurred on by the 1965 public policy report by Daniel Patrick Moynihan. This report reflected Lyndon B. Johnson's agenda to focus on the family through structural and policy initiatives that could lessen the divide in educational and economic opportunities affecting Black and white post-war families. The now infamous Moynihan report argued that the Black family was deteriorating under pathological characteristics like child illegitimacy, divorce, female headed households, and an over dependence on welfare.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately the report served as an answer to what many saw as unwarranted explosions of violence during the 1965 public housing riots in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles. Ultimately

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<sup>6</sup> Nicola Mann, "Performing Cultural Authenticity in CBS's *Good Times*."

Nixon's 1975 moratorium on subsidized housing and the sensationalized neglect and vandalism of large public housing projects, thought to be the answer the post war life, like Cabrini-Green in Chicago and Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, reinforced the image of the broken Black family, pathologically unable to move up in the social hierarchy. Shows like *Good Times* and *The Jeffersons* emerged to counter the Moynihan report's disparaging conceptualization of the weak and broken Black family. The shows were positioned as a more authentic view of a cooperative and functional Black family. In leveraging the strong signification of soul food as an empowering and authentic product of Black life, *Ebony* called *Good Times* "a slice of ghetto life as thick and juicy as a slab of salt pork simmering in a pot of collard greens"<sup>7</sup>

### **Conflict Kitchen**

The opening scenes of the premier episode of *The Jeffersons* centers around a conversation between newfound friends Louise and Diane. Louise, teenage son Lionel, and husband George — whose laundry business just took off — have just moved to an upscale high-rise in Manhattan from a working-class lifestyle in Queens. Diane is a maid who works for families in the building. Most of the families she works for are white. As they step off the elevator and into Louise's apartment, Diane follows, but with hesitation. In the apartment, Diane is entranced by the plush surroundings as both women make their way to the kitchen. The kitchen is a multicolor wonderland of late 1970's vibrancy. It is separated from a living space, complete with a couch, two arm chairs, and a dining room table for four, by a bright blue shuttered door. To great televisual effect, it also boasts a set of hanging cabinets that along with the bar below

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

it, frame an open space where a character can look through the kitchen and into the living room. In a groundbreaking series that would set a standard for Black popular culture for decades to come, the first interaction is between two African-American female characters, and the first scene of significant dialogue happens in the kitchen.

The interior of the kitchen is a striking light mustard yellow, with light beige toned faux wood grain counter tops, and dark wood cabinets. Differently sized colanders, a plastic pitcher, magnetic knife holder, and electric toaster decorate the counter to the right of the double sink, as does a counter top four-eye range where both a teakettle and coffee percolator rest. The entire space is color coordinated so that the walls almost match a full size refrigerator that has both ice and water dispensers. Bright, almost neon orange and yellow accents appear in fake flower arrangements decorated in a two-level counter nook. It is a preparation station familiar to the U-shape kitchen plan of the 1951 Beltsville kitchen. There is one counter set low for seated prep work, and another higher counter next to it for standing and measuring work. The measuring counter also supports three bright orange storage containers that sit next to a blender. Three chairs with yellow wire iron floral pattern backs have the consistent neon orange for cushions that encircle yet another seating area—a table in front of the refrigerator and sink. Seated at this kitchen table, drinking coffee. Diane finally makes her earlier hesitation at the door clear.

**Diane:** It is all right? I mean me coming in like this? Your boss ain't likely to come back unexpected?

**Louise:** Boss!? The day I call George boss is the day I invite Lester Maddox to a colored block party!

**Diane:** Some of the maids around here are so snooty you'd think they own the apartments themselves.

**Louise:** Really?

**Diane:** You better believe it honey. You know I ain't got time for them stuck up folks with their nose so high in the air they can't even smell their own mouthwash.

George, Diane's "boss," enters the kitchen and with his imposition comes the big reveal. Diane of course assumes he is the butler, remarking that the family they work for must be really wealthy to be able to afford a couple. In his suit, and standing in front of the sink, knives, and hanging sieves, George does his trademark lapel grab with both hands and proclaims, "we *are* the Jeffersons." Diane, in shock, spits out her coffee. The action indicates a nervous disjuncture for Diane where the material objects in the space do not connect to the bodies that consume them. The impossibility of both of their bodies being in the kitchen space at the same time is beyond the expectations for Black womanhood at the time. The maid and the misses are both Black, cordial, and making chatter in the kitchen. It is so uncomfortable that Diane rushes out of the kitchen saying "oh well, excuse me," apologizing for what, to her, is an improper presence. This impropriety lies in the fact that, in contradiction to her skin color, Louise is not a maid like Diane. Still she is different enough so that sharing a space becomes an improper act. The themes that this nervous kitchen scene sets up would carry through the episode where its many layers are revealed. And it would take an iconic image and food object of the soul food imaginary to do so.

## **I Don't Want No Cross Town Traffic In My Kitchen**

In the living room George and Louise discuss Diane:

**Louise:** Diane is my friend.

**George:** No she's not, she's a domestic.

[audience moans mostly, laughter peppers the reaction]

**Louise:** You make it sound like a disease.

**George:** The fact of life is you own an apartment in the building and she's a maid.

**Louise:** Now wait a minute buster, ain't you forgetting where you came from?

**George:** It ain't a question of where I came from, its a question of where I am. You are East Side she is West Side. I don't want no cross-town traffic in my kitchen.

**Louise:** George the Lord created everybody equal. Except in your case he quit work before he got to your head. Now just because we are moving up is no reason why we have to look down on people.

George, frustrated, tries to convince Louise that she has to start letting people look up to her now. He explains that Diane can be where Louise is, but until her husband does "right by her," that's not going to happen. "In the meantime" he says, "she is where a domestic belongs – in the kitchen."

**Louise:** And you are going to be where you belong, in the doghouse.

**George:** Look, I wear the pants in this family.

**Louise:** And when you zip them up, include your mouth.

George wants to take Louise out to lunch, but Louise does not have the time because she needs to wash the windows in preparation for a visit from George's mother. We know by Louise's impression of her mother-in-law that she is especially picky about cleanliness in her son's home. George wants Louise to hire a maid once a week to help out, but she does not want to. As Louise tries to explain this to George, the following conversation takes place:

**Louise:** George, remember when Lionel was growing up and I did domestic work twice a week to sorta help out? Remember the folks I worked for? It was all "yes ma'am, no ma'am." Now how can I ask Diane to say "yes ma'am" to me?

**George:** Because now you're the ma'am. That's the way life goes Weezy. Look, some people gotta be the ma'ams and some people gotta be the mammies.

[outrageous laughter]

**Louise:** I am not going to ask my friend to work for me and for the last time George I don't want a maid.

Continuing to feel anxious about spending the money to hire a maid, Louise talks it out with her friends, the Millers, an interracial couple (white man, Black woman), who also live in the building. They tell her that she has to abandon a life of thrift in order to truly enjoy what she has. But Louise explains she was not raised that way. Instead, she was raised to worry about money and to save it. George enters the

scene. He is a foe of the Millers (he objects to, or at least is critical of, the interracial nature of their relationship), who he finds out also have a maid. Showboating, George claims he now wants hired help five times a week as opposed to the twice a week mentioned earlier. While Louise's class anxiety comes in the form of not forgetting her roots, George's comes in the form of making sure everyone respects him because of his elevated status. Louise does not want to be alienated from her people (Diane) and George does not want those people to forget how he labors to be distinguished from them.

Ma'am/mammy separation mimics the class boundaries that separate Diane and Louise. But the signification also imagines what each woman might be doing in her respective kitchen. While ma'am goes out for lunch, mammy is left cooking it; while ma'am might look to magazines and cookbooks for new recipes, mammy knows how it cook it — just tell her what you want. Louise does not feel she has the time to go out to lunch or participate in any of the leisurely activities befitting her class position (theater, movies, shopping) while George argues he has earned those privileges for her. This commentary on gender and the labor of home making is possible through the symbolic slippage between mammy and a down-home lifestyle complete, one imagines, with mammy's foodstuffs — soul food.

Chitlins, an imagined soul food mainstay, also make an appearance along with mammy in episode 7 of the first season. The opening scene finds Louise in the kitchen counting her brand new silverware set. Because he owns his own business on the lower level of the high-rise where they live, George comes home for a coffee and "wife" break. He asks Louise if she likes her new set, but she questions the necessity of "all



this stuff.” George, of course, insists that it is an invaluable part of their life because, with 65 pieces and full service for eight, it “has everything.” “Yeah you’re right” Louise responds sarcastically as she lifts a sterling gravy bowl, “I’ve just found the chitlin boat!” The sarcasm highlights yet another incongruence that Louise sees between soul food and upper class status where an excess of materiality in service to food presentation is seen as an unnecessary aspect of the soul food’s proliferation.

The show is airing at a time when processed foods and timesaving appliances proliferate as short cuts for the often-laborious tasks of the housewife. But for Louise, it is these very everyday tasks that define and give her worth. The push toward processed foods, and the implied distinctions of class and social position between ma’am and mammy, are the same as distinctions between down-home, working-class Blackness and uppity middle-class Blackness.

Writer and culinary theorist Vertamae Grosvenor captures this tension nicely in her 1970 essay “Kitchen Crisis.” In this “rap” Grosvenor calls for Black women to protect their kitchens from the crisis of pre-processed foods. It is not the foods so much that bother Grosvenor, a preacher of the African roots in African-American foodways, but the notions of hospitality and comfort that come with it. Imagining a white man sitting on a bench and eating a pill for lunch, Grosvenor takes on the processed food revolution that has become standard place in so many homes. Instead we are encouraged to embrace guests in our kitchen spaces, offer them food whenever they come inside of it, and in return also take food whenever offered. What Grosvenor doesn’t imagine is how class can become a wedge between the somewhat idealized bonds of African diaspora. Diane, fleeing from Louise’s kitchen, visualizes this wedge.

Furthermore, George telling Louise that she is not in fact a mammy figure further reinforces the point. The discourses in the nervous kitchen where Diane and Louise engage is between the discourses of modernity and class, old Southern hospitality, middle class materiality, and Black women's labor of social reproduction.

The episode ends when "malpractice" between Diane and Louise resolve their misinterpretations of each other through commentary on Black social mobility. Louise finally manages to interview a housekeeper named Florence. A visit from Helen Miller reveals that Diane works for her. Diane becomes confused and offended that Louise would not hire her because she assumed they were good friends. Of course, Louise thought the opposite. In a self-sacrificing manner Florence agrees to share time with Diane but not before commenting on the fact that this bargaining between two Black maids is happening on behalf of two Black "ma'ams." She says to laughter and applause, "Well how come we overcame and nobody told me?"

The question frames the issue of class distinction within the Black community. Although Black middle class populations were not new to the 1975 audience, it is certainly presented in this episode as an anxiety of a post civil rights "what did we just do that for" attitude.<sup>8</sup> With this exclamation, Florence is seriously asking about The Jeffersons' and the Millers' moves upward, while simultaneously naming a tension that has driven the entire episode. The tensions of what will be lost – how will Black women recognize each other when practices of labor and time differ so radically between income status? And how will different generations of Black consumers live all

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<sup>8</sup> Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul babies: Black popular culture and the post-soul aesthetic*. (New York: Routledge, 2002).

in one understanding of rights and freedoms in relation to this labor?

The kitchen does the work of differentiation in this statement-making first episode. With the ever-present mammy, domestics, and chitlins, the show signifies the old Southern and poverty-stricken traditions that are closer to authentic Blackness than the elegant silverware and coordinated kitchenettes of a Northern ma'am. George expresses ownership of the kitchen as a space of differentiated class values while Louise's ambivalence calls her complete ownership of the space into productive tension. The kitchen, material objects, and characters play roles that accentuate a period where the imaginary brands itself soul food. Soul food needs an abject other to rely on — a figure to be hated and reworked while at the same time one that nurtures and is relevant. The Jeffersons contain this anxiety, but it is also contained in their homes. Their new class position allows them the privilege of casting off soul food traditions; at the same time the mammys and domestics, the popular shapers and feeders of African-American home life, are cast to the bottom. The Jeffersons, however, are at the top while their soul food enters symbolically as something to potentially revise for lower class representation of Black life. Thus *Good Times* marks soul food as an obstacle to fix.

### **Hypertension Kitchen**

In Miss Willa Mitchell's 1977 *Black Heritage Cookbook* we find, codified through scientific recipe, the concerns of diet and health as incommensurate with Black cooking. Following the long tradition of fundraising cookbooks like those started by the National Council of Negro Women in 1958, this text sought to raise money for "church, school, and civic organizations." A distinctive trait marks this cookbook,

however, as it is rife with recommendations for domestic activities from official federal sources. For instance, we see a page entitled “Basic Kitchen Information from The National live Stock and Meat Board and United States Department of Agriculture, Armour and Co, Wheat Flour Institute” where we are also directed to the May 1960 issue of *Ebony* for an Armour & Co. advertisement. Indeed, this book boasts a commercial and consumer quality to its pages.

Mitchell notes her appreciation for the help of organizations like the USDA and specific “home economists” for “providing this indexed, up-to-date, authentic information of basic value to our book.” This information can be seen in a table of ingredient substitutions where, for instance, you can substitute whole milk for evaporated or flour for half-cup bran, whole-wheat flour, or cornmeal. Butter can also be substituted for lard, rendered fat, or hydrogenated fat. There are timetables for cooking meats and seafood, efficient uses for leftovers, an herbs guide (whole leaf, dried, or flakes), and storage suggestions for maintaining food quality in purchased frozen foods. All in all the tips from the private kitchens of presumably Mitchell and her community take on the very public tone of prescriptive nutritional materials like those from home demonstration agents. Along with an investment in civic engagement and community health via religious institutions, this cookbook also makes clear the domestic values of efficiency, nutrition, seasonality of foods, hosting large groups, and a “balanced diet.”

The later point is emphasized again with a special note about tips for “reducing.” The text assures readers “you can reduce with safety and comfort,” with a few suggestions on diet where “excess fat will be used to

supply your energy requirements for work and play.” Readers are encouraged to consult a physician before starting on any diet and to enjoy those recipes outlined in the Black Heritage cookbook that are both “low in calories (the heat units used in measuring energy value of foods) and high in protein (the material which will protect your body while you are taking off weight.)”<sup>9</sup> The reader is taught the meaning of words important to a nutritional conceptualization of food, protein, and calorie. Mitchell’s text shows the coexistence of highly systematized and measurable effects of food, the importance of thrift and efficiency along with African-American tradition of using soul food as a commodity to benefit public good through religious institutions.<sup>10</sup> The systematic, almost textbook like organization of Mitchell’s cookbook is deeply engaging in an effort to cook cautiously as the health defects of soul food become a popular conversation of the time. Thus two nervous kitchens extend the sometimes-competing narratives of soul food at this time: the editorialized illustrations of 1968 *Ebony* and an episode of *Good Times* entitled “The Checkup.”

### **The Checkup**

The twelfth episode of season one of *Good Times* would continue the tendency to confront pressing social issues of the day by constructing a narrative around health, gender, and soul food. As a brainchild of white creator Norman Lear, the televisual

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<sup>9</sup> Willa Mitchell. *Black Heritage Cookbook*. (Evangelist Association: 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Williams-Forson *Building Houses* (p.48) notes how the gospel bird (chicken) can be within Black church communities to signify on class distinctions. This would work hand in hand with women who prepared the bird as class then becomes a marker of both cultural solidarity and “gender differentiation.”

apartment of the Florida and James Evans comes about as a spin-off of another Lear creation. Florida was the domestic for the character Maude in the eponymous television show. *Maude* would be the first of its kind to feature a strong, independent female lead. Florida Evans would eventually leave employment with Maude to become a full time mother and homemaker. Lear would prove to be the mastermind of an entire universe of Black subjectivity, having also created *The Jeffersons* and *Sanford and Son*. Interestingly, he was also the developer for *All in The Family*, a sitcom that featured an outright racist main character, Archie Bunker. Yet, Lear would use that show and the others as an innovative testing ground for interracial interactions. Lear himself noted how he worked with Black actors to write and create their own characters. But his presence as developer reminds us that television itself is a true battleground of representation. Just as in the case of white female home economists, the Henderson family, poor whites in the plantation South, and any form of Black representation on network television, the meanings of soul food are equally as contested through the experiences and desires of white audiences who are often co-makers in the discursive development of the cuisine. In this episode of *Good Times*, whiteness is signified through nutritional advice given to the Black patriarch.

If *The Jeffersons* we are meant to highlight the anxieties and tensions incurred when Black folk move on up, *Good Times* was meant to showcase the “something from nothing” imperative of ghetto life or life living on low wages, job insecurity, and within publicly owned and maintained urban housing. Thelma, Michael, and JJ are the Evans children who, along with their parents Thelma and James, occupy a modest apartment with one large main room and two back rooms. Noticeably, when contrasted with the

televisual kitchen of the Jeffersons, that of the Evans family is classed down. There is not nearly as much counter space, nor a double sink, and there is hardly any demarcation between the living area and the kitchen. The ability to mark space is also a sign of power — the power to distinguish. Much like the kitchen of Mrs. Browne in the 1942 USDA film, there is only a table and modest appliances that indicate the kitchen is a separate space in the home.

The episode begins with a jovial tone as Thelma has just gotten a call offering her a part time job at McDonalds. Florida gets to join in the news as she enters, arms full of groceries. Florida makes her way to the kitchen table and asks where Michael, the youngest of the Evans children is. The following exchange occurs in the kitchen after Florida asks where Michael is:

**Thelma:** I sent him to the library to check up on something. Mom, I think I might know what's wrong with daddy.

**Florida:** Thelma I told you there's nothing wrong with your father except he's tired and under a little emotional stress, now that's that!

**JJ:** Well, changing the subject rapidly. What did you get from the grocery store ma?

**Florida:** Well, I got some fresh collard greens, chitlins, sweet potatoes, and we gonna have hot corn bread and butter to go with it. And... pork chops!

**JJ:** Ma last time we had meat around here, Chicken Delight made a wrong delivery.

**Florida:** Calm down. It's not a picnic, I just made your father's

favorite meal to try to cheer him up a little.

James enters on cue and the rest of the family is visibly on edge because they know he will not tolerate Thelma's 7 p.m.-11 p.m. hours at McDonald's. Thelma protests citing the fact that she could have her own money to buy her own things, but James, who becomes increasingly annoyed, is not hearing that. Even when Florida tries to advocate for her daughter he yells, "I don't want to talk about nothing, and nothing means nothing!" He runs into the bedroom and slams the door in Florida's face as she tries to tell him about the surprise soul food dinner. James is very angry and Michael thinks he knows why:

**Michael:** Hey Thelma, you were right about dad. I found about six articles on the subject and dad has hypertension.

**Florida:** Wait a minute Michael, Thelma what's going on here?

**Thelma:** Mama, daddy has to get a physical check up right away.

**Michael:** That's right mama.

**Florida:** Look Dr. Welby, what makes you think your father has hypertension, or as we plain folks say, high blood pressure?

**Thelma:** He's showing all the signs Mama.

**Michael:** And it's the number one killer of black people.

**Florida:** Whatever you kids are thinking about your father's health, you're absolutely wrong. [hesitates] What does it say in that magazine?

**Michael:** (reading) "Hypertension and the importance of taking a physical examination..."



**Thelma:** High blood pressure causes heart attacks, strokes, kidney malfunction.

Still unconvinced, Florida says that although he is exhibiting the symptoms, it does not mean he has it. But the kids are relentless and explain that hypertension is the number one killer of “the black male,” and that “it’s caused by stress and frustration of ghetto life.” To the kids, Dad has all the symptoms: headache, easy to anger, and is “uptight.” Michael also finds that there is another cause of hypertension that mother should be aware of:

**Thelma:** Mama I think were going to have to cancel that dinner we have.

**Florida:** How come?

**Thelma:** Well it says right here. Soul food is one of the biggest causes of hypertension.

**Florida:** Thelma, a little while ago you told me it was caused by emotional stress. Now you say it’s soul food.

**Thelma:** Both. You see ma, it’s not really the soul food but that grease and salt we use when we cook it.

**Florida:** Thelma, one good meal ain’t gonna hurt your daddy.

Just then, James walks back into the scene and into the kitchen where he grabs a beer from the fridge and sits at the table. James tells the family that he just lost his window-washing job to an aircraft engineer. Florida, excitedly tells him that she cooked his favorite meal in hopes it would cheer him up. Indeed, a smile emerges on his face as he says, “that’s a Sunday, meal!” However, this happiness is interrupted by Thelma

who asks her dad when he last had a physical. His response, “Bout twenty years ago when I got out of the army” prompts more prodding from the family. Finally, James explodes in anger, shattering a innocent kitchen chair against the wall, refusing to believe that he’s “sick,” “nervous,” or “upset.”

The outburst from James has the whole family concerned as they eat a breakfast of oatmeal the next morning. When the phone rings, James goes to answer it, expecting his boss; instead it is the employment agency calling for Florida. James detests the idea of Florida working outside of the home, especially if it means going back to her former work as a domestic. In response to the declaration “you ain’t puttin’ in time in nobody’s kitchen!” Florida stands her ground and says, “James there’s dignity in all work. It’s not the kind of work you do that gives you dignity; it’s how well you do it. And when I was a maid (forgive me) but I was the best damn maid there was!” It is James’ pride, according to Florida, that has gotten the best of him. She further explains, his wife and children being concerned for his health and well-being is not something for him to be upset about. Florida reassures James that “everything is going to be just fine.”

Later, the entire family is around the kitchen table once again and it seems James is coming around to the idea of a physical. Although he responds to Michael saying most Blacks do not get physicals, James adds, “most black people can’t pay for physical examinations.” To this the audience responds approvingly, including an audible male “yeah.” Yet, when Florida mentions in the next line of dialogue that actually you can get a free exam at the clinic, the audience is silent.

Michael is usually positioned as the Black radical in the family and this episode proves no exception. Michael and Thelma’s insistence on a changed diet is reminiscent

of those prescriptions found in *Henry Browne, Farmer*. Indeed, the same information from a different source points to the proliferation of soul food's demonization in both public and private spheres. The answer to soul food's "problems" comes in the tensions that each narrative creates when in conflict. The notion that poor health comes from more than "salt and sugar" — it also comes from the context of ghetto life — unravels the notion that it is only content in the food that leads to poor health. However, this choice comes only when the salt and sugar are seen as exceptional variables introduced into the cuisine, but perhaps not apart of its historical roots. USDA home demonstration work and Willia Mitchell's use of scientific cooking and linear diaspora help show how racialized discourses around food are intimately aligned with discourses of being a civilized human and morally correct human being. Counter to what those in the Real Food movement would say, soul food, when seen through Diana Taylor's performative scenarios, is the "realist" food. It has shape-shifted in the face of misery and extinction, but it is time for another shift. This comes in seeing the SFI as a way to examine, with intent, the things we use to attach Blackness to food. These texts reveal how Blackness is attached through food through suffering, complicity, and dynamic choices crafted in response to the food itself being called fake, unhealthy, or junk.

The way objects like pork chops and chitlins attach themselves to Blackness has always hidden conceptualizations of how to live Black life. We must look at the larger picture and disrupt these common sense attachments and instead be mindful of how images are utilized to firmly attach Blackness to certain food. This approach reinforces the need to follow the discourse and not necessarily the food object alone. I follow the discourse and the images, the intangible made into common sense, and the common

sense made into a rubric for Blackness. These powerful attaching forces while always sincere, need to be interrogated. This deeper interrogation can happen by considering the equally powerful forces of interiority, intersubjectivity, and improvisation as fundamental to the meanings of soul food.<sup>11</sup>

In the episode's resolution, James and the family finally go see the doctor. The white middle-aged male doctor reports that although James does not have hypertension, he does have high cholesterol, which is "caused by eating too many foods cooked in grease or with a high content of animal fat." Dejected, JJ responds, "there goes my chitlins." Cottage cheese is the suggested cure because it is cheap and high in protein. The scene that follows finds the family ingesting the renovated meal of cottage cheese and black-eyed peas with James happily congratulating Florida on "one fine meal."

Black femininity is used to maintain the breadwinning status of the man, yet it is also the emotional stress of "ghetto life" that offers as few opportunities for employment for Florida as for James. The episode presents a normative division of gendered labor with a few added caveats. The Black feminine presence is both responsible for her husband's health, she shoulders the burden of changing his mind about how his own body works, and then she becomes a silent martyr for the cause of James (and the family's) health when the pride and practice of cooking that soul food meal is taken away. If James's Black masculine pride kept him from seeing a doctor, Florida's potential pride in how she feeds her family is of no concern.

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<sup>11</sup> I'm thinking here of John Jackson's idea of racial sincerity (*Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005) as mundane gestures that interpret common sense notions of racial identity.

Florida's chitlin dish especially stands out as a meal that takes experience, time, and skill to prepare. Here, Florida is sacrificing whatever joy she may have had in preparing these foods so that her family can be healthier. However, as with any prescription about health (especially with the rhetoric of nutritionism), there is no guarantee that the cottage cheese and black-eyed pea diet will work. While a change in food is seen to quell the outraged masculinity, and thereby guarantee the peace and prosperity of a household, we wonder about the other side of that public labor within the semi-private kitchen space. It's not just Florida cooking in Florida's kitchen. In this episode, her children — representing a cultural movement toward empowered Black cultural productions, her neighbors, and the white male doctor — all whisper in her ear and guide her thoughts. Yet Florida is not without recourse; there is, as Angela Davis notes, room for the cooking work of Black women to be subversive work.<sup>12</sup> One could argue that Florida's obligations to her husband's health and her homemaking echo the calls of Beulah or Grosvenor, whereby her kitchen is her world. Indeed, Florida, although reluctant at first to accept the dietary changes because they effect her shopping and preparation practices, does ultimately follow the nutritional logic out of love for her children and husband. However, it does beg the question of how these popular conversations about health and soul food were different for Black men versus Black women.

An *Ebony Magazine* editorial likewise shows that if it was hypertension and the fear of the doctor for Black men, it was unruly excess for Black women. Health, dieting, and augmenting soul food once again show that in the oscillations between

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<sup>12</sup> Davis, "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves."

James' outraged masculinity and Florida's wifely instinct, there is a unmistakably classed anxiety with soul food. This is well represented through a Black cartoon kitchen where sarcasm and wit seems to argue there is no healthy way to do soul food.

### **Mama Fat Diets**

The June 1968 issue of *Ebony Magazine*, a Black lifestyle periodical targeting the middle class consumer, contains an essay titled "How to lose Weight Without Half Trying." It is an illustrated editorial written by Era Bell Thompson and drawn by Herbert Temple. At the time of its writing Thompson was 63 years old and had been an editor at *Ebony* for 21 years. The article, part advice column, part brutally honest introspection, takes on a acerbic and a bit of a pessimistic tone toward dieting, soul food, and the trope of the voluptuous Black woman, who Thompson terms "Big Mama fat."

The article begins by articulating shifts in Black culture, shifts that the character Michael in *Good Times* would be well familiar with. Thompson, somewhat cheekily, positions her writing in a time of "social revolution" where nappy hair is in and straight or "good" hair is out. However, what sustains these apparently radical revolutions in what is both Black and socially acceptable? She says it is that "fat is ugly and fat is fatal." Not only is Thompson being honest about her struggles with age and overeating but there is also a palpable frustration between her upper class social position and her inability to lose the weight. She laments that even though she went to college, worked as a domestic, and never married she doesn't have the "fortitude" to diminish her belly size. She further relays the observations of her doctors who note that "the more educated a black becomes...the more aware she is of the dangers if obesity."

Thompson admits she has tried and failed at many attempts to “reduce” fueling the “billion dollar industry around fat the relies on people (4 out of 5) gaining that weight back.” Still, comments from co-workers and statistics about the prevalence of obesity, hypertension, and diabetes among middle aged Black women have Thompson searching for answers. Her contribution is a witty reconceptualization of soul food:

Being collard-green colored, that is not easy. After generations of living on crumbs from the Big Table, food became the black American’s status symbol. From chitterlings and fatback, he has eaten his way high up on the hog. Good food is rich food. Soul food is fried in deep grease, strongly seasoned, heavy with starches and sweets, and heaped high on the plate. Salads get short shrift and herbs play a larger role in the mystic life of the ghetto than in ghetto diets. Health stores that dare display carrot juice and yogurt, die aborning. There was no such thing as a soul food diet, but there is (see below) now.

### **Soul Food Diet**

#### Breakfast

1/2 cup pot liquor concentrate  
1 toasted cornbread stick

#### Lunch

Dandelion green sandwich  
1 cup watermelon juice

#### Dinner

Choice of:

2 steamed chicken necks

Or

1 small pig’s foot  
9 black-eyed peas cooked in clear water

Dessert:

1 slice bread soaked in diet sorghum

Her illustrated nervous kitchen above seems to almost accentuate the wit and light heartedness of her soul food diet suggestions. Indeed, the very juxtaposition of poor Black health alongside her comedic tone are striking because they are formulated to not coexist in the SFI. Florida takes on the advice of doctors and experts with very little protest. Thompson however, unravels the many discourses, common sense notions, and an intersubjective concerns that soul food is filtered through. These include perceptions of health by educated Blacks, frustration over prescriptive nutrition, and the constant back sliding of dieting. At the heart of what Thompson finds both ridiculous and imperative about changing big “Mama fat’s” diet is the participation in the material culture of dieting. In cutting through the blame game impulse for her obesity, Thompson simply points to her gluttony and laziness as the culprits. Yet she keeps trying this and that, altering her kitchen space. She writes, “I cleared the fridge of ice cream and filled the pantry with low-calorie cans, diet-drink bottles, and sugar substitutes. Then I began to shop for a juice blender, an ounce scale, calipers, and a computer to record the calories.” Capitulating to social pressures means a greater participation in consumption of consumer products—positioned here as the positive antithesis to the soul food diet. The systematic calculation of food though, cannot replace what Thompson is looking for throughout the piece—the right motivation.

Although she notes that “excuses” will not change the fact of her fatness. she cites famous black men like Duke Ellington and Satchmo who lost large amounts of weight. She writes,

All of these men, I suspect, had good motivation. Now, so have I.



Perhaps my children would be ashamed of me—if I had children.  
Maybe rotundity would interfere with my love life— if I had a lover.  
Surely, my job is not in jeopardy— if I still have a job. But, for my  
own sake, I want to reduce. Now, I have the will power. With my  
“good” hair and beautiful color, I *shall* overcome.

In light of all her attempts to lose weight it would be her neighbor,  
Audrey who intervenes. Audrey, who happens to be a nurse, knows that  
Thompson is dieting but comes over with a freshly baked chocolate cake  
anyway. Thompson hopes to keep to her calorie limit but it is doubtful.

As with the final scene in *The Jeffersons* when Florence asks  
poignantly why no one told her we have overcome, Thompson also ends her  
piece by referring to the civil rights spiritual, “We Shall Overcome.” In  
congress with other Black women, these two references to overcoming point  
to how different conceptions of freedom can be articulated through the  
contentious landscape of the nervous kitchen. Both interrupt the prosperity  
narrative assumed in the refinement of the modern kitchen as highly elusive to  
their own domestic practices. Understanding these pessimistic assertions calls  
into question how Black women navigate in and out of nutrition, health, and  
social roles of domestic production. In doing so Florida, Louise, and  
Thompson talk back to ideologies of health and soul food, inserting a female  
perspective in the era of cuisine branding. In their nervous kitchens we see  
that the discourses that transition soul food into commodity might not get  
automatically taken up but played with and reformulated.

## **Chapter 5: Mighty Matriarchs Kill it with a Skillet: Health, Class, and Performance of Soul Food’s Current Iteration**

Representations of what constitutes and challenges notions of authentic Black life have always found a home on American mainstream television. From the sitcom household to the college dorm, the spaces where Black life is represented have spread to a wide audience, constructing the viewers’ conception of what Black people do and say. Nonetheless, few TV shows have focused on representing or critiquing the culinary practices that purportedly represent “authentic” Black life. And very little attention has been given to the televisual kitchen space for the way it communicates ideologies like domesticity while constructing notions of race, class, and gender through performances of food preparation. This chapter partially fills that gap by examining the television show *My Momma Throws Down* (MMTD), which emerged in May 2012 as the first of its kind, only to be cancelled after its first season.

MMTD distinguishes itself from other cooking competition shows because its intent is to showcase the amateur cooking abilities of Black mothers. This idea presupposes a natural affiliation between Blackness, motherhood, and exceptional cooking. These are tropes that comprise the dominant catchall category for African-American culinary expression—soul food. Yet, I argue, it is through this slippage between Black motherhood, cooking ability, and soul food that we are invited to render a deeper reading into the show’s construction of an authentic Black life. MMTD represents an intriguing set of interactions in a Black televisual kitchen new to food programming.

The interstices of race, class, gender and food are deployed “discursively and formally” in televisual spaces, shaping narratives around what counts as authentic identity.<sup>1</sup> This chapter critiques how MMTD presents and challenges narratives of Black authenticity through conventions of the soul food imaginary. Of particular concern are the ways Black women, through the logics of mammy stereotypes, are figured as authentic in relation to the food they prepare and the way the food is judged. Moreover, the appearance of their personal kitchens, and the use of emblematic kitchen utensils, identify what counts and doesn’t count as soul food, and by extension, authentic Blackness. Still, I read these kitchen scenes for their nervousness and the tensions that underpin the representations.

In order to disentangle these interconnected concepts, this chapter draws from Douglas Kellner’s three-pronged approach to analyzing multiculturalism in media culture.<sup>2</sup> This includes a consideration of the show’s production, textual analysis of the meanings it produces and circulates, and exploration of audience response. Using textual analysis of select scenes while situating the emergence of MMTD on TV One, I trace how the varied meanings of mammy, health, and class circulate and within the show’s limited but noteworthy audience response.

Scenes are read backward from the images of Black women cooking to reveal the ways dominant cultural rules and expectations structure the representation of

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Murray, “Food and Television,” in *Routledge International Handbook of Food Studies*, ed. Ken Albala (London: Routledge, 2013), 188.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Kellner “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture.” *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader* (2011): 10.

Blackness.<sup>3</sup> This chapter examines just a few of the choices made in the production of the show, analyzing how they presuppose larger ideological scripts that frame what Black women's cooking practices are supposed to look like. The spectacle of the televisual kitchens begs a reading that Sarah Murray notes includes "cultural or ideological analyses" of "niche food television."<sup>4</sup> In doing so, I argue that networks like TV One make claims to Black authenticity through associations between Black women and soul food that both adhere to and diverge from dominant scripts.

### **The Show**

Courtesy of the production team that brought you non-stop gladiatorial battles such as *Iron Chef* and *Iron Chef America*, TV One's *My Momma Throws Down* (MMTD) promised similar culinary face-offs where "mighty matriarchs [had] to kill it with a skillet and dominate the opposition." Nominated by family and friends, contestants were almost all married, heterosexual Black women with large families.<sup>5</sup> Comedian and host Ralph Harris introduced the "no holds barred cooking battle" that shows the world how these Mamas' "knife skills meet their life skills."<sup>6</sup> Importantly, the show also exists in a historical context where unlike the previous chapter the focus on Black domestic life is on health and nutrition similar to prescriptions of the USDA. The head chef of Michelle Obama's Lets Move campaign appears as guest judge on the

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<sup>3</sup> Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), *xiii*, notes that television is a discursive site through which choices over the meaning(s) of Blackness are pursued.

<sup>4</sup> Murray, "Food and Television," 191.

<sup>5</sup> Heterosexuality is assumed based on the presence of a husband in the majority of episodes, though family is not always nuclear. Members of the Mamas' families could include cousins, siblings, parents, friends and children.

<sup>6</sup> "My Momma Throws Down: Squash Casserole and Green Salad," directed by Eytan Keller (2012; Atlanta, GA; TV One), Digital file.

show during a time when access to safe and affordable foods is becoming increasingly linked to income. Interestingly, by focusing on exercise and not the agricultural production of food itself, the Let's Move campaign and by some extent MMTD participate in the de-politicization of nutrition and health as it relates to race. When the show aired more people were living in urban areas and agriculture had become monoculture involving large agribusinesses like Monsanto, DuPont Pioneer, and Cargill, who own the seeds, crops, and distribution of most foods we consume. States like Alabama and Minnesota have introduced bills that recommend drug test for welfare recipients as well as prohibit the purchase of foods like steak, shrimp, and lobster. Taken together these render a food landscape where large gaps in income translate into disparities to access to foods and those without accesses are increasingly demonized. Many Black neighborhoods are "food deserts," where it is next to impossible to find fresh produce and other healthful foods. But it is not good enough just to have a well-stocked grocery store in your neighborhood. You also need knowledge of nutrition in the face of SFI's fourth convention (soul food is unhealthy). This translates to conundrum within the show pitting Black authenticity (the SFI convention) against a middle class position and access to foodstuffs that are often thought to conflict with the preparation of authentic soul food.

In the premier episode, contestant Mama Thea says that food brings happiness to her family, who "live to eat."<sup>7</sup> But she reminds us not to get into her pots, and that, while she is "fun," she is also "no nonsense." She accentuates her point by hitting a cast

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<sup>7</sup> All contestants are referred to as "Mamas" during the show by comedian and host Ralph Harris. Harris also locates himself as a son of a mother naming himself "one of Carol's boys" in the first episode. This act, while venerating the work and time that goes into mothering, also serves to limit the viewer's ability to conceive of her as anything but a mother.

iron skillet against the palm of her hand while staring menacingly into the camera, saying: “I know my way is the best way, and I have to be right all the time. And if I’m right about this time, I’m gonna win this competition!”

Mama Thea’s competitive spirit contrasts with the more subdued spirit of her challenger, Mama Marilyn, a mother of two daughters who believes her passion for cooking keeps everyone happy and full. She’s not as rambunctious as Mama Thea, but she cautions the viewer not to underestimate her, saying, “You don’t have to be loud and outright....to be competitive.” Yet, when Ralph Harris asks Marilyn if she’s going to win, she raises an eyebrow, points to Mama Thea, and jests, “Yeah, no disrespect, but keep it moving!” The introduction of each competitor is lighthearted and jovial, peppered with a palatable showing of sass and self-confidence.

In a series intended to showcase the talents of Black female cooks, not to be confused with chefs, both women move within somewhat expected stereotypes of sassiness, down home vernacular, and motherly pride. This representation of Black food is intimately tied to a scripted notion of soul food’s compulsory association with Black womanhood. These scripts rely heavily on “common sense” narratives that, while offering limited definitional value, are in fact complicated by a close reading of the way each woman articulates her food philosophies and interacts with kitchen objects; also by the standards on which she is judged. Despite the fact that the contestants use their own words, we cannot underestimate the way that introductions presuppose “sass” as simply part of how Black women cooks operate. As Williams-Forsen notes, the effort to represent authentic Black life through food on television and in film (Mamas have knife skills, Mamas are competitive, Mamas brandish knives in

kitchens) often reproduce stereotypical cultural logics, so that “authenticity” and racial stereotypes are often intricately entwined in visual representations.<sup>8</sup>

### **Common Sense and TV One**

MMTD was broadcast on a network where the desire to see the “authentic” Black life is negotiated within industry structures that index authenticity through carefully considered niche markets. Developed by Radio One and the Comcast-owned niche mini network TV One,<sup>9</sup> the show taps into the popularity of food competition shows such as *Top Chef*, *Chopped*, and *Master Chef*. Together, Comcast, Radio One and TV One illustrate the increased consolidation of smaller media producers into the paradigms of larger media conglomerates. This shift has had significant implications for depictions of social difference. Each outlet must give the appearance of diverse programming that reaches Latino, Asian, LGBT and Black minority markets, while in reality the programming is developed under the same umbrella corporation. In 2007, the then president of TV One, Jonathan Rodgers, explains how this structure affects Black TV programming saying, “When all we had was BET, they had to be everything to everybody. Why do we, the people who watch the most TV, have only two channels?”<sup>10</sup> In implying that increasing Black programming choice means increased political representation, Rodgers is affirming a long held logic that diverts attention away from the false promise of corporations. In offering a broad range of programming

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<sup>8</sup> Williams-Forsen, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*.

<sup>9</sup> Niche mini networks are a current industry standard that values flexible, frequent, and cheaply made content in contrast to the structured sitcom. This means shows can be developed and produced quickly and with greater frequency, making MMTD’s cancellation an indication of its limited viewing audience and the ruthless “survival of the fittest” standard where turnover rates for new television shows are high.

<sup>10</sup> Felicia R. Lee, “A Network for Blacks With Sense of Mission,” *The New York Times* (New York), Dec. 11, 2007.

choices, TV One bills itself as a corrective to other networks that do not seriously take on the complexity of Black life.

Yet at the same time that this channel purports to offer diversity, company promotions push to reinforce simplified scripts of Black homogeneity. For example, Catherine Pinkney, executive vice president for programming and production at TV One, said, “I have this theory that whatever show we make, however we choose to tell the story, our viewers know it’s someone who cares about their lives and their culture.”<sup>11</sup> Here Blackness is homogenous (“their lives...their culture”), drawing on a common sense notion of race that defines the way it is discussed in the public sphere. “Common sense,” according to David Lionel Smith (applying Gramsci’s analysis) is a collection of “habit, superstition, fact, hearsay, dissent, (and) prejudice” that conforms to produce a feeling about how we “know who and what is truly black.”<sup>12</sup> The relationship between race and cultural products is readily legible, so that we can easily recognize what is made for and by Black people and what is not. Beyond simply doing “a show with black people” as Pinkney notes, TV One is also relying on a common sense ideology in order to produce shows that aim “... to be honest and authentic.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lee, “A Network for Blacks With Sense of Mission,” 1.

1. <sup>12</sup> David Lionel Smith, “What is Black Culture?” in *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano. (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 180-181. Smith raises the question of what opera, normally perceived to be “white” music, becomes when a Black person sings and creates it. This makes it clear that “no one can define blackness, but we Americans embrace it as a matter of common sense.” Smith draws from Gramsci’s “Critical Notes on an Attempt at a Popular Presentation of Marxism by Bukharin,” *Antonio Gramsci, The Modern Prince and other writings* (London: International Publishers, 1959).arguing that the ideology of common sense “is not critically self-conscious, and its function is to facilitate conformity and adaptation to familiar circumstances,” evidenced by the inability to define Blackness. Sentiment comes to stand in for how we draw racial boundaries around cultural products so that “we feel we know who and what is truly black.”

<sup>13</sup> Lee, “A Network for Blacks With Sense of Mission,” 1.



While these concepts are not stable, it begs the question: how does the network's attempt to show authentic Black life translate to the food the Mamas prepare on the show?

### **My “Mammy” Throws Down**

MMTD cannot escape the ever-present “mammy” trope that lurks in the background of the American imaginary, nor can it escape the reductions that envision what Black women's kitchen work looks like, including what food is cooked, how food is cooked, how Black women should feel about the cooking, and who is doing the eating. Her pervasive presence on pancake boxes, trading cards, dolls, cookie jars, and much more means that if we want to investigate the puzzle of how Blackness and womanhood get attached to the preparation of certain food stuffs, we have to look at mammy.<sup>14</sup> However, it would be simplistic and limiting to name the contestants on MMTD as recapitulated mammies. Instead, I consider how this icon haunts the legibility of these figures. Mammy is not in the frame per se, but her defining characteristics (sass, amateur cooking ability, nurturing and joyful character) did indeed cast a shadow on this televisual kitchen, translating what we see into a popular narrative of Blackness, womanhood, food and authenticity.

The show relies upon mammy tropes, common sense, and soul food discourse to show the “authentic” Black life. But this has to be negotiated within industry

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<sup>14</sup> Mammy remains a lasting trope of Black womanhood and food, circulating widely in the American imagination. Donald Bogle, in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* (New York: Continuum Press, 1973), 1-10, traces the evolution of mammy from her 1914 emergence as a strong-willed, “big, fat, and cantankerous” Black woman to the more subdued version of Aunt Jemima who could easily navigate white spaces. Other studies of the mammy trope include: Trudier Harris, *From Mammies to Militants: Domesticity in Black American Literature* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), xi-xvi; Marilyn Kern-Foxworth and Alex Haley, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastu: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (New York: Praeger, 1994); and Maurice Marning's *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1998).

structures that commoditize authenticity, supported by common sense notions of race that circulate in a public sphere to organize social difference. Through representations of contestants' kitchen spaces, signifying battles, and an ever-present sass, the show quickly locates itself within an scripted narrative of soul food that I argue is intended to represent an authentic Black collectivity through its proximity to a *certain kind of* Black womanhood.

### **Why Mammy Is Important on MMTD**

Mammy is both a caricature to be vilified, and also an important guidepost for how to understand the complicated interconnections of nostalgia, popular media, race, consumption, and domesticity in terms of Black womanhood.

The mammy figure is a versatile and flexible symbol of Southern antebellum domestic nostalgia mythologized in the American imagination through the dolls, films, and cookie jars that bear her image.<sup>15</sup> Her pervasive presence after Reconstruction was fueled by the success of Aunt Jemima pancake mix advertisements, introducing her to a new level of mainstream commercial media presence.<sup>16</sup> Not all mammies look alike or were used for the same product, but that doesn't seem to matter as the image has such a "provocative and tenacious hold on the America psyche."<sup>17</sup> Even if the body, sass, and

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<sup>15</sup> Although I deal with representations of Black women and food that harkens back to mammy tropes, scholars like Miki McElya in *Clinging to Mammy* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2007) do the meticulous work of historically contextualizing the development of a yearning and longing for mammy in the antebellum South.

<sup>16</sup> Alice Deck reads advertisements of Aunt Jemima products from 1905-1953, arguing that the commoditization of Aunt Jemima through packaged goods like biscuit mix and flower, influenced ideologies of race, gender, and domesticity. See "Now then—who said biscuits?": The Black Woman Cook as Fetish in American Advertising, 1905–1953," in *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race*, ed. Sherrie A. Inness (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 69-93.

<sup>17</sup> Kimberly Wallace-Sanders' *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 1-3, underscores the need to push past formulations of

iconic kerchief are not there, the nature of an icon of her caliber is that, like a cheat sheet, she assists in making what we see on TV, in cookbooks, and in magazines comprehensible. However, it would simplistic to name the contestants on MMTD as versions of mammies. Instead I consider how this icon haunts the legibility of these figures, eliciting a tension between discomfort and familiarity.

In an attempt to reach niche markets, executives at TV One may have underestimated the extent to which audiences would both abhor *and* identify with these Mamas. Seeming to recognize the slip between Mamas and mammy one viewer called the show's title "ratchet," and another complained that "we [Black people] don't speak like that," while still others found it an authentic celebration of African-American culinary traditions.<sup>18</sup> The food on the show however, is one of many factors that might influence how viewers come to recognize traditional and authentic African-American cuisine.

### **The Uncommon Eggplant: Judging Black Food**

While most cooking competition shows have clear rubrics, this show is often unclear about the standard against which the cooks are measured. This is evidenced in the first episode of MMTD when both mothers are challenged to cook a predetermined main dish (squash casserole and green salad), as well as their own signature dish,

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mammy as a docile servant to understand her conflicting role as a maternal figure to both white and Black children.

<sup>18</sup>An online chat room conversation titled "Stepin Fetchit Is Real — American Black 'Entertainment' Is A Minstrel Show" on The Coli (a site geared toward men interested in sport, hip-hop, and entertainment) featured users praising the show as authentic while others disagreed, noting that "we" don't speak or act like that. Another online forum, Lisptick Alley, featured women in a conversation about how the show went overboard with segments most prominently including the signifying battle, which was deemed too obvious. The conversation mentioned outrage over the use of store bought ingredients and one user even went as far as to call the show a "fucking mess."

within a restricted amount of time, while family members, positioned behind the Mamas as they cook, look on and cheer. The dishes are then evaluated by four different judges every show. These judges ranged from food scholars, to television and film personalities, to Black celebrity chefs. Actresses Nicole Ari Parker, Belinda Williams, Vanessa Williams, and African-American foodways scholar Jessica B. Harris served as judges for the pilot episode. While judges from other cooking competition shows evaluate dishes based on presentation, technique, or creativity, the judges for MMTD are not themselves chefs. In featuring non-culinary judges, the show suggests that anyone can judge soul food, demoting food to a level of ordinariness, perhaps incapable of being evaluated. The lack of clear rubric on MMTD further underscores the suggestion that anyone can cook and/or judge soul food, that soul food cooks and judges do not bring skills set to the table.

This lack of a clear rubric leaves the judges free to articulate a cohesive, stable narrative of African American food. Asked what she is looking for in contestants' cooking, Jessica B. Harris states, "Well, I'm really looking for dishes that really talk about the rich history of African-American food and who we are and where we're from on the plate." The statement, although short, contains many assertions about what constitutes African-American food and what does not. In this view, the history of African-American food, although rich, is singular, and the past of all African-Americans is unified ("where we're from") into a neat collectivity able to be plated and consumed. Echoing Pinkney, Harris' expectations of the food denote a version of a consumable Black authenticity that can at least symbolically indicate collective origins.

The audience gains a somewhat clearer definition of what constitutes Black

food traditions when the Mamas present their signature dishes to the judges. While Mama Marilyn cooks baked macaroni and cheese with eight cheeses, green peppers, garlic and fried onions on top, Mama Thea prepares eggplant parmesan. Mama Thea tells us that in order to get her now adult sons to eat vegetables she would call the golden brown rounds of sliced eggplant “big chips.” In a showoff that could earn the winner \$500 cash, the stakes are high as the judges announce the verdict for Mama Thea. There is not enough sauce for Jessica B. Harris, while Melinda, having never eaten eggplant before, wanted a little more spice, and Vanessa really loved the crispness. Nicole also thought Mama Thea’s “chips” were delicious, saying, “I just applauded you for figuring out a way to bring uncommon vegetable to the African-American home and making it scrumptious.”<sup>19</sup>

The judge’s evaluations frame the culinary repertoire of not just Black women but also heterosexuals, mothers and, by extension, the Black community that they are imagined to feed.<sup>20</sup> Jessica B. Harris’ conservative interpretation of a unified African-American culinary tradition is quickly reaffirmed by Nicole Williams, who, in noting that the foodstuff is “uncommon” in the cuisine, is setting the definitional boundaries for what constitutes it. What ideas informed both Harris’s and Nicole’s expectations of what dishes are common to African-American culinary tradition?

The judges are not alone in positing a definition of African-American food based on terms that are scripted by the term soul food.<sup>21</sup> Popularly understood through

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<sup>19</sup> Squash Casserole and Green Salad.

<sup>20</sup> The trope of motherhood along with compulsory heterosexuality in these family narratives wholly re-inscribes normative family structures that, while important to reading the show, deserve more attention than can be given in the scope of this essay.

<sup>21</sup> Scripts refer to common language and imagery used to describe what soul food is. Scripts are not

the familiar story of enslaved Africans transforming the least of master's scraps into savory, life-sustaining dishes, soul food has an almost mythical origin story unencumbered by its historical inaccuracies. In some ways, these contradictions matter little to the term's ability to create meaning for those who rely on it.<sup>22</sup> Common sense allows these stories to circulate despite their tenuous grasp on history. This serves to reinforce the familiar – the structures through which we think about soul food, as coming from one place or land, void of vegetables or nutrition, and representing a common tradition.

These common sense narratives are discursively formed and maintained through everyday actions and choices. "Soul food," for instance, is a term developed in a specific cultural moment with different political stakes for connecting unique Black cultural products to a West African past.<sup>23</sup> In the current moment, the origin story of the term is often obfuscated by the term's dual effect of symbolizing Black collectivity and

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written in stone and can be revised or ignored. In "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," *Social Text* 27, no. 4 101 (2009): 67-94, Robin Bernstein writes, "the term script denotes not a rigid dictation of performed action but, rather, a necessary openness to resistance, interpretation, and improvisation."

<sup>22</sup> Soul food is an overwhelming ideology that structures conceptions of what Black people eat in the present. Narratives of overcoming poverty, enslavement, or destitution through magic cooking by a Black woman dominate the story of soul food, obfuscating differences based on class, region, and gender. In *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), Doris Witt surmises there are "contradictions inherent in maintaining the fiction of soul as "a sum of all that is typically or uniquely Black" in the face of black geographic and economic diversity." However these "contradictions" fail to hinder the endurance of the term and the images it conjures.

<sup>23</sup> Scripting reemphasizes the fact the soul food is discursively formed by notable Black arts figure Amiri Baraka, who coined the term in his 1966 book *Home: Social Essays* (New York, Morrow, 1966). Because Baraka's definition of what Black people ate was in response to a magazine article claiming Black people had no distinct culture, he defends the West African roots of African-American food, and in listing macaroni and cheese, fried chicken, and collard greens among dishes that typify soul food, Baraka unwittingly scripts how the food is to be referenced in relation to authentically black cultural productions. Not being able to name a distinctly African-American food would delegitimize calls toward Black Nationalism. For more on soul food see Frederick Opie's *Hog & Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) and Jessica Harris' *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011).

its popular demonization as an unhealthy style of eating. Nicole Williams places eggplant outside of the purview of soul food because common sense does not connect soul food to health. However, doing so “makes it difficult...to accept any variation on this theme,” further highlighting the tension between the show’s representation of the healthy possibilities of soul food alongside a narrow definition of a cuisine that excludes eggplant as authentically African-American.<sup>24</sup>

While the show reifies common sense scripts it can also be a terrain where it is negotiated. The point of this analysis is not to differentiate between right and wrong interpretations, but instead, to embrace a transgressive analytical approach.<sup>25</sup> This approach emphasizes the extent to which “Black popular culture is a contradictory space” full of depictions that challenge as well as reaffirm our expectations of what Black life looks like.<sup>26</sup> So while a judge might name a certain vegetable as outside the purview of Black consumption, another may frame the cooking of such vegetable as a part of the diverse and “rich” ways Black people cook and consume. Indeed, the show oscillates between reproducing common sense notions of soul food (Black people do not eat eggplant) and showing how the contestants cook dishes unique to their families. What binds these diverse foods together is the heterosexual Black female body that cooks them. Within the popular culture space the show creates, her cooking transcends these distinctions, symbolically indexing Black collectivity through Black motherhood.

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<sup>24</sup>Williams-Forson, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*, 171.

<sup>25</sup> bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 4-5.

<sup>26</sup> Stuart Hall, “What is this “Black” in Black Popular Culture?” in *The Black Studies Reader*, ed. Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, and Claudine Michel (New York: Routledge, 2004), 259.

## Cast Iron Skillets

Consider, for instance, the demonstrations of authenticity that occur in the dizzying transitions in and out of segments and mini-games within the 43-minute show.<sup>27</sup> One of the richer segments of the show includes sharing a lucky item, usually a kitchen utensil, that was supposed to bring the competitors good fortune throughout the competition. When asked what “lucky item” she brought, Mama Marilyn explained that her cast iron skillet symbolized much more than a cooking tool: “It was my momma’s skillet, and I ate a lot of fried chicken and pork chops and all that good stuff out of that skillet...she was such a great, great woman and cook.” Mama Thea also brought a cast iron skillet, and as she busily mixes ingredients she tells us the skillet belonged to her father, who used to make “so many wonderful things.” Ultimately, through these skillets, both women connect to a unified cooking tradition.

These segments exhibit the ways authentic African-American cooking traditions are scripted through Black women’s position as cultural transmitter while also reminding us that this work is never really done in isolation. Here, I am less concerned with the familial traditions these objects represent than with the choice to represent them. The explanation of the symbolic value of this object relies on the familiar script of mothers teaching daughters to cook as well as the foodstuffs (fried chicken and pork chops) that belong to the canonical definition of soul food. Still some

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<sup>27</sup> As Mamas Thea and Marilyn furiously cook against the clock, host Ralph Harris engages the family members in a game called “Know Your Mama,” where they have to guess their mother’s favorite foods. Also, in an obvious nod to *Family Feud*, “win as a team” dynamic, one member of each family gets elected to perform in an awkwardly staged signifying battle. Family members engage in the language game exchanging light-hearted barbs that usually begin with “your Mama’s cooking is so bad....” The judges then decide the winner of the battle and the contestant that family member represents receives more cooking time.



unexpected moments emerge. Indeed, the cooking wisdom of Black fathers, not a part of the mammy trope, points to a moment when we realize that Black women in the kitchen – although depicted as the sole mighty matriarchs– are never really alone. Although it is their sole lucky item, the family members, who occasionally take quick taste tests to reassure or to correct a Mama’s cooking dish, and the culinary teachers whether male or female, reveal how seemingly solitary cooking practices are indeed interconnected.

Interrogating the “common sense” at play in the show means that the visual field is never neutral, and so the staged moment is noteworthy when both Mamas bring in the same lucky item. As both women acknowledge the culinary education they received from their parents, they simultaneously articulate their skillet’s ability to bring their loved ones into the space, exhibiting the power of material objects to establish continuity of self between past memories, present existence, and future hopes.<sup>28</sup> This centuries-old cooking implement intertwines (grand)mothers as culinary teachers, fried chicken, pork chops, and remembrance of the past. As a central object in the scripts of soul food, a cast iron skillet is made to last for generations, and, as a tool made for open fire or hearth cooking, is emblematic of a tradition in African-American cooking reaching back in the imagination as far back as the 18<sup>th</sup> century plantation South. Often pictured with mammy or Aunt Jemima, the cast iron skillet and mammy are not strangers. The object also evokes Jessica B. Harris’s seminal text *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons*, where her own passionate nostalgic remembrances undergird the

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<sup>28</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi “Why We Need Things.” in *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture*, ed. Steven D. Lubar and W D Kingery (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 26.

historical foodways she recounts in a book that features a cast iron or heavy skillet in at least 35 recipes.<sup>29</sup> Harris's grandmother, too, is mentioned as an important transmitter of cooking wisdom, resonating with the contestants' connection to traditional African-American cooking and womanhood.

The relationship between object, race, gender and food in this segment is a discursive one. The cast iron skillet was not created for the Black woman cook but instead its affiliation with Southern food traditions makes it an undeniably important utensil for the cooking of soul food dishes. These taken-for-granted associations are used to bolster the show's claims toward authentic traditions that speak to the nostalgic and reductive view of soul food, while also adding an unexpected element — the presence of family and fathers “helping” these matriarchs kill it with their skillets.

The show articulates a unified soul food tradition through “Mammy”— the closest referent in American popular media for articulating Black women's relationship to food. Although the contestants do not become mammies in the process of the representation, the always-in-the-background mammy trope provides an entry through which the show asserts claims toward Black authenticity. Indeed if sass, cast irons, and menacing gestures with kitchen knives were not depicted as inherent to Black cooking, then the imagined Black audience of the show would be forced to grapple with their own desire for a constructed notion of authentic Black food through a reliance on this trope of the mammy.<sup>30</sup> In other words, the absence of a figure proximal to the mammy

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<sup>29</sup> Jessica B. Harris, *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons: Africa's Gifts to New World Cooking* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), xii.

<sup>30</sup> Indeed, when a viewer named the mere title of the show “ratchet” and “ghetto” on an online forum, they pointed to the discomfort perhaps of the closeness of mammy to mamma as something that lacks middle class Black respectability.

would unsettle the common sense she embodies and the common sense of the audience. Working backward from the image of Black women cooking illustrates how Black collectivity is imagined through the symbolic attachment of food to Black womanhood rather than understanding that the food comes with always already made meaning.<sup>31</sup>

### **Cooking Class in the Kitchen**

When contestants explain the meaning of their cooking practices in their own words and within their own kitchen spaces, performances of class intersect with discourses on health to further complicate which foods authentically attach themselves to Black identity. As Patricia Hill Collins notes, Black women are uniquely positioned to shoulder the “gender specific” representations that distinguish “poor and working class authenticity and middle class respectability.” On MMTD these differences are indicated through contestants’ investments in preparing healthy foods.<sup>32</sup>

The material objects that fill the contestants’ kitchen spaces reveal classed cooking practices. In the third episode, Mamas Natascha Sherrod and Avarita Hanson battle it out over “Crab Cakes and Green Tomatoes.” As the show transitions to a segment introducing the cooks, we see Mama Natascha in her home kitchen adding seasoning to what looks like three simmering ground beef patties. The mother of four goes on to explain that she cooks because it makes her family “feel good.” The kitchen she works in is moderately sized, with modest cabinetry (a drawer is missing on one fixture) and countertops, two microwaves, a dishwasher; and she cooks on a flat four-

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<sup>31</sup>The phrase comes from Herman S. Gray’s explanation of the Jazz Left as an alternative site for Black media production that resists the idea that the representation is always already made. Herman S. Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California, 2005), 5.

<sup>32</sup> Patricia Hill Collins. *Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender, and The New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2005). 122-123.

range surface stove using one pan and fork to transform ground meat into a juicy burger. We then see her with her arms wrapped around her young son, who is holding a plate with the burger on a white bread bun with bright red ketchup gushing out of the sides. She asks her son “Is it good?” Silenced by a mouthful of hamburger, he enthusiastically bobs his head up and down and gives the camera a thumbs up.

Her competitor, Mama Avarita Hanson, is a self-described “real life Claire Huxtable” — an attorney by day and a “grandiose” chef for her husband and two sons by night. Footage of her working in her kitchen elicits a sharp contrast to her competitor’s space. Tall mahogany cabinetry, crisp white marble counter tops, and stainless steel appliances, including a double oven and a six-burner range with a warming drawer, surround Mama Avarita as she cooks. She narrates the images, describing her interest in healthy cooking as the result of a recent battle with breast cancer. To Mama Hanson “cooking means fellowship,” but it is also a hobby to which she has dedicated much time and energy. She reminds us she’s there to win, saying, “I’ve been cooking a long time, I read cookbooks, I have had dinner parties, I do a lot of cooking. In fact, I give my caterers recipes and so I really like to win.”<sup>33</sup>

In contrast to Mama Natascha’s use of one pot, a single utensil, and seasonings to make her meal, Mama Avarita uses two different pots, including a teal Dutch oven. She makes selections casually from a waist-high pullout spice rack cabinet containing at least 20 different spices. Her family is seated at a marble island, dressed in business casual as they eat from mini dessert glassware. Although their kitchen spaces denote

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<sup>33</sup> *My Momma Throws Down: Crab Cakes and Green Tomatoes*, directed by Eytan Keller (2012; Atlanta, GA; TV One), Digital file. To be clear, Mama Avarita is a lawyer by trade but apparently when she uses caterers she is more than willing to share her recipes with them.

different class locations, they both perform an intriguing gesture to end the segment. In a kind of visual mimicry, both women slash or jab through the air with butcher knives while posturing with menacing smirks. A dubbed audio of them declaring their competitive and tough nature is overlayed on the segment. The implication is clear: we are not to mess with them.<sup>34</sup>

These kitchens are nervous both in relation to each other as well as what they signify to the audience. Their differing class positions are framed through their material lives, but as we will see, they are correlated with one's ability to understand the proper cooking techniques (baking instead of frying) for a more healthful lifestyle. In conversation with the larger audience, the images of Black women in their kitchens wielding knives and laying claim are in conversation with historical discourses that make those spaces nervous by insisting that those histories filter our understanding that they have commitments, rules, and passion for their kitchen spaces.

These images serve to punctuate the show's emphasis on the natural mothering abilities of these sassy, resilient contestants, indexing traces of mammy's no-nonsense approach to having complete dominion of her kitchen space. This makes one wonder to what extent these images rely upon what Williams-Forson calls a "historical stereotype with modern day currency."<sup>35</sup>

Healthy eating and class position constitute an added dimension that disrupts the soul food script's assumption about common Black cooking practices. Throughout

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<sup>34</sup> The act is not foreign to depictions of Black women and food as a knife wielding, kerchief donning Black woman cook was depicted in the 1930s Dixie Chicken Fryer advertisement featured on the cover of Psyche Williams-Forson's book *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*.

<sup>35</sup> Psyche Williams-Forson, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, 208.

the show, the judges negatively comment on Mama Natascha's use of boxed goods while applauding Mama Hanson's choice to bake instead of fry her green tomatoes. In this way, differences in class position are constructed to also communicate different investments in preparing healthy foods. Health here is not a universal concept but instead is a discursively formed American ideology of physiological and cultural wellness often reserved for white middle class bodies and defined against the narrative of unhealthy poor Black mothers and families.<sup>36</sup> The cultural formation in which MMTD is located contains an impassioned debate on how food procurement practices of African-Americans are perceived versus the nuances of their everyday actualization.

In the current globalized food system, financial wealth often translates into culinary capital marked by increased access to safe foods, ethnically diverse foodstuffs, and participation in high-end food service industries such as catering. Although Black class tensions around food are nothing new, class here adds another cog in the wheel of understanding how MMTD displays affinity with both a common sense notion of unified soul food. At the same time, the show disrupts that very same script by depicting class and the access that comes with it as something that can significantly differentiate the cooking practices of Mamas Avarita and Natascha.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> For more on the politics of obesity, health, nutrition and the racing of alternative food movements see Julier, Alice. "The Political Economy of Obesity: The Fat Pay All." In *Food and Culture: A Reader 2*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997), 121-140. See also Rachel Slocum, "Whiteness, Space and Alternative Food Practice," *Geoforum* 38, no. 3 (2007): 520-533; Julie Guthman, "Bringing Good Food to Others: Investigating the Subjects of Alternative Food Practice," *Cultural Geographies* 15, no. 4 (2008): 431-447; and Charlotte Biltekoff, *Eating Right in America: The Cultural Politics of Food and Health*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

<sup>37</sup> Tracy N. Poe, "The Origins of Soul Food in Black Urban Identity: Chicago, 1915-1947," *American Studies International* 37, no. 1 (1999): 4-33. These tensions between class, food, and Black authenticity are far from new. Similar tensions arose in the Chicago from 1915-1947. As Poe notes, the foodstuffs of Blacks traveling to Chicago from the South were deemed unseemly, unhealthy, and impure by already settled northern Black communities. In the age of Black respectability, Poe argues that new

The content and discourses that shape MMTD were contextualized in a specific cultural formation. Although it is important to Black people claiming historical rootedness to locate the origin of soul food in West Africa within everyday practices like cooking, archaeologist Dell Upton reminds us that tradition is forever in a shifting state of invention where cultural products are both in and outside heterogeneous communities with different social and political commitments.<sup>38</sup> In asserting both the richness of reading the televisual kitchen for the way it encompasses these tensions and for the way it articulates these negations, I argue that, while there is no right or wrong representation, there are certainly specific conditions connected to representation that cannot be separated from the cultural contexts in which they were developed. MMTD seeks to capitalize on a popular investment in a simplified story of soul food, not to “debunk” this truth but rather to point to both the tangible and intangible components that constitute food traditions. As Williams-Forson notes, “until most Black people begin to realize that what they perceive as soul food does not define the whole of Black eating habits, then who and what is being misrepresented is subject to particular subject positions.”<sup>39</sup> A show like MMTD both attends to and disrupts how we might imagine not only soul food as a discourse but also the stakes of Black women’s creative practice. Some, like anthropologist John Jackson, attend to the paradox of authenticity by disrupting hegemonic forms of identity formation and locating the definitions for the

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Black cooks coming to Chicago who “were prized in the South’s finest homes and dining rooms” prepared foods that were “not considered refined by an urban clientele.” Differences in racialized health ideologies manifested in the food shaming of lower-class Blacks, adding more incentive to assimilate to middle class food norms.

<sup>38</sup> Dell Upton, “Ethnicity, authenticity, and invented traditions,” *Historical Archaeology* 30 (1996): 1-7.

<sup>39</sup> Williams-Forson, *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs*, 198.

authentic in Black vernacular explanations, calling authenticity a “rendition of identity.”<sup>40</sup> In critiquing the visual field MMTD presents, I argue that one must work backward through the representation to understand how certain renditions get attached to foods, and, as is the case with the dominate scripts of soul food, how these renditions continue to be embodied through Black women.

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<sup>40</sup> John Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity*. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005), 17.



## Chapter 6: Conclusion

This dissertation has explored the complexities of Black material life that are necessarily gendered, racialized and understood best through the layers of expectations we perform in space. I have shown the collective representations that cohere around a common discourse of soul foods origins. In naming these representations the soul food imaginary, I invite critical investigation into understanding soul food not only as a foodway, but also as a discursive cultural product that signifies the multiple ways African-Americans relate to Blackness. I created the “soul food imaginary as a term that honors the stories and truths about what it means to be Black in America that exists above and beyond mere historical fact. By emphasizing the ability of the material records to convey these facts as well as how these facts are imagined within a cultural group that claims them. Within the imaginary, the four conventions I have identified act as boundary lines — when you come upon one, you know you are either entering into or moving beyond the confines of the imagined origin of soul food. Nervousness is used as an adjective to describe when and where these boundaries lie, but it also serves as a verb that reveals when two or more boundaries interact. These terms set up a potential middle ground where individual traditions around the Sunday table (or Wednesday or Friday morning — because not all Black people are Christians, and perhaps the Sunday table needs to be dislodged) are not being lambasted or devalued in favor of a “higher” theory of cultural imaginaries. Instead, by focusing on the common narratives around enslavement, the great migrations, health, and Black motherhood, the conventions honor the everyday and popular manifestations of soul food’s cultural

importance. I further suggest that the materiality of Black life must always be made in conversation with the uncomfortable feelings and associations of nervousness. We see nervousness most as a term that describes what happens when two competing discourses, such as the prescriptions of extension agents, compete with the realities involved in implementing those prescriptions. The project also explicates nervousness as a means by which we can understand the role of domestic space in the politics of Black representation. Here, emerging soul food discourses of the 1960s and 1970s that tie nationhood to a limited conception of the cuisine exist in tension with concerns about health. In each instance nervousness doesn't displace a convention but instead rings the alarm to its deployment or re-instantiation in a popular or archival representation of the Black woman's kitchen space. Ultimately the deployment of both terms helps us arrive at a few conclusions: images of Black women and kitchens rarely depict a neutral scene but instead reflect power structures via hegemonic ideologies expressed in the SFI.

*Nervous Kitchens* offers a creative interchange that refines the terms of Black womanhood's connection to provisioning, cooking, feeding. It considers both the inherent cooking ability and cultural obligation entangled with an imagined notion of authenticity. When the SFI is articulated through nervous kitchens, it highlights the multiple, interconnected significations of the cuisine. This opens up the signifying chain to bombard the material stuffs of soul food with countless amounts of meaning. This project suggests that the ground shared by these significations is the nature, degree, and shape of the bombardment, which always occurs in relation to Black women's kitchen spaces.

## **Future Considerations: Is Soul Food a Cuisine?**

*Nervous Kitchens* reveals that soul food's conventions may be so only because it is a Black cultural product trying to squeeze into the category of cuisine. Nervousness as a symptom of hegemonic spatial order may be present only because of the way we understand a culture's relationship to cuisine in the first place. The critical exploration of Black women's kitchen spaces in this project also highlights how overarching and inescapable the designation is. And indeed, it is a designation. Following Appadurai, Sydney Mintz, and others, I understand cuisine as something that can be imagined but must be maintained through dominant discourse.<sup>1</sup> Everyone eats, but not everyone is considered to have a cuisine. To that end, does soul food want to be a cuisine, or is there another way to create, maintain, and adjust how Black people conceive of their food lives outside of soul food? Does soul food have to be a cuisine? The dialogic instead of dialectic SFI helps us to re-formulate diaspora's relationship to cuisine.

The SFI relies on a certain conception of Black subjectivity through the African diaspora. This formulation makes Blackness via a romantic notion of enslavement (where enslavement is the "evidence" of diaspora) a knowable and stable source for soul food's authentication. Instead, a dialogic movement urges a relationship between ideal, material, and subject that is complex, cross-cultural, and always in the making. Following Michelle Wright's argument in *Becoming Black*, this dialogic movement is best seen in the Black feminist counter discourses that view Black women's kitchens as the world, ritual space, and incomplete.

The question then becomes, is it possible to imagine a diaspora through the

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<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "How To Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30, no 1(1988): 3-24.

cultural traditions of African-American food? How can there be one unified definition of soul food if it can look so different according to region, available foodstuffs, and family tradition? Attempts to trace the African diaspora within African-American foodstuffs creates an important material record of social behaviors and activities. Yet, as the project has shown, the imagined connections among material stuffs and racial unity are important but under-examined aspects of how we come to know diaspora in the everyday. Identifying that conundrum of diaspora's vastness and its individualization, Wright notes that attempts to nail this down materially as a method is bound for failure. However, Wright identifies a theoretical methodology born from two generations of theories. The first, mostly male scholars, countered 19<sup>th</sup> century British, American and French constructions of the "Black as Other to the white subject."<sup>2</sup> The second group of mostly Black feminists theorists countered, "the inherently masculinist and nationalist constructions of the Black subject produced by the first generation." Nervous kitchens seeks to disrupt the "nationalist" constructions of the SFI relating to the second group. The project understands soul food itself as a Black feminist cultural production through which Black women negotiate the terms by which they construct and negotiate personhood. Collectively these counter discourses argue for a theoretical methodology that understands Black subjectivity "as that which must be negotiated between the abstract and the real, or, in theoretical terms, between the ideal and material."<sup>3</sup>

Counter discourses on the Black female subject reveal "the fallacy on which

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<sup>2</sup> Wright, *Becoming Black*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Black nationalist discourses relies,” namely that figures like W.E.B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, and Frantz Fanon “assume the nation as the collective identity for both white and Black subjects.”

By reading Audre Lorde and Carolyn Rodgers, Wright identifies how the figure of the Black mother is used to show how all subjectivities are intersubjective in that they come into being through other subjects, not apart from them. If all subjects are intersubjective, subjectivity cannot be produced dialectically, as thetical and antithetical relations do not exist.”<sup>4</sup> A similar argument can be made about the many and sometimes contradictory ways Black women make space, and thereby their subjecthood, through a deliberate, complicity, and sometimes uncomfortable engagement with the kitchen space. Black women’s production of food is an articulation of a complex subjectivity that must speak back to multiple, and ultimately fallacious, constructions of subjecthood. Can cuisine be considered a hegemonic conception of self-similar to the white self-defining itself against the Black Other? And if so, can a dialogic conception of subjectivity be a call to not only respond to the disciplined/ing techniques of cuisine (cookbooks, James Beard Foundation, cooking institutes), but to also think about how discourses that argue for a legitimating soul food through the modifier of “cuisine” are not countering, but highlighting the assumed illegitimacy of the foodstuffs in the first place.

Is a dialogic a richer way to conceive of Black food lives outside of these constraints of convention? Can Black women’s kitchen sites, read through the nervous kitchen analytic, be a dialogic counter discourse to the hegemonic subject-making logic

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 22.

of cuisine? The dialogic notes that cuisine itself may limit how the food is formed, changed, and adapted.

*Nervous Kitchens* in many ways provides more questions than answers. The project reveals a potential site to see Black women's counter discourse by seeking to unfurl the latent expectations existing in Black women's kitchen space through federal domestic interventions and mythologized tropes. Each convention of the SFI can be thought of as a string tied from one end of the kitchen to another. Together they make a latticework of histories and contexts, and at each point where they touch they tend to unnerve or disrupt one another. Black women have and will continue to side step, run into, sever, and avoid these strings, yet all behaviors within the space are reactions to their presence. Thus the kitchen is an important but overlooked space whereby the materiality of Black life is made and re-made.

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