

Preparing Soul Food: Investigating Performativity vis-à-vis Cultural Memory

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On Zoom, I can see Mrs. Evelyn physically retelling this story. She moves toward the camera and increases extended movement of her upper body when re-enacting characters. She mimics the cooking methods used by her mother-in-law, which include shaping or “patting” the cornbread in preparation for cooking. She *acts* out the performance of cooking the oil. The inflection of her voice is sing-songy almost like a soulful ode in honor of hot water cornbread. Her head shakes to the rhythm of her own making. My mother is animated and joyous in the retelling of this story. Her voice dip and dabbles into southern dialects that appear to remind her of characters with which she once had interaction. An amalgamation of southern accents bleed into each other, even though my mother was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan and has never spent an extensive amount of time in the southern states. According to anthropologist Deborah Kapchan, “Performances are aesthetic practices – patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment – whose repetitions situate actors in time and space, structuring individual and group identities.”¹ My mother’s voice and movements are indicative of our conversation becoming a performance. I even find the cantor of my voice shifts to mirror my mother’s voice, as she explains why hot water cornbread must be enjoyed with another soul food staple, collard greens:

- Michelle: What do you think it is about the hot water cornbread that goes with the greens so well? Like what is it about the flavor of the greens and the hot water cornbread...
- Mommy: Baby, baby baby... It ain't nothin' like some greens and some cornbread that you mash up with yo' hands and you just eat it like that. You cannot have greens without cornbread. You can't have the cabbage without the cornbread. It just goes hand and hand...
- Michelle: It's like eating, um.. it's like eating... fried chicken wings without hot sauce (laughing).
- Mommy: HELLO! You know it baby! You know it! Okay?!
[LAUGHTER]
And if you ain't a hot sauce eater.. you know, you know.. let me give you one better than that. It's like having chitlins and no coleslaw!
[LAUGHTER]
- Mommy: They just go hand and hand. Okay? You know? Burger and fries.

¹ Deborah A. Kapchan, “Performance,” *Journal of American Folklore* 108, no. 430 (1995): 479.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/541657>

- Michelle: [laughs] Burger and fries. You right. Them burgers and fries.
Mommy: You gotta have them hot water cornbread with greens. And a lot of people would not eat greens without cornbread. Cause that's just a southern thing. You just gotta have it!
Michelle: It's almost like it makes the meal, you know.
Mommy: It is the meal. It is... the.. meal.
Michelle: We're does the hot water cornbread sit on the table?
Mommy: Next to the greens baby!
[ALL LAUGH]
Michelle: I love that were laughing because that's just what we do, right? Of course the hot water cornbread sit right next to the dang greens! It's ingrained as part of our culture.
Mommy: Exactly. Exactly.²

As my mother retells the traditions and rituals preparing hot water cornbread, I am reminded of my relationship to the food. As interviewer, I am an outsider to the tradition, but as her daughter, I am also inextricably tied to the tradition as well. I have a cultural relationship with the food item. Once I acknowledge these ties, I become part of the performance; sharing this legacy with the outside world.

In her book, *Culinary Tourism*, Lucy M. Long points out the efficacy of foodways as a desire in which people yearn to connect aesthetically, culturally and socially.

Food is a powerful medium through which to enter another culture. Through food we can communicate identity, relationships, ideologies, and emotions, as well as fulfill basic physical needs. Food offers us an aesthetic experience, and like other aesthetic realms – music, dance, art – it draws us into its own universe of meaning... the act of eating offers a way to share our basic humanity, while also acknowledging and negotiating our differential identities.³

As we acknowledge our humanity within the experience of foodways, aesthetic responses emerge that asks us to explore how the presence of certain foods are cultural, social and personal, and performatively formed. By examining the efficacy of popular Black American soul food cuisines such as hot water cornbread and collard greens, I will look at how these foodways inform, reveal, and influence perceptions of Black identity. This article will serve as a method for analyzing how food can contribute to memory, meaning-making, and meaningfulness among some Black American experiences.

² Mrs. Evelyn, interview by Author, February 17, 2020, personal communication.

³ Lucy M. Long, "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness" in *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy M. Long (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 45-46.

Black folk “soul food” incorporates ritualistic customs for which the body serves as an archive of memory and performance. Recipes are generally passed down orally and heavily rely on body memory to prepare cookery. With a pinch of *this* seasoning and a handful of *that* ingredient, they are deeply-rooted physical elements involved at the conception, follow-through, and execution of a dish. William C. Whit notes that during the enslavement, sensory perception in African cooking traditions was heavily relied upon. This resulted in traditions where enslaved Africans used sight, sound, touch, and taste in order to cook.⁴ Whit states “[Cookbooks] are not a particularly reliable way of documenting what average families really eat or some of the fine points of preparation [in Black homes].”⁵ Until recent years, cookbooks have been used as a method of retention and spreading the culture of soul food.⁶ In his article, *Afro-American Intellectuals and the People’s Culture*, John Brown Childs proposes a way of understanding Black cooking that is living knowledge rather than static artifact. Childs states:

The boundary established by the Black culinary arts was not merely a border. Its demarcation of something autonomous in Afro-American life arose from its integrity as a system of knowledge, a system known only to Black people. The enclosed nature of this knowledge had to do with the very means of its transmission. Recipes were part of the unwritten Negro cookbook. This unwritten book was partly an oral tradition. But, more strictly speaking, it resembled an underground form of written communication, a *samizdat*-type of sharing information from hand to hand.⁷

When my paternal grandmother taught my mother how to prepare hot water cornbread, there was an embodied “act of transfer”, to quote Diana Taylor that, in the process of the telling, transmitted important information about Black identity and performances of blackness.⁸ When my mother retells the story, I can vividly see how her identity as a Black women shifted in the moment of profound impact as she learned to cook like her mentor. She states:

I got married and my mother-in-law, Lula Bell Crenshaw [inflection of the name is exaggerated as to mimic the southern dialect of the person being referred to] was from Alabama...and she was sayin’ one day she said well she said she had cooked some greens and she said, “Ya’ll want some hot water cornbread?” Well I didn’t know what she was talkin’ about so I said, ‘Ah...well I guess...’ So she start fixin’ it. She told me she said, “Evelyn, put the grease on!” Well, I didn’t know. I said, “Put the grease on?”

⁴ William C. Whit, “Soul Food as Cultural Creation” in *African American Foodways*, ed. Anne L. Bower (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 52.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Brown Childs, “Afro-American Intellectuals and the People’s Culture” in *Journal of Theory and Society* 13, no. 1 (1984): 80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00159257>

⁸ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 2-3.

She said, “Yeah! Just go on in there and get that pan and just put some grease on there for me.” So I asked my husband and I asked him, “What she talkin’ about?” And I didn’t want to make her think I was stupid... So she said, “Just take some of that grease she got in there and pour it in the pan.” Cause she used to keep fried... whenever she fried bacon she would keep the grease from the bacon in this little can and ah... took a big ol’ spoon full and put it over in the pan... So she come in the kitchen then. She said, “Well run the hot water.” So I run the hot water – still not knowing what’s going on.. She took the cornmeal, put it in a bowl, and took a little sugar and put it in there, and a little flour... and I’m standing there looking at her. And she took an egg and she beated it up. And she took that hot water and poured it in there and made it kinda thick. She took her hand and she patted it down and put it in that fryer with that hot grease in it. I was amazed. And when it come out off the stove, she put it in some... not paper towel... cause she was from da’ country, mind you, so she used a paper bag. She tore that paper bag and put it on the dish and put that hot water cornbread on that bag so to soak up the grease. I was amazed. Cause I had never seen that before. Okay? She took and she put it on there and she said, “Okay, now ya’ll can eat.” So I tasted one. OH –MY - GOD! It was so freakin’ good. I ate... I got so shamed. I kept going back there to get me another one and another one. AH! That was better than any cake I ever had in my life, look like. It was better than anything. It was good! It was just good.⁹

My mother’s memories emerge as performative expressions. She assumes the identity of my grandmother and uses voice and movement to transmit identifying markers of my paternal grandmother’s blackness. In the moment of retelling, my mother performatively moves from my mother to Mrs. Evelyn. She takes the “stage” and is in her full power. She is called Mrs. Evelyn because in many Black communities you never call an elder by their first name. From this moment through the end of the article, my mother is Mrs. Evelyn.

Ntozake Shange’s (1998) Black American foodways memoir, *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can*, textually enacts recipes that have influenced her blackness while weaving personal, cultural, and literary histories to each dish. As she teaches the recipe, you can hear how class and generational difference in preparation inform ways that Shange sees herself in the process. Shange states:

Wash 2 large bunches of greens carefully ‘cause even to this day in winter critters can hide up in those great green leaves that’re goin’ta taste so very good. If you are an anal type, go ahead and wash them greens with suds (a small squirt of dish detergent) and warm water... Nouveau cuisine greens eaters will have much more sculpted-looking leaves than old-fashioned greens eaters who want the stalks to melt in their mouths along with the leaf of the collard. I add 1/3 cup syrup, or 2 tablespoons honey, or 3 tablespoons

⁹ Mrs. Evelyn, Personal Communication, 2020.

molasses to my greens, but you don't have to. My mother thinks I ruin my greens that way, but she can always make her own, you know.¹⁰

Shange alludes to cues of blackness that include the ease with which the vernacularism of their dialogue and remarks on class and race. Doris Witt observes how generational and communal pressures to maintain traditional methods that are performatively passed from enslavement via oral traditions and rituals are seen as disrepute; even if traditional methods (pork can contribute to high blood pressure or as in Grosvenor's claim, traditional soul food is configured around class and race perceptions), have negative implications.¹¹ In another passage, Shange shares the troubled history of Black American identities that were intrinsically tied to associations with soul food in terms of race and class constructs in her retellings of planting watermelon.

The watermelon is an integral part of our actual life as much as it is a feature of our stereotypical lives in the movies, posters, racial jokes, toys, and early American portraits of the "happy ducky." I remember being instructed not to order watermelon in restaurants or to eat watermelon in any public places because it makes white people think poorly of us. They already did that, so I don't see what the watermelon was going to precipitate.¹²

These retellings are part of a performative oral tradition that is indicative of Black identity that informs our ways of knowing culture, class, and race even today.

In 2012, Burger King removed a commercial advertisement amidst an outpour of protests against the company for racializing Black communities.¹³ The commercial featured R&B recording artist, Mary J. Blige performing an original song proclaiming her appreciation and desire for fried chicken. Bloggers and activists slammed Blige, claiming the ridiculousness and "utter buffoonery" exhibited in the commercial.

This is so beneath you. This harmonizing about chicken is a move I would associate with someone whose glory days were far behind them. And I know you may be thinking everybody, across the world, loves chicken. It's true, most people get down with the poultry; but as a Black woman, singing passionately about chicken is *not* the move! From now on, every time I listen to this up-tempo love song ["Don't Mind"], I'll associate it with crispy, chicken, three cheeses, lettuce and ranch dressing. Do you see what you've done, the ramifications of your actions? You compromised your art to sell chicken wraps

¹⁰ Ntozake Shange, *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 10.

¹¹ Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 12.

¹² Shange, *If I Can Cook/You Know God Can*, 45.

¹³ Burger King maintains that the advertising was released on the Internet prior to music licensing approvals (Rolling Stones 2012). <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/burger-king-apologizes-to-mary-j-blige-for-controversial-ad-95725/>

for the man. Sigh. You are the Queen of Hip Hop Soul, not a court jester for the so-called King of Burgers.¹⁴

The blogger's outrage is directed, not at Blige's "getting down with the poultry," (Alize 2012) but her position as a Black woman in a high-profile position using Black foodways to attract white audiences. The commonality between Blacks and their association with soul food becomes one of racial and class performance that is hidden and revealed at the discretion of the Black body politic¹⁵; in other words, *only low-class Black folks eat soul food in front of white folks*. These everyday interactive performances are not only situated in class but also emerge as social constructs in the ways that Blacks interact with popular soul food dishes. Shange mentions the social ill at play when eating watermelon in public, and the blogger blasts Blige for singing about fried chicken. It is the social interaction with white audiences that changes the performative interaction with soul food and its association with Black identity, part of which may emerge from fear of social and class rejection.

Cooking soul food is a socio-political performance. Witt argues that the late Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam in the 1960s, noted the dangers of consuming soul food for its "unclean" properties and urged followers to "purify their bodies of filth (14)."¹⁶ Much of these dietary practices were enacted to observe Islamic religious practices (since many Muslims refrain from pork, a protein commonly used in many soul food dishes). Additionally, the Nation of Islam associated certain soul foods with slavery as "the white man's poisons," despite Muhammad never actually citing the uses of soul food in any of his writings.¹⁷ According to Muhammad (1967):

Stay away from poison foods, such as pig (swine flesh). Do not eat it. Do not even touch its carcass. No swine flesh eater shall see the Hereafter; for in the Hereafter, there will be no pigs on the earth. They will be killed off. The swine was not made for Black People. It was made only for the white race. And, the white race teaches everybody to eat it, because it is a Divinely prohibited flesh; and they break all the Laws of God, because they are not supposed to obey the Laws of God. They have their own law, because they are the gods of this world."¹⁸

¹⁴ Renay Alize quoted in Marrisa Ellis's article, "Hallelujah: Mary J. Blige's 'Chicken Peddling' Ad Pulled By Burger King," *Madame Noire*, April 2, 2012. <https://madamenoire.com/153085/hallelujah-mary-j-bliges-chicken-peddling-ad-pulled-by-burger-king/>

¹⁵ Ronald L. Jackson, II, defines this as a "...scripting of the Black body for what they reveal about embedded racially xenophobic tendencies that are redistributed and recycled in mass-mediated cultural practices (Jackson II, 2006), 9.

¹⁶ Witt, *Black Hunger*, 14.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Elijah Muhammad, "How to Eat to Live. Book No. 2," (Chicago: Muhammad's Temple of Islam No. 2, 1972).

The socio-political performance of soul food as a white man's poison was apparent in his book, *How to Eat to Live, Book No. 2*.

Muhammad's denunciation of what he called the "slave diet" for his followers... intensified his condemnation of traditional southern Black dietary practices as the popularity of soul food began to peak... [The] "they" he had in mind were not the Radical Chic or Black Arts sets. *They* were African American preachers and priests. It is important to recognize that the foods associated with soul were stigmatized by Muhammad at least in part because they operated through, and perhaps even contributed to, the cultural dominance of his nemesis, Black Christianity.¹⁹

Dorris Witt asserts that Muhammad associated the Black middle class as proprietors of not only Christian patriarchal dominance but consumers of soul food as an ill to Black society.²⁰ "The upwardly mobile Black bourgeoisie (and those working-class Black "strivers" who identified up the class ladder) are attempting to purify themselves by articulating filth..."²¹ Soul food becomes a tool to comment on Black middle-class Christian foodway lifestyles.

Soul food reveals a separatist stance in terms of authenticating racial ideologies. These cultural memories are meant to be performed in the Black community. Some appropriations for the sake of health, curiosity, or inventiveness that could inform or improve soul foods are rejected in an effort to remain a unique and quintessentially traditional experience. Black actress-turned-cookbook-author Vertamae Smart Grosvenor recounts an instance in which she prepared collard greens using an untraditional method:

According to my mother, I did discredit the race when I cooked collard greens on TV... I wanted to use the opportunity to prove that Afro-American cookery was more than chitlins and pigs' feet, and at the same time I wanted to acknowledge the traditional dishes. I decided to go with a traditional "Soul Food" menu, but I'd prepare the dishes in a nontraditional way. For example, the collard greens: Instead of ham hocks, I would use a seasoning of peanut oil and bouillon cubes. I didn't even think about my mother. I had no idea of the embarrassment she would suffer. It seems that some of her church sisters saw the show. "Mrs. Smart's daughter was on coast-to-coast TV and cooked naked greens!" "Where you think she picked that up?" "Maybe she was raised like that." "It's a shame before living justice, 'naked' greens."²²

¹⁹ Ibid, 107.

²⁰ Dorris Witt, "The Intersections of Literary and Culinary Studies" in *African American Foodways*, ed. Anne L. Bower (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 107.

²¹ Ibid., 108.

²² Vertamae Smart Grosvenor, *Vibration Cooking, or the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 12.

Mrs. Evelyn points out that she forgoes ingredients that are high in cholesterol such as shortening and butter in favor of heart-healthy items but only on secular days. On special holidays, she returns to her usually routine using high fat and sodium pork products, real butter (no margarine) and other heavily laden sugary products in her traditional soul food dinners.

Michelle: And if this wasn't a special holiday, you would use butter?

Mrs. Evelyn: Straight up butter, baby! Butter!

LAUGHTER.

Michelle: Why do you think that is?

Mrs. Evelyn: It just feels like I'm going back to tradition. It just feels like I'm going back to the old family method, you know. It ain't nothin' like some real butter, baby.²³

For Mrs. Evelyn, tradition is the cornerstone of soul food cooking and to change or swap out ingredients, except in the case of product availability (i.e., substituting lard with shortening), can be perceived as changing the essence of one's Black identity. I can see the reasons why soul food has maintained a certain *je ne sais quoi* in terms of its ability to reinforce some unhealthy traditions in favor of maintaining its standing in the tradition. Many of our foods are seen by previous generations as some of the few methods of creative expressions at which Blacks have been praised. To the point, soul food is not an enemy of Black people, but rather a saving grace for some. Ntozake Shange points to realities of race in America, while revering the comfort and familiarity that soul food inspires in *From Okra to Greens*:

i remember grandma at the market pickin turnips
collards kale & mustards / to mix em up / drop a ½ stick a lean
in there wit some ham hock & oh my whatta life...
i got them greens just ready for the pot
& you know / wdnt no white man on the TV/
talking all loud n formal make no sense of the miracle
a good pot a greens on a Friday nite cd make to me
that's the reason I turn em off the TV
cant stand they gossipin abt the news/ sides they dont
never like the criminals & enemies I like anyway
that's why I like GREENS / I know how to cook em.²⁴

Shange reveals the essence of soul food as a liberating source of comfort and familiarity in the Black community. Mrs. Evelyn comments on the power of soul food to represent traditional values that strengthen Black identities:

²³ Mrs. Evelyn, Personal Communication, 2020.

²⁴ Ntozake Shange, *From okra to greens, a different love story* (St. Paul: Coffee House Press, 1984), 4-5.

Mrs. Evelyn: Oh yes. Every food has a story. Every food that you have that Blacks put together has a story. I'ma say Blacks because I don't know what White, Hispanics are doing. Because I'm not in their kitchens. So I can only speak for my own, which I know about and it's a rich story behind all of it.²⁵

Mrs. Evelyn places importance on having traditional customs and how those customs are situated in her cultural memory that become performative oral traditions. Inspired by the influences of hot water cornbread and collard greens as a younger Black woman, my mother's rich cultural memory is a performance of heart, remembrance, and soul. Despite how racialization and class dynamics influence the manner and activity at which Black folx count soul food as part of tradition Black experiences, the everyday performance of soul food continues to be a cultural icon. This is evident given the fascination and popularity of television and recipe books like Netflix's series *High on the Hog* (2021) and Bryant Terry's *Black Food* (2021).

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