From Curlers to Chainsaws
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Gas stove with pans. Photo by Justin Reid for J. Samuel Williams Jr.

Watkins Street stoves. Photo by Justin Reid for J. Samuel Williams Jr.
One of the smells I most remember from my childhood is garlic. This aroma most often meant that my mom was frying chicken for Sunday dinner. Early in the morning, I would be awakened by the tangy, pungent odor wafting through our house. Since the bedroom I shared with my sisters was close to the kitchen, the smells were usually accompanied by the incessant sounds of sizzle as the oil cooked through the juices of the chicken. A much lighter sleeper than my sisters, I would drag myself, sleepy-eyed, into the
kitchen and perch on the stool directly beside the Sears model freestanding gas stove that occupied our very small kitchen in rural Virginia. The hiss of the frying pan and the stove that provided its heat serve as vehicles of remembrance: a breeding ground for acts of agency and activism, and a bridge to cultural transmission, preservation, and sustainability—even as they sometimes also operate as symbols of ambivalence.

Telling one’s life history through food—or more directly the stove—means remembering dirt and ashes. It means remembering physical labor. As an African American woman thinking and writing about both stoves and cooking, I significantly engage the ways that my foremothers performed work on coal or wood-burning stoves as well as electric and gas ranges. I muse often about the ways that, as we cooked for others as well as ourselves, they/we had steam burn our faces and hot grease sear our skin. I think this is partly how they came to be “strong black women”—they stood over the heat, they created the heat, they were burned by the heat, and they kept on going. Not invincible, mind you, but black women (like many others) had work to do, and the stove factored centrally in that work.

Since our arrival on the shores of the Americas, African and African American women have been primarily relegated to kitchens. Well-documented, the histories of African American women and domestic work reflect a heritage of pride as much as drudgery. Since first landing in Jamestown, Virginia, African American women have cooked for, and worked in the service of, white families. We are now coming to learn more fully the work that enslaved women performed over an open hearth or a fireplace with their pots and skillets. We are learning that this work not only fed those who enslaved them but also sometimes was used to make Pepper Pot—a hot soup cooked from tripe or some other cheap meat, bird peppers, root vegetables, yams or plantains, okra, salt and other seasonings—or fried chicken and pies, coffee, and other foods that they could sell when time, permission, or the system of labor allowed them to do so. This work was stifling! Not only was this a life of toil, but also the heat from an open fireplace in summertime was taxing.
Long after enslavement, African American women were still entwined with this piece of kitchen technology, often by racist caricatures of the late nineteenth century that tied them to blackening stove polishes as well as to limited employment. It was work that tethered them to cooking and other domestic chores such as laundering and ironing—all of which involved stove heat. But it is black women’s use of the stove to cook that primarily frames my own memories. I remember the large black woman who served as our babysitter once or twice. I recall that while she was ironing clothes to help out my mother, she gnawed on a cold pork chop bone, saying it was too much work to heat the stove. I remember thinking, *I don’t want to eat a cold pork chop* because when meat fat is cold, it turns snow white. *So I’m going to have to learn to cook.*

**Do you want it on your collard greens?**

My sisters and I learned to cook from watching our parents. In his youth, my father had been a short-order cook, so we were regaled with stories of diners on the boardwalk of Atlantic City. Childhood breakfasts were filled with a variety of foods—fried potatoes, eggs cooked runny with the yolk upright (i.e., sunny-side up); fried eggs flipped over with the yolk somewhat soft and runny (i.e., over-easy); fried eggs, flipped over, with the yolk solid all the way through (i.e., over-hard, my favorite); eggs scrambled hard, scrambled easy, scrambled light; egg whites only; and the timeless cheese and/or vegetable omelet. Being from the South, it was not uncommon for us also to have grits and salmon cakes for breakfasts during the weekday. Holiday breakfasts brought fried oysters, a remembrance of my father’s past. Lunches were either provided in school or consisted of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches on the weekends when we went to dance classes. The other children in class frequented McDonald’s during the lunch breaks.

My mother’s tenure as “Mommy” spanned the gamut from staying at home when we were young (selling *World Book Encyclopedia*, Sara Coventry
Jewelry, and Avon) to working as a social worker after we grew up, all while getting her bachelor’s degree. Dinners were usually her domain—stuffed green peppers, pork chops, meatloaf, and chicken (baked, fried, barbecued, stewed), with all kinds of vegetables as sides. Initially, we ate a lot of gravies and white bread, but when my dad was diagnosed with diabetes, more salads were added to our weekly menu, including tuna, chicken, carrot and raisin (his beloved), and a variety of tossed, all with iceberg lettuce.¹ The stove still remained an important kitchen appliance designed to provide nourishment, but now it took on a different role—sustaining personal health. Long before popular edicts on healthy eating became the order of the day, my family was using the stove to transform death into life using vegetables—okra, kale, peas (fresh, frozen, and especially pearled), glazed carrots, eggplant, and always collard greens. Food was pleasure, and my parents enjoyed cooking.

In our home, the stove occupied a place in a life of constant activity. In my early years, rarely did my mother perform cooking as menial work, and my family didn’t see the stove as a site of oppression. Like many women of her era, my mother enjoyed cooking—just like many other women of her time loathed it. Despite the labor-intensive nature of cooking some foods, my mother found joy in cooking. Take, for instance, collard greens. On any given Sunday (then and now), greens could be found on our dining-room table. Long before kale became “hip” and “cool,” it would be simmering on our stove in a pot filled with collards and maybe turnip greens as well. On Saturday, we would go to Shop-Rite or Tops grocery store, and back at home as we put away the food, we were told to get out the big pot and leave the greens on the counter. My mother would sit at the kitchen table and tear the leaves away from the stems and then tear them further into small pieces. I never saw her cut the greens into the neat strips found in restaurants today. Washing any kind of greens is essential because the last thing you want is to “bite down on some grit.” That will ruin a good pot of greens anytime. Using just a smidgen of dish detergent (today we use vinegar or veggie wash), my mother would soak the greens like she was hand-washing delicates. Several rinses ensued, during which time she would also add salt to the water to
separate the grit further. When she could swipe the bottom of the sink and not feel any dirt or grime, the greens were clean.

Saturday evenings and the smell of cooking greens meant we also had to prepare for church the next day. Church prep meant putting out our clothes, shining our shoes, and getting our hair done. My mother would pull up a chair close to the stove, assembling all combs, brushes, and hair grease, preparing to straighten our hair. To the unaware, this means that a hot comb is run through the hair in order to flatten or straighten it to give it a smooth, “sleek” appearance.2 My mother would put the hot comb on the flame of the gas stove until it heated. While it was getting hot, she would part and grease our hair, most likely with Blue Magic hair grease. By then, the comb would be ready, and she would always say, “Hold your ear!” With shoulders undoubtedly hunched, and curls of steam rising from the comb, my mother would blow on it for no real apparent reason as it never actually cooled. The next thing we heard was the hiss and pop as the hot comb made contact with strands of our hair. Though our hair sizzled and the smell of burnt hair filled the air, mixing with the aroma of collard greens simmering on the stove, we knew we would leave the chair beside the stove with a bit more pep in our step!

Do you want it on your candy sweets?

These kinds of childhood recollections are a filter through which objects, such as stoves, take on meanings that fashion a collective memory and that also illustrate women's influence and power in the kitchen. Thinking about my youth enables me to recognize my own memories as a part of self-validation.3 In my African American middle-class family, the stove was central to our family's identity. For example, by cooking and making meals at home, our family was able to use our disposable income for other kinds of activities. Not only were our lunches packed for us when we went to dance class but also when we traveled.

I saw every travel opportunity as an adventure. When we were preparing
to travel to Colorado or even back home to Virginia or to wherever we would go, my mom would get out the picnic basket. She would then start the task of preparing foods that we would take with us—usually fried chicken wings, fruit, barrel juices (“juices”), chips, and some “candy sweets” such as cookies and moon pies. Southerners and African Americans, more than many others, have a taste for foods that are higher in sugar, salt, and fat ingredients. So, candy sweets are often found on the menu. In fact, as Norma Jean and Carole Darden explain in their memoir cookbook *Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine*, when traveling, sweets are considered mandatory. When Norma Jean and Carole traveled in the 1950s, their “shoebox lunch” included “fried chicken, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, deviled eggs, carrot and celery sticks, salt and pepper, chocolate layer cake, and lemonade, all neatly wrapped in wax paper, with ‘extra treats’ like fruit, nuts, raisins, and cheese.” Similarly, we ate a lot of cakes, pies, and cookies until my dad’s illness came into play. Then, like the Darden sisters, we continued to travel with small confections but leaned more toward “fruit, nuts, raisins, and cheese.”

Utensils, condiments, napkins, and so on would complete the basket. I didn’t know then that our food basket for a family of five was as much about economy as it was about racial history. On the mornings of our family trips, I would awaken early to the smells of chicken frying in the kitchen. Sometimes my mother would let me season the chicken with salt, pepper, paprika, and garlic. As I watched and helped, I was also taught. I learned more than how to season fried chicken. I also learned that we traveled with food both out of financial necessity and also for historical reasons: the lack of hospitable places to eat in the rural South. This knowledge dampened my excitement a bit. And yet my parents saw these realities as teachable moments. Since the early 1970s was not too far removed from the racial and cultural tensions surrounding the civil rights movement, travel in rural Virginia late at night could still engender discomfort. Understanding this dynamic, and its social and political implications, my parents turned this stretch of our trip into a time when we learned more about racial inequity.
In packing our food, they were negotiating the financial constraints of traveling. By explaining racism, they were exercising resistance. And when they allowed my sisters and me to assist in the process of packing our own boxes, they taught us the meanings of self-support and collective memory.\textsuperscript{6} Here, then, the kitchen stove is a tool that provides both the sweet and the bitter. On the one hand, it was the source for preparing layer cakes and pies; on the other hand, it was a platform for learning, as the foods prepared by my mom “were materials of political necessity as well as social protest.”\textsuperscript{7}

**Do you want it on your pickled beets?**

The recipe for making pickled beets is relatively simple: beets, cider vinegar, sugar, olive oil, and, if you desire, cloves. According to the *Complete Guide to Home Canning*, when cooked in a pot atop the stove, the entire process should take approximately thirty to forty-five minutes.\textsuperscript{8} The art of pickling is an age-old preservation technique that might include either fermentation to prevent spoilage or simply preserving foods in vinegar (e.g., pickles). But pickling also changes tastes and textures (e.g., cabbage into sauerkraut), mixing together the bitter (vinegar) and the sweet (sugar). The stove functions to change something that could be bitter into something tasty—such as pickled beets. As Jill Scott sings about the flavors of life, love, and the self in her song “It’s Love,” she sees fit to add pickled beets to her lexicon of Southern cuisine alongside collard greens, sweet potatoes, and black-eyed peas.

I grew up eating pickled and nonpickled beets because anemia runs in my family, and they almost immediately restore power and energy. Given the particular quality of this foodstuff, pickled beets become an interesting symbol of agency and activism: a food that synthesizes the bitter with the sweet and one that also gives strength. In my own upbringing, the development of my social consciousness stemmed directly from being the daughter of civil rights activists in my minister father and educator
mother. Cooking and mealtimes were most always used for discussions and debates on social and political awareness. As my mother came into her own gender consciousness during the 1970s, she made sure my sisters and I understood the dynamics of what it meant to be middle-class black women growing up in America, burdened with interlocking systems of oppression. In the Williams family, mealtimes were crucial in the development of collective cultural awareness: my mother procured, prepared, and presented a variety of foods, explaining when they were a part of our culinary heritage. Then my father stressed the importance of what we were eating and why. “Eat!” he would say. “There are people starving in the world!” And through the food itself as well as our discussions about it, my sisters and I would consume, absorb, and digest the physical, social, and psychological complexities of life.

From stove to table, my parents built community within our home and then moved that community outward to sites of our daily lives. In this way, my parents ensured that we took kitchen-table talk to the streets in order to effect social change, no matter how seemingly inconsequential. Little did I know that one of my first engagements with activism would come by way of food. Black women and men have often used stoves, cooking, and foods to change lives. For African Americans, food means something more than just a meal. Stoves have been deployed to contribute to local and communal economies through the cultural work of feeding and the activist work of fundraising. In today’s world of fast-food options such as KFC, Hardee’s, Wendy’s, Chinese take-out restaurants, and grocery stores that provide ready-to-eat fried chicken meals, it is easy to forget that, for many, homemade fried chicken and biscuits were, and are, a means to a profitable—and political—end.

During the summer of 1974, my sisters and I learned about the nexus of racism, sexism, and class and how these variables could be connected to dietary exchange. My parents announced that we were driving across town to purchase fried chicken dinners from a group of people raising money for the Joan Little Defense Fund. Little was accused of first-degree
murder in Beaufort County, North Carolina, for allegedly using an ice pick to stab to death a corrections officer named Clarence Alligood and then trying to escape. To get our dinners, we had to go to the predominantly black section of Buffalo, New York, known as “The Fruitbelt” (because all of the streets were named after fruit). I have a vivid recollection of feeling uncomfortable as my father explained to us the devastating thing called “rape.” And I specifically remember the soothing tones of my mother as she gently helped us (at thirteen, ten, and eight years old) to process our new knowledge of this oppressive phenomenon while we ate our chicken dinners, purchased in the name of self-defense.

**Do you want it on your rice and gravy . . . or biscuits, baby?**

Fried chicken is a Southern hallmark, a celebrated food. Because it was and is often served on Sundays, it is commonly referred to as the Gospel Bird. Celebrity chef Virginia Willis says that fried chicken, rice, and gravy make up the Holy Trinity of food:

Real fried chicken still is special and means down-home comfort for many folks like no other dish. It is the cast-iron Holy Grail of Southern comfort food. Ah, but chicken without gravy and rice is like heaven without the angels: really, really great, but not quite the ticket. Gravy is a salve to the soul. Gravy marries the chicken to the rice and is the deep brown pool for baptizing the biscuit. Chicken with rice and gravy is the comfort food holy trinity.

By the time my family returned to the South, after years of living in the North, I knew how to make rice and gravy. I was about twelve years old and had been cooking for almost four years. We learned to cook by necessity—out of the need to help out around the house. This practice continued in earnest when we moved back into the Southern home my grandparents
once occupied. A one-level, six-room house with a very small kitchen might be considered cramped by today’s standards. We almost never ate in the kitchen, which was nestled in the back of the house, with catty-cornered windows that let in lots of sunlight. Despite the welcome brightness, the kitchen was relatively tight, so we ate our meals in the dining room. Sitting against one of the kitchen windows was a small table, cushioned between a single inset cabinet on the left (crammed with dishes and spices) and a hot water heater on the right, where my mother put her weathered cookbooks. I vividly remember the presence of *A Good Heart and a Light Hand: Ruth Gaskins’ Collection of Traditional Negro Recipes*, *Mary Burgess’s Soul to Soul: A Vegetarian Soul Food Cookbook*, and a vintage version of Irma Rombauer’s classic *Joy of Cooking*. “The wood stove,” as we called it, was adjacent to the water heater. It heated our house in the winter, even as it was also used to cook pots of white beans, cast-iron corn bread, or vegetable stew made from leftovers.

But it was our gas stove, which sat beside the wood stove, that primarily fed the family. Almost thirty years after my mother started using the gas stove, she still remembers how much she enjoyed cooking on it, seeing us relish the foods she prepared. As she says, food was “fresher, tastier, and had more substance to it” back then. “Your dad always had a story to tell and everyone always had input . . . It’s not like now where everyone jumps up from the table after they eat.”12 It was innocuous, really, just a plain white stove, but it was the bedrock for so much more: the stove was the means of bringing the farm to the table and of extending our family time together and thus creating strong family bonds.

Wedged in between elaborate home-cooked breakfasts and school-provided lunches, our slow-cooked dinners would line the stove—string beans with chicken or meatloaf. Then there were the nights of liver and onions, when my dad would pour what seemed like a vat of flour on the table in order to give the liver a good coating. We didn’t have many big meals because schedules didn’t allow for such; leftovers might last a couple of days because of our activities—band practice, basketball practice, and so
on. The heaviest meal of the week was on Sunday, when dinner was often collard greens, fried chicken, and potato salad.

Fried chicken on Sunday has been part of a long-standing tradition among many African Americans. Spending most of the day in church (from sunup to sundown), many congregants did not have the time to travel home and back to make it for the late evening service. Because in many rural churches folks had no access to kitchen facilities, women would prepare the Sunday meals at home, and during a break in the service, they would spread their food on blankets and eat. The bird is critical to church food, both out of habit and because it “traveled well.” And because the pastor is considered to hold the position of highest esteem and cultural power in the church—and often the community—it remains a privilege to serve him or her the best pieces of chicken, usually the breast.

If Sundays were marked by serving chicken, summers were filled with fresh vegetables from someone's garden and my sister’s runt tomatoes grown for 4-H competitions. Often, the latter made their way to our white corner stove, where they were stewed, fried, or boiled. We would wake on summer mornings to the smell of slab bacon and homemade biscuits made from flour, baking powder, salt, and shortening (we used Crisco). My mom would roll out the flour, cut the biscuits out with a glass or a jar—just like her mom used—and then she would prick them. I don’t know why she did this: my mother was never sure if it was for decoration or to let out the air.

Then there were the apples that we fried for breakfast, acquired from Ms. Edna’s tree next door, always by invitation. Sometimes we were awakened just so that we could go next door to get the apples that had fallen off the tree. I gathered sour apples, sometimes with smudges, into a bag, or, if my sisters came along, we loaded them into our arms. Sometimes we just wiped them on our clothes and took a bite. But if they were for breakfast, we washed them off with water and lemon juice. Then we sliced them and put them in the frying pan that had been heating with butter. I listened for the sizzle. The loud hiss and crackle let me know that apples were starting
to cook. As the sounds of frying died down, I would know it was time to add some water to keep them from sticking to the bottom of the pan. As the water met the heat, the apples would steam and brown. I watched my mom add cinnamon and maybe a dash of sugar, and let it “stew down” until there was just the slightest hint of crisp.

I watched, I learned, and then, eventually, I improvised. It was not innate—none of it was innate. My mom learned to cook from her mother, as each one of my sisters and I learned from our own mother. My mother says that the first thing my grandmother taught her to cook were meatballs. Every now and then, my grandmother would let my mother make the meatballs herself, and then my mom moved on to pies. As my mother says, back then “You sat and watched your parents cook” (just as we watched her). She elaborates:

You learned by trial and error. And then you were around your aunts and others. It’s not like today where young people don’t go around older people. People cooked back then. You watched people cook and prepare for revivals and holidays—Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter—people cooked! If you were old enough, you participated; you just didn’t watch. You peeled potatoes, peaches, [and] pears for the summers to can and all that kind of stuff. You didn’t just sit and watch. When they taught you, they would start you off by saying, “Here, do this.” You say, “What do I do?” And they showed you how. “You do it this way, and you learn how to do it this way.” Then you said, “What do you do next?” My mother, my aunt, my grandmother, around my mother’s friends, Daut [my cousin], that’s how we learned to cook.13

Many black women have a strong relationship to cooking. During enslavement, black women dominated the cooking on many plantations. They have been widely credited with lining “Southern groaning boards” with all kinds of marvelous sweet and savory dishes—from pickled beets to rice and gravy. But centrally important, yet often ignored, is not only...
the technical labor that was employed by African and African American women, or the actual foods they cooked, but also the tremendous amount of time spent trying to “get it right.” Cooking is rarely an intrinsic or instinctive process; assuming so belies the levels of skill involved and time taken to perfect one’s talents. Many African American women burned foods until they learned how to cook them—the exact temperatures needed to brown sauces, the right spices to combine in order to season correctly, and so on.

Recognizing and acknowledging this history frees black women from an oppressive and repressive bind and allows us to stop “clinging to mammy,” a stereotypical image that continues to function as a trope in the collective American imagination. Though countless studies have deconstructed the myth of African American women as obese, large-breasted, asexual, and aged mammies who happily perform their domestic duties with broad grins and subservient attitudes, this cultural idea persists.14 As my mother reflects,

And then so many black women like my mother, aunts, and their friends worked for white families and learned how to do things a certain way and they brought that home. [White women] helped them improve their skills. I never forget how your cousin Daut used to set the breakfast table every day at her own house—coffee, juice, cream, sugar, and the proper utensils on the table. I have gone over there many a day and said, who’s coming for breakfast? But no one was coming; it was just her and [her husband], but it had become a part of her and that’s what she did.

Setting the table the way a white woman taught my cousin Daut is more than a revealing anecdote about dining rituals; it is also a metaphor for the politics and the subtleties of power that are embedded in African American cooking practices: the ways that food and foodways can be read as an indicator of social and political meaning. As anthropologist Jeremy MacClancy argues, “Food is power. . . . Those who regulate its production, distribution and consumption can control others.”15 In other words, power
related to food circulation is a process of negotiation and interactions with others in order to change the conditions of one’s culture and surroundings. For this reason, power cannot be viewed as solely structural. It is multifaceted; just like in a multicourse meal, power has many courses, with rules governing the presentation of each new dish. By studying food, food processes, and objects like stoves, we gain a better understanding of the multiple uses and illustrations of power, much of which lies underneath the layers of the meal preparation process. It is there as well that a kind of ambivalence lurks, the kind that governs the ways in which many other women and I approach the stove.

*Feed it to me, feed it to me . . . It’s love . . .*

It is said that food is love. It is also said that the way to a person’s—mostly a man’s—heart is through his stomach. So what happens when the act of feeding and/or the food you cook disrupts his or your child’s stomach? What results when you doubt yourself in the kitchen—or worse, when as an African American woman, you hate to cook, belying the legacy? My mother puts it this way: “These kids today—some of them want to learn to cook because they see it on TV. It looks fun, and it’s exotic. We learned to cook because that’s what you did to help out. . . . You knew you had to eat. . . . People passed traits and skills from one generation to another, just like cleaning and washing clothes.” In reply to this comment, I say to my mother, “Yes, but cooking is different. I think there is something different about knowing or not knowing how to cook. The act of feeding is fraught with so much tension.”

Literally and figuratively, there is a level of skill that must be employed in the kitchen to keep from burning yourself. The same danger does not accompany cleaning and washing clothes. There are reasons that many women fear the stove. For one, food is so heavily tied to emotion, taste, praise, reprisal, and rebuke that it engenders a lot of anxiety. I have heard
countless women say, “My mother wasn’t a good cook,” so they themselves didn’t learn to cook, or they feel that they can’t cook. As my mother points out, “The reality is [such women] probably can [cook], but maybe not as well as someone else.” Cooking and stoves are powerful symbols of love and familial identity because, in part, so many people attribute their own cooking skill to having had a “good mother” or a “bad mother,” depending on how well their mothers cooked.

Food also has the power to shape time, place, and social interaction and most often this begins at the stove. For this reason, among others, the thought of using a stove—any kind of stove—stirs a lot of emotion. Recently, as my best friend watched me butter cornbread, she said, “No wonder my food always looks so ashy.” With this lament, she implied that in her attempts at health consciousness, she sacrifices taste. Interestingly, she will most often eat anything that I cook, as she knows I am equally as health conscious. Perhaps one of the differences between us is that I’ve been cooking a long time, and I learned how to gauge the use of oils and butters without measuring. Like Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor, I tend to cook by vibration. In her landmark autoethnographic cookbook, she writes: “And when I cook, I never measure or weigh anything. I cook by vibration. I can tell by the look and smell of it. . . . Different strokes for different folks. Do your thing your way.”

Cooking by vibration is also why I prefer a gas stove. It is difficult for me to calibrate temperature sometimes using an electric eye. I can cook on it all right, but given the choice, I want to see the flame. For me, it goes along with the sounds of cooking. The higher the flame, of course, the faster food cooks. The lower it is, the more food simmers. Seeing the flame lets me know how well the food is cooking. Adjusting the flame on the stove enables my food to have a particular look and a particular taste. Knowing and being true to your own taste is important anyhow but especially when you are trying to cook cross-culturally.

When I was married, I used to be told, “That is too much oil.” There was a particular consternation on my part that followed such admonitions, as
I was supremely confident that I knew what I was doing. As detailed elsewhere cross-cultural food differences and preferences can be challenging in relationships, even when you marry within a racial and/or ethnic group. I argue, “Food is instrumental in highlighting the ways that situated daily practices can reveal processes of identity formation and place making. Recognizing that food has a unifying power in helping us to construct our sense of belonging and nationality is not a new concept unto itself. Neither is it novel to note that homes and kitchens are more than sites of consumption. They are, in fact, spaces where food and power intersect in the performance of identity negotiation, formation, and reformation.” In our marriage, the stove often served as a barrier—literally and figuratively. It was difficult for us to use the kitchen space or its appliances at the same time. Having worked for some time in an industrial kitchen, my husband was used to each person having a large station in which to work. Similar to my father who needed to flour the entire kitchen table to coat the liver before frying, my husband needed “space” in which to create. I, on the other hand, could produce a meal in minutes pulling together whatever I had planned without needing a lot of terrain.

Though probably very much unintentional, the battle over space became a besmirching of how I was producing “family.” Marjorie DeVault, who has written widely on this argument in Feeding the Family, argues, “Part of the intention behind producing the meal is to produce ‘home’ and ‘family.’” The inability, then, to produce family or home in a way that was culinarily satisfying to everyone was resolved by the implementation of a kinship or “othermothering” network. Because our intercultural black household (like other families) was complex in its makeup, to produce “home” we engaged our stove in a “gender, race, and ethnic negotiation, compromise, and accommodation.” To accommodate my husband’s taste for a certain kind of cooking, I relinquished the stove:

On multiple occasions I would frequent [my sister-in-law’s ethnic market] for “kitchen-talk”—casual or serious family and business-related
conversations—or to purchase items needed at home. Often, they would
dole out motherly advice to me about “setting up house.” . . . [One
time] one of my sisters-in-law mentioned in passing that prior to our
going married, they would sometimes cook for their younger brother,
stockpiling several of his favorite meals. It could have been missed, this
subtle request/invitation to continue occasionally this practice. And
while I recognized that such an arrangement could be loaded with all
kinds of gender and family issues, not to mention power relations, the
context and presentation of the request was understated enough that I
agreed to its continuance. At that moment, a deal was struck that needed
no additional clarification. Like seasoning without measuring, it was
decided upon that my home, literally and figuratively, would be open to
to a certain amount of outside influence—culinary influence. . . . As spices
and smells of foreign and homelands intermingled, we crisscrossed
continents and once again married, not just to families but also food
traditions. Consenting to the food arrangement proffered by the sisters
made it clear that I was willing to engage in an act of culinary plurality.
It was a befitting space—the ethnic market—in which to gel such an
agreement because food would serve as an adhesive for binding our new
family relationship.20

By letting go of the stove and my control over the gender norm that
compelled me to cook for my husband, I engaged in a conscious strategy
that enabled us to produce our own version of home and family. My in-
laws participated in varying traditional gender roles in part because they
recognized my cultural status as a university professor.

Here, the stove is symbolic of the myriad implications wrought by race,
gender, class, region, and nation. Perhaps more importantly, it expands
the understanding of the relationships that black women (and men) have
to food, cooking, cookery, and kitchens. This need to enlarge society’s
understanding is what fuels another ambivalence I have toward stoves—I
tend not to bring actual cooking and/or food into my courses on gender,
food, and identity. It is my express purpose to challenge students to see beyond food as intimacy and communion—a view many already tend to hold—in order to see food as tension and as undergirded by layers of power. More importantly, I need them to see me as a professor: a woman in authority, not as a black woman always already associated with cooking. I do not begrudge my colleagues who introduce actual foodstuffs in the classroom—not at all. But because I believe it is an expectation of me and of a food course in the humanities more generally, I always emphasize to my students, “We will not be eating in this class as a part of the course.”

African American women have always had complicated relationships with stoves. This is due as much to our history in domestic service as to the numerous myths surrounding our ability to cook. Contrary to these fables, I have vivid memories of learning how to make gravies, frying chicken and cabbage, and even boiling corn, by listening to and watching my father and mother. These memories have served me well through the years as I have learned that the stove has held a role of central importance in the lives of many black women, particularly as a source for home provisioning, entrepreneurship, community engagement, and social activism.

My love of cooking by “vibration” and my social class have enabled me to experiment with different herbs and spices. Reay Tannahill reminds us that “food flexibility (as a matter of choice) is usually a characteristic of affluent societies. The nearness of hunger breeds conservatism. Only the well-fed can afford to try something new because only they can afford to leave it on the plate if they dislike it.” My socioeconomic status allows me to have more time and freedom to try out different ingredients, if I choose, and to acquire new knowledge and skills in the kitchen. I have also learned that for many of my African American sisters—historically and today—the stove was and is viewed as an anathema. And as I struggle to cook for my family at the end of a long, busy day, I find sometimes that I, too, look upon this object with loathing, and I wonder, am I losing my love for the stove?

I hope not. I have many more meals to cook and words to share about
the central importance of this material object in the lives of African American people—as well as in my own life.

NOTES

The verse in the epigraph and referred to throughout this chapter come from Jill Scott’s song “It’s Love” (Who is Jill Scott?, Words and Sounds, Vol. 1, Hidden Beach Recordings, 2000).

1. I will never forget the first time we had a tossed salad with hot dogs in it. In the 1970s, who knew any better? We thought it was original and tasty.

2. Hair straightening is an age-old technique that dates back to early societies. As late as the nineteenth century, hot combs were available in Sears catalogs for white and African American women. Early on, when African American women wanted to press their hair, they would use an actual iron. Generally, hair straightening by black women is seen as a desire to conform to white standards of beauty. However, hair performs a number of different cultural and personal articulations for women, so there are a number of reasons why, as children, my sisters and I liked to get our hair pressed. See Noliwe Rooks, Hair Raising: Beauty, Culture, and African American Women (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).


7. Ibid.


9. Williams-Forson, Building Houses out of Chicken Legs, 133.

10. Little was placed on trial while serving an initial sentence for a charge of larceny as well as breaking and entering. So important was the trial to women’s and civil rights groups that it became a cause célèbre requiring several changes in venue and a heavily
guarded courtroom. Major fundraising efforts took place to secure defense money, involving the Southern Poverty Law Center, the Black Panther Party, and numerous grassroots organizations. After various pieces of evidence verified Little’s story, and her testimony was substantiated by a lie-detector test, the charges were reduced to manslaughter. Citing overall lack of evidence, a jury acquitted Little. This case set a precedent for rape victims who wanted to argue self-defense. It also set in motion numerous investigations of women being abused in North Carolina jails. For more complete details on this story, see Wayne King’s coverage for the New York Times from July 1975 to October of that same year.


12. Lyllie Williams, interviews by the author, 28 April 2012; 1 February 2014. Note that all quotations from my mother come from these two interviews.

13. Ibid.


15. Jeremy MacClancy, Consuming Culture: Why You Eat What You Eat (New York: Henry Holt, 1993), 2. Importantly, cultural critics Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen further refine this definition by explaining that power is not something “groups or individuals have; rather, it is a social relationship between groups that determines access to, use of and control over the basic material and ideological resources in society.” See Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen, eds., Women and the Politics of Empowerment (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 4.


