Low on the Hog: Rejections and Medicalizations of Soul Food in the 1970s-2000s

Introduction

In October of 2018, NPR posted an article titled, “Southern Diet Blamed for High Rates of Hypertension Among Black Americans.” Author Maanvi Singh discussed the results of a recent study conducted by a team of white medical researchers that claimed that racial disparities in rates of hypertension are attributable to a Southern food diet.¹ Unsurprisingly, people on the internet pounced on this article, either commenting on its perceived “obviousness” or critiquing the study for spreading misinformation about Southern food and soul food. Some of the arguments about the article were over terminology—people pointed out that Southern food is a regional, not a racial, culinary categorization, and that the study conflated soul food with Southern food. Most arguments against the article attacked the study’s main point, calling out the conflation of a food culture with decades of policies meant to limit access to healthy food.²

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² Michael W. Twitty, “As If.... Y’all Don’t Want to Talk Abt the Middle Passage and Hypertension or the Diff between Celebration Food and Everyday Soul. You Just Want to Make Black Food into a Pathology and Not Deal with Racism or the Need to Embrace African Food. So Fuck Off”, Tweet, @KosherSoul (blog), October 2, 2018, https://twitter.com/KosherSoul/status/1047290652827049985. Includes replies to original tweet.
Both the arguments made in the study itself and the arguments made by its critics are not new. Critiques of soul food have existed for as long as the concept of “soul food.” Chefs, politicians, and medical professionals alike have alternately offered critiques and celebrations of the distinctive food culture. In this paper, I define “soul food” as an inherently political food culture borne out of the dual culinary legacies of the African diaspora and the Great Migration. Chefs and citizens often conflate soul food with Southern food; however, soul food is a racially-specific term that exists regardless of regional geographic boundaries. While the term “soul food” was only coined in the mid-1960s, I use it in this paper to refer to a conception of an African American food culture that predates its denomination.³ If Southern food serves as an apolitical mother term for food that originated in the southeastern United States, soul food is a term that recognizes the cultural and historical weight attached to a food culture borne out of forced enslavement.

Despite the existence of a legible definition for soul food, the precise meaning and value of soul food have long been contested both within and outside of black America. I am primarily concerned with this struggle for meaning as it relates to the medicalization of American food and diet beginning in the 1970s and continuing today. In this paper, I focus on the ongoing process of constructing the meaning of soul food within a culture that enables and upholds these medical myths. I argue that discussions of health and medicine surrounding soul food forced a shift in the constructions of soul food, creating a multiplicity of responses in the black community that constructed, reified, and resisted the conflation of culture and health.

³ Some of the individuals and groups I discuss would not have used or understood the term “soul food,” however, I believe that it is an apt descriptor of black food culture and foodways in all 20th century temporal contexts.
Contemporary critics often consider sustained critiques of soul food from the medical industry a relatively recent event in medical and soul food history. However, I argue that the process of constructing soul food as inherently unhealthy predates the creation of the term “soul food.” In this paper, I term the construction of soul food through medical language an example of the medicalization of food, where medical language and structures consume cultural practices surrounding the consumption and production of food. This is a value-neutral term distinct from the pathologizing of food, which denotes something as inherently unhealthy. I explore both of these concepts in this paper, and I locate the origins of the medicalization of soul food in the racialized depictions of the mammy figure in the early 20th century, and extend my discussion of medicalization into the 1960s, 1970s, and 1990s.

Mammy, Soul Food, and the Construction of Medicalization

White mainstream food media has often sought to control and critique culinary expressions by marginalized groups. These critiques have shifted to focus on objective measures, such as scientific and medical inferiority, aligning with a preoccupation of health and diet through which people “in the United States have been constructed since the early 1970s.”4 Prior to the 1970s, while mainstream culture focused less explicitly on diet and nutrition, societal rules and expectations still heavily regulated black bodies, especially black women’s bodies. Tony Tipton Martin defines the mammy construction as part of the “Jemima Code… an arrangement of words and images synchronized to classify the character and life’s work of our nation’s black chefs as insignificant.”5 Under this code, a black woman was only acceptable to mainstream

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white audiences when she was “heavyset, dark-skinned, scarf wearing, and able to cook everything that comes her way—from scratch.” Corporations articulated the mammy figure in advertisements for products such as Aunt Jemima’s pancake mix, where culinary legitimacy and expertise was constructed through “Aunt Jemima,” a classic mammy figure who held appeal in part because of her perceived lack of intellect and her asexuality. The proper role of black women became intrinsically tied to a model of American history in which “black women did much of the cooking.”

Mammy’s weight was integral to her appeal to white audiences. While contemporaneous advertising throughout the early 20th century depicted white women as necessarily thin, black women could only exist in white publications when overweight and sexually undesirable. Editions of Ladies Home Journal throughout the 1920s show a trend towards thin models, indicating the conditions under which black women were allowed to exist in white media. It would be ahistorical to read contemporary discomfort and distaste with fatness onto materials in the past, but it is noteworthy that visually appropriate depictions of black and white women were so radically different. The mammy figure inextricably linked weight, food, and race as part of a project that removed black women’s agency within the public sphere. When corporations presented black women exclusively as overweight mammy figures, black women were denied independence outside of a model that positioned them as cooks and caretakers. I view this connection as the precursor for the medicalization of soul food, not because the discussions had

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9. While the cultural obsession with thinness became prominent in the post war period, early advertisements still depicted white women with slim figures.
10. See copies of from Ladies Home Journal, 1920-25
yet been imbued with direct discussions of health, but because it naturalized the connections between being overweight (later pathologized as obesity) and the eating habits of black Americans (later reclaimed and redefined as soul food).

If the mammy figure denied black women their culinary importance and agency while still associating blackness with food, the construction of the term “soul food” helped to recentralize the community in their culinary heritage. Soul food was “a shorthand for black dignity and pride,” an expression of community resilience and sovereignty that gave black Americans throughout the country claim over part of America’s culinary heritage. Soul food was a reclamation of the mammy image, a community-constructed symbol of self-sustainability that rejected racist constructions of black food. As Adrian Miller writes, soul food merged “traditional southern food with… racial politics,” a slightly reductionist but nevertheless useful way of viewing the impacts of soul food within the black community.

Soul food originated as a site where black Americans could more authentically construct the complexities and realities of African American foodways. The Black Panther free breakfast programs mobilized black women’s labor in cooking soul food to serve disenfranchised youth members of the community, demonstrating the potency of soul food within the black power movement. Many contemporary food writers and commentators trying to define the differences between Southern and soul food often rely on pithy generalizations where soul food is synonymous with love or, as Leah Chase declared, where soul food “just tastes better [than Southern food].” These statements represent an enduring emotional—not just historical—

13 “Soul food; grits, eggs, bread, and meat is where it’s at which it comes to properly preparing our children for education” from “Breakfast for School Children,” The Black Panther, January 4, 1969, 16.
connection with the food: soul food was made “with ‘soul’ people in mind.”\textsuperscript{15} Soul food was not a perfect or universalizing concept. However, it did serve as a way to build community ties and solidarity opposite the primary presentations of African American food and foodways. If white America constructed mammy as an image of care and motherhood, soul food actualized that claim. Rather than idealizing care for another’s children, soul food idealized care for one’s own community. For many black Americans writing both in the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century and today, soul food is personal. Soul food is intimately tied to memories left behind by mothers and grandmothers; it is a living legacy that audiences continue to redefine. Defining and depicting soul food as a cultural force that originally existed absent any medicalizing language is key to unpacking the implications of the medical discussions within and outside the black community that plagued soul food from the 1970s onwards.

One of the primary ways African Americans constructed and defined soul food was through cookbooks authored and released during the 1960s. Many of these cookbooks read as love letters to soul food and an ancestral past which offer personal insights into the early meanings and constructions of soul food. Bob Jeffries writes that “soul food cooking is an example of how really good southern Negro cooks cooked with what they had available to them.” For Jeffries, the reemergence and rediscovery of soul food is “a good thing.”\textsuperscript{16} Inez Kaiser writes, “there is a spirit connected with the following recipes” that “have a certain feeling of nostalgia, pleasure, and anticipation.”\textsuperscript{17} Pamela Strobel, better known as Princess Pamela, defines soul food as “culinary genius applied to overlooked odds and ends and to leftovers. Eating, still close enough to honest-to-god hunger, to impart to food a savor deep enough for joy

\textsuperscript{17} Kaiser, \textit{Soul Cookery Book}, 1.
and solace.” Each of these definitions offers a personal understanding of a historic past and present, constructing soul food through marginalization and, ultimately, resilience. Soul food was everything mammy could never be, as it allowed people to define food on their own terms.

These cookbooks also fundamentally changed the aesthetics of black food that had existed prior to the terming of soul food. By centralizing the food, not caricatures of the people, these depictions erased the connection between black food and weight that was visually present in person-centered depictions of food. Importantly, even as the meaning and proper place of soul food was contested, during the 1960s and early 1970s it was primarily contested within the community. I discuss this more later as I consider the inter-community rejections of soul food during the 1970s.

**Medical Malpractice: Denying Black Americans Medical Care**

The origination of a termed and legible idea of soul food did not erase the decades of associations between African American foodways, health, weight, and blackness. The mammy construction, even after the intercommunity shift to discussions of soul food, continued to impact the accessibility and viability of African Americans as medical subjects, ultimately demonstrating the need for community-based responses to health challenges experienced by the black community. Mammy’s enduring legacy and heavyset figure helped shape a medical landscape in which black people were underdiagnosed and undertreated, both for anorexia and for other health problems relating to weight, including diabetes and hypertension. Doris Witt discusses the implications of this normalization of fatness and blackness in the 1970s. If the mammy figure “entailed a naturalization and/or biologization of black female cooking skills,

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these discourses of eating disorders have relied on a naturalization of black female appetite.”

Fatness was a biological necessity for black women. The absence of black women in medical dialogues around eating disorders and health issues continued to centralize the notion that fatness was inevitable and thus not the result of social or health problems in the black community. Susan Bordo, in *Unbearable Weight*, notes that the assumption that “African Americans were believed protected by their alternative cultural values,” created a culture in which “many young girls were left feeling stranded” in discussions surrounding eating disorders and health. The perceived naturalness of fatness meant that the medical community systemically excluded black women from burgeoning conversations surrounding eating disorders that took place in the 1970s. The historical connection between black women, food, and size that naturalized black women as always fat replaced the need for medical intervention for eating disorders, despite comparable contemporaneous social pressures on women of all races.

In a 1989 edition of *Essence Magazine*, Retha Powers writes about her experiences growing up with eating disorders in “Fat is a Black Women’s Issue.” After seeking help about her eating disorder from a high school counselor, she was told that “fat is more acceptable in the

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21 Analyses of women’s magazines from the time demonstrates this similar preoccupation on diet and weight. While cultural discourses positioned black women's experiences apart from the weight pressures forced onto white women, an analysis by Heather Thompson-Brenner et al shows that issues of Ebony Magazine analyzed for discussion about weight and dieting between 1969 to 2008, “15.4% of the tables of contents featured diet and exercise in the first 10 years of analysis, the next 20 years saw an increase to 35.9%,” with discussions reaching their peak in the 1990s. These results mirror those of Wiseman et al, who found a significant increase in discussions of dieting through 1988. Cultural pressure on black and white women in media sources was relatively similar, though Black women were seen as less viable subjects for medical concerns, partially because of the legacy offered by the enduring trope of overweight black woman. See Heather Thompson-Brenner, Christina L. Boisseau, and Michelle S. St. Paul, “Representation of Ideal Figure Size in Ebony Magazine: A Content Analysis,” *Body Image* 8, no. 4 (September 1, 2011): 373–78, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2011.05.005.
The mammy image that made fat “acceptable” for black women became a way to erase legitimate medical and health concerns. If earlier responses to the overweight mammy image focused little on the actual health concerns of fatness, the enduring cultural weight of mammy’s image ensured that the medical community overlook black women’s health problems in favor of an unnuanced reading in which “black women aren’t seen as sex objects,” and thus don’t need to be included in medical conversations about weight and health. This experience helps to demonstrate the enduring legacy of the reductionist mammy image of black women. Here, even when Retha Powers is seeking help for her health, her agency is taken away by medical professionals who have systematically excluded black women from the medical sphere, just as mammy’s culinary agency was taken away by mainstream culinary norms. If the mammy figure discursively linked blackness with food and being overweight, it also linked blackness with an uncaring medical community that often reduced medical and psychological health needs down to stereotype.

The absence of black women from medical discussions around eating disorders indicates the medical establishment’s exclusion of nearly all African-American health needs. A 2001 NIH article detailed the history of medical neglect of African-Americans, noting that since 1975, “black health progress has halted,” and that black Americans continue to be "subjected to substandard health care by the underfinanced, inferior, public tier of the nation's dual, unequal, health system.” The medical industry had always failed black Americans, and understanding the legacy of institutional failures and the gap in health outcomes between white and black Americans highlights the importance of community-centered discussions about combating

23 Retha Powers, 78.
disease. Just as the medical establishment failed to take seriously eating disorders in black women, they also failed to treat diet focused diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol. This is the tension embedded in the medical implications of the mammy figure. In the face of an uncaring medical industry, black women faced problems stemming from being either overweight or underweight, while the medical industry took neither issue seriously. Medical groups passed over necessary and nuanced conversations surrounding health and diet in favor of upholding the naturalized notion that black women were always more overweight. Medical attention did not have to mean rejecting or alienating black culture through soul food, but it did have to validate the experiences and illnesses disproportionately facing the black community. Instead, the legacy of early depictions of black foodways ensured that black Americans’ health needs were left out of the medical industry all together.

Mammy represents the origins of the medicalization of soul food. If mammy was synonymous with African-American cooking habits prior to the origination of the term “soul food,” she was also the originator of the link between blackness and obesity. But soul food hadn’t yet been pathologized because of the underrepresentation of black health needs. It would take until the 1990s for the mainstream medical establishment to more explicitly link fatness, health outcomes, blackness, and food culture. If racist mammy caricatures already linked black Americans, and black women particularly with the image of fatness through their roles as cooks,

the pathologizing of eating habits was the next natural step in the evolution of a white understanding of black foodways and health. As black women were left out of view of the medical establishment, it took intercommunity dialogues to fight health problems that plagued the community.\textsuperscript{27}

**Rejections of Soul Food, 1970-1980**

Many of these tensions over health, diet, and weight originated in the 1970s, alongside the earliest responses to and rejections of the soul food diet in the black community.\textsuperscript{28} While the enduring power of the mammy figure provides a starting point in understanding the associations between weight, health, food and blackness, community dialogues and rejections of soul food make explicit these connections by focusing on the health risks posed by the soul food diet. These discussions helped to construct and legitimize the medical industry’s later pathologizing of soul food, though they demonstrate two radically different forms the medicalization of culture can take. Groups such as the Nation of Islam medicalized language surrounding black foodways out of a mission to “sustain life,” not to undermine black cultural practices and enact domination over black bodies.\textsuperscript{29} While the Nation of Islam, a primary site of this critique during the 1970s, “had only 20,000 members,” the organization had “an outsized influence… on the black community.”\textsuperscript{30} In the face of an uncaring and actively regressive medical industry, it became the responsibility of the black community to offer their own critiques and assert the importance of


\textsuperscript{28} Wallach, 177.


black health and survival. The project was not to “save soul food,” as authors writing in the 1990s and beyond argued, but to save the black community from the health impacts caused by a legacy that conflated blackness with fatness, and all the health problems it posed.  

These explicitly medical discussions of soul food existed prior to the widespread discussion of soul food in the mainstream medical community. This follows the pattern established by the weaponization of the mammy figure by medical professionals; the decline in quality of medical care for black Americans during this time ensured that, despite elevated risks of death from heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes, African-Americans were not proper medical subjects and were denied quality medical care. Several black physicians began making the case against soul food in the 1970s, but their impact was limited in scope and targeted almost exclusively at the black community. This contrasts with medical professionals’ comments on soul food during the 1990s, as these commenters were predominately non-black and targeted a much broader audience. Dr. Elijah Saunders was one of the most vocal black medical professionals critiquing soul food and warning of its risk to the black community. Known as an expert on African American cardiovascular care, he was quoted in African American newspapers as early as 1972 warning that “soul food ain’t heart food,” and that it “may be a contributing factor in high rates of essential hypertension among black Americans.”

32 Byrd and Clayton, “Race, Medicine, and Health Care in the United States,” 215.
34 “Guidlines for Community Programs in HIgh Blood Pressure Detection and Control” (National Heart & Lung Institute, February 1974),
Dr. Saunders began his career discussing and advocating for healthier dietary practices in
the black community as an outlier in the medical community. He was first quoted discussing
hypertension and the black community by the New York Times during 1986, almost two full
decades later than he was quoted by the Milwaukee Star. While his reception by the black
community in the 1970s is somewhat unclear, his work provides one of the earliest examples of
medical intervention into issues relating to diet and soul food. His limited impact demonstrates
the relative unpopularity and unviability of these ideas in mainstream discourses and publications
that catered to a wider, whiter audience. The reception of his work helps underscore the
importance of concurrent cultural rejections of soul food using medical language, and sheds light
on the temporal shift that enabled widespread medical criticism of the soul food diet. Until 1990,
the black community was alone in constructing a medical model to fight diet-related health
issues. By drawing medical attention and research to the intersection of the soul food diet and
health problems, Dr. Saunders helped to constitute some of the earliest expressions of
medicalization by the medical industry through his personal narratives and experiences which
helped position him with the black community as a cultural and medical authority.

The many black Americans who articulated these rejections weren’t doing so out of self-
degradation, but out of a radical belief in community sovereignty and independence. Rejecting
soul food was also a way to reject white influence over black America—soul food, in the minds

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http://www.aac.amdigital.co.uk.ezproxy.wellesley.edu/Documents/Images/UIC_CULR_03_0015_0201/T
35 This trend is also visible in other major newspapers at the time. The Washington post first quoted him
in 1988, and earlier references to his work in 1985 in the Houston Chronicle and San Francisco Chronicle
are in reference to unrelated topics. See Sally Squires, “Battling Hypertension Among Blacks; Coalition
Seeks to Counteract Higher Risks With National Education Campaign: [FINAL Edition],” The
Washington Post (Pre-1997 Fulltext); Washington, D.C., March 15, 1988, sec. HEALTH TAB; “Barbers
Getting Licensed to Test Blood Pressure; [NO STAR Edition],” Houston Chronicle (Pre-1997 Fulltext);
Houston, Tex., June 19, 1985, sec. 9; “Barbers to Check Blood Pressure: [TWO STAR Edition],” San
Francisco Chronicle (Pre-1997 Fulltext); San Francisco, Calif., July 4, 1985, sec. NEWS.
of its major opponents, including comedian Dick Gregory, was a genocide being enacted on the black community through forced reliance on unhealthy foodstuffs.\textsuperscript{36} Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad reminded followers that “the white race is a commercializing people,” forcing black Americans to “eat death” to keep “their dollar safe.”\textsuperscript{37} For these authors and commentators, soul food was no longer soul food but “slave food,” a remnant of a traumatizing past that continued to cause real harm to African-Americans.\textsuperscript{38} In the opening pages of \textit{How to Eat to Live}, Muhammad writes that “(black-eyed) peas, collard greens, [and] sweet potatoes,” staples associated with soul food by his contemporaries, were “unfit for human consumption,” as “southern slave masters used them to feed the slaves, and still advise the consumption of them.”\textsuperscript{39} Soul food was still a key component of the historical and contemporary black cultural experience, but it existed as a site of domination, not liberation, as other soul food cookery writers claimed.\textsuperscript{40} Rejecting soul food was the only way to reject white influence and white dominance, and create a culinary and community nationalist movement that advocated for some of the most radical examples of black liberation.

Early opponents of soul food elevated the argument against soul food from an abstract statement about cultural power and legacy to an immediately compelling argument about health and survival. While a part of their argument against soul food rested on the idea that this key part of black culture was a remnant of slavery and thus inherently bad, black opponents of soul food

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Dick Gregory, \textit{Dick Gregory’s Natural Diet for Folks Who Eat: Cookin’ with Mother Nature!} (Perennial Library, 1974).
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Elijah Muhammad and Fard Muhammad, \textit{How to Eat to Live. Book One}, 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Elijah Muhammad and Fard Muhammad
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Elijah Muhammad and Fard Muhammad, 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Dorris Witt reminds us that “even though Muhammad never (to my knowledge) referred directly to "soul food" in his writings, he intensified his condemnation of traditional southern black dietary practices as the popularity of soul food began to peak.” The term “soul food” is useful, as it roughly parallels his conception of the black American diet, though it’s important to note it’s anachronistic use in this essay. See Doris Witt, \textit{Black Hunger}, 107
\end{itemize}
articulated their argument through medicalized opposition. In these depictions, soul food was characterized and caricaturized by proximity to “whiteness and brutality” that posed health consequences to its consumers.\(^{41}\) Creating a sense of urgency in such an integral part of daily life helped generate that same urgency in broader programs of black and economic nationalism. Constructing culture in medical terms shifted conversations around soul food by creating an opt-out—not only from a food culture but from white supremacy. These arguments were contemporaneous to many early cookbooks on soul food; this opposition highlights the multiple modes of resistance to white supremacy and culture taking place. While Dick Gregory and leaders of the Nation of Islam positioned themselves as activists in ways soul food authors often did not, soul food had always contained a fairly radical statement about black love and community.\(^{42}\) Rejecting it allowed for an equally radical statement about black anger and action.

Culture and health and medicine were not necessarily conflicting ideas. The Nation of Islam, Dick Gregory, and others weren’t just providing a blind critique of soul food, but were actively promoting alternate modes of cultural expression. *How to Eat to Live* was a list of prescribed culinary practices as well as a list of prohibitions.\(^{43}\) The culinary subculture that came from the Nation of Islam has an enduring legacy. Bean Pie, made from the same navy beans Elijah Muhammad encouraged his followers to eat, became a cultural symbol referenced by

\(^{42}\) I’m basing this assertion off of close readings of cookbook introductions. Cookbook introductions exist as a place where authors are able to articulate their goals and culinary ethos. Both Dick Gregory’s cookbook and Elijah Muhammad’s two part pseudo-cookbook, *How to Eat to Live*, primarily center on the politics of soul food. I follow on Toni Tipton-Martin’ articulation that both books were fundamentally part of a cookbook culture in the 1970s in order to contrast these works with more traditional cookbooks. See Elijah Muhammad, Dick Gregory, Inez Kaiser, Bob Jeffrie for references to pre-1990s cookbooks in this paper.  
Muhammed Ali, Will Smith, and others.\(^{44}\) Elijah Muhammad wrote that food can be “life or death.” The eponymous chapter revolves primarily around the dangers of black foodways, but implicitly offers the idea that food can also be a source of life, sustainability, and joy.\(^{45}\) Later, 1990s era medical critics of soul food, while offering more detailed information on the health risks of soul food, didn’t provide meaningful alternatives. Black rejections of soul food didn’t exist in a vacuum. It was equally important to find other meaningful ways to assert culinary sustainability in the black community. Jennifer Wallach writes, “‘Muhammad’s Program’ urged NOI members to pursue independent black foodways at the level of production, ensuring gastronomic separatism in every aspect of the food system,” showing that even in the face of opposition to soul food, black anti-soul food activists still placed great importance on the existence of a clearly-defined black-owned food culture and system.\(^{46}\)

A small number of writers in the 1970s used similar medical critiques of soul food while ultimately choosing to keep the moniker “soul.” \(^{47}\) These cookbooks offer the earliest examples of the dominant trend in the 1990s, demonstrating the ability for medicine and culture to coexist. Mary Keyes Burgess’ cookbook, Soul to Soul, was one of the first vegetarian black-aligned cookbooks that positioned itself as a soul cookbook. Burgess’ work deviates from later cookbooks as the mentions of health problems she offers are relatively anecdotal and self-contained; when she was writing, the black community was one of the only groups discussing medicalization. Burgess begins her cookbook with an introduction that discusses, “the realization


\(^{45}\) Elijah Muhammad and Fard Muhammad, How to Eat to Live. Book One, ADD PAGE.

\(^{46}\) Wallach, Every Nation Has Its Dish: Black Bodies and Black Food in Twentieth-Century America, 180.

\(^{47}\) For the most prominent and earliest notable vegetarian cookbook author, see Mary Burgess, Soul to Soul: A Vegetarian Soul Food Cookbook (Santa Barbara, CA: Woodbridge Press Publishing Company, 1976). See also Feast to Your Soul’s Delight, (HHS Pub No. 84-1107, 1980); Lana Shabazz, Cooking for the Champ (New York: Jones-McMillon, 1979).
that eating animal fat may have partially contributed to the fact that many of my family were suffering from high blood pressure.”

Her personal anecdotes about health show that she views traditional soul food partially accountable for health issues in the black community, thought she makes it clear she is writing a “soul’ vegetarian cookbook,” as a way of maintaining and centralizing tradition while introducing newer, healthier recipes that maintain “that special taste.”

Burgess discusses biblical antecedents that establish soul food as sinful, building off of the same religious language used by the Nation of Islam, but maintains that it is salvageable. This is in contrast to the work of contemporaneous critics who viewed the solutions to health disparities outside the world of soul food entirely. Mary Keyes Burgess offered one of the first articulations that soul food could and should exist in conjunction with discussions of the health needs of the black community, though she offered these connections out of choice, rather than necessity caused by the media and cultural landscape. Her work existed at a time where many mainstream culinary authors still prized soul food, and where the mainstream medical complex rarely discussed or criticized it. Her work bridges the gap between contemporaneous authors such as Inez Kaiser and Dick Gregory, painting a picture of a flawed but immensely important and emotional cuisine. As the medical industry later increasingly honed in on soul food as a scapegoat and root cause of ailments in the black community, and traditional soul food cookbooks became a remnant of the past, more and more authors followed Burgess’s model as they too found ways to save soul food.

49 Burgess, 17.
50 Burgess, 15.
The Cooptation of Soul Food by the Medical Community

While previous medical professionals had frequently ignored or otherwise delegitimized medical claims and needs of black Americans, the pathologizing of fatness through the obesity epidemic in the late 1980s and 1990s brought the medical industry’s attention to the needs—and problems—of black Americans. However, unlike previous commentators on the connections between soul food and health concerns, predominately white and non-black doctors and medical professionals controlled the dialogue around black health and wellness, medicalizing and pathologizing blackness and soul food in a way that often ignored or obscured cultural practices. While black authors critiquing soul food as the root of medical problems in the black community explicitly blamed it on a history of white culinary oppression and framed it as rejection of white influence, these new medical commentators provided no such nuance. A New York Times article entitled “I’ll have some chitlins, fires, and an oxygen tank,” had little to nothing to do with chitlins or soul food.51 The title, however, created a rhetorical link between poor health outcomes and black food pathways. Even in an article primarily about drive-through eating, the author targeted black food habits as uniquely bad. This was not merely a site of medicalization, but of pathologizing, discursively labeling soul food as inherently sinful and diseased.

These discussions of weight in the New York Times follow a broader trend that placed increased emphasis on the obesity epidemic. Natalie Boero notes that “between 1990 and 2001 the Times published 751 articles on obesity,” far more articles than were published on the AIDS

Doctors constituted the link between weight and poor health across all groups in society, though special attention was paid to the health needs of black Americans. Even when journalists and doctors didn’t target black cooking habits, they did target black bodies, drawing on a history that demonstrated an innate tendency to be unhealthy. Just as 1970s era writers on eating disorders claimed that blackness eliminated fears about weight in the black community, 1990s medical professionals also claimed that the cultural context eliminated fears about health. Many commentators made much of the fact that even controlling for education and income, the health gap between black and white Americans remained. One journalist writing for the Sun Sentinel wrote that “experts attribute most of the health gap to factors such as an unhealthy diet… and racism by health professionals,” centralizing the importance of diet while relegating institutional racism to the end of the paragraph.

After eliminating easily controllable variables such as income and insurance access, the first thing left to critique was black culture, rather than the systemic failures of the health industry. Disease and diet became inextricably linked in publications, treating soul food less as cultural and more as pathological. The health problems facing the black community were moral failings, not just health failings, because black culture was targeted as a leading cause of death.

One New York Times reporter lists off popular purchases at a small town grocer, paying special attention to foods associated with soul food and the black community, including “fatty ham-hocks and tails… chitlins for frying available in 10 pound buckets, and fatback by the

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slab.” The mere presence of culturally important food becomes evidence for his claim that “it’s not surprising that heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, and obesity are common here.”

Food alone is a health risk and a site of medical concern that necessitates regulation, culture becomes overlaid with images of death and illness, forcing an image of black food culture that synonymized soul food with dangerous food.

Discussion of health and soul food in mainstream publications did not necessarily remove the cultural weight of soul food, but often found ways to delegitimize the importance of culture. After quoting Dawn Matthews, a black woman, about her family’s continued reliance on traditional soul food, a journalist connected her individual choices to the reasons why “half of black women are clinically obese.” Few articles even included voices like Dawn’s, and instead relied on doctors and health officials to voice their claims. When journalists included consumers of soul food, they were often critics of soul food serving up healthy alternatives. When newspapers published the voices of black Americans, it often served to confirm the bias that “soul food is really unhealthy.”

Black authors and activists existed in stories about soul food and health so long as they upheld the notion that soul food was bad or unhealthy. Reports often specified when a quoted doctor was black; Dr. Reed Tuckson became “the highest ranking black in the hierarchy of the American medical association,” (tailoring a healthy message to blacks); his expertise was constructed through his connection to the community, lending credence to mainstream ideals.

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56 Marcus.
57 Bob LaMondola and Stacey Singer, “The Racial Health Gap: Black Americans Die Earlier and Are More Likely to Become Seriously Ill than Their White Counterparts.”
The inclusion of certain voices of color who occupied rarified position in the community—as doctors, health experts, and culinary personalities—obscured the realities and complexities of many conversations around soul food and culture. Dialogues about the health impact of soul food, as I discussed earlier, had taken place for decades, but the mainstream medical industry presented the link between diet and black health outcomes as new. The discussion of culture taking place in mainstream media sources only served to delegitimize the complexities of the issues and obscure the importance and agency of the black community in constructing and contesting the meanings of soul food. Nuanced conversations about the continued relevance and importance of soul food were overlooked in favor of a hyperbolic story of an epidemic that uncritically “used fat bodies… [to] spread moral panic.”

Public discussions about soul food in the 1990s created a hegemonic construction of soul food that many cookbook authors and food writers bought into. The looming narrative that surrounded the obesity epidemic made commercial and critical success dependent on constructing soul food in line with dominant narratives at the time. Cookbooks often offered low-fat, low-sodium, healthy versions of soul food. The traditional articulation of soul food offered by early authors such as Inez Kaiser and Bob Jeffries was no longer viable; traditional soul food was too unhealthy to be promoted and popularized.

1990s era cookbooks represent a complex relationship between soul food and health that neither entirely adhered to or broke norms around food. Soul food was still an important and

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60 Bolereo, “All the News That’s Fat to Print,” 42.
prominent part of black culture, and it deserved continued relevance and attention in the black community. It was also dangerous, which authors made clear through the use of nutritional jargon. Recipes were broken down by saturated and unsaturated fats, complex carbohydrates and calorie counts. The Black Family Dinner Quilt Cookbook provided an entire glossary for readers to make sense of the terms used throughout the book, and each recipe included calorie count, total fat, carbs, protein, cholesterol, and sodium. Each recipe was selected to “meet current Dietary Guidelines for Americans”—the recipes didn’t offer a mix of health and indulgence, but instead offered exclusively healthy recipes that made use of the soul food tradition. The cookbook was well versed in the language of the contemporaneous medicalization of culture and food, but used through critiques within a system that still fundamentally valued and upheld soul food culture.

Healthy, vegetarian, and “neo-soul” cookbooks in the 1990s offered articulation of the value of soul food that parallel the introductions offered by many soul food authors in the 1960s. In 1990s era cookbooks, “soul food continued as compassion.” Jonell Nash remarked that “soul food represents a certain spirit, an attitude, a flamboyance, a kind of loving,” while Wilbert Jones speaks of soul food’s ability “to nourish the soul.” As these authors discussed their goal to combat “an ethnic style of cooking that can be life threatening,” they countered rhetoric about health and nutrition with rhetoric that centralized the community and cultural elements of soul food.

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63 Height and National Council Of Negro Women, 199.
64 Height and National Council Of Negro Women, 203.
65 Nash, Low-Fat Soul, 3; Jones, The Healthy Soul Food Cookbook : How to Cut the Fat but Keep the Flavor, xiv.
66 Jones, The Healthy Soul Food Cookbook : How to Cut the Fat but Keep the Flavor, xii.
Many authors sought to contextualize the reasons soul food was unhealthy, focusing on the necessity of culinary ingenuity and high calorie diets for enslaved persons. As authors centralized narratives around health, they also centralized the historical experiences that shaped soul food, legitimizing and contextualizing nutritional content in a way never done in white, mainstream depictions of soul food. These authors consciously built off of a shared culinary heritage and redefined it for their current moment. Rationalizing the unhealthy nature of soul food through historic and cultural context allowed these authors to move beyond simplistic articulations that soul food was necessarily bad or useless. Soul food was not a static idea, as many nutritionists and doctors insinuated in their narrow, nutritionally focused depictions. Centralizing soul food in its historic context enabled authors to highlight the rich history of vegetable consumption and innovation that had defined the origins of soul food. They framed their work in making soul food increasingly healthy as a return to its origins, legitimizing the past and present of soul food even amidst continued medicalization in language.

In many ways, the healthy trend in soul food cookbook writing is a far more conservative trend than others I have explored elsewhere in this essay. Cookbook authors were not creating and articulating a new food culture, as original authors of soul food cookbooks often were. Nor were they making an argument for black nationalism through culinary sustainability. Unlike previous authors, they were writing in a period where soul food was actively being medicalized and pathologized. While they were writing narratives that continued to view soul food as unhealthy and relatively problematic, they were also writing narratives that continued to center the importance, love, and community of soul food. In 2007, Kimberly Nettles writes about the project of “saving” soul food, discussing the continued negotiation of soul food’s meaning in the

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67 Nash, Low-Fat Soul, 4; Jones, The Healthy Soul Food Cookbook: How to Cut the Fat but Keep the Flavor, xi.
midst of a health crisis in the black community.\textsuperscript{68} By writing about saving soul food, she was not only asserting that soul food needs saving, but that it deserves to be saved. In the face of an oppressive medical industry, cookbook authors continued to centralize the relevance and importance of soul food and a distinct black food culture. While 1990s era cookbook authors and activists actively engaged in the medicalization of soul food, they did so in a way that maintained the importance of the cultural ties and connections soul food provided. Their project wasn’t radical, but it helped enable the preservation of soul food despite widespread medical opposition.

There were still cookbooks published during the 1990s that deviated from the healthy or vegetarian norm I’ve focused on, though these cookbooks represent a smaller trend than what I discuss above.\textsuperscript{69} These cookbooks still represented a site of discontinuity from previous tropes embedded in cookbooks, redefining what it meant to be a professional chef, and opening up culinary legitimacy to wider groups of people. These cookbooks often elevated soul food to a middle- or upper-class professionalized culinary aesthetic, enabling a new perspective on soul food that appealed to new, more sophisticated arguments. While these cookbooks made less use of health and nutrition, the proximity to wealth and whiteness through “handcrafted, artisanal, and exotic” recipes allowed black culinary habits to exist outside of the soul food construction, and thus, outside of the widespread critique.\textsuperscript{70}

Contemporary constructions of soul food have built off of the trend begun in the 1990s. Adrian Miller writes, “soul food’s creative energy burns brightest in the restaurants that are targeting upscale, vegetarian or vegan clientele.”\textsuperscript{71} Authors including Jenné Claiborne and

\textsuperscript{68} Nettes, “‘Saving’ Soul Food.”
\textsuperscript{69} For an extensive bibliography of 1990s era soul food cookbooks, see Tipton-Martin, \textit{The Jemima Code Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks}, 219.
\textsuperscript{70} Tipton-Martin, \textit{The Jemima Code Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks}.
\textsuperscript{71} Miller, \textit{Soul Food}, 256.
Bryant Terry are at the forefront of vegan soul cooking, articulating a new vegan soul aesthetic that takes soul cooking back to its vegetable-based roots.\textsuperscript{72} In many of the neo-soul movements, health and wealth exist synonymously at the forefront of innovative soul food cooking.

Even as cookbook authors create new models of soul food, for many, soul food still conjures up weighty and politicized images of unhealthy food. Doctors and medical professionals continue to argue that soul food is responsible for the health disparities between black and white Americans. A “highly unscientific study” by a New York Times reporter showed that a majority of respondents thought “Southern/soul food” was worst for your health.\textsuperscript{73} These medicalized images and discussions are the extension of a medicalization and pathologizing of black culture and black foodways that have stripped foodways of nuance and stripped consumers of agency. These simplified narratives don’t go—and never have gone—unquestioned. The field of food studies is still emerging, and there is more work to be done to investigate the impact the medical industry has had in reshaping a multiplicity of traditional food cultures in the United States. As this work continues, it is important to recognize the food writers, cookbook authors, and food historians who continue to work to create a more complete—and sometimes healthier—model of soul food.

\textsuperscript{72} I discuss vegan soul food cookbooks at length in Emily Martin, “Veganism, Race, and Soul Food: Evaluating visual reproductions of race in vegan spaces.”

\textsuperscript{73} Miller, Soul Food, 2.