JAST, **2019; 51:43-47**

Submitted: 20.08.2019

Accepted: 18.10.2019

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Food as Hieroglyphics:

Amiri Baraka and Black Expressive Culture

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> Every phase of Negro life is highly dramatized. No matter how joyful or how sad the case there is sufficient poise for drama. Everything is acted out. Unconsciously for the most part of course… Frequently the Negro, even with detached words in his vocabulary—not evolved in him but transplanted on his tongue by contact—must add action to it to make it do. So we have "chop-axe," "sitting-chair," "cook-pot" and the like because the speaker has in his mind the picture of the object in use. Action. Everything illustrated. So, we can say the white man thinks in a written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics.
>
> Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (79-80)

Writing in 1934, Hurston's anthropological skill and cultural familiarity allow her to capture soundly an essence of the beauty and art of African American cultural expression. She notes, "Black people speak in hieroglyphics"; in visuals and in movements, tastes, and sounds. Often, these performances do not "meet conventional standards" but they "[satisfy] the soul of the creator" (Hurston 80). These forms of cultural expressions or hieroglyphics are the ways in which African Americans perform group identity using dance, clothing,

music, language, art, and food.[1] These are some of the ways African American people *do* Blackness. J. Allen Kawan notes "groups utilize expressive culture to reassert control over their bodies, critique white culture, challenge stereotypical representations in mass culture, and develop collective identities that transcend geography and time. Groups censor these cultural performances for mainstream audiences who often appropriate them without knowledge of their hidden meanings."[2]

One of the many appropriations of Blackness is food and one of the earliest writers to call attention to this phenomenon was Amiri Baraka. Most widely known as a poet and leading figure in the Black Power and Black Arts Movement, few, in contemporary food studies (or any discipline), associated Amiri Baraka with African American food culture until Doris Witt resurrected his contributions in *Black Hunger*. She writes, "Baraka began valorizing [soul food] as an expression of pride in the cultural forms created from and articulated through a history of black oppression" (80).

But context is very important. Baraka wrote his essay on soul food as a rebuttal to critics—in this case an African American writer for *Esquire Magazine*—who stated Black people had neither a characteristic language nor cuisine. Baraka penned the essay "Soul Food" in his collection titled *Home: Social Essays*, wherein he describes what we know today as foods primarily associated with the South, but indeed eaten all over the world: grits, hoppin' John (black-eyed peas and rice), fried fish and chicken, buttermilk biscuits, dumplings lima beans and corn, string beans, okra, smoky, hot barbecue, everything from the hog—from neck bones to pork chop—sweet tea or lemonade, and sweet potato or other pies and cakes.

The myriad debates sparked by Baraka's observation have been well documented.[3] My concern is less with those conversations, though very important, and more to highlight Baraka's radical use of food to illustrate the ways Black people "speak in hieroglyphics." Yes, these are all foods eaten by many Southerners, but in conjoining food and soul, food and Blackness is "highly dramatized…[It] is acted out" (Hurston 79). By adding "soul" as a signifier to food, Baraka "add[s] action to [food] to make it do" (Hurston 79). By calling out the ways these foods are cooked—the ingredients, the spices, and the flavoring as well as the methods of frying, stewing, and smoking—he signifies on a mood of ingenuity, creativity, and skill learned out of necessity and hard times.

It was a mood of keeping on, in spite of and yet because of whatever was happening around them. As Issac Hayes says about the song "Soul Man," it was "a story about one's struggle to rise above his present conditions. It's almost a tune kind of like boasting, 'I'm a soul man.' It's a pride thing" (Bowman 128).[4] With soul food not only do Black people play the culinary dozens by trying to one up one another in the cooking, but they also moan when the food is good, and they show with ingenuity and creativity and boast loudly about how, anything—including hog's intestines, chicken feet, back, and necks—can make for a good dinner. Though food—both the word and the material—generally speaking, was "transplanted" on the tongues of Black folks "by contact," by adding soul, Amiri Baraka added action to it "to make it do" (Hurston 79). And this is the drama. Not in today's parlance, necessarily, but to reflect the levels of depth, emotion, and nuance. Soul food is multisensory. It is not just food; it is a way of being. And not only does soul food satiate but it also reflects perseverance, resourcefulness, and creativity by Black people in the face of life's myriad oppressions; actions as relevant today as they were back then.

Notes

[1]See Lawrence W Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*; Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*; Gena Dagel Caponi, ed, *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*; Tanisha Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul*.

[2] Kawan J. Allen, "Expressive Culture."

[3] Shortly after Baraka's treatise was published several debates emerged around the benefits and harm of eating soul food; many of these persist today. While Baraka argued for its merits and was supported by the likes of Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor others such as the nation of Nation of Islam, along with Dick Gregory, and other advocates of nonpork and whole food diets. Frederick Douglass Opie discusses the arguments of European American food critics like Craig Claiborne who insisted, "soul food was a southern regional food that belonged to southerners." See chapter 9, "Food Rebels: African American Critics and Opponents of Soul Food," *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America*. See also Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live*; Dick Gregory, *Dick Gregory's Natural Diet for Folks Who Eat: Cookin' With Mother Nature*, James R. McGraw, ed., with Alvenia M. Fulton.

[4] The song "Soul Man" was written by Isaac Hayes and David Porter, the other half of the recording artist Sam (Moore) and Dave (Porter), who sang the song, see Bob Bowman.

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