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**A Kitchen of His Own: Claiming Black Culinary Identity  
in Kwame Onwuachi's Memoir *Notes of a Young Black Chef***

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**Abstract**

This article examines Kwame Onwuachi's memoir *Notes of a Black Young Chef* (2019). In this memoir, Onwuachi narrates his coming-of-age story with a focus on his culinary journey starting in the Bronx and moving to the world of fine-dining. The chef manages to express himself through cooking and gains social visibility although he has been challenged by racial stereotyping and social hierarchies around him since his childhood. Onwuachi's life narrative has references to the black bildungsroman, and he constructs his culinary style accordingly. Onwuachi treats food as a self-narrative. He rejects the notion of a classical restaurant and transforms the kitchen into a culinary stage where he would display his life as well as the diversity of black identities together with food culture. The chef dislocates the assigned gendered and interpellated racial identity and claims his own space through his self-narrative and culinary performance. Therefore, this article examines the intersections of food, performance, and performativity. Onwuachi, as a black chef, recasts culinary performance and the traditional celebrity chef image to promote social transformation and racial equality for the black community.

**Keywords:** African American Chef, Food and Performance, Food Narratives, Food Memoirs, Black Culinary Culture

## **Kendine Ait Bir Mutfak: Kwame Onwuachi'nin**

### ***Notes of a Young Black Chef* Adlı Eserinde Siyahi Yemek**

#### **Kimliği Edinme**

#### **Öz**

Bu makale, Kwame Onwuachi'nin *Notes of a Young Black Chef* (2019) başlıklı anı kitabını konu alır. Onwuachi bu anı kitabında, Bronx'dan başlayan ve kaliteli yemek kültürü dünyasına uzanan kişisel gelişim öyküsünü, yemek dünyasındaki yolculuğuna odaklanarak anlatır. Çocukluğundan beri deneyimlediği ırk ayrımcılığı ve hiyerarşik toplumsal yapıların engellerine rağmen yemek pişirmeye devam ederek toplumsal görünürlük kazanmayı ve kendini ifade etmeyi başarır. Onwuachi'nin yaşam öyküsü, siyahi gelişim romanlarına benzer ve mutfak tarzını bu olgulaşma doğrultusunda geliştirir. Onwuachi yemeği kişisel bir anlatı olarak algılar. Klasik restoran algısını reddeder ve mutfağı kendi hayatının yanı sıra siyahi kimliklerin ve yemek kültürünün çeşitliliğini temsil edebileceği bir sahneye dönüştürür. Kişisel anlatısı ve mutfaktaki performansı, üzerine yüklenmiş olan toplumsal cinsiyet ve ırka dayalı kimlik algısını sorgular. Bu nedenle, bu makale aynı zamanda, yemek, performans ve edimliliğin kesişim noktalarını irdeler. Onwuachi, siyahi bir şef olarak, mutfaktaki performansı ve geleneksel ünlü şef imajını, toplumsal değişimi ve siyahi toplumun ırk eşitliğini desteklemek için yeniden biçimlendirir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Afrikalı Amerikalı Şefler, Yemek ve Performans, Yemek Anlatıları, Yemek Anı Kitapları, Siyahi Yemek Kültürü

#### **Introduction**

With voracious readers enjoying the genre, food memoirs have gained popularity in the literary scene. Building a bridge between life narratives, food studies, and popular culture, food memoirs can be broadly defined as works in which “the personal story of a great chef, struggling home cook, and knowledgeable foodie is explored,”

and “insider secrets of food culture” are revealed (Wyatt 1). Food memoirs can be examined as personal, cultural, and ethnic history records, emphasizing the connection between food and cultural identity. Within this context, culinary/food memoirs, or in other words, narratives of gastrography, contain stories in which personal identity, ethnicity, and cultural memory intertwine. In keeping with this idea, Melissa Brackney Stoeger provides the following description: “Food Memoirs and Autobiographies incorporate food as a major element of the writer’s experiences. The writer is typically either employed in a profession related to food, such as a chef or has a passion for food that plays a big role in their life” (4). In their memoirs, chefs use food and foodways as an alternative medium to express the significance of food and how it enabled them to interpret life from a different angle.

Elaborating on food and foodways allows chefs from different ethnic backgrounds to explore cultural, political, and economic aspects that shape their lives. Barbara Frey Waxman, in her definition of food memoirs, stresses the bonds between food and “cultural identity, ethnic community, family, and cross-cultural experiences” (363). Food narratives written by ethnic writers are treasured since they disclose avid personal experiences, and their intersections with identity, culture, and politics. As such, food memoirs written by black chefs seek to provide their audience with a close reading of the contemporary reality of black subjectivity in the United States. Kwame Onwuachi is an influential black chef in the popular American scene. In his memoir, *Notes from a Young Black Chef* (2019), Onwuachi details the experience of growing up as a black man in America. In times of personal crisis in his youth, he hooks up on cooking as a vital aspect of his family culture and tradition, which becomes his lifeboat to escape from a drug dealer’s life. Accordingly, this article focuses on how Onwuachi’s narrative presents several aspects of African American bildungsroman and how the chef debunks the negative stereotypes attached to black culinary culture and black masculinity through his performance in the kitchen.

### **Traces of Black Bildungsroman in Onwuachi’s Memoir**

Food memoirs written by black chefs exhibit features that are observable in classical narrative traditions, one of which is the tradition of the bildungsroman. Smith and Watson define bildungsroman as

narratives that focus on “the formation of a young life as gendered, classed, and raced within a social network larger than the family or the religious community” (120). Accordingly, black chefs’ memoirs are presented as coming-of-age stories focusing on the chef’s struggle to build a culinary style. They narrate how their growing interest in food and cooking developed into a profession despite the dominance of white culture. Black chefs use the narrative structures of the bildungsroman to emphasize the hardships they go through on their culinary journeys. Therefore, the memoirs also foreground the chef’s “gendered classed and raced” (Smith and Watson 120) position in mainstream American culture. Similar to the bildungsroman tradition, Onwuachi starts his memoir with the narrative of his childhood. The chef narrates how he grew up in the Bronx where life for young black boys is often identified with the street culture that develops upon underprivileged economic and social conditions. Carroll underlines that in the black American tradition, the black bildungsroman focuses on a “black protagonist (usually a young male)” who “struggles against the irrationality of American institutions” (167). Like Carroll, Geta J. LeSeur draws attention to the fact that, in the black bildungsroman, the portrayals of black children are different from those of their white counterparts in the traditional narratives (21) and emphasizes that “[c]hildhood, as presented in the African American bildungsroman, is depressing, like America’s Black history” (4). Likewise, Onwuachi’s struggles with gender and race started at quite an early age.

From the start, Onwuachi’s memoir exposes the social and cultural networks that shaped his subjectivity while growing up. To start with, schools can be defined as one of the major places where gender and racial discrimination have become visible for young black boys. Onwuachi highlights how challenging it was to build personal resilience due to the racial and gendered codes that surrounded him starting from his school years. LeSeur highlights that schools are identified as the primary places that contribute to the individuation process of the characters in a traditional bildungsroman (23). However, rather than a place of individual growth, school, as an institution, turns out to be a place where black children start to experience racial discrimination. bell hooks also confirms that the educational system often fails to educate the black poor and blames black children for their failure (37). One can also observe in Onwuachi’s narrative that starting from school, black children are often challenged by the negative labels

attached to their identity. Onwuachi narrates the discriminative attitude of teachers towards black boys as follows:

Many of the teachers, however, were middle-aged or older white women, and they approached us—ten-year-olds—like we were dangerous. They wielded their power like prison wardens. And in their fear, I saw reflected back an image of myself I hadn't seen before. At the same time, I saw the power my friends possessed, how they could manipulate using fear. As our teachers reprimanded us and, when that didn't work, suspended us, I saw how the kids around me dealt with this anger and frustration. They turned their faces to stone and deadened their eyes like those of statues. They became hard and menacing, and as I saw it then, that hardness meant strength. (Onwuachi, *Notes* 59)

As emphasized in the quotation, the teachers at school, as the power holders, assign stereotypical roles to black kids by labeling them as aggressive and dangerous. Onwuachi also describes how he internalized the labels attached to him as a black child: "Soon I had cemented my reputation as a troublemaker, and I thought If the suit fits, wear it" (Onwuachi, *Notes* 53). As he puts forward, it is difficult to act out of the boundaries of the attached stereotype, so they could only act as 'troublemakers' in the white culture.

The chef also narrates how easily he indulged in violence, crime, and drugs during the time he was engaged in street culture. In fact, in mainstream culture, black masculinity is often associated with violence and crime (hooks 32). Onwuachi underlines that violence was a standard part of everyday life in the blocks: "Violence, actual violence and the threat of it, permeated Webster. I saw my first murder when I was sixteen" (92). According to hooks, black boys practice violence to maintain social control and to feel powerful (46). Onwuachi also gives insights into how black boys associated power with violent acts: "[t]hat fight had awakened something in me, namely power. In a way I had never felt before, I could finally control my world, and the mechanism to do that was violence" (Onwuachi, *Notes* 90). Since he could not express himself on alternative platforms, Onwuachi was inclined to criminal acts that are normative in street culture. Soon, he became part of the drug-selling gang; "Saying you sell drugs is like saying

you sell cars” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 95). As the chef emphasizes, the acts of violence and crime have shaped black masculinity and daily life. His portrayal of his childhood proves that it is difficult to resist the stereotypes imposed on young black men.

The journey motif is yet another feature of the bildungsroman that can be traced in Onwuachi’s memoir. LeSeur underlines that in the African American tradition, the male hero, who often has distinguishing qualities, starts a journey to transform his life: “the hero . . . sets out on a journey through the world, obtaining guides who represent different worldviews” (18). Recognizing that she has lost control over his actions, his mother feels the necessity to send young Kwame to Nigeria. Although this journey was partially forced, the visit to Nigeria greatly impacts Onwuachi’s understanding of racial consciousness and black subjectivity. Living with his grandfather in Nigeria as a young black boy helps him to recognize the sense of community. W. E. B. Du Bois describes the concept of double consciousness to define the feeling of “twoness” that African American people experience since they constantly evaluate their subjectivity from “the eyes of the others” (xiii). Rather than double consciousness, Onwuachi experiences what social inclusion and social acceptance means in Nigeria: “We were just boys, students, some of us better than others. What we weren’t were problems. At the time, I couldn’t put into words or thoughts exactly why I felt the way I did—lighter than usual, more joyful than I was in the Bronx—but now I know that this was it. I was fundamentally not seen as a problem first and a person second” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 71). Through such a journey during his formative years, Onwuachi had a chance to internalize his black identity and feel a sense of belonging apart from the burdens of the previously assigned identities in the United States. He expresses this feeling as follows: “what it meant to have space, space at home, space to be who I really was without being penned in by what people thought I was” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 75). Eventually, his journey to Nigeria leads to an individual transformation: “Since I had returned from Nigeria, I had stopped using the N-word at all. I was proud to be black, proud to carry the name Kwame Onwuachi, an African name, a black name. I was nobody’s Negro, and I was nobody’s nigga” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 83). However, upon his return to the United States, he quickly adapts back to the street culture again: “Returning to the Bronx felt like stepping back onto a stage and into a character I knew well. Ibusa was a stage too, of course, but with a different cast,

a different audience, and very different scenery. . . . But as soon as I got back home, virtually from the moment I landed, that old rebellion flooded back” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 78). Onwuachi's experience proves the difficulty of rejecting the stereotypical roles assigned to black subjects as young men.

LeSeur emphasizes that, in the African American tradition, different from the European, the historical and social factors that shape the individual's identity dominate the black bildungsroman (21). Although he benefits from the guidance and wisdom of his grandfather in Nigeria, in the United States, Onwuachi feels a lack of guidance in his life as a black youngster: “I haven't waited to be summoned for my big moment by a tap on the shoulder from a mysterious, benevolent stranger. It doesn't work that way where I'm from. You make your own opportunities where I'm from” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 7). Like other young black men around him, the lack of a role model or a mentor in his life urges him to become a self-made man. However, an individual development is not easy and requires overcoming several difficulties, especially for an African American person:

I'd been kicked out of more schools than most people ever attended. I'd gotten into college but expelled because I couldn't kick my ambition to be a drug kingpin. Growing up, I'd had near misses with violence, near misses with the law, near misses with almost everything that moved. Some friends had been shot, others had died, many had ended up in jail, not just because they were black or poor—which is close to an indictable crime in America but because they had gotten themselves into the types of hairy situations that end in lengthy sentences or full stops. To escape, perhaps, I had always kept pushing forward, applying constant pressure to the future in the hope that some avenue would open up. So far it had worked, which is why I found myself at the CIA. Eventually, though, I knew I wouldn't be able to find an exit in time. (Onwuachi, *Notes* 156)

As can be deduced, Onwuachi achieves the self-made man image by constructing his culinary identity. Josée Johnston, et al, in their analysis of celebrity chefs' identities, adopt the term “the self-made man” as a culinary image that reflects the *culinary persona*. As

the critics suggest, a self-made man refers to the “life-changing, food-related narratives of upward mobility” (17). In that sense, the chef’s story foregrounds the archetypal self-made man tradition by narrating how Kwame Onwuachi, from a poor background, reaches culinary success and his American Dream. Chefs from marginalized racial and classed groups, specifically black chefs, favor portraying their life through the “self-made man” narrative (Johnston, et al, 18). The celebrity chefs who adopt the “self-made man” as a culinary persona centralize the “rags-to-riches” stories in their life narratives. Rather than artistic abilities and culinary talent, the narrative focuses on the struggles that challenged the chef through his culinary journey (Johnston, et al, 18). In his memoir, Onwuachi also indicates that his success story follows the traits of the classical “rags-to-riches” story: “In the story, I told myself at the time, I had tunneled through adversity and narrowly avoided bad breaks to emerge triumphant at the apex of fine dining. It was a simple rags-to-riches tale, a narrative as smooth and solid as an on-ramp. I had, in short, come to believe not only in myself but in the Kwame story I told others” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 248). As a result, one may conclude that the rags-to-riches stories reinforce American ideals such as hard work and individualism. The chef articulates his culinary style upon the foundational archetypes of American identity. Presenting his coming-of-age story, he claims his space as a black chef in the popular American culinary scene.

### **The Roots of Kwame Onwuachi’s Culinary Style**

There are two main strains forming Onwuachi’s culinary style. To start with, the chef prioritizes the home kitchen as a creative space and defines the kitchen as the core of domestic life: “The kitchen, as I said, was the heart of this home but not because of the food. It was the family spirit that gave the room its magnetic power” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 50). He foregrounds his mother’s home cooking during his childhood and his memories of cooking together with her in the home kitchen as the initial steps of his culinary career: “There was always something bubbling on the stove or cooking in the oven. She, like me, gravitated there to find a moment for herself” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 26). The second reformative place that provides a new perspective to Onwuachi’s understanding of food and cooking is the kitchen of his grandfather’s house in Nigeria. During his visit to Nigeria, Onwuachi



gains experience in African culinary culture. Observing and helping his aunts in the kitchen, he learns more about Nigerian flavors and ways of cooking (Onwuachi, *Notes* 67). The chef also defines the house kitchen as a resort that enables him to feel the family spirit to reform himself during the chaotic years of his early youth. While he feels the urge to transform his life as a drug-dealing college student, he makes a radical change in his life by deciding to become a chef. Cleaning up his house kitchen and cooking at his student apartment is a metaphor for this personal transformation (Onwuachi, *Notes* 107). As he emphasizes, cooking home food makes him feel secure when “[t]he smells of home filled the house” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 108). The chef prioritizes the home kitchen as a place of personal growth, self-realization, and reformation. With such a shift in the meaning, he challenges the traditional depiction of the kitchen and culinary masculinity that maintains the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Different from the masculine tradition, Onwuachi celebrates the domestic roots that nurtured him. Jonatan Leer emphasizes that the dominant image of the white male chef is often portrayed as separate from the boundaries of house and home cooking in a professional setting (17). In this respect, what distinguishes Onwuachi's narrative from the white chef memoirs is the description of the domestic kitchens. He portrays the house kitchen as a source of inspiration in contrast to the competitive homosocial structure of professional kitchens. The chef indicates that his connection to the house kitchen constructs the kernel of his culinary success. This alternative connection to the home kitchen challenges the traditional white chef narrative that often depicts the industrial kitchen as a battlefield.

Onwuachi also underlines that he builds his culinary style upon the foundations of African American culinary tradition. He draws attention to the connection between black culinary culture and African American history, and approaches cooking as a way to reach black cultural memory: “It’s that I’m cooking for all the people, and to tell all the stories, told and untold, remembered and forgotten, housed in the floors below me” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 8). The chef finds himself responsible for reclaiming the significant roles black chefs and cooks played in American culinary history: “We must realize that those few stories told on the floors below stand for the many that aren’t. In my own way, I am trying to do the same through cooking. Keeping their stories alive” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 11). Onwuachi prioritizes the visibility of black

cooks and chefs before him and demands the visibility of black people's contribution to American culinary history. The chef defines keeping black history alive as his responsibility. In line with this approach, he starts his memoir with a reference to a special event at the Museum of African American History and Culture. For the special event at the museum, he plans to blend African American and African culinary styles in the menu and expresses that his food at the table would embody the stories of black chefs and cooks before him along with his own:

The purpose of this museum is to resurrect the dead, to honor their lives, to celebrate their progress, to remember their suffering, to never forget their stories. This building is an argument that these stories, traditions, this suffering, this history, matters. In three weeks, I will open my restaurant and with it, I'll have a chance to add my voice to that chorus. To prove that my story, like the millions of voices behind and beneath me, matters. As I push open the kitchen door, the last of my smile fades and I get back to work. I'm standing on stories, and this is my own. (Onwuachi, *Notes 21*)

Onwuachi expresses that African American History Museum is one of these sights where the multidimensionality of African American experience is visible. He also presents his culinary journey as an extension of black chefs' stories by cooking in the museum kitchen. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblet identifies "doing," "behaving," and "showing" as the three major phases of culinary performance. While "doing" food refers to the performance of food preparation and serving, "behaving" stands for the performance of social practices and rituals in relation to food. "Showing," as the last step of food performance stands for the display of food and the sharing of it with participants or an audience (83-84). In fact, with his presentation at the museum, Onwuachi fulfills the three stages of culinary performance and provides an alternative medium to reconsider African history and culinary legacy. Each meal served at the table can be evaluated as an alternative expression of intersecting aspects of black culinary culture. Therefore, the food the chef puts on the table not only bridges the past and the present, but also the present and the future. Moreover, the food represents the dynamics of the intersecting identities that are alive, constantly changing, and becoming. While the guests taste the food, they directly interact with the artist/chef who reflects the dynamic

rhythm of black culture through his creation that embodies a personal and cultural narrative.

### **Black Chef in the White World of Fine-Dining**

Onwuachi describes his culinary style as part of this global restaurant culture: "It's a fine-dining, modern American, globally influenced restaurant that tells my life story through food" (Onwuachi, *Notes* 232). In his memoir as well, the chef highlights the challenges of claiming a space as a young black chef in fine-dining restaurants. He stresses the centrality of white male supremacy in determining the norms of the fine-dining world. As opposed to this, he claims a place in the fine-dining restaurant culture and challenges the typical understanding of a black chef cooking traditional Southern/soul food. His belief regarding the preparation of food is similar to white chefs; black chefs also need to have the freedom to create their personal culinary style regardless of their racial identity. However, white dominance in the fine-dining world often does not allow chefs from different racial backgrounds to feel a sense of belonging:

Fine-dining lines are as white as the tablecloths that cover the tables and the patrons that sit around them. And, from my experience, being the only black guy on the line makes you stick out like a minor note on a major scale. No one lets you forget you don't belong. Though it's gaining more exposure now, the kitchen is about as immune from racism as it is from sexism. . . . Sometimes racism takes the form of ugly words and actions. Other times it remains unspoken, communicated by hostile looks and secret snickers. But the most corrosive form, and often the hardest to address, is not being seen at all. (Onwuachi, *Notes* 15)

The chef draws attention to racism and sexism as two domineering concepts that shape the power dynamics at fine-dining restaurants. In *Gender and Power* (1989), Connell states that unequal social structures can be understood by examining social interactions, practices, and institutions (92-93). Connell's conceptualization of the context of social networks can be adopted to understand the intersections of race, masculinity, and food in the fine-dining world. As Onwuachi puts forward, even when working at well-known fine-

dining restaurants, he is reminded that he does not belong to the fine-dining world due to his racialized and gendered identity. The chef states that he is frequently exposed to racist remarks in the fine-dining world, explicitly or implicitly: “The most insidious kind of racism isn’t always being called the N-word. At least that’s shameless enough to get you fired. It’s the unspoken shit, the hard-to-prove, hard-to-pin-down, can’t-go-viral day-to-day shit” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 298). To illustrate this, Onwuachi refers to the racist jokes in the kitchen hidden under the cloak of friendship. In one instance, at T.J., a well-known fine-dining restaurant, a coworker teased him by saying:

“No black people eat here anyway.” He laughed, and I could tell he expected me to laugh too. This clearly racist aside was either a plank to walk or a bridge to connect us. If I acted as offended as I felt, the label of “difficult” or “politically correct” or really just ‘problem’ would be even more deeply imprinted on me. If I laughed, not only would I be betraying myself, but I’d be giving Flint a pass. I kept my face still as the night and nodded. It was not a gesture of acceptance. It was not a gesture of resistance. It let Flint know that I recognized his move for what it was: a racist jab masked as a gesture of friendship. (Onwuachi, *Notes* 209)

Onwuachi’s experience as a black chef also indicates how challenging it is to be a black chef in the American culinary scene when one’s individuality is systematically hampered by gendered racism. For black male chefs, as well as race, gendered discrimination can also be noted as a domineering factor since the definition of a successful chef is made in accordance with white male standards. Like other chefs from different racial backgrounds, Onwuachi uses food and foodways as a vehicle through which he resists gendered racism in the culinary world. In this sense, Onwuachi’s performance in the kitchen can be read in relation to gender and racial performativity. In *Gender Trouble* (2006), Judith Butler treats gender as a cultural construction reproduced through the performative repetition of norms. She delineates gender performativity as follows: “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (32). Butler also presents gender performativity as a linguistic and theatrical performance (xxvii) and accentuates that, since gender is culturally constructed, it

is possible to transform the meaning of stabilized norms surrounding it (11). Based on Butler's theory, numerous critics in their articles look for ways to transform gender performativity into a racial discourse and interpret the construction of racial subjectivity concerning racial performativity. One of those critics, Nadine Ehlers, deploys Butler's formulation of gender performativity and elucidates that race is also performative in her book, *Racial Imperatives*. In her exploration of racial identity, Ehlers asserts: "All racial subjects are formed through the compelled and never-ending recitation of norms associated with particular categories of race" (23). As a black chef, Onwuachi rejects the assigned identities that label him through his culinary performance. Therefore, the theoretical framework of performativity can be adopted to understand Onwuachi's culinary performance since it opens arrays for a discussion focusing on the intersections of black subjectivity, culinary culture, and masculinity.

Coupling performance with performativity to analyze the black performer's identity, Petra Tournay-Theodotou maintains that the white audience expects the black performer to embrace "the assumed identity" assigned to him on the stage as in real life. The critic further explains: "In a racist environment, the performer's assumed identity is therefore seen as his 'true' identity. White America demands these eternal repetitions of its fantasy for its confirmation of the stereotype and for its security" (96). Like black performers, black chefs are also expected to confirm the culinary stereotype of the black chef. Even in the fine-dining culture, they are expected to adapt and serve the typical menus reflecting Southern culinary culture or soul food. For instance, when he opened his first restaurant, Onwuachi received direct criticism from a food critic who emphasized that a black chef would not be accepted as a professional unless he cooked within the framework of the African American culinary tradition:

"The dinner was amazing, absolutely amazing," she began. "It's clear you know how to cook." I waited as she paused for an uncomfortably long time, searching, it seemed, for what to say next. "The problem is, Kwame, and I hate to say it, but America isn't ready for a black chef who makes this kind of food." "What kind?" I asked. "Fine dining: velouté. What the world wants to see is a black chef making black food, you know. Fried chicken and cornbread and collards. (Onwuachi, *Notes* 222)

The young chef was given the message that he would not be accepted in the fine-dining restaurant culture unless he embraced the assumed identity that predetermines the chef's culinary style. Tournay-Theodotou stresses that this stereotypical categorization has been deliberately imposed on black chefs "for security," aiming at preserving the hierarchical power relations between white chefs and chefs of color. However, such an affirmation would not reflect Onwuachi's culinary style. He regards the stereotypical performance of a black chef cooking typical black food and being appreciated by the white world as an "ugly play of degrading black culture for the benefit of white people" (Onwuachi, *Notes* 231). As indicated in the quoted text, Onwuachi cannot express his genuine self within the borders of this limiting, predefined black culinary identity; therefore, he looks for different ways of self-expression.

Onwuachi aims to destroy the stereotypical images of African American foodways through his performance in the kitchen. Accordingly, his initial goal with his first restaurant, Shaw Bijou, is to deconstruct the classical understanding of high-end restaurant culture. To start with, the place of his first restaurant is chosen to be at a unique, historically significant place: "the Shaw neighborhood was founded as a free slave encampment in the 1800s. It had been home to D.C.'s black cultural elite for decades. It was a hotbed of jazz and art in the 1920s and 1930s, a sort of Harlem of the South" (Onwuachi, *Notes* 234). By choosing a place similar to Harlem as the location for his first restaurant, Onwuachi wants to create a bond between Harlem's artistic and cultural legacy and his food as a channel of self-expression. As a black chef, Onwuachi regards food and foodways as an alternative medium to present his life narrative artistically. In the memoir, cooking gradually evolves into a performance with the development of the chef's culinary style. While the restaurant and the kitchen become the stage to assert his subjective position, food becomes the script that narrates Onwuachi's culinary journey. In their evaluation of the intersections of food and performance, Lindenfeld and Langellier posit that, shaping daily life practices, "Food preparation, consumption, and the narratives we create about and through food are, by their very nature, performative" (1). Parallel to Lindenfeld and Langellier's perspective, Onwuachi envisions his food as an extension of his identity: "This was my food, an extension of who I am, and so I cared, probably more than I ever had before" (Onwuachi, *Notes* 215). Therefore, he looks for ways to share his life narrative with his audience at the restaurant.

To achieve this, he adopts the restaurant's menu as an open book that reflects the milestones of his rags-to-riches story. He expresses his motivation to design such a menu in the following words: "I was attempting to execute at a much higher level than I ever had, and at the same time create something much more personal than I'd attempted before. The menu I settled on was truly autobiographical," and he adds that "this attempt might 'quite literally' be read as 'my life story told through food'" (Onwuachi, *Notes* 213). Onwuachi centralizes food as an autobiographical element and shares it with his audience: "my life story could be translated into food and that audiences, guests, diners, wanted to consume both. I had found a way to convert through food, not just the warmth and love of my upbringing but also the struggles I'd faced. Whatever my next step was, I knew I needed to capitalize on this" (Onwuachi, *Notes* 230). To achieve this, he garners the food on the menu with personal, autobiographical touches reflecting his culinary style. Each dish on the menu is served with a preface telling "the Kwame story" related to that specific dish (Onwuachi, *Notes* 248). With such an inventive style, Onwuachi attempts to subvert the high-end restaurant culture in two ways. First and foremost, treating food as a self-narrative enables him to promote the multidimensionality of his identity as a black male chef. At the same time, he challenges the common understanding of classical, French-oriented, high-end restaurant menus in which the dishes are presented in isolation and are not related to a story. Sandra M. Gilbert asserts that "restaurants are in some sense theatrical arenas, with meals at upscale venues a favored form of bourgeois entertainment, in which diners perform not only for their own tablemates but also for others in the room, even the servers and the *maître de*" (76). At Shaw Biju, Onwuachi transforms the high-class dining experience and adopts culinary performativity to reflect on his personal story. The kitchen, in this sense, evolves into an expressive space where the chef constructs his culinary performance.

The failure of this first restaurant due to high pricing and bitter criticism from the gastronomical critics does not discourage Onwuachi from leading a new path. As the executive chef of a new restaurant, Kith/Kin, Onwuachi shifts his focus from his personal story to his black culinary legacy (Krishna). In a magazine interview, the chef defines his experience at Kith/Kin as another form of self-expression: "this felt a lot more like me. It was like a coming-of-age" (Krishna). Onwuachi destroys the stereotypical representations of black-owned restaurants

by offering his interpretation of food that reflects the diversity of the Southern, Nigerian, and Caribbean culinary cultures in a fine-dining setting. Accordingly, the critics evaluate his restaurant in the following words: “The atmosphere is fine-dining, and the food is Afro-Caribbean, exploring the influences of his mother’s Creole and Jamaican roots and his grandfather’s Nigerian heritage” (“Chef Kwame”). In an article he wrote for *Food and Wine* magazine, Onwuachi highlights that often the food created by chefs of color is judged from a solitary perspective. In his own words: “In the culinary industry, we are so often judged for our African, Caribbean, African American, and Latin food by people who have little to no emotional or cultural connection to it” (Onwuachi, “A Jury of My Peers”). Dining at Kith/Kin is also a memorable experience for people of color since the high-end culinary culture has biases against black chefs and black customers. Kith/Kin becomes a success story for Onwuachi, and attracts people with its African and Caribbean culinary notes in a high-end restaurant atmosphere (Lewis). Korsha Wilson, a black female restaurant critic, defines being a critic and diner at fine-dining restaurants as a challenging experience:

From being asked for a drink by white patrons to being told a different wait time for a table (or told there are none at all), restaurant dining rooms too often act in accordance with the same racial hierarchy as the rest of the world. . . . Experiences like these are constant reminders to people of color that they’re an “other” in dining spaces. (Wilson)

Wilson’s experience as a critic also illustrates how black customers are exposed to biased attitudes at fine-dining restaurants. Considering Butler’s theory of performativity in the framework of race, Wilson is expected to perform, eat, drink, and act in preset manners attributed to the black customer’s identity. Different from this demeaning experience in mainstream culture, Onwuachi defines Kith/Kin’s position as follows: “Kith/Kin was a special place because you were able to see people inherently celebrate their own culture while celebrating a special experience. . . . People were finally able to go out and get dressed up, but still eat oxtails and curry goat and jerk chicken and propose in the dining room” (Lewis). Thus, coupling fine-dining restaurant culture with African and African American culinary culture is a significant attempt to subvert the white hegemonic norms. The restaurant does not only provide a space for Onwuachi to perform as a black chef but also for customers to engage in the black culinary culture in an upscale restaurant atmosphere.



In her article entitled “Is Race a Trope?,” Debby Thompson states that racial identity is both a fact and a trope (127), and adds that there is a shift in models of identity in American theater. That is, the character's identity is interpreted as a representation of a transnational and transcultural entity, and the character's actions are read as manifestations of the character's interior identity on stage (128). The same framework can be applied to understand the black chefs' performance on the American culinary stage. As Thompson suggests, the black chef's corporeal reality in the restaurant kitchen maintains intersections with African American history and culinary culture. Therefore, the black chef's identity on the culinary stage occupies a place as a transnational, as well as a transcultural, entity. Onwuachi also underlines that he adopts black culinary culture in his cooking: “I was making food that came from my culture, from black culture. I was saying that this culture is worth something, worth a lot, actually. That I was worth something. Underneath the reaction to the price tag, this was the white-lash rage that seethed” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 234). Moreover, he highlights the transcultural connections of his food: “I want to cook my own food. I'm Nigerian. I'm American. I grew up on Creole and Jamaican food. I've been working in fine dining now for a long time. I want to cook whatever that is” (Onwuachi, *Notes* 211). Therefore, by emphasizing the multidimensionality of the black experience through his food, Onwuachi stresses that the food industry needs to create space for diversity. He hopes to be part of this progress by paving the path for chefs of color (Onwuachi, “A Jury of My Peers”). He celebrates transcultural black culinary identity by expanding the boundaries of soul food since black culinary culture in the twenty-first century expands beyond the limits of the Southern/soul food culture and encompasses its unceasing interactions with African and Caribbean culinary cultures.

### **Popular Culture, Culinary Performance, and Activism**

With the influx of foodie culture as part of popular culture, chefs gained social visibility and are credited as celebrity figures. Starting from the first decade of the twenty-first century, becoming cult, celebrity chefs hold the power “to reach millions of people through a multimedia empire—with books, restaurants, TV shows, and even commercial endorsements” (Shapiro). Chefs from different

ethnic backgrounds have also become acclaimed figures challenging the ideals of hegemonic culture by concentrating on the variety of foods belonging to ethnic cuisines. The chefs of color construct distinctive culinary identities through their culinary performances as an alternative to the stereotypically racialized identities imposed on them by the dominant culinary culture. From this vantage point, one may also observe that Onwuachi capitalizes on his food and personal story as elements of his culinary style. The chef's memoir comes to a close with the narration of the failure of his first restaurant. However, his self-expressive style continues to constitute his personal narrative through the social media. Accordingly, he performs as a TV chef and capitalizes upon this social image to claim a place in the culinary world.

Along with claiming a space in the fine-dining world, Onwuachi constructs a TV image to gain visibility as a chef. While gaining popularity, he realizes that popular culture tends to singularize his culinary identity. However, he interprets this as a standard procedure to create TV personalities, as Johnston, et al, express: "celebrity chefs are discursively represented, packaged, and legitimized as culinary personas. Knowing that producers with more focused identities are more likely to appeal to audiences, achieve acceptance and be successful" (Johnston, et al, 4). Likewise, Onwuachi finds the TV version of himself less approachable since TV heightens his confidence to the point of arrogance (220). As he points out, TV programs openly distort the multidimensionality of identity and force the chefs into two-dimensional characters suitable for the screen. In the flow of his writing, Onwuachi discovers a strong link between his representation on TV as a TV persona and his gendered racial identity as a black man. Thus, he draws attention to one-dimensional depictions of black men in the mainstream culture. According to him, the prefixed identities of TV personalities extend from the boundaries of the TV kitchen to real life for men of color:

And yet, I realized, this wasn't anything new, not to me and not to any other minority. In some ways, I had prepared my whole life for reality television. Ever since I was born, I had been made aware that the world saw me in one way, thanks to the color of my skin, regardless of how I saw myself. This was a lesson learned on the streets of the Bronx and in the dining rooms of Baton Rouge and in the kitchens of Per Se and EMP. (220)

Onwuachi prioritizes his racial identity as a dominant element that shapes his TV personality. The chef emphasizes that stereotypes imposed on young men transform their real-life experiences into performances. In this respect, a young black man has a limited chance for self-expression because of the boundaries that frame his subjectivity. In his article, entitled "Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender," John Tosh states that popular media are powerful in establishing "many of the assumptions of hegemonic masculinity" (43). As Tosh postulates, "the role of the mass media in taking up and reinforcing the dominant expressions of masculinity is central to the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity in modern societies" (44). Likewise, Onwuachi believes that negative racial stereotypes attached to black male subjectivity through popular culture harm young black men since these images represent them as one-dimensional characters and encourage them to experience real-life as TV images. As opposed to this restricted image, Onwuachi adopts gender performativity as a coping mechanism against the stereotypical portrayals of black masculine/culinary identity on the screen. In other words, he gives a performative response to stereotypical representations of black masculinity in popular culture. For instance, taking the seat as the judge in well-known food shows, he consciously reconstructs the black chef's image by playing with racial codes, gender codes, and dress codes. Thus, he subverts the traditional chef image by manipulating the traditionally accepted codes on the screen.

In addition to reconfiguring the popular chef image by emphasizing his blackness, Onwuachi also uses the kitchen as a political platform to contribute to social change. He uses his popularity in the media to draw public attention to racism. For instance, following the death of George Floyd, he wanted to draw attention to The Black Lives Matter movement by opening a debate on violence toward black men. The chef also engages in community projects as an activist. He contributed to "COVID Activism" during the pandemic by voluntary cooking. When Kith/Kin closed its doors to customers, he went to his childhood neighborhood, the Bronx, to cook for World Central Kitchen. World Central Kitchen served free meals for the Mott Haven residents and medical workers during the pandemic. Onwuachi interprets his volunteer cooking experience as a way to contribute to the community (Wells). By drawing such a culinary persona, he inspires social change and promotes equal welfare for the black community. Onwuachi

believes chefs have a fundamental role in social change, and cooking enables social healing since cooking is a significant act of caring for others.

### **Conclusion**

In the contemporary period, food and foodways provide alternative ways for marginalized communities and minority groups to find their voice. Accordingly, food memoirs written by chefs from different racial and cultural backgrounds give their readers an opportunity to understand the dynamics of gender, race, and financial power by narrating their personal experiences in the culinary scene. Chef Kwame Onwuachi brings a new perspective to the fine-dining world with the narrative of his culinary journey. In his memoir, he narrates the challenges of growing up as a young black man in the United States and the difficulties he faces throughout his culinary career. However, his portrayal of a black chef in the memoir cannot be separated from his actual presence in the culinary scene. He portrays a chef image through his cooking style, his restaurants, and social activism. By means of his performance, he challenges the established, white-oriented structure of the fine-dining world. Therefore, his food, his culinary style, his restaurants, and his outlook are all part of his cultural presence. By using foodways and popular food culture as forms of self-expression, the chef attempts to deconstruct the stereotypical representations of black manhood, black chefs, and black culinary culture. He also demonstrates the hybridity of his culinary style and embraces a social role as a chef who promotes resilience for the black community in TV shows and on social media. His culinary performance helps in claiming an alternative space for all contemporary black chefs in the American culinary scene.

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