Opulent Kitchens: Crystal Wilkinson's Use of Food as a Source of Appalachian Identity

Crystal Wikinson's *Praisesong for the Kitchen Ghosts* is a lyrical meditation on the African American, Appalachian (Affrilachian) kitchen as a place to realize absence, both personal and generational, and re-shape her own identity. When Wilkinson enters her kitchen, she encounters ghosts of her ancestors in the food she cooks, and in the food left unmade. Both choices haunt Wilkinson as she grapples with what it means to be a marginalized, voiceless person in Appalachia. Wikinson's poetic choice to explore the relationship between Black women and food as a source of community, growth, and self-actualization enjoys a long tradition in African American literature and criticism. Psyche Williams, in *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* traces how Black women created forms of self-expression, independence, and community through food, especially chicken. Williams describes this process as a "story of feminist consciousness, community building, cultural work, and personal identity," (Williams 1-2). According to Williams, a Black woman is able, in the eyes of her community, to enter womanhood via her own ability to recreate and surpass the recipes of those who came before her. As Erica Abrams Locklear has shown, Wilkinson extends this search for identity and self-expression by also using her kitchen to describe "how food memories and recipes can heal, assert, and resist at the same time that they highlight Black joy" (Locklear, 126). Wilkinson's kitchen, in other words, becomes a site not only to confront experiences of shame and trauma but also to work for their healing. The kitchen becomes a place of resistance by giving space for Wilkinson to reclaim her agency and create "beauty and sustenance in the face of hardship and suffering" (Locklear, 136).

In this paper, I want to extend Locklear's insight by exploring one way that Wilkinson performs this act of resistance and reclamation. My argument is that Wilkinson uses what Psyche Williams calls "culinary dozens" to acknowledge and honor her past within her present. By playing Dozens with her family's recipes, Wilkinson keeps the relationship and memories embedded in the food while trimming those parts that were physically or emotionally dangerous. Finding ways of updating her family's recipes allows her to construct her kitchen as a space not just to reclaim her past but to enter into her present in new ways, thereby using cooking to create a uniquely Black and Appalachian voice and articulate her identity as Affrilachian. To make my case, I want first to explore a key story in the text where Wilkinson uses something like "culinary dozens" to update and reclaim old family recipes. I will then examine an additional passage that sheds light on how she draws on the freedom her game of dozens generates to use her kitchen as a source of identity making and healing from grief.

Before turning to Wilkinson's text, let me first note what we mean by "culinary dozens." The game Dozens is a popular game in African American culture where young men try to "up" each other with various insults. The players trade remarks back and forth, upping the intensity until one player cannot think of a comeback. The term "culinary dozens" refers to this popular game, but with a key distinction. I take the phrase from Psyche Williams's *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs.* In her discussion of the "gospel bird", as Williams puts it, Williams identifies the competition as one that holds an element of gender oppression and negativity between the competing women. However, what is more compelling for Williams – and for this paper – is the positive, community building this competition also creates among black women. This is what Williams terms "culinary dozens". These women do not use the competitive nature of dozens to

“rag on” and tear down each other's creations; rather, these women use their place in the game to “build on” other’s recipes (pg. 148). Dozens is a common game played in African American culture; Frank X Walker even has a poem about it suitably named “Dozens”. What Williams is describing, however, is a game shared and experienced specifically by African American women. Furthermore, this game also acts as a “coming of age”, wherein women can safely and non-violently move into womanhood in the eyes of their community. Williams uses Anna Julia Cooper to express this idea of both non-violence and coming of age. Writing in the late nineteenth century, Anna Julia Cooper said, ‘‘Only the Black Woman can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me,’’’ (6). By identifying and exploring the idea of culinary dozens, Williams connects black women's experiences and foodways together. This sets the stage of Wilkinson’s in-depth exploration of her identity primarily through this connection.

Pork and Freedom

To begin my argument, I want first to examine how Wilkinson plays culinary dozens with her families recipes. Though for much of the book, Wilkinson is content to reclaim and preserve the old recipes, but at a crucial moment in the narrative, she describes how she had to one-up the old recipes and ingredients in order to reclaim them.

In the chapter “Hog Wild About Pork”, Wilkinson discussed her relationship with pork. This is an interesting chapter for two reasons. First, this is one of the only chapters where Wilkinson’s personal relationship with the food item discussed takes precedence over the communal relationship with the food item. Second, in conjunction with the first reason, “Hog

Wild" explores a food that Wilkinson does not have an inherent positive relationship with. Therefore, Wilkinson's exploration of pork becomes an example of the struggles finding identity one might face because of the food itself.

Wilkinson begins the chapter discussing how her grandfather and community would kill a hog. Following this, she describes the ways her grandmother would use every part of the hog both in conjunction with her own history as a poor, black woman from the country and the wider history of black persons living in the mountains. In this moment is also where Wilkinson mentions chitlins. She writes, "My grandmother stopped cooking chitlins once it was no longer a necessary food in her household. I believe they considered the eating of offal behind them and perhaps had residual shame around the circumstances of their youth before they became better off financially," (Wilkinson, 194). This introduction is similar to the rest of the book. Where it differs, however, is on page 195 when Wilkinson begins a new section with "...but I never liked pork much." Pork becomes a symbol of the old ways that Wilkinson is trying to grow away from. At this point, Wilkinson is living in Lexington away from the community she had grown up with. Wilkinson writes that she was "desperate for community" and found it with people who followed a blend of African Spirituality and Islam (pg. 197). Pork has no place in this new community, so Wilkinson cuts it from her diet. Wilkinson writes that she felt "better than" her forbearers for choosing this healthier way of eating, even while acknowledging that this choice is because of her privilege. Interestingly, during this time of her life in which Wilkinson seems to be trying to establish her identity outside of her grandparents and past, she still finds ways to incorporate it into her new life.

For instance, Wilkinson works hard to create an acceptable vegetarian sausage recipe. This is an explicit of William's "culinary dozens", as Wilkinson is attempting to one-up her grandmother's recipe by making it healthier without losing it flavor. However, her new "No Piggie Sausage" does not disrespect her grandmother's original recipe. Instead, Wilkinson uses her new sausage to connect back to her roots within her new identity. When describing her vegetarian recipe, Wilkinson writes that "They were vegetarian, but the warming sage and red pepper smelled like home if I closed my eyes," (pg. 199). Through culinary dozens, Wilkinson is trying to merge her separate identities into one that is more wholistic. Pork is a symbol of the old ways for Wilkinson; and while there are moments in her life where she feels almost ashamed of it, Wilkinson never tries to remove it from her life entirely. This is further proven when Wilkinson's mother dies.

When Wilkinson's mother passes, she has already begun to reincorporate pork back into her diet. However, Wilkinson's consumption of pork takes on a new fervor in the wake of her mother's passing. She writes, "...he had never seen me dive into pork this way...I wanted to eat everything my people had eaten, to taste my childhood again," (pg. 200). Wilkinson wants to connect back to her past and, since pork is her symbol of that, she feels an intense desire to consume it. However, consumption of pork will not take Wilkinson back to the past she wants to return to, and she acknowledges that. Her love of pork and new-found interest in it—going so far as to ask for a handcrank to grind her own sausage — will never magically transport her back to her grandmother's kitchen. As Wilkinson states in the final paragraph, she is searching for a way of life that is unattainable (pg. 202). However, Wilkinson's relationship with pork symbolizes her relationship with Indian Creek and its history. Attempting to establish her own identity

outside of it is impossible, but through her act of culinary dozens and eventual return to merge it with her new way of life, Wilkinson honors her ancestors and history through pork.

The Hot Pot and Passing the Torch

To continue my argument, I now want to examine how Wilkinson explores grief through the recipes and comes to acknowledge her new position in the familial game of culinary dozens. At this point in the narrative, Wilkinson relates her experiences of cooking to her grandmother's and begins to empathize with her grandmother's position. Through this realization, Wilkinson is able to allow her children to play culinary dozens and pass on her heritage through Thanksgiving recipes.

Wilkinson also uses her freedom to update her family's recipes to help her confront the problem of grief, specifically the grief she feels at the absence of her mother and grandmother. Her chapter "Soul Food of the Mountains" is the hinge point chapter of Crystal Wilkinson's *Praisesong for the Kitchen Ghost*s. In this chapter about one-pot meals, Wilkinson most explicitly tackles book's central themes: the relationship between love, cooking, grief, and community. Using bell hooks, Wilkinson observes that love and grief are interdependent and interrelational, and cooking provides an apt metaphor for that interdependence. She writes: "I reexperience grief and stand in it for a while. I chop onions and garlic, let them sizzle in oil," (pg. 177). Grief is a part of love. It is bitter and tearful on its own, like the onions and garlic, but sometimes there is nothing else to do but to let it sizzle and fill the air. It's only after the grief has softened and turned golden that it can be added to the larger pot, but it should never be forgotten or left out. As Wilkinson describes it, the grief is what turns the pot to "magic". Grief is a part of Wilkinson's experience. Throughout *Praisesong* she is grieving for her grandmother, her mother,

even for her ancestors who suffered and cooked in ways she can never understand. Yet these stories and recipes are expressions of deep, total love. Cooking with her grandmother is where Wilkinson first experienced community and connection. And what is community if not learning to love and be loved.

For example, Wilkinson uses memories of her children to work through and identify some of the grief surrounding her grandmother. In “Soul Food of the Mountains”, Wilkinson describes that some of the happiest times she remembers with her children are when she had dinner simmering on the stove so she could give them her undivided attention (pg. 179-80). She relates the love of these moments easily, but within these moments of love there is a grief that comes like an aftertaste. Wilkinson states that seeing her children fed and happy from her cooking was all that she needs; though in the same few lines Wilkinson writes that there were times when she “scraped the bottom of the pot” to feed herself after her children had eaten, then wonders if her grandmother had ever done the same (pg. 181). Cooking is an act of love and sacrifice for Wilkinson, and she believes her grandmother felt the same. The grief comes when Wilkinson, now embodying the same role her grandmother once did in the kitchen, cannot express to her grandmother that she now understands. The only way Wilkinson sees her grandmother is through the memory of cooking the same type of recipes and trying to recreate the loving spirit community her grandmother first made in her kitchen. This is why Wilkinson is so attracted to one-pot meals. She writes that one-pot meals are “steeped in the spirit of providing for community and family,” (pg 181). Through this idea, Wilkinson gives merit to the idea that food carries with it emotional resonances. Food matters within a community; it carries

within it the love, grief, healing, and connection that communities are built upon. When a person cooks, she is establishing a community around herself based on love and acts of service.

Here is where Wilkinson's freedom expresses itself, because as she comes to recognize later in the book, constructing this deep sense of identity through sacrifice requires her to allow her children to update the recipes for their own contexts. This is not a straightforward process however; Wilkinson struggles to acknowledge her children as players of "culinary dozens" as she is. In the final chapter of the book, "Giving Thanks: Past, Present, Future" Wilkinson relates the difficulty of celebrating Thanksgiving with her family in the pandemic. As discussed in "Soul Food", Wilkinson becomes the matriarchal position in her family after her grandmother passes, taking up the role as primary cook and establishing her identity through foodways. Consequently, Wilkinson's foodways become the criteria through which her own children play "culinary dozens", as they attempt to not only replicate her recipes, but also to improve upon them to better suit their way of life. Like Wilkinson does with pork, her children experiment and recreate Thanksgiving dinner. She shares several humorous moments of her children struggling to replicate the recipes on their own, before talking with them after and realizing that her children do not want to continue to cook the same recipes Wilkinson herself does. Rather, her children say, " 'I can see myself doing it but with more shortcuts'... 'I'll keep two or three original recipes for tradition,'" (Wilkinson, 233). This is "culinary dozens" in its most basic form; Wilkinson's children are following the same path she did to establishing their own identity through the ancestral foodways. What Wilkinson realizes, however, is that being the defending player rather than an upcoming one requires a kind of sacrificial love and ability to know grief that only comes through personal identity. In the end, this is what allows Wilkinson to accept her

new role in the familial “culinary dozens” and be “thankful that my children and grandchildren will find their own ways to morph and change culinary tradition...to honor the calling of kitchen ghosts,” (Wilkinson, 233).

Conclusion

In conclusion, as Anna Julia Cooper theorizes, Wilkinson has moved into “the quiet dignity of her womanhood” by the end of *Praisesong for Kitchen Ghosts* (Williams, 6). In the beginning, Wilkinson searched for identity in her past through the recipes that connect her back. Wilkinson struggles with this identity. She pushes against some aspects, struggles to embrace others, and holds on to some parts too tightly. This exploration of identity through foodways, specifically the recipes left to her, is what allows Wilkinson to become a player of “culinary dozens” and thereby enter the “quiet dignity of womanhood” within the eyes of her community. She replicates recipes, learns from those who came before her; then takes this knowledge to better adapt tradition to her way of life. In “Hog Wild About Pork”, Wilkinson’s “culinary dozens” is what allows her to merge her past and present into a new, improved identity through foodways. Afterwards, Wilkinson becomes the defending player in the game of “culinary dozens”. She is a woman now within the eyes of her community. Thus, it becomes her role to pass on the foodways to the younger generation and teach them the history, love, and grief tied into these new recipes. Then, her children are free to become players of “culinary dozens” themselves and reimagine their own identites through these ancestral foodways.

Therefore, I posit that *Praisesong* is not so much a reclamation of the past as it is a passing of the torch. The journey Wilkinson embarks on at the beginning of the book does not end with her making peace or accepting the ghosts that haunt her kitchen – she does that within the first few chapters. Rather, the purpose of *Praisesong* is to relate her struggles with identity and describe how that identity is always carried forward, even as it takes new shape. She is Affrilachian, and she learns how to be Affrilachian in a world where her idea of that identity has faded away. There is no way to be the Affrilachian Wilkinson remembers from her childhood, so to continue this identity it must take new shape. This reality invokes some grief, but ultimately, Wilkinson celebrates the new shapes identities take, especially through foodways, because they speak to the resilience of the people who made them.

Works Cited

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