

African American Foodways and Collection Building: Examining the Importance and Challenges of Progressive  
Food Librarianship

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Final Paper

LIS 651-03

Pratt Institute

“Because food is an imperative element of human survival, and because there has never been any other human body fuel that could replace it, abundant lore about food had appeared throughout human society and culture through all time and place” (Thursby, 2008).

“Having a particular ideology is not necessarily bad. It is not being conscious of the presence of ideology that constitutes the problem” (Andersen, 2008).

Foodways are a part of every culture. It encompasses the cultural, social, and economic aspects of our relationship to the food that we grow, prepare, and consume, as well as the tools we use to forge that relationship. In short, foodways are our food traditions. Food studies is the field dedicated to the multidisciplinary study of those traditions that “focuses on the cultural, symbolic, and ideological meaning of what we cook and eat” (Morris-Knower, 2004). It is difficult to say whether the growth of food librarianship and food library collections has inspired the growth of food studies programs at colleges and universities around the country or if the opposite is true. It almost goes without saying that popular interest in food spurred by the existence of the Food Network has very likely inspired significant numbers of people to explore various national cuisines as well as new and familiar ingredients in different ways.<sup>1</sup>

In the United States, the notion of a national cuisine is a complicated one because of the very nature of American populace as a group of immigrants and their descendants. The dishes or techniques we think of as quintessentially American have origins elsewhere and very often because the development of culinary tradition depended so heavily on immigration, different regions boast different specialties. While there has always been an interest in food, never before has it been taken quite as seriously or been examined quite as creatively at academic and research levels, so while it may be ultimately pointless to try to determine whether the academy inspired the library or vice versa, it *is* important to examine foodways collections in libraries and the processes enlisted in building them.

Food libraries in academic and research libraries and in public libraries have grown, a phenomenon directly connected to burgeoning interest in food at all levels. Some of academic and research libraries around the country include the Esther B. Aresty Collection at the Van-Pelt Dietrich library (University of Pennsylvania), the Peacock-Harper Collection (Virginia Tech), Radcliffe/Harvard, Fales Library (New York University), the American Institute

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Morris-Knower suggests that it is the scholarly interest in food that has inspired popular interest. (2004)

of Food and Wine Culinary Collection (University of California-San Diego), the Janice Bluestine Longone Culinary Archive (University of Michigan-Ann Arbor), the Alan and Shirley Brocker Sliker Culinary Ephemera Collection and the Cookery and Food Collection (Michigan State University). There are many others across the country with individual foci on everything from restaurant menus to 19<sup>th</sup> century cookbooks existing independent of food studies, anthropology, or history programs or as support for them at colleges and universities. Public libraries with notable culinary collections include the New York Public Library, the Los Angeles Public Library, and the country's largest public library, the Library of Congress. There are undoubtedly many other smaller public libraries or libraries connected to cultural institutions that collect cookbooks, food histories, or other ephemera related to United States cookery in general or to other food traditions.

Many food libraries or food-focused library collections at academic libraries have grown to support food studies programs, the number of which has grown significantly since the mid-1990s when in 1996, New York University's (NYU) nutrition department expanded to offer food studies classes and subsequently changed its name to the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies.<sup>2</sup> NYU's program is one of the oldest in the country alongside Boston University's graduate gastronomy program where students can receive a food studies degree with concentrations in business, communication, food policy, or history and culture. The concentrations of the Boston University gastronomy program show clearly the wide range of possibilities and multidisciplinary nature of the study of foodways and food history and represent a growth of the scope of these types of programs. Where once food studies and gastronomy studies existed as (and were often considered to be) frivolous programs bent on cultivating gourmands, they have developed into serious academic programs.

More and more food studies programs are also organized under their own departments rather than as extensions of anthropology departments. They are now multidisciplinary entities offering fascinating and challenging undergraduate, graduate, and continuing education courses of study to interested students. In the New York City area alone, both New York University and The New School have food studies departments offering Master's degrees—NYU also offers a Ph.D. degree—while CUNY's Graduate Center offers a Ph.D. program with an interdisciplinary concentration in food studies. Cornell University offers Bachelor's, Master's, and doctoral degrees in food studies. The Association for the Study of Food and Society (ASFS) maintains a list of colleges,

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<sup>2</sup> It is now the Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health.

universities, and culinary schools around the world offering academic, non-culinary food studies programs. Out of the thirty programs listed thirteen are based in the United States and Canada; this list is by no means comprehensive (Association for the Study of Food and Society, 2012).

The growth of food studies programs has made groups such as ASFS more relevant. Started in 1985, its membership consists primarily of influential professors, professionals and activists, and independent scholars in food related fields. ASFS has a number of projects significant ongoing projects including an annual conference, a scholarly journal called *Food, Culture, and Society*, and a member listserv. The Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society (AFHVS) whose mission is to examine “the values that underlie various food and agricultural systems...” (Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society, 2012) has a similar membership demographic and partners with ASFS on the joint annual conference and publishes *Agriculture and Human Values*, its own monthly journal. There are also numerous culinary history groups in cities across the United States. Another food society, the Southern Foodways Alliance, is affiliated with the Center for the Study of Southern Culture at the University of Mississippi. Its membership includes scholars, writers, food professionals, and those casually interested in Southern foodways.

Other professional organizations across disciplines, like the American Folklore Society (AFS), the American Library Association (ALA) and the Special Libraries Association (SLA) have added sections to their membership categories dedicated to foodways and food librarianship respectively, and the American Historical Association (AHA) has several sessions a year at its annual conference dedicated to topics on food history in the United States. The proliferation and expansion of professional groups, the development university-supported food societies, as well as the inclusion of the foodways, food history, or food studies as topics worthy of attention and serious inquiry at the professional level in the United States alone shows that food studies has achieved a place of merit in academia and libraries. Coupled with the growth, since the mid-1990s of popular interest in food, which includes growing collections of cookbooks, magazines, and popular food histories in public libraries, it is clear that the role of libraries in preserving and supporting foodways, food studies, and food history will become an increasingly important issue.

Food studies programs tend to take a more general survey approach to the study of food, rather than focusing on one specific ethnic group, region, or topic. The intention of most programs is to provide a sweeping

look at the world of food, which can include courses on policy, food history, theoretical examinations of food culture, or even food writing. A look at the core classes required for New York University's Master's in Food Studies shows the following courses: *Contemporary Issues in Food Studies*, *Food Systems*, *Food Policy*, *Food and Culture*, and *Nutrition in Food Studies*. At New Mexico State University, which offers a graduate minor in food studies through its anthropology department, core courses are as follows: *Ethnographic Field Models*; *Issues in Nutritional Anthropology*; *Anthropology of Development*; *Plants, Culture and Sustainable Development*; and *Culture and Foodways*. And finally at Chatham University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, a school with a fully dedicated food studies department, core courses include *Food Systems*; *Food Access*; *Food, Culture, and Society*; and *Food and Agriculture*.<sup>3</sup> These courses illustrate the basic philosophy of food studies both in dedicated departments and in those where the study of foodways is organized under the umbrella of another discipline.

Examining course listings for these programs can provide valuable information on the way in which food studies programs are training the next generations of people who will document and create a framework for the way that we view food, cooking, and the traditions associated with it across cultures. While these programs help to develop an awareness of food and culinary history, this awareness is shaped by traditional attitudes towards foodways that tend toward narrow views of global culinary history characterized by uninformed and misinformed views of the history and traditions of minority and underrepresented groups in the United States that only serves to marginalize certain cuisines. In the world of food today, even among food historians, scholars, and professional food writers the preponderance for European foodways or specific Asian or Latin traditions limits comprehensive study of food and thus, limits the scope of food studies programs further entrenching the process of culinary marginalization of non-European cuisines, which tends to manifest itself in the library collections that support the programs.

Culinary traditions of non-dominant groups or of groups that have not yet caught the attention of those in academia or popular food who control the relatively insular world of food at the professional level can be obscured and subsequently completely misunderstood, when they are superficially explored. Once this happens it is very difficult to change public perceptions. In the United States, while strides have been made in collective thinking regarding the history and culture of non-dominant, underrepresented, and minority groups, there is still a long way

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<sup>3</sup> The core courses at Chatham University also include a research methods and a thesis class.

to go and this, of course, affects ideas about food and the work that is done within the fields of foodways and food studies. In food, one can divide these groups into the “known exotic” and the “unknown exotic.” Generally the known exotic includes non-European food traditions that have become somewhat mainstream and familiar albeit in a less authentic form more acceptable to the American palate. This includes many cuisines from Asian traditions such as Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, and Indian. Latin and African cuisines that fall into this category include Mexican and to a lesser degree Moroccan and Ethiopian food respectively. Middle Eastern food also falls into the category of the known exotic, for its flavor profiles are moderately familiar.<sup>4</sup> The unknown exotic represents the foodways of those groups whose traditions are largely ignored and almost universally misunderstood; included within this category is African American foodways.

African-American food history is unique. Through food and cooking, it narrates the story of traumatic experiences of enslaved Africans from arrival to North America to the triumphs and challenges still experienced by their ancestors, As Helen Mendes aptly states in *The African Heritage Cookbook* “food has provided more than physical sustenance” for African Americans, “[I]t has provided one of the few vehicles through which Blacks have been able to preserve their African heritage” (as cited in Whit, 2008). Ingredients and especially cooking techniques and flavor profiles tie African American cooking traditions to western African ones and to cooking traditions in the broader African Diaspora, illustrating that the food culture of black people in the United States much like jazz, represents a uniquely American tradition solidly grounded in African culture with Native American and European influences. African American ethnicity is communicated through foodways and preserved in “cultural documents [that] shed light on African American people and how food factors into the process of identity formation” (Williams-Forsen, 2008).

African American foodways are synonymous with Soul Food, initially a term coined in the writings of Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver for a style of cooking developed by Afrodescendants in the American South. The term and concepts promoted by Baraka as a way to help inspire a sense of pride in African American food and culture in the 1970s among people battered and bruised by centuries of racism, from the beginning named only a few dishes associated with African Americans such as *chitlins*, fried chicken, candied yams, greens and focused far

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<sup>4</sup> Middle Eastern culinary traditions, much like those of the global African Diaspora, are closely linked and have a great deal in common; however they are also very distinctive. Turkish, Syrian, Yemeni, and Lebanese food is all quite different from each other, though the tendency in the United States is to ignore those differences in favor of something more generic.

less on the cooking techniques and practices from which these largely celebratory dishes were born. Baraka's and Cleaver's focus on Soul Food as a legitimate culinary tradition did much to popularize these dishes in the United States and beyond, but did far less to promote the true essence of African American foodways as a truly hybrid cuisine born of the ingenuity of enslaved people who took firsthand or culturally imprinted knowledge of African culinary practices and in some cases ingredients of African origin, adapted them to a new environment while marrying them with elements of European, Native American culinary traditions and new ingredients.

The existing African American foodways paradigm ignores the richness and diversity of the cuisine and its regional nature, especially in cookbooks. Across the American South people ate far more than the set of five or six dishes commonly thought of as Soul Food, which are by and large special dishes reserved for celebrations. People ate nutritionally sound, seasonal meals that reflected African America's agricultural and, African roots. Cookbooks such as Edna Lewis's seminal *A Taste of Country Cooking* and *Vibration Cooking: Notes of a Geechee Girl* by Vertamae Smart Grosvenor, both published in the 1970s are just two cookbooks that reflect these truths about African American culinary traditions. There are also many cookbooks that provide historical or social context to recipes. Included among them are *Celebrating Our Mother's Kitchens: Treasured Memories and Tested Recipes* and *The Black Family Reunion Cookbook: Recipes and Food Memories* both by the National Council of Negro Women, and *The African American Heritage Cookbook: Traditional and Fond Memories from Alabama's Tuskegee Institute* by Carolyn Quick Tillery. More recent books such as *What the Slave Ate: Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives* by Herbert Covey and Dwight Eisenach (eds.) along with western African cookbooks, food histories, and related ephemera (if appropriate in the context of a particular library's collection policies) can help to create a more comprehensive picture of the foodways of a group whose traditions were often passed down orally. There are also many food histories and analyses that tackle these ideas and make important connections between African American cooking, its African and multi-ethnic roots, and its important place in United States culinary traditions.

As in any field, tackling alterity, in this case, the notion of otherness represented by food is a task that responsible scholars and librarians in public and academic settings must undertake because they are in the business of sharing knowledge *and* because the goals of libraries and the academy are interdependent. One can safely say that foodways—as an academic field now coming into its own and as a topic of keen public interest, to say nothing of

the field's profit- and endorsement-generating capacities—will continue to inspire the growth and creation of library collections so we must begin to think about how to treat *otherness* in these new collections in a way that no longer marginalizes foodways while we actively work at addressing the ways that otherness has been addressed in established collections. The quiet but venerable power of the library to shape our present and future is often underestimated but as a leader in cultural preservation and documentation, the librarian's responsibility to critically examine the work of collection building.

The challenge in developing African American foodways collections is not so much an issue of bias in titles amassed, though in some cases that may certainly be relevant. The real issue is much more insidious, it is more a question of reaching past dated foodways tropes and seeking out materials that present the user with a healthier, more expansive view of African American food traditions that support the African American historical narrative and contributions to United States history and culture as a whole. Thus, the question we must ask is: *how we can create collections that maintain the integrity of African American foodways (and the foodways of other underrepresented groups) without marginalizing them?*

In the case of African American foodways, collection building is tricky for this process. Like so many things related to African Americans, the process has long been affected by persistent stereotypes that African Americans have no culture or that the culture is simplistic and easily understood through a lens often clouded by historical (and persistent) American racism, as well as centuries of cultural appropriation that have allowed African American history, foodways, and culture in general to be discounted in academia and in the public consciousness. It almost goes without saying that not only does this shape the way that we view African American foodways but that it inevitably shapes the way that we create the collections to document them. And, because libraries exist as cultural and social institutions that shape our worldviews and contribute to the human historical narrative, it is imperative that contributions to both be carefully considered.

Librarians evaluate the “ensemble of everyday practices” (Rothbauer, 2010) that they employ in the process of collection building in order to identify hegemonic structures affecting the representation of African American foodways in library collections. This means examining limitations in our thinking regarding the culture of African Americans and their culinary legacy in the United States, a barrier admittedly difficult to penetrate because it is engrained in our national psyche. In Peggy Johnson's *Introduction to Collection Management and Development*,



there are three key points drawn from early 20<sup>th</sup> century textbooks on book selection that can apply to the process of creating African American foodways collections that tell a more truthful and balanced story. They are:

- to cultivate the power of judging and selecting books for purchase with their value and suitability to readers in mind;
- to become familiar with the sources of information;
- to renew acquaintance with books and writers from the library angle (2004).

Meeting these goals most certainly means work for the librarian that includes self-reflection, but can also mean work in the form of consulting with experts, from the university professor to a renowned local home cook. It requires reading and researching a topic, in this case, African American foodways, in new and inventive ways that inspire creative thinking about the way a collection can look. Eradication of hegemony requires commitment from librarians. It is a process that requires engagement and learning about African American foodways and one that means actively and regularly questioning “knowledge organization systems in culture and society” (Andersen, 2008). While it is easy enough to begin including works that present a broader views in collections, it is more important to be reflective in the work of collection building to set a tone. As Dougherty suggests, “[I]ntrinsic to praxis...is reflection-in-action,” a process that can only serve to make the developing field of food librarianship stronger (Towards Self-Reflection in Librarianship: What is Praxis?, 2008).

Critical engagement with collections that takes into account the multidisciplinary nature of the foodways while addressing deficiencies that have plagued African American foodways materials can also open access to patrons who may have avoided traditional collections for their lack of depth. The existence of varied perspectives on African American foodways and those of other underrepresented groups within library collections, is a manifestation of Henry Giroux’s notion of a border pedagogy that can serve to shift collective ideas about minority experiences (including ideas that minority groups may hold about themselves) and contributions to culture and society by providing the tools that allow patrons to educate themselves if they so desire. This shift in collection building has the power to transform the library space into one that “can support democracy by building balanced library collections on diverse subject matter to meet diverse needs” (Eryaman, 2010), which, it seems, is the ultimate goal for any modern library.

Without critical consciousness and engagement in the work of cultural preservation, librarians inevitably fail to maintain the standards they are expected to uphold. Food librarianship provides an opportunity to develop new ways to document foodways and cultural heritage in ways that promote further inquiry among patrons in public and academic libraries while support the growth of food studies program and public interest in food respectively. The time is ripe to create a model for collection building that takes into account the dynamic, nuanced, multi-disciplinary nature of foodways and food studies. It is an opportunity to reach new heights in information preservation and knowledge dissemination to a wide range of library patrons.

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