

Africana Studies Thesis Proposal

a seat at our table: spiritual restoration, Black fugitivity, and intuition-building in
Black southern kitchens

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In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston blends Black Southern traditions of storytelling, herbalism, and conjure to depict an alive, spiritual, diasporic vision of Black Southern life. She speaks to the history that is inscribed in Southern porch dialogues:

The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. ... These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. ... But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.¹

My mother showed me that the places where she and her mothers talked to god, listened to their ancestors, and spat in defiance of the violent nation-state were all the same place. That is, the spaces which foster a Black dialogical allowance—for conversations with god, listening to ancestors, and spitting in defiance of the nation-state—can be whittled down to a central handful: the Southern porch, the kitchen, the annals of the church house, and gardens. My work emerges out of honor and intense affinity with this tradition of witnessing—through my mother, and her futurist invocations of our ancestors. In honor of this, and her, my thesis will be divided into three (possibly four) critical chapters, furnished by three subdisciplines of Africana Studies: Black geography, Black fugitivity, Black spirit work, and potentially Black queer legibility. These substantive categories allow for a discursive exploration of the following three questions: How do Black bodies heal and connect through **food and food-making as a mediator**? How do **kitchen wisdom, the hidden transcript, and porch culture** interact to create **dialogues of spirituality and healing** for bodies marked by systems of structural violence? How does food allow for trans-ancestral connection, knowledge-building, and alternative temporalities?

¹ Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, HarperLuxe, 2008, p. 3.

Someone, or rather, many *someones* have laid bare to me that communion takes place in multiple, sacred pockets of life. Outside of white-coded and heteronormative spaces, Southern and diasporic oratory rests in porch culture, kitchen dialogues or wisdom, and spaces that have been converted into these key sites of spiritual dialogue and transformation. For bodies coded as errant—queer, trans, diasporic bodies of color—the kitchen and the porch become necessary sites of performance, ancestral practice, movement-building, and home-making. I am the daughter of a Black disabled Southern woman who is a domestic childcare worker. Until I was in high school, my mother, Toni, was a single parent. I have a specific intimacy and proximity to her treatment by the nation-state; a closeness to the violence of a domestic sphere that does not recognize or compensate her labor. The kitchen sphere often invokes, or reminds, of specters of violence. I take the example of my mother, who is a Black Southern, disabled, working-class woman and mother who has labored as a brilliant caretaker to children for over forty years. She frequently arrives home exhausted from days spent feeding, coddling, nurturing, and tending to predominantly white children. At the end of 9- and sometimes 10-hour workdays, she was often forced to repeat the task of cooking and performing massive amounts of labor as a single mother for the better part of my life. Other times, cooking was a way for her to see herself—she made big Sunday dinners that are intergenerational in recipe and participation; and while listening to the news and calling it out as she dumped spices in a pot. When I was younger, these critiques and her spicing of food seemed haphazard, but I now recognize those processes as part of larger technologies of survival, modalities toward healing, and as a function of intuition and erotic knowledge (Lorde 1984).

Still, despite the specters of violence that are imbued into the South's (demonic) grounds, specters that follow her into her own kitchen, I learned how to cook through witnessing her—and

what she did to restore herself. The practice of cooking remains one wherein I can ground myself, and thicken my intuition. This work is critical to me as a daughter who has seen the debilitating pain of domestic service, and white Southern exploitation of Black reproductive labor and our tools for healing. I grew up seeing my mother come back to herself while making hoecake; (re)membering her mother by knowing and demonstrating how archives line her flesh. This project is an homage to her, and the futurity and way-making that I see in food. Because my Black femme body is indivisible from my queerness, I want my project to also be an exploration of how recipes and food-making became a healing method for me, and what that means; I want to talk about the porch dialogues that exist for me, which take space in places alternative to traditional kitchen spaces.

a seat at our table is the tentative name of my thesis, which began as a collaborative research and film project produced this summer, co-directed by a fellow MMUF researcher, Arpita Joyce '20 at Bryn Mawr College. Our theses diverge given our respective majors and similar/different interests in our respective diasporas. For me, this project appears as a moment to consider the Black traditions of infrapolitical dialogue/actions, intuitive and embodied knowledge, Black fugitivity, and foodways / traditions as a method of knowledge production and a pursuit of Afrofuturity. Essentially, this project is derived from trans-archival research methods, or from the collective archives of history, Black/Africana, food, media, and geography studies; postcolonial theory, and embodied knowledge of queer and diasporic spiritualities. Utilizing Black and indigenous Southern material archives, specifically literature, embodied knowledge, recipes, oral history and discourse on Black fugitivity and movement, my thesis explores how Black Southern and diasporic cooking practices allow for (re)convenings with ancestral practices, healing and ideas/feelings of home. My thesis looks at how, in spite of being

marked as errant by nation-state discourses, Black trans-queer bodies and Black Southern bodies pursue queer kinship structures through the communal and devotional aspects of food-making, and porch discourses.

ch. 1: it's in our blood: intuitive productions on southern demonic grounds

My first chapter is on Black geography studies, tentatively titled “it’s in [our] blood: intuitive productions on southern demonic grounds.” My chapter begins with a critical examination of some words exchanged with my grand(mother)—biologically/along lines of white nuclear family constructions, she is my grandmother, but I only and have always recognized her as my mother— this last summer, as part of a larger project on Black Southern and diasporic cooking practices as forms of healing. Cooking is an intuitive practice that allowed her to cope while she accessed painful memories that I’d never before heard: the sudden death of her grandmother, who died after a stove explosion in the basement of her family church. She says that her maternal grandmother, Janie Lee Rogers, was covered in soot, went home after feeling fine, and went to her bedroom to wash and change after such an event, at which point she passed away suddenly. What’s most striking to me in an event that is already violent and horrible, and indicative of a larger presence of environmental racism, is that her grandmother, my great-grandmother, Janie Lee Rogers, waded through this traumatic event, was marked by smoke and soot, and went home for one of several reasons. It’s likely that she couldn’t afford to access healthcare due to medical apartheid (in the tradition of Harriet Washington) in the Jim Crow South, and opted out of going so far to be sent home, or not having suitable care at an underresourced colored hospital. Or, she remained in shock from the abrupt bursting of the oven, on her and another person, which could have been either the result of an accident, or the fiery

and tragic end of an aged stove. At any rate, this work, derived from Saidiya Hartman's theory of critical fabulation/speculation, is this: my great-great-grandmother was killed when my grand(mother) was a child, which likely arose from the wear-and-tear related to a cheap stove in a space of safety and worship that could not afford much more in the face of the 1950s Jim Crow South, because of the project of whiteness. Even in the face of a stove that burst solely because of a wiring fault, the fact of refusing medical attention feels commiserate with the very fact of Blackness in the American South, or indicative of the axes that shaped her Black, Southern, working-class woman body and life. McKittrick and Woods suggest state-exacerbated natural disasters, and I invoke their additional framework of "demonic grounds" to examine the visceral, intimate geographic and environmental conditions that form and inform the way that Black bodies move on Southern ground. This chapter is not a listing of all vile factors related to environmental racism in the South, but rather an incisive speculation about my ancestor's death and the factors that triangulated and led to her untimely passing, and how those inform the land on which my grandmothers and my mother live, resist, and work. I invoke Alexis Pauline Gumbs' and E. Patrick Johnson's extended definitions of mothering to center trans-queer bodies, who, like-me, sequestered in as-yet-welcome spaces, mothered themselves into existence on demonic grounds that further triangulate their bodies.

ch. 2: the whole world in our hands: invocations of spirit and intuition-building in Black southern kitchen spaces

My chapter on Black spirit work, tentatively titled "the whole world in our hands: invocations of spirit and intuition-building in Black southern kitchen spaces," installs that very work of speculation and (re)telling of Janie Lee Rogers' life and legibility as spirit work, as

ancestral reconnection that is brought about by muscle memory in cooking. My mother was, in fact, cooking and speaking to her ancestral influences and from whom she borrows some of her intuition when she (smoothly for her; abruptly to me) brought up the tragic death of my great-great-grandmother. I find the cooking inextricable from the conversation that ensued, primarily due to the act of muscle memory and spirit invocation that is involved in cooking as a practice. I argue that she's always invoked her spirit in this way, and the significance of the moment on camera is simply a verbalization of that intuitive, spirit work that she's performed as long as she has cooked. I will then explore the premise of Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor's "vibration cooking" from *Travel Notes of a Gullah-Geechee Girl*, the ideas positioned around archive-making with respect to recipes and dissemination across a lineage in Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, to the idea of ancestral co-writing or writing across a lineage that develops in Alexis Pauline Gumbs' *M Archive*. These sources will assist in a cross-archival analysis of my mother's material ways of doing ancestor work, which occur in the margins and offsites of her family bible; on older index cards; and some aged family cookbooks that act as the spiritual palimpsest to the generation of sustenance. Many of my ancestors are not living, such that my family is small; I articulate a chapter that understands living bodies, engaging in a physical realm, as always-already engaged with ancestors and ancestral knowledge through the intuition-building and spiritual practice of cooking. Cooking, I argue, and engagement with ancestral recipes is a life-giving reading practice that also allows for the practice of Gumbs' concept of ancestral co-writing. Gumbs articulates that "ancestrally cowritten text[s] ... [work] to create textual possibilities for inquiry beyond individual scholarly authority" (Gumbs, 9). For my mother to cook and discuss Janie's life is to engage with Janie's spirit and legacy; for my mother to cook alongside me is both an intergenerational dialogue, and an exchange of intuitive knowledge.

Returning to the extended idea of mothering as a terrain wherein Black trans-queer bodies are making themselves legible, I also understand food-making as an intuition-building practice that is inherently queering time, lineage, and understandings of death. Such a practice lends itself to sufficiently queer embodiment, which also inherently undermines the texts of anti-Black, anti-trans, and anti-queer antagonisms that exclude Black trans-queer bodies from a more open porch dialogue about their infrapolitics; about having an undercommons to the more normative hidden transcripts that take place on the street and in the back of the church, as in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

ch. 3: untitled, but on black fugitivity within Black southern kitchen spaces

My third chapter is on Black fugitivity, and is not yet titled. My work culminates here, where I assess kitchens and porches as liminal and fugitive spaces where Black folk—especially mothers of all kinds, non-cis-men, women, and healers—are critiquing the nation-state, conditions of loss (created by the nation-state), remembering and (re)membering ancestral knowledge, and are performing intimate spiritual rituals with their kin. Home kitchens are not completely disentangled from the violence experienced or remembered while cooking, but instead have the ability to become a site of refuge and grounds for transformation from “tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences” to “lords of sounds and lesser things ... pass[ing] nations through their mouths” (Hurston 1). To be clear, Robin D. G. Kelley emphasizes that this duality is always present in the workplace in his article, “We Are Not What We Seem: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South”; Black workers deploy an infrapolitic that allows them to strategically elide the demands of racialized-gendered capitalism, predicated on their devastation and forced labor. Similarly, I point to Octavia Butler's incisive

mergers of Afropessimism and Afrofuturism in *The Parable of the Sower*, which I use as a critical text in depicting the two schools of thought as fluid and dialectical, and never binary, which contradicts Blackness itself. I also use Hartman's description of archival recovery of unnamed lives as a "hopeful/hopeless" project, which also signals to that duality. Thus, Black Southern working-class bodies, mothers, non-cis and queer folks are always embodying a politic of duality that allows for the infrapolitical to be accessed anywhere. I intend to take the example of my mother, who is a Black Southern disabled working-class woman and mother who has labored as a brilliant caretaker to children for over forty years. She always came home tired, sometimes repeating the task of cooking and performing undue labor as a single mother for the better part of my life. Other times, cooking presented itself as a way to see herself—indulging in big Sunday dinners that are generational, listening to the news and calling it out as she dumped spices in a pot in a way that, when I was younger, seemed haphazard, but I now recognize and understand as a function of intuition and erotic knowledge (Lorde 1984). Kitchens are those liminal spaces where she curses out her bosses, and engages with intuition in a way that is automatic and commiserate with weariness of capitalism, lack of intergenerational stability, from forced labor, etc. Kitchens and porches are where she talks with her mother and god: aloud, on the corners of napkins, recipes on index cards, reminders tucked away with god in family bibles. Kitchens are where she is allowed to live in "the underground" while simultaneously being "in outer space" with her body and knowledge that transcends a linear-time progression; that constantly moves and blurs to elides state surveillance; and that manifests in consort with ancestors to create sustenance that inherently furthers her family line, and her life (when she feeds herself, and when she feeds me).

ch. 4: Black trans-queer performance + fugitive invocations

I'm drawn to make a more explicit note on where Black queer bodies exist in these dialogues about porches and kitchens that usually operate in a physical house. Because we cannot always be legible in the family home, the church, the neighborhood porch when it is suspected or known that one is not cis and/or not straight, I see a lacuna about Black trans and queer legibility that could be furnished by a few participant interviews with Black trans-queer folks from the South. With my participants, I plan to discuss what home looks like, how intuition exists, and the foods that we make/manifest in order to create a sense of home. One of those interviews took place over the summer, but I'm interested in expanding my range of analysis to Black Southern queer folks in Claremont and perhaps elsewhere. E. Patrick Johnson examines the "motherwit" as a reading strategy introduced to his Black Southern queer body by his grandmother. I use his understanding of "reading" strategies as derived from Black grandmothers and in-community, ancestral dialogues to see wherefrom Black trans-queer bodies derive and invent/manifest their own wisdom-sharpening strategies in intimate spaces that then become the infrapolitical room. I understand Black trans-queer house and ball spaces, as well as queer undergrounds as constitutive of fugitive space. However, coming from my own lens of analysis as a Black Southern trans-queer body, I'm interested in charting out my legibility in conjunction with other members of my community to demonstrate an aliveness and an underground that can occur in the normative spaces; within the public/private kitchen that is usually and expressly coded as a conventional, hetero-nuclear space.

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