CONTEMPORARY LITERARY FOODWAYS BETWEEN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA AND THE USA

By
FIONA EMILY FARNSWORTH

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University of Warwick
Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies

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Declaration

I declare that no part of this thesis has been published before.

I also declare that the work contained in this thesis is my own and no part of it is the result of collaborative research.

I confirm that this thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.
Abstract

This thesis examines literary representations and registrations of foodways between sub-Saharan Africa and the United States in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The concept of ‘foodways’ is an organising principle of this thesis because of its useful properties as a catch-all term: it refers not only to what people eat, but also to how they eat it, where, and with whom. ‘Foodways’ are a complex series of processes and decisions, influenced to a great extent by the material conditions of life: today, such conditions are often global in nature. I read foodways in novels by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, NoViolet Bulawayo, Yaa Gyasi, and Imbolo Mbue, as well as in a comparative study of contemporary cookbooks, through discussions of foodwork, the global supermarket, and gendered consumption.

This project is situated within a number of intersecting thematic fields, including food itself (both as commodity and as cultural symbol); migration, and the intersecting evaluations of race and class; and the particular significance of women’s writing and experience. In light of this, then, this thesis aims to investigate female sub-Saharan African immigrant experience in the United States as a facet of a wider critical discourse regarding the world-system, immigration, and the combined impact of the two upon cultural identities. Food is, I suggest, hugely significant in terms of its materiality (ingredients, consumption), its preparation (foodwork, family), and in the sociocultural associations it holds (for the female body in particular, as well as in terms of ethnic significance and cultural tradition). I read food as a site which shapes – and is shaped by – sociopolitical struggles surrounding identity and power; and I read this discussion as one which is both explicitly and implicitly ‘worlded’, as foodways demonstrate the visitation of the global and national upon the local.
Introduction

After she had exchanged hugs with everyone, she settled down with her pounded yam and noticed that I was eating rice. “Why are you not eating food?” she asked in Igbo. I said I did not eat swallow. She smiled and said to my mother, “Oh, you know she is not like us local people. She is foreign.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘Real Food’

At the outset of this project, the organising thematic concern lies in the belief that our consumption – what we eat, how, where, and with whom we eat it – is enormously relevant to the social and economic positions we hold. This thesis is about literary foodways between sub-Saharan Africa and the United States, in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The concept of ‘foodways’ has been an organising principle of my project because of its useful properties as a catch-all term: it refers not only to what people eat, but also to how they eat it, where, and with whom. ‘Foodways’ recognises that eating does not start with ingestion; rather, it is a complex and interlinked series of processes and decisions, many of which might take place in a different country – if not a different continent – and even in a different temporal and/or spatial moment from the actual act of eating.

I begin with a chapter devoted to elaborating upon the conceptual framework within which my thesis operates, outlining my approach to various key structural themes. Firstly, I attend here to more specific discussions surrounding foodways, the world food system and, particularly, scholarship focusing on food in literature. I define the parameters of my corpus by exploring aspects of migration from sub-Saharan Africa to the USA (and defining my use of the term ‘sub-Saharan’, which has been contentious in some academic circles) including ‘push-pull’ factors leading to increased movement abroad from the African sub-continent. In doing so, I attend also to discourses regarding contemporary African literary production – in particular, the debate surrounding Afropolitanism – and highlight the ways in which class impacts upon the circulation of African literature both in and beyond Africa. I discuss, too, my (initially inadvertent, later informed) selection of female writers for this project; and the necessity of a critical approach which is intersectional, and which accounts for historic and local specificities as well as broader global themes. I endeavour thus to demonstrate the critical juncture at which my thesis intervenes: a thematic intersection between food (both as commodity and as cultural symbol); migration, and the intersecting evaluations of race and class; and the particular significance of women’s writing and experience.

My second chapter is an analysis of books specifically centred upon food writing; this chapter comprises a certain materialist approach to society and culture, as well as literary analysis. For the types of text I discuss in Chapter Two, Doris Witt has coined the term ‘recipistolary’ — a literary form which synthesises the culinary and the narrative — and yet, for all the pleasure of the neologism, the linguistic invocation of the ‘epistolary’ fragments the surrounding narratives by suggesting that they are ‘letters’. If these works are letters, to whom are they addressed? While embracing the scope of ‘foodways’ in these texts, I develop the methodology of the ‘food narrative’. This term is intended as an alternative to ‘recipe books’ in the vein of Arjun Appadurai, for example, or ‘cookbooks’ à la literary and food studies critic Alison Carruth — for the reason that I have not yet found another term that sufficiently denotes the cultural project such texts undertake along with their material contribution to culinary libraries. These works contain recipes, practical instructions for the betterment of home cooking; but the ingredients and methodologies called upon cement a particular temporal and geographical moment. In theory, I intend this to elaborate upon the idea that it is possible — and even desirable — to read food as a narratorial schematic; perhaps more accurately, to read a narrative through its alimentary representations, or indeed, to read alimentary representations as narratives in and of themselves. Not only do these provide considerable narrative contrast with the novels analysed elsewhere in the project, but they speak concretely to the ways in which (as Jeffrey M. Pilcher argues):

Cookbook authors help unify a country by encouraging the interchange of foods between different regions, classes, and ethnic groups, and thereby building a sense of community within the kitchen. But these same works also have the power to exclude ethnic minorities or the lower classes by designating their foods as unfit for civilized tables.

In the third chapter, I look at Yaa Gyasi’s 2016 novel Homegoing from the perspective of its foodways. Gyasi’s novel traces the divergent paths of two Ghanaian half-sisters, each unaware of the other’s birth, and the familial lines that succeed them: one (Esi) is enslaved and taken to America by her British captors, and the other (Effia) remains on the African continent as the wife of a British official. Over seven generations, the narrative follows the descendants of Esi

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and Effia across and between Africa and the United States. *Homegoing* has been subject to criticism for failing to deliver upon its exceptionally broad geographical and temporal scope: in a review in *The New Yorker*, Laura Miller suggests that Gyasi’s American characters suffer in narrative terms from ‘demographic imperatives’; that because the ‘linked-story form’ relies upon each chapter’s beginning ‘in a new place and time, with a new set of people, at best picking up a few slender narrative threads from its predecessors’; and that, as a result, the novel assembles the ‘furniture’ of the historical periods with which it is concerned, but does not inhabit them fully. In full recognition of both the merits and flaws of *Homegoing* both as a debut novel and as an articulation of historical and individual experience, I contend that its registration of global foodways is nonetheless a solid foundation upon which to commence my analysis of United States-based African diasporic writing. The reasoning for this is as follows.

Although this thesis acknowledges the transatlantic slave trade as inscribed irrevocably upon the history of African presence in America, present-day migration from Africa to the USA is understood and explored as epochally divergent from this moment. In doing so, it realises a vital distinction between the social and cultural positioning of the African American population and those who move from Africa to the United States in the contemporary moment. All these novels give critical weight to such an interpretation – Ifemelu’s (/Adichie’s) categorisation of the ‘American’ and ‘non-American Black’, for example. However, Gyasi draws a concrete distinction here by demonstrating explicitly the distinct spatial and temporal delineations that separate (and even sever) one character’s experience from another. As such, while *Homegoing* does not foreground migrant experiences in the same way as do these focal works of Mbue, Adichie, and Bulawayo, it is preoccupied nonetheless with a sense of what Yogita Goyal has referred to as a ‘splintering of uniform notions of blackness, unmediated by place or ethnicity’. In other words, Gyasi’s novel finds critical space to consider a push-pull relationship between continental Africa and the USA which acknowledges the painful legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and the ways in which its impact has reverberated and been codified throughout world history (and particularly the history of the Americas).

Chapters Four through Six take a comparative approach to the same three novels – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*, and Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers*. *Americanah* is the story of two young Nigerians, Ifemelu and Obinze, living in Nigeria at a time of political upheaval and military dictatorship: while Obinze departs for the United Kingdom and lives the transitory life of an undocumented migrant, Ifemelu moves to the United States to attend university and must contend with unfamiliar

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‘tribalisms’ of race and class. My focus is, of course, primarily upon Ifemelu’s experiences, and the foodways which register these. In contrast, Behold the Dreamers centres upon two families in the USA – the Jongas, Neni and Jende and their son Liomi, and the Edwards family, Clark, Cindy, and their sons Vincent and Mighty. Each of the Jongas acts as synecdochal representation of a particular element of the migrant population: Liomi is a second generation migrant (born in the United States, and thus endowed with American citizenship); Neni is in the country on a student visa; and Jende’s green card application is denied, meaning that he resides in the USA illegally. In contrast, Clark and Cindy’s family is an all-American one: Clark works for Lehman Brothers on Wall Street, the financial crisis and subsequent bankruptcy of which form the framework for the novel’s action. Neni acts as the primary domestic caregiver for both families, providing food for her own husband and children as well as those of her employers (and her employers themselves). Finally, We Need New Names follows the development of its young protagonist Darling from her childhood in a post-conflict Zimbabwe – in which she and her friends live in a shanty town nicknamed with the misnomer Paradise, surviving by stealing guavas from the wealthier inhabitants of the neighbourhood known as ‘Budapest’ – through her adolescence and coming of age in a USA characterised by both abundance and greed. By reading these novels in conversation with each other, I analyse the different manifestations and representations of foodways in literature, and the ways in which we may read these as both registering and influencing the world food system.

Chapter Four focuses upon the concept of the ‘global supermarket’ and, in particular, the globalization of food. I provide an outline in brief of the status and form of United States supermarkets today, before moving to examine the ways in which the institution of the supermarket is used in sub-Saharan migrant fictions as a site upon which to interrogate the global circulation of food commodities. Furthering this discussion, I turn to the concept of ‘food justice’ as another means through which to read the foodways of these novels. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which these novels’ characters are able to ‘eat African’ within the USA, and the consequent dialogues of belonging and non-belonging that are enacted across families and wider communities.

In Chapter Five I turn to the domestic sphere and women’s foodwork. For reasons of coherence and clarity, I divide the chapter in two: firstly, the foodwork that women undertake in their own homes, and on behalf of members of their own households; and secondly, the

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9 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2013). References to *Americanah* as a primary text will be presented henceforth as in-text parenthetical citations.

10 Imbolo Mbue, *Behold the Dreamers*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2017). References to *Behold the Dreamers* as a primary text will be presented henceforth as in-text parenthetical citations.

11 NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, (London: Vintage, 2013). References to *We Need New Names* as a primary text will be presented henceforth as in-text parenthetical citations.

foodwork that is undertaken as paid labour in the domestic service economy. In both aspects of the novels’ domestic foodways, essentialising attempts to uphold an ‘idealized bourgeois division’\(^{13}\) between the public and private are evident, and these dictate that the majority of labour performed within the home falls to women. Jack Goody’s summary of the household as a site of political contestation comes into play here: ‘The anthropological definition of a household is based on a unit that shares cooking and, if possible, daily domestic commensality. Family division into separate households is marked by separate cooking and separate domestic commensality, and in this respect domestic commensality can be political, too’.\(^{14}\) I recognise the varying definitions of ‘home’ that may impact upon the labour undertaken by women and their cultural identities;\(^{15}\) but I draw also upon the work of materialist feminist scholars such as Maria Mies and Arlie Hochschild in analysing the power dynamics inherent within these representations of foodwork, demonstrating that the delicate balance is nuanced and subject to disruption because of factors like migrancy, class, and intimacy (in its different forms).\(^{16}\) My particular focus here is upon relationships between husband and wife, mother and child, and employer and employee – all of which maintain foodwork’s material and emotional significance.

In the final chapter, I move from the circulation, distribution, and preparation of food to its actual consumption, and the gendered schematics of control that are in evidence throughout Americanah, We Need New Names, and Behold the Dreamers. I suggest that the consumption of the novels’ female characters registers the wider material and sociocultural oppressions visited upon women’s bodies by contemporary American society. Such oppressive measures – enacted not only through food itself, but through social mechanisms which uphold systemic racism and misogyny – result in warped attitudes towards the female body both from men towards women, and from women towards themselves and each other. I explore this through an engagement with the ways in which the novels interrogate the concept of ‘fat’, using elements of the Foucauldian framework adopted by feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo and Sabrina Strings;\(^{17}\) intersecting prejudices regarding ‘race’, ‘gender’, and ‘body size’; and the mechanisms of male control over the food that women eat. Ultimately this, too, is a means through which to register the patriarchal structure of the world food system, and the


detrimental effects that this has on women – here, particularly sub-Saharan African migrant women.

Overall, then, this thesis aims to investigate the experiences of female sub-Saharan African migrants in the United States through their foodways. As such, it intervenes at the point of intersection between several thematic fields within literary studies: critical and literary food studies; world-literature, and evaluations of the ways in which the literature of the African diaspora in the USA might be classed as such; and the gendered implications for women’s writing, particularly that of migrant women. I read food as a site which shapes – and is shaped by – sociopolitical struggles surrounding identity and power; and I read this discussion as one which is both explicitly and implicitly ‘worlded’, as foodways demonstrate the visitation of the global and national upon the local.
Chapter 1 – Conceptual Framework

Introduction

In conceiving of the direction this thesis would take, two books were paramount. The first was Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, which I read as an undergraduate shortly after its publication in 2013. My attention was caught in particular by two aspects of the novel: its female characters – who have, as Zadie Smith observes, ‘not even a moment’s doubt about speaking their mind’\(^{18}\) – and the ways in which they registered and responded to gendered discourses of power; and its depiction of the experience of migrating to the USA. By the time I returned to the novel as a postgraduate, I had been introduced to theories of world-literature – beginning with Goethe’s famous claim that ‘National literature is now a rather unmeaning term; the epoch of World-literature is at hand’,\(^{19}\) and proceeding via more contemporary models such as Franco Moretti’s ‘Conjectures on World Literature’\(^{20}\) – which led me to question the role of migration in the capitalist world-system and its literary representations. If, as Moretti suggests, we understood modernity in line with ‘the world-system school of economic history, for which international capitalism is a system that is simultaneously one, and unequal’,\(^{21}\) what would be at stake for a novel self-consciously occupied not only with mobility from periphery to core (and back again), but with the explicitly racialised, gendered, and class-based discourses which underline and propel this? How might we read such a novel as world-literature – or, how might we read the ‘worlding’ of and within that novel?

However, the book that inspired the thematic focus of my study was Julia Child’s *My Life In France*. Child’s memoir is also occupied with the experience of migration, albeit from one core country to another (USA to France and, more specifically, to Paris); but, given Child’s culinary celebrity, it is little surprise that food is her central focus. In reading this narrative of Child’s love affair with French cooking and consumption – cultivated while living in Paris with her husband after the Second World War, through a combination of *Cordon Bleu* training, restaurant frequenting, and enthusiastic engagement with local chefs – it becomes apparent that food is ‘at the same time a form of self-identification and communication’.\(^{22}\) When Child wrote a book of French recipes targeted at an American audience – *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* – she was not, as Kennan Ferguson notes, ‘attempting to use French cooking to create

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\(^{18}\) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘Between the Lines: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie with Zadie Smith’, in *Between the Lines*, ed. by Zadie Smith (livestream.com: Schomburg Center, 2014).


\(^{21}\) Ibid.

a new national approach. Instead, she wanted *bona fide* French cooking'. Questions regarding identity, authenticity, and ownership are implicit here, alongside the undeniable reality that consumption changes not only according to what is *culturally appropriate* but according to what is *materially available*. Approaching *Americanah* with the same concerns led me to question the ways in which any discussion of foodways – particularly in texts concerned with the spatiality and mobility of migration – might be fundamentally occupied with ideas of the global and the national as juxtaposed with the local. Although food is not the primary narrative focus in Adichie’s novel as it is for Child’s memoir, I began to read the novel’s registrations and representations of food – the materiality of its circulation, preparation, and consumption, as well as the social and societal meanings which ‘condition’ these acts – as both explicitly and implicitly ‘worlded’.

Of course, my thesis underwent innumerable modulations throughout the research process; and even these early conceptions of its critical focus have narrowed, expanded, and refined. However, the project’s essential idea remains that of food as a site of material and cultural contestation upon which global discourses of power are enacted. For the next part of this introductory movement, then, I propose to identify some of the more significant terminology I employ and to address its problematic elements – if not to resolve them entirely. As I noted in the introduction, my thesis is positioned at the critical intersection of a number of fields which are rarely considered all at once in a literary academic context, despite their continual overlapping in day-to-day life. These begin, of course, with food (both as commodity and as cultural symbol); migration, and the intersecting evaluations of race and class; and the particular significance of women’s writing and experience. I propose here, then, to sketch briefly the conceptual framework upon which my research is founded. I seek first to introduce my approach to food studies, both literary and extraliterary: here, I outline my understanding of the world food system and the ways in which this influences my readings, and I survey current scholarship regarding food and foodways in literature. Next, I outline the specific contemporary moment of the literature I study; including American legislation that has made possible an increase in mass African immigration to the United States, and the historical and material situations that accompany (and sometimes perpetuate) this. This is followed by a brief interjection regarding the gendered significance of both migration and food, and my reasoning in focusing explicitly upon women’s writing and experience. Finally, I summarise the ways in which I conceive of the intersection between these fields, and the intervention my thesis makes in using food as a means of interrogating the combined impact of migration and globalization on the cultural identities of female sub-Saharan African migrants in the USA. These sections

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are broad in scope but by no means exhaustive in detail: however, in defining the parameters of my thesis, I justify the selection of my literary corpus (and its necessary omissions), and I evidence the historical, thematic, and literary understandings which have informed my focus.

Food, Foodways, and the World Food System

It is something of a cliché – and, at this juncture, essentially a falsehood – to suggest that food is an understudied or, indeed, under-respected field of academic criticism. This might once have been true – and indeed, ‘food studies’ began in earnest less than fifty years ago, although food itself has been an area of interest for far longer – but with representations of national culinary identity, ‘food porn’, and digestive crises on the rise, amongst other pertinent issues of consumption, it is difficult and essentially reductive to argue that food still does not occupy considerable space in collective consciousness. Food is a human biological necessity, but it is also a site for enacting national and personal identity; a registration of practical or economic circumstance; and a bodily and biological means of controlling both individuals and populations, particularly women (as I shall discuss later in greater depth). However, Warren Belasco has made the wry observation that ‘scholars have sometimes underestimated the importance of basic belly issues in speculative discourse’, and this might certainly be applied to the appetites and alimentary threads that are made evident in immigrant writing in the United States.

My project uses the work of Warwick Research Collective (WReC) on the cultural implications of ‘combined and uneven development’; and it is thus founded upon the base assumption of ‘world literature’ as the literature of the world-system – of the modern capitalist world-system. More useful still is WReC’s statement that

It is clear that the thought-figure of ‘globalisation’ is fundamental to [both ‘world literature’ and ‘global literature’]. But where ‘global literature’ might be understood as in the first instance an extension of postcolonial studies – as postcolonial studies under the sign of ‘globalisation theory’; in fact – ‘world literature’ is in the first instance an extension of comparative literature, and might be understood as the remaking of comparative literature after the multicultural debates and the disciplinary critique of Eurocentrism.

I use this understanding in tandem with the knowledge that foodways are affected by national and local specificities; because, as Elizabeth Engelhardt clarifies, ‘the word ‘foodways’ is useful

27 Ibid. p. 4.
because it is shorthand for cultural processes. In many ways, eating is the culmination of a series of decisions which both determine and articulate what we eat, why and how we eat it, where, and with whom. In the sense that world-literature is both a reading of and a response to the capitalist world-system, then, foodways are the registrations of this in culinary form: and alimentary literature is, therefore, a narrative representation of food not only on its material and, arguably, prosaic level (ingredients, methods, and one’s access to these components), but with regard to the role it plays in negotiating and constructing relationships and identities.

State of Play: Food Studies

Earlier work in food studies has tended to ascribe more importance to the symbolic and cultural value of food than to its material condition and the ways in which it registers processes and patterns of globalisation. Claude Lévi-Strauss’ ‘The Culinary Triangle’ articulates a quasi-linguistic framework not only for the act of eating, but for the preparation of food: he suggests that cooking occurs within ‘a triangular semantic field whose three points correspond respectively to the categories of the raw, the cooked, and the rotted’. Similarly, Roland Barthes’ ‘Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption’ applies a semiotic analysis to the ‘system’ of food, considering particular foodstuffs to be ‘units of signification’ for cultural meaning. Mary Douglas’ ‘Deciphering a Meal’ expands upon Barthes’ understanding, ‘extending Barthes’s semiotic model to an anthropological context’, and exerts considerable effort in defining parameters between drinking and eating: she suggests that one of the primary distinctions between the two categories (food and drink) is the relationship of the former to particular times of the day, stating that ‘The judgment ‘It is too early for alcohol’ would be both rare and likely to be contested’. Growing up, in fact, I have always heard the epithet ‘It’s five o’clock somewhere’; essentially the opposite sentiment, and thus demonstrating once again the variation in both food-based customs and the vernacular influences they wield.

In this thesis, however, I am interested less in these earlier semantic and semiotic approaches to the consumption of food – which seem to me quite rigidly Eurocentric, and do

not lend themselves particularly well to culturally divergent foodways and the surrounding customs, particularly in the context of movement and migration — and more in the kind of materialist approach to food studies that appears across the work of critics like Pierre Bourdieu, Sidney Mintz, and Marvin Harris. Bourdieu is particularly influential in this project: I refer on several occasions to his conception of the *habitus* as ‘a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices’;33 and to his claim that ‘whenever a change in social position puts the habitus into new conditions, so that its specific efficacy can be isolated, it is taste—the taste of necessity or the taste of luxury—and not high or low income which commands the practices objectively adjusted to these resources’.34 Mintz’ argument that ‘Social phenomena are by their nature historical, which is to say that the relationships among events in one ‘moment’ can never be abstracted from their past and future setting’35 lends itself similarly well to a materialist reading of the global food system. Mintz’s seminal *Sweetness and Power* – which presents a compelling argument for the global impact of sugar as a commodity on modern capitalism – also claims that if we question the market, our questions must also be ‘about the metropolitan homeland, the center of power, not about the dependent colony, the object and target of power. And once one attempts to put consumption together with production, to fit colony to metropolis, there is a tendency for one or the other – the ‘hub’ or the ‘outer rim’ – to slip out of focus.’36 In his seminal work *The Sacred Cow and the Abominable Pig*, Marvin Harris treats the material conditions underlying patterns of human consumption as a puzzle: he argues that ‘there are generally good and sufficient practical reasons for why people do what they do, and food is no exception’37 and, though he acknowledges the existence of varying symbolic meanings of food in different cultures, asks ‘which come first, the messages and meanings or the preferences and aversions?’38

Echoing the potential for difference and variation in foodways due to material circumstance, Jeffrey M. Pilcher argues that ‘Cuisine illuminates the complex interplay between regional and national identities, as well as providing a view from below of how women and the lower classes have influenced nationalist ideology’.39 Recalling Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, this formulation posits that nationalisms have become “modular”, capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and

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34 Ibid. p. 171.
36 Ibid. p. xvii.
38 Ibid. p. 16.
ideological constellations’. In a similar vein, Cynthia Chou’s work speaks to the concepts of national imaginaries and ‘national imagination of belongingness’: she asserts, however, that ‘Wide gaps prevail between the theoretical conceptualization of the nation as an imagined entity and understanding the daily practices that produce, reproduce, and maintain it’. In migrant narratives where food comes often to stand for a distant version of ‘home’, this is particularly crucial – in fact, in an interview I conducted with Imbolo Mbue (to which I return in later chapters), she suggested that for her characters ‘how they eat is part of their struggle as immigrants – they’re holding on and they’re letting go, and [thinking about] what to hold on [to] and what to let go’. In Mbue’s articulation here, food is a tangible, material site upon which the push and pull of migration – its nostalgia and its promise of new beginnings – can be investigated, alongside its implications for an individual’s identity.

More recently, social-anthropological research has emerged in response to heightening awareness of the world food system: indeed, texts such as George Ritzer’s *McDonaldization* are sometimes credited with occasioning and contributing to the development of the interdisciplinary field now known as food studies. Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* is also often cited in food studies, particularly in terms of its emphasis upon eating as ‘an ecological act, and a political act’, although like others I have found Pollan’s emphasis to be primarily upon the impetus for individual consumer action, and thus demonstrably targeted at an audience within the liberal middle-class. When Pollan suggests that ‘Many people today seem perfectly content eating at the end of an industrial food chain’, he neglects to mention that this is not always solely because industrial eating is deliberately opaque, but often because of material circumstance such as financial hardship and social stratification – all of which are consequences of the unevenness of the capitalist world-system.

In spite of these accusations of elitism and gatekeeping, however, the work of Pollan and Schlosser does highlight a fundamental and pervasive issue in food consumption in the Global North: the fact that we are part of a *world food system*; and that this system is not only profoundly unequal, but that its more insidious processes of human and extrahuman exploitation are made all but invisible to those who consume without knowledge of the

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42 Ibid. p. 141.
43 Imbolo Mbue, ‘Author Interview with Imbolo Mbue’, ed. by Fiona Farnsworth (Personal Conversation, 2019).
47 Ibid. p. 10.
complex ‘food web’\(^{48}\) of supply and demand. It is for this reason that the idea of the ‘food system’ is a useful one for understanding the impact of globalization on world consumption: as Geoff Tansey and Tony Worsley point out, ‘The idea of a system implies that there is an interconnection beneath the surface of things which… is very much the case when we look at any aspect of food today’.\(^{49}\)

Tansey and Worsley’s work is also useful in providing a clear outline of the connection between individual health – which they suggest depends on several factors including biological or genetic factors, the environment, behavioural and social factors, and the political-economic environment\(^{50}\) – and collective/community health which can be influenced by similar factors but may affect individuals in varying ways. This is a productive suggestion to retain when considering the ways in which food itself contributes to individual and collective health, but also to individual and collective identity. Eric Holt-Giménez’ *A Foodie’s Guide to Capitalism* is similarly cognisant of global foodways as fundamentally warped by the logic of capitalism and argues that capitalism and the world food system are so closely intertwined as to be inseparable: that, indeed, ‘to change our food system we need to understand capitalism’.\(^{51}\)

Holt-Giménez’ persuasive study outlines the development of the contemporary ‘corporate food regime’\(^{52}\) through the agricultural enclosure system, the Industrial Revolution, and the transatlantic slave trade (and particularly the monocultural crops cultivated in the New World, such as sugar, cocoa, and tobacco). Ultimately, he concludes, ‘The skewed distribution of resources and the inequitable exposure to the food system’s ‘externalities’ are rooted in the inseparable histories of imperialism, colonialism, and patriarchy’.\(^{53}\) His key understanding is that the world food system runs parallel and within the capitalist world-system – and that patriarchal structures are essential to the continual running of both.

A similar approach is taken by Raj Patel in *Stuffed and Starved*, as he also suggests that ‘The commitment to women’s rights, and the acknowledgement that the food system depends on women’s work… is one of the clearest signals that some farmers’ movements aren’t pining for some rustic past, but want to shape a radically different future’.\(^{54}\) Like Holt-Giménez, Patel’s work is founded on the assumption of the food system as one in which new relations of production mean the land and labour of the Global South are exploited in order to perpetuate modernisation and ‘progress’ in the Global North. Such an argument has been made in earlier

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\(^{48}\) Belasco, 2008, p. 60.


\(^{50}\) Ibid. p. 58.


\(^{52}\) Ibid. p. 30.

\(^{53}\) Ibid. p. 144.

work by Philip McMichael, too: he suggests that ‘Today’s global justice movements problematize modernity, in the name not just of current social pathologies, but also of the long-term sustainability of the social and natural world’. McMichael understands globalization in terms of three ‘new’ dimensions: ‘new relations of production’ which revolve around the changes to agrarian economies and re-composition of market forces; ‘transformation of the relations of social reproduction’, in relation particularly to changes in local provisioning and the ways in which this change to subsistence farming impacts upon families; and ‘Relations of resistance’, or the ‘movements to reclaim the agrarian world from its conversion to a site of profit’. He states, moreover, that

the so-called ‘world food crisis’ constitutes a layering of spatio-temporal relations, in particular the long-term cycle of fossil-fuel dependence of industrial capitalism (‘peak oil’), combined with the inflation-producing effects of current biofuel offsets and financial speculation, and the concentration and centralization of agribusiness capital stemming from the enabling conjunctural policies associated with the corporate food regime.

In particular, this idea of a ‘layering of spatio-temporal relations’ is of intrinsic importance to work on migrant foodways within the food system. After all, certain foodstuffs are biologically suited to cultivation in particular countries, meaning that exporting them internationally requires, almost undoubtedly, a foray into fossil fuels; and this, before even considering that such foodstuffs may make their way over because they have been sought out by big businesses from the Global North, rather than out of any holistic pursuit of global ‘togetherness’. Yet the nuance of individual migrant experiences of both home and away is such that these products – if found abroad in a foreign supermarket – may still elicit feelings of belonging and nostalgia.

My attention in this project is focused primarily on the later stages of the commodity chain, as it is outlined by Lang and Heasman in Food Wars: the two critics present the food supply chain in the form of a simplified flowchart which maps the processes of food from initial ‘supply of agricultural inputs’ to, eventually, ‘domestic food’. At the penultimate stage, the chart diverges into two paths under the title of ‘Food Distribution’: these are ‘Food Catering’

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36 Ibid. p. 216.
37 Ibid. p. 217.
38 Philip McMichael, 'A Food Regime Analysis of the 'World Food Crisis', Agriculture and Human Values, 26 (2009), 282.
restaurants and cafes, for example) and ‘Food Retailing’. Nonetheless, to return to Tansey and Worsley’s statement, a ‘system implies that there is an interconnection’;\(^{60}\) and if we are to analyse foodways \textit{within} the global food system, including literary representations thereof, it is imperative that we acknowledge the wider processes to which we are, as consumers, otherwise frequently ‘inured’.\(^{61}\)

\textit{Literary Food}

I begin with E.M. Forster’s infamous assertion that food in fiction is ‘mainly social’ and that characters ‘seldom require it physiologically, seldom enjoy it, and never digest it unless specially asked to do so’.\(^{62}\) Forster’s observation is an explicit challenge to what Eric Auerbach calls ‘mimesis’;\(^{63}\) or the literary representation of reality: for most people (as Forster would presumably have been aware), food can be – dually – a source of essential nourishment and aesthetic pleasure, which would suggest a certain degree of both enjoyment and ‘physiological’ requirement. If fictional characters are represented as without need or desire for food, this representation must not be mimetic: it cannot undertake to convey a sense of reality. This is not, however, a thesis overly concerned with the realism, or ‘mimesis’ of the novels it investigates. Indeed, it subscribes more readily to many of the ideas expressed in the WReC’s chapter in \textit{Combined and Uneven Development} on ‘Peripheral Irrealism’: here, the authors argue that ‘irrealist’ aesthetic and formal techniques in semi-peripheral literature are the ‘determinate formal registers of (semi-) peripherality in the world literary system’.\(^{64}\)

In this thesis, the bulk of my analysis focuses upon literary foodways as they are depicted in the novel form (although I interrogate cookbooks of the African diaspora in the USA as a project of cultural inquiry and forging of collective and individual identities). Eileen Julien comments that ‘We are told that the novel which originates in Europe has proliferated on the periphery. One could perhaps read this as the periphery’s triumph: The novel has reached its full potential, has become a commanding presence on the global stage, thanks to its enormous success at the edges of the ‘world system,’ due perhaps to its ‘archeological’ and ‘utopic’ possibilities’.\(^{65}\) In conversation with this, we read constant tension in the critical reception of African novels in which Eyitayo Aloh suggests for \textit{African Writer} that ‘It is strongly believed that the migrating writers have yielded to the allure of the western hosts and have

\(^{60}\) Tansey and Worsley, 1995, p. 1.
\(^{61}\) Patel, 2007, p. 3.
\(^{64}\) WReC, 2015, p. 51.
compromised their writing”. Elleke Boehmer calls this immigrant literature ‘The Writing of ‘Not-Quite’ and ‘In-Between’;66 the creative output of a particular echelon for whom the idea of a ‘national narrative’ has little salience, since there is no longer an absolute identification with ‘Africa’ any more than there is a total assimilation into life in the United States. Nonetheless, as Gian-Paolo Biasin suggests in Flavors of Modernity, ‘If it is true that at the foundation of an entire trend of the novel… there is the fiction of the representation of reality, it is equally true that a fundamental part of this reality is made up of food’.68 If ‘world literature’ is understood as ‘the literature of the world-system – the modern capitalist world-system’69 then for work such as this thesis, it is possible – even imperative – to read it also as literature of the modern capitalist world food system.

In ‘Edible Écriture’ – an essay for the Times Higher Education Supplement – Terry Eagleton outlines parallels between the biological necessity of food and the emotional necessity of language.

Food is what makes up our bodies, just as words are what constitute our minds; and if body and mind are hard to distinguish, it is no wonder that eating and speaking should continually cross over in metaphorical exchange. Both are in any case media of exchange themselves. There is no more modish topic in contemporary literary theory than the human body. But there has been strikingly little concern with the physical stuff of which bodies are composed, as opposed to an excited interest in their genitalia. The human body is generally agreed to be "constructed", but what starts off that construction for all of us - milk - has been curiously passed over. There has been much critical interest in the famished body of the western anorexic, but rather little attention to the malnutrition of the Third World. Perhaps such dwindled bodies are too bluntly material a matter for a so-called "materialist" criticism.70

Eagleton suggests, in fact, that there may be as much truth in the reverse configuration: the emotional necessity of food and the biological necessity of language (emphasis mine). My thesis is similarly preoccupied with food and language in the sense of a focus upon literary registration

69 WReC, 2015, p. 8.
and representation of foodways – through food I seek, as Deborah Geis puts it, a ‘powerful, visceral means of textual analysis’.71 Geis’ 2019 work Read My Plate: The Literature of Food makes the rather grandiose claim that ‘food as it appears within literary texts (fiction, poetry, the graphic novel, drama) and as it appears in non-fiction (the food memoir) has not been treated as a unified subject of textual study’ – demonstrably undermined by the existence of work by critics including Allison Carruth72 and Doris Witt (to whose book Black Hunger Geis actually refers).

In more recent years the study of foodways in literature that might be categorised as ‘postcolonial’ or ‘diasporic’ has extended in critical scope. Gitanjali Shahani’s Tasting Difference: Food, Race, and Cultural Encounters in Early Modern Literature73 takes a quotation by cultural theorist Stuart Hall as its jumping-off point – ‘I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea’74 – and thus situates its critical project as the investigation of how ‘the earliest encounters with our difference [are] registered in the tastes of our food’. Although its focus is upon early modern encounters with race, then, it begins to consider the ways in which food might be a means through which to register and interrogate expanding concepts of cultural divergence and diversity. Similarly, Kyla Wazana Tompkins’ Racial Indigestion is enlightening not only in its advocacy for the notion of a ‘critical eating studies’, as opposed to food studies, but in its argument that ‘What we see in the nineteenth century—as indeed we do today in such racialized discourses as obesity, hunger, and diabetes—is the production of social inequality at the level of the quotidian functioning of the body’.75 While both Tompkins and Shahani interrogate ‘canonical’ texts, then, their methodological approaches resonate in the study of literary foodways in a far more contemporary moment, particularly in relation to colonial and postcolonial texts which also engage with the embodied politics of race and the Other. In arguing that ‘a fair balance between theory and aesthetics can produce a happy union of sense and sensation, of writerly operation and readerly response, for example, and that ‘the politically charged and theory-informed literary reading’ is a formidable methodology in approaching such an aim, Wenying Xu’s Eating Identities provides a critical platform upon which it is possible to construct an analysis not only of the food made and served in the home – which is necessarily specific and individualised – but of the pathways of globalization, world-system, and cultural interaction which bring the international into juxtaposition with the local within the text through foodways. Xu’s work is, however, more metaphorically- and

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74 Ibid.
symbolically-oriented than my own. The same might be said of Parama Roy’s similarly rigorous *Alimentary Tracts*, in which the author argues that ‘Writers have tended to draw freely upon an expansive alimentary epistemology – one that encompasses food, consumption, refusal, and deprivation – to their delineation of the ways in which colonial and postcolonial subjects negotiate experiences of dailiness as well as of world-historical significance’. These texts have been influential in my exploration of postcolonial foodways but do undertake a different critical project than that of my thesis. Furthermore, the focus within these studies has been primarily upon the literature of migration from Asia to the USA; and, moreover, we may look to work such as Allison Carruth’s *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* for focused attention on what Carruth calls ‘U.S. food power’ and its relationship to American imperialism and free trade. However, extensive attention has not been paid to the literary foodways of contemporary sub-Saharan African migrants within the United States. Jonathan Bishop Highfield’s *Food and Foodways in African Narratives* is perhaps the most prominent example of the kind of critical attention that foodways in contemporary African literature merits; but even here, the material and cultural influence of international migration within the world-system is addressed only in a chapter on ‘Food and Exile’ which attends to a variety of novels including Dinaw Mengestu’s novel *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*. However, I take my cue from Highfield’s contention that ‘for immigrant communities the transition from exile to residence involves engaging the past, recognizing what has been lost in the transition from one space to another’; and his attention to Marcus Samuelsson’s cookbook *Soul of a New Cuisine* alongside more ‘conventional’ literary forms. This seems to me to speak to Biasin’s claim that

If alimentary referents become verbal and culinary signs in gastronomy, with even greater reason they become so in literature, and particularly in the novel, where they constitute an integral part of the technique used for representation, narration, and characterization, and hence are meant to establish (and to make us understand) the quality and the value of the text, its literariness. In other words, to deal with the uses of food in the novel means also to cut up a large strip of the verbal tissue that allows an in-depth critical analysis, both metonymic and metaphorical, valid for the entire text.

77 Carruth, 2013, p. 4.
79 Biasin, 2017, p. 11.
In light of a reading of literary foodways which foregrounds the material conditions of globalization and the ways in which migrant foodways shape (and are shaped by) the world food system, then, it is also germane to include specific critical attention to cookbooks as a particular kind of *food narrative*. In Chapter 2 (‘All you need is an open mind and a willing spoon’) I extend my definitions of both ‘cookbook’ and ‘food narrative’ and I interrogate what I conceive of as the cultural project of *questioning* undertaken by cookbooks which endeavour to (re)present sub-Saharan African cuisines. While much of my discussion of the formal aspects of cookbook writing is contained in that second chapter then, I do suggest here that if, as WReC argue further, we consider that ‘The peculiar plasticity and hybridity of the novel form enables it to incorporate not only multiple literary levels, genres and modes, but also other non-literary and archaic cultural forms’, we find an implicit justification for the inclusion of cookbooks and recipe narratives in the same critical space as texts which might be more conventionally recognised as ‘novels’.

**Aspects of Migration, Nation, and Continent**

*Immigration Regulation in the USA*

Each of the four literary case studies in this project is based around novels written in the twenty-first century, about (and by) migrants from sub-Saharan Africa to the USA in the contemporary moment: Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* looks at Ghana; Adichie’s *Americanah* at Nigeria; Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers* at Cameroon; and Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* at Zimbabwe. The historical precedent of immigration policy within the United States is outlined by Mae Ngai as having been informed by ‘Proponents of restriction’ who ‘labored to devise a plan that would discriminate without appearing to do so’. Ngai invokes first of all the Johnson-Reed Act (also known as the Immigration Act of 1924) and its restrictive policy towards immigrants as ‘the first time [of] numerical limits on immigration and a global racial and national hierarchy that favoured some immigrants over others’. In the Johnson-Reed Act, national origins quotas limited the number of visas available to new migrants to two percent of the total population of the foreign-born of each nationality in the United States as recorded in the 1890 census (changing the legislation currently in place which restricted the number of visas to three percent of the foreign-born population as recorded in the 1910 census). Although the quota system instigated here was later abolished, the principle of applying quantitative limits to immigration remains in American foreign policy to the present day.

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80 WReC, 2015, p. 16.
82 Ibid. p. 3.
83 ‘The Immigration Act of 1924 (the Johnson-Reed Act)’, [history.state.gov).
The Immigration and Nationality Act in the USA dates from 1952: known also as the McCarran-Walter Act, this was a controversial measure in light of lingering fears about the impact of immigration upon the American economy, and newer ‘wartime anxieties about enemy aliens, divided loyalties, and ‘fifth column’ saboteurs’.84 E.P. Hutchinson notes that the Act was ‘strongly criticized at the time and subsequently for its severity’,85 but suggests that it should be viewed more constructively in relation to the legislation that preceded it: this is presumably because the Act extended immigration quotas to all countries and eliminated racial categories for ‘symbolic, diplomatic benefit’86 (unlike the Johnson-Reed Act, which placed ‘no numerical restrictions on immigration from countries of the Western Hemisphere’87 while excluding certain countries – namely Japan – from immigration entirely). Despite these ostensible reforms, the McCarran-Walter legislation also added excludable classes, toughened deportation policy including ‘making aliens deportable for acts that were not grounds for deportation at the time they were committed’ and stiffening requirements for naturalized citizenship.88 Ngai suggests that President Truman attempted to veto the Act ‘principally for its racist features’.

In 1965, however, the Immigration and Nationality Act (Hart-Celler Act) enacted more progressive reform for immigration laws by abolishing the system of national-origin quotas (so that national origin, race, and ancestry were, in theory, no longer a basis for immigration). However, as Michael Kazin and Joseph McCartin note, ‘in a world of unequal conditions and power relations’ we must be aware that ‘an immigration policy that treats all nations equally is substantively unequal’.89 The Hart-Celler legislation enforced hemispheric numerical quotas (as opposed to national quotas) and restricted any country from using more than 7 per cent of the total annual global allotment of green cards (which, Ngai claims, ‘has been the single greatest cause of unauthorized entry from Mexico and other populous countries with high emigration demand, such as China’).90

The Immigration and Nationality Act Amendments took place on 20th October 1976; this legislation eased the process of visa obtainment, among its other influences on national policy. As a result, immigrants were able to acquire American visas for the purposes of academic study, work, and the reuniting of family. Now, in fact, the level of education of

85 Ibid. p. 312.
88 Ibid. p. 239.
African immigrant population in the United States – in relative terms – surpasses the level of education attained by both native-born American citizens, and immigrants from other areas of the world. More than one-third of African immigrants to the US hold a college degree or equivalent qualification – moreover, according to Population Bulletin, in 2005 the ethnic grouping ‘African immigrants’ contained among the highest percentage of college graduates found in any ethnic group in the US.\(^{91}\) In fact, this is a contributing factor to what has been termed Africa’s ‘brain drain’: Nancy Keteku references a population of sub-Saharan African students in the United States which has ‘more than doubled, to 32,800 in 2005-6, constituting 6 percent of the world’s total and rising faster than any other region’.\(^{92}\) American immigration laws have undergone further revision in recent years, however, and this has provided the impetus for a vastly increased exodus from Africa to the United States. In 1986, further progressive legislation was enacted through the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA): the purpose of this act was to ‘clarify residents’ legal status, dividing them clearly into citizen and noncitizen categories’\(^{93}\) and it also created an amnesty for undocumented immigrants living in the United States, allowing them to apply for legal status without sanction and using their residency towards naturalisation. This enabled ‘at least 39,000 Africans to regularize their stay and acquire legal status’.\(^{94}\) Following this, the 1990 Immigration Act increased the number of immigrants admitted to the country based on their possession of skills appropriate for US-based jobs. Furthermore, in an effort to increase the admission of immigrants from currently underrepresented countries, a ‘Diversity Program’ (Visa Lottery) system of visa acquisition was introduced: between 1990 and 2000, diversity visas accounted for 47 per cent of the growth in African migration to the USA, and for a third of the increase post-2000.\(^{95}\)

It is in the context of these later immigration reforms in the USA that the characters in the novels on which I write here – the last generations in Gyasi’s *Homegoing*, Uju and Ifemelu in *Americanah*, Darling in *We Need New Names*, and the Jonga family in *Behold the Dreamers* – arrive in the USA. However, the history of immigration legislation in the USA testifies to the systemic racism with which sub-Saharan African migrants (and indeed, migrants from many countries, particularly those in the Global South) must contend in the USA. While later reforms appear superficially to have provided impetus and accessibility for movement to the USA from the African subcontinent in the contemporary moment, it is important also to take note of the

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ways in which racialised hostilities – historic and ongoing – are codified within legal and political frameworks. This is, I feel, an important contextual awareness when reading migrant literatures in the USA; but particularly when investigating intersecting concerns of ‘imagining’ communities in migrant and diasporic populations, and the power dynamics that infiltrate and structure even the most (superficially) mundane of daily practices – food.

Migration from sub-Saharan Africa to the USA

At this interval, I would like also to justify my use of the geophysical term ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ – an expression that has been somewhat contentious, due to negative connotations of the preposition ‘sub’ (as though suggesting inferiority and, as Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe argues, prioritising ‘hackneyed and stereotypical racist labelling’ – although there are few other instances of academic derision for the term, and a more apt criticism would seem to be that if ‘sub’ connotes ‘beneath’, then it imagines a world map which positions the ‘north’ literally at the top). Here, I use the term ‘sub-Saharan’ as a purely geographical descriptor for the countries that are entirely or substantially located beyond the Sahara Desert. This is, of course, an imperfect schema: as L. T. Kampala notes, it might be said to suggest that ‘Africa is defined by a wall of sand’ and it also appears, superficially, to ignore the fact that ‘some countries, like Mauritania, are mostly in the desert itself’. Related and, perhaps, more useful is Eamonn Gearon’s insistence that the Sahara ‘must not be thought of as a monolithic entity, a single mass covered in its entirety by sand dunes because it comprises numerous distinct geographies’; and his claim that the Sahara has not always existed in its current immense desert form, but that ‘Where now there exists a relative paucity of biodiversity there were once well-watered places supporting a large number of productive environments including rainforests and grassland as well as marshes and other wetlands’. Africa can hardly be characterised by ‘a wall of sand’ if no such ‘wall’ exists, and in light of the historically specific knowledge of what the Ghanaian author Ayi Kwei Armah evokes as ‘that marvellous black time before the desert became desert’.

For the discussion of foodways and the circulation of edible commodities, however, there is an important material aspect to this delineation of specific areas. I argue that we might use

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100 Ibid. p. 7.
the term ‘sub-Saharan’ African in a food-focused analysis in a way that recognises that food and foodstuffs available and culturally relevant in the northern Arab states are often necessarily different from those of their neighbours further south. My approach here is a comparative one: I do not intend to create or imply equivalences where they do not exist, and I resist emphatically the problematic homogenisation of the African continent as a whole. However, for reasons of legibility and practicality – I do have a word limit, after all – some form of geographical categorisation is necessary.102

To return to the context of migration to the USA in specific relation to sub-Saharan Africa then requires acknowledgement of the fact that, even when opportunity for migration becomes ostensibly greater in the host country, there is no guarantee of take-up. What, then, provides the impetus for this transcontinental movement? Following this line of critical inquiry, Keteku cites educational opportunities as a major ‘push’ for African students. She includes facilities, financial assistance, and the opportunity to integrate disparate fields of study as influential aspects of American tertiary education provision which expose the poverty of many educational institutions in Africa. However, it is asserted that the fact ‘that America is the greatest meritocracy on earth is, in the final analysis, the most powerful ‘pull’ of all’103. John Akokpari concludes ‘a set of basic and incontrovertible attributes of globalization’104 drawn from a brief survey of theoretical modes of reading ‘globalization’ itself. Four thematic elements are identified as primarily important: ‘internationalization’, which is defined as ‘the intensification of cross border interaction between countries’; ‘liberalization’, involving political and economic ‘deregulation’; ‘universalization’, or global reach; and ‘detrimentalization’ (Akokpari calls upon Scholte in defining this final term as the ‘capacity to undermine the sanctity of state borders’). Such ‘incontrovertible attributes’ are at least couched in the logic of imperialism, if they are not essentially a euphemistic rebranding of the same process: imperialist countries reach beyond the liminality of their own national borders to occupy, marketise, and forge uneven trade deals with peripheral countries, while simultaneously undermining the sovereignty of the countries on which they encroach and identifying any culture that does not resemble their own as provincial or archaic. Africa ‘loses out’ because of these factors and the neoliberal reforms they intimate, Akokpari argues,

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102 It is worth noting that while the Sahara creates an environmental separation between the northern Arab states and the rest of continental Africa, it does not separate ‘Muslim Africa’ from ‘non-Muslim Africa’. There is, of course, an enormous Muslim population in West Africa, for example: in Nigeria, the Muslim population was around 90 million in 2019, making it the fifth-largest in the world. Jeff Diamant, ‘The Countries with the 10 Largest Christian Populations and the 10 Largest Muslim Populations’, (2019) <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/01/the-countries-with-the-10-largest-christian-populations-and-the-10-largest-muslim-populations/#text=Nigeria%2C%20which%20has%20the%20sixth,Muslim%20population%2090%20million).> [accessed 23 Sep 2020].


focusing his analysis on the economic ‘push’ factors – ‘Africa’s reliance on export agriculture’ – and the resultant reduction in available arable land and agricultural employment, for example – as an indictment of Africa’s global situation. The predominant focus of Akokpari’s analysis here falls upon the concept of ‘brain drain’ (also termed ‘globalization of human capital’ by J. K. Mapulanga-Hulston), or the exodus of many of Africa’s skilled professionals (often associated with medical students and practitioners) for greater economic opportunity in the West. While my work does not focus preliminarily upon literary representation of the effects of African migration upon source countries, this remains an important element in the configuration of migrant notions of ‘home’: in Adichie’s Americanah, for example, Obinze suggests wryly that ‘Nigeria is chasing away its best resources’ (100) in reference to Ifemelu’s emigration for the purpose of pursuing higher education.

The post-millennium context of this project’s corpus is also important because it acknowledges the advent of a technology that – while perhaps not referenced in the texts with great particularity or frequency – is nonetheless an organising feature of contemporary society. I refer, of course, to the internet. As perhaps the most epochal development in globalisation and, particularly, in the wider circulation of various types of information and knowledge production, the internet is a ubiquitous presence in twenty-first century life and literary registrations and representations thereof. I do not focus upon the internet in this project and, as such, I do not intend here to outline the various ways in which the weight and impact of the internet upon ‘modern’ society have been theorised (in the introduction to Social Theory after the Internet, for example, Schroeder refers to network power, mediatization theory, and actor-network theory as the ‘three strands [which] currently dominate’ discussions). My feeling is that regardless of one’s opinion of the shape of the fissure and re-figuration of social production as a result of the advent of the internet, the fact that this exists in some formation is unarguable. This provides sufficient basis for my acknowledgement of the internet’s vast reach and even vaster power; especially in conjunction with the fact that the internet has altered the ways in which the ‘global’ is visited upon the ‘local’ by virtue of the way that it connects people on national and international stages. Migrants need not communicate via expensive long-distance phone calls, or letters that arrive weeks after they are sent. There is, instead, the opportunity to communicate instantly via messenger applications or to video chat using various apps. In each of the primary literary studies, at least one of these mediums is essential to the characters’ communication with their family at home, although perhaps most prominently in Americanah.

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103 Ibid. p. 133.
as Ifemelu’s blog garners readers across the world, and it is through emails that she and her ex-lover are able to communicate across continents.

*African Literatures*

Chinua Achebe articulates for us a number of questions regarding how we might ‘define “African literature” satisfactorily’: ‘Was it literature produced in Africa, or about Africa? Could African literature be on any subject, or must it have an African theme?’ Both the existence and the relevance of a historical literary precedent in determining the traction of African literature in America are indisputable. These questions continue to be pertinent today – particularly in a cultural moment in which much of the production and circulation of what is widely considered to be ‘African literature’ occurs outside of the African continent. In ‘The Idea of ‘Third Generation Nigerian Literature’, Hamish Dalley suggests that narratorial frameworks are historicised and conceptualised according to a temporal association with the nation state of origin. Dalley invokes existing criticism on the subject in questioning ‘how individuals locate themselves within concentric circles of imaginative affiliation’, identifying Teju Cole’s *Open City* and Tricia Nwaubani’s *I Do Not Come to You By Chance* as specific examples of this ‘third generation’ of literature emerging from Nigeria. Compared to other African literary output of the same moment, *Americanah* has received a disparate amount of critical attention since its publication. In part, this is due to its timeliness – the election of the country’s first black President is both temporal identifier and plot hastener, for example, and salient questions about race arise in light of both technological development (blogging) and civil rights (Black Lives Matter) – but it stems also from Adichie’s own public persona. Comparable in fame and reach to the stature of figures such as Arundhati Roy, for example, Adichie’s social influence derives less from explicit political confrontation, and more from a quasi-celebrity positioning on an international stage. A TED Talk given by Adichie in 2013 has been sampled on a Beyonce track; she has authored two feminist tracts – *We Should All Be Feminists* and, more recently, *Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions*; and she is one of the faces of make-up brand No7. Adichie’s admiration for Chinua Achebe is evident in her narratives and in her own public discourse, and the way in which she articulates the reasoning behind her writing in English (this latter issue denoted as the product of an English education and concretely affirmed as ‘taking ownership of English’). There is little doubt that much is owed in Adichie’s writing to the literary genealogy who precede her.

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However, it is equally evident that the cultural modes through which these earlier works have traditionally been negotiated no longer provide sufficient material for the current paradigm. While newer legislation has, as outlined, increased the potential (and actuality) of African immigration to the United States, and an increasing social emphasis on the importance of diverse and equal opportunities has arguably increased the extent to which immigrant populations are able to assimilate into American society, there are also salient concerns in terms of the construction and navigation of identity within the capitalist world-system. The discussion about what can be deemed ‘authentic’ representation of Africa gains further notoriety in terms of thematic material: any literary publication perceived as an attempted depiction of the ‘real Africa’ is innately controversial in definition. Helon Habila criticises NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* for its ‘palpable anxiety to cover every “African” topic’, a list which comprises ‘fraudulent preachers’, ‘Aids’, ‘political violence’, and ‘street children’, amongst others. Much of the book’s critical acclaim resulted from the ‘vibrant’ language used to describe the Zimbabwuan situation of its child narrators, however.

Another aspect of this project is then to highlight the presence and influence of Africa in these works, and thus the extent to which the process of migration is configured not only as on-going but as a continual exchange. In each of these novels, ‘Africa’ – though, of course, I use the term here loosely as a means of grouping the countries of origin of each novel’s respective characters (Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe) – is a near-constant presence in both the literary narrative and in the personal narratives the characters ‘write’ for themselves. Current debates regarding the reception and bibliomigrancy of African literature tend to focalise around concepts of the ‘Afropolitan’ – a term coined by Taiye Selasi to denote a new generation of young Africans who consider themselves ‘not citizens: but Africans of the world’ – and ‘Pan-Africanism’, which speaks more widely to notions of diaspora and transatlantic connection, and to ‘the unity of Africans and black diasporans in a joint struggle, a struggle ordained by the pains of the deep historical wounds inflicted by slavery, racism, colonialism, and neocolonialism’. In particular, the term ‘Afropolitan’ has garnered substantial criticism on the basis that it ‘gives the West an opportunity to understand, even ‘consume’ Africa’. Emma Dabiri is similarly critical of the term, exhibiting derision for ‘the rapacious consumerism of the African elites claimed to make up the ranks of the

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Afropolitans’.\textsuperscript{115} She argues instead for the invocation of ideas of mobility and lack of stasis which, while not superficially divergent from the concept of the Afropolitan, ask whether we ‘might… recentralize African fluidity, rather than international, aspirational lifestyles, within the Afropolitan assemblage?’\textsuperscript{116} Rather than condemn the existence of the concept of the Afropolitan per se, Dabiri suggests that the real issue lies in the critical reception of the term: ‘While Afropolitanism may go some way in redressing the balance concerning Africans speaking for themselves, the problem lies in the fact that we still do not hear the narratives of Africans who are not privileged’.\textsuperscript{117} In fact, Dabiri employs Adichie as an example of one who identifies not as Afropolitan but as African. However, to identify as African is not simultaneously to identify as pan-African by necessity, and this ignites a critical discourse surrounding the relations between African nations (as well as between Africa and the Global North). For example, Achille Mbembe’s defence of Afropolitanism suggests its usefulness as an aesthetic and ‘a way of being in the world’\textsuperscript{118} and as an intellectual means of achieving what (according to Mbembe’s analysis) pan-Africanism has not: ‘the relativization of primary roots and memberships and the way of embracing, with full knowledge of the facts, strangeness, foreignness, and remoteness, the ability to recognize one’s face in that of a foreigner[…]’\textsuperscript{119}

Since I have selected the authors for this thesis on the basis of their work’s interaction with the push-and-pull relationship between sub-Saharan Africa and the United States, it is perhaps only natural that in the biography of each is a personal experience of a similar pattern of migration. For Adichie, Bulawayo, and Mbue, this entailed movement to the USA for college after childhood and upbringing on the African continent, while Gyasi left her home country of Ghana at the age of two while her father completed his PhD. While the authors’ experiences of the United States naturally differ to some degree, there is nonetheless a striking commonality between all of them: that of higher education.

Criticisms of the ‘Afropolitan’ argument – which centralises capitalism and its portents in the experience of migration – might be seen here to be well-founded; those authors who are considered to be ‘authentic’ voices of African experience are nonetheless representative of a middle-class minority, as opposed to all African migrants. It is significant, too, that the majority of African writers who have found prominence in global circulation (including those upon whom this thesis focuses) belong to a particular class-fraction that is best characterised as middle-class: where novels such as Americanah contain a biographical element, then, generally it describes a middle-class trajectory. Taiye Selasi notes in a recent conversation with Bhakti

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid. p. 106.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid. p. 105.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid. p. 59.
Shringarpure titled ‘Revisiting Afropolitanism’ that the ‘immigrant kid[s]’ who recognised themselves in her 2005 essay were ‘not for the most part rich’; that although they were ‘a group of people in movement’, they were not ‘in movement toward luxury packaged vacations’ but rather ‘counting their pennies… to get home (from home)’; and that they would have been told ‘to hustle and not to stop hustling until [they’d] entered, irrevocably, the global middle class’. Although Selasi acknowledges that to have the means to undertake such global travel is ‘a privilege’, she does so while qualifying that the ‘multi-locality’ of the family unit is ‘a post-colonial outcome’, and arguing that ‘to re-write that multi-locality in capitalist terms is to erase the human cost’. It is certainly true that there is a human cost to the fracturing of families across countries and continents: this much appears often as a theme in modern migrant fictions, such as Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club and, more recently, Selasi’s own Ghana Must Go. However, the fact remains that entry into the global middle class – hustle or otherwise – remains an inaccessible avenue for those in certain social stratifications, particularly in the Global South; and, without undermining or negating the traumatic legacies of colonialism that Selasi describes, we must acknowledge that there remain other, marginalised voices from the African subcontinent that we do not hear in literary circulation. We cannot ‘re-write’ the ‘Afropolitan’ scenario in ‘capitalist terms’, as Selasi suggests, because these scenarios already occur within and are shaped by the capitalist world-system.

Maaza Mengiste addresses this controversy in ‘What Makes a Real African?’, describing succinctly the extent to which critical engagement with African literature seems to be neglected in favour of more probing discussion regarding ‘authenticity’ of African authorial identity. Indeed, she says, “The question about an African identity implies that the differences between "home" and "destination" are so stark that living in the West should be a constant negotiation between living where one must and where one really belongs” – and, while this may be a pertinent topic in some African novels, in many it is by no means the sole nor even the organising thematic concern.

‘Becoming Black’

Across historical moments, Africa as the home nation has assumed varying levels of importance in the configuration of an associated African identity. Most recently, African writers seem divided upon the subject of the ‘Afropolitan’ and the ‘Pan-African’, although

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both terms denote a kind of collectivity in terms of the African population abroad. Even to abbreviate this latter collective using the term ‘diaspora’ is problematic; Zeleza notes this when he suggests that there is an ‘analytical tendency to privilege the Atlantic, or rather the Anglophone, indeed the American branch of the African diaspora’,\(^{124}\) also crucially highlighting the sometimes contradictory nature of connections drawn between transcontinental diasporas and between African Americans and Africans. Moreover, Zeleza perforates his analysis with the acknowledgement that ‘not all dispersals result in the formation of diasporas’,\(^{125}\) a superficially simplistic observation which gives credence to the specificity of the situation of the Black African diaspora.

The prospect of sub-Saharan migration to the USA as entailing the development of a new racial consciousness – a ‘becoming Black’ – is well-documented in fictional, biographical, and journalistic narratives. Again, this is not the specific focus of my thesis; but it is an influential on both migrant experiences and Teju Cole – a Nigerian author living in the USA – articulates this racialised aspect of global mobility thus:

> On my way to becoming African, I also began to become black, which proved a more complex journey. ‘African’ was about sharing a mutual space with Africans: friends from across the continent, or people with whom I’d been placed in the same category. It had something to do with us finding ourselves strangers in the strange American land, but also with our shared experience of the background radiation of colonialism… ‘Black’ was something else. It was in a sense more inclusive. It took in all that colonial hangover and added to it the American experiences of slavery, slave rebellion, Jim Crow, and contemporary racism, as well as the connective tissue that bound the Black Atlantic into a single territory of pain…\(^{126}\)

However, also crucial to Cole’s understanding is the localized specificity of the situation of the ‘American black’ population (a term which Adichie also uses in *Americanah*, and which refers to ‘slave-descended black’).\(^{127}\) Cultural divergence between Black American communities and Black sub-Saharan immigrants in the United States forms much of my discussion in Chapter 3, in relation to Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* and its emotional engagement with the concept of an African diaspora. In some ways, this returns once more to the concept of pan-Africanism, albeit expanding its focus to include a broader notion of African diaspora. While Pius

\(^{125}\) Ibid. p. 39.
\(^{127}\) Ibid. p. 40.
Adusenmi presents the idea of a unified African diaspora as an intellectual formation more than a tangible reality – ‘What university training added to this foundation was a transcendental, borderless black world that privileged colour, history, and memory above geography and nation’\textsuperscript{128} – Yogita Goyal poses pertinent questions such as ‘Can racial unity offer a clear alternative to Western oppression? Can a unified black diasporic identity counter the modernity that alienates and fragments?’ These are not questions that I claim to answer; but they are contextually important in any critical engagement with the intersecting concerns of race and class in sub-Saharan African foodways.

**Hungry Women**

All of these concerns are applicable in similar situations across African immigration to the United States. However, this thesis focuses upon the specificity of the female migrant experience: the intersection of sex and gender ideologies with ideas of education, opportunity, and participation in communities at both local and international levels. We should look, then, to existing debates regarding the agency of women immigrants, and the ways in which these women negotiate their plural identities of ‘woman’, ‘migrant’, ‘African’, and even ‘Black’. I argue – with particular specificity in Chapter 6, but across the thesis as a whole – that an intersectional approach (defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw as one which ‘highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas’)\textsuperscript{129} is imperative in engaging with such discourses of power imbalance and the dynamics of oppression.

Elleke Boehmer addresses the writing of women immigrants in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors*, noting that women’s writing adds ‘to the more general postcolonial interest in multiplicity… the concept of women’s many-centred, constellated power, the emphasis being at once on the importance of diversity and on occupying an enabling position from which to articulate selfhood’.\textsuperscript{130} Boehmer’s suggestion that there exists a specifically female affinity with the transnational is particularly pertinent to the overarching question of this thesis regarding the ‘political construction of foods as institutionalized vehicles of national cultural identities’\textsuperscript{131} in alignment with concerns of the feminine. Moreover, Brenda Cooper suggests that these immigrants are ‘trapped in what Bourdieu dubs the dilemma of “parvenus”’,\textsuperscript{132} labelling this ‘in-between’ status as a constant, pressurised tension between


\textsuperscript{130} Boehmer, 2005, p. 220.


conforming – configured here as total assimilation in all-American situ – or continuing to participate in the traditions of African cultural heritage, thus risking enforced separation from the remainder of the adopted culture. In fact, Sarala Krishnamurthy suggests that this enacts a divide between ‘assimilationists’ and ‘traditionalists’133 – a juxtaposition of attitudes which serves no purpose other than to construct further divisions according to different configurations of the ‘African’ and the ‘American’.

According to Boehmer’s analysis, there is a fundamentally urban aspect to the immigrant experience: she refers to the ‘world city’ in conversation with the nation as ‘validated sites of political opposition, where women can organize solidarities and networks that short-circuit the operation of [impersonal global forces]’.134 In the novels on which I focus, such a spatially-informed experience of migration is suggested in the emotional attachments protagonists form to particular urban settings: Neni’s love of New York City in Behold the Dreamers, for example, or Darling’s ‘Destroyedmichygen’ (as an imagined construct that is gradually dismantled through more intimate engagement with the city) in We Need New Names. Then in Americanah Ifemelu, too, evokes spatialised emotional connections with the places that she lives, and these are effected with explicit references to each city’s gastronomic offerings – while Philadelphia is described as ‘the smell of the summer sun’ (132), more evocative is the subsequent reference to ‘sizzling meat from food carts tucked into street corners’. Adichie proceeds to render the delicious minutiae of the offerings from these carts – ‘flatbread and lamb and dripping sauces’ – and Ifemelu’s affinity towards them as a comparable journey to her ‘love’ for Philadelphia itself. In a parallel encounter with Baltimore, a significant proportion of its appeal lies in ‘its farmers’ market… bursting with green vegetables and plump fruit and virtuous souls’ (206). In Princeton, it is ‘the locals who drove with pointed courtesy and parked their latest-model cars outside the organic grocery store on Nassau Street or outside the sushi restaurants or outside the ice cream shop that had fifty different flavours including red pepper’ (3). Rather than positioning Ifemelu as an outsider, however, the gastronomic patterns through which cultural transition is enacted enable her to connect on a fundamental and emotional level with her urban environment.

Although illuminating work on food and masculinities has emerged in recent years – particularly Michelle Szabo and Shelley L. Koch’s edited volume Food, Masculinities, and Home135 – a fundamental premise of my thesis is that women’s relationships with food (in globally, nationally, and locally specific situations) are subject to the warped dynamics of patriarchal capitalism at each stage of the food commodity chain. While this is most typically

addressed on the level of women’s bodies – and thus, as I demonstrate in my final chapter, ‘Please please please feed your wife’, the gendered dynamics of power that surround women’s consumption – I am interested, too, in the ways in which this patriarchal logic is enacted in the production, distribution, and preparation of foods within the parameters of my study. As such, I employ work by materialist feminists including Silvia Federici and Maria Mies, particularly in relation to women’s foodwork as it is figured in the context of sub-Saharan migration to the USA: this relates not only to recognition of ‘housework as productive labour and as an area of exploitation and a source for capital accumulation’¹³⁶ but to the conflicting discourses regarding the feminisation of the domestic space and the provision of affective care through food. Psyche Williams-Forson has also undertaken considerable enlightening studies into the foodways of Black American women, in particular – her 2006 work Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs is critically focused upon the reclamation of Black women’s foodwork as a site of power and agency with particular attention to the role of chicken. Williams-Forson argues that ‘Some women used chicken for economic freedom and independence; others used it to show off their cooking skills. Still others used chicken to travel at times when their own movement was restricted’.¹³⁷ Her work asks that we pay attention to the ways in which ‘Black women utilize the dominant discourses to create spaces of dissent against and strategic acquiescence to the logics of capital everpresent in our food systems’;¹³⁸ but it is also a timely reminder – during a period in which the policemen who killed Breonna Taylor still walk free, unimpeded by criminal justice – of the extent to which this racist patriarchal violence is codified in America and in the world-system.

Marilyn Lawrence suggests that ‘women develop problems around food and eating in response to readily identifiable social demands’,¹³⁹ locating this in a paradigm of patriarchal control over women’s bodies. Aspects of gendered consumption have also been highlighted in work by Sarah Sceats, who argues that fiction written by women engages with alimentary discourses ‘ranging from explorations of female culinary sensuousness, creativity and authority in cooking, to the exercise of power or political responsibility through food and acts of eating, to the revisiting of earlier depictions of women’s sexuality through appetite and eating’.¹⁴⁰ I take my cue here from Sceats’ evocation of the sheer multiplicity of projects that women’s writing may enact with regard to food, and the nuanced power dynamics that play out within.

¹³⁶ Mies, 2014, p. 32.
Other critics have also observed keenly the critical relationship between food and power that is also infiltrated by gendered patriarchal logics: a classic example of this is Carol J. Adams’ *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, in which Adams argues for vegetarianism on the basis that ‘Meat eating is the re-inscription of male power at every meal’.\(^{141}\) While Adams’ work contains valuable insights – asking, for example, ‘How do we overthrow patriarchal power while eating its symbol?’\(^{142}\) – it is highly focused upon the metaphorical elements of consumption with which my project is less concerned. For a more materially-grounded analysis of gendered elements of consumption, we may look to analyses such Elspeth Probyn’s *Carnal Appetites*: here Probyn argues that ‘food and its relation to bodies is fundamentally about power’\(^{143}\) and concludes that ‘while we still do not know the full capacities of bodies, in different contexts they give off clues about their knowledges’\(^{144}\).

All of this should be accounted for, of course, at the same time as acknowledgement of the racialised discourses that accompany the patriarchal logic of capitalism, and the ways in which these are disproportionately and violently visited upon Black women. For example, domestic labour has often been racialised in the USA due to the figures of ‘the mammy’ and ‘Aunt Jemima’\(^{145}\); racist caricatures engendered by the transatlantic slave trade which positioned Black women as ‘faithful slaves’ who occupied their ‘place in modern life with servility, obedience, and joviality’.\(^{146}\) In such a narrative, the foodwork of Black women is subsumed by a patriarchal white supremacist discourse. Useful here is bell hooks’ work on ‘eating the other’, and her suggestion that ‘the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism’\(^{146}\).

In a project which focuses upon foodways and consumption it is, I think, important to trust one’s gut instinct; and mine suggests that capitalist patriarchal logic enacts a specifically gendered relationship with food at each stage of the world food system. It is for this reason that I choose to analyse sub-Saharan Africa migrant women’s writing and representation of women’s experiences, in particular. Because my focus is primarily upon the situation of these migrants within the USA, I do not attend in any great detail to the agricultural and subsistence work of women in food production. Given that my work is situated in an understanding of the world food system, however, it is important to acknowledge the existence and foundational

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142 Ibid. p. 179.
144 Ibid. p. 149.
imperative of this work: particularly given that, as Silvia Federici tells us ‘Despite women’s resistance to their marginalization, and their continuous engagement in subsistence farming and land reclamation struggles, these [colonial and capitalist] developments have had a profound effect on food production’.147 Vandana Shiva concurs with and extends this argument, telling us not only that women ‘are the primary growers and providers of food, nutrition, and nourishment in societies across the world’148 but that the ‘seeds of knowledge’ required to effect tangible, substantial reform to the food system are ‘from centuries of the evolution of indigenous women, from our grandmothers, and from teachers across the world’.149 From these ‘seeds of knowledge’ to billboard adverts which ask whether one is ‘Beach body ready’, women are present and influential throughout the world food system.

Conclusion

In this opening chapter I have endeavoured to contextualise the critical space into which my thesis intervenes, by providing a brief qualitative survey of existing scholarly engagement with a) food and foodways, both literary and extraliterary; b) discourses of identity for West African immigrants in the United States and the wider African diaspora; and c) transnational feminism and women’s writing. I have presented some of the conceptual debates ongoing within each field which are, though not necessarily foregrounded in the main bulk of my thesis, contextually vital; and which resonate throughout my own work as well as within both the literary and extraliterary registrations of the issues I discuss. Hall’s assertion that cultural identities ‘undergo continual transformation’150 – that they are ‘subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power’ – seems apt here, particularly in acknowledging the cultural and power-based dynamics which influence individual and collective conceptions of identity and which are, so often, gendered and racialised.

In sum, then, I look to identify the intersecting concerns of these three thematic fields: foodways and the world food system; contemporary African migration and migrant writing in the USA; and the gendered experiences of women within the world-system. In The Sacred Cow and the Abominable Pig, Harris tells us that

Each puzzling food item has to be seen as part of a whole system of food production, a distinction must be made between long and short-run consequences, and one must

149 Ibid. p. 150.
not forget that food is often a source of wealth and power for the few as well as nourishment for the many.151

Key here is, I think, this notion of the ‘as well as’ – what Lorna Piatti-Farnell calls food’s ‘protean and polysemic qualities’, or its capability of registering multifaceted and varied meanings which are culturally and materially mediated.152 It is possible – and indeed, almost inescapable – for food to bear social meaning for individuals and communities (locally, nationally, and globally) at the same time as it registers the logic of the global supermarket, the constant pressures of supply and demand, and the systemic inequalities on which the world food system is built. For these reasons, I argue, the foodways of literary narratives between sub-Saharan Africa and the USA enable a ‘worlded’ reading of the sociopolitical struggles surrounding cultural and individual identity – indeed, they make such a reading essential.

This was, at first, a thesis about migrant women’s writing, and then a thesis about food writing: in its final iteration, it is about both. It is concerned with foodways, commodity chains, and the internal, malevolent logic of patriarchy that props up and propels these. It is about migration – about the relationship to, from, and between sub-Saharan Africa and the United States – and about the conception and enactment of identity in light of the material and cultural changes this brings about. It is about power.

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151 Harris, 1987, p. 17.
152 Piatti-Farnell, 2011, p. 7.
Chapter 2 – ‘All you need to join in is an open mind and a willing spoon’: Cookbooks and Food Narratives

The identity-constructing qualities of food can be encapsulated within the recipe. As the reader is invited to participate, the recipe becomes a textual conversation over the metaphorical and actual breaking of bread. Recipes can pass on traditions, overcoming distances of time and spaces as well as differences between groups, taking part in the invention of traditions that can help to establish the story of the nation, the boundaries of the masculine community, the sisterhood of non-hegemonic sexualities. Food discourses are an important site of power relations and a site of dominance and resistance within the establishment and performance of identities in daily life.¹⁵³

Introduction

Chapter Methodology

This thesis looks primarily at the figuring of food in general in literature of African migration. In this chapter, however, I propose to engage more explicitly with African cooking itself, and the ways in which it is beginning to become more ‘mainstream’ in the United States. In later chapters I focus specifically upon novels, working on the presupposition that the novel is ‘the’ genre of the world-system; that its ‘modes of spatio-temporal compression, its juxtaposition of asynchronous orders and levels of historical experience, its barometric indications of invisible forces acting from a distance on the local and familiar’¹⁵⁴ make this the preferred (if not the only) medium through which the experience of the modern can be articulated. However, Katharina Vester invokes a couple of particularly salient points in relation to the ways in which we might read cookbooks as productive interventions in the same critical conversations: namely, the role of the cookbook in ‘overcoming distances of time and spaces as well as differences between groups’ and the participation of the author(s) in ‘the invention of traditions’.¹⁵⁵

In this chapter, then, I focus specifically upon cookbooks. In our contemporary model of communication – what Deborah Lupton calls ‘the increasingly digitized societies of the

¹⁵⁴ WRc, 2015, p. 17.
¹⁵⁵ Vester, 2015, p. 9.
Global North\textsuperscript{156} – the recording and transmission of recipes has become increasingly based online (albeit not necessarily at the expense of more traditional cookbooks, as noted by Vester) through blogs,\textsuperscript{157} YouTube videos,\textsuperscript{158} and other social media exchanges.\textsuperscript{159} A cursory investigation of the websites of the largest book vendors in the USA – Barnes and Noble and Books-A-Million as the most prevalent dedicated book chains, and Amazon as the world’s largest book retailer (albeit not really a bookstore at all)\textsuperscript{160} – reveals a number of ‘African’ recipe books available in the United States. Of these, I elected to study a selection of the most popular: my methodology in determining popularity involved using sorting functions on the websites of the aforementioned book vendors (Barnes and Noble, Books-A-Million, and Amazon.com) to list available cookbooks in bestselling order. These are Evi Aki’s \textit{Flavors of Africa}; Jessica B. Harris’ \textit{The Africa Cookbook}; Fran Osseo-Asare’s \textit{The Ghana Cookbook}; Bryant Terry’s \textit{Afro-Vegan}; \textit{Food From Across Africa: Recipes to Share} by Duval Timothy, Jacob Fodio Todd and Folayemi Brown; and Bea Sandler’s \textit{The African Cookbook}.

Finding case studies and examples for this chapter has been something of a challenge, not least because of my own geographical and experiential distance from the American setting of my research (and the African regions from which many of the dishes encountered in these works originate or find inspiration). As with the broader remit of this thesis as a whole, I have found it necessary to focus my research upon a particular set of criteria.\textsuperscript{161} I have therefore focused on cookbooks that are available in the United States and, moreover, I have largely sustained my emphasis upon authors who have a vested interest in both Africa and the United States. The only exception to this is \textit{Food From Across Africa: Recipes to Share} by Timothy Duval, Jacob Fodio Todd, and Folayemi Brown, which was published originally as \textit{The Groundnut Cookbook} in the United Kingdom, after the supper club ‘The Groundnut’ that the authors began together in 2012. The book is therefore distinctive not only for its collective, collaborative authorship, but for the fact that it emerged out of the contemporary revival trend towards supper clubs in the United Kingdom.\textsuperscript{162} Functionally, there are very few alterations


\textsuperscript{161} This is not to designate those works which fall outside these criteria as either less important or less worthy of study: it is simply to provide this chapter with an inherent sense of both structure and purpose.

between the USA and UK versions of the volume.\textsuperscript{163} In fact, those present are largely vocabulary changes which indicate distinctions between American and British English (e.g. ‘eggplant’ as opposed to ‘aubergine’), rather than ingredient substitutions. This suggests that obtaining the necessary ingredients (from supermarkets, ethnic grocery stores, and health food shops, or from online suppliers\textsuperscript{164}) is a similar task in both the UK and the USA. The title is, of course, different too: \textit{Food From Across Africa} is a more explicit nod to the content of the book and the authors’ project of drawing ‘attention to traditional recipes, both inherited and adapted, as well as [exploring] new ingredients and combinations’;\textsuperscript{165} and without the context of the supper club itself (at least initially, a solely London-based endeavour) ‘The Groundnut’ name might have meant little to a North American audience.

As is also evident from this list, at this point it becomes necessary to include cookbook authors who do not fit into the female focus of the preceding chapters. Marcus Samuelsson and Bryant Terry, for example, are both prominent chefs in the United States whose work is focused at least in part on flavours found in Africa and the African diaspora. The three authors of \textit{Food From Across Africa} are also male: Timothy, Fodio Todd and Brown met as friends in university, and bonded over the various African influences over the food of their childhoods. Nonetheless, there remains a gendered element to the discourse of these books, particularly in relation to the traditional division of domestic labour (see Chapter 5). Productive dialogues emerge subsequently when we read these books in conversation with those by female authors. In Janet Theophano’s work \textit{Eat My Words} she asserts that ‘Women have conserved a whole world, past and present, in the idiom of food’.\textsuperscript{166} Theophano’s volume is effusive on the point of the women to whom she accords this critical space, and the innovative ways in which they have circumvented issues like poverty and illiteracy to bring their recipe books to mass audiences. For example, one of the writers whose output is important here is Fran Osseo-Asare – an American woman married to a Ghanaian man, Kwadwo Osseo-Asare – whose \textit{The Ghana Cookbook} is the culmination of a ‘love affair with her husband’s homeland and its cuisine’.\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{163} I elect to discuss this work from the UK as opposed to other African cookbooks by UK-based authors (such as Lope Ariyo’s \textit{Hibiscus}, Zoe Adjonyoh’s \textit{Zoe’s Ghana Kitchen}, or Yemisi Aribisala’s \textit{Longthroat Memoirs}) because its publication has been deliberately altered for American publication. I compare the two versions briefly to outline the ways in which the USA version diverges from its British counterpart, but I focus primarily upon the USA publication.

\textsuperscript{164} See online retailers like: West Africa Cooks, ‘Order Now African Food in America and Great Britain’, (westafricacooks.com). This website includes recipes and restaurant recommendations as well as offering shipping of African food ingredients to the UK and the USA.


and who learned many of the techniques and dishes included in the book from her husband’s extended family in Ghana. Another is prolific food historian Jessica B. Harris: her *The Africa Cookbook* acts as memoir, travelogue, and cookbook. Finally, Evi Aki occupies a demonstrably ‘modern’ culinary space, given that the origins of her cookbook lay in her weblog ‘Ev’s Eats’.

Each of the cookbooks included adopts a focus upon continent-wide African cooking, covering multiple national food cultures under the umbrella term of ‘African’ cuisine. The only exception to this is *The Ghana Cookbook* which, as the name suggests, focuses solely upon the cuisine of Ghana (although it recognises continuities with cuisines of other West African countries, for example when noting that a Black-eyed pea fritter known as ‘akara’ in Ghana is also popular in Nigeria, and known under many different names including ‘acara, akla, kose, koose, kosai’). Initially this might seem a falsely homogenous perception of the continent, in much the same way that Anita Mannur suggests in *Culinary Fictions* that ‘the cultural and political hegemony of India has often led to a conflation of South Asia with India’ (the resentment of which has been noted not just in academic work such as Mannur’s, but in popular culture opinion pieces such as Ibnat Islam for gal-dem). In fact, this sort of ‘pan-African’ approach to food seems to me to undertake a more radical project of identity construction, attempting to hold notions of local, national, and continental (even global) in one.

As I and many others have explored previously, the African continent is so vast and geographically diverse that there are myriad environmental divergences between its hemispheric sections. Harris states that ‘Africa, with all its conflicting images, is a continent of diversity, and nowhere is this diversity better expressed than in the Africa that is a continent of cuisines’. These differences in physical environment — and therefore in the conditions present for growing and cultivating crops — provide the primary impetus for this chapter. As such, I have widened the scope of my analysis here to include countries in which English is not the primary language or is, indeed, barely spoken by anyone on a day-to-day basis — for example, Senegal. I note, of course, that the experiences of these countries under colonisation will have been subject to different influences. My reasoning for this is that the cuisines of these countries are often linked more closely by ingredients and foodstuffs than by governance or

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168 Ibid. p. 78.
170 Ibnat Islam, ‘Stop Calling All South Asian People ‘Indian’’, gal-dem, (2019) <https://gal-dem.com/stop-calling-all-south-asian-people-indian/> [accessed 14 Sep 2020]. Of course, the negation of particular national identities here is slightly different: although both the South Asian and African instances are synecdochal, in the former the part (‘India’) comes to stand in for the whole (‘South Asia’), whereas in the latter the whole (‘Africa’) erases the subjective national identities of its constituent parts. Moreover, this erasure of other South Asian nationalities is deeply resented in countries such as Pakistan (due, in part, to historic events such as the Partition of India in 1947).
demographic factors; for example, a dish like jollof rice (supposed to have originated from the Wolof people in Senegal) might be popular all over West Africa, and the subject of many heated debates regarding origin, ingredients, and the ‘best’ version. James C. McCann calls this ‘an interaction of both taste and texture and the ecology of ingredients’.

In the same way that it is difficult – but crucial – to engage with cultural productions from the African continent in a way that does not homogenise those countries, it is crucial that we do not create a false and homogenous concept of what constitutes ‘African food’. It is important to note, however, that a number of the works interrogated here purport to offer an overview of ‘African cooking’ – albeit one that is, as a rule, researched meticulously and conveyed in a manner that recognises the individuality both of countries and the many, varied cultures within those countries – and that, while those works include recipes attributed to northern African countries (in which the cultures and foodways have been shaped by the movement and intercourse between Arab peoples across the region, as well as Mediterranean influences) and to South Africa (where English and Afrikaans colonial influences have substantially shaped foodways in a manner quite different from the cuisines of other sub-Saharan regions), my focus will remain here primarily upon the ways in which these narratives present recipes originating in or based upon those of sub-Saharan Africa.

A Note on Terminology
Throughout this chapter I refer to key texts interchangeably as ‘cookbooks’ and ‘food narratives’. My use of these terms (both separately and in tandem) is weighted by my argument regarding the interplay between the cultural project undertaken by these texts and my own literary reading of them as global texts. As such, I would like briefly to address the terminologies available, and to justify those I have judged appropriate for this chapter’s critical approach.

Throughout his essay ‘How to Make a National Cuisine’, Arjun Appadurai uses the term ‘cookbooks’ to refer to texts which ‘combine the sturdy pragmatic virtues of all manuals with the vicarious pleasures of the literature of the senses’. He proceeds to argue that ‘Cookbooks appear in literate civilizations where the display of class hierarchies is essential to

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174 For example, bobotie – South Africa’s national dish, consisting of curried meat and fruit baked with a milk- and egg-based custard – originated in the Western Cape among the urban slave population: Clifton Crais notes that “It is a quintessentially creole dish combining African, European, and Indonesian foods. From Khoekhoe pastoralists came beef and lamb. From Europe came the tradition of making egg and milk custards, meatloaf, and ground meat with rich topping similar to British shepherd’s pie or Greek moussaka. And from Indonesia came curries and spices such as cumin, coriander, dried peppercorns, turmeric, and, crucially, rice”. Clifton Crais, ‘Bobotie Recipe’, in The South Africa Reader : History, Culture, Politics, ed. by Clifton Crais and Thomas V. McClendon (Durham, UNITED STATES: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 64 - 65 (p. 64).
175 Appadurai, 1988, p. 3.
their maintenance, and where cooking is seen as a communicable variety of expert knowledge.\textsuperscript{176} In doing so, Appadurai acknowledges and builds upon Jack Goody’s claim that cookbooks have contributed to social stratification by virtue of their reliance upon literacy and financial accessibility (‘writing could also be an instrument of oppression as well of liberation’);\textsuperscript{177} and because they have historically tended to focus on what Goody calls the \textit{haute cuisine} of upper societal echelons, which ‘always seek to distance themselves from their local sources’.\textsuperscript{178} Similarly, Adam Kopnik suggests that there has been a historical progression in the trend of cookbook writing ‘from dictionary to encyclopedia, and to anthology and then grammar’,\textsuperscript{179} each of which categories – though useful to a degree in highlighting the ‘anthological’ aspect of compiling recipes from multiple cultures into a single volume – seem to characterise cookbooks as specifically and solely prescriptive texts.

In comparison, Doris Witt has coined the term ‘recipistolary’\textsuperscript{180} with respect to Ntozake Shange’s \textit{Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo}, for a genre that is closely related to the novel (and, as in the case of Shange’s work, often self-identifies as such) but which ‘embeds recipes in the text as gifts of love’. In some ways, this idea of the ‘recipistolary’ seems a useful one for approaching cookbooks, in the sense that it foregrounds the narrative aspects of the texts and appreciates that the recipes themselves may be incidental or illustrative, as opposed to objects of primary focus. This more holistic interpretation of the function of cookbooks which is echoed by Rachel Cooke, who argues (in relation to her own extensive collection of much-loved cookbooks from which, nevertheless, she cooks rarely) that ‘cookbooks are not just for those who cook’, but for those who find that ‘reading about food is the next best thing to eating it’.\textsuperscript{181} Yet, for all the linguistic pleasure of the neologism, the lexical invocation of the ‘epistolary’ fragments the surrounding narratives by suggesting that they are, in some capacity, ‘letters’. But a letter requires a recipient; and, if these works are letters, to whom are they addressed? If we use ‘recipistolary’ in relation to cookbooks, then, the question of target audience is prioritised at the expense of exploring the multiple, discursive layers of narrative: material, cultural, political.

More closely aligned with my own conception here is Traci Marie Kelly’s reference to texts of similar formal construction to those investigated by Witt as ‘culinary

\textsuperscript{176} Ibid. p. 4.
\textsuperscript{177} Goody, 1982, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{178} Appadurai, 1988, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{180} Witt, 1999, p. 11.
autobiography' – a complex pastiche of recipes, personal anecdotes, family history, public
history, photographs, even family trees – although she separates this classification into the
three categories of ‘the culinary memoir, the autobiographical cookbook, and the
autoethnographic cookbook’. While I do not investigate the texts within this chapter in the
same way as Kelly (who focuses primarily upon the ‘autobiographical’ element of cookbooks,
whereas I argue not only that we can read these narrative layers as a complex dialogue of the
relationship between the individual and the collective, but that it is imperative that we do), her
insistence upon the ‘validity and significance of culinary literature’ is critically important in
examining the synthesis of the culinary and the narrative. The purposes behind my use of the
term ‘food narratives’ are therefore threefold: firstly, to argue for food as a narrative device or,
as Ruby Tandoh puts it, of reading narratives as ‘mapped in food’; secondly, to employ this
narrative understanding to acknowledge specifically the literary merits of cookbooks; and
thirdly, in suggesting cookbooks as a means of storytelling, to highlight the ways in which such
stories may be individual and collective and, furthermore, circulate often far beyond the
cultures they describe.

A Note on Form
Most analyses of cookbooks as cultural artefacts begin with an introductory element regarding
the function of cookbooks: their place in society, the nature of the recipes they present, the
purpose for which they have been written. In brief, and at its simplest, the purpose of a
cookbook is to enable the replication of a particular food dish by producing instructions as to
its component ingredients and the means through which these should be assembled,
combined, and cooked. But, as many critics have observed, the intentions behind cookbooks
are not necessarily so easily deciphered; nor are the audiences to whom they are addressed so
easily identified. Not many cookbooks were as explicit in their intent as Julia Child and Simone
Berclolette’s Mastering the Art of French Cooking; a 750-page tome of which early drafts were
entitled French Recipes for American Cooks. However, there is another important differentiation to
be made here: Child’s work offered ‘French’ recipes, whereas the works within this chapter
offer food from ‘Africa’. While more specific regions and nations are identified when one
investigates the books further, they are marketed initially upon their ‘broad geographic scope’
– their capacity to cover recipes from across the continent. Many scholars of food studies point

182 Traci Marie Kelly, “If I Were a Voodoo Priestess”, in Kitchen Culture in America, ed. by Sherrie A.
183 Ibid. p. 253.
184 Ibid. p. 254.
2020].
out that cookbooks are never a truly mimetic representation of a historical or cultural moment; rather, they are narratives. Anything that we write about them is speculative, and we must read them as such: Theophano summarises this best, stating that ‘Prescriptive literature does not necessarily represent the “reality” of the period in which it was written nor does it reflect the ways in which women (people) actually behaved’.More accurately, perhaps – and recalling Althusser’s theory of ideology as a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence – these texts might be read as representing the way that the authors experience their own reality, as opposed to ‘the “reality” of the period’. I also take as inspiration here Paul Magee’s introduction to an edited volume of Postcolonial Studies on food, in which he states that ‘We’ve basically ignored technical literature like cookbooks where the function of representation is less to provide a veridical statement about some supposed reality, or thing-in-itself, than to put in motion, and so replicate, a series of practices’.

When it comes to recipes in particular, then, there is the problem of authenticity; and, relatedly, the question of ownership. What does it mean to record a recipe? And, in questioning authenticity and ownership, further concerns arise with regard to the apparently prescriptive nature of the recipe. Must it be a decisive effort to define the ‘right way’ of cooking? Fredric Jameson makes a pertinent claim here: that ‘we all do “read” many different kinds of texts in this life of ours is a useful one, since, whether we are willing to admit it or not, we spend much of our existence in the force field of a mass culture that is radically different from our “great books” and live at least a double life in the various compartments of our unavoidably fragmented society’. Jameson’s words here could speak to the experience of reading a cookbook, and to the disjointed nature of a narrative that encompasses not only a list of ingredients, but an (often anecdotal) introduction, a set of methodological instructions, and even, on occasion, an illustration. Megan Elias states that ‘Cookbooks are aspirational texts’, arguing that narratives of this kind instruct readers not only on how to construct dishes, but on how to construct the kind of life that accompanies them. Bryant Terry acknowledges this frankly and unabashedly in the introduction to Afro-vegan, stating that the recipes in the book are ‘designed to nourish you—but also to inspire you’. To be ‘inspired’ is, consciously or unconsciously, to allow one’s ambitious impulses to be stimulated by an

186 Theophano, 2003, p. 228.
external force. I am arguing that these cookbooks are indeed aspirational texts – but that they are so on the part of the authors. It is for this reason that I propose the concept of the ‘food narrative’ – a term which encompasses not only the material contribution of these volumes to culinary libraries, but the cultural project they undertake at the same time.

Is there, then, a difference between the writing of a cookbook and the recording of a particular culinary moment or tradition? Perhaps there would be fewer complications in the reception and analysis of recipes if it were to be generally accepted that writing a recipe does not necessarily pretend to an overarching superiority nor decisive knowledge. For traditional recipes, especially, there are often as many variations as there are families or homesteads. Is it necessary to include these small anecdotes which offer, by way of an apologetic aside, that ‘this is just my way of doing it’? (This is with the possible exception of Bryant Terry, whose writing is unequivocally proud of the elements of ‘remix’ and ‘reimagining’ that characterise his cooking: although, as Susan Leonardi suggests, such remarks ‘construct an identifiable authorial persona with whom the reader not only can agree or argue but is encouraged to agree or argue’). Lisa Heldke asks these questions in her treatise on food and philosophy, ‘Recipes for Theory Making’, which both posits cooking as a form of inquiry and ‘consider[s] cooking qua inquiry’. Heldke argues that ‘cooking, because of the relationships that obtain between cook, recipe and ingredients, escapes both absolutism and relativism’, a philosophical standpoint which lends itself particularly well to my reading of the intrinsic and necessary polyphony of cookbook food narratives. Most useful is her assertion that ‘A recipe is a description or explanation of how to do something—specifically, how to prepare a particular kind of food. As such, it does not present itself as the way to make that food—the opinion of some cooks not withstanding—nor does it suggest that this food is the food to eat—the opinion of some eaters not withstanding’, which acknowledges not only the many reasons why someone might write a recipe, but also the many ways in which that recipe might be received. Such an acknowledgement of the project undertaken by these kinds of quasi-autobiographical cookbooks – which assert, at once, the lived experiences of the individual and the commensal importance of the collective – underlines the multiple purposes they may serve for both author and audience; and it emphasises the ways in which such texts demand narrative space for the storytelling of migrants and their descendants.

As such, taking my cue from Heldke, I suggest that the cookbooks within this chapter are acts of inquiry – that although their authors are presenting African foods from different nations and regions and making these accessible to a broader audience, they are not answering...
questions about an overarching African cuisine so much as they are posing questions about the ways in which diasporic and migratory experiences can both celebrate traditional culinary practices and produce new food knowledge. This understanding is also informed by Paul Tiyambe Zeleza’s articulation of ‘Diaspora [as] simultaneously a state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving’. In a similar vein, we might extend Zeleza’s configuration by adding that by referring to the possibility of ‘never arriving’, we invoke, too, the possibility of ‘never leaving’. The tension between departure and arrival (and, in tandem, the tension that exists between the desire to assimilate and the desire to retain one’s culture of origin) is the core concern of many migrant texts. As such, I argue that these works problematise that conventional notion of the ‘pan-African’, working instead towards a reconfiguration of the term that permits coexistent individual, national, and continental identities; that celebrates this coexistence and that communicates it to global audiences without creating a false homogeny that positions any food from the African continent as vaguely and uncritically ‘African’.

African Cookbooks as Food Narratives

On the subject of a collective, political ‘Pan-Africanism’ – which, Molefi Kete Asante summarises, ‘has come to mean the unity of Africans and the elimination of white racial domination from the continent of Africa’ – I turn to a question that began circulating in academic debate in the 1960s, 70s, and early 80s, and which has more recently been associated with the Caine Prize for African Writing: how African does one have to be? Particularly when, as we have seen, cuisine can be so fraught a site of national pride and political contestation, to look at the United States distribution and commercial success of books

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197 Of course, it is important to note that ‘coexistence’ is itself not an unproblematic notion, and not one that can be approached uncritically. We know, for example, that to co-exist is not necessarily to do so peacefully. Here, I’m using this term purely to indicate the simultaneous holding of multiple concepts in tension with each other.


199 Such debates emerged in a period of extensive literary production on the continent in the wake of multiple independence movements: as such, they were often associated particularly with controversies regarding literary writing in African languages, as opposed to colonial languages such as English and French. For example, we may refer again to Achebe’s recollection of the 1962 Makerere African Writers’ Conference and its attempts to define “African literature”: “Should it embrace the whole continent, or south of the Sahara, or just Black Africa? And then the question of language. Should it be in indigenous African languages or should it include Arabic, English, French, Portugese, Afrikaans, and so on?” Achebe, 1997, p. 342.

concerned with African recipes is to move necessarily to focus upon communities both in the African diaspora, and with little to no connection to Africa at all. This brings us once more to the question of audience, and its associated problems: the cookbook’s function, and the purpose behind its production. In a blog for TED based on The Ghana Cookbook, Osseo-Asare even asks – rhetorically – ‘But I’m a white American woman with working-class roots. So how would I know about all this?’

Across each of the works included in my analysis here, then, a common theme emerges. There is an insistence upon the authenticity of the ‘Africanness’ of the cookbook, and of the author’s qualification to write such a volume. This is rarely explicit; although Evi Aki does call attention specifically to her dual heritage (growing up in the USA with Nigerian parents and extended family). Often, instead, it takes the form of extensive chapters which refer more obliquely to the authors’ research into and/or lived experience of the culinary traditions they explore. Fran Osseo-Asare’s The Ghana Cookbook is, for example, ‘the book [she] always wanted to buy and could never find’ when attempting to emulate the food of her husband’s Ghanaian family – thus simultaneously identifying and positioning her own work within an existing gap in the market of cookbooks and food writing. Nonetheless, the very fact that Osseo-Asare herself found the task of obtaining a Ghanaian cookbook so difficult as to necessitate writing one herself is indicative of the relative underrepresentation of sub-Saharan African cuisine in the US market (and thus testifies to the purported necessity of demystifying these cultures for a wider external audience, as I discuss later).

Another common aspect of both The Africa Cookbook and Afro-Vegan (and, incidentally, Michael W. Twitty’s The Cooking Gene) is that both are authored by Black American writers looking to continental Africa as inspiration. As we have established, this does not detract from notional ‘authenticity’ in the cookbooks (nor should highlighting it be read as a suggestion any kind of ‘inferiority’ or ‘inaccuracy’ in the narratives they depict); but we may certainly read it as a significant influence upon both Harris’ and Terry’s writings. Both books – though fastidiously recommended for ‘everyone’ – are also portrayed as inherently personal: the introduction to The Africa Cookbook opens with the words ‘Africa! The mother country, that was my destination,’ positioning the narrative immediately as one of both familial and ancestral ties, and individual exploration.

As this suggests, it is important to acknowledge the historical and material links between American southern foodways (particularly ‘soul food’) and the traditional cuisine of certain countries from West and Central Africa. I explore this in greater depth in Chapter

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202 Osseo-Asare, 2016, p. 4.

Three, in relation to Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing*. It is relevant here particularly in Bryant Terry’s *Afro-Vegan*, however, because Terry positions his work as addressing ‘the basic human right to fresh, safe, affordable, and culturally appropriate food’ which, Terry suggests, requires Black American communities to ‘work to reclaim [their] ancestral knowledge and embrace [their] culinary roots’. For Terry and for Harris, African cuisines are continually compared and contrasted with the cuisine of the American South, due to their own lived experiences with the latter. I have deliberately drawn a distinction in this thesis – operating along the lines of the same distinction articulated by Ifemelu in *Americanah* – between the ‘American Black’ and ‘non-American Black’: this is in acknowledgement of the transatlantic slave trade as inscribed irrevocably upon the history of African presence in America, and to understand and explore present-day emigration as an experience that is temporally and historically differentiated. In doing so, it recognises vital differences between social and cultural (and, indeed, culinary) experiences of African Americans and those who move from Africa to the United States in the contemporary moment. Moreover, just as we must not understand ‘African’ as one single, homogenous category, so must we be mindful that we do not essentialise the idea of ‘African American’ (or Black). In both categories, experiences are as multitudinous and as diverse as the people who live them, even when there are elements of commonality or commensality.

In the remainder of this chapter, then, I propose to extend my analysis of these African food narratives, identifying three pivotal points of conceptual commonality across the cultural projects they action. These are as follows:

1. The experiences of migration and diaspora – while not synonymous – are both epistemologically generative in terms of culinary knowledge.
2. Cookbooks are a means of recalling and celebrating a distant ‘home’, even when the very notion of ‘home’ is complicated by an increasingly globalized paradigm.
3. For sub-Saharan African cuisines – in which culinary traditions are otherwise passed down through generations – cookbooks are also a means of demystifying and celebrating cultures and culinary traditions for external parties.

Following these cogent lines of thematic comparison, I argue, therefore, that:

4. Cookbooks are a means of resisting hegemonic power by demanding and employing narrative space for the multiple and varied stories of Afrodiasporic experiences.

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204 Terry, 2014.
Producing New Culinary Knowledge

Igor Cusack states that ‘Like most of material culture, [cuisines] are clearly products of dominant ideologies and related power structures’: he suggests, in fact, that ‘A national cuisine is a useful part of building a national culture’. However, behind these cookbooks lie not just impulses of nostalgia, but of creativity: what happens to a ‘national cuisine’ when those who follow its culinary traditions adapt their cooking (voluntarily or out of necessity) in response to the influences of new cultural experiences and material circumstances?

Evi Aki self-define as a ‘first-generation Nigerian American’. Raised in Atlanta, Georgia following an early childhood in Austin, Texas, Aki is now based in Los Angeles. From here, she launched her popular food blog ‘Ev’s Eats’ – the premise of which is the author’s conviction that ‘food connects and brings us all together’, as well as a belief in ‘the importance of cooking and family’. While the blog provides recipes inspired by numerous different cultures (the ‘Recipes’ section of the site is divided into twenty-three different sections, ranging from ‘Asian’ to ‘Soul Food’), the cookbook it inspired – Flavors of Africa – is, as the title suggests, a volume devoted entirely to recipes from or inspired by the African continent.

Aki’s book is presented in five sections, four of which divide recipes according to hemispheric regions of Africa – West, East, North, and South. The fifth and final section is entitled ‘Stocking Your Pantry for African Cooking’. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that Aki’s own heritage is Nigerian, it is to West Africa that she affords the greatest attention; both in terms of the number of included recipes (there are thirty-one) and in terms of the anecdotal passages which preface each recipe. There are thirteen recipes each designated to East, North, and South Africa – and of course, the explicit attribution of these recipes to particular African regions (and in some cases, countries) ensures that the notion of the continent-wide ‘African’ identity retains its national and regional specificities.

As noted previously, Food From Across Africa is unique amongst this selection in several ways. Firstly, it is the only cookbook on this list that was written first in the United Kingdom for UK audiences: authors Timothy, Todd, and Brown wrote it in a bid to extend the scope of their supper-club project. It is, furthermore, the only volume which claims explicitly to have multiple authors. While Aki’s work in particular attributes certain recipes to other people (often family members – her mother or her auntie, for example), the implication is that these are nonetheless Aki’s own production in part, if not entirely. In the work of Timothy et al., credit for the development of the recipes is distributed fairly equally across the three founding members. I call attention again to the fact that the book has been adapted for American

206 Evi Aki, ‘Recipes’, (evseats.com).
audiences – its original UK printing is entitled *The Groundnut Cookbook*, and explains that ‘Family in Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Kenya and South Sudan connect us to Africa, though south London is the landscape that brings us together’.

*Food From Across Africa* is, in many ways, a conventional recipe book: each recipe includes a title; list of ingredients and required quantities; a set of methodological instructions; an indicative time; a suggested number of servings; and an anecdotal piece about the dish in question. Recipes are generally presented on a double-page spread – with one page designated for the recipe itself, and its opposite used for a full-page photograph that is often of the dish in its final, cooked form, but might also be an image of the constituent ingredients. The aspiration of the book is ‘to make food that is simple, balanced, beautiful and fundamentally to share’ – aspirations which are notably not attached to any particular nation or cuisine. However, the book’s supper club origins are signalled in its division into ‘Menus’ (as opposed to categories denoted by meal, ingredient, or even region as in Aki’s book). Each menu contains food that the authors consider ‘associative’ – they state that this is intended to ‘represent the ways that dishes fit together, whether attached by season, dominant flavours or by another unifying point of inspiration’. Particularly pertinent here is the question of authorship; this because in the corner of each recipe is the name of one or more of the three named authors, which works in tandem with use of the first person in each introductory anecdote. For example – just before the recipe for ‘The Groundnut Stew’ (the dish that afforded the collective their name), Todd puts his name to a story in which he discusses tasting Groundnut stew made by Duval’s Sierra Leonean grandmother and being ‘immediately transported back to being a five-year-old in Maputo’. That this story is Todd’s is indicated only by his name – Jacob – in the corner of the page, and the anaphoric reference back to his childhood in Mozambique (about which we have already been informed). Notably, the recipe itself is attributed to Duval, instead. This is a particularly salient example of the ways in which the authors have found commonality and connection through their experiences of diaspora and migration: each of them harnesses his own nostalgia as evoked by the recreation of particular tastes and foodstuffs; and uses this as inspiration (both alone and collectively) for creative work.

Terry’s work is organised not by region, but in a manner that is almost casual in its simplicity. He begins with seasonings, spices, and sauces, including berbere, Jamaican curry powder (again, he notes here that ‘the composition and preparation of curry powders vary depending on national and local traditions and family preferences’. Other sections are


210 Ibid. p. 12.

211 Ibid. p. 13.

212 Timothy, Fodio Todd, and Brown, 2016, p. 31.

‘Okra. Black-eyed peas. Watermelon.’; ‘Soups. Stews. Tagines.’; ‘Greens. Squashes. Roots.’; ‘Grits. Grains. Couscous.’; ‘Street Food. Snacks. Small Bites.’; ‘Preserves. Creams. Spreads.’; ‘Biscuits. Smoothies. Porridge.’; ‘Cakes. Treats. Fruit.’; and ‘Cold Drinks. Tonics. Cocktails.’ These categories seem definite in Terry’s mind, and he notes that ‘Historically, selling street food has provided many poor people with a means of generating income outside of the formal economy, and poor and working-poor people have been the primary consumers of cheap, filling, and portable food’. When reading Terry, one must remember, too, that this book is also dedicated to the pursuit of veganism; and it is therefore an explicitly political work in more ways than one. Raj Patel states that ‘In blowing apart the notion that the state has a paramount authority, by pointing to the multivalent hierarchies of power and control that exist within the world food system, food sovereignty paradoxically displaces one sovereign, but remains silent about the others’. In addition, Terry states that he perceives his work as ‘naming and solidifying a new genre of cooking and eating… extending farm-fresh, compassionate food to include foods of the African diaspora’. He cements his argument with the assertion that African food (despite its reputation as generally meat-heavy) is perfectly placed to undertake vegan principles, given that West and Central African diets were historically vegetarian. Once more, the question of audience becomes important here, though this time in relation to that of food sovereignty. Terry is the author of five cookbooks including Afro-Vegan, of which the most recent publication is Vegetable Kingdom. All of these volumes are focused upon vegan food; however, Afro-Vegan is the only one to focus upon explicitly upon the interaction between African food and vegan food and, moreover, upon the ways in which the former is eminently suited to the lifestyle associated with the latter. Notably, Terry’s work also emphasises ‘values’ of freshness and seasonality – concepts often (though not always) found alongside veganism in popular discourse, and sometimes treated as synonymous – to the extent that ‘It goes without saying that fresh, seasonal fruits and vegetables provide the foundation for delicious, nourishing dishes’. Of course, each of these authors’ work is testament to the generative possibilities of migration and diaspora in terms of the production and development of culinary knowledge; and, in doing so, it testifies too to the usefulness of ‘foodways’ as a means of accessing these culinary impulses since, as Courtney Thorsson points out, ‘the term insists on mobility and multiplicity’.

214 Ibid. p. 115.
217 Nettles-Barcelón and others 2015.
Bea Sandler’s *The African Cookbook* serves as an important contrast to the other volumes in this chapter. First published in 1970, and popularly acknowledged as one of the first of an early wave of ‘African’ cookbooks, Sandler’s work is introduced by one Dr James H. Robinson: Dr Robinson praises Sandler’s recipes for being ‘authentic, or as authentic as they need to be for American cooks’.218 Note, here, the similarity of the title to Harris’ volume – *The Africa Cookbook*, versus Sandler’s *The African Cookbook*: while both use the definite article (in a trope common to cookbooks which endeavour to portray themselves as ‘the only one you’ll ever need!’ for any particular scenario),219 Sandler’s is somehow more audacious in marketing itself as ‘African’. The rest of the introduction is similarly condescending, and affirms the success of the book for indulging ‘anyone with a taste for good food and a curiosity about this almost undiscovered facet of African culture’.220 The content of the book is dated not only by its use of long-defunct names for countries (‘Upper Volta’ for the country that is now Burkina Faso, and ‘Rhodesia’ for Zimbabwe, for instance) but by its evocation of both American audience and American context. Particularly illustrative of this is a section of suggestions regarding how an American cook might present an Ethiopian dinner, when Sandler notes the following:

> It would be impossible to make *Injera*, the pancake which serves as a ‘tablecloth,’ for it is made in Ethiopia with *Tef*, a flour not available here. The closest substitute devised in our test kitchen is a large buckwheat pancake which does not taste exactly like Injera but is similar in texture and color. (You will like the buckwheat pancake more than the actual *Injera*).221

The issues here are divisible into three categories: Sandler’s preconception of the ingredients available to her audience; her ‘substitutions’ for ingredients she believes to be unavailable or less desirable; and finally, her assumptions regarding audience preferences. As Sandler states, injera is an Ethiopian flatbread typically made from starter, water, and teff flour.222 It might be presumed that the emphatic statement ‘You will like the buckwheat pancake more than the actual *Injera*’ is based upon the stronger flavour imparted by the process of fermentation, though this is perhaps undermined by comparison with Osseo-Asare’s partiality to Ghanaian

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219 Cooke, 2010.

220 Robinson and Sandler, 1994, p. ix. Naturally, ‘discover’ is used here in a quasi-colonial capacity to refer to the cuisine(s)’ ‘ discovery’ by American and Western readership, as opposed to its actual invention.


222 The ‘starter’ is made from fermented fluid from previous dough. While injera is not always made from teff, this is the typical choice of grain: see Adamu Zegeye, ‘Acceptability of Injera with Stewed Chicken’, *Food Quality and Preference*, 8 (1997).
kenkey – made from fermented cornmeal dough – which she attributes to ‘having grown up on sourdough in the San Francisco Bay Area’. Moreover, the recipe Sandler provides for injera calls for ‘buckwheat pancake mix’ and ‘biscuit mix’, both North American packaged convenience food which bear little resemblance to teff flour: and, while Sandler admits that the buckwheat pancake ‘does not taste exactly like Injera’, this does not entirely address the fact that her recipe does not require any kind of fermentation process, removing the sour tang with which the bread is usually associated. Presumably, then, Sandler’s dish will not taste very much like injera at all: although she suggests (with considerable arrogance) that this is of little consequence, having made the assumption that her readers will prefer a substitution to the Ethiopian original (and therefore having also made a pejorative statement about the Ethiopian dish itself).

Of the works discussed here, only those by Aki and The Groundnut include recipes for injera, and both are introduced as unconventional. The Groundnut’s recipe is not for classic injera but for ‘Injera Pikelets’, based on injera and ‘enlarged crumpets – pikelets’. Like Sandler, the authors acknowledge the fermentation process required for traditional injera but forego it in their own recipe, suggesting instead that theirs is ‘an achievable compromise that didn’t take seven days to ferment – or call for capturing wild yeast’. Furthermore, The Groundnut recipe is about as far from traditional injera as Sandler’s, in terms of ingredients – it asks for ‘light soy milk’ as well as bread flour, yeast, and rice flour – but unlike Sandler’s aesthetic approximation of a traditional dish, it is the result of a concerted attempt at culinary fusion. In contrast, Aki’s recipe is explicitly called ‘Injera’ with an English translation (‘Sourdough Crepes’) for unfamiliar readers. Here, the fermentation process crucial to ‘that sour taste injera is known for’ takes place over two to three days, more closely emulating Ethiopian injera. Moreover, Aki’s recipe is the only one to call for teff flour, albeit in addition to ‘all-purpose flour’: this is testament to the increased availability of teff in the USA, attributed to an increase in Ethiopia-USA migration after the passing of the 1980 Immigration Act and a related surge in Ethiopian restaurants in the USA. Despite this, Aki testifies that making injera in ‘the classic way’ is difficult, and that her own recipe is a ‘simpler, humbler version’ – in an almost defensive tone, she states that ‘While it may not hold up as authentic in Ethiopia, I happen to think it does just the trick, and my Ethiopian friends have agreed with me’. Invoking unnamed ‘Ethiopian friends’ to cement the verdict that a dish Aki admits is not ‘authentic’ nonetheless does ‘just the trick’ recalls the pan-African focus of the book at the same time as it acknowledges the American context in which it is positioned. Importantly, she does

223 Fran Osseo-Asare, "We Eat First with Our Eyes": On Ghanaian Cuisine, Gastronomica, 2 (2002), 55.
not suggest that culinary authenticity is not important – simply that it can be, momentarily, less important than taste or function.

**Recalling Home**

In Jonathan Bishop-Highfield’s *Food and Foodways in African Narratives*, he focuses in part upon Marcus Samuelsson’s cookbook *Discovery of a Continent* – another text which might be read in terms of its food narrative, since Samuelsson’s personal ‘discovery’ of Africa is framed by his own exploration of his Ethiopian heritage after he was adopted by Swedish parents as a child. Bishop-Highfield suggests that in his food narrative Samuelsson ‘is attempting to actively hybridize himself and the foods that define him’, while Badia Ahad suggests that he ‘attempts to reconstruct the past and reproduce the self through the creation and consumption of food’. Both critics here acknowledge the role played by the food narrative in affecting (or even creating) oneself in relation to an idea of ‘belonging’. In these food narratives, similar endeavours to create cultural commensality on one’s own behalf are enacted via the evocation of a ‘home’ nation from which one is geographically or culturally removed.

Structurally, *Flavors of Africa* is conventional in its presentation. Each recipe is titled – sometimes with a ‘translated’ title, as in the cases of ‘Braaibroodjie (South African grilled cheese)’ and ‘Mum’s Moin Moin (Spicy Bean Cakes)’ – and introduced with a short paragraph providing further information about the recipe. Often this takes the form of an anecdote, as in the ‘Mum’s Moin Moin’ recipe, in which Aki discusses the formative connection between her cooking and her relationship with her mother, with whom she has otherwise little in common, stating that ‘Making her moin moin makes me feel accomplished, like I am a strong, independent, loving and nurturing African woman. Other times – particularly in recipes which speak to regions outside of West Africa – the prelude to the recipe focalises a particular aspect of the region’s culture (‘Berbere is the spice of East Africa!’). Aki comments in the introduction to her book that ‘…being from two cultures can be a beautiful thing, but it is hard to balance. At times I felt I was too American, not proud of my Nigerian

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227 Bishop Highfield, 2017, p. 179.
231 Ibid.
232 Ibid. p. 78.
heritage. Other times, I felt phony because while my parents were Nigerian, I had never lived in Nigeria. Cooking was, she states, a means through which she could ‘identify [her]self’ and ‘find [her] way back to [her] roots’. Aki’s testimony here is congruent with the arguments made by Nomvula Mashoai Cook and Betty J. Belanus in their piece ‘A Taste of Home: African Immigrant Foodways’, in which they suggest that ‘African immigrant foods embody cultural connections. They create a continuity with custom back home, and they reflect the circumstances of living in a new place’.

Fran Osseo-Asare’s claim to knowledge of Ghanaian cooking lies through marriage, as opposed to through birthright. Osseo-Asare positions herself not as an anthropologist but as an invitee to and embracer of Ghanaian culture. The very notion of ‘home’ is complicated here: The book is written under the guidance of Ghanaian native Barbara Baëta – famous both within Ghana and globally for her catering company, Flair Catering Services Ltd – and Osseo-Asare states early on that ‘Barbara’s profound influence and experience are evident throughout the book’ (albeit while positioning herself as the author-narrator of the book and stating that the narrative is written in her ‘own voice’). Osseo-Asare’s naming of the woman who has taught and advised her is not only a deserved acknowledgement, and a measure of respect, but a means of signalling the book’s authenticity – the implication is that The Ghana Cookbook has been approved by Ghanaians, as well as directly influenced by them. This is a similar narrative technique to the way in which Harris names each of the ‘culinary sisters’ who have taught her about regional and national African cuisines: it lends Harris’ narrative an air of authenticity (in terms of her own experience and the historical situations she invokes) and, by extension, it legitimises the recipes she presents later. While this reading may sound cynical, to signal a recipe’s authenticity by highlighting its point of origin is hardly cause for criticism. Instead, Harris’ and Osseo-Asare’s attribution of recipes to particular people and their thanks for guidance from individuals are indicative of a real desire to represent African cuisines with veracity. It is also, of course, another way in which to understand the polyphony of the cookbook narrative.

*Jollof Rice*

In the sardonic opening to his essay ‘After Migration’ in *The Good Immigrant USA*, Walé Oyéjidé comments that ‘after sharing a meal with sub-Saharan expats, you could flirt with tribal excommunication by professing that jollof rice made by Ghanaians is ‘actually just as good as

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233 Ibid. p. 9.
Nigerian jollof if we’re being honest. Although Oyéjidé’s prose here is intended in jest – it prefaces a passage about how best to disappoint one’s Nigerian ancestors – there is nonetheless a kernel of truth in the cultural power wielded by this single rice dish. English chef Jamie Oliver faced considerable backlash when he published a recipe for jollof rice on his blog in 2014: in response, Nigerian food blogger Ozoz Sokoh (of The Kitchen Butterfly) offered advice on her own blog for Oliver and any other chefs purporting to represent the cuisine of another culture, cautioning would-be food writers that ‘When writing about recipes with cultural significance, be mindful of what names you give, particularly if your methods and ingredients are not traditional.’ Worth noting here is also the fact that Oliver’s website refers to jollof rice as Ghanaian when, as we have seen, its versions are as extensive and as divergent at least as cultures (tribal and national), if not families on the African continent. The dish is said, after all, to have originated from the Wolof tribe in Senegal: a story corroborated by Harris, Terry, Aki, and the founders of The Groundnut. Every food narrative in this chapter contains a recipe for jollof rice. The ubiquity of the dish – and the contention that surrounds its component ingredients and the ‘right’ version – is perhaps best summarised by Timothy, Todd and Brown for their Nigerian-inspired fifth menu: ‘[Jollof rice] is common to many West African countries, and most people familiar with jollof rice will claim to have a ‘true’ recipe, tale and affection for this incandescent orange rice’. Brown calls it ‘the dish that first got [him] into cooking’, and it is attributed to him in the recipe’s corner. Duval follows this with a recipe for the ‘jollof sauce’ that accompanies the jollof rice to which he is accustomed (influenced by his Sierra Leonean heritage) – an inclusion that we do not find in any of the other volumes discussed here. Indeed, jollof rice is one of a number of dishes that suggest commonality between aspects of West African cuisines and, consequently, heavily weighted with cultural symbolism and expectation. McCann suggests that these ‘culinary preparations may appear mummified as formal recipes in modern cookery books’, and argues that, while these formalised notations are ‘Platonic shadows of women’s oral knowledge’, West African culinary cultures are themselves ‘deeply historical and fluid, reflecting active bodies of local history, ecology, and cultural exchange.’

The Groundnut recipe for jollof appears to be based primarily on the Nigerian version, including red palm oil, Scotch bonnet, chicken stock, garlic, and onion. In TGC,

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240 Timothy, Fodio Todd, and Brown, 2015, p. 151.
241 Ibid. p. 178.
Osseo-Asare draws a direct comparison between Nigerian and Ghanaian jollof, stating that while red palm oil is used in the former, the latter gets its signature red colour from the use of tomatoes and tomato paste.\(^{243}\) Another distinction between the two recipes is that Osseo-Asare’s includes chicken in the recipe, whereas The Groundnut offers instructions only for the rice itself (thus allowing for the meat sauce offered by Duval as an accompaniment on the following page). ‘Party Jollof Rice’ is the first recipe in Aki’s book, but her version of the dish – presumably Nigerian-inspired, given that she recollects its presence on the dinner table during her childhood, and that it was the first dish her mother taught her to cook – contains no palm oil; obtains its ‘red’ colour from tomatoes and tomato paste; and is ostensibly ‘unique’ to Aki’s family because of the use of ‘parboiled white rice [which] can stand up to a long cooking time without getting mushy and soft’.\(^{244}\) Not only does Aki’s narrative testify to the fact that recipes do modulate between households – so that even attempting to formalise what might constitute a ‘Nigerian’ version of a dish like jollof rice becomes problematic – but it suggests material evidence as to why this might be the case. Thus, a dish like jollof rice – which is simultaneously so beloved and so various in its different manifestations – is a particularly useful illustration for the ways in which a cookbook or food narrative may work on an individual level for the author’s evocation and connection to their ‘home’ nation, while also signalling the regional foodways that link that home nation with other areas of the African continent.

**Decoding Cultures**

Courtney Thorsson argues that ‘Recipes are didactic (they tell us how to prepare a dish), function on linear time (we must follow the instructions in the right order to get edible results), and are printed explicitly for repeated reproduction beyond the page. The formal conventions of the recipe invite the reader to perform the text. The recipe is textual instruction for action’.\(^{245}\) These are all, of course, accurate observations; but another important aspect of the ‘didacticism’ to which Thorsson refers (but which she does not attend specifically) is the element of cultural elaboration and demystification contained within the food narrative. Just as the recipe is instructional regarding ‘how to prepare a dish’, so too is the cookbook informative not only upon the requirements of this preparation, but how they fit into the wider cultural remit of the cuisine in question; in other words, the *why* of the foodways.

The majority of the cookbooks surveyed in this chapter include some form of guide to stocking one’s cupboards for African cooking: these are not simply prosaic lists of required ingredients, but spatially evocative components of what an ‘African kitchen’ might look like.

\(^{243}\) Osseo-Asare, 2016, p. 156.

\(^{244}\) Aki, 2018, p. 13.

\(^{245}\) Nettles-Barcelón and others 2015, p. 43.
For *The Africa Cookbook*, this comes in the form of a glossary, providing French and English terms for foodstuffs and utensils for use in various African cuisines. In the majority of the glossary definitions, Harris describes the object in question, and recommends locations in which an American reader might look for them (an African or South American market or, occasionally, a typical American supermarket). Often, she provides a suggestion for a substitution, as she does for *Utazi Leaves*, telling readers that they ‘can use any bitter green instead, such as broccoli rabe leaves or arugula’. In fact, Harris even includes a list of specific stores and online shops from which a North American reader might source particular items. Including substitutions in the glossary like this means that there is no interruption in the actual recipes. Rather, the recipes’ narratives assume either full knowledge, or that the reader has the responsibility and capacity to investigate ingredients further themselves. In *TGC* this desire is given further weight by the structural division of the book into two: the second section comprising recipes, and the first providing a comprehensive introduction to ‘Essential Flavors and Techniques’. The first section does contain some recipes, but these are primarily for what we might term ‘components’ – gravy, for example, or *banku* (fermented corn and cassava dough). As in many cookbooks, the narrative is fragmented: while there are elements of consistent prose, particularly in relation to the origins of a recipe or how it might be popularly enjoyed in Ghana, in order to decode certain dishes we are often required to attend to smaller ‘Troubleshooting’ sections or notes on ‘Variations’ and ‘How to serve’. Such sections evidence the fact that Osseo-Asare’s book is intended for a non-Ghanaian audience – or at least, an audience outside of Ghana – and recall her claim that to have authored this cookbook when she was unable to find one that proffered the kind of culinary guidance she sought: the ‘troubleshooting’ advice Osseo-Asare offers is of the nature that would likely be passed down tacitly through generations by those for whom these are traditional recipes (‘If the balls of dough flatten out, there is likely too much liquid in the batter—try adding a little more flour’).

Harris’ volume is therefore self-evidently targeted at the reader who is not merely interested in the recipes themselves, but in their history. Structurally, it moves cogently from a historical overview of food on the African continent (entitled ‘Beyond Bare-Breasted Maidens and Cannibal Cooks’ – as outlined in the book’s introduction, a determined effort to ‘eradicate the concept of the noble savage’ and perhaps, in light of the book’s cultural project, the ‘ignoble savage’ even more so) to an evocation of more contemporary culinary situations in each of the continent’s hemispheric regions. This latter section – ‘A Cornucopia of Cuisines’ – is also the section of the book based primarily around Harris’ own travels. Each piece references at least one individual Harris meets (Fatéma in Marrakesh, Shareen in South Africa,  

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246 Harris, 1998, p. 70.  
and Theodora in Ghana, for example), and describes the ways in which those individuals have informed or guided her interactions with African cuisines. Notably, each of these individuals is female – women Harris refers to as her ‘African culinary sisters’. Here, Harris invokes an explicitly female culinary lineage of the kind that Erica Fretwell alludes to in her essay ‘Black Power in the Kitchen’: ‘More important than the taste of food is the upwardly mobile aspirations the food represents. The cookbook tells the story not of what Black women can do in the kitchen but of what the kitchen can do for Black women’.248 Although Fretwell refers here to the potentialities of the kitchen as a space for the radical dismantling of white supremacist patriarchy through the critical foodwork of Black women, her configuration of the cookbook (and indeed, the kitchen) as a tool for resisting hegemonic discourses through creative praxis is equally applicable to an Afrodiasporic context. Similarly, Thorsson suggests that ‘Contemporary Black women writers use culinary discourse and the recipe form to describe, theoritize, and demand specific ways of performing racial and gendered identities’.249 In invoking a culinary ‘sisterhood’, Harris’ text is simultaneously paying homage to the production and communication of culinary knowledge by women, and inviting readers to participate in the continuation of these traditions and perpetuation of the knowledge they contain.

Following this is a short section upon the intersection between traditional African diets and modern conceptions of health. Harris’ emphasis is primarily nutritional, accounting not only for the considerable overlap between traditional African diets and the lauded Mediterranean diet (which ‘is low in animal protein, places the emphasis on consumption of whole grains and fiber, includes lots of fruit and fresh vegetables, and uses vegetable oils for cooking’)250 but for the mineral and protein sources in many African dishes and ingredients, such as black-eyed peas, millet, and leafy greens. Interestingly, however, the aspect of traditional African cuisines which Harris believes to be ‘the healthiest… and indeed the easiest to duplicate on this side of the Atlantic’ is that of commensality, sharing, and communing. Placing such an emphasis upon the ways in which the dishes contained in this food narrative are intended to be consumed and, in particular, the ways in which they should be shared illustrates the extent to which Harris’ work (and indeed, the other food narratives I highlight) may be read as broader explorations of cultural tradition, rather than as purely didactic texts. Indeed, we see such commensality in Imbolo Mbue’s Behold the Dreamers, when the main characters Neni and Jende invite the sons of their employers over to eat ‘Cameroon style’ (see Chapter 5); Jende informs the boys that ‘In Cameroon we do not usually sit around the table,

249 Nettles-Barceló and others 2015, p. 43.
like you do in America. Everyone takes their food and sits where they like, on a chair, on the floor. They eat how they like, with a spoon or a fork or with their hands[...]. Here, the emphasis is upon both the tactility and performance of consumption (the utensils with which one chooses to eat) and the spatiality of communal eating (the ways in which a party may take up space). However, it is the very idea of eating ‘Cameroon style’ here that recalls Harris’ assertion that the aspects of African culinary traditions that are characterised by commensuality may be most easily demystified for a global audience. All one needs to participate is, she suggests, ‘an open mind and a willing spoon’.  

**Telling Stories**

In concluding, I would like to recall Ruby Tandoh’s 2019 article for *Taste* magazine, in which she interviews Jacob Fodio Todd of The Groundnut (*Food From Across Africa: Recipes to Share*). ‘Not only was The Groundnut’s food vision simplified and depoliticized; it was sold to everyone except the people to whom that cuisine truly belonged. ‘I think we struggled with the classic paradox of trying to add nuance to an audience yearning for simple narratives,’ Fodio Todd says’. In the cookbook itself, there is attention paid to the ways in which guests from different African regional and national backgrounds appreciate the ways in which the supper club attended to dishes they recognised as part of their cultural heritage. This is a retrospective view of what is already marketed as a retrospective cookbook, based on the menus provided by the group for their guests – a reflection upon the political ramifications of a collective that was always intended, at least in part, to be political.

The multiple layers in cookbooks are a way to experience the tensions continually in place between one’s identity as an individual and as part of a collective. This is pertinent to the experience and configuration of diaspora, and particularly to the African diaspora in the United States, where there is a continual impetus both to reproduce and to reinvent dishes from African countries of origin. Of course, part of this tension arises from the implicit questions surrounding the readership and the purpose of a cookbook. This affects the tone of the narrative – if commercial success is the ambition, the narrative will take an inherently positive tone – as well as the aesthetic, calling attention to the cookbook as a cultural artefact. Modern cookbooks tend particularly towards the aesthetic, incorporating glossy pages and full colour photographs (in *Food From Across Africa*, for example, the meeting of the book’s photographer and her induction into ‘the family’ are covered in a chapter introduction – and both *The Ghana Cookbook* and *The Africa Cookbook* rely upon postcards (calling that idea of the

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251 Ibid. p. 19.
‘recipistolary’ genre to mind once again) to provide visual aids to underline the broad reach of their cultural projects.

I have argued in this chapter that the food narratives I analyse represent diaspora and migration as epistemologically generative in terms of foodways and the production of culinary knowledge. It is undeniable, I think, that these are ‘global’ texts: not simply because their content testifies to the culinary creativity and fusion generated by the experiences of migration and diaspora, because they are preoccupied with the notion of a spatially distant ‘home’, or because they communicate ‘African’ foodways to an audience in the Global North; but because they do all of these things simultaneously. As Bishop Highfield suggests, ‘Making foreign ingredients your own, turning introduced plants and animals into part of your agriculture and your food culture is surely part, though definitely not all, of food sovereignty, a concept very much aligned with Fanon’s idea that the people must control the material means of survival to be truly independent’.253 If we read these cookbooks as both demanding and creating the space for diasporic and migratory storytelling, then, we must see them as narrative projects that are at once intensely personal, assertively national (and ‘African’), and incontrovertibly of the world.

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Chapter 3: ‘Eat or be eaten’: Mapping Homegoing As Food Narrative

Introduction

In an opinion piece for the New York Times entitled ‘I’m Ghanaian-American. Am I Black?’ Yaa Gyasi gives voice to her first experiences of being racialised and racially objectified while living in the United States. Gyasi recalls that, while external forces directed racial harassment towards her as a black individual – commiserating that she ‘would never find a boyfriend, what with black men being what they are’ and working in a retirement home where occupants called her black co-worker a ‘n—’ – she herself was cognisant that ‘at home, we weren’t black. We were Ghanaian’. W.E.B. DuBois’ theory of double-consciousness argues forcefully that to be black in America is to grapple with a ‘sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’, and to be constantly aware of one’s ‘two-ness,—an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings’. Gyasi implies here, however, that for her family and for herself, there is an extra dimension of critical consciousness – that they are simultaneously black and not-white, but that they must also reconcile this with their identities as Africans and as Ghanaians. Ava Landry argues that

Adjusting to US society is marked by learning how to balance the pre-migration ethnic identities that such immigrants assert with the post-migration racial identification that they are assigned, especially since that racial identification has been both historically and contemporarily marginalized in the US racial structure. African immigrants mediate this struggle by occupying the status of an ethnicized Other.

For Homegoing, as for many novels of the African diaspora, this experience is better articulated by what Paul Tiyambe Zeleza terms ‘multiple consciousness’: he describes this in terms of ‘its ‘racial,’ ‘national’ and ‘transnational’ intersections’, and suggests that ‘It is a mode of naming, remembering, living, and feeling group identity molded out of experiences… which are shared

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or seen to be shared across the boundaries of time and space that frame ‘indigenous’ identities in the contested and constructed locations of ‘there’ and ‘here’.

Sidney Mintz and Richard Price argue that ‘the notion of a shared African heritage takes on meaning only in a comparative context, when one asks what, if any, features the various cultural systems of West and Central Africa may have had in common’. Not only does this study provide grounds for dismissing older theories of a unified culture ‘shared’ by all Africans enslaved and removed from Africa, but it posits that ‘What the slaves undeniably shared at the outset was their enslavement; all—or nearly all—else had to be created by them’.

To follow this argument permits a comparative reading of the divergent narratives of Gyasi’s debut novel, *Homegoing* – the Ghanaian and Black American ancestral lines – as linked, but not homogenous. By this, I mean that it is possible for us to read the paths of the two families alongside and in comparison with each other as, the novel’s structure suggests, is the intention: with an eye for the ways in which these two lines of narrative are, in fact, doing quite different things; and without constructing false equivalences between the various characters’ experiences. A comparison of this kind undertakes, therefore, to read Ghana and the USA as coeval – as part of the same world-system, in spite of the differences in their positions within this world-system.

In relation to the study and praxis of foodways, this means that while there are material connections between the Ghanaian and American sides of Gyasi’s novel, we must also be cognisant of the ways in which these foodways deviate according to the material conditions of the people as well as their socio-historical and cultural experiences. A cursory look reveals considerable differences between the food that is eaten by the Ghanaian characters and that eaten by the Black American characters: the primary foodstuff of the Ghanaian chapters is a combination of yams, palm oil stew, and various meats, whereas in the United States chapters, corn, salted pork, and greens are the staple food items. The fact that there are common themes in the novel’s representation and registration of foodways across the Atlantic – particularly in the roles and treatment of Black women – is therefore of interest as a point of comparison regarding globalisation and worlded experiences of Blackness.

Productive comparative studies have already been made between African American authors and African authors writing about experiences of migrating to America as a black African: Stephanie Li’s 2018 work *Pan-African American Literature*, for example, makes a compelling case for the theory that ‘Slavery set the terms of what blackness and, most

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259 Ibid. p. 18.
importantly for this context, what black masculinity mean in the American imagination, but these distortions signify on all black bodies, regardless of when or how they arrived on these violent shores’. Unlike Li’s work, my thesis does not purport to interrogate the creation of a pan-African literature: nonetheless, I acknowledge that the perception of all black bodies as part of a ‘Black’ experience is a crucial aspect of the experience of migrating from sub-Saharan Africa to the United States. It is for this reason that *Homegoing* is a vital inclusion in the corpus of my thesis, and in interrogating the racial and migratory implications for the world food-system.

**Homegoing as Food Narrative**

Gyasi’s 2016 debut novel *Homegoing* traces the parallel lineages of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, as it bisects and diverges across two continents: born to the same Asante mother, Effia remains in Ghana as the wife to a colonial governor of Cape Coast Castle, and Esi is forcibly taken to the New World as slave ‘cargo’ on the ‘Big Boat’. Structurally, each of the novel’s chapters focuses on the life of a single character, alternating between Effia’s ancestral line and Esi’s, and evoking the modulating resonance of the transatlantic slave trade from historic moments through to the present-day.

As a title, *Homegoing* makes sense on a number of levels. ‘Homegoing’ is a distinctively African American Christian funeral tradition, marking the departure of the deceased to return ‘home’ with the Lord. However, ‘homegoing’ would seem also to suggest the troubled relationship between the various characters – many of whom experience forced migration or exile – and any notion of ‘going home’. In the end, ‘Homegoing’ is something of a misnomer.

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261 I use the term ‘slave cargo’ here only to illustrate an historically specific understanding of the way in which were the enslaved were treated by their captors. Please see Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (p. 55) for an eloquent argument regarding the use of ‘cargo’ to describe people held captive on ships post-slavery.

262 These characters merit a brief overview, given their number and the breadth of the historical period covered by Gyasi’s narrative. Effia’s descendents are Quey, the son she has with her colonial governor husband; James, Quey’s son with Nana Yaa, kidnapped daughter of the Asante king; Abena, James’ daughter, who conceives her child with a man who promises to marry her after the next good harvest, and by whom she is subsequently betrayed; Akua, the daughter that Abena carries to British missionaries, and for whom the ancestral trauma is registered in her village reputation as ‘crazy’; Yaw, the only child of Akua’s to survive the fire that she sets accidentally; and Marjorie, Yaw’s child who is brought up in America, and who seeks to understand her position in a country that will not claim her in a way that aligns with her own conception of her identity. Esi’s ancestral line moves first to Ness, a child conceived through Esi’s rape by a white sailor before she is transported to the United States via the Middle Passage; Kojo, Ness’ child with another enslaved African to whom she is married ‘for reasons of insurance’; H, the last son born to Kojo and Anna, who is born after Anna is forcibly taken from her family; H’s daughter Willie, who is left to raise her son alone by a husband whose skin is light enough that he may ‘pass’ for white; Carson (Sonny), whose self-embitterment results in a heroin addiction, which he is nonetheless able to overcome; and Marcus, Sonny’s son, a young academic, and the first of Esi’s line to visit Ghana since her forced departure over two hundred years earlier.
for the novel, implying as it does a sort of endpoint: the ‘home’ of the title. While the descendants of both ancestral lines end up living in the USA, they both also end up with a vested interest (and even material connection) to Ghana. However, in comparison to the more familiar configuration of ‘homecoming’, the noun form of ‘going’ may also suggest a continual movement, in which *Homegoing is ongoing* – one never reaches home, or one is always carrying ‘home’ with them, making the act of ‘going’ home redundant. In many ways, this is a reflection of Paul Tiymbe Zeleza’s configuration of *diaspora* itself: ‘simultaneously a state of being and a process of becoming, a kind of voyage that encompasses the possibility of never arriving or returning’.264

Gyasi states that her self-assigned prompt for writing the novel was ‘What does it mean to be black in America?’ Rather than asking what it means to be ‘African in America’ or ‘Ghanaian in America’ – or even what it means to be ‘a migrant in America’ – for Gyasi to organise a novel that grapples with the concept and configuration of African diaspora more particularly around the experience of ‘being black in America’ is a significant political and stylistic choice. That the novel itself spans eight generations and two hundred and fifty years is testament to an argument that it is not possible to account for the vastness of the transatlantic slave trade’s traumatic legacy in a single story: that there is, contrary to historic opinion, no ‘single story about black life’.265 Criticisms of the novel refer generally to its depiction of Black American characters, described variously as ‘reductive in the way of emblems’266, ‘passive, boats buffeted by the currents’267, and ‘less like the emanations of a coherent personality than boxes that must be checked’.268 I would like to refute such criticisms by referring to work by Hazel Carby; in *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Carby states that ‘the objective of stereotypes is not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations’.269 Read in this way, characters such as Eli (a lothario who leaves Willie and their

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263 The idea of ‘homecoming’ is also a complicated one, however – Saidiya Hartman explores this in her work *Lose Your Mother*, an account of the transatlantic slave trade through the lens of the author’s own travels along a slave route. In Hartman’s account, she is viewed as a stranger by locals in Elmina, Ghana: she says that ‘The vision of an African continental family or a sable race standing shoulder to shoulder was born by captives, exiles, and orphans and in the aftermath of the Atlantic slave trade. Racial solidarity was expressed in the language of kinship because it both evidenced the wound and attempted to heal it’; (Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008), (p. 5)). In this way, the story of ‘homecoming’ is also presented as one of fracture and the pursuit of belonging.

264 Zeleza, 2009, p. 32.
268 L. Miller, 2016.
children sporadically and unpredictably, ultimately to disappear without trace) and Amani (Marcus’ mother, and a heroin addict) become less defined by the stereotypes of which they might otherwise be considered caricatures. Instead, it is useful for us to defer briefly here to the novel’s form, and to what Gyasi refers to as the ‘urgency’ of the structure: this is achieved by spending only a short amount of time with each character. Gyasi notes that, in light of this urgency, ‘every character might portray a stereotype’, but that the duty of the author is to ‘explore these characters with an intimacy and truth’. The traumas visited upon these fictional characters speak to this organising concern of ‘being Black in America’ and, in their nuance, complicate these stereotypes: as Gyasi observes, ‘for every bad thing that happens in this novel, there’s a corollary moment that happened to a real person’.

In Americanah, Behold the Dreamers, and We Need New Names, the United States (‘America’, as it is figured) is used as a point of comparison with each protagonist’s country and culture of origin. In Homegoing, Gyasi uses the conceit of the separated sisters ‘doomed to stay on opposite sides of the pond’ (19) to forge two narrative threads that are separated geographically by the Atlantic Ocean; and the multiple traumas wrought by the slave trade shape the material existences of characters on both continents in different ways. However, more than perhaps any other work in this thesis, Homegoing illustrates the capitalist world-system in which Ghana and the United States are participants, and the combined and uneven nature of that system as it evolves temporally. Using the logic of commodity chains and the poetics of particular resources (food and labour), Gyasi’s novel evokes a push-pull relationship between the two countries as part of this wider world-system. Africa and the USA are positioned as coexistent despite geographical distance – there are links between the two (like the boats in the harbour for Kojo, which act as a reminder that there is an exterior world made accessible through trade and nautical travel), which remind us that both exist at the same time. As the novel progresses, the separation becomes less distinct in some ways (each country’s awareness of the other’s existence, and travel of the main characters between them) and more so in others (particularly in the configuration of national consciousness, as in Ghana post-independence). As such, in taking on the subject matter of the slave trade the narrative becomes an explicitly global one, intentionally undertaking to represent cross-continental relationships and the increasingly blurred lines between the individual, the national, and the international. Reading this novel as a food narrative – or, more accurately, using food as a key to unlock the text’s wider commentary on labour and power in the capitalist world-system – illuminates some of the questions about Southern foodways and their interaction with African foodways, historic

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and contemporary, as well as interrogating contemporary issues of race and the global food system.

Bound up with this are notions of identity, influenced particularly by class, race, and gender, all of which can be unpacked through the medium of food. In fact, Kyla Wazana Tompkins argues that ‘it is exactly as a site of racial anxiety that eating is most productively read’.271 I am troubled by the notion of ‘eating’ in ‘critical eating studies’ because it appears to me to place too strong an emphasis upon the act(s) of consumption. I am wholly convinced of Wazana’s argument that ‘it is not simply the “what” of what one eats that matters’ and that we must reckon with the ‘interrogatives’ of where, when, how, with whom and, of course, why one eats, and that these interrogatives are integral to questions surrounding how it is that ‘the matter of food comes to “matter”.’272 Nevertheless, my instinct is that to allude solely and specifically to ‘eating’ risks eliminating the ‘what’ of one’s consumption entirely. This is dangerous because, in actuality, it should be impossible to separate the material reality of what is eaten from the processes and people that produce it, as well as from the cultural traditions that surround it once formed. In this chapter I propose consciously to foreground literary analysis of what is eaten; not at the expense of other ‘interrogatives’, but simply before them in the process of interrogation. This is not to discount ‘the many “whys” of eating—the differing imperatives of hunger, necessity, pleasure, nostalgia, and protest’273 – but to bolster them: the material conditions and processes that lead to eating (and, indeed, decisions not to eat) are as important to understanding the foodways of Homegoing.

Readers must be cognisant of the fact that the geographical and regional spaces its characters occupy – particularly in relation to ideas of nationhood – are liminal and subject to constant negotiation throughout the broad historical period of the novel. We are, after all, dealing with a narrative that not only registers but represents the longue durée – or, as Immanuel Wallerstein clarifies, ‘social transformations over long historical time (Braudel’s “the long term”).’274 For clarity and convenience, I refer throughout to the ‘Ghanaian’ and ‘USA’ chapters, which refer respectively to Effia’s bloodline and to Esi’s. However, the area which is present-day Ghana became known as Ghana275 upon the country’s declaration of independence in 1957; before this, it had been known as the Gold Coast under British colonial rule, divided into three administrative regions (the Gold Coast, Asante, and Northern

272 Ibid. p. 4.
273 Ibid.
275 ‘Ghana’ comes from the title of ‘an ancient kingdom located in the Sahel north of the Niger on the edge of the Sahara’: credit for the choice of name is often attributed to J.B. Danquah, a statesman, in relation to a popular belief that inhabitants of modern-day Ghana were descended from the people of ancient Ghana who had moved south. (David Owusu-Ansah, Historical Dictionary of Ghana, (Lanham, UNITED STATES: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), pp. 128 - 29.)
and prior to that, the territory was home to a number of tribal states including those of the Akan people. Moreover, while the American Declaration of Independence (1776) and therefore the naming of the United States of America had likely taken place prior to the events with which Homegoing begins, ‘American’ nationality continued to be a fraught and contested concept. Indeed, as Lisa Lowe argues, ‘It is through the terrain of national culture that the individual subject is politically formed as the American citizen’. In fact, as is often observed, the Declaration of Independence is directly contradictory in terms of the country’s treatment of its black population up to and including the present day. The first of the ‘self-evident truths’ to which it alludes – ‘that all men are created equal’ – is self-evidently hypocritical given, firstly, the treatment of the enslaved prior to emancipation and, secondly, each of the subsequent pieces of legislation which enacted and maintained racial segregation. But this is, of course, the ‘national culture’ to which Lowe alludes; it is because of this culture of brutality – rooted immovably in slavery and its ramifications – that migrants from sub-Saharan Africa find themselves ‘politically formed’ not as ‘the American citizen,’ but as ‘Black’.

These questions of nationhood, race, and the intersections between these concepts are paramount in the reading of Homegoing as a food narrative; and, by extension, as a piece of world-literature.

Crops and Sites of Extraction

Many of the antebellum plantations in the Americas were devoted to cultivating foodstuffs such as coffee, tea, cocoa, and sugar. However, as Marcie Cohen Ferris observes, ‘The plantation elite’s commitment to cotton and tobacco – rather than food production – ignored the hunger and malnutrition that generations of poor white and black southerners endured’. Undoubtedly this malnourishment affected the enslaved population to a far greater extent than the white southern population, therefore making it an important consideration in the

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279 In the last months of writing this thesis, Ahmaud Arbery was killed when a white person called the police after seeing him outside running. A white woman threatened to call the police on a black birder who asked her – politely – to put her dog on a leash. George Floyd was killed by a police officer who knelt on his neck, preventing him from breathing; an incident which catalysed Black Lives Matter protests globally. Breonna Taylor was shot fatally in her own home while she slept, by three policemen of whom only one has been indicted (and only then for wanton endangerment of a neighbouring family). These are only the most publicised current examples among many of Black individuals subjected to racist attacks by white systems and individuals, and they will have been overshadowed by others by the time of this thesis’ submission. These incidents – and the innumerable others like them – evidence the realism of Homegoing’s depiction of sickening and ongoing threats toward Black lives.
material everyday experiences of Gyasi’s characters on the cotton plantations. The concentration of agricultural and labour resources on the cotton commodity frontier for the purposes of maximising profit is a reminder that food remains ‘not only daily sustenance or profitable cash crop, but the caloric fuel required for wage-labour and its reproduction’ in *Homegoing*, even in chapters in which food is most notable for its scarcity.

When the novel opens, it is with a fire that lays waste to the yam crop of Cobbe Otcher, Effia’s father, ‘that most precious crop known far and wide to sustain families’ (4). Later, we learn that this fire was set by Effia’s mother Maame – an Asante slave whom Cobbe raped, resulting in Effia’s conception – in order to make her escape. Thus, when the narrative explains that ‘Cobbe had lost seven yams, and he felt each as a blow to his own family’ (3), there is a material seriousness to the threat beyond the cultural symbolism of the yam – not only is Cobbe’s ability to provide subsistence for his family threatened, but it is his own actions that have resulted in the violence that plagues Effia’s descendants for generations. This latter claim is evidenced by the fact that in the book there are seven generations – the destruction of the seven yams therefore acts as a portent of the trauma that will be inherited by the future descendants. Furthermore, a fetish man tells Akua later that ‘there is evil in [her] lineage’, because the book begins with an act of violation, preceding years of violence in each subsequent generation. The ‘evil’ could also refer obliquely to Maame’s abandonment of her daughter, as is suggested when Esi realises that ‘Maame was not a whole woman. There were large swaths of her spirit missing’ (42). However, I would argue that – given that this filial abandonment is itself a tragic consequence of that first bodily violation – the reference ‘evil’ is multifaceted, centring primarily around the bodily violence enacted upon women and as a result of chattel slavery. This symbolism also works in reverse: each time fire recurs as a motif for the violent disruption of the family, we are also reminded of the first fire which destroyed the yams, and the resultant precarity of the family’s sustenance. Crop failure and damage as a direct result of human action also recur as a thematic link: Abena’s father James is named ‘Unlucky’ by the villagers because his crops never grow; and there are multiple failed harvests before cocoa is introduced as the village’s agricultural salvation.

Silvia Federici tells us that across colonial Africa British and French officers ‘disrupted female farming by forcing women to assist their husbands in the cultivation of cash crops, thus altering power relations between women and men and instigating new conflicts between them’. The novel’s depiction of early cocoa farming is a marker of the Asante societies’ agricultural movement from ‘subsistence-cropping’ to ‘cash-cropping’ during the colonial

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period. Academics and anthropologists are reasonably sure that cocoa was introduced to Ghana in the late nineteenth century, but there are disagreements regarding precisely when, how, and by whom the introduction occurred. Some sources suggest that cocoa was introduced to Ghana in 1858 by the Basel Mission and that Akuapem farmers were responsible for the subsequent boom in the cocoa industry (the latter hypothesis certainly supported by the cocoa enterprise in *Homegoing*). However, others argue that ‘Africans were the main historical actors’ involved in introducing cocoa to West Africa; in Ghana, in particular, this has been attributed to an individual named Tetteh Quarshie (a quasi-mythological figure) ‘who, returning from working on the island of Fernando Po around 1880, brought cocoa beans with which he established a seed farm’. In any case, critical consensus appears now to be that African cocoa growers played a vital role in the diffusion of cocoa as a cash crop following its introduction to the continent. Since Ohene Nyarko (Abena’s lover, and the man who brings cocoa plants to her village) is planting and cultivating cocoa in the late 1870s – and in addition to the text’s references to cocoa as the ‘new seeds’ (148), as well as the fact that ‘the villagers had never seen anything like it’ – we can reasonably assume that he is intended to be among the earliest Gold Coast cocoa farmers.

Though the date is not specified in Abena’s chapter, it is possible to deduce this from information in later chapters. Akua – the daughter of Abena and Ohene Nyarko – notes that 1895 is ‘sixteen years after… Abena had carried her Akua-swollen belly to the missionaries in Kumasi’ (177), meaning that Abena would have left her village in 1879. The narrative does suggest that Ohene Nyarko’s trees begin to sprout ‘within months’ of their planting – however, I posit that we may log this as an example of the ‘irrealism’ that Sharae Deckard has found to be characteristic of ‘cacao aesthetics’; a fecundity resulting from violence enacted upon both the workers and the land as an incipient cacao frontier. However, even assuming the typical crop cycle for cocoa cultivation – three to five years for the trees to yield cocoa pods, and five to six months for the pods to ripen – Ohene Nyarko would be cultivating cocoa in the mid-late 1870s: just as the crop’s diffusion in West Africa began in earnest. West Africa and, in this case, Ghana are among the few biomes in which cocoa/cacao can grow. While it is important to note that there are myriad differences between the West African cocoa trade and that of South America from where cacao originated, I suggest that Deckard’s formulation of ‘cacao

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284 Konadu and Campbell, 2016, p. 183.
‘aesthetics’ is nonetheless applicable to this Ghanaian context because the crop itself (as opposed to the trade in the crop) remains comparable.

As Deckard argues, then, cacao/cocoa ‘serves as energy in two respects, producing a high-caloric foodstuff for energetic consumption, and mobilizing various forms of energy for its own production’.289 After all, while the villagers who work alongside Ohene Nyarko cultivate the cocoa to provide their families with means of subsistence, they do not produce the cocoa itself for consumption. When Marjorie’s ‘sweet tooth reserved for chocolate’ (266) is revealed in the novel’s penultimate chapter, then, it is far from an innocent image. Marjorie’s ‘mother often joked that Marjorie must have been birthed from a cocoa nut, split open and wide’; and, indeed, the earlier narrative of Abena’s coupling with Ohene Nyarko recalls how ‘His hands smell of that new smell, sweet and dark and earthy, and after she had left him, she would continue to smell it on the places he had touched, the full dark circles of her nipples or just behind her ears’ (148). Ohene Nyarko promises to marry Abena after a good harvest, for which reason he seeks out cocoa plants in the first place; and Akua – Marjorie’s grandmother – is conceived at some point during the cultivation of the cocoa. As a result, cocoa becomes a symbolic ancestor; not only in terms of its value (energy and capital) but as a crucial third presence in the relationship between Abena and Ohene Nyarko. Moreover, the ‘sweet tooth’ to which the narrative refers is an indication of the historic comorbidity of sugar and cocoa production. Here, then, the chocolate preferred by Marjorie acts as a means of foregrounding the otherwise invisibilised peripheral sites of extraction for both cocoa and sugar. Once more this signals the historic – and globalised – foundations of the entanglement between the USA and the Gold Coast/Ghana, and the exploitation of Black bodies that is integral to this formation. Again, Deckard’s work is useful here, as she notes that ‘For the undervalued peripheral producers of ‘raw’ cacao, the consumption of processed chocolate is unaffordable, meaning cacao is often characterized as a ‘dessert crop’ for core consumption’.290 As Abena’s village turns to cash crops which they will not eat, then, her chapter mirrors the experiences of Ness and other plantation slaves who are forced to labour for cotton that they will not wear and the profits from which they will not benefit. These narratives differ in that the Asante villagers will, at least, derive sustenance paid for with the capital earned through their own labour (Ohene Nyarko returns with ‘four fat and obstinate goats’ (150) paid for with the cocoa harvest’s profits, along with ‘yams and kola nuts, some fresh palm oil, and plenty of palm wine’ to break the villagers’ involuntary fast). Gyasi’s inclusion of cash crop sites of extraction in both the USA and Ghana lineages therefore invites comparison between the two, even as we recognise that they develop independently, yet parallel.

290 Ibid. p. 345.
Embodied Food, Bodily Control

An explicit link between food and race as signified through skin colour is evoked through Gyasi’s use of food metaphors to describe characters’ aesthetic appearances. Although these are not material instances of consumption, they do figure the bodies of the characters as sites of potential consumption, as well as registering the influence and prevalence of particular foodstuffs in Akan and American society. Tellingly, the colonial presence of the British and the detrimental effects of this on tribal relations on the Gold Coast is conceptualised by James as ‘a pot of groundnut soup’ (89). James’s mother, Nana Yaa, is the daughter of the Asante king, captured by Fante chiefs led by Effia’s brother as an ‘important political bargaining tool’ (67): she is forced by her captors to marry Quey so that the Asante cannot attack him or his village. It is thus from Nana Yaa that James learns the metaphor of ‘groundnut soup’ to conceive of his homeland. She describes it thus:

Her people, the Asantes, were the broth, and his father’s people, the Fantes, were the groundnuts, and the many other nations that began at the edge of the Atlantic and moved up through the bushland into the North made up the meat and pepper and vegetables. This pot was already full to the brim before white men came and added fire. Now it was all the Gold Coast people could do to keep from boiling over again and again and again. (89)

The groundnut itself is a staple foodstuff across West Africa, ‘important in African agriculture as a nutritious food and profitable cash crop’.

Groundnut soup is an historic West African dish, consumed in traditional tribal societies across the region: as we have seen in contemporary cookbooks like *The Groundnut and The Ghana Cookbook*, the dish’s popularity continues in the present day. Gracia Clark observes that groundnut soup is one of only a few traditional soups to be considered by the Asante [Ashanti] people to be ‘appropriate to complement fufu’ [fufu itself being a dish of intrinsic importance to Asante self-image]. This is testament to the importance of oral tradition and the tacit ways in which culinary knowledge is produced in traditional Asante societies, as well as the material circumstances integral to the cultural significance of groundnut soup. Fran Osseo-Asare contextualises the introduction of the peanut to West Africa during the sixteenth century, commenting that

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293 Ibid. p. 48.
‘peanuts were introduced into West Africa from South America via the Portuguese and supplanted the native *bambara* groundnut’.

She notes particularly that dairy products are generally atypical in West African diets because of the risk to cattle from the prevalent tsetse fly, and the richness of the soup is therefore a specific attribute of the groundnut itself. This richness is literarily evoked in Nana Yaa’s metaphor, in which she understands each of the nations of the Gold Coast as vital components of the soup. Note, however, that the ‘white men’ are responsible for adding fire to an already-full pot. Of course, by now we are aware of the destructive potential of fire in the novel; positioning the ‘white men’ as the destructive catalyst that upsets the delicate balance of the societal ‘soup’ enables a wider narrative gesture to the damage wrought by the colonial project.

One of the earliest instances of this metaphorical yet irrefutable connection between body and food is the description of Fante chief Abeeku Badu, whose skin is compared to ‘the pit of an avocado’ (7) in the novel’s opening pages, set in the late 1700s. Incidentally, in terms of the registration of foodways through metaphor, this is also the least successful: the metaphor is anachronistic in that avocados were amongst the crops introduced to the Gold Coast in the nineteenth century, and there is little evidence to suggest that they had been grown in the region prior to this. While the third-person narrative focalises Effia’s perspective, then, there is no reason to assume that she would be aware of the existence of avocado as a foodstuff, let alone have sufficient knowledge for it to become a comparison she might make automatically or unconsciously. In contrast, Esi’s narrative identifies the skin of the white soldiers as ‘the color of coconut meat’, and notes that she and her fellow enslaved have ‘learned to back away’ (29) from it. Crucially, this is an instance in which white skin signifies a threat – a motif that is implicit throughout the novel, and which highlights the irony depicted in Marcus’ chapter later on, when white characters need only see a black person from a distance to register a threat.

Esi is known to her village as ‘ripe mango’ (31), an idiomatic reference to the fact that she is ‘just on the right side of spoiled, still sweet’. Conversely, Effia’s bodily relationship to food in her earliest memories revolves around Baaba’s abuse. For example, when Effia drops her brother Fiifi by accident, Baaba ‘who had been stirring *banku*, lifted her stirring stick and beat Effia across her bare back. Each time the stick lifted off the girl’s body, it would leave behind hot sticky, pieces of *banku* that burned into her flesh’ (4). The visceral nature of this imagery is recalled later in the novel when Ness is found and beaten by the man she knows as ‘the Devil’, leaving the skin of her back ‘like pulled taffy’ (81). Effia is known as ‘The Beauty’,

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albeit only when it suits the male members of her village: her body becomes ‘soft and fleshy, its own kind of fruit’ (25) only when she becomes pregnant, invoking ‘the libidinal language of fruits’ to signal feminine sexuality and fertility. The pregnant belly of another village girl – Millicent – is described as ‘no bigger than a coconut, slung low’ which makes similar use of fruitful comparison, albeit in a slightly more sinister way. Millicent, too, is married to a white colonial: as such, in light of the fact that ‘coconut’ is the fruit to which the skin of the white men is commonly compared in the novel, Effia focuses upon the child as simultaneously Ghanaian (like the coconut itself) and white (like the invasive presence of the British colonisers). In both cases, however, the female body (and specifically, the black female body, cast in opposition to the white male body) is figured as an object for consumption and, through consumption, control.

Later in the novel Gyasi’s narrative recalls this representation of the body as fruit (food) in a more oblique fashion, in the interactions between Akua and the Missionary who punishes her for her ‘heathenism’ and ‘sins’. Akua categorises the look on the Missionary’s face as ‘hungry, like if he could, he would devour her’ (184). In this instance – and over the ten years during which Akua is subject to violent emotional and physical abuse by the Missionary – hunger is linked to bodily control. There is also a divergence here because these embodied food metaphors are a particular characteristic of Akan social consciousness. For the Missionary – whose religion and ‘civilizing’ mission enacts a violent separation between him and the Gold Coast natives he meets – to look at Akua in ‘hunger’ is not to compare her to food (as it is when female characters are compared by menfolk to fruit in earlier moments), but to try to ‘consume’ (read: overpower) her by erasing her agency and enacting bodily control over her through beatings. If there is a sexual element to this control, it is not overt, but implied through the physical dominance of the male figure over the younger female. Nonetheless, if the Missionary would devour Akua ‘if he could’, the implication is that, in fact, he cannot: Akua is able to break his control by leaving to marry. Cementing this metaphor of hunger and consumption is the fact that when Akua manages to escape, it is into the arms of Asamoah – arms which are described as ‘thick as yams, and his skin as brown’ (186). Not only does Akua regain her subjectivity by escaping the Missionary’s ‘hunger’, but she returns to the yam: a staple foodstuff of the Akan people, and a symbolic return to commensality with the land.

‘Soul’, Subsistence, and Survival

As noted previously (Homegoing as Food Narrative), the idea of eating as a site of ‘racial anxiety’ (as foregrounded by Wazana Tompkins) is particularly pertinent to the
foodways of the ‘American’ half of this novel. Terming this ‘anxiety’ is a useful exercise because it speaks to the uncertainty of food scarcity—the persistent theme throughout the novel that ‘no food for mother meant no food for baby’ (28) as well as to the ways in which food becomes a means through which to construct and assert a Black American identity. My initial intention for this chapter was to trace the interaction in *Homegoing* between sub-Saharan African foodways and those of the black population in the American South; in particular, marking the impact of the transatlantic slave trade on the respective histories and present-day situations of the two regions. With respect to this, Robert L. Hall suggests that there are two ways to approach African influences on Southern foodways: these are to ‘emphasize the basic food crops that were either domesticated in Africa or, though domesticated elsewhere, had become incorporated into the diets of Atlantic Africa before the captives were shipped to the Americas’, or to place emphasis upon ‘how ingredients (regardless of their ultimate locus of domestication in the case of plants) were prepared and seasoned’.297 In *Homegoing*, however, Hall’s approaches are more difficult to implement. In part, this is because the narrative describes Southern food in real sensory detail only rarely: it is also because the majority of the Southern food present in the novel bears little resemblance to the food eaten by the majority of the Ghanaian characters. This same material divergence is articulated by Psyche Williams-Forson in her essay ‘Other Men Cooked For My Husband’, in which she details the differences between her own foodways and those of her Ghanaian husband and argues that although they are both ‘characterized by the designation ‘Black’, [they] do not share the same cultural realities’.298

Culinary historian Michael W. Twitty comments that ‘All of the negotiations and conflict—between European indentures, Africans, and Native people, with one another, and within their own groupings—affect how the food came to be and what we think of as soul or Southern’,299 highlighting the ways in which food customs and materials from each of these cultures have merged to contribute to a contemporary understanding of what constitutes the food of the South. Once more, this cements my idea that food is inherently, materially opposed to a ‘single story’, because of the many narratives that collate to form what is ‘Southern’; and that it is this innate quality of plurality that lends food its suitability as a medium through which to interrogate diaspora and the world-system. Rather than recommending a sole focus upon food that is typically associated with ‘Southern’ cuisine—or, more specifically, with ‘soul food’—I argue in this chapter at large that *Homegoing* invites a broader (yet no less vital) mapping of foodways between sub-Saharan Africa and the USA. Nonetheless, the notable continuity between what is today considered ‘soul’ food and that which is eaten in various

parts of sub-Saharan Africa as a particular material legacy of slavery is an important aspect of this novel’s foodscape and, as such, it demands our critical attention.

‘Southern foodways’ is a fraught terminology, and a site of critical contestation, as we see in a 2016 exchange between Southern foodways academic John T. Edge and chef Tunde Wey: Wey asserts that ‘Southern food culture has openly appropriated black food culture and prescribed the proper feelings the appropriated should possess regarding their hurt’.300 As with any usage of ‘foodways’, it refers to what is eaten, and the customs and material influences surrounding that consumption: however, in the American South, those influences are traceable to indigenous American peoples, enslaved Africans, and white colonialists. ‘Soul food’ is, however, associated particularly with the Black population in the USA; Tracy N. Poe explains that ‘What there was in urban black neighborhoods, was an African American culinary tradition that centered on two principles: Southerness and commensality’,301 and that these two principles became ‘Soul food’ after the publication of Malcolm X’s life story in 1963. Poe proceeds to outline a number of the more prominent staples of soul food:

By combining the foodstuffs and methods of African and Anglo-American cuisines, the lexicon of Southern African American foodways was created: fried chicken and fish; barbecued pork; boiled greens with ‘pot likker;’ roasted sweet potatoes; one-pot dishes which, depending on the region, had names such as ‘sloosh,’ ‘cush-cush,’ or ‘gumbo;’ corn bread, corn fritters, corn pone, cornmeal mush and hominy grits; stewed legumes like black-eyed peas, field peas, and beans and rice; and of course the African-descended watermelon were all typical African American foods.302

A common misconception of ‘soul food’ or any Black southern cuisine is that it revolves primarily around those cheaper items and cheaper cuts of meat that enslavers would permit to the enslaved: essentially, that it is a culture of ‘survival’, first and foremost. This focus on the cheap is emphasised in narratives surrounding capital and the slave trade itself. Lowe tells us in Immigrant Acts, for example, that ‘Capital deals with its systemic crisis of declining profits by seeking out cheaper factors of production, especially labor’.303 Slaves were, of course, the cheapest form of labour:304 not only were the enslavers not required to pay their captives for

302 Ibid. p. 95.
304 It was not, however, the most productive: for various material reasons including nutritional deficiency, inflicted punishment, lack of training for manual labour in an essentially non-industrialised
their labour, but the commodification of African bodies as cargo, rather than human beings, meant that factors of production such as welfare were willfully overlooked by the white ruling class. As such, rations were designed to be enough for the enslaved to subsist on and still retain their capacity for productive labour, but no more. In addition, Poe speaks also to the fact that ‘black people developed an affinity for the parts of animals normally discarded by whites: entrails, known as ‘chitterlings’ (pronounced ‘chitlins’); pigs’ heads, which were made into ‘souse,’ a kind of head-cheese; pigs’ and chickens’ feet, and so on’ – again, evidence of the ways in which the scarcity had a material influence on the food culture of the enslaved and, in subsequent years, on the ‘soul food’ of the Black population (as, for example, when Kojo purchases pigs’ feet in Baltimore later on in the novel (112)).

In the American chapters of Homegoing, Hall confirms this, citing Fogel and Engerman in stating that ‘While corn and pork did not constitute the totality of the slave diet, they were the core of the diet on most plantations because corn and pork could be stored and made available fresh for distribution year around, whereas vegetables were less easily stored and, hence, were primarily available on a seasonal basis’. Almost exactly this meal accompanies Ness to the plantation in her pail – ‘cornmeal cakes, a bit of salt pork, and, if she was lucky, some greens’ – not only for the convenience of its cultivation but because it is food that is easily consumed with one hand while continuing to work with the other. For the enslaved who were often working towards a daily quota (failure to meet which would result in any number of violent punishments), to maximise productivity was simply an essential mechanism of survival. As such, when Ness continues ‘picking cotton with her right hand, shoveling food in with her left’ as she did in the place she refers to only as ‘Hell’, even when this is no longer necessary, it is recognisable as an ongoing survival response to the complex trauma of her previous position. Furthermore, the action of eating whilst working warns about the risk faced by the enslaved if they took a break from their productive labour. It is perhaps little surprise, then, that there are so few sensorial descriptions of food in the novel’s earlier USA chapters – this acts as a registration of the ‘survival’ aspect of Black Southern cuisine.

Pork is perhaps the most prevalent staple eaten by Homegoing’s characters. Marvin Harris’ The Sacred Cow and the Abominable Pig argues that pork was the preferred meat across the South and the Midwest in the antebellum period, positing the fact that pigs could survive without cultivated pasture (foraging instead on readily available forest vegetation), to be then brought to market weight by feeding on surplus corn. Salt pork such as that eaten by Ness

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305 Poe, 2002, p. 95.
306 Hall, 2007, p. 36.
307 Harris, 1987, p. 113.
while working on cotton plantations and as cooked by Ethe would therefore have been both easily accessible and easily cultivated. One of the novel’s most evocative passages is that of H’s reunion with Ethe. H is released from his prison sentence in the coal mines – having been part of another force of (primarily black) free labourers – and he finds himself unable to look after himself. When Ethe – the woman to whom he was unfaithful – returns and chastises him for calling her by another woman’s name, she is depicted as arriving in a cloud of smoke around a cooking pot. She is cooking greens and, when H attempts to seduce her, she is scraping the fatback from the bottom of the pot and does not ‘lean back into him until the pot had been scraped clean’ (176). This method of cooking greens using fatback (the fairly self-explanatory term for the ‘cured middlings (relatively fat abdominal walls)’ of the pig)\textsuperscript{308} is typical of Black Southern cuisine. This is explored by John T. Edge in The Potlikker Papers, opening with a description of the greens served at Bertha’s Kitchen (a restaurant in North Charleston, South Carolina): ‘Simmered in a pigtail- and neckbone- perfumed potlikker [the nutrient-rich liquid left behind after greens are boiled] those greens showcase the talents of the black women who stir Bertha’s pots’.\textsuperscript{309} Sam B. Hilliard’s landmark study Hog Meat and Hoecake also confirms that ‘Though the actual amount of pork consumed in the South is not known in detail, a strong dependence upon pork by the great bulk of southern people is well established’,\textsuperscript{310} noting that the comparable standardisation of slave rations makes it easy for us to ascertain how much pork each man or woman might have been afforded.

Despite its origins in the slave trade and the exercising of power over Black slaves by white masters, however, it is important to retain awareness of Black Southern food culture as a source of pride, familiarity, and cultural commensality. It is this pride that affords such food its moniker of ‘soul’. Dishes such as potlikker, greens, and pork are testament not just to the suffering endured by the enslaved, but to the ingenuity referred to by Mintz and Price: ‘the institutions created by the slaves to deal with what are at once the most ordinary and most important aspects of life took on their characteristic shape within the parameters of the masters’ monopoly of power, but separate from the masters’ institutions’.\textsuperscript{311} This, too, is demonstrated through the presence of pork in Black households, and perhaps even more so through the continuing requirement for corn. Hilliard tells us this about the historic relevance of corn in the slave diet:

\textsuperscript{310} Hilliard and Cobb, 2014, p. 86.
\textsuperscript{311} Mintz and Price, 1992, p. 39.
The slave ration (usually doled out weekly) almost invariably contained corn which, in some cases, was unground, but most planters preferred to issue cornmeal since it saved the time required to grind the corn… Cornmeal was a major segment of the slave’s diet and, in most cases, the recommended allowance was followed carefully, but some planters allowed unlimited access to the meal bin. It was consumed primarily in the form of corn bread, but from time to time mush was made. Occasionally, grits and hominy were issued but by far the most common was cornmeal.\textsuperscript{312}

Again, corn is one of the staples that Ness takes with her to work, in the form of cornmeal cakes. However, it recurs in the breakfast that Kojo shares with his friend Poot – ‘a little cornbread and some fish’ (116), the inclusion of fish in his diet now a registration of his proximity to the sea – and it is possible that the ‘bread’ referred to in Sonny’s chapter is, still, cornbread. Further underlining this is Kojo’s perception of his pregnant wife’s feet as ‘folded back out and over, like bread that had too much yeast and could not be contained by its pan’ (123): a rare example of the embodied food we see more commonly in the Ghanaian chapters of the novel, and an indication not only of Anna’s fertility, but of the continued presence of cornbread in the Black kitchen even when no longer in the South.

Perhaps the most telling instance of the continued importance of ‘Using food as a vehicle for displaying Southern identity’\textsuperscript{313} is in the passage relating to the family for whom Willie cooks in Harlem, the Morrises. They are a wealthy black family, who ‘had been in New York since before the Great Migration, but they ate as though the South was a place in their kitchen instead of one that was miles and miles away’ (209). Although it is not specified what this particular style of eating entails, we do see that Willie leaves their house with ‘a smear of chicken grease’ on her forehead, implying that fried chicken constitutes at least part of the menu. Fried chicken is, of course, a Southern staple (according to Williams-Forson, ‘fried chicken was proclaimed as one of the most recognized foods of the South’, and ‘[Black women] were widely credited with lining the “southern groaning boards” with heaping platters of steaming fried chicken’\textsuperscript{314}) and the source of a number of contentious stereotypes regarding Black Americans. However, the fact that the Morrises eat ‘as though the South was a place in their kitchen’ also signals the fact that Southern food is not available to them outside of their own home, nor without a Black cook to undertake the labour of preparing it for them. Poe outlines this, too, stating that ‘black cooks were prized in the South’s finest homes and dining rooms, but the Southern cuisine they created was not considered refined by an urban

\textsuperscript{312} Hilliard and Cobb, 2014, p. 53.
\textsuperscript{313} Poe, 2002, p. 92.
\textsuperscript{314} Williams-Forson, 2006, p. 77.
clientele’ – this is among the reasons why white claims over the food of the American South are contentious (see Edge’s conversation with Wey regarding ‘what whites have gained at the expense of blacks’), because contemporary white chefs now profit from the sale of cuisine that their forebears ridiculed.

These demonstrable material continuities in the foodways of the novel’s Black American characters speak thus to the ways in which racial trauma and survival were encoded in the food of Black Americans, even when they moved out of the South. Even ice cream – though not generally considered stereotypical ‘soul’ food – becomes part of this pattern of inherited trauma: this is particularly resonant given that ice cream parlours were often prolific sites of sit-in protests against racial segregation. It begins when Willie and her husband Robert find an ice cream parlour hiring and are aggressively rebuffed due to the de jure segregation of public facilities at the time. While Robert is sufficiently light-skinned to ‘pass’ for white, Willie is not – and it is thus the fact that he is ‘married to a black woman’ (206) as opposed to being black himself that prevents Robert from acquiring a job in the ice cream parlour, in spite of his previous retail experience. This is the first instance of explicit racial discrimination that the couple experience in New York; and the fact that it occurs in an ice cream parlour foreshadows another incident which takes place after Robert has left Willie. This later incident acts as a framing device for Willie’s chapter. Willie takes Sonny (then still known as Carson) to get an ice cream, and the narrative focalises Willie’s perspective, as she watches while ‘Carson licked his ice cream cone delicately, sculpting that round shape with his own tongue. He would lick all the way around, and then look at it carefully, lick again’ (200/1).

It is a bittersweet moment for Willie, who cannot remember ‘the last time she had seen [Sonny] so happy’ but in whom happiness is not so easily evoked. As the two walk, they move from relative safety into majority white neighbourhoods (the passage of time registered in the fact that ‘Carson crunched on his cone’ just as they near the limits of Harlem) and it is at this point that Willie sees Robert from afar: this time, with his white wife and his white son. Although Willie is initially arrested by the sight, eventually she and Robert smile at each other, and the moment becomes one of powerful release for both.

315 Poe, 2002, p. 94.
A number of points are salient here. Firstly, that Willie is able to purchase Sonny an ice cream is evidence of her ability and determination to provide for herself and her son financially, as well as an emphatic refusal of the limits placed upon her by the earlier proprietor of the ice cream parlour. In addition, however, the use of the ice cream to placate the child is a subtle allusion to the ways in which memories of food culture can differ even for individuals in the same family: when Willie reveals to Sonny at the end of his chapter that the man they saw that day was his real father, it becomes apparent that young Sonny’s attention was absorbed entirely by the ice cream. For Willie, the event of seeing Robert after a number of years was monumental; for Sonny, it was a walk on which he was promised and received a sweet treat. Furthermore, the instance of Willie taking Sonny for an ice cream finds parallel in the novel’s final chapter, as Marcus remembers his mother Amani also taking him on a long walk on which he was promised ice cream. However, the difference between these two events is stark: Amani cannot afford the cone (‘Marcus could remember her walking with him from one parlor to another shop to another and another in the hope that the prices would be better’ (292)); and the danger of the neighbourhood to which she takes him lies not in predominant whiteness, but in the presence of drug dealers. In adult-Marcus’ recollection, two things are registered: ‘first, that he was somewhere he was not supposed to be, and second, that there would be no ice cream’ (292). Fear marks this memory for Marcus, but so does ‘the fullness of love and protection he’d felt later, when his family had finally found him’. The promise of ice cream is therefore used to elicit Marcus’ happy acquiescence, just as Willie used actual, tangible sugar to evoke happiness in Sonny years before: both events are marked by the trauma suffered by the women as a result of individual and systemic racial discrimination, and by the semi-obliviousness of their children; and both events integrate a sense of racialised spatiality that designates some neighbourhoods as ‘safe’, and others as ‘unsafe’. While ice cream is not necessarily a ‘Southern’ staple in the same way as other foodstuffs, it is nonetheless a conspicuous presence in the ‘American’ foodways of the novel, and a material registration of the aftereffects of systemic racial discrimination.

**Family Feasting and Commensality**

Throughout *Homegoing*, the material and symbolic aspects of food are used to map ‘commensality’, a term usefully defined by Susanne Kerner and Cynthia Chou as consisting of ‘the sharing of food, conversation, and exchange of body-language between the participants’;\(^{318}\) an intentionally broad definition which can therefore account for and apply to the commensal ideas and rules of all cultures. A fruitful starting point for analysis of the

Commensality depicted in *Homegoing* is to compare the notions of feasting (what Kerner and Chou call ‘special commensal occasions’)[319] between Effia’s chapter and Esi’s. Importantly, Effia’s village is Fante and Esi’s Asante, but it is of equal importance to account for the nuances in their individual situations. While Effia’s birth is marked only by the fire that destroys Cobbe’s means of subsistence, Esi’s father throws a four-night feast during which ‘five goats were slaughtered and boiled until their tough skins turned tender’ (31) to celebrate her birth. Then, as the girls grow older, both of them are deemed to be the most beautiful women in their respective villages, at which point men begin to bring foodstuffs as gifts in hopes of securing their hands. For Effia, suitors bring exquisite palm wine and plentiful fish, enabling her family to ‘feast’ off her burgeoning womanhood (5). Furthermore, when Abeeku Badu (the presumptive chief of the village, and Effia’s own preferred choice of husband) visits to share a meal with Effia, he brings a goat, yams, fish, and palm wine (7). In comparison, Esi’s suitor Kwasi Nnuro ‘brought sixty yams. More yams than any other suitor had ever brought before’ (28). Here, both the Asante and Fante societies demonstrate the custom of marriage gifts: D. D. Nsereko observes that these gifts ‘serve as an expression of the husband’s and/or his family’s gratitude to the bride’s parents for the care they took in bringing her up and in allowing her to marry him’. This substantiates an immediate line of comparison between the two girls, as there is a sense of prosperity in the sheer volume of food garnered by Esi, particularly comparing this plenitude to the fact that Cobbe’s loss of only seven yams earlier felt to him like physical ‘blows’. In contrast, Effia’s family position Effia as provider purely because her beauty endears her to the most powerful man in her village. However, this prosperity (and the security it provides) is soon reversed. Esi’s childhood is framed through a retrospective narrative: ‘Hell was a place of remembering’ (18) whereupon the abundance of her upbringing – during which she is often seen eating, her ‘mouth stained orange’ from palm oil stew – is contrasted explicitly with the ‘mushy porridge’ that is the only foodstuff afforded to the captured. This porridge provides no nutritive value (‘The porridge passed right through her, it seemed’ (29)) and is, of course, of no cultural significance to the captured Asante other than as a material registration of the conditions of their imprisonment. The denial of culturally appropriate food (or indeed, any food at all) here acts as a starting point for the dehumanisation that will follow the captives through the Middle Passage and to the USA: commensality is a fundamentally human value, and the removal of any possibility of commensality by slavers is another reflection of the commodification of the enslaved. Meanwhile, the precarity of this subsistence contrasts starkly with the material wealth and bodily security that Effia secures for herself through her marriage to the British Governor.

[319] Ibid. p. 1.  
As the narrative moves historically and geographically away from the traditional Akan feasts to celebrate weddings and births, however, the feast’s accompanying ideas of community and collectivity become no less important. While no bride price is required for the marriage of Agnes (Kojo and Anna’s daughter) to take place, one of the focal aspects of the wedding is the fact that ‘all the female congregants had cooked a meal fit to feed a king’ (123). The occasion is a happy one, ‘even though there were whispers about Timmy marrying a girl whose folks didn’t attend a church’. Contrasting this with the meagre wedding ‘celebration’ afforded to Effia in the novel’s opening chapter – which permits ‘no dancing, no feasting, no bright colors’ and at which Effia’s family are not even in attendance – illuminates temporal and cultural distance between the Ghanaian lineage and the American, as well as testifying to a sense of commensality and hospitality shared by Black communities in America even across religious denominations.

However, we can extend the concept of ‘commensality’ beyond the fact that ‘feasts and conspicuous food sharing are social obligations vital to one’s status in West African society’ and work instead with Fran Osseo-Asare’s assertion that ‘one definition of the family unit in West Africa is those who regularly eat from the same cooking pot’. In doing so, we open up possibilities for food-based analysis of the relationship between Yaw and Esther. Yaw’s face bears the physical scarring from the fire set by Akua (another example of trauma manifested upon the body) and he has found it difficult to forge romantic relationships because of the prejudice he has encountered as a result. At the beginning of his chapter, he eats at his friend Edward’s house: ‘Yaw was eating dinner at Edward Boahen’s house for the sixth night that week. On Sunday, he would eat there for the seventh. Edward’s wife liked to complain that she was married to two men, but Yaw complimented her cooking so often that he knew she would continue to welcome him’ (222). Here, the notion of inclusion is forged through the idea of exclusion: Yaw’s rejection by the majority of society has nonetheless enabled him to find commensality and friendship elsewhere. Eventually, however, Mrs Boahen becomes pregnant for the fifth time, and she and her husband slowly entertain fewer people and on rarer occasions, so that finally Yaw is also made unwelcome. This modulation in commensal values indicates that they are not always aligned with material circumstance, as well as the fact that a notion of ‘family’ based on eating from the same cooking pot is subject to the whim of the person/people to whom that cooking pot belongs.

It is at this point that Yaw hires Esther as a house girl. Although their relationship is initially unsteady (due primarily to Yaw’s embarrassment and unwillingness to interact with

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Esther – ‘Make whatever you want for dinner. I don’t care what’ (230)), Esther is finally able to break down the communication barriers Yaw has constructed by inviting him to go to market with her to purchase items for goat pepper soup. The market itself may be read as a site of cultural inclusion, since the ‘soup, corn, yams, meat’ all reflect the types of foodstuffs that might be conceivably desired in a Ghanaian home, according to the availability and cultural significance of particular crops like, again, the yam. However, it is back at Yaw’s home that the relationship between the two is cemented. Their growing intimacy is nourished by sharing meals when Yaw balks at the idea of Esther eating alone, although ‘In the beginning she had insisted on taking her meals separately from him, saying that it wouldn’t be proper for them to eat together’ (233). The idea of ‘eating from the same cooking pot’ returns here: though it makes economic sense for Yaw and Esther to eat the same food, that they do so at the same time and at the same table facilitates their growing bond. When, finally, Yaw asks Esther to visit his mother with him, hinting at a willingness for emotional openness that he has been thus far unable to exhibit with anybody else, he becomes immediately embarrassed and clarifies that this is ‘In case I need someone to cook for me as I travel’ (234). It is Yaw’s reunion with his mother, and Esther’s facilitation of this – urging him to visit his mother and cooking the food over which the reunion takes place – that enables Yaw to work through his trauma, and subsequently to realise and act upon his feelings for Esther. In this way, Esther’s culinary labour and the food she prepares is catalytic, forging commensality not just between herself and Yaw, but between Yaw and his mother. By the end of the novel, not only are Esther and Yaw still eating at the same table, and from the same cooking pot, but they share this food with their daughter Marjorie. Although the substance of the food changes – Marjorie’s narrative establishes that Yaw ‘had suffered from a heart attack two years before and now ate a bowl of oatmeal every day’ (271), revealing a consciousness of nutritional health which is notably absent from previous chapters – the custom of creating one’s family from those with whom one shares food remains in evidence.

A final evocation of the community that can be registered through food occurs in the poem that Marjorie writes regarding her experience of being ‘black’ in America. By this point, Marjorie has encountered Black American children who make her aware that ‘they were not the same kind of black that she was’ (268): differences in lived experience which manifest here in language, accent, and the fact that Marjorie chooses to sit alone reading with her lunch, thus physically separating herself from the other Black children. The teacher who rescues Marjorie from the ignominy of being designated ‘white girl’ – Mrs Pinkston – is also the first to clarify for Marjorie that her identity is not something for which she alone is responsible, and that it is not possible for her to lead a non-politicised existence, because ‘it doesn’t matter where you came from first to the white people running things’. Therefore, when Marjorie considers telling her high school teacher that ‘akata people [Black people descended from
enslaved African populations] were different from Ghanaians, too long gone from the mother continent to continue calling it the mother continent’, she is informed by that same teacher that ‘here black is black is black’ (273). The poem includes the following lines:

We, two, black.
Me, you.
One grew from
cocoa’s soil, birthed from nut,
skin uncut, still bleeding. (282)

Here, as in much of the novel’s narrative, food appears to be of secondary importance. However, the reference to cocoa is an unmistakeable allusion to both the cocoa frontier back in Abena’s time and Marjorie’s mother’s joke that Marjorie herself ‘must have been birthed from a cocoa nut’ (266); and the poem itself is imbued with something of the ‘cacao irrealism’ observed earlier (‘skin uncut’ yet ‘still bleeding’, for example). All this is particular to Marjorie’s own ancestry. Yet, by preceding these particular, individual experiences with ‘We, two, black’, not only does she acknowledge and embrace the political identity she has taken on in the USA, but she acknowledges and embraces those others who share that political identity. This is not commensality in the sense of shared food customs and cultural mores: but it uses the historic resonance of the cultivation and consumption of cocoa across the Atlantic to evoke a shared identity that is centred upon complex, varied experiences of Blackness.

**Motherhood and the ‘Mammy’**

Servitude and reproductive labour are intimately connected throughout the novel. By ‘reproductive labour’ I refer to the means through which labour forces are reproduced in the modern world-system: literal, sexual reproduction of bodies that would subsequently become workforce, and the domestic and affective labour that ensures that these bodies are capable of undertaking their own labour. As feminist scholars (Angela Davis, Silvia Federici, Maria

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323 There is arguably an additional resonance here in that although Marjorie’s West African ancestry is invoked, there is also a latent evocation of the ethnic slur ‘coconut’, as ‘sort of an all-purpose, you’re-white-on-the-inside epithet for all manner of brownness’ (Kat Chow and Gene Demby, ‘Overthinking It: Using Food as a Racial Metaphor’, NPR, 2014) <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/09/12/348008432/overthinking-it-using-food-as-a-racial-metaphor> [accessed 25 Sep 2020].) This interpretation is supported by the ways in which Marjorie is targeted by Black students at her school, who mock her by saying ‘You sound like a white girl’. (269)

324 In stating this, I refer to the ways in which ‘The system of slavery placed a monetary and labor value on black women’s production of more laboring black bodies’ (McElya, 82).
Mies, and Saidiya Hartman, among others) have demonstrated, ‘this general production of life, or subsistence production—mainly performed through the non-wage labour of women… constitutes the perennial basis upon which ‘capitalist productive labour’ can be built up and exploited’.

As Saidiya Hartman observes, ‘Gestational language has been key to describing the world-making and world-breaking capacities of racial slavery’ and ‘The material relations of sexuality and reproduction defined black women’s historical experiences as laborers’.

Slavery is a fact of life in both the Fante and Asante cultures of Effia’s and Esi’s upbringing. The sisters’ mother Maame is revealed to have been a slave for the family of a ‘Big Man’ who raped her, resulting in Effia’s conception. Later, Esi’s mother is told by her husband to take on an enslaved house girl, Abronoma, to help with the cooking, to whom she also becomes a quasi-maternal figure (as demonstrated through the affective care she provides to the child in dressing her wounds and completing the chores that Abronoma cannot finish (38)). Robert Collins notes that ‘Although African slavery was in many cases qualitatively different from that found in the colonies of the Atlantic world, it was still slavery’, a fact evident not only in the rape of Maame, but in the physical humiliations to which Abronoma is subjected by Esi’s father, and in the continuing complicity of Effia’s bloodline (particularly Quey and James) in the work of slavers.

In contrast, on antebellum plantations, reproductive labour – particularly that which could also be associated with affective care, such as cooking – was often linked both metaphorically and explicitly to the problematic figure of the ‘mammy’. This fictionalised ‘Mammy’ character was a prolific example of a ‘faithful slave narrative’: a means through which the cruelty and barbarism of slavery could be characterised instead as a benevolent and formative means of ‘civilising’ the enslaved, who would recognise and welcome this ‘refining’ influence. Crucially, it was also an explicitly feminised version of this narrative: popular constructions of the mammy ‘included not only her physical attributes, which stressed her advanced age or wide girth, but also her spirited character. She loved her white ‘family’ and would defend and protect them fiercely, but she could be cantankerous with them and was a disciplinarian of white children’. Of course, this construction of the ‘mammy’ was generally erroneous: a fact reflected in the fact that none of Homegoing’s main female characters remotely resemble the caricature. However, Mikki McElya observes that in the majority of ‘mammy’

327 Hartman, 2016, p. 166.
330 Ibid. p. 8.
narratives, white owners cultivated ‘a fundamental lack of concern for black women’s private emotions, their families, and the maternal work they performed outside the white domestic sphere’.331 By focalising Black female characters’ perspectives, the novel ensures that their complex internal emotional lives are represented; and by narrating the reproductive labour that Black women perform within their own homes and families, it counters the racialised white understanding that ‘the emotional traits that defined maternal affection fell outside the realm of black women’s relationships with black children’.332

Food, fecundity, and fertility are key organising themes of the narrative’s focus, particularly in relation to the role of women in both reproduction and reproductive labour. In each chapter, the maternal figure is pivotal: even if that person goes missing, like Esi in Ness’ chapter or Anna in Kojo’s; or despises their spouse, as Nana Yaa despises James; or is only present in the chapter’s final lines, as when Ette arrives to forgive H for having removed the agency of and pride in her own name. This is not just because it is through the mother that the genealogical line is propelled forward and the narrative is furthered, but as material registration of – and symbolic gesture towards – the reproductive centrality of women. In the same way, it is persistently the maternal figure – or, at minimum, female figures – to whom responsibility for domestic labour (and thus for reproductive labour) is assigned. However, Angela Davis argues that ‘The designation of the black woman as a matriarch… is a misnomer because it implies stable kinship structures within which the mother exercises decisive authority’.333 While the disabling of ‘kinship structures’ is inarguable in Homegoing, I posit that the ways in which women form and nourish their own families (whether or not those families would be traditionally recognised as such) result in the novel’s matrilineal aesthetic, which often finds its expression in food.

Maame’s abandonment of Effia in the Fante village in which she was enslaved results in Cobbe taking baby Effia to his first wife, Baaba, and commanding that Baaba ‘Love her’… as though love were as simple an act as lifting food up from an iron plate and past one’s lips’ (5). There is a certain irony in the fact that, as a result of the damage to Cobbe’s crops, finding subsistence has itself just become a far more fraught exercise – in actual fact, the affective care required to ‘love’ the child is likely no less difficult than emotional love (particularly since Gyasi’s language is intentionally vague until this point, so as to render Effia’s true parenthood unclear). Indeed, for Effia, to eat is a challenge even before she is able to consume solid food as Baaba has no milk – in part because her body has not undergone pregnancy and is therefore unprepared for the production of milk, but also because of damage to the yams as food supply. As we know, ‘no food for mother meant no food for baby’ (28).

331 Ibid. p. 81.
332 Ibid. p. 82.
333 Davis, 1971, p. 84.
Williams-Forson states that ‘In their ability to control the ‘symbolic language of food’ and to dictate what foods say about their families, women often negotiate the dialectical relationship between the internal identity formation of their families and the externally influenced medium of popular culture’ and, certainly, it is in Willie’s kitchen that she is able to circumvent the racialised external world. Williams-Forson’s assertion that ‘Migrant women, in their role as primary caregivers and preparers of food, were at the center of mediating these social interactions and power interplays that coalesced around gender, race, class, and region’ can therefore be applied easily to Willie, whose role as a mother (and, later, grandmother) is of material importance to her own life as well as that of her children and grandchildren. Importantly, Williams-Forson’s invocation of ‘migrant’ refers here to ‘newly arrived African Americans’: those who reached the northern states during the Great Migration. Most pertinently, this occurs in the recurring event of Sunday dinner, to which we are first introduced in Sonny’s chapter. William C. Whit has observed that ‘Saturday night usually was the distribution of slave provisions. This made possible the tradition of a larger than normal Sunday dinner—a tradition which has continued with minor modification in African American households down to the present’. Similarly, Poe observes that ‘Commensality persisted in the agricultural setting in the form of picnics and Sunday dinners after slavery was abolished, establishing itself as one of the most important features of Southern African American culture’.

I use Whit and Poe here to contextualise the importance of the first time that Sonny skips Sunday dinner at his mother’s (246), and the invitation that Willie extends to him as a final effort at salvaging their relationship. At this point, Sonny has been introduced to heroin by his girlfriend Amani and propelled into addiction not only by the properties of the drug itself, but by sociological circumstance: Sonny, along with many of Harlem’s addicted population at the time, is ‘socially and economically marginal, limited by a color line to the oldest neighborhoods, shabbiest schools, and worst jobs’. It is Amani who passes this invitation on, speaking to Sonny as he ‘found a piece of bread and ate around the mold’ (258). The presence of mould is evidence of Sonny’s neglect of his health, as is the fact that his search for food is characterised as ‘rummaging’ and ‘finding’; the effect is to portray both Sonny and Amani as scavenging to find subsistence because any money that they do have is immediately spent on heroin. This physical neglect is further emphasised in the fact that, when Sonny eventually goes to Willie’s for Sunday dinner, he begins ‘to feel a little sick from eating so fast’—consuming both a quantity and quality of food to which he is no longer accustomed— and is

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334 Williams-Forson, 2006, p. 92.
335 William C. Whit, ‘Soul Food as Cultural Creation’, *Journal for the Study of Food and Society*, 3 (1999), 39.
asked by his mother ‘How long it been since you ate something proper?’ (261). The very concept of Willie’s feeding her son ‘something proper’ harkens back to the novel’s prior depiction of slave rations as the bare minimum for subsistence: ‘something proper’ gestures towards food that is culturally appropriate as well as sufficient to fuel the body’s basic requirements. Finally, after finding out the truth about his father and almost choking on several chicken bones (Williams-Forson, again, reminds us that ‘By utilizing and identifying symbols commonly associated with black expressive culture like chicken, some black women engage in the process of self-definition’) Sonny is strengthened by the maternal care he has received, and ultimately resolves to quit heroin. As we see, Willie is constantly taking care of her family, and her kitchen becomes a focal point of this care: when Marcus calls home from college, he times it for the point at which he knows ‘his aunt Josephine and all the cousins would be in Ma Willie’s house cooking and eating after church’ (286). The comfort of the family scene sought by Marcus is centred upon the Sunday meal as a site of commensality and, through his memories of the food, a way for him to connect with his family even while he is geographically distant.

In contrast to the American chapters, in which characters like Willie represent a foil to the stereotype of African American women as ‘domineering mammies and emasculating matriarchs’, however, the Ghanaian characters – particularly Akua – are typical examples of Asante matrilineal tradition. Dennis Puorideme provides a useful definition for matriliny as ‘the descent system whereby individuals trace their clan and lineage through a single female ancestress’. I read Akua as the most significant maternal figure. Her chapter is, incidentally, contemporaneous with Willie’s, thereby inviting closer comparison between the two depictions of womanhood because of their temporal proximity. When Akua’s chapter opens, she is cooking: ‘Every time Akua dropped a quartered yam into sizzling palm oil, the sound made her jump. It was a hungry sound, the sound of oil swallowing whatever it was given’ (177). The image of both yam and fire recur once more here, though we begin with the more constructive combination of the two in the process of cooking. As we learn from Effia earlier in the novel, yams are significant to the Akan people as ‘the most precious crop known far and wide to sustain families’; early colonialists even observed Asante festivals that marked the beginning of the yam harvest each year. In light of this cultural symbolism, and Gyasi’s already-

341 Joseph S. Kaminski, ‘The Yam Festival Celebrated by the Asante People in Kumase in 1817’, *Music in Art*, 41 (2016), 95. There is also a suggested intertextual link with Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, in which the New Yam Festival is a central custom for the Igbo people of Nigeria.
established metaphor of the yams as family, the sinister image of the yam consumed by the heat of the oil acts as a portent for the tragedy that will occur later. This is underlined by Akua’s belief that her troubling dreams ‘latched onto the sizzling sounds of fried things in the daytime and lodged themselves in her mind at night’ (178). Moreover, the following passage occurs later in the chapter: ‘Two days before, she had forgotten the yams she dropped into the oil, forgotten them as her eyes slept. By the time Nana Serwah shook her awake, the yams had burned to black’ (195). Once again, yams are destroyed by fire: once again, physical subsistence is challenged by the actions of Akua as an inheritor of both the ‘evil’ in her lineage and the trauma it has enacted.

In discourse with *Homegoing*’s yams, *fufu* is another staple foodstuff central to Akua’s maternal role. Starches are central to West African meals, and *fufu* – ‘a thick dough made by boiling and pounding a starchy vegetable such as cocoyam, plantain, potato, or cassava’\(^{342}\) – is of particular importance in Ghana. Indeed, Ghanaian chef Dinah Ayensu tells us that even now, ‘There are people who will say they haven’t eaten the whole day, simply because they haven’t had their soup and fufu’\(^{343}\). Cooking *fufu* is therefore a fundamental aspect of the women’s role in Akua’s village, as is demonstrated in this passage:

> After she swept, Akua would help the other women cook. Abee was only four years old, but she liked to hold the giant pestle and pretend that she was helping. ‘Mama, look!’ she would say, hugging the tall stick to her tiny body. It towered above her, and the weight of it threatened to throw her off-balance. Akua’s toddler, Ama Serwah, had big, bright eyes that would glance from the top of the fufu stick to the trembling sister before sending her gaze to her mother. (179)

Here, the cooking of *fufu* is inextricably intertwined with Akua’s labour as a mother. While keeping watch over her children, she is able also to introduce them to the customs of Asante food, and the ways in which women are responsible for feeding the inhabitants of the village. That the child is described as ‘tiny’, ‘trembling’, and ‘threatened’ by the weight of the pestle used to make the *fufu* is telling, however: already, her safety is precarious. When Akua’s mother-in-law Nana Serwah ‘snatches’ the *fufu* stick from Abee on the basis that she may injure herself, it is an explicit indictment not only of Akua’s mothering technique, but of her capacity to fulfil the role of ‘mother’ at all. Indeed, Akua herself knows that ‘Nana Serwah did not approve of her, often saying that a woman whose mother had left her to be taught by white men would never know how to raise children herself’. It is here, then, that we see the material

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\(^{342}\) Williams-Forson, 2010, p. 440.

legacy of British colonialism at large upon the more intimate domestic scale: the trauma enacted upon Akua’s mother and inherited through the maternal line by Akua herself has resulted in major disruption to native configurations of motherhood and the labour through which cultural maternal affect is reproduced. The apex of this trauma is reached when Akua is responsible – albeit accidentally – for the fire that causes the death of her daughters and the scarification of her newborn son.

Akua’s killing of her two young daughters is reminiscent of Sethe’s killing of her daughter in Toni Morrison’s Beloved. Sethe kills her daughter in an act of love to ‘deny ownership to those who would claim her and her children as a property’ and Akua loses her daughters in a fire that she sets while she is in a fugue state. This fugue state is caused by the residual trauma of Akua’s early life with the Missionary, and more directly through the emotional stress of repeated visits from the ‘firewoman’ (187). The latter is strongly implied to be a dreamlike rendition of Maame, who warns Akua that she ‘must always know where [her] children are’. For both Morrison’s Sethe and Gyasi’s Akua, infanticide occurs as a result of the trauma registered by individuals, families, and communities from the slave trade. It matters little that Sethe’s act is intentional and Akua’s accidental, because the intertextual allusion of Gyasi’s novel to Morrison’s merely reflects slavery’s warping of the poetics of motherhood: in both Beloved and Homegoing, the maternal figures who should nourish and protect the children are paradoxically the deliverers of their deaths.

When Yaw – Akua’s son – is a child, she is only allowed to see him in order to feed him – when he is a little older, he is removed from her entirely. By the time that Yaw visits Akua as a grown man, the novel’s food-based traditions and the production of associated culinary knowledge have been transmitted through at least five generations – presumably more, accounting for the fact that both Esi and Effia must have obtained their own culinary knowledge from their elders. When Yaw and Akua share a meal, served to them by Esther and Kukua (their households’ respective house girls), the food is imbued not only with the literal and symbolic reconciliation of mother and son, but with the awareness of all parties of the way in which such a reunion ought to be celebrated according to Akan tradition. As such, when Kukua asks ‘The son comes home after all these years, does the mother not kill a goat?’ – her rhetorical question assuming shared understanding of the rituals the occasion merits – she invokes what Toyin Falola calls ‘ritual archives’. Falola uses the term ‘archives’ here as a way of ‘challenging the conventions of Western archives, namely, what is deemed worthy of preservation and organization as data’ and ‘insisting that we must never lose sight of that

346 Ibid. p. 703.
dimension of archive that is never (fully) collected but retains power and agency in invisible ways.

It is evident, then, that domestic structures are intensely shaped by the public pressures of ‘living while black’ in the United States. Black bodies are treated overwhelmingly as surplus, black workers are more frequently left unemployed, and the internal fissures in black families (personified in *Homegoing* by the ways in which children are taken from their mothers, who are then no longer able to nourish them) are demonstrably caused by racial disparity and endemic state violence – towards non-white populations at large, but towards black people specifically. In contrast, the violence and inequalities depicted in the domestic aspects of the Gold Coast chapters are both evident in the representation of motherhood, and easily traceable to the systemic violence of British empire and colonisation. In both the Ghanaian and American chapters, the narrative of food is not only a useful way of mapping ideas of motherhood and reproductive labour, but of the ways in which these are warped by the violence of colonialism and slavery.

**Conclusions**

Although the ancestral lines separate in the first chapter and do not entwine once more until the novel’s final page – and though we cannot equate the situations of the enslaved in the USA with those of their counterparts in Ghana – by positioning the two narrative tracks alongside each other, comparison is inevitable, if not imperative. Because the novel’s scope is so epic, food is not merely a matter of expanding our focus from local to national to global, but of the reverse; a means through which to narrow our focus in order to make the breadth of the global legible on a granular level.

It is not my place as an academic or as a global citizen – nor my purpose in this thesis – to propose a definition of what it means to be Black, historically or in the present moment. What is clear, however, is that this is the central question of Gyasi’s novel, and that to go any distance towards answering it demands attention to the stories of many: stories of modernity’s combined and uneven development which are, themselves, combined and uneven. At several points, the novel becomes somewhat didactic in enforcing this, particularly in Yaw’s chapter. Firstly, an extradiegetic literary genealogy is evoked through Yaw’s lessons for his students on the importance of storytelling and the history of marginalised peoples: ‘So, when you study history, you must always ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story.

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347 Ibid. p. 704.
too’ (226/7). This recalls Adichie’s now-famous ‘The Danger of a Single Story’348 which itself recalls, as Eve Eisenberg points out, Chinua Achebe’s ‘Image of Africa’ essay: 349 both Adichie and Achebe argue that ‘a paucity of stories—or a lot of stories that all say the same thing—reinforces stereotypes, while a wealth of varied stories simply makes it more difficult to swallow stereotypes uncritically’.350 Later, when Yaw meets his mother Akua after more than thirty years apart, she asks him ‘How can I tell you the story of your scar without first telling you the story of my dreams? And how do I talk about my dreams without talking about my family? Our family?’ (240). Here, the notion of the ‘single’ story is used to evidence the importance of collective and individual narratives in rendering legible a traumatic past.

Because Homegoing is occupied so explicitly with the traumatic legacy of transatlantic slavery ‘both for those who were taken and those who stayed,’351 it is a compelling literary study for the ways in which cultures and traditions are shaped by material circumstances despite having originated from a common ancestral heritage. In brief—the differences in lived experiences of Gyasi’s Gold Coast characters and her American characters are illustrative of the real-life differences between those who have grown up black in America and those who ‘became’ black upon arrival. This is an important conceptual difference both in this chapter and for the critical trajectory of my thesis, which focuses instead upon experiences of diaspora and migration, and the effects of these upon foodways.

Gyasi’s novel and the foodways it represents (of both the Akan people of the Gold Coast and the American South) are therefore crucial in acknowledging the continuing afterlife of the transatlantic slave trade throughout American society, and the subsequent impact that this has on the lives of newly-arrived (and newly-racialised) black migrants; at the same time, however, they cement my reading of the ‘American black’ and ‘non-American black’ experiences of America represented in these novels as materially different. In Gyasi’s novel, these differences in material conditions are evident—and thus more easily comprehensible—through the divergent foodways sustained and cultivated by the characters. While there are certainly similarities across (particularly) Southern foodways and those of Ghana/the Gold Coast in this novel—particularly in relation to customs such as wedding feasts, and the composition of meals (starch and meat as primary components, for example)—there are often substantial differences as a result of different environmental and human influences.

However, Spillers asserts that ‘The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness, that take place on the sub-Saharan Continent during the

350 Ibid. p. 98.
351 See blurb for Homegoing’s USA edition (qtd in this chapter).
initiative strikes which open the Atlantic Slave Trade in the fifteenth century of our Christ, interrupted hundreds of years of black African culture. We write and think, then, about an outcome of aspects of African-American life in the United States under the pressure of those events.\textsuperscript{352} We can apply Spiller’s understanding of this violent disruption – characterised by Emma Dabiri as the imposition of ‘a world of taxes and artificial wants, producing a new reality where scarcity replaced abundance’\textsuperscript{353} – and its impact upon both black African cultures and black American cultures to our study of foodways between sub-Saharan Africa and the USA.

As Gyasi’s novel demonstrates, then, there are productive comparisons to be made between African migrant experiences and those of Black Americans: particularly in the literary context of a novel which registers and addresses directly the historic and present-day resonance of transatlantic slavery, and particularly when, as Tunde Wey states, ‘When one realizes one is black in America—and subject to the political implications of that reality—then it is almost impossible for the immanent not to become conspicuous’.\textsuperscript{354} As Mintz and Price state, it is important for academics ‘to delineate the processes by which those cultural materials that were retained could contribute to the institution-building’ of the enslaved African population, and the ways in which this helped to ‘inform their condition with coherence, meaning, and some measure of autonomy’.\textsuperscript{355} Such a task is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis, which is interested primarily in the worlded experiences of contemporary sub-Saharan African migrants. While \textit{Homegoing} is undoubtedly a useful food narrative for this work, exploring the historic and contemporary resonances of transatlantic slavery in both Ghana and the USA, above all it serves to illustrate the necessary material distinctions between those who were forcibly removed from Africa during the slave trade and those for whom migration is ‘voluntary’ in the present-day.

\textsuperscript{353} Emma Dabiri, ‘Don’t Touch My Hair’, (Penguin, 2019), (p. 85).
\textsuperscript{354} Edge and Wey, 2016.
\textsuperscript{355} Mintz and Price, 1992, p. 41.
Chapter 4: ‘Hungering to understand America’: Migrant Anxieties and Food Justice in the Global Supermarket

Introduction
In advance of our first family holiday to the United States (more specifically to Orlando, Florida) my parents regaled my siblings and me with preparatory anecdotes: to my recollection, the majority of these centred upon food. Having been fed such narratives, I envisioned a country in which everything edible was supersized; Gatorade more readily available than water; ice cream menus featuring ‘cake batter’ and ‘Cherry Garcia’, leaving ‘vanilla’ and ‘chocolate’ firmly behind in the drizzling United Kingdom. In hindsight, these stories of the ‘supersized’ and the ubiquitous ‘fries with that’ relied upon our childhood appetite for what George Ritzer famously terms ‘McDonaldization’; the global spread of industrialised big-brand fast food. More than this, though, it relied upon the thrill of the prospect of eating ‘American’: but, as Sidney Mintz suggests, ‘Americans have sought ways to integrate and assimilate newcomer populations within some generalized American culture’; and while ‘there are powerful pressures towards sameness’ within narratives of ‘American’ culture, increasing homogeneity is ‘not the same as learning, or creating, a cuisine’.

Instead, the stories my parents told us relied upon a USA characterised by convenience and abundance; and nowhere was this more apparent than in Walmart, the country’s largest supermarket chain. I recall aisles upon aisles of brightly coloured plastic packaging and, most vividly in my mind, a coffee aisle in which different varieties of beans were stored in a manner akin to ‘Pick ‘n’ Mix’. In many of the sources I cite in this chapter, North American supermarkets are referenced only in passing – if at all – so what makes them relevant for a study on a specifically American interaction with the world food system? The answer lies in the conceptualising of the supermarket as chain, and in the resultant construction of these stores as at once ‘local’ (one’s ‘local’ supermarket, where one might ordinarily do one’s weekly shop) and ‘global’ (headquarters are often abroad, stores are franchised and thus located across countries, and stock includes products sourced worldwide). The nature of the supermarket industry in the United States is thus one that has defied blanket definition since its inception.

357 Mintz, 1996, p. 112.
358 Ibid. p. 113.
Peter Jackson argues that ‘In examining consumer anxieties about food, we need to attend to all of these dimensions: the emotional, the embodied and the behavioural if we are effectively to map the social contours of contemporary anxieties’ and suggests, further, that we explore the nature of ‘anxiety as a social condition, including its moral and political dimensions’. In *Americanah*, *Behold the Dreamers*, and *We Need New Names*, the ‘moral and political dimensions’ of characters’ anxieties surrounding food are informed and shaped by their experiences of migration (and the intersecting experiences that are gendered, racialised, and class-based). This chapter is thus oriented around the social and political tensions exposed when we read food in the ‘global supermarket’: a term I am using in the same vein as Joseph Collins and Frances Moore Lappé who argue that food businesses are ‘now busily creating a global farm to supply a global supermarket’ on the basis that ‘agriculture in the colonized world has been seen as a mine from which to extract wealth rather than the basis of livelihood and nutrition for the local people’; and Richard Wilk, who makes the related argument ‘Only from our position of power [in the USA] can we afford to ignore where things really come from, because we know that all things drain, like syrup through a pipeline, from the edges of the world into the center’. Wilk’s work *Home Cooking in the Global Village* provides a particularly influential perspective for my work, using food as a means of mapping processes of globalization.

A particularly important aspect of the globalization of food, however, is the culture of forgetfulness that surrounds contemporary food consumption in the West. Warren Belasco discusses this in *Food: The Key Concepts*, noting that ‘the efforts of the food industry to obscure and mystify the links between the farm and the dinner table’ are such that consumers are distanced from both the means of production and the circulation of the commodity in question. This statement is comparable with Fredric Jameson’s identification of ‘reification’ as the ‘effacement of the traces of production’: Jameson argues that ‘a product somehow shuts us out even from a sympathetic participation, by imagination, in its production’. Moreover, Belasco cites Edward East (an agricultural geneticist):

Today [1924] one sits down to breakfast, spreads out a napkin of Irish linen, opens the meal with a banana from Central America, follows with a cereal of Minnesota sweetened with the product of Cuban cane, and ends with a Montana lamb chop and

359 Peter Jackson, ‘Food Stories: Consumption in an Age of Anxiety’, *cultural geographies*, 17 (2010), 154.
360 Collins and Lappe, 1977, p. 4.
364 Ibid. p. 317.
cup of Brazilian coffee. Our daily life is a trip around the world, yet the wonder of it
gives us not a single thrill.\textsuperscript{365}

Dismantling this culture of convenient amnesia is no easy task; but it is paramount in
deciphering the tangled relations between the American supermarket and migrant food
consumption, particularly in light of discussions surrounding food justice (a term usefully
defined by Agyeman and Alkon in their volume \textit{Cultivating Food Justice} as the provision for all
of ‘healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food’).\textsuperscript{366} Important here are the
Eurocentric models perpetuated by Western food media which lead to a distinction between
continental Europe and North America, on the one hand, and sub-continental Africa, on the
other. We need merely look to recent and ongoing debates – Wainaina’s ‘How to Write About
Africa’, for example\textsuperscript{367} – to discern a directly post-imperial prejudice dictating a readier
Western belief in the differences between African markets and Western supermarkets than
between, say, a French supermarket and an American one. The reality is, of course, that each
supermarket is both as different and as similar from another as the rest.

On the most basic, structural level, supermarkets feature myriad shelves of produce both
‘ambient’ (room temperature – tends towards dried goods, clothing, homeware, and so on)
and ‘fresh’ (fruit, vegetables, meat, and dairy), where a more ‘traditional’ food marketplace
might focus with more primacy upon fresh produce. More pertinently, a supermarket is a
single retailer of multiple products, where marketplaces comprise a number of stalls, usually
run by multiple vendors. Moreover, the supermarket acts as a transitional site between the
home and the society external to it, since the food and ingredients purchased (and indeed,
available for purchase) here are influenced by the world food system but are employed within
the home. Indeed, the very name, ‘super’ market, seems to prompt customers towards
overconsumption by virtue of the breadth of choice available. In \textit{Global Appetites}, Allison
Carruth invokes comparable thematic material in discussing Toni Morrison’s \textit{Tar Baby}: she
observes how ‘the novel shows up the presumed banality of the supermarket by disrupting the
economic procedures and cultural conventions that typically govern grocery shopping –
disrupting, to invoke Pierre Bourdieu, the supermarket’s habitus’.\textsuperscript{368} Although it is worth
noting that Carruth’s understanding of ‘habitus’ here does not actually speak to Bourdieu’s

\textsuperscript{365} Edward East, cited in Belasco, 2008, p. 5.
\textsuperscript{366} Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, ‘Introduction: The Food Movement as Polyculture’, in
\textit{Cultivating food justice (electronic resource): race, class, and sustainability}, ed. by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian
to-write-about-africa/> [accessed 29 Sep 2020].
\textsuperscript{368} Carruth, 2013, p. 94.
definition of the concept as ‘the physical embodiment of cultural capital’ (since an ‘embodied’ principle can be applied only to us as people, and not to an institution like a supermarket), these characters’ engagement (or inability to engage) with the ‘economic procedures’ that constitute the norm of the American supermarket are nonetheless thematically comparable. Indeed, Carruth’s suggestion is that in the continual entanglement of hunger and consumerism in the modern world-system, ‘the mobility of foodstuffs is as important as the migration of communities and cultural practice’. As such, this chapter aims to provide a history in brief of the origins of the American supermarket; to contextualise American food retail in Adichie’s Americanah, Bulawayo’s We Need New Names, and Mbue’s Behold the Dreamers as a site of cultural anxiety; to identify these novels’ registration of hunger and scarcity as symptomatic of the capitalist food system; and to explore some of the consequent resonances and tensions of eating of ‘home food’ (here Nigerian, Zimbabwean, and Cameroonian, respectively) within the USA.

**Origins of the United States Supermarket**

In identifying foodways or exercising our ‘textual knowledge of the alimentary habits’ in literature as appropriate subject matter for academic study, we open our analysis up also to the spaces in which these foods are distributed and circulated, as opposed to where they are produced or where they end up. I refer, of course, to the corner shops, the grocery stores, and – perhaps most prominently in a twenty-first century United States characterised by conglomerates, convenience, and mass production – the supermarkets. In each of these spaces and formations, a relationship is constructed between commodity and consumer. As I discuss in Chapter 5, food comes to mean familiarity – to speak to a notion of ‘home’ – even in a country which feels otherwise unfamiliar.

Although Walmart is ubiquitous now, it was far from the first American supermarket – it was only incorporated in 1969 and it was not, in fact, recognised as a supermarket by the Food Marketing Institute until it was the number one food retailer in the United States. In fact, America’s first supermarket chain – Piggly Wiggly – originated in Memphis, Tennessee in 1916 with the opening of a self-service store patented by Clarence Saunders. Here, ‘self-service’ refers to selecting one’s own produce for purchase, and to the manual acts of removing it from shelves and placing it in a shopping basket or trolley, as opposed to the now-ubiquitous self-service till. In years prior to this, customers had visited multiple shops (for example, butchers for meat, bakers for bread, and greengrocers for fruits and vegetables) and were

370 Carruth, 2013, p. 92.
served by individual clerks.\textsuperscript{373} With the introduction of supermarkets, however, shoppers were able to make their own selections between different varieties of the same product and, more than this, to decide upon such selections during the process of shopping. John Stanton’s ‘A brief history of food retail’ suggests that the introduction of self-service shopping promoted and incited ‘impulse shopping’ (purchasing items which might not have been on the buyer’s initial list); however, its most significant impact was upon food processing and the relationship between consumers and product branding. Stanton observes that since ‘consumers now walked around the store and made their own selections… food processing companies needed to find ways to have consumers identify their specific products’.\textsuperscript{374} The introduction of product branding therefore enabled consumers not simply to identify products on shelves for their function or taste, but to choose between multiple options according to their preference.

This move towards branding was certainly effective for supermarket profit margins: the market share of food sales attributed to supermarkets rose 40 per cent between 1948 and 1972.\textsuperscript{375} Many novels feature the supermarket in some capacity as a site in which globalization and global capitalism can be mapped through the retail of food; however, in novels like \textit{We Need New Names}, \textit{Americanah}, and \textit{Behold the Dreamers} which centre upon the experience of migration from the ‘Global South’ to the ‘Global North’ – these processes of globalization are entangled with similarly worlded battles of community and exclusion. This might be traced to the packaging – use of a particular language might exclude some communities, for example – or perhaps simply to the use of branding to create recognisable products. Branded products feed into a consumer-oriented ideology of uniform quality – products are often recognisable from as little as a logo (American examples might be McDonalds, Coca-Cola, and Lucky Charms). More importantly, the symbolic language of these logos and its contingency upon product familiarity is indicative of the extent to which consumers in the global ‘centre’ are disassociated from the origins of their food: Richard Wilk notes that ‘What we [Americans] want will appear, as if by magic, on the shelves of our supermarkets because we have the money to pay for it… other people grow it and process it, and buy it and sell it until all we see is the brand, a language we understand without effort’.\textsuperscript{376} Wilk’s argument here is that wilful or unconscious ignorance of the processes involved in producing, refining, and transporting food commodities around the world (and, more importantly, of the wider environmental or social


\textsuperscript{374} Stanton, 2018, p. 174.


\textsuperscript{377} Wilk, 2006, p. 2.
consequences of these) is a luxury afforded to the United States by virtue of national wealth and a belief in the country’s exceptionalism.

However, the flip side of a society in which cultural commensality is indicated – at least in part – by product familiarity is that a lack of similar awareness of such commodities marks one immediately as ‘other’. For example, first generation migrants might continue to cook dishes traditional to their country of origin as a means through which to maintain emotional and cultural connection with their homeland (as is the case for Ashima in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*, for example). For second generation migrants, however, traditional ‘ethnic’ dishes might, in the USA, become emblematic of a feeling of non-belonging. For example, an early passage in Eddie Huang’s *Fresh Off the Boat* exemplifies the ‘relentless food shaming’ he experienced as a child when bringing home-cooked Chinese meals to school for lunch, as opposed to the ‘white people food’ – ‘sandwiches, chips, and juice boxes’ – of his peers. It is to this that Huang attributes his mother’s concession in shopping for food, finally, at an American grocery store rather than ‘Dong-a Trading’ or ‘Hong Kong Supermarket’. Sidney Mintz elaborates upon a similar point in *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, noting that migrants are ‘subject to pressures to change their ways, including their foodways, by an Americanization process that goes on in the schools, in the media, and in the course of daily life’.

What we see in both Huang’s autobiographical account and in Mintz’s anthropological interest in the nature (or lack) of ‘American’ cuisine is the effect of such pressure upon the eating habits – and thus also upon the buying habits – of migrant consumers.

### Literary Narratives of Supermarkets and Grocery Stores

Criticism of literary depictions of supermarkets have typically focused upon literature from the Global North (for example, Allen Ginsberg’s poem ‘A Supermarket in California’ or Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*). More recently, however, attention has pivoted to look at the impact of the transnational routes taken by food upon literature from the Global South: examples include Alison Carruth’s aforementioned ‘Supermarkets and Exotic Foods: Toni Morrison’s *Chocolate Eater*’, which reads chocolate as a global commodity in Morrison’s *Tar Baby* and argues for the novel’s textual centrality to ‘the current configuration—and potential reconfiguration—of fair trade’; and Héctor Hoyos’ ‘All the World’s a Supermarket (And All the Men and Women Merely Shoppers)’. When food retailers appear in the narrative of *Americanah*, it is because they are the sites upon which the commercial and cultural values of food converge: Michaela DeSoucey suggests that ‘the materiality of the food ingredient in its

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raw form’ is the valuable commodity here, but we should look also to the materiality of packaged foodstuffs, including dry ingredients as well as fresh. Indeed, one of Ifemelu’s anecdotes is a lightly humorous recollection of ‘vertigo’ upon her first excursion to an American supermarket to buy cereal as a result of the proliferation of goods on offer, which she tells in a bid to appeal to ‘the American ego’. In search of cornflakes ‘which she was used to eating back home’ – thus a consumable representative of nostalgia and comfort – Ifemelu finds herself ‘suddenly confronted by a hundred different cereal boxes, in a swirl of colours and images’ (147). The disorientation narrated here occurs primarily as a result of the store’s layout, carefully calculated to ‘engineer’ sales, according to Warren Belasco. Belasco states that through this process – by which customers are confronted with ‘overflowing ‘gondola’ shelves and bins of sale items [to encourage] impulse buying’ – customers are easily persuaded of the necessity of whatever item they have bought. For Ifemelu, however, the reverse occurs: the proliferation of consumer goods is characterised as a ‘confrontation’ – aggressive and intimidating – and this deters her from making any purchase at all. Referring to the ‘American ego’ appears initially a curious choice of phrasing. The implication is, of course, a sense of national pride, which is in turn suggestive of a particular configuration of the ‘national’ in relation to the site of food retail. More peculiar is the fact that precisely in what this pride is taken is unclear. Most probably would be a proprietary sense of the USA’s culture of competitive business – with the existence of numerous brands marketing similar (if not the same) products under different branding and packaging – and therefore in the sheer multiplicity of foodstuffs on offer. By extension, however, this would also suggest a personal satisfaction in one’s own familiarity with this culture of abundance, and knowledge of the social mores which not only permit but encourage this. This perspective discounts the prevalence of class in American food retail, albeit momentarily, and removes the emphasis upon financial facility – after all, it is the spectre of choice that is foregrounded here, not one’s ability to engage with it. Thus the ‘American ego’ is detached from class sensibility, since all that is required is a familiarity with and understanding of a culture of ‘excess’. It is interesting, too, that in her story Ifemelu characterises the feeling as ‘vertigo’; not a fear of heights, as per the common misconception, but a feeling of overwhelming nausea, as though the concrete setting around an individual is spinning. A feeling of unreality, we might say – an inability to find one’s bearings in a situation that is both familiar and alien. By her own admission, Ifemelu seeks food that is familiar and that reminds her of home – cornflakes – but is confronted by ‘a hundred different cereal boxes’. Detail is omitted: partially because such a sensation of ‘dizziness’ would surely make focus upon and comprehension of individual brands and

packaging near-impossible; and also because a list of these would serve minimal narrative purpose (unless to highlight further the consumerist impetus behind American food retail).

It is perhaps worth also questioning the veracity of this story in its contextual surrounding. Some degree of unreliability can generally be assumed when an omniscient narrative focalises the perspective of a particular character and reported speech is, after all, prone to hyperbole; all this before we hear that Ifemelu ‘told this story because she thought it was funny; it appealed harmlessly to the American ego’. Another power dynamic is thus at play here – the role in which the African migrant casts herself as innocent of the corrupting values of the Western capitalist plutocracy, cast into bewilderment when confronted with the multiple and varied brands in the supermarket. In an article for *New Statesman*, Adichie speaks to the question of identifying as an ‘African writer’ and the individual importance of the category of ‘African’. Her emphatic statement that those from the African continent are

a people conditioned by our history and by our place in the world to look towards somewhere else for validation. We are conditioned to learn a lot of untruths and half-truths about who we are, and some of us make the choice to consciously unlearn these, but even the very act of unlearning takes on a colonial colouration and feeds into our nervous condition.\(^\text{304}\)

seems particularly apt in approaching Ifemelu’s experience in the supermarket. In self-consciously appealing to a particular kind of ‘American ego’, Ifemelu’s self-deprecating outlook indicates also an awareness of what is expected of her as an African in America, and the ‘colonial colouration’ of these expectations. She is dizzied and surprised by the previously unforeseen variety of branded produce in the American supermarket; but now, having spent some time in the country, she knows also that she is expected to be dizzied and surprised by such abundance because of her nationality, her migrant status, and the assumptions of non-belonging that accompany both. Assuming the role of cultural (even anthropological) observer by virtue of these and perhaps even more potently her blog, Ifemelu becomes dually conscious not only of these expectations, but of her own responses to them. This is particularly evident in her further interactions with Kimberly. Ifemelu’s employer is depicted as well-meaning; but because her tolerance appears so performative (she suggests that every black woman is beautiful, to a frank rebuttal from Ifemelu), she is in danger of unwittingly fetishising migrants

\(^{304}\) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘Shut up and Write’, *New Statesman*, (2019) <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-african-writer-art-citizenship-essay> [accessed 11 Apr 2019]. Adichie’s phraseology here resonates intertextually with Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions*, and thus also with Jean-Paul Sartre’s introduction to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, from which Dangarembga derived her novel’s title. Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘Preface to Frantz Fanon’s “the Wretched of the Earth”’, in *Jean-Paul Sartre Archive*, (marxists.org, 1961).
from the ‘third world’. When Kimberly comments that Ifemelu must be used to ‘wonderful organic food’ in Nigeria, as compared with the USA’s ‘Frankenfood’,\textsuperscript{385} the implication is not only that the foodscape of ‘Africa’ is somehow more inherently ‘natural’, but that there exists a homogenous ‘Africa’ across which a singular foodscape may be mapped.

Early on in Ifemelu’s time in the USA (during the period in which she is staying with Aunty Uju and Dike), she accompanies her relative to the grocery store. While the scene focalises Ifemelu’s perspective as a recent migrant for whom the experience of the American grocery store is a new one, for Uju it has become an everyday site. The crucial element of this grocery store mise en scène is the mundane nature of its backdrop. Adichie describes how ‘Aunty Uju never bought what she needed; instead she bought what was on sale and made herself need it’ (108). Uju’s lack of both financial capital and the wherewithal to raise it mean that, rather than accede to taste or desire, she must purchase that which she can afford, as opposed to that which she might prefer to eat. When discussing the development of working-class tastes, Bourdieu notes that ‘Necessity imposes a taste for necessity which implies a form of adaptation to and consequently acceptance of the necessary’. \textsuperscript{386} This ‘choice of the necessary’ is manifest in the resignation with which Uju forces her own needs to conform to that which she can buy cheaply. Moreover, Dike’s observation that the ‘sale’ food ‘doesn’t taste good’ (108) merely solidifies the impression that taste is denied here in favour of economy – as a child without financial responsibility or dependents, he has not yet developed the social awareness, nor the resignation exhibited by his mother. At this point, the ‘choice of the necessary’ is simply not yet necessary for Dike.

Ifemelu’s observations – that Uju alters her accent and her social behaviours under the watchful eye of the store clerk, that she purchases only food that she can find on sale as opposed to indulging her wants – occur as she is inducted into the ritual of grocery shopping. Daniel Miller notes that in his study ‘Making Love in Supermarkets’, subjects found that children ‘commonly help themselves to sweets and other goods, which simply appear in the trolley when the parent is not looking’,\textsuperscript{387} as we see here when Dike makes the case for a particular branded (therefore in all likelihood more expensive) kind of cereal in the shopping bag. Negative adverbial reference to time here (‘Aunty Uju never bought what she needed’; ‘do not ever take anything in the grocery!’) (emphasis added) constructs the surrounding temporality of the family’s lived experience in the United States – past and future – because this is not only something that Dike has not done before, but also something which must not be done again

\textsuperscript{385} ‘Frankenfood’ is a metaphor used to refer to genetically modified foodstuffs, relating the practice of genetic engineering to Mary Shelley’s seminal Frankenstein. See Lisa H. Weasel’s Food Fray: Inside the Controversy over Genetically Modified Food, for example.

\textsuperscript{386} Bourdieu, 2010, p. 373.

in order to ensure continued survival (at minimum) and to pursue an aspirational level of belonging.

Two things are at stake here. The first is, obviously, financial: by purchasing the more expensive item, Uju risks cutting into her restricted budget for non-essentials, negatively impacting her ability to provide for herself and her son. As such, the dilemma that Uju faces occurs as a result of the inferred social prestige attached to particular food products: these purchases act as material signifiers of the extent to which she has (or has not) assimilated into American society. Her choice is thus: purchase the branded food chosen innocently by her young son, at a price she cannot afford, in order to satisfy her son’s cravings and (more pertinently) to save face in front of the perceived judgment of the cashier; or stand firm in ordering Dike to return the more expensive products to the shelves, which is an implicit admission of her financial limitations.\(^3\)\(^8\) Again, this is perhaps indicative of class consciousness and the accompanying social anxieties – however, we must be mindful that Uju’s particular positioning within the American class system is couched in the racial and nationalist prejudice that accompanies her migrant status. Though she began training as a doctor in Nigeria, Uju finds her previous experience is considered all but worthless – as Abraham Verghese’s novel *Cutting For Stone* articulates, migration to the USA for the purpose of working in the medical profession ‘meant starting all over again, because [there] you don’t get credit for postgraduate training anywhere else’\(^3\)\(^8\) – and she must go through rigorous schooling once more, this time while working three different jobs to support herself and her young son. As such, Uju’s limited finances stem from her inability to practice which, in turn, stem from the fact that she has not previously studied in the USA; that she is not from the USA; that on some fundamental level, she does not belong. Buying the branded cereal is less about the ‘mood of the shopper and the current state of the relationship, parent to child’\(^3\)\(^9\)\(^0\) in terms of indulgence; in this instance, the shopper (Uju) sees the purchase as an indicator of the extent to which she and Dike are able to perform their assimilation into American society together. Her hope is, of course, that what is now a performance may become reified as a mundane activity in the future; but this can happen only with improved financial position.

\(^3\)\(^8\) In other African migrant narratives in America, similar situations play out quite differently. See, for example, E. C. Osondu’s short story ‘Stars in my Mother’s Eyes, Stripes on my Back’ in *Voice of America*: in this short story, the protagonist’s Nigerian migrant father loads their trolley with all manner of goods for which he cannot afford to pay, and which are eventually bought for him by a stranger behind him in the queue. In Osondu’s work, social prestige is secondary to survival instinct, where Uju’s practical approach prioritises the appearance of commensality and belonging.\(^3\)\(^9\)\(^0\) Abraham Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*, (London: Vintage Books, 2010). This is also true of many of ‘credentialed’ sectors in the USA (for example, law and psychiatry), though not in sectors like finance and capitalist enterprise. There is, moreover, a significant bias towards qualifications from the ‘Global North’ (e.g. postgraduate degrees awarded in the UK) – migrants with qualifications awarded in the Global South are far more likely to have the validity and rigour of those qualifications questioned.\(^3\)\(^9\)\(^0\) Miller, 1998, p. 42.
In comparison, for Neni Jonga in *Behold the Dreamers*, the experience of shopping in the supermarket is far less assulting – she even finds it ‘weirdly serene’ (277). Where Ifemelu professes to find the abundance of choice available to her arresting, particularly in terms of the proliferate corporate packaging, Neni finds the ‘American way of shopping’ (276) to be calm and systematic. Narrative lists effect a compartmentalisation of the aspects of grocery shopping which Neni perceives to be distinctively ‘American’: ‘the queues at checkout, everyone calmly awaiting their turn; the orderly aisles with prices next to products so shoppers could easily do a comparison for the best value; the superfluous transparency of food manufacturers…’ These are the types of modifications to ensure efficiency detailed by Tracey Deutsch in *Building a Housewife’s Paradise*: ‘Supermarkets and their processed foods allowed women to hold down a job and prepare meals at home. The towering displays, the array of goods, the cleanliness, brightness, and possibilities were both impressive and assurances that women could find what they needed in the store’. Here, the ‘orderly’ aisles Neni observes should make the work of grocery shopping easier, and the ‘calm’ of the queues should make transactions faster, thus enabling the in-out of the supermarket to take place over a shorter period of time. However, in depicting these features as part of the ‘American way of shopping’, the narrative foregrounds the idea of geographical situatedness. While the suggestion of an ‘American way’ appears to allude to some intrinsic ‘American’ shopping process or character, in fact what is being described is the material effect of the supermarket as a site upon the shopping habits and behaviours of consumers.

In fact, for the duration of her grocery shopping in the American supermarket, Neni is recalling the site of the market in Limbe – according to her memory, an altogether more chaotic experience – so that the two sites are layered in her imagination. This creates an imaginative space for cultural comparison, and for Neni to interrogate her experiences of Limbe and New York in tandem. The goods available differ between the two sites – where Pathmark sells ‘attractively packaged products’, sellers in Limbe market hold ‘smoked fish and crayfish on one end, plantains and cocoyams and vegetables on another end’ – as well as the way in which they are displayed (without any discernible order in Limbe, so that secondhand clothes are sold on tables next to slaughtered cows). Neni’s nostalgia for these aspects of the market is accompanied by evocations of bargaining between buyers and sellers, and ‘the joy of walking away knowing she had negotiated a good deal for a bag of rice’ is depicted as a quintessential part of the experience. While Pathmark is clinical – the epitome of industrialised chain shopping – Limbe market is imbued with the vibrancy and flavour of the locale.

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Naturally, Neni romanticises Limbe market to some degree – this is a commonly acknowledged feature of nostalgia, which does, after all, refer to a yearning for the past – but as she calculates the prices of goods and compares these prices to the quantities of food she could have bought in Cameroon for approximately the same amount, there is a demonstrably pragmatic element to her nostalgia too. This is the fact that the marketplace (and particularly the haggling that takes place there) is financially viable for Neni in a way that the supermarket is not. Viewing grocery shopping as an extension of domestic foodwork (see Chapter 5) illuminates a particularly prescient cultural clash, then: what Shelley Koch calls the ‘efficient housewife discourse’\(^{392}\) (‘strategies for the household purchaser to economize in order to save money for the household’) is functionally useful only in households for which supermarkets and grocery stores are the primary sites of food retail. In contrast, when Neni considers the supermarket, it is a source of mounting financial anxiety. She cannot but calculate her shopping bills through contemporary exchange rates, thereby existing in a kind of cognitive dissonance as she seeks solutions to feeding her family in her present situation while simultaneously maintaining awareness of the fact that in a different, hypothetical scenario, feeding them would be easy: ‘Three plantains for two dollars? Why? Two dollars in Cameroon was approximately 1,000 CFA francs, and for that amount, as recently as in the early 2000s, a woman could buy groceries to feed her family three good meals’ (275). In terms of the specific prices of plantains, Neni does not account here for the fact that plantains are not native to the USA and therefore incur costs both in production and in tariffs on global imports. However, there is still an obvious inequity in the extent to which she would be able to provide for her family in Cameroon compared with the utility of the same amount of money in an American supermarket. While this is undoubtedly attributable in practice to differences in factors such as tariffs, trade restrictions, and shipping costs,\(^ {393}\) Neni considers it also to be evidence of the usefulness of haggling: ‘if she could bargain she would find a way to make her new grocery budget work’ (278). In other words, Neni believes – at least to some degree – that the systems and processes of Pathmark (in which ‘The owners stated the prices and no one dared challenge them’, thus synecdochally representative of all supermarket chains here – although notably Neni speaks of ‘the owners’ as though they are actual individuals as opposed to a business conglomerate) inhibit her ability to economise while shopping for her family’s food. No matter the availability of varied and global foodstuffs, then, the fact remains that the ‘efficient housewife discourse’ encoded within and perpetuated by the operations of the modern-day supermarket is not culturally appropriate nor financially viable for Neni.


It is noteworthy, then, that the supermarket is also the site of Neni’s final emotional severance from the USA, as Jende permits her more money than he would ordinarily allow in order to ‘buy whatever she wanted to buy’ (348). Although he allows her five hundred dollars, she manages to spend eight hundred on ‘things not easily found back in Limbe’: exceeding her spending limit is a minor act of rebellion on Neni’s part, both against the infantilising gesture of her husband ‘allowing’ her to spend the money that belongs to both of them\footnote{Particularly in light of the fact that Neni is responsible for securing the majority of this money, having secured it from Cindy Edwards via blackmail (threatening to publish photos from the scene of Cindy’s earlier overdose).} and against the fact that their departure from the USA is also Jende’s choice. Neni’s purchases include ‘foods in jars and all the sweet cereals Liomi had become accustomed to’ which are intended, along with clothes and toys, to ‘preserve their American aura’. Neni foresees that items which can be bought for comparatively low prices in the USA will be infused with a new cultural prestige when they are seen in the Global South – the idea, articulated by David Bell and Gill Valentine, that food items and brands take on different ‘local cultural significance’ because ‘homogenisation is impossible since global sameness is always subject to local reworking and contextualisation’\footnote{David Bell and Gill Valentine, \textit{Consuming Geographies: We Are Where We Eat}, (London; New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 190.}. Even the idea of ‘preserving’ whatever constitutes an ‘American aura’ wields culinary connotations (particularly in tandem with ‘food in jars’) suggesting that there is something intrinsically and tangibly ‘American’ that can be bottled, transported, and consumed by migrants returning to their countries of origin. Here, the promise of maintaining an ‘American aura’ – of being associated with America by her Cameroonian family and friends, even if she can no longer live there – is the only consolation for Neni. While the supermarket foregrounds the tensions surrounding acculturation that characterise the Jongas’ experiences of migration while residing in the USA, then, it is also the place in which they are able to purchase the items which will mark them as ‘been-to’ upon their return to Limbe; thus reinforcing the idea of the supermarket as ‘a historically configured space that presents globalization as a lived experience’\footnote{Héctor Hoyos, ‘All the World’s a Supermarket (and All the Men and Women Merely Shoppers)’, in \textit{Beyond Bolaño}, (Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 96-125 (p. 96).}

In contrast to both Neni and Ifemelu, both of whom are portrayed in their role as consumers in the global supermarket, by the end of \textit{We Need New Names}, Darling is depicted as an employee: in order to help her aunt with household bills, she holds a job in what she refers to as a ‘brightly lit store’ (253) though it is not identified explicitly as a branch of a chain. The novel makes visible the labour of supermarket employees that facilitates retail distribution of food, especially since there are (unusually) no interactions with customers in Darling’s account of the store (she spends the majority of the time in areas marked ‘Employees Only’). Her tasks at work include bagging groceries and sorting bottles and cans that have been returned to the

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store for deposit – ‘Faygo, Pepsi, Dr Pepper, 7-Up, root beer, Miller, Budweiser, Heineken’ (251). This list begins with a brand of soft drink originating in Detroit – Faygo (which was, incidentally, begun by Russian immigrants) before moving to more generally ‘American’ drinks like Pepsi and root beer, and finally to European imports like Heineken. Such a list emphasises that globalization is an intrinsic condition of life and consumption in the USA – and it evokes, once more, that sense of American ‘abundance’ generated by the proliferation of multiple brands selling variations on the same product.

**Food Justice in the Global Supermarket**

Eric Holt-Giménez states that ‘Food—from seed to plate—is organized in a way that generates the highest possible global cash flows, regardless of the consequences’—such consequences include ‘the steady increase in global hunger and environmental degradation’. As such, the idea of ‘food justice’ is a fraught one, since it combines two vital ideas: it speaks not only to one’s biological human need for and right to food, but to the social and material conditions which influence (or limit) the decision as to what to eat. Identifying ‘food injustice’, or as Beth Dixon explains, the ‘conditions that constrain choices and create deprivation of opportunities for populations of people who occupy a social and political location in our food system’, is a significantly easier task. These are broad, fraught concepts; and to interrogate in full the ways in which they shape and appear within sub-Saharan migrant literature would require significantly more space than is available to me in this thesis. Nonetheless, I look here to identify briefly some of the more prominent manifestations of food justice concerns in

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398 As a point of interest, including Budweiser in this list highlights the global impact of big business on smaller enterprises: though Budweiser is an American beer originated by a German migrant, Adolphus Busch (thus testifying to the ‘concentration of the foreign born in a distinctive alcohol niche in the American economy’), it is also the source of persistent controversies and hundreds of legal cases regarding the use of the ‘Budweiser’ brand name. In most of the European Union, for example, rights to ‘Budweiser’ are owned by the Czech brand Budějovický Budvar – so that in countries like Spain, the Anheuser-Busch beer is sold instead as ‘Bud’. Benjamin Cunningham, ‘Where a Budweiser Isn’t Allowed to Be a Budweiser’, *TIME*, (2014) [accessed 14 Aug 2020]. Referring to ‘Budweiser’ in the narrative here, then, invokes the fundamental competition that propels the world food system, and US hegemony in food retail both at home and abroad.

399 Holt-Giménez, 2017, p. 56.


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Americanah and We Need New Names, in reference to the systemic inequalities and unevenness of the contemporary world food system.

It is often difficult for authors to write convincingly a novel in which the sole or focal perspective is that of a child. We Need New Names succeeds in this respect because rather than centre action and event around Darling’s age, it registers her youth in her observations and behaviours. In framing the narrative thus, certain aspects of the storytelling are slightly obscured in accordance with the perspective of the child. This is particularly true of the half of We Need New Names that is set in Zimbabwe, in which scarcity and starvation are encoded in the fabric of daily life. For example, the first time that Darling encounters pizza in the hand of a wealthy American expatriate she observes it purely as a ‘thing’:

It’s flat, and the outer part is crusty. The top is creamish and looks fluffy and soft, and there are coin-like things on it, a deep pink, the colour of burn wounds. I also see sprinkles of red and green and yellow, and finally the brown bumps that look like pimples. (6)

Though Darling recognises that this is some kind of foodstuff (having determined from the physical signifiers of the woman’s ‘red chewing mouth’ and ‘the way she smacks her big lips’ that this is what she is eating), she has not tried it herself. Note the similes our protagonist uses to describe the cooked cheese – ‘the brown bumps that look like pimples’ – and the pepperoni on top – ‘the colour of burn wounds’: these are visceral images and, more than this, they relate specifically to the marring or blemishing of the body. Evoked in these terms the pizza sounds far from appetising, even to a child who describes herself as so hungry that her ‘stomach feels like somebody just took a shovel and dug everything out’ (1). Louise Fresco suggests that there exists ‘No clear relationship exists between hunger and food production… Famine is rarely the result of acute scarcity (in other words, of an absolute lack of food, except in wartime’. Instead, she argue, ‘it almost always results from a relative lack of buying power among a large group of people, which arises suddenly from joblessness, sharply falling incomes, rising food prices, or other disturbances to the market and to relative prices while production remains steady’. The national corruption from which this stems is self-evident from the novel’s references to characters like the young political activist Bornfree, whose nominative determinism is belied by his death in the violence following Zimbabwe’s 2008 elections. As Isaac Ndlovu observes, ‘The narrator never describes Bornfree’s actual murder but the reader gets to know that he was killed before all Paradise community subsequently enabling Darling

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and her friends to re-enact this event at the Heavenway cemetery after they had secretly watched Bornfree’s burial.403

While scarcity and hunger are more pressing issues in Adichie’s earlier work (see, for example, the food shortages during the Biafran War as depicted in Half of a Yellow Sun, leaving stores ‘empty except for a small bag of rice in the corner; weevils crawled all over it’),404 questions of ethical consumption within the food system are raised in Americanah via the relationship between Blaine and Ifemelu. Jacques Derrida tells us that ‘The moral question is thus not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat, eat this and not that… but since one must eat in any case and since it is and tastes good to eat, and since there is no definition of the good [du bien], how for goodness’ sake should one eat well [bien manger]?’.405 For Blaine – who is committed to eating only food which is ethically sourced and produced, and in whom Ifemelu perceives a rod of ‘moral goodness’ in place of a backbone – the idea of ‘eating well’ is self-explanatory. In contrast, for Ifemelu ‘eating well’ is a category subject to continual fluctuation: it might mean fresh and flavourful, as in the Nigerian food with which she becomes reacquainted upon her return to Lagos; it might mean ‘healthy’, as she becomes conscious of her protein intake and aligns this with the ‘morality’ of Blaine (who chooses foods like tempeh based on whether they are ‘good for him’ as opposed to whether he actually enjoys eating them); or it might mean the comfort derived from the cheap, sugary thrill of a clandestine chocolate bar. Notably, the question of what one should and should not eat diverges not only between the Nigerian culture and the American, but between the members of each respective culture. Invoking once more Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus – as the physical embodiment of cultural capital or, as Raphael Dalleo outlines, ‘the durably installed generative principle of regulative improvisations’406 – it is possible to read here a direct correlation between the adoption or cultivation of particular moral and ethical undertakings, and the cultural capital afforded by economic facility, education, and social class. Such knowledge is a product of the education that permits its communication and nurture, as well as the culture in which it is fostered.

Moreover, the negotiation of ethical consumption is feasible only for those who are not only cognizant of ‘big picture’ issues of environmental decline and worker neglect, but for whom the extra financial cost is of lesser consequence. Blaine is, we presume, relatively well-off: he is a professor at a prestigious institution, purchases rich hot chocolate and falafel on-the-go from cafes around the city (indicating a sufficient disposable income to purchase, and

has the facility to occupy (whether rented or owned) property in Philadelphia. Ifemelu – who has neither the same financial wherewithal as Blaine, nor the same awareness of issues surrounding contemporary ethical consumption – has previously been ‘frightened’ by Blaine’s stories of excess sugar and the chemical influences upon modern food. (This is not even to address the fact that ‘chemical’ is, in this context, almost meaningless: all food is chemical). By the time Ifemelu has broken up with Blaine and purchases fast, convenient comfort in the form of a cheap chocolate bar, she has become – once more – a person who buys food ‘at the train station’, on-the-go; while with Blaine, it is emphasised, such a purchase would have been off the table entirely. ‘Organic, fair trade’ food might be assumed to command less shelf-space in a vending location primed for expedience (although it is worth noting that trends towards ‘wellness’ and ‘clean’ eating, as well as increased – albeit still limited – global attention to the ethical concerns of the food supply chain have increased the presence of health- and eco-conscious food in commercial venues).  

It appears, then, that it is possible for Ifemelu to return to a state of unknowing (or uncaring) about the relationship of the global to the local in terms of fair trade. I return here to Deckard’s ‘Cacao and Cascadura’, in that ‘cheap’ chocolate has become ‘integral to the industrial work break’: Deckard attributes this to the fact that ‘As a non-alcoholic stimulant, chocolate increases mental activity, provides a sensation of happiness that stimulates effort [and] provides temporary respite from anxiety’. The latter is certainly in evidence here; the narrative states that Ifemelu takes explicit pleasure in the ‘cheapness’ of the chocolate, and in the ‘sugar and chemicals and other genetically modified, ghastly things’ (348) she imagines complicit in its taste. In this evocation of pleasure as opposed to revulsion or fear, the emotional release implied is not only from modifying one’s behaviours according to knowledge of wider implications for global health and wellbeing (and thus from the negotiation of subsequent ethical quandaries), but from the relationship through which such emotional responses have been introduced and cultivated. Ifemelu’s eating of a cheap chocolate bar may fly in the face of her learned ethical standpoints, as far as we are able to see, but it is more likely a symbolic refutation of her relationship and the values by which Blaine encouraged her to abide. The fact is that Ifemelu’s cultural sensibilities differ from those of Blaine by virtue of the difference in the material circumstances of their upbringing (she in Nigeria, he in the USA) – having grown up in the Global South, Ifemelu cannot comprehend why ‘these people’ (Blaine’s friends) would be so enraged about ‘food ripening in trucks’, or about child labour in countries which they have never visited. At this point, the very reference to ‘these people’ is indicative of the extent to which Ifemelu has retained her own ethical


sensibilities as opposed to adopting Blaine’s opinions uncritically. However, it is also indicative of a certain cultural awareness that Ifemelu does not share because of her different material circumstance; and therefore an aspect of life in the USA in which she can only participate with the guidance of a well-off American whose behaviours she can mimic.

‘Home food’: Eating ‘African’ in the USA
Generally speaking, the instances of eating identifiable ‘home’ food in these novels take the form of dinner parties – and when these take place in migrant communities, they are often bound up with that more elusive notion of ‘home’ that is related not just to the domestic but to the national and the global. On these occasions, food ‘cuisine remains rooted in its locality and also extends itself synchronically and diachronically to encompass a culinary geography of diaspora’.

In fact, across both Mbue’s novel and Bulawayo’s, these gatherings are related explicitly to the manufacturing of a sense of ‘home’ (as in one’s country of origin) by reproducing cultural traditions and customs. Lorna Piatti-Farnell states that ‘The role of food practices, it would seem, has a fundamental value in ‘producing and reproducing’ the concept of ‘home’ but I am arguing here that at the same time as ‘producing and reproducing’ the concept of ‘home’ in the sense of shared domestic space, foodways are also ‘producing and reproducing’ the concept of the home country. Here, the concept of terroir becomes useful, defined by Richard Wilk and Livia Barbosa as ‘that blending of the geography, climate, and culture that makes a food synonymous with place’.

While in Darling’s account the food just ‘appears’ with the advent of her relatives, in Behold the Dreamers, the kitchen space is entirely given over for the purpose of cooking for guests rather than for the family alone, and we are privy to the substantial effort Neni puts into her duties as hostess. This is highlighted particularly in the depiction of the Jongas’ Christmas celebrations: they eat ‘fried ripe plantains and beans’ on Christmas morning, and then ‘In the afternoon they ate rice and chicken stew, like most of the households in Limbe. Neni made chin-chin and cake, too, using the cake recipe she’d relied on in Limbe in the days when she baked over a blistering fire in an iron pot filled with sand’.

Already, then, Neni is solely responsible for producing the meals that reproduce cultural traditions from Cameroon in the USA – and which therefore, as Imbolo Mbue stated in our conversation, act as a means of ‘transporting [the Jongas] back home’.

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410 Piatti-Farnell, 2011, p. 18.
412 Mbue, 2019.
but Jende also considers extending festive hospitality to his employer’s secretary. Ultimately, he decides against this on the basis that ‘Neni would cook seven different dishes for the American coming to her house’ while simultaneously acting upon her maternal duties. Although Jende’s conscience tells him that he ‘would feel bad that she was doing it while also taking care of Liomi and the baby’ (239), it does not occur to him to contribute to either aspect of domestic labour, cooking or childcare: rather, he decides not to ask Leah to visit at all, despite his belief that this is ‘a day when everyone should be with someone’. There may be some small element of consideration for his wife’s feelings on Jende’s part here; but whatever rudimentary concern he exhibits is undermined by his unwillingness to compromise on their assigned roles – and thus the balance of power – within the domestic sphere (or, perhaps, that such a compromise does not even occur to him).

However, when Vince and Mighty visit Harlem for ‘some sweet Cameroonian food’ (161/2), the event is notable for the fact that its narrative encompasses multiple aspects of foodways – from Neni’s cooking of multiple dishes, to the food that is presented to guests, to the act of eating and sharing in a social occasion – so that the sharing of food really is the cultural axis of the gathering. Neni’s cooking is communicated via extensive lists within which certain dishes remain untranslated (egusi stew, ekwang) and which contain, too, foodstuffs which are translated but which may nonetheless be unfamiliar to Western readership (such as cocoyams and bush onions). As such, the narrative recalls the ways in which food can signal non-belonging as easily as it can commensality: Fabio Parasecoli writes that ‘it is precisely at the level of daily experiences that important negotiations between American and foreigners, ‘us’ and ‘them,’ take place. We can’t forget that meals unite and divide, connecting those who share them and excluding those who are not entitled to participate’. 413 Although the Edwards boys have been invited to the Jongas’ home and thus to participate in this celebratory meal, their visit is still depicted as an act of culinary tourism through which they may learn about aspects of these particular dishes (such as the ground melon seeds that are a vital component of egusi). Moreover, that the invitation is extended as a result of the emotional bond felt by both Neni and Jende with their younger charges, it is also implicated in the slippage between the home and the workplace (see Chapter 5). In relation to Cameroonian hospitality, John Mukum Mbaku notes that ‘In most Cameroonian societies, visitors are invited to eat with the family’ and that ‘Affection for and respect for guests is expressed through generous portions’. 414 However, since Vince and Mighty are not ‘ordinary’ guests but the sons of the Jongas’

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employers, traditional notions of Cameroonian hospitality are complicated and somewhat heightened:

She spent the day cleaning the apartment, shopping for groceries, and preparing a five-course farewell dinner for Vince. All afternoon she stayed in the kitchen, making egusi stew with smoked turkey, garri and okra soup, fried ripe plantains and beans, jollof rice with chicken gizzard, and ekwang, which took two hours to make because she had to peel the cocoyams, grate them, tightly and painstakingly wrap teaspoons of the grated cocoyam into spinach leaves, then simmer in a pot with palm oil, dried fish, crayfish, salt, pepper, maggi, and bush onions, for an hour. (161)

The inclusion of maggi—stock cubes ‘rich with sodium, MSG, and hydrogenated fats’ which are ‘ubiquitous in West African cooking’—speaks to food’s ability to transcend national borders, since it is an American-made product that is globally available, and which is particularly central to cuisines of many Central and West African countries. Moreover, Psyche Williams-Forson lists maggi cubes among the ‘foods that cultures have in common’ and observes that these foods can be found in ethnic markets across the USA. That the seasoning is found globally ensures its availability as a means through which ‘the familiarity of the birthland is both conjured and physically actualized through fragrant whiffs of memory’—though found in a different geospatial context, it links nonetheless with home. Mbue uses the practical realities of the ways in which foodstuffs must move in a global trajectory, both as part of the global supermarket (shipped and sold as part of business) and within the homes of migrants) to demonstrate the comparable importance of movement to the trajectories of both.

Mbaku notes also that ‘Most families sit either on the floor or at a table with relatives’ and indeed, later on in the evening, Jende asserts specifically that the party will eat ‘Cameroon style’: on the floor. The implication here is that, while their meal is indeed ‘styled’ upon authentic Cameroonian cuisine, something is fundamentally amiss: however closely comparable to the ‘real thing’, it is necessarily imitative, not only because of the limited availability of particular foodstuffs but because of the recontextualising of the dinner party ‘scene’. Once more, Mbue turns her readers’ attention to the spatial aspect of foodways: this is Cameroonian food, cooked by a Cameroonian woman, and so what, after all, would make it an authentic Cameroonian dining experience? Nonetheless, this is not pejorative in the first instance: in fact, it becomes an act of cultural tourism for the Edwards boys, and one founded

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upon national and domestic pride for the Jongas. When Jende tells Mighty and Vince that ‘we do not usually sit around the table, like you do in America’, his words draw a ‘binarism’\(^{418}\) between an explicitly defined ‘we’ and ‘you’ which negates for the evening the fact that they are all in America. Here, Mbue’s narrative foreshadows Jende’s later affirmation that his ‘body may still be here, but [his] heart has already gone back home’. The Harlem flat becomes a microcosmic representation of Cameroon and, by way of reproducing traditional foodways, an opportunity for Neni and Jende to exhibit national pride. As I discuss in Chapter 5, however, the evening’s significance for both the Jongas and the Edwards boys is later complicated by Vince’s request that Neni reproduce the evening once again and ‘bring [Mighty] up to Harlem and give him an evening like the one we had that night’ (345).

In *We Need New Names*, similar ideas of community and commensality are most evident when Darling and Fostalina are visited by relatives:

> The uncles and aunts bring goat insides and cook ezangaphakathi and sadza and mbhida and occasionally they will bring amacimbi, which is my number one favorite relish, umfushwa, and other foods from home, and people descend on the food like they haven’t eaten all their lives. They tear off the sthwala with their bare hands, hastily roll and dip it in relish and pause briefly to look at one another before shoving it in their mouths. Then they carefully chew, tilting their heads to the side as if the food speaks and they are listening to the taste, and then their faces light up. When they cook home food, even Aunt Fostalina will forget she is on a fruit diet. (161)

These are not blood relatives, however – they have become Uncles and Aunts by virtue of their Zimbabwean origins, and Darling believes that ‘it’s like the country has become a real family since we are in America, which is not our country’. Ironically, Darling’s Uncle Kojo is effectively ousted from his home during these events: he is Ghanaian and cannot understand the language, and thus feels both isolated and unwelcome. This is underlined by the subsequent alignment of food with language (‘as if the food speaks and they are listening to the taste’): Kojo cannot ‘listen to the taste’ of the food with which he is unfamiliar because he cannot understand its ‘speech’, in the same way that the Ndebele language of Darling and her relatives is, to him, incomprehensible. The figurative ‘speech’ of the food harkens back to both Annie Hauck-Lawson’s idea of the ‘food voice’, and Roland Barthes’ seminal assertion that ‘Substances, techniques of preparation, habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification; and as soon as this happens, we have communication by way of food’,\(^{419}\) by providing the food with a personified ‘voice’.

\(^{418}\) Mannur, 2009, p. 152.

\(^{419}\) Barthes, 2013, p. 25.
As in *Behold the Dreamers*, foodstuffs and meals associated with ‘home’ on the African subcontinent are listed without translation: this has the dual effect of creating an impression of abundance (the use of polysyndeton in separating items in each list with ‘and’) and presuming cultural and/or linguistic awareness. However, as is indicated by the fact that the relatives bring ‘goat insides’, ezangaphakathi is a method of cooking innards; sadza and mbhida are served as accompaniments to this, since sadza is a staple corn-based dish, and mbhida resembles closely Southern American collard greens. Amacimbi,\(^{420}\) Darling’s ‘number one favorite relish’, is cooked mopane worms (the edible caterpillar of the emperor moth species *Gonimbrasia belina*).\(^{421}\) In particular, amacimbi is unlikely to be easily found or widely available within the United States: the species is native to southern Africa, and insects are not commonly found in non-indigenous North American diets (‘acclimation toward Western lifestyles tends to cause a reduction in the use of insects, frequently in populations that are economically marginal, without affording the means by which the lost nutrition can be replaced’).\(^{422}\) This episode in the novel highlights the construction of migrant communities, and the bonds created through the shared experiences of displacement and nostalgia: Iain Walker argues in his discussion of the ways in which culinary difference is used in order to evoke commensality in the Comorian diaspora where there appears, initially, to be none, ‘in the diaspora, food differences are more important and it is the foodstuffs themselves that are invoked to mark identities’,\(^{423}\) and here those ‘food differences’ denote not only cultural delicacies but what is edible and what is not. In relation to the notion of the supermarket, we might also consider here the likelihood that mopane worms would not be available in a standard United States supermarket or grocery store: instead, it would be necessary to find a specialised African foodstuff store (or, as is recommended in a number of sub-Saharan African cookbooks, to source ingredients from Asian food markets which may be more easily accessible).

In comparison, Ifemelu’s consumption of Nigerian food during her time in the USA is relatively limited in *Americanah*. Aunty Uju cooks peppered gizzards for her partner Bartholomew. Ifemelu herself makes jollof rice for Dike following his suicide attempt in an effort both to demonstrate familial care and connection, and to provide Dike with a cultural rootedness the lack of which – she believes – is the reason behind his self-destructive impulses: ‘She made him the kind of jollof rice he liked, flecked with bits of red and green peppers, and as he ate, fork moving from the plate to his mouth… she felt her tears and her questions gathering. Why? Why had he done it?’ (379). While it appears initially that Ifemelu attributes

\(^{420}\) Osseo-Asare, 2005, p. 76.
\(^{423}\) Iain Walker, ‘Ntsambu, the Foul Smell of Home: Food, Commensality and Identity in the Comoros and in the Diaspora’ *Food and Foodways*. 2012, p. 187
more significance to this idea of cultural identity than Dike does – telling Aunty Uju that ‘His depression is because of his experience’ (380) – her instinct seems to be confirmed when Dike asks if he can visit her in Lagos and exclaims upon arrival that he has ‘never seen so many black people in the same place!’ (420) Hungry, Dike orders a hamburger at a fast-food place, but is disappointed (and mildly revolted) by what he receives: ‘Is this horse meat, Coz? Because it isn’t a hamburger’. This interaction demonstrates the impact of cultural and geographical situatedness upon understanding of particular foodstuffs – and is also a humorous reversal of the ‘hotdog incident’ earlier in the novel – but it also provides an opportunity for Dike to adapt his own food habits. While in Nigeria, we are told, ‘he would only eat jollof rice and fried plantain’ (420). In dispensing with his Americanised palate for the duration of his stay in Lagos, and particularly in doing so through a dish (jollof rice) that we know, already, is associated with familial love and affection, Dike appears to find substantial comfort in his own return to the country he left as a child. Once more, foodways are associated here with a tangible notion of what it means to ‘belong’ – but, through Dike, that category of ‘home’ is shown to be flexible and amorphous.

**Returns and Returnees**

As Héctor Hoyos observes, ‘The predominant form of globality today—our understanding of the world as a whole—is shaped by the recent consolidation of a world market, most noticeably after the collapse of numerous non-market oriented economies’. While I focus largely upon sub-Saharan migrant foodways within the USA, then, the continuity, flux, and adaptation of these foodways as a result of transatlantic lived experience are perhaps even more self-evident upon characters’ return to their countries of origin.

For Ifemelu, for example, it is her return to Nigeria that makes her the titular ‘Americanah’ – ‘the sanctified, the returnees, back home with an extra gleaming layer’ (408). Helen Cousins and Pauline Dodgson-Katiyo raise a salient point about the nature of this ‘Nigeropolitan’ return, however, observing that ‘Ifemelu returns to Lagos and not to her natal home village, which, for an Igbo, is really what home would mean. Her ability to reintegrate into Nigeria is predicated on living in a vibrant, globalized city with other ‘been-tos’’. Along similar lines, we might also reference the fact that Ifemelu’s cultural background also positions her as a minority in Lagos: Igbo is a minority language in this city, where Yoruba is spoken most widely. It seems self-evident here that the narrative calls attention to the relative privilege of the members of the ‘Nigeropolitan club’ – people who are in a position to exercise preferences

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424 Hoyos, 2015, p. 96.
(as opposed to the ‘choice of necessity’ exemplified by Uju in the USA) – which should act once more as a reminder that the narratives of African migration which reach Western audiences are generally representative of a particular social and/or class echelon. It is useful to recollect at this point that Ifemelu left Nigeria for the USA in order to attend college. In line with Taiye Selasi’s famous essay ‘Bye-Bye Babar’, which argues for a new generation of global migrants from Africa who are ‘not citizens, but Africans of the world’, Ifemelu could certainly be categorised as ‘Afropolitan’. There are arguments to be made regarding lack of quality education as a ‘push factor’ in migration from Africa to the United States (particularly, Nancy Keteku argues, because of underfunding and regular strike action,\textsuperscript{426} the latter of which is in fact precisely why Ifemelu leaves Nigeria in the novel; but Ifemelu’s passage to the USA is comparatively easy (she receives a visa without the kind of bureaucracy with which Jende has to contend, for example). However, while Selasi suggests that Afropolitans ‘belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many’, Ifemelu’s transatlantic mobility appears to have the opposite effect of leaving her feeling not quite at home in either Nigeria or the USA – rather, it is her participation in the Nigerpolitan club that allows her to access a sense of belonging when she returns to Lagos. Her sense of herself and her ‘Nigerpolitan’ compatriots as ‘globalized’ is evoked through reminiscences about aspects of life abroad that they miss (‘Low-fat soya milk, NPR, fast internet’ and ‘Good customer service, good customer service, good customer service’ (408)); but particularly in the newly-established category of ‘food we can eat’ (that use of the plural first person indicating the simultaneous existence of a ‘they’, here an ‘other’ category designated not along racial lines but by the lack of immersion in explicitly worldly experiences). Nigerian cuisine and the kind of food Ifemelu eats whilst in the USA are positioned as mutually exclusive: ‘She loved eating all the things she had missed while away, jollof rice cooked with a lot of oil, fried plantains, boiled yams, but she longed, also, for the other things she had become used to in America, even quinoa, Blaine’s specialty, made with feta and tomatoes’ (409). Notable, however, is the fact that Ifemelu feels a strong sense of shame as a result of this yearning for ‘American’ food, upon which she meditates in an online post for a Nigerian magazine:

> Nigeria is not a nation of people with food allergies, not a nation of picky eaters for whom food is about distinctions and separations. It is a nation of people who eat beef and chicken and cow skin and intestines and dried fish in a single bowl of soup, and it is called assorted, and so get over yourselves and realize that the way of life here is just that, assorted. (410)

\textsuperscript{426} Keteku, 2007.
The idea that Nigeria is ‘not a nation for picky eaters’ acts as a self-admonishment for Ifemelu, but it also speaks once more to the idea of food as identifying those who are excluded as much as it does those who share commensal values. Adichie highlights this further in her essay ‘Real Food’, in which she discusses her own aversion to ‘swallow’ (garri – pounded yam), and notes that her brothers ‘sometimes ask whether it is possible for a person who does not eat swallow to be authentically Igbo, Nigerian, African’. Once again, then, the consumption of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa to the USA is the subject of nuance and modulation – and once again, it appears that Ifemelu’s food habits have changed such that she is no longer entirely ‘at home’ in her country of origin. This is a notable contrast with Dike’s experience of visiting Nigeria, where he is able to immerse himself in not only food culture that is explicitly West African (jollof rice and fried plantain), but in a society in which almost everyone is ‘black like [him]’.

*Behold the Dreamers* is occupied primarily with the Jongas’ time in the USA – indeed, Cameroon is depicted only through flashback or reported speech, and their eventual return occurs so late in the narrative as to receive little attention. It is ironic, then, that it is only in the arrangements Jende makes for the family’s return to Cameroon that he is able to achieve the kind of upward social mobility promised in the very concept of the ‘American dream’ (the old adage that ‘each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position’). Before the departure, Jende devises a plan to enter into the agricultural market: to ‘hire people to farm the eight acres of land his father had left for him in Bimbia. He could sell the food in the Limbe market and ship some of it abroad’ (353). By determining to start his own business using the cultural capital garnered by his time in the USA – ‘Jonga Enterprises: Bringing the Wisdom of Wall Street to Limbe’ (353) – Jende aspires to enter the capitalist free market, but can only do so in the USA firstly when he is no longer a migrant, and secondly when he is no longer undocumented and at the mercy of American bureaucracy. This ending does subvert what Helon Habila calls ‘an aesthetic of African suffering’ associated with narratives of a broadly and uncritically impoverished ‘Africa’, since Jende is able to achieve financial success only in Cameroon, and not as a fulfilment of the American dream, thereby reinforcing the idea that ‘globalization is not a one way exchange of items and ideas, and certainly not an expansion of values from Euro-America to peripheries lacking their own culinary identities’.

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429 Habila, 20.
be possible for him to sell his goods to African stores abroad in the USA – an aspiration which would permit him to support migrants from sub-Saharan Africa by providing them with a means of securing culturally appropriate food. Although Jende’s capitalist aspirations are somewhat problematic – there is an air of profiteering about the way in which Winston (Jende’s cousin and his guide in the USA) gives the plan his seal of approval on the basis that ‘food… will always be needed’ (353) – his plans for his triumphant return to Limbe following the turbulence of the Jongas’ time in the USA make visible some of the aspects of agricultural production and therefore also make less obscure ‘the links between the farm and the dinner table’.

While Ifemelu and the Jongas return, respectively, to Nigeria and to Cameroon, Darling does not return physically to Zimbabwe. However, the narrative of the novel still concludes with an evocation of the Zimbabwe of her childhood rendered through the lens of memory, thus acting as a metaphorical ‘return’ that is necessarily incomplete. The novel’s present-day narrative ends with Darling at the end of high school, readying herself to go to college, on the anniversary of the day that Bin Laden was killed by USA special forces in May 2011. Darling discusses Bin Laden’s demise briefly with her uncle, but the focal event of the day for her is a video conversation with a childhood friend, Chipo, who accuses Darling of having departed from Zimbabwe during a time of political turmoil (figured metaphorically as having ‘left the house burning’ – leaving home in a state of chaos) but claiming it as ‘her’ country despite this perceived lack of loyalty. Darling’s anger and distress at this accusation incites her to throw her computer at the wall, smashing it – an event that is of far more emotional import to her than the demise of Bin Laden.

During this reminiscence about the day ‘when America put the big reward up for Bin Laden’, Darling recalls that she and her friends invented a game around hunting the wanted terrorist. The final images of the narrative are a grotesque rendition of the body of Ncuncu, a dog hit by the Lobels lorry (presumably on its way to complete deliveries):

There was red on the road. Two gaping furrows where the tires had plowed into the earth. An unsounded yelp drowned in the hollow of a twisted throat. White fur, red streaks in some places, like somebody clumsy had tried to decorate. Big, bared teeth. Crushed meat. Long pink tongue licking the earth. A lone paw raised in a perfect high-five. Bones jutting from the side of the stomach. One eye popped out (I could not see the other). And the delicious, delicious smell of Lobels bread. (292)

431 Belasco, 2008, p. 4.
Hunger frames the recollection: the grotesquerie of the mangled canine corpse (which Darling remembers as ‘crushed meat’) is bathetically juxtaposed with the ‘delicious, delicious smell of Lobels bread’. Both images centre around a grumbling stomach, though one is explicitly horrifying; but it is the Lobels bread that really underlines the extent to which hunger is the governing force of Darling’s younger years. Two significant events happened on this day – the first being the announcement of the reward for Bin Laden, and the second being the car hitting the dog, at which Darling was physically present – and yet the novel ends with neither of these. Instead, it is a scent – entirely unrelated to the action of the scene – that rounds off the entire novel. As with so much of this novel, the explicit mention of the scent is an intentional recall of the earlier instance in which the children steal the shoes of the hanged woman in order to buy Lobels bread. Lobels Bread is an indigenous company, and considered ‘the’ bread of Zimbabwe: its dedicated Facebook page claims that bakery employees spend nights making bread, so that all its fresh products have been made on the same day of purchase.432 For Darling and her friends, however, the status of these products (‘fresh’ or otherwise) is of far less significance than the actual existence of something to eat. Because hunger infiltrates everyday existence, it is also the filter through which memories of the everyday are recalled: this remains true for Darling even after her migration, given that she conceives of her homesickness for Zimbabwe as an appetite; ‘like I am hungry for my country and nothing is going to fix that’ (153). Significantly, when the children find the hanging body of an AIDS victim at the beginning of the novel and steal her shoes to sell, it is Lobels bread – ‘real bread’ (17) – that they hope to acquire. In both scenarios the relatively inoffensive product is juxtaposed with a scene of gore and horror; and hunger wins out over revulsion. It is little wonder, in light of all this, that the closing image of We Need New Names is not an image at all, but a scent: with that rhapsodic repetition of ‘delicious’, and the explicit reference to this particular kind of Zimbabwean bread, the narrative weaves multiple threads of belonging and non-belonging together across transatlantic migratory lines.

Conclusions

Simplistically, then, ‘food retail’ is divisible into two parties (consumer and retailer), with divergent but co-dependent motives. If we understand this, we understand also that the symbiotic relationship between the two is both subject to and influence upon material conditions in the USA. Implicated thus in the global food system, food retail sites and the decisions enacted upon them are an ideal introduction to an investigation into the complex socio-political negotiations of migration and national identity. Often, as we see in Americanah,

432 Lobels Bread, ed. by @LobelsBread (Since 1957).

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the ‘national identity’ under interrogation is not necessarily ‘African’ (here, Nigerian, Zimbabwean, or Cameroonian) but American – or perhaps, in fact, the way in which these ‘national identities’ might meld in the consciousness of individual migrants seeking commensality and belonging. However, such work is complicated by the intrinsic inequalities of the world food system, which results in dramatic decreases not only in the availability of culturally appropriate food, but in the availability of any food at all.

In Adichie’s work, the supermarket and the grocery store are full of promise in the form of abundant imported food and rainbows of branded packaging; but in promising such things, they are also emblematic of a very different material situation – and thus a very different cultural mindset – to the one with which Ifemelu has grown up. Navigation of the new country necessitates the learning and assimilating into a new set of material and cultural parameters, which are by no means uniform across the populace of the USA. Both the food represented in Americanah and Ifemelu’s own alimentary narrative are therefore subject to material influence; not only by the retail and circulation of food commodities (in the site of the supermarket, but also in the intellectualised and moralised fads surrounding health, wellness, and ethical purchase) but by systemic race- and class-based discrimination within the USA as a nation. Comparably, for Neni Jonga the American supermarket is simultaneously a site of aspiration (where she can purchase items which will confer upon her an ‘American aura’) and one of anxiety, where she must feed her family on a limited budget while simultaneously navigating the cultural mores of the USA. Finally, We Need New Names demonstrates the effects of the world’s food system upon the Zimbabwe of Darling’s childhood and the USA of her adolescence, including the ways in which her individual foodways are subject to adaptation and acculturation. Across each of the novels, however, migrants both experience and complicate the hegemony of the American supermarket.

All of this to say that the ‘global’ nature of the institutional supermarket works more often and more insidiously to assimilate populations – migrant and non-migrant – into ‘the national fabric of normality and whiteness’, attempting to pressure a certain kind of ‘sameness’. In spite of this hegemonic force, however, the institution of the supermarket is a propulsive literary device in these novels: as a site, it registers the combined and uneven development inherent in processes of globalisation, but it also permits the dynamic shifting in migrant foodways as they adapt and modulate according to custom, preference, and food availability. For Neni, Ifemelu, and Darling, quintessential ‘American’ supermarkets (and the customs and social mores that surround them) are integral to the experience and articulation of diaspora, and this is cemented by the movement of food within the commodity chains of the ‘global supermarket’. Lynne Phillips states that ‘Twinning the ideas of globalizing food and

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feeding globalization challenges common binaries, referring to common distinctions in scholarship between the circulation of commodities and the circulation of sociality and custom. In this chapter, I have endeavoured to demonstrate some of the ways in which comparable challenges to these binaries are mounted in the work of Adichie, Bulawayo, and Mbue, through the site of the supermarket and through the global and interconnected movements of food and people.

Chapter 5: ‘Cooking and cleaning and doing laundry while we’re losing money and sleep’: Waged and Unwaged Foodwork in the Domestic Sphere

Introduction

Imbolo Mbue (author of Behold the Dreamers) told me that in her experience as a Cameroonian migrant in the USA, food became ‘that thing that took [her] back home as much as possible’\(^436\): even more emphatic was her assertion that food ‘is home, in a way’. This chapter is preoccupied with the intersection between food and home that Mbue identifies, and I argue for its productive use as a lens through which to interrogate the ‘dramatic feminisation of migration’.\(^437\) It seems obvious that notions of ‘home’ and ‘the home’ are aligned, but not necessarily synonymous: a country can be ‘home’, particularly when one is away from it, but so can a region, a house, a room, and so on. However, the connection between these two concepts gains traction and complexity when one considers also the relationship between domesticity and America’s domestic service economy, as well as the functional division of labour within the domestic sphere itself. Jeffery Sobal suggests, however, that ‘foodwork’ is a separate form of work which ‘is largely performed in the consumer subsystem stages (acquisition, preparation, and consumption) typically accomplished within households by women as unpaid labor’\(^438\) – this happens in the stages of the food system following production, processing, and distribution. I use Sobal’s definition of foodwork throughout this chapter, conceptualising foodwork as ‘involving physical, cognitive, interactional, and institutional labor in the processes of feeding individuals, families, and groups’. This discourse regarding domestic foodwork is one of gender and it is one of power. For the sake of argument, we can reduce this stratification of power to a simple (and, as I shall also demonstrate, simplistic) binary: who cooks, and who is cooked for. Michelle Szabo describes this as an expanded concept of social reproduction which considers the organisation of social reproduction and the ways in which this is shaped by ‘gender, class and race relations’: ‘When goods or services related to social reproduction are provided by the market (e.g. domestic help, fast food/convenience

\(^{436}\) Mbue, 2019.


food assembly) or the state (e.g. in some contexts, child care, health care), they have historically depended, and still often depend, on the labor of immigrants and people of color.\footnote{Michelle Szabo, “The Challenges of “Re-Engaging with Food””, 
*Food, Culture & Society*, 14 (2011), 551.}

In this chapter, then, I interrogate the power dynamics inherent in the domestic foodways of Imbolo Mbue’s *Behold the Dreamers*, using Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* and NoViolet Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* as secondary texts to substantiate the comparative aspects of my approach and its warning against essentialised narratives of migrant experiences. Traditionally, Warren Belasco observes, an ‘idealized bourgeois division’ has been enacted between ‘the private female sphere of consumption and the more public male sphere of production’.\footnote{Belasco, 2008, p. 42.} Although this polarisation ‘did not reflect the daily realities for most women’ (as Belasco notes further) who remain responsible for a significant percentage of global food production,\footnote{Cheryl Doss, ‘If Women Hold up Half the Sky, How Much of the World’s Food Do They Produce?’, (New York: UN Food and Agriculture Organization, 2011), (p. 3). In this working paper, Doss explores the ‘stylized fact’ of women’s food production, commonly reported as between 60 and 80 per cent of global food production; although she interrogates what is meant by ‘food production’ and the extent to which women are constrained in their participation, she concludes nonetheless that ‘overwhelming empirical evidence points to the importance of women as agricultural producers’ (18).} it is incontrovertible that in the capitalist world-system the majority of global reproductive labour falls to women. María Mies contends that ‘the capitalist production process [is] one which comprises both: the superexploitation of non-wage labourers (women, colonies, peasants) upon which wage labour exploitation is then possible’,\footnote{Mies, 2014, p. 48.} building upon Marxist ideas of capitalist exploitation, but fundamentally disagreeing with the way in which ‘Marx himself has theoretically contributed to the removal of all ‘non-productive’ labour (that is, non-wage labour, including most of women’s labour) from public visibility’. Applying Mies’ logic to these novels reads the women as both exploited and superexploited: as waged labourers within ‘sectors of the economy that are typically regarded as marginal or precarious’ which are also ‘feminised and widely perceived to be synonymous with female migrant labour’;\footnote{Megha Amrith and Nina Sahraoui, ‘Introduction’, in *Gender, Work and Migration*, ed. by Megha Amrith and Nina Sahraoui (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 1 - 9 (p. 1).} and as unwaged housewives within their own homes. However, to read the domestic labour therein as indicative solely of the subjugation of female characters would be to take an overly schematic approach to the novels’ foodways, and to erase the agency that is also enacted by the female characters within these same foodways. Just as we must be careful not to essentialise ‘the migrant experience’, we must also take care that our attention to the foodways of these women focuses not only on their exploitation (or superexploitation) but recognises their agency and the ways in which they deploy it within the home.

Belasco explains that ‘Even when women are restricted to feeding just their own immediate family, they find leverage through cooking. For one thing, control of the kitchen
often translates into control of domestic consumption; as “gatekeepers,” cooks manage a household’s imports of nutrients and its exports of money.\textsuperscript{444} In spite of the ‘superexploitation’ evident in the writers’ depictions of waged and unwaged domestic labour, there is nuance in the foodways of the home and the power dynamics they register; and it is far from useful to cast migrant women workers solely as objects of oppression in their foodwork. In order to explore this, I have structured this chapter according to categories which emerge when we consider the domestic spaces in which both feeding and eating take place. These are the homes of the migrant characters and the homes of their employers, in which they undertake domestic labour including foodwork. Spatiality is, of course, a standard trajectory in narratives informed by the experience of migration: to migrate requires movement, and to move requires space. However, this notion of spatiality in terms of the ‘home’ owes much to the ideological bifurcation between ‘public’ and ‘private’ diagnosed by Belasco; and these novels expose the fallacy that upholds this binary by using waged domestic labour – the kind of work typically consigned to the ‘private’ sphere, but in an arena that is neither entirely private nor entirely public – to explore the complexities of and slippages between categories. In particular, we can read this through the foodwork undertaken by the characters of Neni Jonga in \textit{Behold the Dreamers}; by Ifemelu and Aunty Uju in \textit{Americanah}; and by Darling and Aunt Fostalina in \textit{We Need New Names}.

\textbf{Feeding the Family}

In each of the three novels, female characters are primarily responsible for reproductive labour within their own homes. Having defined ‘reproductive labour’ broadly as the household labour required for the subsistence of the inhabitants – ‘the work that makes all other work possible’\textsuperscript{445} – I suggest the following categories as a framework through which to interrogate the specifically culinary dimension to such work:

- Feeding the family (children to whom one is related, in particular),
- Feeding one’s partner (often intimately connected to the emotional and sensual aspects of the romantic relationship, whether positive or negative),
- Feeding oneself.

In each of these categories, food is a means of providing material and affective care; but as the recipients of this care (and the labour which produces it) differ, so does the material and cultural significance of the female characters’ foodwork.

\textsuperscript{444} Belasco, 2008, p. 42.
Feeding the Family

In her seminal study *Feeding the Family*, Marjorie DeVault observes that ‘by feeding the family, a woman conducts herself as recognisably womanly’. \(^{446}\) Along similar lines, in their study *Food and Femininity*, Megan Cairns and Josée Johnston observe that ‘For many mothers, foodwork is not simply work, although it is certainly a form of labor. It is also a way to perform femininities by caring for family members and expressing love through food’. \(^{447}\) While these authors argue convincingly for the analysis of foodwork as ‘women’s work’ within the world food system, it is notable that this idea of ‘women’s work’ is also almost automatically equated with ‘maternal work’. Read in this way, the act of ‘feeding the family’ assumes a particular kind of patriarchal logic in line with the capitalist formation of traditional expectations for women, which lie in the nurture of the heteronormative family unit. Marx and Engels call this ‘latent slavery in the family’ \(^{448}\), and argue that it ‘corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists who call it the power of disposing of the labour-power of others’. Effectively, then, foodwork becomes associated with notions of maternal care (or, at least, quasi-maternal care, as when older female relations take care of their younger relations, even if the relationship is not literally parental), which are in turn perpetuated by essentialist assumptions of ‘nurture’ as an inherently feminine trait: ‘we are told that women produce food for their families as a demonstration of love’. \(^{449}\)

However, it is important to visit this assumed ‘feminised’ work alongside the criticism of intersectional academics such as Patricia Hill Collins, who has argued that while there is an overarching heteronormative logic to the ‘ideal family’ in the United States, experiences of familial labour division are nonetheless varied and nuanced according to class and, particularly, race. \(^{450}\) As I have noted previously, all of the foodways and food-based experiences within these novels are specifically mediated through the lived experiences of migration and race. As such, when we read the work of Adichie, Bulawayo, and Mbue, through and alongside work such as Hochschild’s *The Double Shift* (in which she argues that women work a ‘double shift’ by entering the workforce but remaining responsible for the majority of the childcare and housework), it is crucial that we also account for the modulations of this work occurring because of the situations of individual migrant experiences. I refer here to the way in which migrant women who undertake familial foodwork are responsible not only

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for providing physical nourishment for their families, but for doing so in a way that both preserves and perpetuates cultural tradition. Hochschild alludes to this in a case study of Chicana women in the USA, observing that ‘Many traditional women feel they should carry on all of the domestic tradition and that only women carry it on’.\(^{451}\) This is particularly important for the parents or carers of children who have limited experience of their country of origin, if any at all: ‘creating a domestic space where the subject feels ‘at home’ can help resituate and reconstitute the diasporic subject’\(^{452}\) and, when ‘the subject’ is a child, to create this domestic space falls to their caregiver.

Neni Jonga, the main female protagonist of Behold the Dreamers, is a married mother: at the beginning of the novel she and her husband Jende have one child together (Liomi) who was conceived in Cameroon: during the chronology of the novel they have another child (Timba) who is conceived and born in the USA.\(^{453}\) Although Neni resides in the USA on a student visa, studying pharmacy with a view to qualifying as a pharmacist, she works an additional job as a carer, and remains responsible for the majority of the domestic labour in her own home. In fact, Neni is forced to consume coffee in order to stay awake long enough to have sufficient time to study: ‘Nothing about coffee’s forceful smell and dry, bitter taste pleased her, but she drank it, because it worked. Always did. One cup and she could stay up for two more hours’ (52). Neni’s prioritising of her family’s wellbeing is evident in the following passage:

> For the first time in much too long, she didn’t wake up in the morning with no plans except to clean the house, go to the market, cook for her parents and siblings, take care of Liomi, meet with her friends and listen to them bash their mothers-in-law, go to bed and look forward to more of the same the next day because her life was going neither forward nor backward. (14)

Suggesting that Neni would ordinarily have ‘no plans except…’ is litotical, given that it is succeeded by what is, in fact, an exhaustive list of scheduled activities which are characterised by duty and obligation as opposed to desire. In actuality, the significance of this new life in America is that some of Neni’s time is apportioned for her own education, rather than occupied constantly with the needs of others: it is not that she has more time, but that more of

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\(^{453}\) The difference in circumstances of birth for Liomi and Timba becomes important when Neni and Jende are fighting for asylum: while Timba is an American citizen by virtue of her birth, Liomi is in the same precarious position as his father since he also came to the USA on a visitor’s visa which has since expired.
her time can be taken for herself. Ironically, however, many of the aspects of caregiving listed here—cleaning the house, shopping, cooking, taking care of her child—change little when she moves. Even the cooking that she performs for her extended family (her parents and siblings) finds a parallel in the meals that she cooks for Jende’s cousin, Winston, to thank him for his aid in securing Jende a job: Winston requests that Jende ‘tell Neni to cook for me her special pepper soup recipe, the one with cow feet and chicken gizzards’ (17), telling Jende ‘That’s all I want’, and therefore simultaneously acknowledging that making such a meal would require labour on Neni’s part while negating the effort involved. Later, when Neni is away in the Hamptons working as the Edwards family’s housekeeper, she prepares and freezes meals for Jende and Liomi so that they are not required to cook while she is away (127): the two either eat these meals or they visit ‘one of the African restaurants on 116th Street, where they ordered attiéché with grilled lamb’. In neither scenario are father or son required to cook for themselves: foodwork is still Neni’s responsibility, even when she is physically elsewhere, once more complicating the notion of domestic labour as spatially consigned to the home. Given that Neni resides with the Edwards family in the Hamptons for four weeks, and these meals are depicted as part of Jende and Liomi’s routine for the duration of Neni’s absence, it seems reasonable to assume that a considerable amount of time would be required to prepare meals in sufficient quantity. By extending this inference, then, we may presume that at some point prior to her departure for the Hamptons, Neni’s domestic workload increased in order to prevent her family from having to undertake any of ‘her duties’ themselves. Foodwork is here demonstrated to be so intrinsically feminised that for male characters to undertake it in any capacity—even when the female caregiver is physically removed from the family home, and the situation of care—is unthinkable.

In contrast to Neni and Jende’s nuclear family, however, when Ifemelu arrives first in the USA, she lives with her relative Aunty Uju and Uju’s son Dike. New migrants staying with relatives who have already established themselves overseas is a common theme within many narratives of migration; in this case, it might be said to reflect the fact that ‘in many sub-Saharan African societies, the extended family includes a wider circle than Western society’. Uju is the daughter of the brother of Ifemelu’s grandfather, making her Ifemelu’s first cousin once removed: in Nigeria, during Ifemelu’s adolescence and early adulthood, the two are close friends and confidantes. However, Uju is forced to flee to America when her military lover is killed in a plane crash; and when she and Ifemelu are reunited, it is ‘as if, between them, an

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454 A point of interest here is the fact that Mbue refers to an ‘African restaurant’, as opposed to a specific cuisine. Attiéché is a cassava-based dish that is most commonly eaten in Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Togo, and Benin. Notably, when the Jongas are leaving the USA, Jende takes Liomi for a final meal of attiéché (377), demonstrating that one of the more significant meals for their experience in the USA is actually African cuisine.

old intimacy had quite suddenly lapsed’ (107). Uju’s ‘new prickliness’ is a consequence of the temporal and financial pressures of migrant life, and she tells Ifemelu of the fatigue that comes because ‘It’s not as if anybody was helping me and I just could not believe how quickly money went. I was studying and working three jobs’ (109). However, Uju expects Ifemelu to undertake babysitting duties for Dike, and it is explicit that this care will be unpaid: ‘I think it’s better if you take care of Dike for the summer and save me babysitting money and then start looking for a job when you get to Philadelphia’ (106). The fact that Uju suggests that Ifemelu’s caregiving as babysitter will save money which would otherwise have been spent upon hiring another person to perform this role is an unequivocal acknowledgement that the labour is worth payment. However, this financial transaction can be bypassed because of the implicit obligation engendered by the familial connection (and particularly by the fact that Uju is providing Ifemelu with accommodation). Of course, it is not unusual in Western societies for family members to babysit for their younger relations: however, this is compounded for Ifemelu by her Igbo heritage, in which the ‘extended family system or network is predominant and functions not only as a kinship system but also as a social welfare and security mechanism’.456

Ifemelu’s narrative track is crucial, too, in Adichie’s demonstration of immigrant transition and the navigation of differences in food preparation, rather than in ingredients. The ‘hot dog incident’ (18) is an early demonstration of the occupational difficulties which occur in translating foodwork across global boundaries. Here, Dike asks for a hotdog, and so Ifemelu attempts to fry American hot dogs in oil ‘as she was used to doing with Satis sausages’; the hot dogs shrivel up and become essentially inedible. This lack of success results in a comical reaction from Dike, and ‘none of the amusement Ifemelu had expected’ from Aunty Uju, who tells her in no uncertain terms that ‘They are not sausages, they are hot dogs’. The implication: the foodstuff is the same, but the method of cooking is different; and this fundamental alteration from the immigrant’s country of origin to their destination takes place not merely in the eventual form and taste of the food product, but in the cultural significance it holds. Read in this way, the incident also becomes a salient depiction of food as symbolic of cultural attitudes; moreover, the phraseology associated with it allows for new ways of navigating social situations and the ways in which immigrants constitute their identity in relation to other people. Separation is drawn between home situations in the United States and Nigeria – one in which these are ‘hot dogs’, and one in which they are ‘sausages’ – so that the divergence between cultures is enacted even in the domestic sphere. This is further evidence that ‘Eating

and cooking as acts at once intimate and public, empowering and complicit, are constitutive of racial identity and its politics’, as Slocum has written.457 In America, names have power; this is as true of the names ascribed to cultural elements as it is of the names of the immigrant population. Uju is demonstrating her assimilation into American society – to refer to a food by the wrong name is to signify oneself as an outsider, as one to whom the natural order of things is alternative and, by the standard of current social mores, wrong – but she is also defending the domestic space she has created for her son. Such a reflection of wider society within the cultural microcosm of the home is also reflected in García-Fuentes et. al, whose investigation of Catalan cuisine in the market halls of Barcelona finds the ‘more domestic facet of the culinary process as an expression of popular culture’.458

Similarly resonant is the passage in which Uju tells Ifemelu ‘There’s corned beef so you can make sandwiches for lunch’, Ifemelu observing that she says this ‘as though those words were perfectly normal and did not require a humorous preamble about how Americans ate bread for lunch’ (18). Here, there is a difference in domestic foodways between Nigeria and the USA in terms of the literal construction of meals. Historically, the term ‘foodways’ has been used interchangeably with the phrase ‘food habits’; a phrase linked semantically and cognitively with Pierre Bourdieu’s expansive concept of the ‘habitus’ as a ‘classificatory system’ that is ‘the product of the internalization of the structure of social space’. The habitus is – as habits are – mediated by material condition and lived experience; and Uju has lived in the USA for so long that an American tendency towards eating sandwiches for lunch (as opposed to ‘hot food’, as is typically consumed at such a meal in Nigeria) is no longer remarkable. When Ifemelu does, eventually, make Dike a sandwich, he requests peanut butter and jelly – a quintessentially American filling, and one which marks Ifemelu’s willingness to adapt her own foodways as she makes it. Notably, she ‘followed his instructions for the sandwich, cutting off the bread crusts, layering on the peanut butter first, stifling her laughter at how closely he watched her, as though she just might decide to fry the sandwich’. Like the hotdog incident, the anecdote is humorous – of course she would not fry a sandwich!459 – and yet we must remember that, to Dike, frying hotdogs appeared as incongruous an approach to sausages as it would be to fry a sandwich.

459 Incidentally, it takes a very cursory internet search now to locate recipes for fried or even deep-fried peanut butter and jelly sandwiches [Laura Rege, ‘Fried Pb&Js’, (delish.com, 2019); LCEditors, ‘Deep-Fried Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwiches’, (leitesculinaria.com, 2020.)] – suggesting that the prospect is perhaps no longer quite so unexpected, if still unorthodox.
Feeding the family in these novels varies also because each portrays a protagonist at a different stage of her life: in *We Need New Names* Darling is a child, not even in her teens when she leaves Zimbabwe; in *Americanah* Ifemelu has completed a couple of years of college before transferring to Philadelphia; and in *Behold the Dreamers* Neni is a married mother of two. Darling’s narrative is therefore formally different from Ifemelu’s and from Neni’s, as her childish perspective is conveyed through the use of devices such as phonetic representation of place names (‘DestroyedMichygen’), simplistic metaphorical language (‘like a man’s angry fist’ (11)), and irregular sentence construction (‘I don’t want to touch myself with that hand, I don’t want to eat with it or do nothing with it’ (90)). Furthermore, the novel is told primarily in the first person, reflecting the self-absorption of the young: in relation to food, this means that Darling narrates the experience of being the recipient of someone else’s foodwork, as opposed to the experience of being the actor who delivers it. While she still resides in Zimbabwe, the role of her caregiver falls to Mother of Bones, an older woman who resides in Darling’s shanty town. However, given the narrative’s initial emphasis upon the scarcity of food during Darling’s childhood (evidenced by her theft of guavas with her friends, and the fact that these escapades are established as ‘the only way to kill [their] hunger’ (15)), it appears that while Darling may be the recipient of someone else’s care, she is often required to take on the responsibility of feeding herself. While we do not see Mother of Bones cooking in the narrative, Darling does report during her time in the USA that ‘All that food TK [Kojo’s son] eats in one day, me and Mother and Mother of Bones would eat in maybe two or three days back home’ (156). This comparison has the dual effect of recalling the scarcity of the resources with which Mother of Bones had to provide for her dependents, and underlining TK’s participation in an American culture of excess and greed.

In the USA, however, Darling’s Aunt Fostalina becomes her primary caregiver; and at this point, the role begins to entail not only physical subsistence, but guidance on cultural adaptation. Scholar Fiona Moolla draws attention to Darling’s ‘transnational straddling of the postcolonial Zimbabwean foodway of starvation and the foodway of American overconsumption’, but this is a problematic way of phrasing it. ‘Straddling’ is an inadequate expression, first of all – it implies a means of stretching oneself across both sides of an equation, a metaphor which does not really work for this particular instance given that Darling is not experiencing the starvation/overconsumption dichotomy simultaneously. Rather, Darling’s migration to the USA broadens the basis of her global understanding, thus making her aware of ‘American overconsumption’ that is not possible from a position of geographical displacement. Aware of both the food security crisis in her native Zimbabwe and the culture of chronic overindulgence in her adopted USA, therefore, Darling’s consciousness of her own positionality in a global system is heightened. Fostalina’s role is to facilitate this: Darling notes that Fostalina ‘always asks me if I want to do a thing—Do you feel like eating mac and cheese?'
Do you want to go to bed? Do you prefer this or that? Are you sure?—as if I have become a real person’ (158). Two things are at stake here: the most important being the increased availability of food within America and thus the introduction of the capacity to choose;\(^\text{460}\) and also the implications this wields for Darling’s identity as a ‘real person’, as though this is something from which her hunger initially detracted. Returning to Moolla, it is furthermore problematic to categorise ‘starvation’ as a foodway in and of itself: it is rather a physical condition symptomatic of the absence of food which has, in many cases been caused by the capitalist system; and, although the material condition of scarcity certainly affects foodways and food customs, ‘starvation’ is not itself a custom to be reckoned with or ‘straddled’.

Similarly, we would likely not term ‘overconsumption’\(^\text{461}\) a custom, particularly since overconsumption (and conditions which commonly accompany it, such as obesity) does not necessarily align with a particular set of material circumstances or cultural capital in an American context. It has been observed by multiple critics not only that wealthier individuals may ‘eat too much as a means of filling an emotional emptiness’\(^\text{462}\) perpetuated by a ‘capitalist social life that is both isolating and organized principally around an ever-increasing speeding up of producing, buying, and selling commodities’; but that ‘People who live in or near food deserts tend to be poorer and have fewer healthy food options, which in turn contributes to their high overweight/obesity rates’.\(^\text{463}\) In other words, ‘starvation’ and ‘overconsumption’ aside, the foodstuffs that people eat in their homes are determined to a great extent by material circumstance — and therefore so is the foodwork that undertakes to transform foodstuffs into meals.

Notable too, however, is that Darling’s observations of the gendered division of labour within the home – specifically, that her aunt is entirely responsible for foodwork – appear to condition her into passively accepting a similarly nurturing role as she grows older. This becomes apparent when Kojo suffers from an undiagnosed depressive condition which, Darling speculates, has its origins in his son’s departure for Afghanistan. In fact, even TK’s departure for the army is also associated with food – Darling recalls that ‘He just came one day when we were all eating spaghetti and said, I’m joining the army’ (261). An ordinary mealtime is thus interrupted with an extraordinary event. Kojo is signed off work and advised to ‘return home’, creating a further complication for the notion of ‘home’ because, to Kojo, ‘home’ equates to ‘Ghana’; whereas his employers intend merely that he should take some time away from work to recover. Regardless, Kojo is temporarily unable to fulfil his work

\(^\text{460}\) Of course, this recalls once more Bourdieu’s summary classification of the ‘choice of the necessary’ – see my discussion in Chapter 4.

\(^\text{461}\) I use ‘overconsumption’ here to denote the consumption of excess calories: there are, of course, other definitions of the term, which might include excess consumption of particular foodstuffs (sugar, salt, fat).


\(^\text{463}\) Mark Winne, *Closing the Food Gap*, (Boston, UNITED STATES: Beacon Press, 2008), p. xvii.
obligations, thus rendering him an unproductive member of the labour force, in addition to losing his capacity to feed and care for himself. Because Fostalina and Kojo are no longer together, the task of reminding Kojo to eat falls to Darling; and this is further reflective of DeVault’s understanding that ‘for most girls, learning about housework begins early’,\(^{464}\) which she and participants in her study attribute to the ways in which ‘much of the knowledge underlying the work of feeding is transmitted through activities that link women across generations’. Maria Mies is categorical in stating that ‘Without the ongoing ‘subsistence production’ of non-wage labourers (mainly women), wage labour would not be ‘productive’.\(^{465}\)

The role of the household’s women in unwaged domestic labour is therefore particularly pressing with regard to its fuelling of the corporate machine. By the end of the novel, Fostalina and Kojo’s romantic relationship has been severed and they are ‘just living together, like neighboring countries’; at this point, Darling assumes responsibility for her uncle’s food, explaining that she must ‘microwave food for him because otherwise he will forget to eat’ (281). Of course, Kojo is related to Darling neither by blood nor through familial relationships – the term ‘uncle’ is solely nominal, though present in a number of African cultures (but not in the USA) – and as such, there is no cultural mandate for her to take care of him. However, Darling takes over the duties of feeding from her aunt: although she does not cook the food herself from scratch (instead microwaving jollof rice and curry which have presumably been cooked initially by Fostalina), she does perform the nurturing act of feeding. This occasion demonstrates underlying contradictions in the notion of foodwork which Fostalina is able to exploit – while cooking may be considered ‘women’s work’, the decision as to what to eat – or indeed, whether to eat – lies ultimately with the individual. That Fostalina continues to cook for Kojo after the end of their relationship indicates that there is an entrenched sense of duty regarding the task of providing food for him, as opposed to its stemming entirely from their romantic relationship (see next section); but the power dynamics of the situation are minutely skewed by the fact that she absolves herself of the responsibility of checking whether or not he has actually eaten the food. As such, the fact that Darling takes up this task instead – assuming responsibility for the nourishment which Kojo would otherwise ‘forget’ to seek – testifies to the tacit conditioning of foodwork as inescapably ‘feminine’ labour in this novel.

**Feeding One’s Partner**

Within the stereotypical assignment of cooking for the family as ‘women’s work’ exists a patriarchal and heteronormative tradition of the wife cooking for the husband – or, at the very least, of women cooking for men. Although the heterosexual mother and father are the


figureheads of the ‘ideal family’\textsuperscript{466} within the capitalist system, I reason here that there is a
difference between the foodwork on behalf of one’s family and the foodwork on behalf of one’s partner. Such a distinction may be drawn along sexual lines – there are many studies of the
relationship between food and sex, such as Elspeth Probyn’s \textit{Carnal Bodies} – or romantic lines.
Piatti-Farnell suggests that ‘A cooked dinner is the perfect medium through which a mother—
through a series of culinary routines and domestic habits—shows her attention to detail and
love for the husband’.\textsuperscript{467} However, many of these critiques are based around a family unit
captained by a father and mother who must necessarily – to accede to the heteronormative,
patriarchal nuclear family – be husband and wife. Not only does this reading erase
representations of homosexual and other non-heterosexual relationships, but it suggests that
all sexual relations within the home should be conducted solely within the confines of
marriage. Although these caveats are important in examining foodwork and foodways within
homes, however, the fact remains that the salient relationships within these three novels are
heterosexual. When we read the power dynamics enacted through food, then, there are
elements which are determined specifically by a traditional, patriarchal relationship between
man and woman: and it is to the ostensibly sexual and romantic element of women’s foodwork
that I wish to draw attention now.

Sarah Sceats states that ‘Food is a currency of love and desire’,\textsuperscript{468} proceeding to claim
that ‘The use of food and eating as a deliberate sexual metonymy or metaphor is along-
established tradition, especially for suggesting human flesh and sexual intercourse’.\textsuperscript{469} Jende
and Neni’s relationship is depicted as highly sensual: the couple demonstrate their continuing
desire for each other on a number of occasions, and this is also alluded to when, for example,
Jende returns home to a meal Neni has cooked for him. The description focuses upon Jende’s
mouth while he eats – ‘he’d picked up a drumstick, ripped the meat off the bone with his front
teeth, and sucked the juice inside the bone’ (28); ‘he asked with a full mouth, tomato sauce
running down his fingers’ – and verbs such as ‘licking’ and ‘sucked’ connote sensuality.
Additionally, the narrative focuses repeatedly on the fact that ‘Neni watched’ while Jende eats;
and the bodily intimacy between the two that this conveys is underlined further by the fact
that Jende eats with his hands in a fashion later termed ‘Cameroon-style’ (164). Fran Osseo-
Asare likens eating without cutlery to an ‘art’ and adds that eating in this way is ‘a very sensual
experience’,\textsuperscript{470} presumably due to the physicality of holding one’s food and the subsequent
focus upon the evocation of touch and taste. The sensuality to which she refers is evident in
an earlier instance in the same meal in which Neni watches Jende ‘[lick] his lips, [pick] up a

\textsuperscript{466} Collins, 1998, p. 62.
\textsuperscript{467} Piatti-Farnell, 2011, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{468} Sceats, 2000, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{469} Ibid. p. 23.
\textsuperscript{470} Osseo-Asare, 2002, p. 50.
Contemporary Literary Foodways Between Sub-Saharan Africa and the USA

piece of plantain from the plate, [break] it with his fingers’ (31). Jende’s pace is described as ‘hurried’ due to the voraciousness of his appetite, his eating described as ‘devouring’; the imagery is intensely focused upon the visceral nature of his consumption. The narrative of the occasion concludes that ‘Nothing pleased him like a delicious dinner after a long day of work. Nothing pleased her like knowing she had pleased him’ (31), acting as a literary representation of sexual climax, which is assumed to be reciprocal given Neni’s apparent relish for the task of cooking for her husband. Overall, however, this does contrast with the passage explored in the previous section – in which Neni’s focalised perspective expresses obvious, if subtle, dissatisfaction with a life in which she is occupied entirely with reproductive labour performed on behalf of others – since it appears here that she derives tangible personal enjoyment from feeding her husband. In fact, this meal appears to yield an aphrodisiacal quality, as Neni reassures Jende that Liomi is sleeping, therefore leaving them their own bed ‘to celebrate on’. Perhaps, therefore, Neni’s foodwork is not solely mundane or based off social conditioning regarding ‘women’s work’, but intimately bound up with her identity as a sexual being; aligned with but nonetheless separate from her identity as a wife. This is an example of the ways in which the domestic foodways may permit fluidity and nuance in home power dynamics.

Even so, it is impossible to extricate this aspect of Neni’s foodwork fully from the deployment of patriarchal social mores both within and outside of her home: and the reading of her feeding of Jende as somehow mutually beneficial is undermined later on in the novel, when the couple enter into a fight regarding their looming departure from the USA. Neni does not want to leave, while Jende has made the decision on behalf of the family: that they will, as he says, ‘go back home’ (332). When Neni challenges Jende, frustrated that ‘the final decision wasn’t hers to make’, Jende becomes incensed and beats Neni. While the narrative is unequivocal in suggesting that this incident is caused by the stressors of migrant life and the resultant ‘fraught conversations about their future’ (332), it is nonetheless indicative of male physical dominance employed for the purposes of patriarchal control. This fight begins over dinner – ‘If she spoke while he was eating, he would push away his food and jump into a rant about how she had been sold the stupid nonsense about America being the greatest country in the world’ – and therefore with Jende’s symbolic rejection not only of the food that Neni has made him, but of her opinions and feelings.471 In comparison to the earlier scene – in which violent verbs like ‘ripped’, ‘broke’, and ‘devouring’ are used to signal masculine sexuality in a way that is implied to be alluring – Jende’s outburst of violence here is simultaneously a

471 It is worth noting, too, that food insecurity has been linked to intimate partner violence in several studies in the social sciences: see Erin C. Lentz, ‘Complicating Narratives of Women’s Food and Nutrition Insecurity: Domestic Violence in Rural Bangladesh’, World Development, 104 (2018); Nadia Diamond-Smith and others, ‘Food Insecurity and Intimate Partner Violence among Married Women in Nepal’, Journal of Global Health, 9 (2019). Diamond-Smith et. al find that ‘Household stressors, such as food insecurity, are associated with multiple forms of IPV [Intimate Partner Violence]’ (7).
loss of control over his own faculties, and an attempt to regain control over Neni. That he succeeds is evident in the fact that, the following day, Neni ‘woke up before [Jende], as she often did, and made his breakfast, which he ate before heading off to work’ (336). However, though Neni has been subjected to violence at the hands of her husband – an act which she recognises as criminal in the USA, since filing charges is ‘something wives in America did when their husbands beat them’ (335) – she continues the following day to fulfil ‘wifely’ obligations of feeding and nourishment. So ingrained are the expectations within the Jonga home of foodwork as Neni’s responsibility that Neni herself does not question this, even when there are ruptures within the very structure of her family (Jende’s aggression is depicted as atypical for his personality, and attributed rather to his being ‘lost [with] no way out of the misery that had become his life’ (336)).

Similarly, there is some acquiescence with this domestic imaginary of foodwork as feminine in Americanah in Uju’s relationship with Bartholomew, during which she cooks traditional Nigerian food (‘peppered gizzards’) for him and attempts to portray herself as ‘a good cook and therefore a good wife’ in an effort to secure a promise of marriage. Once again, this recalls traditional, patriarchal values which not only ascribe domestic labour the moniker of ‘women’s work’ but suggest that those women who undertake it willingly and well are more deserving of marital security than those who do not. This aligns with Megan K. Blake’s description of certain food customs in Nigeria – ‘Because food is frequently shared, women aim to achieve a reputation as a good cook among family and friends. Indeed, a number of epigrams are directly related to acknowledging the importance of women’s cooking, such as ‘the way to a man’s heart is through good food’472 – and it echoes, too, the English proverb ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach’. Uju’s absorption of and adherence to this patriarchal understanding of women’s domestic duties is also evident in the way that she responds to Curt, Ifemelu’s ‘Hot White Ex’ when he visits: ‘Curt, won’t you try the soup? Ifemelu has never cooked this soup for you? Have you tried fried plantain?’ (216) Initially, this particular instance is depicted primarily as an opportunity for Curt to behave in a manner that is ‘solicitous and charming’ so as to woo Ifemelu’s friends and relatives; but while Ifemelu recognises Uju’s behaviour as part of the social etiquette of this scenario (‘allowing’ herself to be charmed), it has the additional effect of shifting the narrative focus onto Ifemelu’s role and participation in her own relationship via the division of labour in the home. In this scene, the ‘privacy’ of Ifemelu and Curt’s relationship is altered because, by asking who cooks and who is cooked for, Uju has effectively assumed a definitive division of labour within the home and, in doing so, passed judgment: ‘Ifemelu has never cooked this soup for you?’ suggests

simultaneously that Ifemelu should have done so and that her failure to do so is also a failure to perform a duty expected of her as a woman.473

Uju’s attitudes here lie in stark contrast to those of Ifemelu who is consistently preoccupied with the foodways of her new country – she begins her time as an expatriate with a ‘summer of eating’ (113), exploring all manner of ‘American’ foods including bologna and McDonald’s hamburgers – but for whom cooking itself is not an enjoyable activity. Particular attention is paid to Ifemelu’s rejection of the expectation that foodwork will be her domain within her romantic relationships (although these relationships are otherwise constitutive of gendered and racialised aspects of her identity). With Curt – as Uju observes – Ifemelu does not cook at all: but neither, it appears, does Curt. Instead, the two pursue a hedonistic lifestyle whereupon they can purchase food according to their whims: with Curt as her guide, Ifemelu learns mentally to configure herself as ‘a woman running in the rain with the taste of sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth’ (196), indicating a new carefreedom. On their first date, (‘an Italian restaurant in Old City’ (192), an area already imbued with connotations of the expensive) he compliments Ifemelu on eating ‘so delicately’ although she herself is aware of ‘nothing particularly delicate about her raising a fork to her mouth’. Curt displays here a culturally engrained understanding of ‘the physical approach to the act of eating’474 explored by Bourdieu in Distinction, and particularly an adherence to the stereotype of ‘nibbling and picking, as befits a woman’. Moreover, Curt’s understanding of his stereotypically masculine role is here conflated with an implicit racial charge that he does not quite understand. Although Ifemelu is demonstrably not in agreement with his fundamental association of the feminine with ‘delicacy’ of portioning and of consumption, the fact that ‘she liked that he thought’ (197) this way is evidence of her complicity – conscious or otherwise – in the construction of her own identity as a woman according to the male preference.

Ifemelu’s other significant romantic relationship in the USA is with Blaine, a Black American professor. As in Neni and Jende’s relationship, there is a strong undercurrent of sensuality and desire to the alimentary narratives of Ifemelu and Blaine’s initial romance. Ifemelu even envisages their first sexual encounter occurring in the kitchen: ‘She had imagined them both with ginger on their lips, yellow curry licked off her body, bay leaves crushed beneath them, but instead they had been so responsible, kissing in the living room and then her leading him into the bedroom’. (309) Ifemelu relates this culinary fantasy to Blaine afterwards as she mixes the rice, ‘now cold, in the coconut sauce’ – responsible they may have

473 However, if we read female provision of food for men as indicative of love or desire, it is notable that all of this occurs in a paragraph preoccupied with aspects of Curt’s character that Ifemelu finds comfortable. She does not like that he is charming, wishes he were ‘quieter and more inward’. That she has not cooked for him as a traditional Igbo woman might have done can therefore be read, too, as a portent of the relationship’s ultimate failure.

474 Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction, (Routledge Classics, 2010), p. 188.
been, but they must have succumbed to their passions in the midst of the cooking process, since the rice (acting once more as a marker of time passing) has had time to cool. In fact, Ifemelu explains, ‘cooking bore[s] her’: whereas Blaine does enjoy cooking and becomes thus tacitly responsible for the majority of the foodwork in their relationship. This reflects Gorman-Murray’s assertion that ‘men’s changing engagements with domesticity can refashion dominant discourses of the home’, particularly since it is Blaine who now assumes the ‘culinary gatekeeper’ role in terms of the couple’s consumption of foods he considers ‘healthy’ (‘He cooked organic vegetables and grains whose names she could not pronounce—bulgur, quinoa’ (310)); however it recalls, too, Szabo’s observation that ‘men may find cooking more leisurely than women because they have more choice about when they do it, and because their cooking is more self/leisure-oriented than other/care-oriented’. While foodways in the relationship between Blaine and Ifemelu appear subversive in their reversal of the gendered division of labour, then, the fact remains that Blaine’s foodwork is depicted as creative and enjoyable, as opposed to purely necessary.

In We Need New Names, as Darling observes, Kojo is ‘like Aunt Fostalina’s husband but not really her husband because I don’t think they are married-married’ (148), the behaviour of the couple mimics that of a marriage (they live together in the same house, for example). TK (Kojo’s son, and Darling’s cousin) calls Kojo a ‘patriarchal motherfucker’ in response to Kojo’s expectations of Fostalina’s domestic labour. To allude explicitly to someone’s ‘patriarchal’ beliefs is surely to have come across the word before, and to deploy it correctly is to have become critically conscious of at least some of patriarchal society’s patterns and concerns; and indeed, TK undertakes his own foodwork, although as far as is textually apparent, this takes the form of microwaveable goods and thus eliminates the need for much manual labour.

Kojo complains, for example, that Fostalina does not adhere to the social organisation of his culture of origin in Ghana, since she does not cook hot food for him when he comes home from work. He says ‘You know, me, I actually don’t understand why there is never any hot food in this house’ (155): Fostalina refutes this by stating that she ‘did groceries yesterday’ (thus making evident the fact that the problem is not that there is no food in the house, but that Kojo simply does not want to eat the food available to him). Of course, this demonstrates Kojo’s reliance upon Fostalina’s reproductive labour – it does not even occur to him that a possible reason for the lack of ‘hot food’ is that he himself has not made any. He subscribes wholly to the view that cooking is the female domain, and comments that ‘You know in my

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country, wives actually cook hot meals every day for their husbands and children’ (155). However, an additional layer of meaning is extractable here because Kojo is Ghanaian, and Fostalina is Zimbabwean (and this even before we consider Fostalina’s attempts to subscribe to American body ideals through fad diets – see ‘Food and the Female Body’). For Kojo, then, the absence of ‘hot food’ appears here to be comparable to the observation that Dinah Ayensu makes in interview with Fran Osseo-Asare in which she states ‘There are people who will say they haven’t eaten the whole day, simply because they haven’t had their soup and fufu’.478 Essentially, no matter how conservative or traditional his expectations of women’s labour, the fact remains that, for Kojo, a day without hot food to eat equates to a day without any food at all. We are also reminded of the moment in Americanah in which Ifemelu listens to a welcome talk from a member of the African Students Association, which warns listeners ‘You are now in America: do not expect to have hot food for lunch. That African taste must be abolished’ (139), as well as the aforementioned incident in which Ifemelu is surprised and amused to learn that ‘Americans ate bread for lunch’ (18). In combination with the cultural expectations that Kojo’s Ghanaian heritage has fostered – that ‘wives... cook hot meals every day’ – this is evidently a moment in which Fostalina has adapted to a more ‘American’ status quo to which Kojo has not yet acclimatised. Moreover, in the depressive episode that Kojo suffers following TK’s departure, ‘Fostalina went online and got recipes from his country because that’s the only food she could get him to eat’ (260), suggesting once more that Kojo is fundamentally detached from his immediate cultural surroundings. This makes evident the role of food in the familial negotiations of power over a cultural divide, explored by Williams-Forson in her essay ‘Other Women Cooked For My Husband’. Here, a methodology of self-ethnography is employed to identify the role played by food in Williams-Forson’s own household, in which the influences of her own African American heritage and those of her husband’s Ghanaian background are negotiated. And it is a negotiation: Williams-Forson refers to similarities between the two marital parties which are ‘the result of African retentions, values, and traditions that have been transmitted over generations’,479 but also to the fact that ‘establishing a sense of community and cultural relevancy is not static; it comes in all forms’.480 Where Williams-Forson and her husband are able eventually to use their divergent foodways as a site of fusion and commensality, however, the differences between Fostalina’s and Kojo’s cultural contexts cause consternation and frustration for both parties, and result ultimately in their emotional alienation from each other.

480 Ibid. p. 151.
Feeding Oneself

Feminist critical attention to women’s domestic labour tends to focus upon social reproduction and the ways in which their work makes possible the work of others within the family unit. However, in analysing home foodways as a particularly fraught (and therefore particularly productive) site for interrogating domestic power and labour structures, the food labour that women perform on their own behalf is also important. This is because food is literally the fuel that reproduces human bodily function, and the labour that prepares it for consumption is arguably even more invisible than other aspects of housework; thus even when women feed themselves, in doing so they are also perpetuating their ability to perform reproductive labour including foodwork on behalf of others. As such, there is a radicality in the way that the narratives focalise these instances of self-oriented domestic labour, especially as compared with the family-oriented domestic labour that occupies the women at all other points in the narrative – and yet, there are still fewer of these instances than might be hoped or expected.

In Behold the Dreamers, in fact, Neni is never seen cooking for herself alone; and she is rarely depicted in the moment of eating at all. The only moment at which she purchases food for herself is ‘to order moo shu pork and spend ten dollars she didn’t want to spend’ when studying within a group – she excuses this purchase to herself on the basis that ‘the sight of others eating would make her hungry and ultimately chew into her concentration’ (54). Eating is causally (and paradoxically) aligned with metaphorical mastication: since domestic labour is divided such that Neni performs it only on behalf of others, she is able to justify her own eating only by suggesting that her mind will begin to consume itself if she does not, thereby focusing entirely on the fact that she will become unproductive if she does not eat. Moreover, we do not see her eat it, instead witnessing only her horror at having spent money on a meal that she did not need in the first place (‘need’ here used in the same way that Ifemelu is bemused by her housemates’ ostensible ‘need’ for non-essential food items like beer, pizza, and buffalo wings (128)). On another occasion, when the Edwards host a party, Neni waits on guests with trays of ‘wickedly delectable creations’, including a ‘steak tartare with ginger and shallot’ which she ‘devoured without restraint though she’d never once imagined she’d one day find herself eating raw meat like a beast in the forest’ (151/2). In juxtaposing the culinary delicacy with the animal primitivism of ‘a beast’, Mbue aligns the superficial elegance of the Edwards’ lifestyle with a more sinister undercurrent of greed and aggression. More pertinent, however, is the fact that Neni is only portrayed as eating on an occasion in which she is still cast in a service role: this is not an instance of feeding herself or even of ‘being’ herself, but of waiting

481 As when Neni drinks coffee despite her dislike of the beverage, this is an instance of consumption for the purpose of fuel, as opposed to influenced by taste or preference.
on her employers and their social circle and – in what we might also read as a somewhat ‘animalistic’ sense – essentially eating their discarded scraps. Regardless, common to the two incidents is the fact that Neni has not cooked these meals herself: when she cooks, she cooks for others.

Economic background and social stratification are crucial factors in determining one’s ability to feed oneself. In *Americanah*, this occurs often as an aside: for example, Uju is often depicted favouring food of convenience, whether this is yoghurt scooped from a plastic cup (380) – quickly consumed, and easily disposable – or ‘a hamburger from a rumpled paper bag’ (113), presumably purchased from a fast food joint. At least in part, this is due to the pressure of both time and effort that Uju is under at work as a medical intern: Robert Albritton notes that a fast food meal ‘can be eaten while driving, which often fits with the fast pace of life characteristic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries’, also noting that the nutritional quality of these foods is not what qualifies them as ‘fast’ but their capacity to be ‘almost immediately available for consumption’. The literary portrayal of Uju eating these convenience foods in her home without ceremony concretises their ubiquity in her daily life, and the extent to which they replace home-cooked meals in order to facilitate her workload. Furthermore, Guptill et. al argue that ‘the hamburger embodies the American values of populist equality and modernist efficiency’, characterising this busy life in which nutrition must be secured at pace and in calorically dense packages as somehow unavoidably ‘American’.

The cultural values with which Ifemelu is at odds are embodied in her housemates wherein if they need a particular kind of food – and here, ‘need’ is safely assumed to be used synonymously with ‘want’, given that the ‘essentials’ to which the narrative refers are the likes of takeaway food and beer – they go out and simply buy it. Evidently these housemates have sufficient disposable income to make such purchases without needing to think in great detail about the financial consequences, and so it might well be assumed that this particular example is likely a stronger indicator of class-consciousness than of transcontinental culture clash. Nonetheless, this inability to make such food choices in the same way as her peers is an important factor in Ifemelu’s discomfort in her new home, and a microcosmic registration of the extent to which she has yet to feel she ‘belongs’. In comparison, Ifemelu lives off cheap foods like bacon, rice, and beans, which she cooks for herself, as opposed to relying upon expensive takeaway food that she can order in. However, Ifemelu’s cooking for herself is impacted when she is afflicted by depression following a non-consensual sexual encounter for

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This incident is presented as the root of a period of self-loathing for Ifemelu, causing a depression that leaves her ‘lost in a viscous haze, shrouded in a soup of nothingness’ (156). Such imagery – the ‘soup’ of ‘nothingness’ – not only recalls common experiences of fatigue alongside depression but characterises Ifemelu’s situation as ‘soup’ while she is paradoxically unable to feed herself through both financial and bodily circumstance. This depression (and therefore the incident that provoked it) is also pivotal in the narrative trajectory of the novel, for it is the instigating factor behind Ifemelu’s withdrawal from Obinze, whom she had previously called the love of her life; a severance which perpetuates her depressive episode by isolating her from those who care about her. Throughout this episode, Ifemelu’s ability to perform foodwork on her own behalf is severely impeded, in addition to her desire to engage with food at all:

Sometimes she forgot to eat and other times she waited until midnight, her roommates in their rooms, before heating up her food, and she left the dirty plates under her bed, until greenish mould fluffed up around the oily remnants of rice and beans. Often, in the middle of eating or reading, she would feel a crushing urge to cry, and the tears would come. (156)

Ifemelu’s foodwork here both registers and shapes her attitude towards herself. As Deborah Lupton notes, ‘we all, as living beings, must eat to survive’,485 but also ‘Food and eating are central to our subjectivity, or sense of self’: that Ifemelu is out of touch with bodily cues such as hunger is evidence of both the impact of her depression upon her capacity for self-preservation and her conception of her identity both as an individual and in relation to others. When Ifemelu does eat during this period, she eats rice and beans – this is likely because, as Richard Wilk and Lívia Barbosa suggest, ‘rice and beans are commodities, and in many places their significance and status as staples depends on the fact that they are cheap sources of calories and protein, whose prices are at least partially subject to a global marketplace’.486 Moreover, we can read this incident in line with Lévi-Strauss’ culinary triangle, which distinguishes between the raw, the cooked, and the rotten: the distinction between the latter two categories being that ‘the cooked is a cultural transformation of the raw, whereas the rotten is a natural transformation’.487 By leaving remnants of her meals to rot, Ifemelu rejects participation in a society which requires her to take part in ‘cultural transformations’ of food in order to make it edible. Whether she does this as a conscious rebuttal of the system which

484 This sexual encounter is certainly exploitative, but the narrative does not portray it explicitly as assault.
486 Wilk and Barbosa, 2012, p. 11.
487 Lévi-Strauss, 2013, p. 41.
has forced her to resort (however briefly) to sex work in order to make ends meet, or as an unconscious response to the dampening of her survival hunger cues is of little consequence, because the fact remains that her circumstances are the result of systemic and material inequality.

**Domestic Labour Economy**

In a report produced by the USA’s National Domestic Workers Alliance, Linda Burnham and Nik Theodore find that ‘The idea of home is deeply infused with the notion of private space, beyond governmental interference or regulation’.\(^{488}\) The report infers a correlation between this demarcation of the home as ‘beyond governmental interference’ and the fact that domestic workers are excluded from the majority of federal labour laws and regulations (for example, the 1935 National Labor Relations Act – Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein argue that there is a ‘persistent legacy of slavery, racialization, and feminization in shaping domestic and carework’\(^{489}\) in the USA as a result of such legislation); and it argues that domestic workers are subject to economic instability and immobility, as a direct consequence of this lack of government regulation. The veracity of this claim is, to a degree, inarguable: after all, as Rosemary Marangoly George argues, ‘the basic organizing principle around which the notion of the ‘home’ is built is a pattern of select inclusions and exclusions’,\(^{490}\) immediately denoting an ostensible separation between the ‘private sphere’ and the public exterior. This enables what is, for Neni and Ifemelu, the only plausible benefit of the domestic service economy’s structural irregularity: the fact that they are both able to earn money despite their lack of legal working papers, since their employers (Cindy and Kimberley respectively) pay them cash in hand and do not undertake rigorous inspection of their formal right to work. However, as Arlie Hochschild has observed, ‘we imagine an impermeable wall between market and non-market life; home is a haven from a heartless market world… But, especially today, this wall is highly permeable, the object of cultural belief and strong emotion’.\(^{491}\) Food and foodwork are crucial agents in both registering and shaping ideas of ‘home’; and, since foodwork is commonly conceptualised as ‘women’s work’, it follows that this work also demonstrates the gendered power dynamics inherent within ‘home’ situations.

However, Hochschild has also argued – drawing on Kurt Sandholtz et. al in their article ‘Beyond Juggling: Outsourcing—Having It All, but Not Doing It All’ – that hiring domestic help can be conceptualised as ‘outsourcing’. Tasks that are outsourced are, she

\(^{490}\) George, 1999, p. 2.  
suggests, the ‘chores [the employers] do not have time to do or do not want to do’.\textsuperscript{492} So if
foodwork is essential to both general and gendered concepts of the ‘home’, what does it mean
when foodwork— and therefore its contribution to these conceptions—is outsourced to migrant
labourers?

These novels register the fact that the domestic service economy in the USA is
overwhelmingly populated by migrant women, the majority of whom are non-white. Although
Neni Jonga resides in the USA on a student visa, for example her student status does not reflect
the fact that the majority of her time is spent caring for her family; and, furthermore, her visa prohibits her specifically from undertaking any labour in addition to her studies. When the
novel begins, she has a job ‘as a home health aide through an agency that paid her in cash, 
since she had no working papers’ (13/4). When Neni secures a job as housekeeper for Cindy
Edwards, she is hired for extra work as a waitress alongside the family’s previous employee, 
Anna; and Anna is also a migrant, as implied through her speech in broken English (‘I say,
what you do to Cindy yesterday?’ (278)). Comparably, in \textit{Americanah}, all of the jobs for which 
Ifemelu is able to apply require some aspect of service work – ‘waitress, hostess, babysitter’
(144) – and she is advised by friends ‘to delete the three years of university in Nigeria’ from 
her resume because ‘American employers did not like lower level employees to be too 
educated’ (139). In \textit{We Need New Names}, not only does Darling come by a domestic vacancy 
because the job’s previous occupant Esperanza returned to Mexico to see her sick mother and 
‘didn’t come back when she was supposed to’, but Aunt Fostalina recounts cleaning hotels 
upon her arrival in the USA with coworkers from ‘countries like Senegal, Cameroon, Tibet, 
the Philippines, Ethiopia, and so on’ (263). The fact that these are introduced as ‘countries like’ each other is telling in itself: in reality, the most pressing comparison that might be made
is that these are all peripheral countries, non-Western and non-white.\textsuperscript{493} Similarly, suggesting
that Esperanza did not come back ‘when she was supposed to’ is a cunning narratorial device
because it shifts responsibility almost imperceptibly onto the disappeared worker, as opposed
to the systems which dictated her ‘illegality’ and prevented her from returning to the USA
post-departure.\textsuperscript{494} Coupled with Darling’s accounting that her new employer has asked
specifically for ‘someone trustworthy’ – the implication being that the previous holder of the
position could not be described thus – the fact that there is no information about Esperanza’s

\textsuperscript{492} Ibid. p. 109.

\textsuperscript{493} Categorising countries thus recalls the ‘Countries’ game played by Darling and her friends in 
Zimbabwe, wherein countries are ranked according to international prestige (so that Western
countries, including the USA, are conceptualised as ‘winning’).

\textsuperscript{494} This inference is weighted by the fact that, later on in the novel, Uncle Kojo is also prevented from
returning home to Ghana because he has no papers and would not be able to come back. Similarly,
Jende is unable to attend his father’s funeral in \textit{Behold the Dreamers} because it takes place in Limbe and, 
without a legal visa, Jende would be refused re-entry to the USA upon arrival. Each of these scenarios
demonstrates both the vulnerability of undocumented workers, and the callousness with which their
precarity is often regarded by American citizens.
departure suggests that her departure occurred as a result of her status as an undocumented migrant. Each of these incidents serves to underline the precarity of the domestic service worker, which is visited upon them by the capitalist patriarchy of the United States. I posit, then, that waged domestic foodwork (and the food produced through it) registers a series of slippages between public and private which complicate the hierarchical deployment of power between employer and employee.

Kitchen Space

Returning to the spatial focus of the category of ‘home’, we may look to the kitchen as a site upon which class- and race-based power relations are enacted. As I have already highlighted, the ‘where’ of food consumption is an important focus in the analysis of foodways; and to substantiate the division between one’s own home and the home of one’s own employer, it is essential to consider the ‘where’ of cooking too. As Erica Fretwell asserts that ‘The kitchen has long been a site of black female labor: of commensality and generativity, of preservation and perseverance, of contestation and experimentation’, later reaffirming this in the same article by stating that ‘the kitchen is a black female space’. In these novels, however, the kitchens that are foregrounded are those of the employers; and, as Kate A. Baldwin comments, ‘various articulations of the kitchen return us to the fictions of commodities as liberating and of universal womanhood, and the occlusions of minority voices and diverse ways of being’.

Neni’s kitchen in her own home in Harlem receives little textual attention: we know that she alone is responsible for cleaning it (‘After that she had to cook dinner for the next day because, between work and evening classes, there would be no time to cook and clean the kitchen’) and that there is a ‘cabinet above the stove’ in which the instant coffee is kept (52). Similarly, no detailed description of the kitchen in the Hamptons is provided amongst the general ‘sumptuousness’ of the décor, except for the presence of ‘high-end electrical appliances’ (137) – a stark contrast to Neni’s home in Limbe, where simply owning ‘electrical appliances and a working telephone’ acted as a symbol of prosperity (110). In fact, Neni ‘spent all evening of that first day in the kitchen with Mighty, too circumspect to go anywhere besides her bedroom’ (282) for fear of breaking something. Immediately a contrast is evoked between the Hamptons kitchen, so luxurious as to be overwhelming, and Neni’s own kitchen, which is unremarkable partially because it is hers and therefore not ‘new’ to her, and partially because it is drab in comparison to the Edwards’ wealth. Nonetheless, it is notable that the only place Neni feels able to be in the house is the place in which she is performing a service – by restricting

495 Fretwell, 2020, p. 182.
496 Ibid. p. 196.
herself to the kitchen, she makes herself literally invisible in all the places in which her labour is not explicitly required and subscribes to a traditional narrative of ‘upstairs downstairs’ class divide.

In comparison, when Neni visits the Edwards home for the first and only time as a non-employee, the kitchen is described in luxuriant detail: ‘the stainless steel appliances and the cream-coloured cabinetry with brass handles; the ultraclean kitchen island with a bowl of perfect-looking apples and bananas; the black marble table and vase of fresh pink calla lilies; the Wolf stove, with its frantically loud red buttons’ (262). Semantically, this kitchen appears so impeccable as to have never been used: in fact, the narrative voice appears to divert from Neni’s perspective to a more omniscient tone here, by way of a slightly judgmental tone (for example, referring to red as a ‘loud’ colour; or referring explicitly to the superficial flawlessness of fruits so as to suggest that something rotten lies beneath). In ‘The Kitchen Crisis’, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor comments that ‘everything is prepared for the unprepared woman’498 in the modern American kitchen; while Smart-Grosvenor refers primarily to the ‘instant’ nature of commodities like coffee and convenience foods which can be cooked in microwaves, we can also apply this logic of ‘preparation’ to the kitchen’s appliances, all of which are – presumably - intended to ease the process of cooking. Smart-Grosvenor argues further that such appliances (in addition to instant food commodities) emerged because ‘the servant problem got so bad that [white] women had to get in the kitchen herself with her own two lily white hands’. Indeed, Neni wonders if Cindy uses the kitchen often ‘or if she used it only occasionally, to make a special recipe for the boys or give detailed directions to the help’. The kitchen is thus conceptualised as a place of service, if it is to be used at all: the ‘ultraclean’ façade of Cindy’s kitchen elicits comparison with another of Smart-Grosvenor’s pearls of wisdom – ‘if they don’t make a mess in the kitchen they ain’t cooking nothing fit to eat’.499

Similar parallels are drawn in We Need New Names, as the kitchen of Darling’s employer is described as ‘the kitchen with the many counters, the interesting fridge and stove and all the gadgets’ (262). Though not as descriptively involved as the observation of the Edwards’ kitchen in Behold the Dreamers, there are nonetheless connotations of modern abundance. Oblique reference to ‘gadgets’ permits Darling to register the presence of time-saving devices without actually requiring her to understand their purpose; and the ‘interesting fridge’ acts as an anaphoric reference to the fridge in Zimbabwe which Darling and her friends raided as children. In the latter, the children found ‘bread, bananas, yogurt, drinks, chicken, mangoes, rice, apples, carrots, milk’ and more; but now older, and approaching the ‘interesting’ fridge

of her employer, Darling observes it only from the outside, without inspecting its contents. In comparison, the kitchen in Darling’s own home is referenced primarily in relation to the microwave – either for TK preparing his own food, or for Darling preparing Kojo’s – or with regard to Fostalina ‘sipping rooibos tea and poring over her bills’ (257). In so doing, the kitchen in Fostalina’s home becomes spatially aligned with financial insecurity, while the kitchen of Darling’s employer is so full of ‘gadgets’ (a term which particularly signifies novelty – a technology that is fun, but not essential) that it conveys an aura of wealth even when no further detail is provided.

**Power Dynamics Between Employer and Employee**

In *Behold the Dreamers*, both Neni and Jende become privy to the innermost aspects of the Edwards’ lives: the housekeeper, who is first to the scene of an accidental drug overdose; and the chauffeur, who drives his employer to his appointments with a prostitute. However, Neni’s work as a housekeeper is particularly notable for this notion of intimate labour: as Linda McDowell argues, a domestic workplace is ‘not a (relatively) neutral territory… It is also the living space of the employer, a space imbued with social meaning, embodying the aspirations of its inhabitants’.

Neni’s employment lasts only a month, but during this time she looks after Mighty (the youngest Edwards child) and undertakes domestic roles from cleaning to cooking – later, however, these duties come to encompass not only finding and looking after her employer in a state of dishevelled intoxication but keeping quiet about this incident and others like it. Once again, this convergence of familial intimacies is acknowledged by the Domestic Workers Alliance as common to the precarious domestic labourer who ‘may hold secrets with which she never wanted to be burdened. This intimacy can become an emotional entanglement that confuses employers and disarms workers, potentially undermining their already structurally limited ability to negotiate terms of employment’.

A particularly potent depiction of this ‘emotional entanglement’ occurs in the relations between Neni and Cindy Edwards, who hires Neni as a housekeeper for their summer vacation in the Hamptons. As far as is evident in the narrative, Cindy is not a participant in the workforce. Throughout the novel, her time is generally occupied with social occasions – lunches with friends, cocktail parties – and, later, with consumption of alcohol and other intoxicants. Though there is no doubt as to Cindy’s love for her children, she has very little to do with the daily maintenance of their wellbeing: she tells Neni ‘to make [Vince and Mighty] their meals and snacks just the way they liked them’ (115), while having no physical culinary input here herself. In fact, ‘just the way they liked them’ pays lip service to her interest, because

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it suggests care for her sons’ wellbeing without requiring her to demonstrate actual concrete knowledge of their preferences. Despite the fact that these tasks have presumably been outsourced because Cindy does not want to perform them as opposed to because she does not have time (to recall Hochschild), and despite Neni’s conviction that it is through her babysitting of Mighty that she impresses her employer the most (114), Cindy appears to consider only her sons’ resultant satisfaction, as opposed to the actual labour involved, and the fact that ‘just the way they liked them’ requires Neni’s affective labour (understanding the children’s tastes) as well as her culinary labour. As Kyoko Shinozaki notes, ‘irregular migrants, especially those working as domestic workers and nannies in private homes… are commonly perceived as doubly invisible’\(^\text{502}\) on account of their undocumented status in combination with the fact that they work in the private sphere in forms of labour that are care-based, that do not generate capital, and that are therefore not visibly ‘productive’.

In a similar vein, when the possibility of limiting her expenditure on domestic help arises, Cindy comments jokingly to a friend “that’s exactly what we need now, right?… To be cooking and cleaning and doing laundry while we’re losing money and sleep”\(^\text{180}\), all while Jende is within earshot. Once again, Cindy acknowledges that her lifestyle is one which she would find ‘difficult and even undesirable to sustain had [she] undertaken [her] upkeep [herself]\(^\text{503}\), without actually acknowledging or conveying any appreciation for the people who perform that labour. After Cindy’s death, however, Vince tells Neni that Cindy’s husband Clark ‘wants to learn how to cook the meals [the boys’] mom used to make for Mighty’\(^\text{341}\), effectively doubling down on the invisibilisation of Neni’s domestic labour by attributing the material demonstrations of her affective care to her employer. After all, we are not privy to any scenario in which Cindy has provided food for her children herself — throughout the text it is Neni who has undertaken the labour of cooking, and thus to some degree ‘taken care’ of the boys in loco parentis. Throughout, then, the invisibilising of Neni’s foodwork and her other domestic labours conveys the contradictory nature of Cindy Edwards’ attitude towards her domestic help: she is paradoxically unable to live without it, and unable to acknowledge it.

However, the ‘permeability’ of the perceived privacy of the domestic sphere is further evident in the (admittedly, more limited) power conferred upon the domestic worker by virtue of their proximity to the family’s private life. In Behold the Dreamers, the most significant example of this is the point at which Neni finds Cindy in a state of intoxication, having consumed a combination of red wine and prescription medication (119). In the first instance, Neni is entirely unsure of the appropriate response for the situation, and calls both Jende and her

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friend Betty for help: while Jende advises that she do nothing and limit her involvement in what he considers the Edwards’ ‘business’, Betty advises that Neni wake Cindy up, and ‘If she’s dead… call her husband, not the police’ (118). However, it is Betty’s final comment that signifies the extent to which Neni’s position as housekeeper may now encumber her with ‘secrets with which she never wished to be burdened’. Betty asks Neni ‘please, don’t tell the police you called me first. I’m begging, don’t even mention my name for any reason whatsoever. I’m afraid of police people’ (118/9). Betty’s fear may be attributable to the precarity of her migrant status (whether or not she is a documented migrant is omitted from the narrative), or to the violent threat wielded by the American police towards Black populations. In either case, the same may be said of Neni – and thus, the fact that she is able to provide Cindy with affective care in the aftermath of the incident by responding to specific requests for sustenance (two glasses of water and ‘a plate of salad—plain lettuce with oil and vinegar’ (119)) is indicative not only of her fear for the wellbeing of another woman, but of the contribution that she can make towards securing her own situation by ensuring the safety of her employer. This reading is compounded by the way in which the following day Neni takes it upon herself to rouse Cindy from bed, offering to make her breakfast and asking where she would like to receive her food (121): acting to take care of her employer, but also to portray herself as a reliable, conscientious employee.

Cindy asks Neni never to disclose the events of the day on which she found her intoxicated: ‘I am asking you to make this promise to me not as from an employee to an employer but as from one woman to another, as from one who knows how important it is to protect our families’ (124). By appealing to and manipulating Neni’s maternal instincts she creates a false intimacy through which her employee feels obligated to keep her secret on the basis of a pseudo-familial connection. Ultimately, however, Neni must reverse this power dynamic in order to protect her own family; and it is at this point that the fact that the Edwards family are the Jongas ‘bread and tea’ (metonymically representative, of course, of the wages on which the Jongas subsist) is thrown into sharp relief. After Jende is fired (by Clark, but at Cindy’s demand) there is not ‘enough money to buy beef so [Neni can] cook rice and beef stew’ (258), nor is there ‘enough to cook a good meal with chicken some days’ (304): Liomi can no longer eat the sweet American cereals to which he has become accustomed, and Jende must give up his Mountain Dew in favour of water. These dietary changes are the concrete registrations of the family’s change in financial circumstance, and therefore reflect once more the precarity of their position as a migrant family, half of whom are undocumented. By employing the secrets she has learned by virtue of her proximity to the Edwards family to extort them, then, Neni subverts the hierarchical paradigm of employer/employee. As the

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superficiality of the emotional connection between Cindy and Neni becomes increasingly apparent, and as the ‘bread and tea’ disappears, Neni is able to dismiss any moral misgivings about exploiting her former employers: after all, she reasons, ‘People with money, they think their money can do anything in this world. They can hire you when they like, fire you when they like, it means nothing to them’ (272). In using the slippage between public and private that has characterised her working life to her advantage, then – blackmailing Cindy with a photograph of her most vulnerable moment – Neni is able to secure the financial means to feed her own family.

Eating in the Home of the Employer

While Neni’s domestic service is consistently based around foodwork, for Ifemelu and Darling food is a secondary duty, if a duty at all. However, all three women find that their domestic service positions them in close proximity to their employers and thus to their employers’ eating habits, so that racial and class distinctions are similarly illuminated, albeit through different intersections of food and domestic labour. In the case of NoViolet Bulawayo’s Darling – whose domestic employment is centred upon cleaning, as opposed to affective caregiving – the undertaking of domestic labour places her as witness to the disordered eating of her employer’s daughter. This ‘secret’ is one that Darling seeks out actively by reading the girl’s diary, as opposed to an entanglement that she enters into unwittingly, thereby intentionally disrupting the notion of privacy by reading a document that is intended for personal use only. As an unreliable narrator, Darling does not suggest that she has any moral misgivings about doing so: for her, this is evidence of a fundamentally warped American perspective in which hunger is conflated with the patriarchal logic of thinness and bodily control (see Chapter 7). Darling states that ‘When, at last, she has her breakfast arranged on her plate—five raisins, one little round thing, and a glass of water—I burst out laughing’ (267/8), thus using her position to vocally (if non-verbally) judge the consumption of her employer. Unlike Neni, whose emotional entanglement with and dependency upon the Edwards requires her to maintain secrets on their behalf, Darling feels no obligation towards her employer because ‘it is not like [Darling] stole her guavas’ (268).

Of all the Cameroonian dishes in Behold the Dreamers, the most prevalent is puff-puff. This is a West African snack food comparable to a Western doughnut: it is made of dough comprising flour, sugar, yeast, salt, and water, which is then fried in oil. For Imbolo Mbue – much like Neni – puff-puff is an evocative reminder of her childhood, and representative of

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‘comfort and feeling at home’. She noted, however, that its status as a street food meant that, when she was growing up in Cameroon, ‘people did not make puff-puff at home… we had women on the street corners, and they had this big pot of oil, and they were frying and selling the puff-puff right on the street corner’. In Behold the Dreamers, this is implicit – when Neni tells Mighty stories about her own childhood, the puff-puff she eats on the way to school is an important feature – but, as Mbue observed about her own experience of migration, ‘there was nobody on the street corner selling puff-puff, so people had to learn to make their own’. Puff-puff is therefore an interesting example of the ways in which the emotional and material circumstances of migration can interact to shape the modulating conditions of food: what was once street food becomes a site of nostalgia when one is far from home and can be subsequently recreated outside of its original setting. On a similar note, DeVault argues that ‘a family is not a naturally occurring collection of individuals; its reality is constructed from day to day through activities like eating together’. Despite Neni’s care for Mighty, then – which is self-evident in her emotional responses to his distress – her response cannot be termed ‘familial’ by DeVault’s standards, because she does not eat with him. Also significant here is the fact that, when the Jongas are struggling for money, Neni decides that ‘Liomi would soon have to start eating puff-puff for breakfast, instead of Honey Nut Cheerios’ (278); whereas for Mighty puff-puff is an aesthetic choice – something novel and fun that he can request of the housekeeper to go along with his otherwise typically Westernised meals of ‘sauteed salmon and oven fries’ (132) – for Liomi it is a non-negotiable alteration to his diet on the basis that it is all his family can afford.

In contrast, Neni is directly responsible for foodwork in her role as the Edwards’ housekeeper, as we observe in her cooking for the intoxicated Cindy and, particularly, for Mighty. When Neni recounts her employment with the Edwards family after it has ended, she recalls an occasion on which Mighty had a playdate with a friend:

One time I took him to a playdate with his friend and his friend’s mother offered him some food and he said, no thanks, he was not going to eat anything because he preferred to eat my food when we got home. He thought I was the best cook. (285)

Of course, Mighty’s words here are reported speech and the representation of the occasion is therefore less reliable than if the narrative provided witness to Mighty saying it himself. However, it is clear nonetheless that Neni has taken immense pride in the compliment, partially because of her emotional attachment to the child, and also because of the satisfaction she derives from cooking for others. Later in the novel, when Mighty’s older brother Vince

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506 Mbue, 2019.
offers to hire Neni as a ‘kind of constant, nurturing mother figure’ for his younger sibling, he refers back to a ‘five-course farewell dinner’ cooked for him by Neni earlier in the novel (I discuss this further in Chapter 6): here, he undermines the Jongas’ hospitality by identifying a social invitation as simply one of the duties Neni performed during her time as the Edwards’ housekeeper. The instance is once more reflective of the extent to which the labour which Neni and Jende undertake for the Edwards is itself subject to slippage between the public and the private. If not immediately apparent to the Jongas, this becomes so at the end of the novel, when Vince suggests to Neni that she ‘bring [Mighty] up to Harlem and give him an evening like the one we had that night’ (345). In assuring Neni that he would ‘not mind’ paying, Vince commodifies the social occasion in hindsight, undermining the generosity behind the initial gesture. Though food itself is typically configured as correspondent to and concretising a feeling of belonging, \(^{508}\) by attempting – perhaps unthinkingly – to rewrite this particular social occasion as a commodified experience which can be reproduced at his behest, Vince demonstrates that he did not comprehend the cultural significance of the evening.

There are no comparable instances of cooking in the waged domestic labour undertaken by Ifemelu in Americanah: her role is primarily babysitting, which seems to involve supervising her young charges, Taylor and Morgan, while they do their own activities. Nonetheless, one of the episodes that stands out in Ifemelu’s recollection of her time in the USA is an incident involving an orange. Already, at this point, Ifemelu has encountered what she considers to be ‘American’ fruit, which is characterised by uniformity and tastelessness – ‘She was disoriented by the blandness of fruits, as though Nature had forgotten to sprinkle some seasoning on the oranges and bananas’ (113) – but at this point, the cultural difference this indicates becomes apparent. The episode is introduced with a hyperbole, ‘At issue was an orange’ (165): Taylor – Ifemelu’s young charge – is disgusted by her fruit snack, because it is seeded. Having never had seeded oranges before, he refuses initially to believe that Ifemelu’s orange can even be of the same family as the fruit that he has grown up with. In fact, Morgan (Taylor’s sister) even accuses Ifemelu of purchasing the ‘wrong kind’ of orange – though she, unlike Taylor is aware of the existence of seeded oranges, she attributes ‘perceived produce abnormality’ \(^{509}\) to them. Ifemelu responds that it is the ‘right kind for her’, implicitly invoking the subjectivity of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ as terms used in food consumption across cultures. The children’s attitudes here reflect their upbringing in the United States’ paradigm of what their mother calls ‘Frankenfood’, wherein fruits are genetically modified to appear perfect in order to satisfy to the ‘aesthetic premium’ for produce exhibited by consumers. \(^{510}\) This occasion is

\(^{510}\) Ibid. p. 91.
comparable to another, earlier incident in which Ifemelu demonstrates eating banana and peanuts together as a Nigerian snack to a young Dike, to which her cousin responds ‘I don’t think I like Nigeria, Coz’ (113). On both occasions, Ifemelu introduces a young Americanised child to a foodstuff with which they have previously had no contact, and is met with disgust: however, while Taylor is briefly fascinated by the cultural difference and returns quickly to his own activities, for Dike and Ifemelu banana and peanuts become a motif of familial affection. These incidents also wield different significances in the overarching narrative of Ifemelu’s time in America. While ‘banana and peanuts’ is also a joke to which Ifemelu and Dike return on multiple occasions in order to highlight their kinship and reciprocal familial responsibility, as when Dike brings the snack on a tray for Ifemelu when she is vulnerable after breaking up with Curt (‘Snack time!’ (300)), the ‘orange incident’ is a story that Ifemelu chooses to relate to her employer Kimberly instead of telling her about another incident that happened that same day. In the latter incident, Ifemelu is subject to racial profiling by a carpet cleaner who is brusque with her until he establishes that she, too, is ‘the help’ (166) – but Ifemelu decides not to tell this story because ‘Kimberly might become flustered and apologize for what was not her fault’ (166). Through the food-based anecdote which appears innocuous and amusing, as opposed to the offensive nature of the other incident, Ifemelu protects Kimberly from discomfort: and, although the fact that Ifemelu is unable to have this discussion about race with her employer is certainly deeply problematic, the fact remains that in doing so she safeguards herself from having to undertake the emotional labour of dealing with Kimberly’s discomfort.

Conclusions
In summarising the trajectory of this chapter, I propose to return to Lorna Piatti-Farnell’s *Food and Culture in Contemporary American Fiction*. This is an enormously useful volume in literary study of foodways, and its lines of enquiry regarding the ‘polysemy’ of food have been influential upon my own conception of the innumerable nuances of food and the ways in which our critical approaches must allow for this. However, I would suggest that while Piatti-Farnell writes thoughtfully and provocatively on ‘Immigrant Experiences’, the fact that these migrant narratives (Monique Truong’s *Book of Salt*, for example, and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava*) are isolated in their own chapter overlooks the implications that migrant status wields for other concerns within food studies, like ‘Home and Away’ or ‘Race and History’ (other chapters in Piatti-Farnell’s work). In relation to domestic food work, this realisation has a number of implications.

Firstly, I acknowledge the multiple texts I use which read housework as designated ‘women’s work’, in line with the patriarchal construction of Western (and in this case, American) capitalist societies, and the ensuing oppressive structures. However, we must take
an intersectional approach to this work – we must acknowledge that migrant women are actively discriminated against in our conceptions of domestic foodwork and, more than this, we must acknowledge that this discrimination increases dramatically for Black migrant women. At the same time it is crucial to recognise that, for Black sub-Saharan African migrants, this negotiation of power is a nuanced and fraught one because of the aspects of race. These are additional reasons as to why experiences of ‘Non-American Black’ people in the USA are at once comparable to and demonstrably distinct from the experiences of both other migrant populations and Black Americans, as discussed previously in Chapter 3. Moreover, these ‘experiences’ may be referred to in the general only as long as we do not essentialise them – as we see across the literary narratives of Adichie, Bulawayo, and Mbue, multiple and varied factors affect the material conditions of consumption and the ways in which these are registered and represented. Across the three novels, the balance of power in the hierarchal relationship between employer and employee is subject to push and pull as a result of factors such as the migrantisation and feminisation of the domestic labour force, class and racial disparity, and intimate proximity. However, the same may be said of the domestic labour undertaken by women in their own homes, which is used often to exert influence over the consumption habits of the family (including the sexual relationship between partners), but which is also typically rendered invisible by essentialist attitudes which dictate that housework and nurture are somehow implicitly and irrevocably feminine.

As such, I refer back to the conflation I identified previously regarding the multiple definitions of ‘home’, and the significances of this for foodways and foodwork within domestic spaces in these novels. I suggested that domestic foodways can be initially and superficially divided into the food cooked for and consumed by the family (including children, partners, and selves), and the food cooked as an aspect of waged reproductive labour within the domestic service economy. In both of these scenarios, however, such labour is generally undertaken by women and, more specifically, by migrant women. In tandem, these nuances affect both the materiality of foodwork – the time and division of labour – but also its emotional significance, both for the feeder and for the fed.
Chapter 6: ‘Please please please feed your wife’: Consuming narratives of gender and migration

Introduction
In previous chapters, I have referred to the argument that the consumption of food shapes and is shaped by the material conditions of lived experience; and that these conditions are often global in nature. Having interrogated the distribution and circulation of foodstuffs, as well as cooking and foodwork, I would like to turn now to the more explicitly bodily and embodied aspects of consumption. In particular, I propose to highlight the themes of race and gender that have emerged throughout my work, in relation to contemporary American ideals about the female body and female bodily consumption. Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin’s maxim ‘Show me what you eat and I will tell you what you are’ comes to mind here, as it does for so much of food scholarship: except that, as I shall argue, women’s food consumption is often conditioned and controlled by participation in a capitalist system that is both patriarchal and racialised; and, in these cases, to infer ‘what a woman is’ from what she eats is actually to perpetuate a discourse of misogyny and racial violence.

Of course, all consumption within the world food system as it stands is shaped and – in many cases – warped by the capitalist world-system. As Eric Holt-Giménez points out, the system ‘is not broken. It functions precisely as the capitalist food system has always worked, concentrating power in the hands of a privileged minority and passing off the social and environmental ‘externalities’ to racially stigmatized groups’. However, I want to suggest here that such conditions are particularly apposite for an exploration of the position of women, who are told in perpetuity that their bodies are ‘wrong’ or that they do not ‘fit in’ the world as they are. Sub-Saharan migrant women in these novels provide a useful case study for this because while they negotiate more general aspects of migration from the Global South to the Global North and – in particular – induction into the African diaspora, including culture clash and racial difference, they must also contend with the explicitly gendered form of biopolitical control enacted by American patriarchal society over women’s bodies and women’s consumption.

Any discussion relating to female bodies should account, first of all, for the fact that ‘the female body’ (as preceded by the definite article and purporting to present an objective

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definition of what a ‘woman’s body’ looks like) is a fallacy; and, in doing so, such a discussion should also acknowledge the necessity of an intersectional approach that recognises the infinite multiplicity of ‘female’ experiences. In *Americanah, We Need New Names*, and *Behold the Dreamers*, the main female protagonists are Black African migrants, subject to the ramifications of rife racial and xenophobic tensions; but they are also all cisgender women. In light of this latter point, it is important to acknowledge that, statistically, Black women in the USA who are not cisgender experience increased harassment and violence as well as racial- and gender-based violence. ‘Intersectionality’ as coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw refers to the ways in which marginalised identities intersect within systemic relations of power. Crenshaw’s work explores the intersection between race and gender for Black women specifically, but she does state that ‘the concept can and should be expanded by factoring in issues such as class, sexual orientation, age, and color’. While my approach here is focused on intersecting concerns of gender, colour, and migration status for the female characters in work by Adichie, Bulawayo, and Mbue, then, I must underline two things. Firstly that, as a white woman, I have had little direct experience with the violences experienced by Black people; and must therefore acknowledge the epistemological gap between my own experiences of living in a racialised capitalist society, and those of the people – whose voices and experiences have been systemically marginalised in a way that mine never have – that are the subject of my study. Secondly, I emphasise that in referring to ‘female bodies’ I do not mean to suggest that the working definition I provide here is the only nor the objective demarcation of that category.

As Shirley Ann Tate states, ‘it is important to keep at the forefront of our minds that many different models of beautiful Black women’s bodies co-exist and that class, sexuality and age, for example, impact on these models’. With all of this in mind, I propose in this chapter to explore in the novels in question the particular relationship between women and their gendered consumption of food. Elspeth Probyn comments that ‘if society finds the fat female body disgusting, the obvious move is to blame patriarchal attitudes. Or if I find myself disgusting or shameful, isn’t it normal to blame you, or the media, or another body for instilling those attitudes in me?’. Comparably, in *Let Them Eat Junk*, Robert Albritton argues convincingly that the world food system is governed by ‘the basic imperative of capitalism to maximize profits’. This claim is weighted by the further assertion that ‘We have increasingly good knowledge about what is good for human health and environmental health, and yet there is a huge gap between our knowledge and policy, precisely because policy change is tightly

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515 Probyn, 2000, p. 130.
constrained by the interests of giant corporations.\textsuperscript{517} Because the food system is focused upon corporations and marketisation – as opposed to individual need – food becomes a focus of biopolitical control (using Megan A. Carney’s summary of ‘biopolitics’ here as ‘the politicization of life, specifically natural life’\textsuperscript{518}) enacted particularly upon the bodies of women, migrants, those deemed racially ‘Other’, and those who fall into any number of these categories in tandem. Albritton articulates this thus: ‘The first shortcoming of the market is that it does not respond to individual preferences—or even needs. It responds to money’.\textsuperscript{519} When we think about what is at stake here, we must be aware of a weary yet still-pertinent dialogue surrounding the choices that women make about their bodies, and the material conditions and social mores upon which those choices are predicated.

In these novels, however, concerns of race and gender intersect with – and are amplified by – discourses of belonging and non-belonging that are fundamental in migrant fictions. Muzna Rahman summarises that there exists a ‘rootlessness’ that ‘manipulates the discursive structures that characterize conventional diasporas as hinged around a binary of ‘home’ and ‘non-home’ but chooses to emphasize the aspect of diasporic discourse that assumes utopian constructions of home’\textsuperscript{520} In Rahman’s analysis, ‘The stringently constructed binaries of home and away, of local and foreigner—so vital to the diasporic imaginary—are revealed as simplistic and inaccurate\textsuperscript{521} because those who are considered ‘local’ are equally subject to yearnings for home and the homeland. While it is certainly true that categories like ‘home’ and ‘away’ are nuanced and often in a state of perpetual flux, I do believe that it is possible for us to use the idea of ‘home’ (and, concurrently, ideas of ‘belonging’ and ‘commensality’) in relation to the significance of foodways and food consumption for female migrants – particularly when we consider that the categories of ‘home’ and ‘away’ are, wherever they may be, still part of the same world-system.

While I concur with Deepika Bahri’s perspective that ‘Postcolonial hungers… far from substantiating tired clichés of third world scarcity and ineptitude, should be understood within a corrupt system of appropriation and various forms of theft in a globe girdled by capital and corporation in the phase following imperialism as a special stage of capitalism’\textsuperscript{522} – a claim which Bahri corroborates via an illuminating analysis of We Need New Names alongside Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Nervous Conditions and its sequel, The Book of Not – I want to use here a more

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\item[\textsuperscript{517}] Ibn. p. 8.
\item[\textsuperscript{518}] Megan A. Carney, The Unending Hunger : Tracing Women and Food Insecurity across Borders, (Berkeley, UNITED STATES: University of California Press, 2015).
\item[\textsuperscript{520}] Muzna Rahman, ‘Covert Communications: Food in Transition in Ritesh Batra’s the Lunchbox’, Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 54 (2018), 486.
\item[\textsuperscript{521}] Ibid. p. 487.
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expansive definition of ‘hunger’ which also incorporates similar (but not quite synonymous) notions of ‘appetite’. This is not to suggest that hunger in the context of starvation, scarcity, and deprivation is no longer relevant in world-literature; in many ways, hunger characterises the modern food system, which is based upon the profound inequalities that occur as a result of a global push for ‘cheap food’. Jason W. Moore and Raj Patel explain this thus: ‘Capitalism’s agricultural revolutions provided cheap food, which lowered the minimum-wage threshold: workers could be paid less and not starve. This in turn reduced employers’ wage bills as the scale of proletarianization increased, allowing the rate of exploitation to rise’. However, my analysis here is not exclusively nor primarily about women’s hunger – it is about women’s appetites, and desires, and their radical material and cultural capacity to indulge or refuse them. This is particularly relevant in narratives which focus around the inherent contradictions of migrant life: women who must negotiate ideas of belonging and non-belonging that are both nuanced and subject to constant fluctuation. In this chapter, I propose that we ask, first of all – why are these women hungry?

**Hungry Women, Female Appetites**

Kyla Wazana Tompkins has argued, ‘The colloquial nature of eating, its everydayness, and the biological imperative that makes eating a necessity often render it invisible as a highly discursive as well as material practice’. It is to the ‘biological imperative’ of eating that I direct my definition of ‘hunger’ in this chapter: to the literal caloric and nutritional value of food as imperative to the fuelling and sustainment of human life, and the bodily consequences if this imperative is not fulfilled. However, my working definition of ‘appetite’ here is contrastingly focused primarily on desire, taste, and preference. These are, of course related to physical hunger; but they permit a more expansive definition which can encompass not just the physical craving for substantive nutrition, but the kind of ‘culturally appropriate’ food that sustains individual and collective identity. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that ‘It is the way we position historical narratives of experience in relation to each other, the way we theorize relationality as both historical and simultaneously singular and collective that determines how and what we learn when we cross cultural and experiential borders’. This particular claim of Mohanty’s can be read productively alongside that of Doris Witt in *Black Hunger* – the latter argues that ‘work on food can help us make sense of how we come to

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524 Wazana Tompkins, 2012, p. 185.
understand ourselves as individual and collective subjects, and therefore also how we come to ally ourselves with and against the prevailing social order.\textsuperscript{527}

In \textit{We Need New Names}, of course, hunger is introduced first as material scarcity. This is the precarious, vulnerable status that characterises Darling’s childhood, throughout which she and her peers are constantly hungry: ‘Somebody’s stomach makes a loud long sound and I remember I am hungry. We are all hungry’ (69). This hunger is figured primarily through the children’s theft and consumption of guavas – the novel’s most arresting image in terms of scarcity. Although Darling suggests that she does not have ‘proper strength’ (15) because of nutritional lack, such an assessment of her own weakness is at odds with the narrative’s energetic evocation of the children’s play. From Bourdieu’s \textit{Distinction}, the quotation “The hedonism which seizes day by day the rare satisfactions (‘good times’) of the immediate present is the only philosophy conceivable to those who ‘have no future’”\textsuperscript{528} seems applicable particularly to Darling’s account of the children’s descent upon a house abandoned after the abduction of its wealthy owners. After watching the owners brought out by a nationalist group, Darling describes the event thus:

> When we open the fridge we find it untouched, which surprises us. We gorge ourselves on the bread, bananas, yogurt, drinks, chicken, mangoes, rice, apples, carrots, milk, and whatever food we find. We eat things we have never seen before, things whose names we don’t even know. (129)

From the \textit{habitus} comes the concept of ‘taste’ – and taste is ‘the choice of destiny, but a forced choice, produced by conditions of existence which rule out all alternatives as mere daydreams and leave no choice but the taste for the necessary’.\textsuperscript{529} When Darling and her friends descend upon the house, they are consuming the food of a different class with which they have little familiarity – hence ‘names [they] don’t even know’, and the fact that hilarity ensues from the suggestion of cutlery (‘Wee fawgoat the fowks, wee fawgoat the fowks, Godknows says, sounding like a white man, and we giggle’). Later, this incident is recalled at a wedding Darling attends in the USA, during which she is uncomfortable eating in front of others out of concern regarding her capacity to use a knife and fork: in the American context, such utensils are no longer a source of amusement but a site upon which one’s ‘belonging’ may be assessed upon one’s ability to perform the most basic of commensal behaviours. By extension, therefore, knives and forks become a material indicator of the extent to which Darling must still ‘Americanise’ her foodways, and the disparity between her culture of origin and the culture to

\textsuperscript{527} Witt, 1999, p. 17.
\textsuperscript{528} Bourdieu, 2010, p. 176.
\textsuperscript{529} Ibid. p. 174.
which she must now adapt. In that first instance, however, so jarring is the children’s temporary appropriation of the house – so unjust, the fact that they must commit theft in order to eat – that there is humour in the bathetic depiction of the unfamiliar. Moreover, it is telling that there is emphasis upon the fact that the food is ‘untouched’ and that it is this immaculate state that surprises Darling and her friends: not only are they not used to the very idea of an abundance of food, but there is an existential dissonance in the idea that an abundance of food could exist without being eaten. For children who have grown up feeling constantly ‘like somebody took a shovel and dug everything out’ of their stomachs (1), the concept of having enough of what one needs is unfamiliar, let alone having surplus.

For a child who has grown up in the Global South with such a visceral experience of starvation, then, it is interesting that when Darling leaves Zimbabwe for the USA she also configures her yearning for her country as a kind of metaphorical hunger: ‘there is food to eat here, all types and types of food. There are times, though, that no matter how much food I eat, I find the food does nothing for me, like I am hungry for my country and nothing is going to fix that’ (153). This is an example of a rhetorical strategy to represent and ‘create arguments about what it means to have a ‘healthy’ relationship to food and to one’s body. Those who are starving can be represented as nourished; hunger can be both physical and emotional’.

Such an interpretation creates a radical inversion of the ‘American Dream’ narrative, because it represents as lacking a country that is otherwise so firmly convinced of its own exceptionalism.

Female hunger in Americanah is depicted as somehow dangerous, or at minimum, unsettling. When Ifemelu is unfaithful to her partner Curt (for further discussion on whom see section: ‘Gastropatriarchy’), she thinks ‘She did not know what it was but there was something wrong with her. A hunger, a restlessness. An incomplete knowledge of herself’ (289). As it does for Darling, ‘hunger’ becomes here a means of representing a kind of cultural void that is created in the process of migrating from one continent to another; so that the jarring feeling of Otherness affects not only the individual in question (for whom it is an isolating and displacing experience) but those around them who may be hurt as a result. Although Ifemelu’s ‘hunger’ is rendered obliquely, then, it is suggested nonetheless to be indicative of something

331 Carlos Bulosan presents a similar inversion in his essay ‘The Freedom From Want’: although the essay looks towards ‘the dignity of the individual to live in a society of free men’, it is fearless in confronting the truth of an America in which immigrants ‘bleeding where clubs are smashing heads, where bayonets are gleaming. We are fighting where the bullet is crashing upon armorless citizens, where the tear gas is choking unprotected children. Under the lynch trees, amidst hysterical mobs’. Bulosan speaks of an ‘America we hope to see’ that is characterised peace, democracy, and freedom for all its inhabitants – by implication, an America which does not yet exist. (Carlos Bulosan, ‘Carlos Bulosan’s ‘Freedom from Want”, The Saturday Evening Post, [1943]) <https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2017/12/carlos-bulosans-freedom-want/> [accessed 26 Sep 2020].
at the core of her identity that is fundamentally absent. In terms of female appetites however, there is an implicit irony for the literature scholar in interrogating the politics of food and consumption in a novel in which one character – Blaine’s best friend Araminta – ridicules the capacity of his professorial colleagues to reduce all aspects of life to academic interpretation. Araminta mocks one colleague in particular (Marcia) for suggesting that ‘black women are fat because their bodies are sites of anti-slavery resistance’ (311), remarking in response that this is true only as long as ‘burgers and sodas are anti-slavery resistance’. In doing so, she scorns the attempts of the group to intellectualise lived experiences of Black women from the relative security of an academic ivory tower and indicates that such interpretations of the metaphorical significance of food have little relevance to her own life. Although indeed some scholars have suggested that there are metaphorical elements to Black women’s weight and food consumption – Tara Beauboeuf-Lafontant suggests that ‘From a symbolic approach to the body and weight, we may view some overweight and obese Black women as literally carrying the weight of the world on their bodies’ – there is no doubt that there is a social chasm between the scholarship of Blaine’s academic circle and those for whom the subject of the scholarship is not an academic hypothetical, but a lived reality. In the narrative, this is underlined by a hyperbolic encounter with another female academic at Marcia’s birthday dinner, who eats collard greens with her fingers and professes that ‘We humans are not supposed to eat with utensils’ (325). Although eating with one’s hands is a significant alimentary custom in a number of sub-Saharan African cuisines – ‘Cameroon style’ as we have seen in Behold the Dreamers (164), for example, or as in Ethiopian cultures while eating injera – it is depicted here as a performative act, signifying an affiliative connection with an imagined ancestral ‘Africa’, as opposed to a historically and culturally specific country of origin.

It is also – perhaps unsurprisingly – to food that Ifemelu turns in an effort to conceptualise the cultural differences between her own upbringing and that of Blaine and his other American friends. I pick up here on the textual representation of ‘soul food’ – here, collard greens and pumpkin pie, among other dishes, presented briefly in a meeting with Blaine’s closest circle of friends – as a further marker of the difference in the cultural frames of reference between the couple. Although Ifemelu professes (inwardly) not actually to enjoy soul food – even ‘snacking on a handful of nuts’ prior to the event, enabling her to take smaller portions without sacrificing either personal appetite or social etiquette – she finds herself nonetheless unintentionally isolated from other diners by this difference in taste. This realisation is depicted as particularly contentious because Blaine’s ex-girlfriend Paula is also

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present and appears not only to share Blaine’s frame of culinary cultural reference, but to be able to evoke moments from their shared romantic past (‘Remember that awful Thanksgiving at my parents’ house?’) which reinforce both a sense of their ‘belonging’ at the table and, to Ifemelu, a sense of their ‘belonging together’. Ifemelu tells Blaine ‘The fried chicken you eat is not the fried chicken I eat, but it’s the fried chicken Paula eats’ (330). Blaine laughs this off as a humorously ‘loaded metaphor’ due to the connotations held by fried chicken – firstly, ‘the hallmark of southern cuisine’534 as suggested by Psyche Williams-Forson, and as a pejorative racial stereotyping of the African American population535 believed by Claire Schmidt to have been ‘solidified’ by the 1915 silent movie Birth of a Nation. For Ifemelu, however, it is no laughing matter, and her intentions are not pejorative; rather, her observation occurs on a singularly pragmatic level, which is that ‘for [Blaine] and Paula, fried chicken is battered’, where for Ifemelu it ‘has no batter’. As Blaine notes, it is an unfortunate example for Ifemelu to have selected: but this is not simply because of its racialised connotations, as he suggests, but because Ifemelu’s evident unawareness of these racialised connotations erects another barrier of cultural difference between the two. Because neither are fully aware of this barrier, however, it succeeds only in preventing them from communicating. Ifemelu makes a cognitive link here between Blaine and Paula on the basis of their shared cultural background as Americans, figured through the food which is common to the upbringing of both; and while their commensality is here figured upon ‘an oppressed people’s foodways as a form of cultural capital’536, that Ifemelu has no similar frame of reference nor nostalgic recollection means that a line of difference is drawn which marks her, once more, as an immigrant Other.

Filed Under ‘Race, Gender, and Body Size’

As Holt-Giménez states, while patriarchy precedes the onset of the capitalist world-system, nonetheless ‘all capitalist societies did establish the rule of patriarchy as the hierarchical basis for class rule’.537 The key argument here is that the world food system runs parallel to and within the capitalist world-system – and that patriarchal structures are essential to the continual running of both. Such an understanding is key in considering the embodied relationships that women form with and around food. To study the embodied nature of power relations is, at this juncture, necessarily to consult the work of Michel Foucault, although his

oeuvre has been criticised by many for its gender blindness: Amelia Morris states that ‘Foucault refers to men and women’s relationship to power as being the same, despite the fact that women’s bodies have historically been more subjugated than men’. Furthermore, Joy James criticises Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* for its disregard of the particular racial implications of a surveillance economy: she states that the text is shaped by a ‘(mis)measure of man—naturalized and universalized as masculine and European’, stating too that this is ‘obscuring the private realm and the bodies policed there—those of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, the poor, women, and dark-skinned peoples’ (although given Foucault’s work in *The History of Sexuality*, which attends in detail to ‘peripheral sexualities’ and the ways in which they have been persecuted and policed by churches, courts, and other social mechanisms, it is difficult to see how he might be seen as ‘obscuring’ the experiences of people who do not identify as heterosexual). Despite these criticisms of Foucault’s work, feminist scholars including Susan Bordo and Katharina Vester have found useful material with which to work. Vester claims that ‘Foucault’s framework allows an understanding of nationality, sexuality, and masculinity as contested fields of knowledge and power that are not static but constantly changing, and not solely produced by political, medical, or scientific discourses, but from below and in the everyday’; while Bordo uses a Foucauldian understanding of the ‘material’ to focus ‘on the “direct grip” (as opposed to representational influence) that culture has on our bodies, through the practices and bodily habits of everyday life’. My own use of Foucault here revolves chiefly around his conception of ‘docile bodies’ – ‘how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines – read specifically in relation to the operative logic dictated by a capitalist society which is founded upon patriarchy and white supremacy. Indeed, later in this chapter I suggest the term ‘gastropatriarchy’ as a means of conceptualising the profoundly unequal relations of power surrounding women’s food consumption in capitalist society; but what might appear an initial weakness of ‘gastropatriarchy’ as a term is that it does not explicitly highlight the racial dimension of America’s corporeal aesthetic paradigm in the contemporary moment, nor the racist historical grounding from which it has emerged. However, I would address such criticisms by noting that I consider the ‘patriarchy’ of ‘gastropatriarchy’ along the lines of bell hooks’ definition of the ‘white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy’ in which ‘theoretically men

341 Vester, 2015, p. 9.
342 Bordo, 2003, p. 16.
are the powerful, women the powerless; adults the powerful, children the powerless; white people the powerful, black people and other non-white people the powerless’.\textsuperscript{544}

The entanglement of racism and patriarchy is focalised in Sabrina Strings’ Fearing the Black Body, which outlines two concurrent historical developments that have led to a ‘fetish for svelteness and a phobia about fatness’ in the contemporary USA. These are ‘the rise of the transatlantic slave trade and the spread of Protestantism’:\textsuperscript{545} while the former fostered and perpetuated violent disregard for Black bodies, the latter advocated for ‘Christian temperance in food and drink’ which ‘bred the slender physiques that offered evidence of racial superiority’.\textsuperscript{546} The crux of Strings’ argument is then that American attitudes to fat bodies are rooted in systemic fear of and violence towards Black bodies – so that race and fat are inextricably linked: a claim echoed by Amy Farrell in Fat Shame, as she states that ‘fat denigration is intricately related to gender as well as racial hierarchies’.\textsuperscript{547} This claim is evidenced in Americanah in one of the most pertinent passages regarding the ways in which female consumption and feminine aesthetics are read in conjunction: that of Ifemelu’s reunion with her school friend, Ginika, when both are in the USA. Ginika left Nigeria years before Ifemelu, has attended American high schools and made American friends; and, importantly here, she has intentionally changed her body composition in order to escape teasing from her peers. Upon meeting Ginika at the train station, Ifemelu asks her ‘When did you stop eating and start looking like a dried stockfish?’. Although the simile here is predicated upon the image of shrunken flesh, referring to the new slenderness of Ginika’s physique (‘Ginika was much thinner, half her old size, and her head looked bigger, balanced on a long neck that brought to mind a vague, exotic animal’ (122)), it is also rooted in the young women’s shared culture. According to Osseo-Asare, a ‘hallmark of much cooking of the West African coast and region is the use of smoked, dried, and/or salted fish and seafood’:\textsuperscript{548} by referencing a staple of Nigerian cooking Ifemelu calls upon her own frame of cultural reference, but also restates this frame of reference as one that she and Ginika share. Although this appears superficially to evoke cultural commensality between the two, it is undermined firstly by the fact that Ifemelu is inwardly embarrassed on Ginika’s behalf for her attempts to appear culturally relevant (‘Ifemelu did not have the heart to tell her that nobody said ‘shay’ anymore’), and secondly because Ginika herself testifies to the ways in which she has adapted her self-image to align with the aesthetic paradigm of the USA. Sidney Mintz elaborates upon a similar point in Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom, noting that migrants are ‘subject to pressures to change their ways,

\textsuperscript{545} Strings, 2019, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{546} Ibid. p. 122.
\textsuperscript{548} Osseo-Asare, 2005.
including their foodways, by an Americanization process that goes on in the schools, in the media, and in the course of daily life— but here, the ‘Americanization process’ is gendered, and thus tailored specifically to the bodies of migrant women.

It is Ginika, here, from whom Ifemelu learns that ‘Americans say ‘thin.’ Here ‘thin’ is a good word’. Once more, Americanah’s non-linear narrative is invoked here. In the first pages of the novel, set thirteen years after Ifemelu’s initial arrival in the USA, this conversation regarding the morality and aesthetics of weight in her reunion with Ginika is referenced cataphorically: ‘one of the first things her friend Ginika told her was that ‘fat’ in America was a bad word, heaving with moral judgement like ‘stupid’ or ‘bastard’, and not a mere description like ‘short’ or ‘tall’ (5). Of course, in reading the scene it becomes apparent that the notion of ‘fat’ as derogatory or negative is not stated outright in this particular instance, but rather simply implied: Ginika says that ‘Americans say ‘thin’. Here ‘thin is a good word’ (124) – if ‘thin’ is ‘good’ then, using modus ponens, ‘not thin’ must be ‘bad’. Similar exercising of moral judgment regarding feminine weight and aesthetic appearance occurs in Behold the Dreamers during Neni’s pregnancy, when she complains to Jende that ‘not working made her feel fat and lazy and worthless’ (171). Not only is there a deeply problematic internalisation of capitalism here (one’s worth is derived from one’s productivity – if one is not working, one is worthless), but there is a concurrent assumption that those who are fat are also lazy and, by extension, surplus not only in body but in value. Such assumptions regarding ‘fat’ as equivalent to ‘lazy’ are widespread in the USA in the contemporary moment; but these too, are racial in origin. Strings cites the role of race-making European individuals in the eighteenth century in linking ‘corpulence to laziness and slow-wittedness and explains that ‘racial discourse was deployed by elite Europeans and white Americans to create social distinctions between themselves and so-called greedy and fat racial Others’.

Ginika relates how she had begun to lose weight almost immediately upon arrival after ‘the kids at [her] high school called [her] Pork’. There are obvious cultural implications here: after all, it is the movement from Africa to the USA in which Ginika becomes aware not only of her own body, but of the fact that it is somehow unacceptable in its current form. However, she also notes that ‘at home when somebody tells you that you lost weight, it means something bad’. In line with Slocum’s assertion that ‘Decisions about what to eat are profoundly central to preserving racial identity just as choice is emphasized in the neoliberal condemnation of obesity’, a correlation is drawn directly between weight – and, therefore, consumption – and some form of moral value within both Nigeria and the USA, albeit on opposing sides of the

549 Mintz, 1996, p. 112.
550 Strings, 2019, p. 77.
551 Ibid. p. 7.
552 Slocum, 2013, p. 29.
spectrum. While the configuration of an accepted (or, more pertinently, attractive) feminine corporeality differs between countries, then, there is a sense of public judgment in this regard, nonetheless. Furthermore, in the same conversation Ginika discusses the racial politics of her own identity, having been told that ‘half-caste’ – the term she used to describe her ethnicity when in Nigeria – is deemed offensive in the USA, and that she is required instead to refer to herself as ‘biracial’. In both instances, the frame of reference for corporeal experience has been irreversibly shifted.

The racialised history of American association of ‘fat’ with Black populations and, particularly, with Black women is also registered when Ifemelu reflects upon a train journey taken from New Jersey Transit to Penn Station and how she noticed that ‘mostly slim white people got off at the stops in Manhattan and, as the train went further into Brooklyn, the people left were mostly black and fat’ (5). Although the narrative moves on relatively quickly from this realisation of the overlaps between, race, economic stratification, and spatiality, the moment itself is nonetheless a registration of the existence of downtown urban areas which might be described as ‘food deserts’. ‘Food desert’ is the term used most often to denote the kind of residential environment in which the majority of residents lack access to nutritious food at affordable prices, which can result in elevated risk of obesity due to the proximity and accessibility of ‘junk’ food in contrast to more expensive ‘healthier’ options. It is important to recognise here, however, that the term ‘food desert’ is based upon problematic associations and omissions. It neglects, for example, to take into account that systemic injustice predicated upon historic prejudices has undeniably resulted in the racialisation of the existence and location of these ‘food deserts’. Poorer neighbourhoods in the United States are often also those inhabited by BAME communities – people against whom systemic racial disparity works to obfuscate career development and the kinds of employment through which enough money might be secured to move into a more economically prosperous area. Ifemelu’s observation here therefore testifies quite literally to refer to an area (generally downtown urban and comprising low-income households) within which there is little provision for residents’ quality nutrition at affordable costs, and thus to the inarguably racialised context of demonised ‘fat’ in the USA.

Having registered this division as one of both racial and economic disparity, however, Ifemelu moves on quickly to reflect alone upon more general use of ‘fat’ as a descriptor and its appropriateness in registering her own physical appearance:

But ‘fat’ came back to her last winter, after almost thirteen years, when a man in line behind her at the supermarket muttered, ‘Fat people don’t need to be eating that shit,’

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as she paid for her giant bag of Tostitos. She glanced at him, mildly offended, and thought it a perfect blog post, how this stranger had decided she was fat. She would file the post under the tag ‘race, gender and body size’. But back home, as she stood and faced the mirror’s truth, she realized that she had ignored, for too long, the new tightness of her clothes, the rubbing together of her inner thighs, the softer, rounder parts of her that shook when she moved. She was fat. (6)

While the man who (frankly, very rudely) comments upon Ifemelu’s consumption might well have considered his comment racially neutral, if he thought about the presence of race at all, for Ifemelu the incident is immediately categorizable ‘under the tag race, gender and body size’. In addition, the insidiousness of the normative cultural discourse is such here that Ifemelu’s sensibilities are offended by someone calling her fat – thereby registering ‘fat’ as a pejorative term on the same continuum of ‘that shit’ – and that she believes she has refused to accept this ‘for too long’, as though her capacity to extend her attention beyond the aesthetic scope of her body is in some way problematic or willfully ignorant.

The notion of ‘fat’ is explored briefly in Behold the Dreamers, too, as Jende considers it in relation to Clark’s secretary Leah. Upon meeting her for the first time, Jende considers how Leah’s physical appearance does not, in actuality, align with the expectations he had held based on ‘her high-pitched honeyed voice and the girly manner in which she sometimes giggled at banal things he said’. In light of these characteristics, we learn, Jende had expected Leah to ‘be small – tiny, even’ (48) – instead, she is ‘wide and round, like some of the people he’d seen when he landed at Newark; thick and fleshy humans who had made him wonder if America was a country of large people’ (48/9). Describing these people as ‘thick and fleshy humans’ evokes an almost anthropological interest, as though Jende is surveying a different species. This impression is cemented by the way in which Jende creates a mental comparison between the status of ‘fat’ in Limbe, and the status of ‘fat’ in New York: ‘In Limbe there were perhaps two people of that size in a neighborhood of hundreds, but at the airport, walking from the plane through immigration and customs to baggage claim, he had counted at least twenty’ (49).

A similar idea of ‘American fat’ as something monstrous occurs in We Need New Names when Darling attends a wedding with her aunt and uncle. The groom of this wedding is a previous partner of Aunt Fostalina’s and is now, it is implied, marrying only in order to secure green card status – the bride is large enough to be described as ‘a freaking mountain’ (173) by one guest, and Darling herself suggests with the casual callousness of the child that ‘it’s not like other women are busy envying her and wanting to kill her for her beauty’ (171). In fact, Darling conceives of ‘American fatness’ as something almost incomprehensible, in comparison to the ‘fatness’ she has seen previously in Zimbabwe which ‘meant that the person ate well’.
'American fatness’ is, in contrast, depicted as physically and bodily disruptive: ‘the body is turned into something else—the neck becomes a thigh, the stomach becomes an anthill, an arm a thing, a buttock a I don’t even know what’. To Darling, this woman’s appearance is so obscene that it is barely categorizable as human—each part of the body comprehensible only in isolation, and sometimes (as with ‘a buttock’) not even then. In contrast, Darling remembers that Aunt Fostalina bought a cream dress to wear for the wedding (traditionally a faux pas at a Western wedding—nobody should wear white, lest they upstage the bride), but also that the dress was too small and she ‘would have to lose some pounds for it’ (169) which, accordingly, she does. As a result, Aunt Fostalina is ‘all smiles’ at the wedding; and Darling knows that ‘the reason [Aunt Fostalina] is so happy is that Dumi’s bride is fat and ugly’ while she herself has lost weight and therefore aligned herself more closely with a hegemonic discourse of beauty. Once again, an interaction governed by the malevolent logic of patriarchy, but on multiple levels. Firstly, there is the element of competition through which Aunt Fostalina measures her own worth—if she can ‘win’ against Dumi’s bride, in whatever capacity that might be, she will feel better about herself. But there is also the fact that ‘winning’ here means being smaller and taking up less space—and being, therefore, more attractive (thus taking up more space, metaphorically, in the minds of observers). However, to Darling, Fostalina’s slender frame is not aspirational, but comparable to the ravaged physique of her father who is seen dying of The Sickness (HIV/AIDS) in Zimbabwe: ‘Aunt Fostalina is very thin and soon she will begin to look like Father’s bones, drowning there on the bed and just waiting to die’ (155). This description of Fostalina is not only a harrowing depiction of her physical appearance as a corporeality caught somewhere between sickness and death, but a registration of the toxic extent of Fostalina’s obsession with her weight. This is underlined, too, in Darling’s naïve comparison of Fostalina’s efforts to lose weight by ‘walking and walking and walking… just in one place’ (148) to the continual walking of a Zimbabwean woman, MaDube, who lost her son: ‘MaDube used to walk like this too… That was because MaDube suffered from madness after they killed her son, Bornfree, but I don’t really know about Aunt Fostalina here, like what her issue is’. Aligning an obsessional focus on female weight and consumption with insanity recalls Naomi Wolf’s argument in The Beauty Myth that ‘Dieting is the most potent political sedative in women’s history; a quietly mad population is a tractable one’. In both, women’s consumption and appearance—their physical presence in the world—is subject to patriarchal control in order to control the women themselves. It is notable, too, that the wealthier characters of both We Need New Names and Behold the Dreamers are characterised by their slim physiques and by their whiteness. This is redolent both of Strings’ argument that racial ideologies ‘have been used to both degrade black women

and discipline white women" and of common misconceptions and historical inaccuracies in which anorexia nervosa has been configured as a disease which affects young white women exclusively. Arguably, Kate (the daughter of Darling’s wealthy white employer in We Need New Names) is representative of the latter: she endeavours to lose weight in a bid to alter her body composition after an ex-boyfriend suggests that she is ‘not sexy enough’. Darling says ‘I know that when she looks in the mirror she sees an ugly fat cow and that she hates her body because it’s not what it’s supposed to look like,’ the intricacies of which thought process she has found out by reading Kate’s diary, secreted away underneath her bed. It is unclear whether ‘ugly fat cow’ is Darling’s own phraseology or quoted verbatim from the daughter’s diary of self-loathing but to some extent, this is irrelevant: in either case, the effect is to create a synonymous alignment between ‘ugly’ and ‘fat’, reinforcing both the moralisation of different corporealties and a discourse of self-policing of the female body. A reverse configuration of this is also enacted in Behold the Dreamers when Neni describes Cindy as ‘slim and really good-looking’, as though the two concepts – slenderness and beauty – are symbiotic and inextricable. Darling considers this ‘expensive nonsense’, however: though her objections remain unvoiced due to her status in the service of Kate’s father, her perspective is focalised as she thinks ‘You have a fridge bloated with food so no matter how much you starve yourself, you’ll never know real, true hunger’.

As I have noted elsewhere (see Chapter 5), there is little textual evidence in Behold the Dreamers to suggest that Cindy does any sort of work: instead, she seems to be perpetually on her way to one social engagement or another, either with members of her family or with her equally well-off friends. In contrast to her apparent lack of career, however, Jende informs his wife that Cindy is ‘one of those food people’ (28), clarifying that these are ‘The people who teach other people how to eat… so they can look one way or not look another way’. The idea of a person who coaches others on how to eat is mystifying to Jende: ‘If you don’t know how to eat’, he asks, ‘what else can you know how to do in this world?’ Two issues are clearly at play here: the first, an instance of cultural clash between the USA and Cameroon, wherein the idea of ‘teaching’ someone how to eat well is fundamentally opposed to Jende’s definition of eating well (which centres around taste and preference and, therefore, requires that the individual accede to their own senses as opposed to the teachings of another person); and the second, an inability on Jende’s part to bear witness to the systemic control borne over the diets and consumption of women in an American context. Although Cindy herself is demonstrably in the thrall of these social mores – when she relates memories of her abusive mother, a painful recollection that stands out among them is having been called ‘fat’ – in occupying a position teaching people to ‘look one way or not look another way’, she perpetuates the values of and

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355 Strings, 2019, p. 6.
adherence to a patriarchal capitalist society, making money by exploiting the manufactured insecurities of her clients. This speaks once more to a Foucauldian framework in which citizens are so governed by the dynamics of power that they will also monitor their own behaviour accordingly: ‘So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary… in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers’.557

Furthermore, when Jende asks Clark Edwards later if his wife is unwell, this question is based on a perception of Cindy having lost weight: ‘I don’t know if it is the right thing for me to say, but it looked to me like she has lost some weight, so I just wanted to make sure that she is fine’ (206). Despite the fact that Jende himself equates weight loss cognitively with illness, when Clark tells him ‘You should tell her that she lost weight’ because ‘She’ll be glad to hear that,’ Jende agrees smilingly to do so. In principle, Jende believes that weight loss is ridiculous, and the moral position of the narrative appears to align with this perspective.558 It is a fundamentally warped society in which each time Cindy’s slenderness is commented upon in a positive light, it is because she has lost further weight as a result of external stressors and emotional upheaval; and in which she can remember clearly the hunger of her impoverished childhood – ‘Waiting in line with homeless people to enter food pantries… Eating rice and SPAM for almost every dinner’ – and yet still take pride in her slenderness as an adult.

**Gastropatriarchy**

I deploy the term ‘gastropatriarchy’ here in the manner outlined earlier in this chapter: as a means of conceptualising the particular ramifications of the patriarchal capitalist world-system’s infiltration of the domestic sphere upon female consumption. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu’s ‘discovery’ of race in the USA is integral to the novel’s trajectory: her experiences of discrimination on the basis of her skin colour (and, just as frequently, her hair type) are the foundational material for the blog that provides her with a creative and sociopolitical outlet, and that also acts as her primary income for several years of her life in the States. However, the blog is written from the perspective of a self-identified ‘Non-American Black’ – a Black person who enters the USA from the Afro-Caribbean diaspora – and, as such, it is explicitly preoccupied with the distinctions that can be made between the lives of ‘Non-American Blacks’ and ‘American Blacks’, and with the racial discriminations that are codified more generally within USA culture.

557 Foucault, 2019, p. 235.

558 It is worth noting that *Behold the Dreamers* was originally titled *The Longings of Jende Jonga* – such a title might have implied more primacy for Jende’s narrative, and therefore fewer opportunities for the focalisation of Neni’s perspective.
Ifemelu has two significant romantic relationships during her time in the USA: these are with Curt, the wealthy white American cousin of her employer, and Blaine, a Black American professor at a New England college. Since we know already that Ifemelu uses food as a means of both exploring and immersing herself in the culture of a new country (‘her summer of eating’ is that of her initial arrival in the USA), it stands to reason that she might also use food, however unconsciously, as a means of familiarising herself with the habits and character of her significant other. It is also undeniable that Ifemelu’s periods with Curt and Blaine serve, respectively, to educate her about aspects of American life to which she might not otherwise have had access, particularly in terms of the racialised dynamics of power; and, therefore, that the food she consumes is influenced both by her partners as people, and by the cultural and material situations to which they introduce her. Although in both relationships food is at various points imbued with a sense of the erotic – the coconut rice that Ifemelu cooks for Blaine on the night of their first sexual encounter, for example – my focus in this particular chapter is not upon the metaphorical sexualities of food, but upon its literal existence in romantic relationships and the ways in which it registers and shapes consumption.

Within Ifemelu’s relationship with Curt, food is imbued with eroticism and, perhaps more significantly, it tastes of an unfamiliar cultural freedom: a sensory registration of the increased access to the typical configuration of American life that Ifemelu is able to enjoy by virtue of having a white man as her lover and guide. As Curt leads her around, she learns mentally to configure herself as ‘a woman running in the rain with the taste of sun-warmed strawberries in her mouth’ (196), with all the connotations of the carefree that the position yields (and, furthermore, this acts as an indicator of the extent to which Ifemelu’s tastes are changing as a result of her situation in America: if we recall, she has already registered ‘the blandness of fruits’ (147) in America). This is also comparable with that previous instance with Ifemelu’s first housemates, in which she cannot comprehend the possibility of indulging a ‘want’ rather than a ‘need’. Curt embodies a masculinised white America: on their first date (‘an Italian restaurant in Old City’ (192), an area already imbued with connotations of the expensive) he compliments Ifemelu on eating ‘so delicately’ although she herself is aware of ‘nothing particularly delicate about her raising a fork to her mouth’. Such attentions to ‘the physical approach to the act of eating’ are reminiscent of Bourdieu’s approach in Distinction, relevant here particularly for its reference to ‘nibbling and picking, as befits a woman’. Bourdieu’s suggestions here are rooted in the logic of patriarchy. The study ‘I Don’t Want to be Sexist But…’ argues that socially- and self-inscribed discourses of gender attached to particular foods are reinforced by a denial that such discourses exist and a doubling down on

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559 Bourdieu, 2010, p. 188.
Researchers McPhail et al. asked participants to select foods that they considered ‘male’ or ‘female’ and found that – an initial reluctance to gender certain foods and meals notwithstanding – not only did participants suggest that women preferred meals that were prettier, fancier, and ‘delicate’, but that women and girls ate ‘lighter,’ more balanced meals comprised of healthy foods, with ‘weight, health and ‘lightness’ the overwhelming criteria for food designated ‘women’s’. Note, too, that moreover, Curt’s understanding of his stereotypically masculine role is here conflated with an implicit racial charge that he does not quite understand. Although Ifemelu is demonstrably not in agreement with his fundamental association of the feminine with ‘delicacy’ of portioning and of consumption, the fact that ‘she liked that he thought’ (197) this way is evidence of her complicity – conscious or otherwise – in the construction of her own identity as a woman according to the male preference.

If Ifemelu’s relationship with Curt is founded upon financial privilege and hedonistic pursuits (for example, jetting off to Paris at a moment’s notice), her relationship with Blaine centres around efforts to live to the fullest extent of ‘moral goodness’. Di Giovine and Brulotte note that although the literal consumption of food is an individual activity, ‘within… discrete social entities, food binds people together’ and we see this from the first instance of their meeting, when the initial frisson between them is substantiated over ‘the grainy fullness of beer’ (181). Ifemelu has, we are told, previously dismissed beer as ‘male alcohol, gruff and inelegant’; but through her conversation with Blaine and the sexual and romantic impulses it fosters, she decides that beer is a drink that she ‘could like’ after all. The modal construction of ‘could like’ is indicative of a conscious decision to change oneself or one’s preference; and thus, although the detailed sensorial description of the beer’s ‘grainy fullness’ lends weight to the suggestion of independently acquired taste, it is notable that Adichie places the greatest textual emphasis upon Blaine’s anecdotal accompaniment to the beer ‘about the first time he got truly drunk in his freshman year’. There is little doubt that it is the burgeoning attraction between the two (and Ifemelu’s explicit desire to impress Blaine, as when she performs derision with regard to the ‘women’s magazine’ that she had brought onto the train for reading material) that heralds Ifemelu’s changing tastes, as opposed to an immediately or organically felt preference.

Of course, we must note that the economic facility to purchase food conscientiously – to buy juice that is organic, ‘both stylish and salutary’ (177) – is an indicator of privilege. Here, Adichie’s text registers one of the primary criticisms of the Afropolitan movement: ‘While

361 Ibid. p. 480.
Afropolitanism may go some way in redressing the balance concerning Africans speaking for themselves, the problem lies in the fact that we still do not hear the narratives of Africans who are not privileged. Actually, as Carruth notes, individualised commitment to a certain ethical standard in terms of one’s food consumption is ‘surely no less an instance of commodity fetishism than the hurried purchase of a fast food meal’. Read in this way, Blaine’s attention to what is often termed ‘clean’ or ‘healthy’ eating (both problematic categorisations in and of themselves) in accordance with emergent fads becomes significantly less admirable. Though Ifemelu questions whether Blaine’s friends ‘who were so enraged about imported vegetables that ripened in trucks’ are serious in their criticisms (see Chapter 4), she does not consciously acknowledge the cognitive parallels between this concern and her own fear of ‘the chemicals that were sprayed on crops, the chemicals fed to chickens to make them grow quickly, and the chemicals used to give fruits perfect skin’. Repeating ‘chemicals’ threefold is suggestive of the urgency with which Blaine appears to have communicated the concern to Ifemelu and, by extension, the care with which he selects his own food for consumption. However, it is also relevant here to note that Blaine does not try overtly to change Ifemelu, at least in the first instance – instead, each time Ifemelu cultivates a new dietary taste (when she begins to alter her consumption of macronutrients, for example, ‘eating more protein than carbohydrates… because they improved her’) it posits a fundamental shift in the way that she perceives herself. Now, she is a ‘person who prioritises her protein intake’: an alteration to her diet which stems from a desire for perceived self-improvement. Dietary choices are a means of ‘improving’ herself (as Delind notes, ‘local food represents a vehicle for personal improvement’) – becoming worthy of both the man and, by extension, the social circles within which he is situated. ‘Local food and eating locally become both the symbol and substance for structural change from which flows enormous social and environmental benefit’ for Ifemelu – and although she is able to make detached observations about her own consumption and that of others, she is still absorbed in the efforts of self-improvement.

However, in addition to the moral dimensions of Blaine and Ifemelu’s food consumption, it is notable that many of the minutiae that form a life together – dates, sexual relationship, and even arguments – are enacted across a variety of alimentary events. During their courtship, Adichie’s narrative follows the two to ‘the falafel place on Howe Street for hummus’ – one of several instances in the novel in which a geographical location is referenced with street-level specificity, and which is therefore suggestive of Ifemelu’s increasing

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363 Dabiri, 2016, p. 105.
366 Ibid.
familiarity with the spatiality of America at a granular level – and ‘drinking chocolate that was too rich, eating croissants that were too grainily whole wheat’. Already, this speaks to what we might call the ‘gastropolis’\textsuperscript{567}, to borrow Annie Hauck-Lawson and Jonathon Deutsch’s term: the city in which a traditionally Middle Eastern street food becomes widely accessible, and a croissant (the flaky origins of which lie in Austria, while its more prominent associations lie with the French) is so commonplace as to be hardly worth remark. Once more, though the food itself is superficially second-fiddle to the burgeoning romance, it is a material gesture to the ‘melting pot’ of American society and the ever-increasing availability and fusion of new foods.

In fact, a common theme in these novels is the way in which female characters have a stronger awareness of American cultural paradigms than do their male counterparts; or, at least, that female characters make more concerted efforts to conform to the normative aesthetic standards encoded within those cultural paradigms. Notably, this is not restricted to migrant characters – both native citizens and those who arrive in the USA from elsewhere appear to have adopted the racialised patriarchal logic that dictates a preference for the slender female body, as we see in the characters of Aunt Fostalina and Kate in \textit{We Need New Names}. Such an observation aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s assertion that ‘The lives of women are connected and interdependent, albeit not the same, no matter which geographical area we happen to live in’,\textsuperscript{568} as it is connected to her arguments for the need in intersectional feminist work to know ‘differences and particularities’ so that ‘we can better see the connections and commonalities’.\textsuperscript{569} Sherrie A. Inness’ argument that ‘Kitchen culture is a critical way that women are instructed to behave like “correctly” gendered beings’\textsuperscript{570} and finds parallels in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s \textit{Nervous Conditions} (to which Bulawayo’s novel has been compared) when the young protagonist Tambu assists her female relatives in cooking for the family and finds that ‘it was comfortable to occupy the corner that… natural process had carved out for [her]’\textsuperscript{571}.

Throughout Bulawayo’s novel, Aunt Fostalina is preoccupied with her weight. For example, Darling’s Uncle Kojo ridicules Aunt Fostalina for her adherence to multiple diets, even stating that his mother has asked him to ‘please please please feed [his] wife’, as though Fostalina’s consumption is ultimately under Kojo’s control. That Kojo’s mother has said ‘don’t nah bring her here looking like this, you will embarrass us’ implies that a thin wife is supposed to be indicative of a husband who is unable sufficiently to provide for her in a material capacity;

\textsuperscript{567} \textit{Gastropolis: Food and New York City}, (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010).
\textsuperscript{568} Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2003, p. 521.
\textsuperscript{569} Ibid. p. 505.
an understanding which is reinforced by Darling’s observation that to be fat at home in Zimbabwe meant simply that ‘the person ate well’ (171), implying that the reverse – that to be thin meant somebody did not eat well – would also be true. The significance of Aunt Fostalina’s food consumption is thus extrapolated so that it has social and cultural weight for Uncle Kojo too: rather than being purely a matter of energetic bodily fuel or individual culinary taste, Fostalina’s food intake becomes either a threat to or a bolster for Kojo’s male ego, and thus also to his position in a patriarchal order. Because of this, Fostalina’s refusal to alter her consumption to satisfy Kojo becomes an act of rebellion against his attempt to exercise control as the household patriarch; but, as a rebellious act, it can never be wholly radical because Fostalina refuses to eat on the basis of American social conditioning which dictates an aesthetic preference for the slender body. Her refusal of Kojo’s Ghanaian sensibilities (and particularly those reinforced by the tears of his mother) is therefore really more evidence of the cultural divide between the two. In particular, such an interpretation is evidenced by Darling’s comment that ‘When they cook home food, even Aunt Fostalina will forget she is on a fruit diet’ (161); suggesting that Fostalina will contravene the Americanised social and dietary rules to which she has adapted, but only in order to experience the tastes of home. Again, this recalls Darling’s representation of her nostalgia for Zimbabwe as ‘hunger’ – Fostalina is similarly endeavouring to fill the cultural void evoked by migration by eating familiar foods and engaging in commensal behaviour with people who share her heritage. This reading is echoed in Fiona Moolla’s work, in which she argues that ‘food is forcing a realization about identity, belonging and ideas of home which may be specific to the nature of food and the cuisines they support rather than dependent on artificially created national borders’.572 These notions of identity are also inextricable from the ‘gendered social oppression of unrealistic physical ideals of female beauty’.573

I have established elsewhere in this thesis that Neni Jonga is rarely depicted in the act of eating in Behold the Dreamers, and I have argued, too, that this is due to the feminisation of domestic foodwork. Here, however, I identify Neni’s pregnancy as a moment of particular resonance in terms of the exercising of patriarchal control over the female body. As in We Need New Names and Americanah, Jende’s focalised perspective here suggests that fears surrounding ‘fat’ female bodies and women’s consumption are a peculiarly American trait:


573 Ibid. p. 17.
He could see her becoming needlessly terrified, especially now that her face had grown fat, her legs had grown fat, and her whole body looked like it would be fat for years to come. Which didn’t bother him. Didn’t bother him at all. But he knew that she thought he cared, which was why she bought all those magazines with skinny women on the cover and made sure she didn’t put too much palm oil in the food. Now she was talking about weight loss and calories and cholesterol and sugar-free this and fat-free that and stupid things no one in Limbe talked about. Now she was beginning to worry about nonsense. She was becoming a fearful wife. (198)

Key in this passage is the fact that Jende considers female concerns about body weight to be ‘stupid things no one in Limbe talked about’. At least as far as he is concerned, these issues have become pertinent to Neni only since moving to the USA; and they affect him only in the sense that Neni is also modifying her cooking for him by reducing her use of key sub-Saharan ingredients like palm oil. This latter observation is a subtle yet crucial Americanisation of Neni’s foodways based not on the cultural capital of a particular dish, but on its effects upon the body. Moreover, Jende’s dismissal of Neni’s concerns focuses solely on the fact that her weight does not bother him – as opposed to the notion that Neni’s physical appearance and corporeal experience should be determined based on her own preference and her own body. In doing so, he prioritises his perspective over that of his wife, and reinforces a patriarchal expectation of female subjugation to the male gaze.

Perhaps it is due partly to Jende’s inability to ascribe Neni total agency over her own body that she finds it so difficult to reverse her acculturation to a slender American aesthetic: when she prepares to return to Cameroon at the end of the novel, she decides that ‘She would have to give [Jende] no reason to move his eyes sideways… because motherhood had squeezed out the appeal from her breasts and drawn lines of exhaustion on her belly. Her body was no longer a marvel’ (349). In spite of the fact that the alterations to Neni’s body are the result of the natural hormonal fluctuations of pregnancy (arguably ‘a marvel’ in itself), she subscribes to the notion that her larger body makes her less attractive, and purchases multiple commodities (‘beauty creams and anti-aging moisturizers’ (348)) which she hopes will improve her visage and distract Jende from her changing body. She plans, moreover, ‘to lose five pounds in the coming month’ – setting herself aspirational targets focused solely around weight. Comparably, when Ifemelu returns to Nigeria in Americanah, she retains a new self-consciousness about her weight: like Neni, she is concerned about the negative effect that she believes this will have upon her attractiveness to the opposite sex and decides that she must lose weight before she is willing to reunite with Obinze (423). Even when these ideas are confronted and dismissed by Obinze (‘you’re not fat. You’re being very American about that’).
Ifemelu is unable to rid herself of her new weight consciousness. This is reminiscent of a moment in Dolly Alderton’s memoir *Everything I Know About Love* in which the author suggests that, although one ‘can develop a rational, balanced, caring attitude to weight’ following a damaging relationship with food, consumption, and weight, still ‘you can’t forget how many calories are in a boiled egg or how many steps burn how many calories’. Although Alderton represents here a specifically British (and notably white and wealthy) experience of anorexia and troubled relations with female consumption, this is still a useful evocation of foodways not only as behaviours, but as embodied knowledge which cannot be unlearned: as Neni and Ifemelu demonstrate, the adaptation of foodways is not easily reversible when women’s weight, appetite, and hunger is associated so closely with their social acceptance and perceived worth.

Neni’s pregnancy is also the only point at which Jende undertakes any aspect of the domestic role. He insists that Neni ‘eat the salmon and sardine dinners he made for her’ (172) on the basis that ‘fetuses whose mothers ate oily fishes grew up to be intelligent adults’ (173), and that she ‘wash her lettuce well before making salad’, lest untoward ‘germs’ bring harm to his unborn child (and note – ‘his’ child, not ‘their’ child, perhaps alluding to Bakweri patrilineal tradition). Such assertions are notable not only for the fact that Jende’s concern appears to be primarily – if not solely – for the child, rather than for his wife, but because it is only during pregnancy that Neni is able to forego any other domestic duties – resigning herself to a life in which she is not ‘a successful career woman like Oprah or Martha Stewart’. Martha Stewart’s name, in particular, is emblematic of a certain feminine domesticity marketed towards suburban America. The comparison is more notable still for the fact that Stewart has incurred criticism for promoting a classist environment in which women are required to ‘have it all’: to perform the affective care associated with the division of labour in the domestic sphere, in addition to maintaining a successful independent career. While Neni chooses role models who are able to sustain the precarious balance of public and private, she is herself forced to accede to her husband’s decisions regarding her body, relinquishing control of both her labour and consumption and, by extension, her agency within her home and marriage. Notably, Neni understands the imbalance of power between husband and wife in these scenarios as an unequivocally Cameroonian (or at least non-American) aspect of the marital relationship:

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574 An interesting note here is that Ifemelu’s friend, Ranyinudo, is described as ‘No longer a ropy mass of gangly arms and gangly legs, but now a big, firm, curvy woman, exulting in her weight and height’ (386) – and while Ifemelu finds Ranyinudo’s imposing presence ‘arresting’ and ‘attractive’, this does not appear to translate to her perception of her own size and weight.


later, she says to a friend ‘You think I’m an American woman? I cannot just tell my husband how I want something to be’, as though it is impossible for a Cameroonian woman to express desire (or, to recall this chapter’s structural thematic, appetite), never mind act upon such an impulse. The same friends also ridicule Neni for complaining now that her ‘husband [is] treating [her] like a queen’ – neglecting to realise that the sovereign power implied by the regal comparison is negated by the patriarchal structures codified in the marital relationship.

Conclusions

How are these women supposed to establish where they feel ‘at home’ if they are made to feel constantly ‘Other’? How can we dictate a binary opposition between ‘home’ and ‘not home’ if the nuances of ‘home’ are so indistinct; and if what it means to be ‘at home in the world’ differs for women because they are forced to be constantly dissatisfied? It means adhering to a certain socially acceptable body type, and to ‘the organs of mass culture’ which suggest that women ‘should prepare food for others but be wary of it ourselves’. Where Neni is swayed more easily by the normative aesthetic ideals for women perpetuated by American society – and adapts her consumption habits accordingly – Ifemelu does so in a manner that appears to be influenced more by curiosity and an impulse to explore. However, as Sherry B. Ortner summarises, ‘to break down the boundary between capitalism as a theoretically impersonal (and theoretically ungendered) economic system, and kinship/patriarchy as a separate and highly gendered sphere of intimate social life’ is to begin to understand ‘how capitalism infuses almost every aspect of intimate life’.

Effectively what we see in these novels underlines claims made by Crenshaw and others for the need for overlapping and intersecting forms of justice and activism in order to combat overlapping and intersecting forms of prejudice. Black African women who migrate to the USA are being inducted into a society that marginalises them on the basis of their gender, but that also designates them as Black and therefore, to borrow phraseology from Neil Lazarus’ reading of Frantz Fanon, ‘indelibly other, if not necessarily onto-genetically inferior’. The society into which these women attempt to acculture marginalises them not only as women, but as Black women – and for the latter, their own racial identification does not matter to their broader social categorisation. Food and food consumption are thus both evidence of the ways in which sub-Saharan African migrant women are subject to biopolitical control in these novels, and mechanisms of biopolitical control themselves.

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To return to the idea of hunger and appetite then I suggest that women’s consumption of food – and the way in which it is altered by forces external to the individual women themselves according to material situations and sociocultural experiences – can be read as indicative of the gendered and racialised dynamics of power in American society which marginalise women’s bodies and demand their acquiescence to a social milieu which is continually hostile towards them. Thus, Black migrant women are prevented from ‘maintaining layered sets of embodied relationships’\(^ {581} \) to place and to the food associated with particular places by the intersecting forms of prejudice they face. As Beth Dixon comments, then, ‘the wrong story about hungry women may effectively trump or interfere with our ideas about who has a fundamental right to be food secure. In this sense food justice is a fragile thing, depending as it does on the stories we tell about who is hungry and why’\(^ {582} \).

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\(^{581}\) Delind, 2006, p. 121.

Conclusion

…the truth of the matter is that, much as we might like to think of ourselves as spiritual, emotional beings, on some level at least we are cells, atoms, dirt, germs, matter. We are made of stuff. Something as resolutely physical as food – pure, heavy stuff, from dirt-caked potatoes to the chips on your plate – can’t feed, fuel or cure us or give us pleasure unless we, too, exist in that material world.583

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out during the last months of this project, wreaking social, political, and economic havoc on a global scale. As a result, many of us – particularly those of us located in the Global North – have been required to interrogate more closely the ways in which we understand individuality and community, and how we consider our ethical responsibilities to each other on local, national, and global levels.

Foodways have been affected, of course. Initial rumours regarding the outbreak insisted that it had originated from the consumption of a bat in a Wuhan wet market – a narrative which warped the (otherwise comparatively easily grasped) notion that ‘some groups eat, even relish, what other groups spurn and abominate’584 and perpetuated xenophobic discourses of racial difference and blame against Chinese and other Asian peoples which continue now.585 Throughout the pandemic thus far, we have witnessed food-based modulations from the slightly bizarre but seemingly benign (the mass purchase of flour for baking now that ‘Americans have been forced to confront a fundamental bargain that the food system had made on their behalf: The broad availability of prepared and processed foods means that a lot of people have no idea what they’re doing in the kitchen’586), to the profoundly disturbing (early research suggests that food insecurity among USA households is rising rapidly above pre-pandemic levels, particularly since already-insecure individuals were rendered disproportionately vulnerable to the social and economic impacts of the crisis).587 David Laborde et. al suggest that, while no major food shortages have yet emerged, supply chains face disruptions due to illness, labour shortages, and guidance regarding safe practice that directly impacts upon the operational processes of food businesses.588 Throughout this thesis,

I have argued that foodways are products of—and influences upon—material conditions and sociopolitical struggles; and that these conditions and these struggles are products of the capitalist world-system. It has never, I think, been clearer that—as Eric Holt-Giménez tells us with such precision, in a quotation to which I have already referred—‘The food system is unjust and unsustainable, but it is not broken. It functions precisely as the capitalist food system has always worked, concentrating power in the hands of a privileged minority and passing off the social and environmental ‘externalities’ to racially stigmatized groups’.589

In Chapter 2, I explored some of the facets of cookbooks as food narratives, interrogating them as projects that conceptualise and innovate food associated with particular cultures, and the ways in which these are texts both of the world and in the world. By reading food narratives—a term I use to evoke the merits of cookbooks as an explicitly literary form—for their efforts in interrogating notions of ‘home’ as well as decoding African culinary cultures for external parties, I suggested that experiences of diaspora and migration are epistemologically generative in terms of the production of culinary knowledge. Following this, in Chapter 3 I attended to Yaa Gyasi’s _Homegoing_, a novel of the African diaspora that is epic in its temporal and geographical scope, and throughout which foodways are an exceptionally useful tool for analysing the global pathways of people and commodities; and, moreover, for delineating the distinction I have drawn necessarily here between the experiences of Black African migrants in the USA, and those of Black American people. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 focused upon different thematic dimensions of the foodways within the same three novels: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s _Americanah_, NoViolet Bulawayo’s _We Need New Names_, and Imbolo Mbue’s _Behold the Dreamers_. Although this thesis works overall within a theoretical framework informed by my understanding of the world food system as part of (and integral to) the capitalist world-system, Chapter 4 moved to a more explicit focus upon the global supermarket. Here, I read scenes specifically centred in and around American supermarkets alongside more overarching discourses of the global circulation of food commodities and customs, arguing that within such narratives it is possible to read the constant modulation of migrant foodways and the significance of this to the formation of identity abroad. In Chapter 5, I narrowed my focus from the circulation and distribution of food to the deployment of domestic foodwork. I focused on both waged and unwaged domestic labour, and the particular resonances of both to a feminised migrant labour force subject to both the gendered and racialised violences of patriarchal capitalism. Once more, then, the implicit discourse is one of power relations, and the fundamental inequities upheld by a world-system predicated upon capitalist exploitation. Finally, in Chapter 6, I turned to sub-Saharan African migrant women’s

consumption as regulated and shaped by the gendered and racialised power dynamics of the capitalist world-system and, more particularly, in the contemporary context of the USA.

Throughout, then, I have read the discussion of literary foodways as one that is both implicitly and explicitly ‘worlded’. For the authors of the cookbooks I invoke, food becomes a means not only of communicating with one’s own culture, but of communicating one’s own culture with external parties; an exercise in storytelling which disrupts discourses of hegemonic power and invokes notions of ‘home’ and ‘belonging’. For characters in the novels of my study, food is simultaneously a means through which to assert and explore cultural identity (individual and collective) and a site of fraught and sometimes violent contestation; a source of energetic fuel for the body, and a mechanism of patriarchal control; a way of expressing affective care for loved ones, and a physical manifestation of the exploitation of one’s reproductive labour. Future study on literary foodways must account for this unique capacity of food as a medium to register multiple, divergent meanings simultaneously. Food sovereignty is defined as access to ‘healthy, affordable, and culturally appropriate food’; and if we are to find food for everyone that is ‘culturally appropriate’, then to acknowledge this polysemy is essential.

Sidney Mintz observes that ‘Earthy people and earthy cultures may vaunt how readily they accept bodily functions and dysfunctions as integral parts of our human natures; but in the West, at least, these things, whatever else they may be, are often seen as uncomfortable manifestations of our animality’. My final contention here is that those elements of our foodways which should make us truly uncomfortable are not the digestive nor the scatological; but the relentless unevenness and inequity of our world food system, and the extent to which we are willing to overlook its violences. Reading literary accounts of migration through the foodways of their characters should therefore give us pause for thought as we consider the possibilities for radical reform of the ways in which we eat – as well as something to chew on.

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