

THESIS

FOOD AND BLACK LIVINGNESS IN THE SOUTH CAROLINA MIDLANDS

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores how food, food spaces, and food sharing practices play a role in the lives of Black women in Newberry County, South Carolina. In particular, it explores how power relations take shape at the intersection of southern foodways and Black geographies via the everyday and intimate practices in the lives of Black women and their communities. Using ethnographic methods informed by Black feminist and community-engaged methodologies, I collaborated with community members in Newberry County over the summer and winter of 2023 to document and examine how plantation histories have impacted intergenerational knowledge sharing and feelings of personal and community empowerment, and how community members rely on themselves and one another, particularly through food sharing practices, to defy ongoing systematic oppressions. Using a critical and Black feminist approach, the first empirical chapter explores the connection between creativity and care work in food sharing practices when examined as an expression of aesthetic labor. Looking to Black geographies and Black feminist scholarship, the second empirical chapter explores how community members employ self-intimacy and spirituality as intimate strategies of resistance and liberatory world-build in and through food spaces. The motivation for this thesis came first and foremost from the desires of community members to document and preserve their knowledges, particularly those related to food and its impact on their lives and communities. This research is also intended to contribute to geographic and critical food literature by calling into question the ways in which much of southern foodways and southern foodways scholarship

have sought to erase Black geographies and, even more importantly, by centering Black life, livingness, and sense of place in food spaces.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this ethnographic and community-engaged thesis is to examine and document the food sharing practices of Black women in Newberry County, South Carolina, and their understanding of the role of food, food spaces, and food sharing in their lives. Drawing from ethnographic interviews, participant observation, archival data, and written word, this research seeks to illuminate personal and communal approaches to food and food sharing and more broadly understand how power relations shape and are shaped through everyday and intimate practices in the lives of Black women and their communities.

The development of research questions addressed in this thesis was motivated by community members' desires to document and examine how plantation histories have impacted intergenerational knowledge sharing and feelings of personal and community empowerment, and how community members rely on themselves and one another, particularly through food sharing practices, to defy ongoing systematic oppressions. Using a critical and Black feminist approach, this thesis explores the connection between creativity and care work in food sharing practices when examined as an expression of aesthetic labor (Chapter 2). It also highlights how community members use self-intimacy and spirituality as intimate strategies of resistance and liberatory world-building in and through food spaces (Chapter 3).

Context of Study

Fieldwork for this study took place across Newberry County, South Carolina, a rural county in the South Carolina Midlands, focusing on the towns of Prosperity and Pomaria and the city of Newberry. Throughout history and even today, research and archives on Black life and

food in South Carolina have focused predominantly on the Lowcountry (Harris 2009; White 2015; Derickson 2022; c.f. McCutcheon 2021), leaving stories from the Midlands and other regions underexamined and untold in the literature. According to community members, this lack of archives and literature in other parts of the state, particularly, in this case, the Midlands, is detrimental to Black knowledge preservation and, as a result, feelings of community identity. Thus, this thesis is meant to contribute to the record of Black life and knowledge in the Midlands according to what community members wish to document, and is also meant to contribute to the expansion of critical analysis of South Carolina foodways from the Lowcountry to the Midlands.

Studies of Black geographies across the South, in places like Newberry County, are important for critiquing the "historical, social, political, and economic processes of racialization" in the region and beyond (Bledsoe, Eaves, and Williams 2017: 7). According to community members, these processes are reflected in issues of food and housing insecurity, loss of land to eminent domain, fear of police violence, a problematic public admiration for the county's plantations, and a silencing of Black life and voice in public archives, among other things. However, Bledsoe, Eaves, and Williams (7) also point out that the "innovative practice of Black survival and resistance [have] been inseparable from the production of southern spaces." The same is the case in Newberry County; just as plantation legacies are living and apparent today, the county and many of its spaces are continuously influenced by Black community members' collective resilience and resistance of racial violence and injustice (See Jones 2019).

This research focused foremost on the lives, knowledges, and everyday practices of Black women. Still, research occurred across food sharing sites around Newberry County (e.g., food banks, restaurants, group dinners, and community gardens) and with community members connected to and through these sites. Before pursuing thesis research, I had completed other

ethnographic research projects in Newberry County, through which I began to form relationships with participants in this project and began to learn about their desires for future projects. Most prominently, Black community members, particularly women, desired a public platform to document their food stories. This research, therefore, serves to do just that while demonstrating how community members' food sharing efforts, including their efforts to document, archive, and pass on stories about food for generations to come, make for southern futures that are "more sustainable and socially just" (Graves & Alderman 2017: 291).

Theory

In this thesis, I work through the lenses of Black feminist theory, critical food studies, and Black geographies. In this section, I include a broad overview of these interdisciplinary fields and discuss their relevance to my work with community members in Newberry County.

Black Feminisms

Black feminisms, as Patricia Hill Collins (1990/2000: xi) refers to it, are a "social justice project" that promote the empowerment of Black women and their communities against the intersectional violence of an "imperialist, capitalist, patriarchal society" (hooks 1984/2000: 92). They speak to and provide the tools for individual and collective knowledge and action to challenge the structures that suppress Black voice and livingness, reinforce political and economic inequities, and perpetuate Black placelessness through "geographic domination" (McKittrick 2006: xii). In this thesis, I rely on Katherine McKittrick's (2006: x) definition of geography: "space, place, and location in their physical materiality and imaginative configurations." In other words, Black feminisms are a liberatory strategy that focuses on Black women's scholarship and activism to communicate ways in which Black women, their communities, and their allies can build a better today and a "richer and more possible tomorrow"

(Lorde 1984: 54) in a “world where all people can live fully and well” (hooks 2009: 5) by being attuned to what McKittrick (2021a) refers to as a “black sense of place.”

The Combahee River Collective (1977) explains that the transformative potential of Black feminism begins with a “healthy love” for self, sister, and community; only then can Black feminists “continue [their] struggle and work.” Audre Lorde (1984, 1988) elaborates on the radicalism of this love, explaining that generations of violent structures put in place by a white hetero-patriarchy have disconnected women, and especially women of color, from a sense of self and therefore ostracized people from their internal power; thus, self-care is “not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare” (Lorde 1988: 130). Note that ‘self,’ here, is not strictly individual. The ‘self’ within these literatures is understood as relational, as intrinsically connected to human and non-human communities. As Ezinwanne Tooohukwu Odozor (2022: 252) puts it, “the self and other are inherently linked,” and beyond this, Black women’s fates and liberations are bound together (Quashie 2001; hooks 2009; brown 2017, 2019; Simpson 2017; June 2020; Thompson 2023; Donovan & Moss 2017). Therefore, radical love and self-care are political strategies that provide the guidance, structure, and energy for Black feminist mobilization through strategies like aesthetic labor (McKittrick 2021a; See Chapter 2), the erotic (Lorde 1984; See Chapter 3), and testifying (Toliver 2020; See Chapter 3).

As a framework that highlights intersectional oppression, Black feminism critiques white feminist disregard for the particular experiences of women of color (Collins 1990/2000; hooks 1984/2000) and calls for white scholars seeking to be allies in decolonial social justice efforts to “think with” Black scholars, including those with whom we work and perform research (Courtney 2017; Penniman 2022). Drawing upon these literatures positioned me to partner with community members and explore how they are tapping into radical love and care to challenge

plantation legacies and foster a sense of place.

Critical Food Studies and Black Food Geographies

In this thesis, I draw upon critical food scholarship to further think with Black feminist theory and to better understand and more accurately relay the "different geographic stories" told by Black community partners that communicate life, liberation, resistance, and a sense of place in contrast to white narratives that attempt to communicate Black life as placeless (McKittrick 2006: x). Jones (2019: 909) regards critical food scholarship as that which explores "food as a medium through which power, privilege, and identities are (re)produced, negotiated, and/or resisted through relationships." A major focus of critical food studies is how food and food spaces create gendered and racialized realities and act as spaces of oppression and empowerment across the African diaspora. Moulton and Salo (2022: 160) explain that a focus on Black poetics of space, including "stories, recipes, [and] food practices," expose structures of oppression—such as "cultural appropriation, Black land thefts, and the system production of racialized food insecurity"—while also highlighting and celebrating Black world-building practices by, for example, elucidating "rich culinary heritage, economies of care, and technical knowledge vital to agrarian success." This thesis, then, looks to Black poetics of space to expose the failures of racialized food systems while also highlighting the life-giving labor, knowledges, and creative works of community members that (re)claim food spaces and build better futures through food sharing.

Black feminist playwright, poet, and food scholar Ntozake Shange (1998: 103) reminds us that food is "the ultimate implication of who [Black people] are" and is, therefore, a powerful tool in connecting with self, claiming space, and resisting those structures that seek to suppress Black life. Black life and knowledge have been continuously denied in food spaces through, for

example, systematic political and economic failures that lead to nutrition insecurity and lack of perceived agency (e.g., Jones 2019; Reese and Cooper 2021), stereotyping that denies Black women’s culinary ownership and scholarship and perpetuates narratives of subservience (e.g., Williams-Forson 2006; Tipton-Martin 2015; Nettles-Barcelón et al. 2015), a barring of Black voices in culinary archives which, consequentially, makes forming connections with one’s self and community more difficult (Sharpless 2013; Twitty 2017), and racial surveillance which contributes to the slow violence of generational racial trauma (Jones 2019). By reflecting on how food binds communities of family, friends, ancestors, animals, land, ideas, and feelings—and therefore informs and empowers understandings of the self—Shange demonstrates how understanding and embracing the role of food in identity for Black communities is an integral part of finding communal and individual power.

Likewise, Toni Tipton-Martin (2015: 2) coins the “Jemima Code” as the arrangement of images and messages meant to portray Black women cooks as "passive and ignorant laborers incapable of creative culinary artistry" and to "classify the character and life's work of our nation's black cooks as insignificant.” In this same text, however, she opposes the Jemima Code and reinvigorates an archive that has historically challenged Black visibility by compiling entries of Black culinary scholarship dating back to 1827 that demonstrate Black creativity, individuality, and skill. Power relations in food, food sharing practices, and food spaces, then, are complex and embedded with traumatic plantation histories but also can also be empowering and life-giving.

Further illustrating the power of food in Black world-building practices, White (2018: 72) explains that Fannie Lou Hamer’s Freedom Farms reclaimed land in the rural South, despite constant political and economic pushback, to develop “an agricultural cooperative that would

meet the food and nutritional needs of the county’s most vulnerable,” in addition to providing housing, healthcare, education, and other social services, to “achieve collective agency and community resilience.” Priscilla McCutcheon (2021: 889) documents the material and spiritual liberation of Black Christian communities working in food and agrarian spaces “in the midst of and oftentimes in spite of” the trauma experienced through these spaces. This work, informed by the tenets of Black liberation theology, has included providing an immediate response to hunger, fostering community land ownership, and dreaming in the Black radical tradition, among others.

The ways that power relations manifest in and through food spaces, as made evident by critical food scholarship, is only made more apparent through the lived experiences of community members in Newberry County. Interweaving Black feminism, critical food studies, and Black geographies helps inform my understanding of the structural inequities of food realities in Newberry County, but more importantly, informs my understanding of how community members draw upon philosophies of radical care to reclaim food, food sharing, and food spaces as liberating.

Methodology

Centering participants and working to support the needs and desires of community members is foundational to this research. Therefore, in this thesis, I weave together Black feminist and community-engaged methodologies to remain critically aware of positionality within the project and in relation to the community. These methodologies guide my use of ethnographic methods, which included participant observation, unstructured interviewing, semi-structured interviewing, archival analysis, and journaling. In this section, I discuss why these methodologies are critical to this research and how they inform my approach to this work.

Black feminist and community-engaged scholars emphasize the importance of attending

to relational and embodied knowledge production as a life-affirming practice and the need to challenge dominant narratives about knowledge production that have deepened hierarchies of “knowing” and suppressed Black livingness (Lorde 1984; Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006; Simpson 2017; McKittrick 2021a; Liboiron 2021). In essence, a combined Black feminist and community-engaged approach insists upon being attuned to a “black sense of place”: the “collaborative praxis” and “diasporic-plantocratic-black geography that reframes what we know by reorienting and honoring *where* we know from” through embracing relationality through encounter and unraveling prevailing racist narratives (McKittrick 2021a: 106-107, emphasis original). For this thesis, this has meant centering participant knowledges above all in data collection, analysis, and the presentation of results.

Further, and especially as it pertains to this research, Black feminist researchers have encouraged greater reflexivity from white feminist researchers in the social sciences, whose uncritical look at power has historically reinforced Western science’s uplift of white “knowing” as most valid (Lorde 1984; Collins 1990/2000; McKittrick 2021a; Liboiron 2021; Maynard & Simpson 2022). As a white feminist scholar working primarily with Black women in a majority Black community, it is deeply important that I center community knowledge, remain critical of the space I take up in this project and in the community, and embrace the relational and collaborative production of knowledge that forms the foundation of, and continues to shape, this research. This centering is particularly important as I am a former resident of the South Carolina Midlands, having received all the privileges of growing up white in the South, and community members attest to the suppression of their and their ancestors’ knowledge in the public record.

These methodologies have proven critical throughout this research. First, as mentioned, the creation of this project was inspired by existing community desires. Additionally, identifying

sites and potential participants was done through the guidance of community members. Throughout data collection, I participated in autoethnographic journaling to reflect upon and complicate how I understand my relationships with the county, the research sites, and community members as collaborators. Further, data analysis was guided by the input of community members. For instance, in addition to sending drafts to community members to ensure an accurate portrayal of the knowledges they shared, communication with community members also directly influenced methods of analysis, leading me to look to testimony as a methodology that encourages, instructs, and enlivens social justice efforts via storytelling (Toliver 2022) (See Chapter 3). Finally, we looked to scholars who speak to the importance of participant choice in being named in research as a way to further emphasize participant ownership over the knowledges they have produced and shared (Cahill, Quijada Cerecer, and Bradley 2010; Jerolmack & Murphy 2017; Weiss & McGranahan 2021). Accordingly, participants in this project chose whether they preferred to be named in data collection and reporting. Community members who contributed to this project and chose to be identified by name include: Birdell Dennis (Newberry), Gloria Glasgow (Newberry), Norma “Fajra” Donaldson-Jenkins (Newberry), Judy Sanders (Newberry), Cynthia Worthy (Newberry), Shelvy Ham (Pomaria), Tia Devette (Newberry), Jason Devette (Newberry). Many others—such as John Glasgow (Newberry), Jeff Ham (Pomaria), Lillie Bates (Newberry), Peggy Winder (Newberry), Mary Lovelace (Prosperity), and Alicia Klauk (Prosperity)—also chose to be named in data collection. Although their testimonies were not directly quoted in this thesis, their knowledges were invaluable in its formation. Further, countless other community members contributed through casual conversation or brief interaction to my understanding of life in Newberry County.

Due to the limited nature of a master’s thesis (and research in general) and my

positionality in this research and within this community, this thesis can never fully do justice to the realities of the community members. Nevertheless, I hope that taking this approach has created a body of work that benefits the community and the literatures it is situated within.

Thesis Organization

This thesis includes four chapters: this introduction (Chapter 1), two body articles (Chapter 2 & 3), and a conclusion (Chapter 4). Chapter two examines how community members' creative efforts and care work come together in food sharing practices and are integral in the struggle against processes of racialization in Newberry County. Specifically, we look to Katherine McKittrick's (2021a) concept of aesthetic labor, which explains that Black consciousness is inherently effortful, to highlight "legacy cooking," a term used by community members, passed down from their ancestors, as a praxis that supports Black life in Newberry County through labor, artistry, and culinary prowess. Chapter three brings together two testimonies by community members to look at intimacy as a practice of resisting oppression and building better and more liberatory worlds. In particular, the chapter examines how practices of "blossoming" (a self- or interior-focused form of intimacy, highlighted in one testimony) and "ministry" (a spiritually motivated promotion of communal intimacy, in the other testimony) are enacted through food, food spaces, and food sharing practices as tools for self and community liberation. Overall, while the motivation for this thesis came first and foremost from the desires of community members, I hope it will also contribute to geographic and critical food literature by calling into question the ways in which much of southern foodways and southern foodways scholarship have sought to erase Black geographies, and more importantly, by centering Black life, livingness, and sense of place in food spaces.

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CHAPTER 2. “*THIS IS LEGACY COOKING*”: FOOD SHARING AS BLACK WOMEN’S AESTHETIC LABOR IN NEWBERRY COUNTY, SOUTH CAROLINA

Reagan Ross and Carrie Chennault

Introduction

On December 9th, 2023, 14 women gathered around the dining table at Birdell Dennis's home in the city of Newberry. That night, Birdell hosted the second biannual Women’s Table, a passion project dreamt up and maintained by her and her cousin. Upon entry, the home was intricately decorated with all the holiday trappings and smelled of warm spices and candles. The guests were welcomed into a place of whole-person nourishment and comfort, and their energy reflected that of the home—the women in attendance extended a warm embrace of one another through laughter, storytelling, and deep listening. The crowd spanned generations, and at the table, the women gathered to learn from one another. They celebrated recent accomplishments, asked for wisdom, and offered lessons, revelations, and encouragement. This learning extended into lighthearted fill-in-the-blank games of old sayings and holiday phrases. Birdell then opened dinner with a poem she had written that recalled her childhood Christmas mornings: biscuits with butter and jelly, the smell of firewood upon which a pot of grits is cooking, and an old frying pan “inviting the fish to come on in.” The poem ends with an insistence that these memories must be held on to, and the culinary gifts from great-grandparent to grandparent to parent to child must now be paid forward. She writes, “The legacy of black cooking lives on.” Then, dinner is served.

Settings like this—spaces created around food by Black women in Newberry County, a rural county in the South Carolina Midlands—were the primary field sites of the ethnographic

and community-engaged research presented in this paper. In these spaces, community members engage in what they refer to as “legacy”: the preservation, sharing, and expression of skill, artistry, knowledge, power, care, resistance, and the lived, embodied knowing that coincides with Black southern cooking. Food sharing at the Women’s Table and at restaurants, food pantries, churches, and home kitchens makes visible the presence, importance, and impact of “legacy” cooking for Black life. Moments like these, gathering around the dining table to intentionally learn from one another, are the crux of what maintains and spreads this knowledge, this way of being together, and this way of supporting one another with and through food.



Figure 2.1. Side dishes, including (starting top left, going clockwise) stewed tomatoes, mac and cheese, dressing, cranberry sauce, beets, collards, string beans, corn pudding, sweet potato pudding, and gravy at the Women’s Table. Photo by Reagan Ross.



Figure 2.2. A full plate of food at the Women’s Table, accompanied by sweet tea and a parting gift of mints and chocolates. Photo by Reagan Ross.

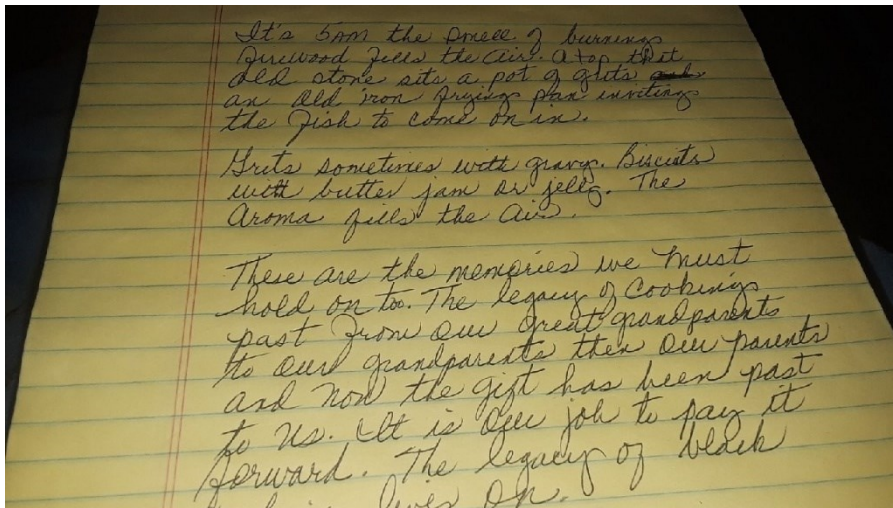


Figure 2.3. The poem read by Birdell at the Women’s Table to open dinner. Photo provided by Birdell Dennis.

Yet, according to dinner guests and other community members in Newberry County, the legacy of Black cooking has received little to no documentation or recognition by the broader

public, which they have pointed out is detrimental to the general public's understanding, appreciation, and respect for the creative labor that goes into producing spaces of Black life and liberation through food sharing. So, in partnership and following community members' goals for documentation, we began by asking, "What is the meaning, according to Black women in Newberry County, of food sharing in their lives?" More broadly, we ask how we, as scholars, can not only document legacy cooking in places like Newberry County but also make sense of how such food sharing practices produce and reflect what Hawthorne (2019: 2) refers to as the "complex spatialities of Black life, oppression, resistance, and radical imagination?"

Black food geographers have highlighted the histories of collective and radical care work to meet people's basic needs amid racialized inequalities embedded in United States food systems (Reese 2019; Reese and Cooper 2021; Hassberg 2020; Hobart and Kneese 2020; Ramirez 2020; Richard-Greaves 2020; White 2018), while also attending to the importance of "embodied food experience and knowledges" for advancing food justice (Jones 2019; Chennault 2019). At the same time, food studies scholars have documented the lives, recipes, and culinary traditions of Black women to establish their definitive role as cultural producers, culinary authors, and creatives, pushing back against stereotypes in food scholarship and society more broadly that attempt to diminish and obscure their culinary prowess and cultural impact (Shange 1998; Williams-Forsen 2006; Sharpless 2013; White 2015; Tipton-Martin 2015).

Less often, though, are Black women's *creative* efforts—including, in the context of this case study, the work to celebrate and spread legacy cooking—considered in relation to the *care* work that is central in the struggle against food injustice. In this paper, we make the case for aesthetic labor, a term developed by Katherine McKittrick (2021a) that recognizes Black consciousness as inherently effortful, to highlight the connection between creativity and care in

legacy cooking and understand why it matters to Black life. While this paper focuses on Black women's aesthetic labor, we acknowledge the role of Black men in the community also as practitioners and torchbearers of legacy cooking. Indeed, several women community members reflected on grandfathers, fathers, husbands, sons, and nephews as pivotal to their own understanding of legacy and as eager students of these lessons. The decision to highlight women's role in legacy cooking responds to community members' and other scholars' call to challenge historical and contemporary narratives that minimize Black women's knowledge and culinary prowess. Before diving into the case study, we first locate ourselves and our methodological approach in relation to the study. Then, in the next section, we ground this study of legacy cooking in the literature on Black aesthetics and aesthetic labor, followed by the testimonies from community members that reveal legacy cooking as aesthetic labor in Newberry County, South Carolina.

Black Feminist and Participatory Methodologies

The research and writing of this paper were led by Reagan Ross, a graduate student at Colorado State University, together with her thesis advisor, Carrie Chennault. Reagan was born and raised in the South Carolina Midlands, only a thirty-minute drive to Newberry County where, throughout her childhood, she often visited to spend time in nature and visit farms and farmers markets. While an undergraduate student, also in South Carolina, Reagan was involved in multiple research projects on local food systems in Newberry County, during which time she was welcomed into relationships with the women who motivated the primary research question of this study. Beyond the scope of those projects, several community members she met desired a more public platform to document, preserve, and share their food stories. From there, Reagan's thesis project emerged, with data collection, analysis, and this presentation of findings following

the community member's suggestions. Dr. Chennault also has a background in participatory action research and has written on Black women's placemaking practices amidst conditions of antiracism in the US Midwestern city of Dubuque, Iowa (Chennault 2019, 2021, 2023). Following scholars who call for greater reflexivity in the social sciences, including and sometimes particularly from white feminist researchers such as ourselves (Lorde 1984; Collins 1990/2022; Frost and Elichaooff 2014; McKittrick 2021a; Catungal and Dowling 2021; Liboiron 2021), we center community knowledge and insight first throughout this project—in development of research questions; data collection; analysis of text, imagery, interviews, and data broadly; and in the preparation, presentation, and publication of findings.

Black feminist and decolonial scholars have cautioned that an uncritical look at power and place in geography, anthropology, and science more broadly reinforces narratives of white dominance; an absence of reflexivity and criticism of traditional paradigms in Western science uplifts white “knowing” as more valid than that of non-white scholars and community members who are involved in research (Lorde 1984; McKittrick 2021a; Liboiron 2021). Moreover, a history of uncritical stances on how southern foodways are often publicly celebrated has silenced Black knowledges and suppressed Black livingness (Nettles-Barcelón et al. 2015; Williams-Forson 2006; Tipton-Martin 2015). In response, the methods taken on by this research project approach participants as partners in a co-production of relational knowledge that centers community members' scholarship and life at the forefront.

Yet, more than merely challenging who produces knowledge, a Black feminist approach points toward a different knowledge system altogether—a methodology attuned to a “black sense of place” (McKittrick 2021a: 106-107):

A black sense of place draws attention to geographic processes that emerged from

plantation slavery and its attendant racial violences yet cannot be contained by the logics of white supremacy. A black sense of place is not a standpoint or a situated knowledge; it is a location of difficult encounter and relationality. A black sense of place is not individualized knowledge—it is collaborative praxis. It assumes that our collective assertions of life are always in tandem with other ways of being (including those ways of being we cannot bear). A black sense of place always calls into question, struggles against, critiques, undoes, prevailing racist scripts. A black sense of place is a diasporic-plantocratic-black geography that reframes what we know by reorienting and honoring *where* we know from.

Putting this life-affirming and relational practice to work, we implemented two primary methods of data collection to center Black women's knowledges and collaborative praxis: semi-structured interviewing and unstructured interviewing by way of participant observation. Sites of participant observation were first selected based on previous relationships with community members who guided Reagan to locations and activities where she could contribute to the community and simultaneously get involved with a broader network of folks. These first two sites were the Living Hope Foundation (LHF) Food Bank and the Pomaria Community Food Bank (PCFB). Ultimately, community guidance resulted in exploring more sites and activities around the county: a community garden; trips to community members' homes to deliver food; a meeting at the local library for local food bank leaders; the downtown scenes of Newberry, Prosperity, and Pomaria; a local history museum; and more. To provide further context of the historical underpinnings that inform community members' lived experiences and sense of place, we also reviewed archival data to better understand life past and present in Newberry County, specifically regarding the history of racism and struggles against it, as well as food sharing practices.

Participants were asked about their preference to be referred to by name or pseudonym in data collection and reporting. If a participant wished to claim ownership of their knowledge by retaining their name in the study (which almost all did), we honored that choice. Additionally,

participants were invited to provide comments and feedback on the original draft of this manuscript. Coinciding with goals to challenge the ways that Black women's scholarship has been portrayed in food studies, the social sciences, by white feminist scholars, and society, it was deeply important for participants to drive the research process and outcomes, including which knowledges they chose to share (and not share) and how that knowledge is represented.

Aesthetic Labor and Food

For more than 400 years, “Black aesthetics”—or the “rebelliously enthusiastic,” life-affirming praxis and products of creative expression—have demonstrated how Black consciousness subverts European colonial systems of knowledge that deny Black humanity (McKittrick 2021a: 153-154). Situated within sites of “difficult encounter and relationality,” (2020: 106), Black aesthetics build a world otherwise, providing “the conditions for action, activity, organising, creating” (2021: 11). To name a few expressions, Black aesthetics has been linked to music, narrative, poetry—like the poem written by Birdell for the holiday women's table (Figure 2.3)—photography, film, theater, visual art, research methodologies, and creation of place in home, funerals, and parties (hooks 1995; McKittrick 2021a). McKittrick (2021a) makes clear, though, that Black consciousness is inherently effortful, especially in rewriting narratives of life in opposition to narratives of death that, for most of the white Western world, dominate thought on what it means to be Black. Aesthetic labor—the artful, enthusiastic effort to promote, create, and insist upon life and liberation—“provides the conditions to imagine and live who and what” Black folks are outside of colonial narratives (McKittrick 2021a: 70). It entails effortful, collaborative, intensely personal, political, and radical ways of being that exist in opposition to settler-colonial lifeways which work to suppress Black creativity and life (68).

Food, to our knowledge, has not been included in theorizations and discussions of

aesthetic labor. Yet, we see aesthetic labor as connecting care work and creative expression, pulling together two strands of literature on Black women and food in the United States that are less often in direct conversation: Black food geographies and food studies scholarship within cultural studies. Black food geographies examine structural racialized inequities in the food system, place-based struggles against food apartheid, and efforts toward food justice. Reese and Cooper (2021: 453) articulate the centrality of Black women’s care work to food justice, arguing that “if Black feminisms are lights that help us imagine new ways of being and relating, then how we think about and enact care is the energy that animates those lights.” Care labor is a collective response to racial capitalism and structural inequity, guided by a Black feminist ethics of care rooted in the transformative uplift of those struggling under oppression (Hobart and Kneese 2020: 1; Reese and Cooper 2021; Quizar 2024; Neely and Lopez 2022). As one notable example, civil rights activist Fannie Lou Hamer founded Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County, Mississippi, creating an agrarian space for Black people to take collective ownership of the land and be self-sufficient in a way that was independent of systems of state care fueled by racial capitalism and patriarchal, oppressive iterations of “care.” Freedom Farm relied on the interdependent care of one another, supporting economic, political, and social liberation, all while focusing on the nourishment of Black bodies (McCutcheon 2019; White 2018).

To date, there has been less explicit exploration in Black food geographies on creativity—on cultural production as such—as a component of care work, or consideration of what creative expression might mean for food justice. Van Sant (2015: 24-25) does weave together cultural geography and food studies, writing about Black South Carolinian cookbook authors’ alternative visions of the Lowcountry and its cuisine, including a chef who practices

cooking as a “dynamic art” and a Gullah home cook whose “demanding but equally rewarding tasks of growing, gathering, and preparing countless meals” is a “product of communal labor and knowledge.” Jones’ (2018, 2019) community engagement and food justice research, in its focus on somatics, healing, and embodied pedagogies, also directly invokes creative expressions, even if not named as such. Though perhaps more obvious in the context of the labor and aesthetics of writing recipes, cooking, or teaching embodied food pedagogies, we argue that other examples like Freedom Farm also fall within this conversation as they were creatively imagined and curated spaces. In short, we see room for this literature to examine the role of Black creative expression in producing the conditions to collectively struggle for food justice.

Whereas Black food geographers emphasize material and embodied resistance to structures of inequality through solidarity and care labor across a range of sites—from the cooperative farm to the community garden, grocery store, kitchen, and food pantry—scholars in food studies provide deeper insight into the consciousness of food, recipes, chef work, restaurant creation, and dining experiences that are central to Black cultural production. Williams-Forsion (2006), for example, has critically examined the role of traditional foods, such as chicken, in Black women’s livelihoods—as formative of individual and collective agency, consciousness, community building, culture, and identity. Williams-Forsion asks us not to consider the stereotypical stories told about these foods in Black life but instead to consider the stories Black people themselves have to share (or have already shared). She examines the cultural sites and complex power relations from which these stories emerge, where agency is created, and where food, memory, and power intersect, such as cookbooks and even artwork focused on food. Flipping the narrative, foods like chicken can come to be seen as an element of Black resistance, agency, and identity. Tipton-Martin (2015) expands on this discussion by speaking to the history

of the “Jemima Code,” or a set of language and visualizations that generate the stereotypical “mammy.” Regarding cookbooks produced by Black scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, she explains that in the face of a historic silencing and trivializing of Black food scholars, these works embraced Black individuality and authenticity in food sharing; celebrated culinary origin, food scholarship, and creativity; and deliberately emphasized “personal narrative and reflection” (109-111, 159-161). Articulating the importance of first-hand narrative, Shange (1998: 3) powerfully explains what food means for Black identity, place, and satisfaction, stating, “[t]hese perusals of history, literature, vernacular, culture, and philosophy, ‘long with absolutely fabulous receipts (Charlestonian for recipes), are meant to open our hearts and minds to what it means for black folks in the Western Hemisphere to be full.”

More recently, a collective of community activists, academics, and chefs came together in co-authorship to challenge dominant narratives associated with Black women who work with food, asserting that “Black women do talk back in the kitchen!” (Nettles-Barcelón et al. 2015: 35). Chef Gillian Clark, for instance, defies white people’s expectations of Black women, bringing out her own pure personality, which is serious and contemplative, when cooking. Gillian has even been labeled a “sourpuss chef” who “mistreats customers” just for running her kitchen with the same strict standards as any white chef (36-37). Her co-author Thorsson explains the power of the embodiment of a recipe on page, insisting that food demands the same consideration as jazz music has received in Black literary studies (43), a goal that we feel aesthetic labor is primed to do. In short, food studies scholarship shows how Black women are contributing to the long tradition of Black aesthetics, revealing food and food work “as artisanal, complex, and imbued with the histories of where [they] have been and what [they] are striving to become” (46).

Field Site, Background, and Context

Newberry County is a rural county located in the Midlands of South Carolina, home to the city of Newberry and the towns of Prosperity and Pomaria, which were sites of this research. Beginning in 1749, the area was settled by Scotch-Irish, English, and German immigrants (Pope 1973). As across much of the South, with the cotton gin's introduction in the late 18th century, the number of farms in Newberry County decreased and the economy increasingly transitioned to a plantation agriculture system reliant upon chattel slavery (Pope 1973). The introduction of the railroad in Newberry County in 1851—which still runs through the area today—also contributed to this transition by allowing Newberry to become “the leading inland cotton market of South Carolina” (viii). Reflecting these changes, in 1790, the county had a population of 9,342, which included 1,444 enslaved people (Hollis 1974: 53), and by 1860, the population totaled 7,000 white people (including 937 slaveholders) and 13,695 enslaved people (54).

Critical analysis of South Carolina history is generally absent in local archives—as reflected in our reviews of collections within food-related archives of the Newberry County Museum, food- and political-economy-related selections from the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, the South Caroliniana Cookbook Collection from the Digital Collections of the University of South Carolina Libraries, as well as sleuthing online and at local institutions like town halls. Among these sources, little surfaced that took a deep dive into the realities of Black life in the Midlands throughout its history. Hollis (1974), then-historian at the University of South Carolina, agrees, pointing out that South Carolina historiography tends to stress white genealogy, misrepresent historical events, and shy away from critical reflection.

Today, the history of Newberry County's plantations is still celebrated publicly. At the height of the Antebellum Period, the county was home to at least eight plantations (South

Carolina Plantations, n.d.), including the Summer-Huggins House, or Pomaria Nursery, which seems to remain a particular source of pride today. This plantation also remains standing in Pomaria as a tourist site, just one mile from the Pomaria Community Food Bank, a site for this study. James Kibler, a local restorationist and professor emeritus of English at the University of Georgia, has donated his expertise and a collection of artifacts from the Summer-Huggins house to build a permanent exhibit titled, “From Nursery to Garden: The Impact of Pomaria Nursery on Local Landscapes” (personal communication, Newberry County Museum staff, June 29, 2023). We interpret this exhibit, which describes the plantation-owning family at the forefront as “brilliant horticulturists,” as one that depoliticizes and misrepresents the history of Pomaria Nursery and plantation society. Similarly, Kibler’s (1998) history of the Hardy plantation, which he now owns and restores, is featured in his book *Our Fathers' Fields: A Southern Story*, portraying what we see as an entirely distorted view of plantation society with its “strict” but “kindly masters,” “faithful manservants” and “humble field hands” (Kibler 1998: ix). Yet, conversations with community members and observation of how his name is commonly represented around the county revealed how James Kibler remains publicly admired by some.

The uncritical rendering of Newberry County and South Carolina in history books, museums, and the broader public discourse also infuses culinary archives. The Newberry County Museum includes an archive stocked with materials sourced primarily via donations from current or former county residents (or those who otherwise feel passionately about the area). When asked about Black recipes and food sharing, the museum's volunteers (with admitted frustration) were only able to point in the direction of materials that problematically portrayed Black residents, such as copies of books that describe a romantic “Old South,” depicting images of African Americans in what can only be described as gleeful, submissive servitude.

Similarly, *Confections Delicacies Sweets from the Old Slave Mart* (1900), now part of the South Caroliniana Cookbook Collection in the University of South Carolina's Digital Collections, is indicative of white representations of Black women in the local archives. The book gives recipes for individually packaged and sold products that could be purchased through Charleston, South Carolina's "slave mart." It also uses illustrations of smiling enslaved women working in kitchens and fields alongside these recipes to contribute to the recipes' "romantic" allure (2). Its introduction reads:

"... the Old Slave Mart brings you a living part of the romantic ante-bellum South ... in delicacies and sweets ... recipes which have been jealously guarded, carefully handed down for generations. ... Combining the magic of old cookery with the best of modern cooking procedure, the chef of Slave Recipes [a related cookbook] proudly offers you a culinary heritage of tempting delicacies" (author unknown 1900: 2).

This introduction and each recipe thereafter are accompanied by an illustration of a smiling Black woman cook preparing and serving food, dressed in a bandana, long dress, and apron, or dressed in farm clothes if she is depicted harvesting ingredients. For the women represented, not only are their individual names and identities—their full lives and personhood—disappeared and misrepresented, but their original contributions as culinary artists and Black cultural creatives are also silenced (for instance, who has the power to guard and share these recipes?). Their aesthetic labor is erased—naturalized to a "magic" gift that is only marketable once combined with more scientific methods or "modern cooking procedure" (3).

First-hand accounts of Black history are largely absent in local archives (oral histories we reviewed from formerly enslaved peoples in Newberry County, collected as a part of the Federal Writers' Project of 1936-1938, provide one exception [Library of Congress, n.d.], though the community members involved in this research did not mention these archives during conversations). Community members corroborate this absence of Black life and knowledge in

public records, emphasizing time and again that accurate representations “just can’t be found.” A significant motivation for this project is the desire of several community members to publicly document local Black knowledges, as much of the history is being held by an older generation no longer capable of caring for physical archives that they have held onto—and stories are disappearing as each generation passes. Detailing the practices of legacy cooking, which we turn to next, aims to address community members’ aims to produce rich counterarchives and narratives.

Legacy in Action

We turn here to the food sharing practices of Black women in Newberry County, South Carolina. In our goal to document the rich understandings and traditions of legacy cooking, we explore how care and cultural production are mutually entwined as aesthetic labor in producing Black life. Below, we provide a definition of legacy cooking through three features of legacy—its specific methods and techniques, its form as dynamic, radiating knowledges spreading across generations and out into the community, and its role in connecting and supporting community through and beyond food. We then show legacy cooking in action as aesthetic labor, reflected in the stories shared with us by Black women and their families in Newberry County.

Legacy as method. First, legacy cooking involves specific methods and techniques. Legacy cooking methods—which are also referred to by some other women involved in this project as “vibration cooking” or “Black southern heritage cooking”—do not rely on exact measurements, but on taste, practice, and embodied feeling and knowledge. Legacy cooking is an artful practice of creativity and skill foundational to the collective identity of those who practice it.

Legacy as radiating. The knowledge and practice of legacy has been carried forward

through generations with care, originating with ancestors in Africa and the African Diaspora, and it continues to radiate joyfully across generations of Black community members and out into the community through places like food pantries, Black-owned restaurants, friends' gardens, the Women's Table, and more.

Legacy as being with and for people. Legacy cooking, as method and technique passed down from generations and out into the community, is inseparable from a more abstract expression of “legacy”—that is, deeply connecting with and supporting people physically, emotionally, and spiritually, through and beyond food. It is “inseparable” because the intuition that goes into the preparation and sharing of food is heavily influenced by one's community and the people around them.

This three-part definition of “legacy” is enacted in the lives and food sharing practices of Black community members in Newberry County. In discussions about the place of food in their lives, community members often recalled fond moments shared with or knowledge inherited from their mothers, grandmothers, in-laws, sisters, aunts, other family, and friends. For many of the women involved in this project, there is an intellectual project embedded within acts of food sharing that is intimately tied with promoting life skills, informing daily movements, and remembering, establishing, and producing identity as Black women in the South.

Birdell Dennis, first introduced at the beginning of the paper, provides insight into legacy cooking's method, technique, and ingredients as an artform, explaining:

“ ... a lot of foods that originally came from Africa, Cajun cooking. A lot of recipes contain rice, because that's what the Carolinas famous for, that is legacy cooking ... You know, a lot of things like you hear about, shrimp, crabs, basically bottom feeders. Most of the recipes that are centered around that food came from Blacks because you know that was the leftover, yeah, that was given to the slaves ... You might not want to write this and I don't know if you know this, but in

Black culture it's called 'shitting the stick' ... We don't usually cook from a recipe. We cook from taste, and that is right now why today, Reagan, people will ask me, how do you make this? I can't give it to you written because we taste. Like, I just do it, and you throw it in, you stir it up – that's the stick – see how it tastes and you throw some more in.”

Birdell describes the intergenerational legacy of these practices—of techniques and tastes originating in Africa and during slavery—as a foundational part of her identity. Gloria Glasgow, writer, cook, and former caterer, similarly shares Birdell's commitment to what she terms “Black southern cultural foods” or “heritage food.” In our conversation, Gloria similarly explained the techniques and tastes of legacy cooking and what it means to her to keep this commitment alive:

“My background is southern cultural food—Black southern cultural foods. That's my background. That is the food that I still cook today, and the food that I will always cook. I stay loyal to these foods ... I will always be faithful to these foods, because it's who I am. But, what I'm faithful to is the taste, like I said, I change some ingredients here and there but it's the taste that stays the same ... These ways of cooking and these foods came from somewhere. I don't know exactly, I've never been to anywhere in Africa. But when the slaves got here, they didn't have the foods they left. But they had the knowledge. So they had to use that knowledge with the materials that they had to create the foods that was for them. And this keeps going today. Our food is not the same as it was – food is an evolution, food is a migration. And this knowledge is passed down. That's why I cook the heritage foods today – you know, like I said my parents were more active so they could eat certain ingredients, but we are less active so I use different ingredients, but the same knowledge and the same process.”

Like Birdell, Gloria attributes the origination of Black southern cultural foods to the expertise of ancestors from Africa and in the diaspora. She also emphasizes the dynamic, evolving quality of legacy by explaining that this ancestral creativity and knowledge go hand-in-hand with ongoing development and movement through generational exchange.

Norma “Fajra” Donaldson-Jenkins, an artist, educator, and volunteer at the local history museum and opera house, shares in Birdell's and Gloria's commitment to legacy. In our conversation, Norma referenced Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor's (1970) *Vibration Cooking* as a

defining text for understanding how important it is to feel when cooking, especially as a Black southern woman and even more specifically as one from South Carolina. Describing Grosvenor's book, Norma explained, "she has this whole thing on food and cooking and what it means as a social interaction and in familial ties and how you don't do the exact measuring." For Norma, who identifies as a vibration cook, this concept encompasses all of what happens in and as an extension of the kitchen. The act and art of cooking itself is based on the feelings of yourself, your space, and the food, and the social movements around sharing that food. She described some of her best creations of vibration cooking, such as mulled wine and simple day-to-day foods like pantry-staple parmesan crisps. Being a vibration cook is an integral piece of her identity within her family; it is a term, method, art form, relation, and deeply felt state of being that she shares with her daughters and nieces and is proud to pass on.

Norma further explains the process and products of legacy cooking as a "social interaction," meaning that it is influenced *by* community. At the same time, social interaction and community gathering are necessary for legacy cooking to leave its impact *on* community and for its lessons to radiate out into the community—after all, legacy is being with and for people. The Women's Tables that Birdell hosts twice annually are similarly designed for sharing food knowledge and life skills among Black women in the community. As she puts it, the Tables are a place to "encourage women to share information with each other but make it fun." This is why events like the women's table are so important; they act as the sites where this knowledge and mutual support network is fostered and radiated joyfully across generations and out into the community. Describing legacy in action at the Spring 2023 table, Birdell noted:

"There were five young women and the rest of the ladies who came were my age. We call ourselves seasoned women, and so it's to share the recipes with them, you know, so that they can pass it on and not just to get together, but to share

knowledge and let each other know what's going on in the community, I tell them a lot of legal things that they need to know, you know, about healthcare and insurance and what you should be doing right now ... My mom was like that too. And so, I'm following in her steps and what she would want me to do and what she taught me to do ... This is legacy because that's what my mom would have done.”

Entwined with the labor of providing care and sharing knowledge, food sharing practices are enriched with joyful, intimate artistic expression and cultural production. For the Winter 2023 Women's Table, Birdell began preparations back in September, filling her home with Christmas decorations, formulating her menu of legacy foods that go back to what the attendees grew up with, putting together games, setting the schedule, and sending out invites. Birdell also expresses her identity, creativity, and skill through batch cooking and selling her “legacy foods” once a year. These foods are so popular that they not only sell out with friends in Newberry County, but loved ones who live as far away as Maryland make the drive to pick up a “car full.” The batch menu includes macaroni and cheese, country fried steak with onions and gravy, bean and sausage soup (made by her husband, Jimmy), collard greens, and “Birdie's soul food lasagna.” Different from Italian lasagna, Birdell's “has a different taste altogether” because she cooks “from her background to make it.” In other words, it's different because it's legacy. This lasagna is what makes her once-a-year cooking famous—and the reason she only does this cooking once a year, as the lasagna alone takes three days to make.

All in all, being with and for people is essential to legacy cooking; this element is what Birdell describes as “gathering and cooking with love.” Birdell learned from her mother that what matters most when cooking is putting love into your food. But legacy cooking goes beyond the dish to the table and even further out into the community. In this labor of love, “heritage,” “vibration,” and “legacy” cooking are grounded in the food on the plate, but also are enacted as knowledge sharing, cultural production, and identity formation for those who participate. She

insisted throughout our conversations that in the Women's Table dinners and elsewhere in her life, she commits to caring for her community through food because, as she says, “This is what my mom would have done. *This* is legacy cooking.”



Figure 2.4. Guests of the Women’s Table gathered around the table of side dishes.
Photo by Reagan Ross.

Norma, when reflecting on her most cherished food memories, also expressed the centrality of love. In sharing stories of her grandmother’s cakes, Norma explained how, at some of the most pivotal moments in her life, these cakes came as a symbol of loving care, feeding herself and loved ones physically and in spirit. She recalled:

“...When I was in college, my grandmother sent me my own coconut cake, which again, talk about a care package your first year as a freshman – it was. And she

sent me a note to share it with a really, really good friend of mine who was like a brother. Like, 'maybe he won't know....' But he knew. She had contacted his parents to say, 'I'm sending this to her and she's gonna share.' So I'm in class and I see him standing outside my door like, 'your grandmother's cake come yet?' So I shared little crumbs of the cake with the people on my floor in the dorm because I didn't really want [to share] *laughter*, and I gave him his part. And I thought life couldn't get better, but it did. When I got married, I got not only my own pound cake, I got my own fruit cake now. ... And again, my grandmother and her sisters were some bakers supreme, and when I had my own cake and my husband told me he didn't like fruit cake, it meant I had my own cake and I was not saying, 'but baby taste a piece and change your mind.' *laughter*. And I pour a little rum over it every so often and try to make it last until my birthday in March and maybe in March it was a little slice of cake left - where there again, you couldn't tell me that the skies hadn't opened and all of this bounty had come down upon me with the receipt of these wonderful baked goods that had come from my grandmother."

Norma further reflected on the artistry and expertise put into her grandmother's foodstuffs and the glee she felt when she witnessed this aesthetic production in action. Capturing precisely what it meant to receive these cakes as Christmas presents throughout her childhood, Norma recalled how, "You would have thought that we had just received gold from Fat Fort Knox when that box arrived, because we knew what it was, there weren't any toys or anything like that. We weren't looking for toys, people, people [wanted] that cake." Thirty years later, Norma relished the opportunity to live with her grandmother and learn from her. She remembers how "elated" she was to be her grandmother's "sous chef." These stories underscore how the baking of cakes was not only an act of loving care, but also a demonstration of skill that was a gift to receive, learn, and carry forward.

Judy Sanders, who is a committed servant of her community, and enthusiastic member of her church's women's group, and a Court Administrator at the Newberry County Magistrate Court, also commented on how her family members come together for a meal, each contributing their favorite items:

"Everyone has their specialty. For example, one of my sisters love making potato

salad, another sister love to cook baked beans, one brother (who was dropped off at our home when he was 2 weeks old by his mother and he was raised as ‘my’ brother), his favorite to cook is mac and cheese and he is great on the grill. He does the phone calls/text messages to everyone giving the date, place and time and what to bring.”

In this scenario, she describes that everyone in her family is deft at creating their own dishes and also, like Birdell, in creating the space to support food sharing. In a written response, Judy highlighted sharing as a personal value of hers, learned from her family and grounded in her spirituality (also citing the biblical verses Matthew 25:40, 1 Timothy 5:8, and Proverbs 28:19):

“SHARE, SHARE, SHARE — DON’T JUST GROW A GARDEN & TALK ABOUT IT, SHARE IT WITH SOMEONE ELSE ... it’s very important to share what you’ve been blessed with, even if it’s a garden you planted” (emphasis original).

Embraced in adulthood from lessons of her childhood, Judy explains here that the “key” to growth, both literally of food and of people in food spaces, is to remember that your “garden is for the neighbors.” For Judy, legacy is for and with people because growth through food is only possible when people keep in mind that any labor done towards growth is not done for them alone, lest their growth be minimal.

Cynthia Worthy is a member of the board at the Living Hope Foundation, an active member of her church’s women’s group, and an engaged community member and civil servant in and around Newberry, especially in her recent retirement. Cynthia’s aesthetic labor to create spaces of food sharing should also be noted. Cynthia works to provide nourishment for the body and spirit at the LHF Food Bank, community meals alongside blood drives, and celebratory events accompanied by food like birthdays, reunions, and neighborhood cookouts.

It cannot be understated, though, how much work Cynthia does to create these spaces of care. Regarding these neighborhood cookouts, for example, Cynthia nearly single-handedly

organized this party as a Homeowner's Association fundraiser and facilitated the donation of the extra food that she and her husband cooked, and any other food attendees brought. Although she is technically the treasurer of her HOA, Cynthia has continued to organize these parties every year and, from the first event, has been casually regarded as a true leader, stating of her neighbors, "somehow they think I'm the HOA president."

This public image of assumed "facilitator" extends to other food spaces that she helps curate. Assuming a leadership role in her women's group (Women in God's Service, or WINGS) for these events, Cynthia coordinates an event to distribute hot meals in partnership with a blood drive. She spearheaded this initiative not only because she supports working towards collective blood to treat sickle cell anemia in African American people, but also to help reinvigorate social movements by local churches after COVID-19 made community connection challenging. In neighborhood cookouts, WINGS events, her work at the food bank, and celebrations, Cynthia's labor creates spaces of joy, support, and whole-person nourishment. Her labor exemplifies legacy as being with and for people, and her labor, creativity, and leadership are widely recognized.

Shelvy Ham is founder and owner of the Pomaria Community Food Bank (PCFB), a teacher of young children with disabilities, and a board member of the Living Water Foundation, a local organization committed to promoting overall well-being across Newberry County through locally grown foods. Shelvy spoke about following God's direction in starting this food bank, which operates by the mission statement, "If the people are hungry, feed them." Legacy works through this mission, and through Shelvy, in the way that she gets to know each guest of the food bank to personally curate a box of goods that supports their specific nutritional and emotional needs. In other words, legacy for Shelvy is precisely about deeply connecting with and

supporting people physically, emotionally, and spiritually through and beyond food.

To demonstrate legacy in action, Shelvy shared that if she knows a recipient has diabetes, she will reduce the amount of sugary treats and add more whole grains, vegetables, and lean meat. If a recipient is a particular fan of squash, Shelvy will prioritize the distribution of any produce donations in order to give that person more squash. If a recipient has children, she will include some treats but balance those treats with more fruits and vegetables. Of course, availability at PCFB (as is the case with many food banks) is not always consistent. But, when options are available, Shelvy uses her culinary and nutritional knowledge and skills to put forth another layer of labor in which she creates artful and intentional parcels of care. Whether you have infants at home, live with high blood pressure, just really love squash and onions—or all three—she will put in the extra effort to place the most appropriate foods from her stock in your pick-up box when you stop by.

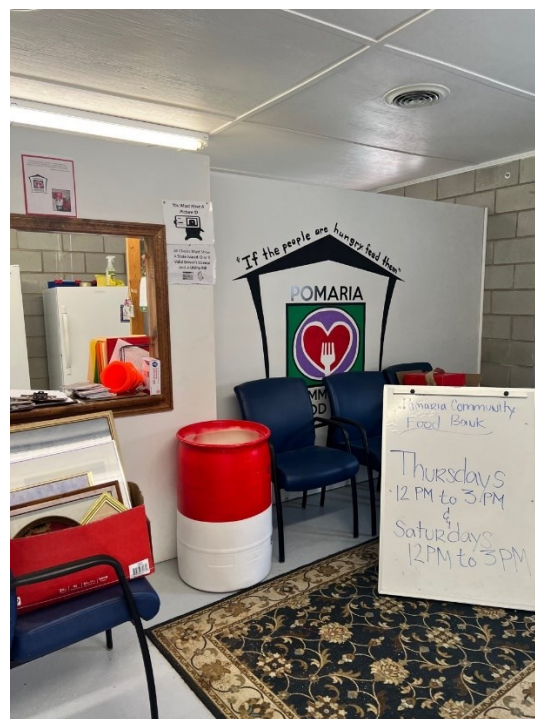


Figure 2.5. Entryway of Pomaria Community Food Bank. Photo by Reagan Ross.

Why Legacy Matters

We have shown how legacy as a form of aesthetic labor involves inherited, radiating knowledge expressed through specific techniques, methods, dishes, and ways of supporting one's community through and beyond food sharing. But why is this important to Black community members in Newberry County?

First, legacy cooking is an avenue to personal healing and liberation. Community members have testified that participating in legacy cooking can be a practice of finding personal power through creativity, connecting intimately with oneself, and exercising technical and intuitive knowledge and skill. Tia Devette, co-owner of Laila's Place restaurant—pictured in Figure 2.6—along with her husband Jason, spoke about how the creative challenges of operating a family-owned restaurant have been restorative for herself, her marriage, and each member of her family. In the face of food insecurity, interpersonal conflict, spiritual distress, plantation histories whose other artifacts surround you daily, and more, the spirit of legacy cooking provides the nourishment for community members to carry on. See in Figure 2.7, the “prayer box” near the entrance of Laila's Place. This restaurant does many things for their family and community, like feeding the physical body and providing emotional support through serving as an intentional space of welcoming and radical love. Above all, though, Tia and her husband Jason refer to it as a “ministry.” Part of this ministry's action includes offering personal prayers to anyone who is seeking that type of spiritual support through submissions to the prayer box or otherwise. Like Wynter's (n.d., as cited in McKittrick 2021a) descriptions of music on the Middle Passage in *Black Metamorphosis* where rhythm, sound, waveform—auditory aesthetic labor—produced the conditions to rebelliously insist upon humanity, food spaces like Laila's Place, the Women's Table, the Pomaria Community Food Bank, and more reflect a labor of love,

offering the space and means for community members to connect, to heal themselves and one another by nourishing body and soul.



Figure 2.6. Inside Laila's Place Cafe and Bakery. Photo by Reagan Ross.



Figure 2.7. Trash can, bussing tub, and prayer box, located just inside the door of Laila's Place Cafe and Bakery. Photo by Reagan Ross.

Moreover, the spirit of legacy supports the preservation, the insistence upon, and the carrying forward of important aspects of—something expressed time and time again by community members—Black southern heritage through the artistic, joyful creation of recipes, dishes, and spaces that support food sharing and eating together. The stories of legacy cooking shared in this paper echo calls for creating “spaces, platforms, environments, partnerships, theories, methods, and art that witness our freedom in their very creation” (Carter 2018: 41). Returning briefly to Gloria Glasgow, she created a cookbook for her son’s move to college. As a writer, this cookbook is one avenue where she can practice an artform that is personally meaningful to her, but it also transmits care and knowledge to her son by providing principles, methods, and techniques for cooking and by offering a piece of family and love to take with him on his journey. This cookbook and the labor taken on by Gloria to write it carry forward an identity, expressed through recipe, which Gloria states is rooted in “Black southern culture.”

For the community members whose stories we have shared, supporting their families and communities with love, food, carefully and creatively curated spaces to come together, and cherished communications—whether messages in a prayer box or recipes passed down to the next generation—is easily described as part of their life missions. This work by community members, shown through this paper, reveals a glimpse of living as Black in Newberry County—specifically that food sharing, especially in the spirit of legacy, is the creative expression through which Black life is expressed, and Black consciousness is explored. The spirit of legacy reminds those who embrace it what they are capable of and what their communities are capable of.

As such, legacy cooking in Newberry County provides a foundational pillar for Black women’s intellectual projects that include promoting and producing culture. To return to Wynter’s *Black Metamorphosis*, she describes works such as “marronages, mutinies, funerals,

carnivals, dramas, visual arts, fictions, poems, fights, dances, music-making and listening” (McKittrick 2021a: 158) as “periodic uprisings ... and the ongoing creation of culture” (Wynter n.d.: 83, as cited in McKittrick 2021a). Wynter understood these practices as following a lineage of producing aesthetics to “reinvent the black as human” (25). As shown through these stories of legacy cooking in Newberry County, the spirit of legacy, as it radiates through generations and out into the community, brings with it lessons of the complexities of Black consciousness and placemaking throughout history and into today as lessons of art, labor, craft, community, resistance, persistence, and accomplishment. Over food, Black community members in Newberry County exchange valuable knowledge for daily survival—for example, how to interpret medical documents and where to access and use tools for material support. Through food and food spaces, they also maintain and adapt culinary heritage practices dating back to Africa, which affirm such life and connection and promote this heritage among family, friends, and other community members. In such dynamic, radiating intellectual projects, and the life skills and cultural production hosted therein, is an insistence that Black women’s culinary knowledges and practices are an artform and a rebellious act of liberation.

Legacy cooking also matters to community members as a way to speak back to broader audiences in and beyond the county. Southern food studies scholars have grappled with the negative impacts of a long history of gastronomic practice and literature which are filled with romanticism and nostalgia, arguing that this narrow-minded view of southern cuisine and food history obscures the humanity and scholarship of non-white populations (Williams-Forson 2006; Sharpless 2010; Wallach 2016; Twitty 2017; Cooley 2018). Likewise, many of the people whose stories we shared here expressed concern for the lack of appropriately regarded Black knowledge in the public record.

In fact, almost every participant who shared a desired outcome for this project mentioned increased visibility for Black food work and knowledge, which they believe can promote Black livelihood for generations. They believe this knowledge is deeply important for Black people (and specifically Black women) to thrive and survive. They also believe it is problematic that this knowledge has not been translated to the public as it bolsters narratives that deem Black ingenuity nonexistent or at least unworthy to publicly acknowledge. Thus, the need to center legacy cooking—as life, livingness, care, skill, talent, creativity, and scholarship—is not just felt in the literature but also in the community of participants in this research.

Conclusion

While this study of legacy cooking as aesthetic labor was driven first and foremost by the needs and desires of community partners in Newberry County, incorporating aesthetic labor into studies of Black women’s food sharing practices also adds three important perspectives to academic conversations. First, to understand place-specific aesthetic labor in Newberry County, and to honor and more deeply understand people’s lived realities, this research strives to center our partners’ voices before all. In doing so, this work contributes to recent advances in geography and in (southern) food studies challenging a long history of scholarship that has censored and silenced the realities and knowledges of Black women (Williams-Forson 2006; Sharpless 2013; Nettles-Barcelón et al. 2015; Tipton-Martin 2015; Wallach 2016; Twitty 2017). Second, examining legacy cooking in relation to McKittrick’s (2021a, 2021b) work on aesthetic labor reveals a political praxis that has been intentionally obscured by popular food narratives in and beyond the South: the enthusiastic work to rebelliously preserve and promote Black life. Specifically, the aesthetic labor of Black women in Newberry County is made possible because they are knowledge holders who use their time, effort, and skill to enact rebellious healing

through care. Third, this research has demonstrated how aesthetic labor is a useful framework for connecting the goals of our community partners with the lessons brought forward by Black geographies and food studies scholars to reflect on how care and creativity come together through legacy cooking as an effortful expression of Black consciousness.

Solidifying the validity of food sharing in Black geographic discussions of aesthetic labor, the community members we spoke with expressed their care practices and creative visions through a variety of food-focused projects, such as writing cookbooks and recipes for family and friends; inventing spaces to host group meals, which can include decorations, games, menus, and dishes; carefully curating food boxes of donated foods to meet nutritional needs of community members; and of course, cooking. McKittrick (2021a: 154) describes aesthetic labor as waveforms, groove, sound—at its heart an “ungraspable resonance” enacted with “rebellious enthusiasm.” Through the enthusiastic creations that happen in the kitchen, the dining room, the food bank, at the restaurant, and on the pages of recipes passed down in Newberry County and beyond, gustatory waveforms take their place alongside McKittrick’s auditory waveforms. There is an ungraspable resonance—not of sound, but of taste—that supports the rebellious enthusiasm of this caring and creative food sharing work.

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CHAPTER 3. BLOSSOMING AND MINISTRY: INTIMACY AS LIBERATORY WORLD-BUILDING AT AND BEYOND THE KITCHEN TABLE

Reagan Ross and Carrie Chennault

Introduction

Community members in Newberry County, a rural county in the South Carolina Midlands, have identified barriers and opportunities to develop deep, meaningful, and what they describe as “joyful” intimacies within self and community. This paper highlights two sets of community member testimonies shared during ethnographic fieldwork and through their personal writings. The testimonies show how Black Newberrians’ lives have unfolded through intimacies in and around food spaces—spaces within which they work for a joyful recovery of their deepest and truest selves and to enact radical care.

Through these testimonies, shared by the city of Newberry residents Gloria Glasgow and Tia and Jason Devette, we learn about the transformative power of self-intimacy and spirituality taking place in and beyond the “kitchen table” in Newberry County. In this paper, the “kitchen table” is used to refer to kitchen tables literally and as a metaphorical stand-in for any food-centric environment, such as restaurant booths, dining tables, food banks, and recipe books, to name a few. The use of this term is inspired by Barbara Smith’s *Kitchen Table: Women of Color* Press (now Kitchen Table Literary Arts Center), which was named for those “sturdy, purposeful gathering place[s]” where ideas are shared and positive change in the world starts (Smith 1989; Kitchen Table Literary Arts). Yet, it is also inspired by Priscilla McCutcheon, Latrice E. Best, and Theresa Rajack-Talley (2023: 12), who underscore that “the where of food work often

occurs beyond the kitchen table and can happen on farms and in community spaces, among others.” The testimonies from Newberry County reveal how practices of “blossoming” (a self- or interior-focused form of intimacy, highlighted in one testimony) and “ministry” (a spiritually motivated promotion of communal intimacy, in the other testimony) are enacted in and beyond the kitchen table as tools for building more liberatory worlds for themselves and their communities.

This chapter has been developed in partnership with community members’ goals for additional archived documentation of Black life in the South Carolina Midlands, narratives highlighting self-discovery and self-nurturing, and testimonies demonstrating the presence and power of spirituality and care in Newberry County, in and beyond food spaces. The literal and metaphorical kitchen table has served as a space in Newberry County to acknowledge and unpack barriers within food systems, and how food and food spaces have been used as tools for Black oppression. According to community members’ observations (and our own), gendered and racialized narratives that minimize Black life, skill, and scholarship related to food and that attempt to naturalize stereotypes of Black women as subservient abound in Newberry County and across the South broadly (see Chapter 2). These narratives aim to prevent people, and especially Black women, from knowing and nurturing what one community member refers to as their “truest selves.” At the same time, though, community member testimonies demonstrate how intimacies are fostered in and through food and food spaces as a means for community empowerment. Intimacy straddles this complex terrain of power.

This paper’s focus on intimacy arises from community member testimonies and is also informed by Black feminists who have highlighted the “psychic and material reach” of the Middle Passage as transmitted through all sites of intimacy, including how these often unspoken,

"monstrous intimacies" have shaped gendered and racialized realities through experiences of trauma, shame, and violence (Sharp 2010: 4; Price 2013; Smith 2014; Berry et al. 2017). These scholars also have documented strategies of resistance and liberation accessed through intimacy. Their works shine a light on the liberatory power for women—and particularly women of color—of intimate practices focused on the self, like *the erotic* (Lorde 1984), *self-actualization* and *self-recovery* (hooks 1993), and *prioritizing the self in love* (brown 2019). These practices, which we collectively refer to as self-intimacy, initiate a journey towards the reclamation of bodily autonomy, creative energy, intuition, and ultimately, power (The Combahee River Collective 1977; Lorde 1984, 1988; hooks 1993, 2001, 2008; McKittrick 2006, 2021a; brown 2015; Glasgow 2017; Syedullah 2022; Odozor 2022).

In these literatures, food and food spaces often form the backdrop of stories about the liberatory power of self-intimacy, self-recovery, and the erotic in Black women's lives (Lorde 1984, 1988; hooks 1993, brown 2017, 2019), a point to which we will return in the next section. Yet, although fundamentally important, food and food spaces are not explicitly theorized for their formative roles in supporting practices of self-intimacy. At the same time, the centrality of food as a tool of liberation via intimate practice in Black women's lives has been directly taken up in Black and critical food studies, where Black women's food spaces, including personal relationships with food, have been shown as simultaneously affective, power-laden, and powerful (Williams-Forson 2006; Sharpe, Halberstam, and Lowe 2010; Tipton-Martin 2011; White 2015; Twitty 2017). In this paper, we bring these two literatures together to better understand how food and intimacy matter to liberation.

Our focus on intimacy is also informed by Black geographers and critical geographers who, in recent years, have highlighted how spirituality—defined by Laura Pulido (1998: 721) as

“consciousness and connection—our connections as individuals to our souls, other people, places, nature, spirits, and in some cases, connection to a creator”—can similarly be liberating for Black communities (Alexander 2005; McCutcheon 2016; Eaves 2017; King 2024; Newman 2024). They explain that, while the Black Church, for example, is not without criticism, Black spirituality, for many, has provided comfort, empowerment, and the strength, courage, and energy for “Black mobilization,” everyday resistance, and “radical social change” since slavery (Eaves 2017: 90; Pulido 1998; Kohl 2018; King 2024; Newman 2024), including in contemporary food and agricultural systems (McCutcheon 2015, 2021). Further, while spirituality often makes an appearance in critical geographies, including Black food geographies, the ways in which people’s “spiritual beliefs are integrated into their motivation, tactics, and aims” for everyday resistance and placemaking are under-explored due to academic discomfort with the subject, leading to underservice of the lived realities of those whose lives we write about (Kohl 2018: 2; Pulido 1998; Alexander 2005; McCutcheon 2021). Through this study’s testimonies, we came to recognize spiritual connections at and beyond the kitchen table as an intimate practice, even though it has not been explicitly examined as such by geographers.

Therefore, responding to these gaps in the literature and responding to what was most salient for community members, we engage with intimate encounter, including self-intimacy and spirituality, as an integral part of Black and critical food geographies. The processes, praxis, and products of self-intimacy and spirituality are utilized as powerful forces in resisting and dismantling systems of white heteropatriarchy, colonialism, and oppression that have operated precisely by regulating people’s bodies, autonomy, senses of self, and intimate lives (Lorde 1984: 54, 56, 57; Lorde 1988; hooks 1993, 2008; brown 2015; Eaves 2017; McCutcheon 2021; Jordan-Zachery 2022; Thompson 2023; Newman 2024). In other words, self-intimacy and

spirituality are liberatory praxes. As food is a critical tool for both systems of oppression and movements of liberation, we answer this call through the lens of Black and critical food geographies, exploring these intimate practices in the lives of Black women, their families, and communities in Newberry County with a specific focus on the food spaces where this intimacy—and transformative potential—is alive.

Before turning our attention to the two testimonies, we first engage more deeply with Black, feminist, food studies, and geographic literatures at the intersections of intimacy and food. Then, we provide background on the field site in Newberry County, South Carolina and the desires and needs of participants that motivate and inform this project, along with a discussion of the study's methodological approach. We finally turn to the testimonies that reveal self-intimacy and spirituality in Newberry County food spaces, followed by a discussion of the process and liberatory potential of these intimate praxes.

Self-Intimacy, Spirituality, and Food

Intimacy has been described as complex “close affective encounter[s]” (Oswin and Olund 2010: 62) and as “deeply felt orientations and entrenched practices that make up what people consider to be their ‘personal’ or ‘private’ lives and their interior selves” (Wilson 2012: 32). While associated with proximate and personal connections, intimacy also “traverses sites and scales” (Pain and Staeheli 2014: 346), taking shape in the context of gendered and racialized realities, through emotional and affective experiences of pleasure, love, and support, and of horror, violence, and oppression (Sharpe 2010; Price 2013; Smith 2014; Berry et al. 2017). Sharpe elaborates by introducing the concept of “monstrous intimacies,” or those tools which reinforce “master narratives of violence and forced submission” that are so intimate, so private, even reinscribed as consent and affection, that they are “breathed in like air and often

unacknowledged to be monstrous" (Sharpe 2010: 3). Drawing on Fredrick's Douglass' (1855/2003) *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and within in it the story of the beating of Aunt H/Esther, Sharpe points out that food spaces in particular, such as kitchens, have historically been sites rife with monstrous intimacies, where the horrors and violence of working and living in this space are often overwritten by the proximity of kitchen work to whiteness and, therefore, "access to a freedom narrative" (9).

While Black feminist and geographic scholars remind us that violent and oppressive forms of intimacy historically have been used to enact horror upon Black communities, they also have illuminated joyful and caring intimacies that have informed and energized generations of liberation work (Lorde 1984, 1988; hooks 1993, 2001, 2008; Pulido 1998; brown 2015; McCutcheon 2015, 2016, 2021; Eaves 2017; Syedullah 2022; Odozor 2022). Further, they demonstrate that food, food spaces, and food sharing practices are deeply intimate. While some intimate food spaces indeed have been used to enact and justify horror, others have produced a rich history in supporting self and community empowerment (Shange 1998; Williams-Forson 2006; Tipton-Martin 2015; White 2015; McCutcheon 2015, 2019, 2021; Twitty 2017; Hirsch & Jones 2021; Newman 2024). This thesis explores the intersection of food and intimate strategies of resistance through interior-focused self-intimacy, and community-focused intimacy as motivated by spirituality, and in the remainder of this section we briefly review relevant literatures coming from Black, feminist, food studies, and geographic scholarship.

Self-Intimacy

As a liberatory praxis, self-intimacy has enabled women, and specifically women of color, to find and connect with their most desired selves and subsequently use the power found from that internal truth to resist regulatory control of their bodies and their identities (Lorde

1984; hooks 1993, 2008; McKittrick 2006; Young 2012; Simpson 2017; brown 2019; Jordan-Zachary 2022; Odozor 2022; Syedullah 2022). Audre Lorde’s concept of the erotic, or “those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meanings” (Lorde 1984: 56), exemplifies the practice, praxis, and product of self-intimacy. Finding and using the erotic, according to Lorde, empowers the individual for her own benefit, but on a greater level, makes a better today and a “richer and more possible” tomorrow for the benefit of loved ones across generations (Lorde 1984: 54-55). These richer and more possible worlds, formulated and invigorated by the energy of the erotic, are made possible because the erotic is a “political, social, and academic tool of deconstruction, subversion, and imagination” (Young 2012: 301).

Scholars engaging with Lorde’s erotic, even when they do not reference it directly, carry a shared ethos: to intentionally labor towards self-discovery and exercise self-care as a part of this process of discovery is to work towards building a more caring and just world (Lorde 1984, 1988; hooks 1993, 2008; brown 2017, 2019; Simpson 2017; Maynard and Simpson 2022; Odozor 2022; Thompson 2023). In *Sisters of the Yam* (1993), for instance, bell hooks echoes Lorde’s notion of the erotic by calling Black women to put the struggle to “self-actualize at the center of [their] daily life” (hooks 1993: 6). For hooks, self-actualization describes the realization and embrace of self in opposition to systems of racialized and gendered violence that have suppressed this sense of self. It is an essential element in practicing and promoting collective, anti-racist, and anti-sexist political social change (3-5).

While Black feminist writings on self-intimacy often take shape within a backdrop of food, food-sharing, and/or food spaces (Lorde 1984, 1988; Smith 1989; hooks 1993; brown 2017, 2019; Kitchen Table Literary Arts), food is not incidental to their praxis. For instance,

Lorde (1984: 57) uses World War II-era margarine pellets as a metaphor for the power of finding and nurturing the erotic within the self, writing, “I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.” In another example, bell hooks (1993) carried forward this relationship between food and the erotic ethos in *Sisters of the Yam*. She explained that she named her support group, which doubles as her book’s name, simultaneously in honor of Toni Bambara’s (1980) *The Salt Eaters* and what it teaches about Black women’s struggle to “draw up powers from the deep,” and also because the yam—with origins in West Africa and a staple of African and diasporic cuisines—is a symbol for nourishment and care as food and medicine, as “diasporic connection,” and as “black kinship and community” (hooks 1993: 12-15). While food has a clear connection to self-intimacy, as demonstrated through these examples, these scholars do not often directly discuss why food is so significant for self-intimacy.

We do, however, see discussion of this significance in the works of Black feminists who are exploring how food can be a tool for women of color to find and heal oneself and community. For example, in *If I Can Cook It/You Know God Can*, Ntozake Shange (1998) chronicles her explorations of Black food, identity, and place and encourages readers to consider Black intimacy through food studies. She writes, “[t]hese perusals of history, literature, vernacular, culture, and philosophy, ‘long with absolutely fabulous receipts (Charlestonian for recipes), are meant to open our hearts and minds to what it means for black folks in the Western Hemisphere to be full’ (1998: 3). Getting the closest to the connection between self-intimacy, food, and food spaces—and thus enlightening this nexus which we explore through this paper—Shange asserts that food, and all the political, economic, spiritual, and communal relations built

into what and how people of the African diaspora cook and eat, is “the ultimate implication of who [Black people] are” (103). In essence, food is a powerful tool by which Black people can access intimacy and truth in self and community.

Spirituality

Spirituality has long functioned as a tool for liberation work in Black communities (Pulido 1998; Alexander 2005; McCutcheon 2016; Eaves 2017; King 2024; Newman 2024). While Black geographic scholars such as LaToya Eaves (2017) remind us that Christian religious formations, including the Black Church, have long been influenced by and reinforced the structures of patriarchy, racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia, and homophobia, Black spirituality has also provided the tools, courage, strength, and energy to challenge these horrific structures and create imagined and material alternative time, spaces, and places of “respite from the anti-Blackness of the world” (King 2024: 46). Priscilla McCutcheon, for instance, engages James Cone’s (1975) Black Liberation Theology (BLIBT) to demonstrate how spirituality has guided struggles for liberation in and through agrarian landscapes. Further, M. Jacqui Alexander (2005: 15) reminds us that spirituality is integral to understanding the self and therefore integral to communal liberation work, writing “spiritual labor and spiritual knowing is primarily a project of self-knowing and transformation that constantly invokes community simply because it requires it.” We read these works in light of participant testimonies, which speak to the role of spirituality in their everyday practices of intimacy that are integral to community building, placemaking through relationships, and formations of self (internally and in community with other people, places, nature, and God). Thus, we interpret spirituality to be deeply intimate and important—if not necessary, for many of the community members with whom we worked—for the everyday intimacies that foster community liberation.

According to McCutcheon, BLIBT "originated from the struggles of Black people who believed that God called Black people to be free" (McCutcheon 2021: 887) and communicates that Black ministry should promote liberation (Cone 1975; McCutcheon 2021). It is not a doctrine but a framework through which we can better understand how spirituality functions as a tool that encourages community intimacy and fosters collective resistance against oppressive structures. Regarding, for example, drawing upon spirituality to reclaim land that's drenched in the horrors of plantation legacies and transforming it into a space of transformative collective care, Cone (1975: 144) states that Black people were not "created to work in someone else's field," but to experience fellowship and freedom on cooperatively owned land. McCutcheon (2019, 2021) sees cooperative land ownership as a tenant of BLIBT and extends it to Fannie Lou Hamer's Freedom Farms Cooperative and DuBois' theories on cooperative economics—both of which demonstrate the pooling of resources to meet the emergency needs of Black people and create sustainable food and economic structures that "build lasting institutions in Black communities."

As McCutcheon (2015, 2021) and other Black geographers demonstrate, food, like with self-intimacy, plays an integral role in spirituality as a liberatory praxis (Shange 1998; Williams-Forson 2006; Twitty 2017; Newman 2024). Food and spirituality are deeply entrenched in complex power relations across sites and scales and can be used in tandem to challenge the oppression sometimes enacted through them. Rachel Grace Newman (2024: 47), for example, writes about "provision grounds" on Jamaican plantations—spaces where enslaved people could grow food for themselves—explaining that this land was nutritionally life-giving, struck a balance between threatening "planter control" and maintaining a "healthy workforce," and above all, was "sacred," providing "the humic foundation through which Afro-Jamaican folk culture

was forged, linking generations of ancestors and descendants through the sacred earth.”

While geographers focused on spirituality do specifically explore the significance of food, these scholars point out that critical geographies have broadly given inadequate attention to the role of spirituality in placemaking. If we consider “what motivates some Black people to build liberatory food and agrarian landscapes” (McCutcheon 2021: 901), particularly when the community members with whom we work express that their faith guides their life and motivates their food work in the community, then we must also ask ourselves “what else we write out” when we *don't* take spirituality into account (Kohl 2018: 5). Therefore, we extend calls for greater consideration of the intersection of spirituality and placemaking by looking towards Black food geographies as spiritually rich in Newberry County.

Field Site, Background, and Methodologies

Newberry County is a rural county located in the Midlands of South Carolina and its county seat, the city of Newberry, is the primary research site for this paper, in addition to the towns of Prosperity and Pomaria. As with much of the South, the legacy of slavery still runs deep in Newberry County. By 1860, after the introduction of the railroad in the county in 1851 and the subsequent cotton boom, the county had a population of 7,000 white people (including 937 slaveholders) and 13,695 enslaved people (Pope 1973; Hollis 1974: 53-54). Over time, the county hosted at least eight plantations (South Carolina Plantations n.d.), one of which, such as the Summer-Huggins House or Pomaria Nursery, are still publicly admired today (Kibler 1998; personal communication, Newberry County Museum staff, June 29, 2023). The impact of this history persists across Newberry County.

In addition to the continued celebration of some plantation sites, the public archive of Newberry County remains largely uncritical and is, in many ways, absent from what the

community deems to be accurate representations of Black life and knowledge. For instance, when searching for Black recipes and narratives of food sharing in the archives of the Newberry County Museum and the South Caroliniana Cookbooks located (hosted digitally by the nearby University of South Carolina), results primarily yielded cookbooks filled with romantic narratives of the antebellum South which depicted Black women as gleefully subservient and underwrote Black knowledge and skill. Community members attest that the effects of this mischaracterization of Black life, specifically Black women's life in relation to food, and the broader lack of first-hand account of Black life, are compounding. First, it encourages a narrative of servitude for Black women. Second, Black history that does not make it to the public archive is disappearing as older generations pass; therefore, younger generations of Black women do not have as much access to the stories that may help them understand their history and identity and encourage them to make themselves a priority in their own lives, as one community member puts it. In this way, the legacies of the plantation South have restricted Black women from, and simultaneously created the need for, tapping into self-intimacy.

This history of anti-Black racism persists today not only in the archives and broader discourses, but, as reported by Black community members, also in their material lives as they face disproportionate rates of poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity. For instance, community members without reliable transportation of their own have little to no options for public transportation and can, therefore, not sustainably rely on food from the food pantry. When community members are able to get to the pantry, especially those pantries that are centrally located in the city of Newberry and serve the most people, they wait in their cars for sometimes over an hour in triple-digit heat due to funding limitations of the food banks that constrain their usable space, only to be met with pages of paperwork to fill out as required by the USDA (lest

the food pantry is shut down) before they can be given their box of food. Additionally, at the time of writing, the city has no shelters for its unhoused population. It is also reported by community members that at night, some people who are unhoused in Newberry—in addition to having nowhere to escape the heat or store cold food—are picked up by city police and dropped off in neighboring Richland County to find shelter in South Carolina’s capital city of Columbia. In many ways, according to community members, these institutional failures have radiating effects across the community, seen in, for instance, embodied feelings of instability, loneliness, and anxiety.

Our motivation in documenting and examining Black women’s food sharing practices in Newberry County—a place where the legacies of slavery and plantation culture remain present in its foodways but also where Black residents use food to foster self-discovery, build material and imagined spaces of respite and support, encourage communal care, and provide their community with physical and spiritual nourishment—is rooted in community members’ desires to publicly share their food stories and expand the archive of Black life and knowledge in the Midlands (see Chapter 2). By engaging with these stories, we assert that community members’ use of food to promote social justice demonstrates how liberating practices of intimacy, particularly self-intimacy and spirituality, are fostered through food spaces. Thus, in addition to working with community desires to document and archive their livingness and knowledges, we also aim to promote understanding of how, through food, food spaces, and food sharing practices, Black communities across the South and the African diaspora more broadly might engage intimacy as everyday acts of resistance and liberatory world-building. To do so, we bear witness, and encourage readers to bear witness, to the testimonies of Gloria Glasgow and Tia and Jason Devette, gathered through their personal writing and creation and through interviews and

conversations had over the course of two months of ethnographic fieldwork in Newberry County.

Grounded in Black religious tradition, testimony is a method for telling stories—often faith stories—to empower both storyteller and listeners by communicating knowledge and experience to provide lessons about larger societal issues (Tarpley 1995; Lathan 2014; Jones 2019; Toliver 2020; Jordan-Zachary 2022). As a tool for social justice, Tarpley (1995: 3) describes testimony as a means to “define and redefine one’s humanity; to ground oneself in community; to revel in the touch of hands and bodies familiar with the testifier’s pain and joy.” Black, feminist, and geographic scholars have shown how testimony, as presentation of spiritual identity and an action that invites “witnesses,” or those willing to hear the truths in the story and respond (Lathan 2014; Jones 2019), has been used to promote self-intimacy (Jordan-Zachary 2022), mobilize communal care efforts for the benefit of “those in greatest need,” (Ross 2003: 224; McGuire 2004), and provide a rich counterhistory that challenges oppressive narratives driven by white heteropatriarchy (Berg 2009; Dillard 2000). We contend that the testimonies shared by Gloria, Tia, and Jason, which we turn to next, share many of the same goals. In partnership with their efforts, we extend those testimonies here and ask you to bear witness.

Testimonies of Intimacy

At food spaces like dining tables occupied women’s groups, bakery seats surrounded by the smell of fresh donuts, kitchen table stools with sweet tea in hand, food banks heavy with the humid air of a South Carolina summer but still buzzing with the energy of volunteers, and in their own reflections on food memories, community members in Newberry County process and promote self-intimacy and intimacy as motivated by spiritual connection. The following testimonies are drawn from knowledges shared by Gloria Glasgow and Tia and Jason Devette during conversations and in-depth interviews, the published writings of Gloria Glasgow, and the

restaurant owned and operated by Tia and Jason Devette. By demonstrating self-intimacy and spirituality in action, these testimonies show how the imaginary, remembered, material, and metaphorical “kitchen table” operates as intimate space in their lives.

Gloria Glasgow

“The journey I speak on, ‘to blossom out from hiding’ is of a personal focus and issue. To determine who you are, apart from all others, not in comparison. If there’s to be any measurement of comparison at all, it is for you to measure and compare the present self to the ideal self; tapping into your innermost feelings; remembering fallen dreams, aspirations and passions; to revive qualities of a fundamental nature which may have been forsaken; retracting and recapturing hidden essence; to reincorporate those elements into the present, developing and enhancing a revised version of self; one which breaths exuberance into the soul.” - Gloria Glasgow (2017)

Gloria Mangum Glasgow is a retired educator and caterer, an entrepreneur, a skilled artist, a creative, a wordsmith, and a cook. Reagan Ross was introduced to Gloria by her husband, John Glasgow, who, at the time of fieldwork, served at the Executive Director of the Living Hope Foundation, which serves the needs of the community through several initiatives including the Living Hope Food Pantry. John spoke of her creativity, her dedication to herself and her craft, and her work to preserve and shine a light upon Black history, life, and knowledge in Newberry, including that which is related to food and food spaces.

Eventually, Gloria and Reagan were able to connect, and through interviews, dinner table conversations, and written word via her book, *To Blossom Out From Hiding: Especially for Woman*, Reagan was able to bear witness to Gloria's testimony. This testimony reflects and directly speaks to the process and impact of self-discovery and self-recovery, or what she refers to as “blossoming out from hiding.” According to Gloria, this blossoming entails the journey of “claim[ing] that power” of reframing the deal you’ve been dealt in life to “explore your uniqueness, your talents, interests and desires,” and to “let all you have experienced work into wonderfulness” (150). Gloria explained her motivation for putting this journey to page, writing

this book—one of both reflection and instruction—first for herself but also for other women who have “lived life under a mound of expectations and responsibility” that have prevented explorations and understandings of “who [they] really are.” In essence, she explains, this book is about “accepting that you are a priority in your own life.” The book provides strategies for how to accept that priority, how to claim that power, and how to nurture a version of self that “breaths exuberance into the soul” (220). Some of these strategies include confronting yourself in true nakedness (both literally a figuratively) (237), vomiting and purging that which is unnecessary, unused, unhelpful, uncontrollable, and oppressive (259-265), and embracing faith, focus, health, and all that which encourages those “types of feelings you want to experience in life as routine” like “expansion of self,” exhilaration, empowerment, and liberation (271-281).

Some of Gloria’s own life experiences are reflected in the book, and her journey to blossom resonates throughout her written, vocalized, and lived testimony. She explains that this journey resonates through all parts of her life; for example, it has transformed how she understands herself in relation to family and how she creates through writing and other artistic practices. This journey also applies to how she lives through and participates in food spaces.

Gloria explains that she is committed to Black southern cultural cooking—the kind of cooking her parents did, the kind of cooking she was surrounded by as a child living in Newberry. She now claims it as an integral part of her identity. Her associations with the food and food spaces of her childhood, though, were not always met with such embrace, nor seen by her so positively.

Gloria grew up working in her parents’ restaurant, which was open in Newberry’s “backstreets”—the city’s Black business district—from the 1950s and into the early 1970s. She also cooked at home, serving up full family meals by age 10. Around the time the restaurant

closed, Gloria left for college in Pittsburgh, for a few reasons. First, she'd grown up during a period of intense racial segregation, which she explains only began to fade in Newberry in the early 1970s. According to Gloria, many people in her generation left the area around that time because they did not want to “have a life like [their] parents” or be treated the way their parents were. She also left the area (and specifically left the business) because she “didn't see its worth.” In her book, she elaborates that she even had begun to operate her own independent business, an expansion of the restaurant, by 16, and that all these efforts were esteem-building, they were not “what [she] really wanted to do, but rather what [her] father directed her to do. So [she] lived it” (144). Working in the restaurant, being a food industry entrepreneur, and cooking in general, exemplified the “performance” piece of “performing in one way, and actually desiring in the other”—those forces in women's lives that prevent an understanding of and connection with “true self” (56).

She explains that in adulthood, she realized this conflict between performance and desire, and that this conflict hindered her own authentic existence. So, she started her pursuit of blossoming. Through this process, which she credits to “God's amazing graces, self-actualization, and assertion,” she was able to “rearrange a few things in [her] life, adjust a few perceptions, adjust mindset, and allow [herself] certain liberties” (57). As a result, she has reframed the experiences of her childhood which once felt limiting to now feel liberating—including those experiences which were related to food.

For example, when it comes to her parent's restaurant, which at one time felt acutely contrasted with what Gloria desired for her life, she now uses some of her time in retirement to document the work done there and across the backstreets; together with a team of only two other Newberrians, she is the primary historian working to locate, archive, and lift up Black

knowledge that is being lost to time. Additionally, the foods that have been used as a tool of oppression via stereotyping—including during segregation, which served as a reason for Gloria's temporary leave from Newberry—are not the foods that Gloria, in her words, stays loyal to. What Gloria refers to as “Black southern cultural foods”—foods like chicken, collard greens, and cornbread, she explains—were and are points of racial scrutiny. Nevertheless, Gloria now claims that these foods are “who she is.” As a result, and as an ongoing process of her blossoming, Gloria now proudly shares this part of her identity, this healed part of herself, through the labor, skill, and creativity of cooking these foods for her family and community. She is also committed to preserving this knowledge and passing it on to future generations, and does so through, for example, cookbook writing and her documentary. Additionally, she encourages other Black women her age (which she and her circle refer to as “seasoned women”) and proceeding generations to pursue their own journey to blossom by holding intentional conversation and attending events dedicated to how their individual and collective identities are formed through their foods and food sharing practices.

Gloria has and continues to put in the work to blossom—to reorder and reclaim her experiences to rediscover and nurture her true self. When it comes to food, Gloria has reframed her experiences in a way that acknowledges their toxicity but extracts from them what serves her—again, what breathes exuberance into her soul. What was once a signifier of inauthentic performance, familial expectation, and racial prejudice, Gloria now shares that the foods of her childhood are those that she “will always cook,” that that knowledge must be archived, and that her “mission is to feed the community.”

Tia and Jason Devette

“I want people to understand that people are still out here in your corner. We do food, but this is literally a ministry for us. ... Food is just a byproduct of who we

are. We try to make sure you taken care of, try to take care of the whole person here.” - Jason Devette



Figure 3.1. Laila's Place logo on the window of the cafe. Photo by Reagan Ross.



Figure 3.2. Interior of Laila's Place. Photo by Reagan Ross.

Tia and Jason Devette are the founders of Laila's Place, a family-owned and operated

café and bakery in the heart of downtown Newberry, just a couple streets from where Gloria's family operated their restaurant over 50 years ago. Reagan was urged to connect with Tia and Jason by other community members throughout Newberry who spoke highly of how warm and welcoming they are, their impact on the community at large, and how good their food is.

After meeting the Devettes, it was clearly evident that their dedication to extend warmth, connect with the community, and encourage customers to connect with one another enacts positive change. In our conversations, in the way they interact with employees and customers, and in the physical spaces they carefully curate, Tia and Jason share their testimony. This testimony speaks to the ability of food spaces to facilitate intimate connection and "whole person" care motivated and enabled by faith, or what Tia and Jason refer to as "ministry."

The ministry enacted at Laila's Place starts with its name. Now most commonly known simply as "Laila's Place," the café's original name was "Laila's Wonderfully Made Goods." This original name paid homage to their daughter, Laila, and was named for her favorite scripture, Psalm 139:14, which reads, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made." Thus, the café's inception was founded on the empowerment of spirituality.

For Tia and Jason, ministry at Laila's Place is their calling. They both explained that while they have the pencil, God has the eraser. Though they tried to do things "their way" first and nothing worked, when they moved in the direction that they felt they were being called to, momentum finally took hold. The business grew, and continues to grow, through catering events, markets, local partnerships, and secondary locations. Their name was spreading statewide and nationwide, and they were seeing customers and making personal connections with folks as far as New York and California. And, most importantly according to Tia and Jason, their impact in the community was also taking hold.

Before discussing what this impact looks like, though, it's important to acknowledge why exactly The Devettes believe that their spirituality makes it possible. First, Tia cites transparency. She describes herself as someone who "lives what they say they believe," explaining, while motioning to her outward self, "this is me. I love the Lord. I'm saved." As a result of this transparency, she explains, oneself, faith, and passion, "just [come] out;" if people choose to accept this unfiltered version of yourself, they will receive the work you do. Thus, the Devette's spiritual identity is intentionally apparent in this space and in the way they represent themselves and their business in the community. The second reason is, simultaneously, faith. Jason explains, "the scripture says we plant and water, and trust God for the increase." This planting and watering are what Tia refers to as "putting legs to" their faith. This is what forms the basis of their ministry and enables their mission to make Laila's Place and place of care.

At Laila's Place, the actions of their ministry look like, as one example, altering the infrastructure of the space to support connection between customers, employees, and their community more broadly. For instance, they purposefully don't play music and don't have Wi-Fi, in an effort to get people to converse with one another more. The Devettes proudly speak of the effectiveness of this strategy, citing one particular example of two community members who first met at Laila's Place and now regularly sit in the space pictured in Figure 3.3, to just talk for hours.



Figure 3.3. Front parlor seating at Laila's Place. Photo by Reagan Ross.



Figure 3.4. Prayer box (upper right corner of photo) located just inside the main entrance and exit of Laila's Place. Photo by Reagan Ross.

Additionally, Tia and Jason make an effort to learn the names of every customer, greeting

them each time they come in and bidding them farewell when they go. They regard each customer the same, ensuring that people who might be ostracized by others feel equal here. They give food to kids, elderly folks, and other customers, who come in but might not have the money. They sincerely inquire about customers' wellbeing and they train their staff to do all the same. This is done in an effort to make customers feel comfortable and welcome in this space. They strive to ensure their reputation across Newberry as a safe space and foster an environment where customers can connect to and form the "lifetime memories" that establish food as symbolic of "joy," "love," and "connection" to self and other. Not only does Laila's Place provide nostalgic memories associated with eating ice cream and baked goods, but it's also a space to build trust so that customers, especially those who feel unsupported elsewhere in the community, can lean on the folks at Laila's Place.

Tia and Jason also use Laila's Place as an entry point for community members with less power to have a voice. Tia explains that, by creating an environment where all customers feel they can express their needs and desires for their neighborhoods and the city, she and Jason hear many of the grievances and concerns of their neighbors. Further, by cementing their spot in the community as approachable, sincere, transparent, and well-connected, they are able to communicate these concerns with individuals who have more political and economic power, such as other business owners, City Council members, and the mayor. Tia explains, "we want to be a bridge that connects these two parts of the stratosphere" by "working towards ... developing more fluid relationships between [the community and those with the power to change infrastructure]."

This advocacy, care, and encouragement of interpersonal connection—all ushered through food—are what Tia and Jason refer to as "the Laila's experience." Jason elaborated why

the Laila’s experience is unique compared to cold and unfeeling, profit-driven “big box” stores, stating,

“[People] can get ice cream and cake from Walmart, but they can’t get this experience. They can’t get the Laila’s experience. They can’t get somebody calling you by name when you walk in the door. They’re not going to get somebody just coming out and asking you how your day is going. They’re not going to get somebody who pray with you.”

At Laila’s Place, Tia and Jason live out their faith to create a space where customers can feel free. With food as a “byproduct,” they use Laila’s Place to advocate and provide care for their community—this is their ministry.

The Impact of Intimacy

In Newberry County, the use of food and food spaces to attempt to suppress Black life persists through, for example, gendered and racial stereotyping and a food apartheid that deepens political and economic hierarchies, decreases food security, and promotes emotionally and spiritually sterile megastores at the sake of community-oriented food spaces. At the same time, though, Newberrians demonstrate that food and food spaces can also be used to resist these oppressive systems and structures. As Gloria’s testimony explains, Black women’s efforts to discover, heal, and “embrace inner-self and fulfill what is needed for self” facilitate individual and interpersonal empowerment (Glasgow 2017: 17-18). Her efforts to embrace inner self are deeply influenced and promoted by her commitment to being in community with other women over food, healing her connection to the foods she now sees as integral to her identity, and sharing her food knowledge with future generations. For the Devettes, efforts to “put legs” to faith have facilitated the construction of a space dedicated to community empowerment via care, advocacy, and interpersonal connection. Food enables this construction by eliciting emotion, bringing people together, facilitating meaningful conversation, and nourishing the body and spirit. Thus, while food is a tool for subjugation in Newberry County, it is also a powerful tool

that enables resistance through intimacy.

Gloria Glasgow provides an extensive profile of how she understands and prioritizes herself today, compared to how she did (or did not) do so in her past. She also provides strategies for others to follow should they assume the journey to blossom, such as purging that which is unhelpful and embracing a joyful nakedness. Through these reflections and instruction, Gloria demonstrates the transformative potential of self-intimacy. In essence, she testifies to the power of blossoming.

In her testimony, food emerges as one area of her life that has seen this transformation due to her self-intimacy. For Gloria, blossoming has reframed her relationship with the food of her childhood, taking what once was a symbol of expectation and racism into one of pride, creativity, and identity. Further, what was once the burden of feeding others, a barrier to Gloria's access to discover what actually "breathes exuberance to [her] soul" and nurtures her internal traits which she explains God placed within her, is now her "mission." Her journey makes evident Gloria's internal transformation through self-intimacy, and also shows how that internal work promotes external action that positively contributes to the collective; in this case, by feeding the community and using her creative efforts to contribute to food-focused writing and creating the backstreets documentary, Gloria nourishes the community and promotes Black life and knowledge in the city of Newberry.

Regarding the necessity for self-intimacy, Gloria's story corroborates the need expressed by Lorde (1984), hooks (1998, 2001, 2008), McKittrick (2006), brown (2017, 2019), and the Combahee River Collective (1977) for oppositional healing and reclamation of self-ownership brought on by the pressures of historical and contemporary racism and sexism. Her story also highlights the specific pressures of growing up as a Black woman in the South. In addition to

discussing the impacts of segregation she carried with her from childhood as hindering her connection to self, she also writes of the normative gendered expectations that necessitate the need for her and many other women to blossom out from hiding,

“amid all the positive changes in views concerning a woman’s position in society, for many, individuality still wars against age-old practices and traditions. Women are moving forward in one way and basically standing still in the other. The reason for this is, the expectation of her role remains basically old-school traditions. The same old-school benchmarks continue to measure her conduct and presentation” (Glasgow 2017: 20-21)

Tia and Jason Devette, on the other hand, demonstrate the ways in which faith can be translated into Laila’s Place, as a food landscape, to empower the community. Like McCutcheon’s (2021: 894) characterization of BLIBT as “help[ing] us to actualize the spirit onto the material landscape and advocate for radical change,” the Devettes see their work at Laila’s place, through grounding in their spiritual beliefs, as enacting change in their community. By explaining that their faith, the transparency of their faith in Laila’s Place, and their labor to “put legs” to their faith allow them to enact their ministry through this space, the Devettes demonstrate the liberatory potential of spirituality. Just as Gloria testifies to the power of blossoming and makes clear that food is a powerful avenue through which to pursue this blossoming, the Devettes testify to the power of ministry in food landscapes.

Although not preachers, and although they do not run a place of worship or evangelize in any way, Tia and Jason imbue their spirituality into the food landscape via Laila’s Place to respond to community needs in two ways. First, similar to DeWitt King’s (2024: 46) assertion that, through its soundscapes, the Black church “offer[s] a respite from the anti-Blackness of the world” because these soundscapes are “a robust repository of Black hope, love, pain, and most importantly, joy” (45), Laila’s Place also offers a place of respite as facilitated by its food, and reflects what Alexander (2005: 15) reminds us of: that the flesh is “an embodiment of the spirit.”

Tia and Jason explain that the menu of Laila’s Place is specifically crafted to elicit joy, feelings of nostalgia, and positive memories of family and community. They, along with many other community members, also attest that food—and especially food created and offered with radical care in mind—brings people together. In this way, and furthered by other structures of the cafe like the intentional lack of music and Wi-Fi, not only are customers ushered into meaningfully connecting with themselves and one another, but they are also encouraged to confide in the employees of this space who offer other forms of care such as prayer. Thus, the food of Laila’s Place is intended to enact imagined internal and interpersonal transformation. Second, by inviting in people across political and economic strata with its reputation for great food and a welcoming environment, Tia and Jason seek to respond to a “void in the community,” characterized by a lack of representation and voice for people most affected by social, political, and economic disparity. They attest that because food is so emotionally and spiritually meaningful and because their ministry through food is transparent, people let their walls down to both confide in them and to listen to them, which enables Tia and Jason to better understand the needs of the community and convey these needs to those with greater social influence. Therefore, in this way, food helps facilitate structural change in the community.

Laila’s Place embodies the intimacy described in Pulido’s (1998: 721) spirituality by promoting “consciousness and connection” for customers throughout Newberry and beyond. Additionally, it furthers principles of BLIBT that call Black Christians and faith leaders to use their faith to motivate work towards positive social change. McCutcheon (2021: 898) explains that by engaging with BLIBT, Black churches and other spiritual spaces like farms can be “geographies of self-reliance,” withstanding the test of time by ensuring transformative and sustainable collective care. At Laila’s Place, Tia and Jason’s faith energizes the food work that

opens people up to give and receive this care within the café and across the community, therefore making a space of self-reliance. Through Laila's Place, the Devettes host what McCutcheon (2016) refers to as the "radical welcome table." In testifying their ministry and the power available through tapping into interpersonal intimacy over food, the Devettes make space where the community "can dream of a new world" (20), and which invites witnesses to "dream beyond the present day circumstances to create a landscape where liberation is evident, visible, and available to all" (21).

From Lorde's Sapphire Sapphos dinner tables (1988: 44) to hooks' (1993: 12-15) invocation of the yam as "diasporic connection," to Beulah Land Farms' dedication to promoting Black spiritual transformation through marrying community and land (McCutcheon 2021: 888) to brown's (2019: 12-13) insistence, inspired by Toni Cade Bambara and her students' teaching, that food is a requirement of radical love and spiritual support in sisterhood, food matters to practices of self-intimacy and spirituality as an empowering practice. These forms of intimacy for community members like Gloria, Tia, and Jason work as an oppositional strategy to the historical and contemporary structures of racism and sexism that attempt to force placelessness upon Black people by dispossessing them from the source of power that is the self. By rediscovering and prioritizing self, embracing "consciousness and connection" (Pulido 1998: 721), and using that power to build a better today and "richer and more possible tomorrow" for the individual and collective self (Lorde 1984: 54-55), intimacy in Newberry County demonstrates spatial praxis according to Katherine McKittrick's statement that "black lives are necessarily geographic, but also struggle with discourses that erase and despatialize their sense of place" (McKittrick 2006: xii-xiii). In process and impact, intimacy for these community members also echoes Ki'Amber Thompson's (2023: 1705, 1699) and bell hooks' (2008)

discussions of intentional and interpersonal relationality as having transformative potential. Through “deep listening”—one mechanism Thompson offers for practicing intimacy—for example, with past self, present self, and other-as-self, community members are “embodying desired worlds” in internal spaces (of the individual mind and body) and external spaces (of interpersonal relationships and material places). These worlds are those where the self and all people “can live fully and well” (hooks 2009: 5).

Conclusion

This study was driven first and foremost by the desires of community partners in Newberry County to document and archive their stories so that lessons may be felt for generations to come, and to highlight the ways in which people can tap into community for support. The knowledges and experiences they shared, which made this research possible, also expand the way intimacy is understood in food spaces for Black women and their communities in and beyond the American South. First, by demonstrating self-intimacy and spirituality in action, these testimonies corroborate Black feminist discussions of intimacy as a way in which women can find and nurture the self and community, use faith to motivate and promote liberatory efforts, and subsequently use the power found from these connections for internal and community-wide transformation. Second, they expand upon existing narratives of the erotic and spiritual by shifting the lens towards the often tangentially mentioned element of food and clarifying the significance of food in Black placemaking by exploring its role in intimacy. By shifting the focus in this way, this paper further highlights the liberatory disruptions made by Black women and their communities in and through food spaces via intimacy.

Food, as a cultural knowledge and practice, as a livelihood, and as physical and spiritual nourishment, has long been an avenue for Black women in the United States and across the

African diaspora to foster transformation, joy, healing, and kinship for themselves and their communities (Shange 1998; Nettles-Barcelón, 2015; Jones 2019; Reese & Cooper 2021; Ford 2023; McCutcheon 2023). Such embodied and liberatory space-making practices are all the more significant given how food also has been and continues to be weaponized against Black women in the maintenance of white heteropatriarchy (Williams-Forson 2006; Tipton-Martin 2011; Twitty 2017; Cooley 2019; Jones 2019). By bearing witness to the testimonies of Gloria Glasgow and Tia and Jason Devette, we can better understand how self-intimacy and spirituality, at and beyond the kitchen table, contribute to liberatory space-making practices as intimate strategies of resistance.

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CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

This thesis explored how food, food spaces, and food sharing practices play a role in the lives of Black women in Newberry County, South Carolina. In particular, this thesis explored how power relations take shape at the intersection of southern foodways and Black geographies. By asserting that food work is a form of aesthetic labor and focusing on how the intimacies of food can be accessed in such a way that promotes self and community liberation, this thesis highlights the ways in which, in spite of persisting “plantation logics” (McKittrick 2013: 3), community members use food to build “richer and more possible” worlds for themselves and future generations (Lorde 1984: 55).

Contributions

By examining legacy cooking for these community members, Chapter 2 contributes to feminist geography and critical (southern) food studies’ understandings of how creativity and care come together through food sharing in Black communities. It reveals how food sharing practices are aligned with Katherine McKittrick’s (2021a, 2021b) concept of aesthetic labor, or the enthusiastic work to rebelliously preserve and promote Black life, and challenges the historical silencing of these narratives in popular food literature in and beyond the South Carolina Midlands. Further, the chapter demonstrates how aesthetic labor is a useful framework for connecting community goals to document and preserve cultural food knowledge with calls from Black geographies and food studies scholars to reflect on the intersection of creativity and care by demonstrating that legacy cooking is an effortful expression of Black consciousness.

Chapter 3 contributes to feminist geography and critical (southern) food studies’ understandings of how food, food sharing, and food spaces facilitate liberation work through

intimate practice. First, when examining self-intimacy, this chapter shifts the focus to understand why *food* specifically—a lens that often forms the background of narratives of self-intimacy but less often incurs specific theorization—has an important place in processes of self-discovery, self-actualization, and finding internal empowerment. Further, this chapter answers the call from scholars who urge critical geographies to engage more deeply with spirituality to better understand what motivates community members’ daily lives and strategies for communal “everyday resistance” (Kohl 2018: 2; Pulido 1998; Alexander 2005; McCutcheon 2021); as food is essential in both systems of oppression and strategies for everyday resistance, and because it is deeply important to participants’ connections to faith, identity, and community action, this answers this call through critical *food* geographies.

In addition to making these contributions within the respective literatures, this thesis strives to center participant’s voices above all and was inspired and guided by community members’ goals and desires for public preservation of their life and knowledges surrounding food. The historical and contemporary suppression of Black women’s food stories in the public archive has driven these stories—which are instructive of history, identity, family, community, self-preservation, liberation work, culinary artistry, and more—to stay in the minds of community members or the private archives of homes and churches. As each generation passes, this knowledge is lost to time, leaving future generations without any ancestral knowledge that is not passed down. Thus, while I do not claim that this thesis offers a perfect solution, it does offer an applied contribution of building out the public archive; with much guidance by participants to ensure its texts do justice to their lived experience and the lessons they wish to preserve, the body chapters will be published in journals as open-access articles.

Areas for Future Work

Future work in Newberry County and perhaps in other Black communities across the South, by recommendation of community members, should focus on building out the public archive in an even more accessible way, such as publishing in local newspapers or contributing to local museum exhibits. Further, considering the relative scarcity of Black geographies and food studies research in the Midlands compared to the Lowcountry (see, for example, Harris 2009; White 2015; Derickson 2022; and as an exception, see McCutcheon 2021), I hope to see additional work build out the literature and archives of Black life and knowledge in this region. In this expansion, I also hope to see future food studies, ethnographic, and community-engaged research in the Midlands consider specific groups who were not the primary focus of this thesis, including, for example, other racialized communities, LGBTQ+ folks, Black men and youth, immigrant communities, disabled people, and urban residents (e.g., those belonging to larger cities than Newberry, such as Columbia), among others.

Many aspects of the alternative realities created by Black communities, through food sharing and otherwise, remain intentionally private. However, when members of marginalized communities do choose to partner with researchers and choose to have their knowledges documented and shared, we as researchers—especially white researchers desiring to be allies—must consider how we can best support community goals to restore histories lost by the very institutions we continuously benefit from.

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