Review of:

Every Nation Has Its Dish: Black Bodies and Black Food in Twentieth-Century America

Jennifer Jensen Wallach. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Pp. 248, bibliography, index.

Review by: Marissa Francisco Farahbod

Every Nation Has Its Dish by Jennifer Jensen Wallach is an intriguing work that centralizes the importance of foodways to the study of group identity construction. Laying emphasis on the fact that the study of food choices and food habits provides an entryway into a significant yet elusive kind of historical knowing, Wallach eloquently elaborates on the nuances of black identity construction in the twentieth century. She uses a plethora of examples from relevant literature and introduces readers to the lives and works of numerous African American activists, writers, and dedicated food reformers.

Throughout her work, Wallach demonstrates the ways in which cultural and political meanings are embedded within the ritual of mealtime: the comestibles, the ways of eating, and the places where one eats. Thus, the performative act of dining and the heavily symbolic act of accepting or rejecting a meal can reveal much about values, social hierarchies of class and race status, and heritage. The author demonstrates how, in the era of post-emancipation, food practices became a significant tool for African Americans to distance themselves from the debasement of slavery by revealing their transition through food choice, dining etiquette, hygiene, and meal regularity.

Every Nation is divided into seven chapters that serve as a thought-provoking survey of African American identity formation through food behavior. Her initial chapter, "Creating the Foodways of Uplift," is dedicated to examining the highly performative and race-conscious food practices of middle-class African Americans in the movement for racial uplift. Wallach introduces readers to food reformers and respectable eaters who deliberately distanced themselves from culinary practices that were tainted with representations of poverty and slavery. These middle-class reformers had the privilege to opt for factory-produced food (also known as pure foods) that was symbolic of modernity and cleanliness. However, while these practices were designed to gain the unlikely approval of white Americans, they simultaneously created social hierarchies among black community members.

In Chapter 2, "Booker T. Washington's Multifaceted Program for Food Reform at the Tuskegee Institute," Wallach provides a detailed history of Washington's program for food reform at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. To Washington, for whom food choices and food habits were an important vehicle for social uplift and assimilation, the creation and management of food systems by and for black people was a dream to which they could aspire. Wallach elaborates on the challenges and apprehensions that Washington faced as the principal of the institute and his ultimately elusive dream of self-sufficiency.

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"W.E.B. Du Bois, Respectable Child-Rearing, and the Representative Black Body," Chapter 3, reveals the anxieties felt by African American food reformers as specifically set forth in Du Bois's writings. Wallach's helpful excerpts from Du Bois's work tangibly reveal his frustrations, if not obsessions, over his daughter's health, as well as his own. For Du Bois and his like-minded contemporaries, morality, manhood, and character were linked to good health and slimness, which could be achieved through good food practices.

In chapter four, "Regionalism, Social Class, Elite Perceptions of Social Class Foodways during the Era of Great Migration," Wallach discusses how, throughout the uplift movement, an important agenda for middle-class respectable eaters was to refrain from consuming food with racialized associations. Instead they ate what was performatively American in order to transcend negative stereotypes. However, the staple foods of working-class African Americans living in poverty in the South remained the "three m's diet" of meal (corn), meat (pork), and molasses (sweetener). Far from succumbing to the middle-class desire to abandon food choices that were symbolic of a history of violence and resistance, these African Americans maintained their Southern food roots, labeling them "soul food" in the 1960s and reclaiming their culinary heritage.

By then, however, soul food ingredients such as corn and pork had been rebranded and reframed as patriotic food choices. With the aim of conserving staples of middle- and upper-class American diners, such as beef and wheat, cornmeal and pork had been advertised during World War I, linked to the ideology of nationalism, and their customary symbolic associations forever changed. Wallach covers this theme brilliantly in Chapter 5, "World War I, the Great Depression, and the Changing Symbolic Value of Black Food Traditions."

Wallach moves to meaningful food choices made by African Americans after the Civil Rights Movement, in Chapter 6, "The Civil Rights Movement and the Ascendency of the Idea of a Racial Style of Eating." She explains how much is revealed about exclusion, racism, and second-class citizenship in America when patriotism, nationalism (which she broadly describes as a feeling of belonging), and first-class citizenship are symbolized in the consumption of certain foods that are denied to some citizens. Wallach treats this topic in depth especially with regards to the civil rights movement and the symbolic significance of Coca-Cola and hamburgers that were both globally and locally associated with American culture. She relates numerous stories about such food denials to African Americans in the era prior to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Most notably she tells how Mohammad Ali, despite winning an Olympic gold medal for the US in 1960, was denied service when he asked for a coke and a burger at a Kentucky restaurant after he had returned home.

The author concludes with "Culinary Nationalism Beyond Soul Food," focusing on the history of black culinary nationalism in America. Her survey reviews activism in the promotion of pan-African diasporic soul food, in the rejection of soul food as a marker of black identity, in the rise of vegetarianism, and in building a new national black culinary identity.

Throughout this very well-researched work, Wallach displays her profound knowledge of African American history and foodways, presenting the experiences of generations of African American activists and reformers. Helpful illustrations

make the narrative more tangible to readers, although some historically important photographs do not find their way into the pages of this book (such as the photograph of Diane Nash and other student activists drinking Coca-Cola in a newly desegregated diner). Notwithstanding Wallach's vivid descriptions, the visual impact of such culturally significant photographs would have made the work as a whole more powerful.

Every Nation Has Its Dish is a compelling work that examines and decodes food practices, habits, and choices to reveal the ways in which individuals and groups construct and reform social, political, and cultural identities. Wallach's work serves as a strong introduction for students and scholars interested in African American foodways in the twentieth century.