Mon Nourriture, Soul Food: Dependent on All Fronts

I have two cultural diets, neither that exist in their maiden form nor seem poised to be liberated, which I will define in this article, in the next section. Having grown up half African American and half Cameroonian, I am privy to a southern and soul food diet amongst African Americans in the United States, and a traditional Bamileke diet from rural Cameroon. Unfortunately, pressures from a uniform front have prevented me from having access to food justice within either of my cultures. This is not just a physiological problem, but an issue that challenges the social and cultural institutions that make me who I am today.

I recognize that food justice has an established definition but prescribing to the orthodox meaning reproduces some of the dynamics that robs me of the ability to have a diet in the first place, namely that of reliance on external actors to control the trajectory of my community and I's food pathways. I ultimately believe that food justice addresses physical, mental, and emotional elements. Instead of defining food justice persay, I would like to describe the core elements of what a liberated diet, or one in which a community receives the food well suited to its interests across the array of human needs:
- Healthy and nutritious
- Culturally and socially enmeshed within my community
- Affordable and in reach
- Tastes good
- Free of control and influence from outside actors

First and foremost, food is meant to nourish the body and provide for the physiological needs of staying alive. This is the primary purpose, and I recognize that. In communities that have not achieved a diet defined by food justice, you see either malnutrition in the case of the absence of food, or you see prominent health issues like obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and more (that is if the food is non-nutritious but still plenty).

However, I believe that almost equally important, it serves a cultural and social role. Humans are social animals, and need complicated structures to keep cohesive systems that promote group improvement through solidarity. Food has developed into one of these institutions, and honestly not just for humans but all types of organisms (like a pride of lions, or amongst birds where parents chew the food for their young). They set the foundation for Sunday get-togethers, weddings, funerals, hanging out with friends, having relationships with your parents, and more. These particular institutions are not solely dependent on food per say, but it underlays the bedrock of the entire setting. For example, my family from Louisiana in proud African American tradition have annual family reunions centered around BBQ and other southern foods. We know that Mawmaw, the late matriarch of the family, would prepare the same food, at her beautiful home, and we knew we would get into trouble for sneaking in and breaking off a piece of fish. Wishing I had a video to convey this message/example, you can see how the entire get-together, the setting, cultural relationship between family members, and more is contextualized around the food.

Of course, it is culturally relevant that the food tastes good, and while usually never mentioned, I believe this should be included within food justice. You cannot have a context where people are

going to eat something that does not taste good, as it 1) deters people from eating and 2) destroys the sociocultural benefits of eating (if there are any). I am not a biologist and wish to dissect the relationship between food tasting good and being good for you, but I am sure there is a link (for example through something like food poisoning, or a person's palette or body is not adapted to extremely spicy food, etc.). It could be said that there's no coincidence that everyone loves their mother or grandmother's cooking.

Thus, in this first portion of the essay, I hope I could exemplify the importance of cultural and social relationships stemming from diet. These are often excluded yet play pivotal roles in the development of communities that are consuming food. Moving forward, the elements of affordability and control by external actors will be addressed by looking at the African American side of my cultural heritage (I could do it in the Cameroonian context as well), and how it's limited through these final two elements.

Let's take a textured analysis of how external actors (violating one element of liberated diets) influence the affordability and access to foods to facilitate healthy, culturally conscious eating (violating the second element). First and foremost, a large contributor to the well-documented culinary plight of African Americans are urban policy and dynamics, particularly around how neighborhoods are starved of grocery stores but flooded with convenience, fast-food, and liquor stores. Suffocated from public transportation and reasonable transportation to fresh food containing venues, black people have no choice but to eat fast and highly processed foods. These foods cause inflammation, increased fluid retention, weight gain, all of which conglomerate and lead to tangible negative health outcomes (like gout, strokes, and more).

If we add COVID-19 to the mix, all these issues become exacerbated. Grocery stores have been struggling, and with black communities in the United States already having low rates of transportation access to these venues, COVID-19 challenged the will to eat healthy anymore because public transportation became taboo and, in some cases, completely restricted, at least temporarily. African American citizens will then begin using the rapidly dominant fast food delivery services like Grubhub, UberEATS, DoorDash, individual courier services for individual food establishments, and more. The American economy does what it always does, prioritizes making money over the practical flow of services and goods, and black people are at the bottom of the cup to receive the worst effects of it.

Ultimately, understanding the policy dynamics and outcomes from COVID involves admitting the truth behind the underlying vector of white supremacy in the United States. It's outside of the scope of this paper to argue for its existence and define it to a precise point, but let's just say it is no surprise to see that black people have even worse food pathways during the pandemic, and are disproportionately becoming infected, dying from, and even have the comorbidities that lead to complications. The food we eat and the sedentary lifestyle that COVID creates create a feedback loop. Black people have lower access to healthy and nutritious food, have more comorbidities, die from COVID more, causing their family to face economic precarity and take jobs on the front line to sustain themselves, exposing themselves to the virus, etc. You get the picture.

Admittedly, there are additional problems that are not within the feedback loop of the relationship between white supremacy and black subjugation. The entire work/schooling experience has transformed, making things easier in terms of professionally advancing, but making eating food healthily much harder. First, the idea of transportation time and lunch is eliminated. You can jump from one meeting to another with two clicks of a mouse, instead of through either 1) walking down the hall 2) driving somewhere in the car or 3) traveling to an entirely different locale. The acceleration of the amount of work limits people's leisure time in which food could either be obtained or prepared.

Furthermore, there is something that I am not sure is coined yet but what I would call "home fatigue", a pernicious entity that makes it unlikely an individual will want to engage in certain tasks via the kitchen. As you work from home, eat from home, entertain from home, and spend essentially 23 hours at home on average throughout the course of months, you begin to get tired of it, and want to not move or do things. This makes it unlikely you would want to go down and be in the kitchen, as you want to limit the amount of time you go to the same spaces over and over besides your bedroom.

Now, to the meat of my own particular experience, I can notice the economic and policy effects on food systems that affect the local black community in which I am currently living. I moved back home in March of 2020 to finish up my undergraduate education, begin my PhD virtually in August, having lived at home ever. With my current projected MA thesis being on the institutionalization of African American diets over time, I can see some of the trends I predict in my research unfolding in my own home and community. For example, my grandparents, whom I would predict would be more inclined to eat cooked food (as they grew up and internalized a traditional diet before the fast-food boom of the 1970s), are eating just as much fast food as me. This is because of 1) home fatigue but 2) proximity to fast-food and its convenience.

Walking in the store and doing shopping was relatively dangerous at the time (now things have changed slightly as vaccines are available and cases are down), so you could either 1) pull up, have groceries put in the back of the car, and go through the normal process from driving home from the market to a cooked meal on the table, or drive up to the fast-food window and receive a meal. My grandparents are older and need care, so my mother or I would have to do all the cooking, cleaning, upkeep for the house, etc. So, with only 10–15-minute breaks between meetings and tasks, we could either go get a meal from the store, or try to cook and clean and all that during our breaks (which did not always line up). One is easily more obvious as there's two dozen food establishments within a mile radius, and not enough time for all the tasks needed to do to prepare food.

While it disproportionately happens to African Americans for numerous reasons beyond even the interactions I mentioned above, this is something that happens to all families and households in the United States. Additionally, the food companies are in a great position in terms of conquering the psychological front, with advertising being as cheap and easy as ever. For example, tech companies have grown with stock prices hitting astronomical highs, and with people on televisions or other screens all day, more people can get in front of ads on a much more frequent basis.

Myself, I have gained 50 pounds. As much as people will say that I am blaming the system, I don't have willpower, etc., I truly believe that it is near impossible to beat the food pathways system that many Americans are subjected to. The crazy part is I am a former Division 1 athlete who ran the 400m, one of the toughest events that requires a healthy, low-body fat physique. I am extremely motivated, driven, and love healthy food, but conditions make it psychologically impossible to cook food on my own. I feel terrible every day, cannot fit my clothes, and hate looking at myself in the mirror. In fact, I never thought I would ever be this heavy in my life (210 pounds). Not only are the conditions difficult in terms of me eating healthy and being able to work out, but also the external help/influences. With marketing and advertising so cheap, many fake gurus/programs/fad diets have popped up, giving the appearance of helping for a day or two, only to plateau, then cause you to gain more weight than you started with.

This sounds like a depressing story, but there are possible ways in which things could improve going into the future. We should realize the cultural importance of diet, and work to undo systems and companies that are causing bad food pathways. To me, food security means something slightly more different but comprehensive. We should strive to fight for all the elements I outlined above and be much more understanding of the people's situation with food, and the outcomes the current food pathways cause.