

Food: The emptiness of displacement and the satiety of community

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“I remember,” Bob Marley writes

when we used to sit

In the government yard in Trenchtown,

Observing the hypocrites

As they would mingle with the good people we meet.

It is a credit to Marley’s caliber as a songwriter that he can make a verb like “mingle” – a happy sounding word – seem ominous. But in the next verse the darkness clears, both figuratively and literally:

I remember when we used to sit

In the government yard in Trenchtown.

And then Georgie would make the fire lights,

As it was logwood burnin' through the nights.

Then we would cook cornmeal porridge,

Of which I'll share with you

The entire tone of the song shifts in this verse. The singer is no longer distanced – “observing” – but now engaged in sharing a humble meal around a fire. While still living in poverty, the people have found a way to ensure that “Everything’s gonna be all right” for the members of the community. That change of mood in the lyric hints at the power of food to bring people together, to spark conversations, to fill not only bellies but souls.

Today, too many people do not have access to even that humble meal of maize and water. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 815 million people go hungry.¹ In *Sozaboy*, Ken Saro-Wiwa documents the look of hunger as his protagonist searches for his family in the aftermath of the Biafran War:

So I will leave that camp and go to another. And again na soso the same thing. Plenty people without no dress or little dress walking round with small small bowl begging for food to eat: small small picken with big belly, eyes like pit for dem head, mosquito legs and crying for food, and small yarse and waiting for death, long line of people standing, waiting for food.... Because all these people cannot

find food to chop. There is no fish so the people are beginning to kill and chop lizard. Oh, God no gree bad thing. To see all these men and women who are children of God killing and chopping lizard because of can't help is something that I will be remembering all the days of my life for ever and ever, amen.²

As Marley shows the power of community in his lyrics, Saro-Wiwa shows the devastation caused by war and displacement. No one can croon in good conscience, “Everything’s gonna be all right” to the men, women, and children in the camps Saro-Wiwa writes about. The novel also insists that the suffering could be alleviated as there are army officers, village chiefs, and religious leaders who have stockpiled food and who gain weight as the people around them die. Saro-Wiwa terms these people “bellymen” writing that “their customer is death.”³

Today too many of those bellymen profit off poverty. As food activist Ron Finley says of his neighborhood of South Central Los Angeles:

The city planners get together and they figure they are going to change the name to represent something else. So they change it to South Los Angeles, like this is going to change what is really going wrong in the city. This is South Los Angeles: liquor stores, fast food, vacant lots. Like 26.5 million other Americans, I live in a food desert. South Central Los Angeles: home of the drive-thru and the drive-by. Funny thing is the drive-thrus are killing more people than the drive-bys.⁴

In the United States, where health care is profit-driven, obesity and its accompanying diseases are a golden goose for insurance companies and dialysis centers. In *The End of Food*, Paul Roberts describes the Zip Code Effect, which turns poor neighborhoods into food deserts:

One study of all food stores in three low-income Zip Codes in Detroit found that fewer than one in five carried a minimal healthy-food basket – that is, food products representing all strata of the food pyramid. The study also found that perishable items weren’t as fresh as they were in richer neighborhoods, and that, in the cruelest

twist, basic staples like bread and milk were actually more expensive in poor Zip Codes than in wealthy ones.⁵

Corporations across the United States base their profits on food insecurity; Finley's trifecta of liquor stores, fast food, and dialysis centers exploit an already vulnerable population with the profits leaving the community. The sicker the inner cities are, the more money can be made off them in the fields of healthcare and security services. The waves of killings of brown people by police officers are happening primarily in these food deserts, and that is no coincidence.

As Frantz Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* for people in the "context of oppression, living does not mean embodying moral values or taking his (sic) place in the coherent and fruitful development of the world. To live means to keep on existing. Every date is a victory: not as the result of work, but a victory felt as a triumph for life."⁶ In NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*, street children unhomed in Zimbabwe by Operation Murambatsvina come across a visitor from London eating something they have never seen before:

I look closely at her long hand, at the thing she is eating. It's flat, and the outer part is crusty. The top is creamish and looks fluffy and soft, and there are coin-like things on it, a deep pink, the color of burn wounds. I also see sprinkles of red and green and yellow, and finally the brown bumps that look like pimples.⁷

The piece of pizza is so unrecognizable to the narrator that she calls it "a thing"; it does not even remotely resemble what she would think of as food. When the woman casually chucks it away, laughing as she misses the bin, the children are horrified: "We have never ever seen anyone throw food away, even if it's a thing."⁸ The children allow her to take some photographs of them, then walk away, stopping and turning back after crossing the street to yell insults at her: "We shout and we shout and we shout; we want to eat the thing she was eating, we want to hear our voices soar, we want our hunger to go away."⁹

The children see the throwing away of the pizza crust not as insulting, not as a transgression, but, as Fanon writes, as an attempt at murder.¹⁰ Just as Operation Murambatsvina has robbed their parents of their livelihoods, has stolen their education, has condemned their relatives and thousands of others to deaths from HIV/AIDS, the casual discarding of food is an act of dispossession, stripping their dignity away, as they struggle to restrain themselves from picking the discarded pizza off the ground.

Food must be viewed in context: a piece of pizza means something different to street children in Zimbabwe than it does to teenagers in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Rozena Maart emphasizes this contextualization in a scene in *Rosa's District 6*, using frikkadel to convey meaning:

Mr Collingwood's teeth sunk into the flaked crayfish, snoek, and prawns, all brought together by mashed bread, egg, and select roasted spices. Frikkadel were fried and then eaten with a tomato sambal and spices, which merged their individual sensations into one glorious moment, all revealed in that first bite which drew out the different flavors of the seafood. Auntie Flowers slowly and carefully handed Mr Collingwood the sambal and he scooped it all on his frikkadel then ate it like a ravenous animal. His appetite was insatiable.¹¹

That insatiability is not only for the frikkadel, it is for the culture of the District Six of his youth. As Maart writes elsewhere in a piece about the older Rosa, the community Rosa lives in, and the sharing of food will soon be shattered by the forced relocations:

I don't know where Gadija moved to or Mari. I know they'll be looking at the mountain every day, just like me. I look across the court, the block from where we live. There are clothes stuffed in broken window-panes, pregnant, bulging, bursting with unspoken words fisted into glass panes. We eat our fish frikkadels and our savoury rice with tomato smooortjie in silence.¹²

The silence as Rosa eats her frikkadel contrasts with Mr Collingwood's moaning pleasure as "his tongue caressed every morsel which sunk itself into his mouth."¹³ The sensuality and

companionship of the dinner in District Six are entirely absent in silent Lavendar Hill. The frikkadel no longer has the same meaning divorced from the community.

In *We Need New Names*, the context of food is also stressed. In the United States food is associated with death through the descriptions of the eating disorders Darling sees all around her. Darling describes her cousin's eating pattern and contrasts to her experience in Zimbabwe:

When the microwave says *nting*, fat boy TK takes out a pizza and eats it. When the microwave says *nting* again, he takes out the chicken wings. And then it's the burritos and hot dogs. Eat eat eat. All the food TK eats in one day, me and Mother and Mother of Bones would eat in maybe two or three days back home.¹⁴

These eating patterns lead to obesity and all of its accompanying health risks: heart disease, "sleep disorders, blood clots, leg ulcers, pancreatic inflammation" and type 2 diabetes.¹⁵ As Darling points out, "In America, the fatness is not the fatness I was used to at home."¹⁶ In describing obesity, Darling says, "the body is turned into something else."¹⁷ In Zimbabwe, the poor suffered from lack of food; in Michigan, people in economic distress often only have access to the kind of processed food Darling describes TK as eating and are more likely to battle obesity and its health effects.

Soul Food, a 1997 feature film written and directed by George Tillman, Jr, on the surface is deceptively simple. The Josephs, a Black family in Chicago, gather every Sunday at the matriarch's house to cook and eat together. When she becomes ill, and eventually dies, the family seems on the verge of collapsing and Sunday dinner is the first casualty. Her precocious grandson, though, comes up with a scheme to bring all the family together on a Sunday and tricks them into cooking dinner, which eventually reveals a stash of money Big Mama had been hiding, which allows the family to save the house and return to the Sunday dinner tradition.

The plot is as hackneyed as I described it. There are reclusive uncles, infidelities, and stereotypically gay hairdressers. When viewed through the subtext of soul food itself, however, the movie speaks to the importance of food traditions in keeping community alive. In *High on the Hog: A Culinary Journey from Africa to America*, Jessica Harris defines "soul food," or rather speaks to the difficulty in defining it:

Soul food, it would seem, depends on an ineffable quality. It is the combination of nostalgia for and pride in the food of those who came before. In the manner of the Negro spiritual, “How I Got Over,” soul food looks back and celebrates a genuine taste palate while offering more than a nod to the history of disenfranchisement of blacks in the United States. In the 1960s, as the history of African Americans began to be rewritten with pride instead of with the shame that had previously accompanied the experience of disenfranchisement and enslavement, soul food was as much an affirmation as a diet. Eating neckbones and chitterlings, turnip greens and fried chicken, became a political statement to many.¹⁸

Soul food emerged from the foodways of the slave-owning South, particularly the plantations in Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Each of those areas specialized in different crops, however, so as it moved North with the Great Migration, soul food became an amalgam of different cuisines – rice dishes from South Carolina, barbecued pork from North Carolina, gumbos and gravies from Louisiana. And even further back were the tubers beloved across West Africa and African vegetables like okra and cowpeas whose cooking techniques follow enslaved Africans to the Americas. The dinner the Joseph family cooks together, therefore is a celebration of survival and retention of foodways through multiple migrations, some forced, others voluntary. Ahmad, the grandson, explains in a voiceover the real meaning of the weekly celebrations:

Now I understand what soul food was all about. See, during slavery us black folks didn’t have a whole lot to celebrate so cooking became the way we expressed our love for one another. And that’s what those Sunday dinners meant to us. More than just eating, it was a time to share our joys and sorrows.¹⁹

The joys are symbolized in the film by home ownership, by business ownership, by the successes offered by education. The sorrows are the threat of incarceration and its repercussions that hangs disproportionately over the heads of young African-American men, and the health effects of diabetes, which kills Mama Joe. Though Sunday dinners are “more

than just eating,” it is the food that represents those joys and sorrows in tangible form, for the Josephs and all the oppressed but resilient people worldwide.

¹ “How close are we to #ZeroHunger?: THE STATE OF FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION IN THE WORLD 2017.” <http://www.fao.org/state-of-food-security-nutrition/en/>

² Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy*, 149.

³ Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy*, 165.

⁴ “Ron Finley, Speaker, TED.” https://www.ted.com/speakers/ron_finley

⁵ Roberts 96.

⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1968. 308.

⁷ Bulawayo 8.

⁸ Bulawayo 9.

⁹ Bulawayo 12.

¹⁰ Fanon 309.

¹¹ Maart *Rosa’s* 186.

¹² Maart “Exordium” 23.

¹³ Maart *Rosa’s* 186.

¹⁴ Bulawayo 159.

¹⁵ Paul Roberts, *The End of Food*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008. 90.

¹⁶ Bulawayo 173.

¹⁷ Bulawayo 173.

¹⁸ Jessica Harris, *High on the Hog* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011) 208.

¹⁹ *Soul Food*, written and directed by George Tillman, Jr. Fox 2000 Pictures, 1997.