

# Rhetoric in Mexico

## Retoryka w Meksyku

11 (3) 2024

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## Curating Culinary Culture: The Rhetorical Function of Cookbooks and Their Paratexts

### Kreowanie kultury kulinarnej: retoryczna funkcja książek kucharskich i ich paratekstów

#### Abstract

Cookbooks are more than mere collections of recipes; they are also repositories of nonculinary information. Those featuring the cuisine of the American South are no exception, reflecting as they do the cultural, historical, and social contexts related to that region's complicated racial history. A prominent part of that history are the Gullah Geechee people—an African American community inhabiting the coastal areas of the Carolinas, Georgia, and northeastern Florida—who have preserved their distinctive cultural heritage in part through the oral transmission of traditional recipes that function as a medium of shared memories that help sustain their communal identity. Recently, these recipes have made their way into print. A notable example is Emily Meggett's bestselling cookbook, *Gullah Geechee Home Cooking*. In this study, we examine how this venerable matriarch's cookbook creates a rhetorical space facilitating reader engagement with her people's history and culture while simultaneously sharing traditional recipes. In particular, we focus upon how her skillful use of what Gérard Genette calls "paratexts" serves to compliment the main text of her cookbook by offering personal and communal context for such dishes as her famous fried okra. And, we point out how those paratexts situate traditional Gullah Geechee cuisine within the broader culinary conversation of contemporary American food culture.

Książki kucharskie zazwyczaj nie są jedynie zbiorami przepisów; stanowią również repozytoria informacji pozakulinarnych. Publikacje przedstawiające kuchnię amerykańskiego Południa nie są wyjątkiem, odzwierciedlają kulturowe, historyczne i społeczne konteksty skomplikowanej historii rasowej tego regionu Stanów Zjednoczonych. Ważną część owej historii tworzy lud Gullah Geechee, afroamerykańska społeczność zamieszkująca obszary przybrzeżne Karoliny, Georgii i północno-wschodniej Florydy, który zachował swoje dziedzictwo kulturowe, częściowo właśnie dzięki ustnym przekazom tradycyjnych przepisów. Przepisy te funkcjonują jako nośnik wspomnień, pomagając utrzymać wspólnotową tożsamość. Ostatnio zostały one zebrane i opublikowane w bestsellerowej książce kucharskiej Emily Meggett *Gullah Geechee Home Cooking*. W niniejszym studium zbadamy, w jaki sposób książka kucharska tej szanowanej przedstawicielki społeczności Gullah tworzy retoryczną przestrzeń, która umożliwi czytelnikowi zaangażowanie się w historię i kulturę jej ludu, jednocześnie przybliżając tradycyjne przepisy. W szczególności skupiamy się na pokazaniu, jak wykorzystanie tego, co Gérard Genette nazywa „paratekstami”, uzupełnia główny tekst omawianej książki kucharskiej, oferując odbiorcy osobisty i społeczny kontekst dla takich potraw, jak słynny smażony piżmian jadalny (*fried okra*). Wskazujemy również, w jaki sposób wskazane „parateksty” sytuują tradycyjną kuchnię Gullah Geechee w szerszym kontekście współczesnego amerykańskiego dyskursu kulinarnego.

#### Key words

cookbooks, paratexts, recipe's "embedded discourse", culinary culture, authenticity, oral tradition  
książki kucharskie, parateksty, „wbudowany dyskurs” przepisu, kultura kulinarna, autentyczność, tradycja ustna

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## Curating Culinary Culture: The Rhetorical Function of Cookbooks and Their Paratexts

“Food often tells the stories that society will not.”  
Emily Meggett, *Gullah Geechee Home Cooking*

A recipe is not simply a set of instructions; rather, it is a text embedded within and reflecting the cultural, social, and historical contexts shaping it. It can “give us a sense of the world from which it originates, incorporate some history or an inkling of the personality of its writer” (Bower 1997, 8). In doing so, recipes serve as a rhetorical tool for communal continuity and cohesion. As Floyd and Forster (2003, 3) assert, “cookery texts, long attached to discussions of the continuities of community and the conventions of the writing of domesticity, are seen here in terms of a range of shifting practices and as imbricated in difficult debates about national, colonial, postcolonial, class, race and gender politics.” Since “a recipe becomes a powerful piece of discourse, an opportunity for women to speak and be heard based on an economy of food” (Bishop 1997, 97), through exchanging recipes women “connect with other women and validate their own existence in the domestic sphere” (Fleitz 2010, 1). In this study, we examine how Emily Meggett’s bestselling cookbook, *Gullah Geechee Home Cooking* (2022), functions rhetorically. In particular, we focus upon how she does so via her recipe for “Fried Okra” and the paratexts that accompany that recipe. As the doyenne of Gullah cuisine, Emily Meggett perpetuates her Gullah culinary heritage while also connecting it with the broader world.

To appreciate what the recipe communicates beyond mere cooking instructions, we first provide a brief introduction to Gullah culture, focusing on a quintessential Gullah contribution to Southern cuisine, fried okra, which graces the menus of Lowcountry eateries, from unpretentious neighborhood BBQ joints to the South’s

toniest dining establishments. We then identify and analyze paratexts included within Meggett's cookbook that contextualize her recipe for fried okra. Next, we explore the okra recipe as a rhetorical means of cultural reclamation and engagement, and conclude with a discussion of the appropriation and gentrification of Black Southern cuisine (the ascent of a food once a staple in the diet of enslaved peoples to the ranks of haute cuisine), the implications of the transition of traditional Gullah recipes from oral to written transmission, and the contested authenticity of Black/southern recipes once a food's provenance and stewardship go beyond its original community.

### 1. The Gullah People: A Brief Overview

Charleston, South Carolina is consistently included on lists of top food cities. In 2023, *Travel + Leisure* magazine listed Charleston as its readers' top US destination for the eleventh consecutive year (Chang 2023). Charleston's celebrated culinary culture is the product of various and diverse peoples. A significant influence upon the town's foodscape are the Gullah people, descendants of enslaved Africans captured and forcibly transported across the Atlantic to work Carolina's cotton, indigo, and rice plantations, who have inhabited the South Carolina coast and sea islands for 300 years. These Africans brought with them indigenous agricultural products and processes, some now fixtures of Southern culinary culture, such as grits, collard greens, and fried chicken, while others remain relatively unknown outside of the Lowcountry, like benne wafers (sesame seed cookies).

Charleston's geographic location positioned it to have a prominent role in the transatlantic slave trade. From 1783-1807, the city's Gadsden's Wharf served as "the largest single point of entry into North America for enslaved Africans" (Roberts 2023). The magnitude of Charleston's role in the slave trade is underscored by the fact that "[m]ore than 40 percent of all captive Africans were brought into the U.S. [via Charleston], where they were sold into slavery at auction" (Roberts 2023). These unfortunates faced three possible destinations: a minority went to Charleston's grand homes; some were consigned to Lowcountry plantations; others were dispersed to different slaveholding states. Those remaining in coastal Carolina, who came to be called Gullah, developed their own distinctive culture and language, blending their West African heritage with influences from European settlers and Native Americans. Scholars have traced the lineage of the Gullah to such tribes as "Mandingo, Bamana, Wolof, Fula, Temne, Mende, Vai, Akan, Ewe Makongo, and Kimbundu" ("American Language").

Though dispersed along the eastern Atlantic coast from Wilmington, NC to Jacksonville, FL, the Gullah are concentrated in and around Charleston. For

over three centuries, they preserved their culture, largely due to the isolation of the Sea Islands and the remote plantations where they lived and labored. Today, the Gullah are integrated into the larger world through roads and bridges, as well as connections provided by mass and social media. These factors wrought significant cultural, economic, and social pressures, forcing the Gullah to choose between retaining the customs and language of their enslaved African ancestors or adapting to the increasingly homogenous culture of mainstream America. Shifting demographics are another influence. Emily Meggett, a resident of Edisto Island, reports changes to the southern Sea Islands due to the ever-increasing presence of whites. Vast stretches of coastal property were developed – with hotels, residences, golf courses, and businesses encroaching upon traditional Gullah land and erasing their cultural heritage.

Gullah descendants still face challenges from “buckra” – a west African term used in Carolina and the Caribbean to denote slave masters. They battle exorbitant property tax increases, aggressive land speculators, and commercial development. They fight to safeguard their heritage, language, and land amidst gentrification and displacement. The importance of their cultural heritage, and the critical need to preserve it, was recognized by the Department of Interior’s National Park Service, which designated a Gullah/Geechee<sup>1</sup> Cultural Heritage Corridor from Wilmington to Jacksonville. In her bestselling cookbook, *Gullah Geechee Home Cooking*, Meggett notes that in July 2000, the Gullah Geechee people proclaimed themselves a nation. In 2006, the US Congress enacted the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Act, which allocated \$10 million over a decade to safeguard historic sites integral to Gullah Geechee culture, with the purpose of preserving and celebrating their community’s narratives, quilts, music, and culinary heritage (Meggett 2022).

At this point, we highlight a few noteworthy aspects of the culture the Gullah and interested outsiders are striving to preserve, and which Meggett’s cookbook draws from and contributes to. One distinctive element of Gullah culture is their subversively clever folklore, rooted in African storytelling traditions, which has been co-opted and commercially exploited by white authors who retold traditional Gullah narratives in written form for the benefit of white readers, such as Joel Chandler Harris’s collection of Uncle Remus stories. Harris repackaged these stories for white audiences, sanitizing the harsh realities of plantation life through his portrayal of the fictional Uncle Remus as a happy and contented freedman. Gullah stories, such as the Br’er Rabbit tales, reached a broad audience as retold by such white authors as Robert Roosevelt and John Bennett. These predatory authors profited from the cultural capital of uncompensated and unacknowledged

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1. Geechee is the term used for descendants of enslaved Africans living in Florida and Georgia who share essentially the same culture and language as the Gullah of the Carolinas. In practice, the terms Gullah and Gullah Geechee are often used interchangeably.

Gullah storytellers (Troike 2010). Similarly, white Southern ladies incorporated Black recipes into their cookbooks without crediting the original African American creators, perpetuating the same cycle of cultural exploitation and erasure.

The Gullah are also skilled artisans. Their intricately designed sweetgrass baskets are vital conduits of cultural memory, linking generations and bridging geographic distance. Their design and construction techniques are reminiscent of the coil baskets crafted by the Wolof people of Senegal. In Charleston, Gullah women weaving and selling these baskets are a familiar sight. The art of making sweetgrass baskets is a skill traditionally handed down from mother to daughter. Similarly, the oral passing down of recipes among Gullah women ensures that culinary traditions are preserved and celebrated across generations.

Additionally, the Gullah maintain African supernatural beliefs and practices, such as tales of boo hags (vampirish creatures who drain the energy of sleeping people) and haints (ghostly spirits who chase their prey to exhaustion). According to Alphonso Brown (2008), the pale blue-green floors and ceilings of the side porches characteristic of traditional Charleston house architecture are said to protect against these spirits. Alongside these traditions lies a more guarded aspect of their heritage: Hoodoo, a form of root medicine practiced by conjure doctors, which is a fusion of magic, folk medicine, and knowledge of the healing property of various plants and other natural elements. Hoodoo practices are deeply rooted in and protected by the Gullah community and unlike their foodways, rarely shared with outsiders.

The adaptive resilience of enslaved Africans enabled them to forge a shared identity via the development of the Gullah creole language. Meggett (2022) comments on this language's ability to foster a sense of shared community, even under the harshest of circumstances,

Because enslaved Africans came from all over Africa, enslaved people were being introduced to hundreds of new African languages. These groups intermingled, found common threads, and united their native tongues and the English language into a new African creole language called Gullah .... Building and retaining community is how my ancestors were able to create Gullah Geechee culture, and community is how we'll make sure it survives.

Meggett reminds her readers that community is more than just a shared history; it is a living entity requiring collective effort to ensure its survival and continued relevance for future generations. The Gullah language, “an English-based creole language” (Opala 1987, 15), was perceived by many as “broken English” (1987, 15); consequently, as Alfonso Brown (2008) points out, Gullah and those who spoke it were ridiculed. Meggett speaks to the mockery of the language in her bestselling cookbook. This dismissive view eventually underwent a significant shift thanks to linguist Lorenzo Dow Turner, whose pioneering fieldwork in

rural South Carolina and Georgia during the 1930s and 1940s lead to a greater appreciation for Gullah, which Turner ([1949] 2002) identified as a language with its own grammar, syntax, sentence structure, and vocabulary, much of which could be traced back to Africa.

In *The Cooking Gene*, Michael Twitty cites Charles Joyner's<sup>2</sup> observation that the development of the South's food mirrored the evolution of the Gullah language. Like that language, Gullah Geechee cuisine emerged from an "African culinary grammar." This foundation, encompassing "methods of cooking and spicing, remembered foods, ancestral tastes" (Joyner, qtd. in Twitty 2017), not only shaped the taste profiles of the dishes but also the very identity of the creators. This influence extends to tools and artifacts, such as carved standing mortar and pestles and the coiled sweetgrass baskets used for winnowing rice. Gullah contributions to Charleston and Lowcountry cuisine include staple dishes and distinctive preparation methods, brought from West Africa and eventually introduced to people throughout the South, across America, and around the world. Their cuisine features leafy vegetable greens (collard, mustard, turnip, etc.) as well as okra. The cuisine also relies heavily on bean pods, grits, peanuts, red rice, and sea food such as shrimp. These ingredients come together in iconic dishes like gumbo, jambalaya, and rice-n-beans. Desserts in African American cuisine often center around sweet potatoes, pecans, pumpkins, and lemons (e.g., the popular lemon meringue pie), while bean cakes add another sweet dimension. Common preparation techniques include deep-fat frying, as with chicken, and boiling, used for greens and red beans.

For a long time, Gullah Geechee culture remained insulated from external influences, prompting women to perpetuate their African culinary legacy and strengthen that cultural identity through cooking. In her cookbook, Meggett (2022) reminisces: "I grew up eating some of the same meals that my great-great-grandmother prepared in the 1840s, meals that existed even before her time." Meggett's memories are not unique. Many contemporary West Africans, from Senegal to Liberia, as Michael Twitty notes, recognize a strong resemblance between their culinary traditions and those of the Gullah Geechee. Meggett (2022) underscores the significance of specific ingredients:

I learned that lima beans, butter beans, black-eyed peas, and other crops that we sometimes call "southern food" simply wouldn't exist without the skill and creativity of my Gullah Geechee ancestors. .... Now, when I grew up, I knew that these meals were our meals – meaning they were by Black people and for Black people. Okra gumbo would sustain our family during the winter, while I enjoyed red rice whenever I could. These dishes were made with what we could grow, and with meat that we could easily cook.

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2. A prominent historian of Gullah Geechee culture.

Referencing okra, Meggett (2022) highlights the enduring influence of African culinary heritage on American cuisine: “I learned early that okra – in gumbo and soup – used to be one of the most important African crops our ancestors brought here. Today, chefs and cooks all over the country use okra in their own food.” Meggett emphasizes that the contributions of her African ancestors go beyond mere sustenance; they shape the very fabric of American food culture. The journey of okra from an essential African crop to a staple in various American dishes is indicative of the cultural exchanges and integrations defining American’s hybrid culinary landscape.

Historians, scholars, and chefs, including Harris, Meggett, and Twitty, concur that okra originated from Africa, most likely Ethiopia. It was introduced to the Americas around the mid-1600s via slave ships (Dupree and Graubart 2015). However, the exact route it took to reach the New World is disputed.<sup>3</sup> Multiple sources, including Harris, Twitty, and Dupree & Graubart, assert that by late 18<sup>th</sup> century okra was cultivated in the gardens of Monticello and deemed commonplace by Thomas Jefferson. Additionally, Mary Randolph’s *Virginia House-wife* (1824), often considered the first truly Southern cookbook, includes some of the earliest documented recipes incorporating okra (Kolb 2007, 206). Since then, as Jessica Harris (2011) emphasizes, okra, like watermelon and black-eyed peas, has been closely tied to Africans and their descendants in the US. Moreover, as Harris observes, while okra is widely recognized, it remains largely misunderstood outside African American and Southern homes.

## 2. The “Paratexts” of Emily Meggett’s *Gullah Geechee Home Cooking*

Rarely are cookbooks simply collections of recipes; frequently, they offer a wealth of additional cultural and historical information. They serve as a medium for sharing ideas and memories; and in doing so, they operate rhetorically. In this sense, cookbooks function like any other literary book, communicating with readers through the main text and supplementary elements, termed paratexts by French literary theorist Gérard Genette.<sup>4</sup> Devices such as titles, dedications, prefaces, illustrations, and afterwords form a threshold between the text and outside world, presenting the text in such a way as to influence its reception (Genette [1987] 1997, 1-2). Analyzing the paratexts of Meggett’s cookbook enhances our understanding of and appreciation for the cultural and rhetorical dimensions embedded within her cookbook.

3. Kolb (2007) speculates it might have come via the West Indies; Jessica Harris (2011), the Caribbean; Virginia Willis (2014), by way of the Mediterranean and India.

4. In *A History of Cookbooks: From Kitchen to Page over Seven Centuries*, Henry Notaker (2017) makes a similar observation, dedicating an entire chapter to the issue of “Paratexts in Cookbooks.”

The title itself – *Gullah Geechee Home Cooking: Recipes from the Matriarch of Edisto Island* – adheres to the functions Genette ascribed to the title of a literary text, which Henry Notaker (2017, 130-133) applied to analysis of multiple cookbooks. The title not only identifies the work and indicates its content (“Gullah Geechee” and “Home Cooking”), but more importantly, it entices the public – here, mention of remote “Edisto Island” renders the recipes intriguingly exotic. This aligns well with Theophano’s (2002, 6) observation that “for many of us, reading a cookbook is like following a sensate trail to another world remote in space and time.” The true appeal of a cookbook often resides in the narratives woven between the recipes, in the anecdotes and stories. Cookbooks often shape notions of belonging and identity by highlighting geographical connections and socio-cultural hierarchies. The rhetoric of place and social position evident in the title – “the Matriarch of Edisto Island” – is accentuated by the inclusion of two photographs at the book’s beginning: one of the South Carolinian landscape and the other of the author. The eponymous matriarch is shown standing on a typically Southern porch in a white apron, thereby constructing a sense of place. She is situated within domesticity but also at the threshold of the household (bridging private and public spaces). This alludes to home, rather than restaurants, as the domain of Gullah cuisine (Dixler 2016), and highlights the cookbook’s purpose: to share her home cooking with the outside world. The second photograph is accompanied by a dedication, an established tradition in publishing cookbooks (Notaker 2017, 135). Dedications are usually “directed to a person of authority” (Notaker 2017, 135). Here, the dedication follows this standard pattern, offering laudatory comments on the author’s culinary prowess: “You were always bound to get something good to eat. I thought she was God, could make anything. I wanted to be just like her” (Meggett 2022). This divine comparison highlights the matriarch’s culinary mastery. That this opinion is voiced by the author’s oldest grandchild rhetorically reinforces the conception of cooking as a gendered practice and home-cooking as a means of preserving cultural traditions, echoing the book’s title. The dedication highlights themes of reverence, emotional connection, the crucial role of women in family life, the preservation of cultural traditions, and the formation of personal identity and communal connections as aspirations for the cookbook.

Preceding the recipes, there are four paratexts featuring various rhetorical devices that serve to set the stage for the rest of the cookbook. In the first – “Welcome to Edisto Island” the author fosters a sense of familiarity through sharing personal stories about agricultural life on the island, family traditions, and specific memories, connecting these to the island’s broader culture and history. Meggett seems to combine the strategies that, as Carrie Tippen (2018) suggests, make a rhetorical appeal to “communicate authenticity,” specifically referencing



“geographic specificity, personal connection, and ‘honesty.’” The matriarch’s tone is inviting and conversational, such that readers feel they are welcomed into her Gullah domestic life on the Edisto Island. Meggett’s choice (2022) to open her cookbook with this image: “When you cross the Dawhoo Bridge that connects Edisto Island to the rest of South Carolina, you’re in Heaven. Heaven on Earth, that is” suggests Gullah Geechee culture inhabits a sacred preserve insulated by the protective water surrounding her island from any cultural contamination from the mainland.<sup>5</sup> Recognizing this deep connection to place, Meggett (2022) explains: “what makes the Gullah Geechee people particularly special is how long we’ve been able to hold on to our old ways, including the way we speak and the way we eat.” Their place-based identity is reflected and refracted in their culinary repertoire, illustrating that, as Cook and Crang (1996, 140) argue, “foods do not simply come from places, but also make places as symbolic constructs.”

Meggett asserts her identity not only as a Gullah but also as a woman, emphasizing the intersection of cultural and gender experiences that shape her narrative. Through the invocation of her grandmother’s advice, such as “Don’t ever cook enough just for you, ’cause you never know who gonna come through that door” (2022), the author communicates the rhetoric of hospitality, inclusiveness, and shared responsibility. In so doing, she endows food with the values, traditions, and social bonds central to maintaining a strong, cohesive community: “I believe that food is one of the most important ways we take care of each other, and I’ll tell ya, nobody leaves my house without a to-go plate” (2022). At the same time, she acknowledges her place in a matrilineal line of women who cooked and took care of their own: “I grew up eating some of the same meals that my great-great-grandmother prepared in the 1840s, meals that existed even before her time” (2022). This experience of physical nourishment and spiritual support is at the core of what Elizabeth Fleitz (2010, 2) terms “a vital, life-affirming community that respects their [women’s] authority and experience, something most women were unable to have in the public sphere of society for many years.”

In a similar vein, Susan Leonardi (1989, 340) explains that for women sharing recipes is a community-building practice. By publishing her cookbook Meggett (2022) joins this community of Black female chefs:

Many Black women—including those whose names have been lost to history—paved the way for cooks like me to find a career that could support my family and give me the chance to do something I’m good at. Abby Fisher, Zephyr Wright, and Edna Lewis are some of the women

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5. Despite Meggett’s referring to Edisto Island in paradisaical terms her narrative is far from nostalgic. The harsh agricultural reality and her family’s poverty lurk beneath the “sense of peace and stillness” (2022) that infuses the island. The resilience and strength of the Gullah Geechee enable them to navigate this duality and thus manage to preserve their cultural and traditions in the face of ongoing challenges. This theme reverberates in the next paratext as well.

whose contributions have changed the face of American cooking, and I'm grateful that we not only know their names, but know of the tastes, love, and joy they shared with others through food.

Meggett's inclusion in the culinary pantheon is further underscored by a series of paintings by Natalie Daise, which pay homage to six women celebrated as the mothers of South Carolina and Gullah cuisine. Included in this series is "Matriarchs of the Lowcountry: Emily Meggett," a 2023 work recently acquired by the South Carolina State Museum (Allen 2024).

The author intends her cookbook to celebrate the rich cultural and historical heritage of the Gullah Geechee people, highlighting their contributions to American cuisine and history. By writing cookbooks, Gullah women, much like Mormon women studied by Bishop (1997, 96), "create a rhetorical situation that calls for affirmation and perpetuation of their worth." The cookbook also enables her to leave a personal legacy, sharing her life's work and experiences with a broader audience. As a curator of Gullah culture, Meggett (2022) confesses:

To me, sharing home cooking is what truly represents Gullah Geechee food. I want future generations to understand the cooking and the culture of this place, and to understand that cooking is much more than about how something tastes—it's about the heart and soul behind the stove.

Her desire to connect with readers on a personal level, inviting them into her home and culture through food ("Welcome to my home, my heaven, and my life through food"), reflects her broader goal of fostering understanding of and appreciation for Gullah Geechee culture.

Rosalyn Collings Eves (2005, 280) claims that "cookbooks function rhetorically as memory texts: to memorialize both individuals and community, to invoke 'memory beyond mind,' and to generate a sense of collective memory that in turn shapes communal memory." This function is central to the second section – "The American Story of the Gullah Geechee People." Meggett shares her journey of self-discovery regarding her Gullah Geechee heritage, weaving personal anecdotes with historical facts about her people, evoking a profound sense of collective, communal memory. Employing a reflective narrative voice, the matriarch crafts an autoethnographic cookbook that educates readers about the rich history and culture of the Gullah Geechee people.<sup>6</sup> With her cookbook Meggett (2022) challenges the American grand narrative that has long excluded African American contributions, providing a perspective that honors the voices and presence of those who have been silenced, unrecognized, and invalidated:

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6. This approach to cookbooks authored by ethnic/racial minorities aligns with May Louis Pratt's (1991, 35) approach to autoethnographic texts "in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them."

Too much of American storytelling has ignored this country's sins. It's ignored slavery, its obsession with invalidating African culture, and its inability to recognize just how much African Americans have helped to build, develop, shape this country. It's time to recognize the Gullah Geechee history that's part of American history.

In compiling her cookbook Meggett creates a rhetorical situation that recognizes and validates Gullah identity through food. As she explains, "Food often tells the stories that society will not."

The next chapter – "How to Use This Book" – serves several rhetorical functions. First, it establishes ethos by sharing Meggett's experience with and deep-rooted knowledge of Gullah Geechee cooking: "I learned how to master recipes and make them my own" (2022). Second, the chapter employs pathos<sup>7</sup> by evoking emotions via personal anecdotes, emphasizing the centrality of community and family in cooking while simultaneously enabling readers to connect with her cultural heritage. Cognard-Black's observations about the rhetorical functions of recipes suggest that "though a form determined by its logos—a didactic genre meant to instruct a reader on how to assemble a specific foodstuff—a recipe is simultaneously pathos-driven. It's a synthesis of collective memories from a community of cooks who share and extend these memories with their readership" (2017, 66). These insights open space to consider Meggett's memory of cooking with her mother: "When I was a child, I watched Mama cook, and eventually started to cook right next to her. You never cooked just for yourself; you were always cooking for family and loved ones" (2022). This personal recollection is consistent with Floyd and Forster's (2003, 7) conclusions, drawn from Michel de Certeau's and Luce Giard's research, that "food and its preparation [require] a multiple memory; a memory of apprenticeship, of witnessed gestures, and of consistencies," emphasizing the generational transmission of knowledge and the communal nature of cooking. And finally, the chapter utilizes logos by providing clear, logical explanations and practical advice, emphasizing the benefits of seasonal ingredients and the empirical use of the senses in preparing meals. Her advice about adjusting a rice dish based on its texture and feel demonstrates a practical and intuitive approach to cooking. Apart from natural talent, Meggett (2022) acknowledges the importance of the continuous process of improvement and experimentation: "I learned how to make food that everyone on Edisto loves—and I mean *loves*. This came from talent and instinct, but also from learning, changing, and being willing to make mistakes and try again." This same experiential approach is evident in Meggett's (2022) encouraging readers to trust their instincts and not fear mistakes, boosting their confidence to experiment and personalize her recipes: "Trust yourself. And if something doesn't work, you can always try again, just like I have."

7. In his *The Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle points to the persuasive power of his three artistic proofs: ethos (authorial credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic).

Meggett (2022) advocates a communal and generous rather than individualistic approach to cooking, promoting values of hospitality and community by encouraging readers to share their culinary creations: “When I cook, I cook for three things: for passion, for family, and for community. That means I cook big, and I cook by memory.” Food affects relationships and social interactions, so cooking in large quantities is not merely about feeding others; it also reflects underlying social values and dynamics (Shuman 1981). Meggett’s decision to cook big is not a sign of extravagance, decadence, or wastefulness; it is a tradition rooted in the past when sprawling families enjoyed meals together at the table. As an old-school matriarch with ten children, her recipes are designed for large gatherings and may be too much for singles. In the true spirit of hospitality, she (2022) advises her readers: “sometimes you’re going to have a little extra. That’s okay! Give a loaf of banana bread to your neighbor. Share a bowl of oyster stew with a friend in need. And my, oh my, if you don’t share that big ol’ pot of red rice with your family?”

The final paratextual section preceding the recipes – “Miss Emily’s Essential Kitchen Items” – provides practical advice that serves multiple rhetorical functions. Again she emphasizes the importance of using all five senses in cooking, as this sensory approach is crucial for mastering traditional Gullah Geechee recipes. She advises readers to focus upon procuring and storing affordable essential ingredients, regardless of their financial status. She encourages readers to familiarize themselves with ingredients beyond their specific uses in recipes by understanding their seasonality and versatile applications. This section also underscores the value of resourcefulness and minimizing waste, reflecting a deep respect for locally sourced ingredients and sustainable cooking practices. There is some overlap with the “How to Use This Book” chapter; both emphasize the use of senses in cooking, the importance of cultural heritage, and the values of community and generosity.

### 3. Fried Okra: “Embedded Discourse” of a Recipe<sup>8</sup>

The paratexts discussed above frame the recipes included in Meggett’s cookbook. One such recipe features a preparation style and essential ingredient closely associated with Gullah culinary culture: fried okra. In the recipe headnote Meggett (2022) writes: “You can find fried okra all over the South, but the Gullah Geechee people on the Sea Islands keep the dish close to us, finding our own special ways

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8. Susan Leonardi uses the term “embedded discourse” to refer to the way recipes are integrated within a broader narrative context, imbuing them with deeper meanings and connections beyond their immediate culinary instructions. She observes that recipes in cookbooks like *The Joy of Cooking* are often surrounded by anecdotes, personal stories, and cultural references related to the cultural, historical, and personal contexts of their authors. Leonardi (1989, 340) states, “a recipe is, then, an embedded discourse, and like other embedded discourses, it can have a variety of relationships with its frame, or its bed.”

to make it at home for our families and communities.” We have chosen to focus upon a recipe featuring okra as it is a rhetorically contested icon of Gullah cuisine<sup>9</sup> that elicits strong feelings in the form of fervent defense and passionate criticism. Indeed, as Virginia Willis (2014) asserts in her book *Okra: Savior the South Cookbook*, okra is “a contentious vegetable.” However, while it is widely referred to and used as a vegetable in culinary contexts, okra is botanically classified as a fruit. Whatever its classification, it remains a quintessential Southern ingredient, as integral to the regions’ cuisine as collard greens and black-eyed peas. Willis (2014) also notes that okra spurs more debates than any other vegetable. “Folks love okra or they hate it. No one – veritably no one – is in the middle .... Those who hate it think it’s slimy, gooey, and gummy”; if so, they haven’t encountered the right preparation of okra, Willis argues. In their cookbook, Kevin Mitchell and David S. Shields (2021, 12) note that in contrast to other Southern staples, okra finds limited admirers outside the South, with many balking at its slimy texture when boiled. Okra does not face the same level of dislike or disdain as some other vegetables. Julia Reed, in her 2022 *New York Times* article on vegetable aversions, highlighted okra’s unique position: “So few people eat okra (more radishes are grown in this country) that it never even makes it onto the lists of Top 10 hated foods. This is not the case for the perennial winners broccoli and Brussels sprouts” (E85). Reed suggests that okra might escape such negativity only because of its limited recognition outside the South. In her *New Southern Garden Cookbook*, Sheri Castle (2011, 194) explores the divisive nature of okra, stating that this unique plant “is defended and defamed with equal passion. Although certain recipes and meals are incomplete without okra, its inclusion is incomprehensible to people who just don’t like it or just won’t give it a try .... Many of the South’s iconic dishes would never have been created without the kitchen wisdom of the African cooks who knew and grew okra.”

#### 4. From Humble Food to Haute Cuisine

Cookbooks and their paratexts contribute to broader cultural conversations. Meggett’s text touches upon many serious issues, such as the racial divisions that continue to blight American society. During the era of slavery, there was a sharp divide between the diets of the enslaved and their putative “owners.” Enslaved people subsided mainly on foods the “masters” considered undesirable or downright unfit. This included weedy plants like collard greens and pokeweed, as well as supposedly inferior cuts of meat, such as oxtails, pig’s ears, feet, jowl, neck, and snout, as well as meat byproducts like fatback and, of course, chitlins

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9. As well as African and African diaspora food, such as America’s soul food.

(hog intestines). Enslaved individuals also relied on their own small gardens, where they cultivated crops of African origin (black-eyed peas, okra, yams, watermelon, etc.). They supplemented their diets with protein from hunted game (possum, rabbit, squirrel), caught seafood (catfish, crabs, shrimp), or gathered shellfish (clams, mussels, oysters). Additionally, they sometimes foraged for wild edibles or risked punishment by stealing food. Apart from occasional leftovers from the master's table, the enslaved were essentially left to fend for themselves in matters of nourishment. This system benefitted slave owners in several ways. Economically, it minimized the cost of feeding their human chattel. Psychologically, the dietary divide reinforced the perceived social hierarchy, delineating “lowbrow” black cooking from “highbrow” white cuisine. And socially, that same disparity served to uphold the status quo, perpetuating the institution of slavery and its inherent inequalities.

The delineation between highbrow and lowbrow cuisine mirrors broader societal hierarchies, encompassing class, race, and power dynamics prevalent in the USA. Such classifications carry with them a web of historical, socio-economic, and racial connotations. Historically, in the American South highbrow cuisine was identified with Southern cooking that echoed European influences, and was viewed as more refined and sophisticated. This type of cuisine, relished predominantly by the white elite, was associated with plantation homes, where the experience of Southern hospitality was as important as the dishes served.

According to Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) framework of distinction, cultural tastes manifest themselves as a strict binary of highbrow and lowbrow. The planter elite had one taste, so conversely, lowbrow culinary tastes were associated with those excluded from whiteness, namely enslaved peoples. That is why many dishes that now epitomize soul food originated in the kitchens of the enslaved during the slavery era. Faced with limited resources, the enslaved conjured meals that were hearty and sustaining, providing much-needed energy for rigorous labor. Over the years, dishes such as collard greens, fried chicken, chitlins, cornbread, and sweet potato pie became staples in black communities, eventually defining the essence of soul food. While Southern black cooking has long been emblematic of community, family, and a preservation of cultural identity in the face of oppression, black cooking was often dismissed, sidelined, or overlooked by white elite culinary circles.

Today, many dishes reflecting the culinary heritage of black America and previously labeled lowbrow are now revered in upscale dining venues. Cookbook paratexts comment upon and critique this practice. In her groundbreaking cookbook, *A Date with a Dish: A Cook Book of American Negro Recipes*, Freda De Knight (1948, xiv) remarked, “there are no set rules for dishes created by most

Negroes. They just seem to ‘have a way’ of taking a plain, ordinary, everyday dish and improving it into a creation that is a gourmet’s delight.” Echoing this sentiment almost half a century later, food writer Joe Crea (1993, L27) observed how the African American culinary tradition masterfully “started with scraps. Today, the legacy of African American cooking is a phenomenal array of flavors – from crusty barbecue smoldering with sassy sauce to the wild taste of bitter greens boiled to mellow tenderness with salty-smoky meat to melt-in-mouth yams and buttery-tender pies.”

The phenomenon of white patrons embracing black cuisine, particularly Gullah dishes, can be examined through the lens of “omnivorousness.” This term, as defined by Richard Peterson and Roger Kern (1996, 990), denotes the inclination of those in higher socioeconomic strata to diversify their tastes. It represents a shift in how elite status is manifested – “from snobbish exclusion to omnivorous appropriation.” While their research primarily scrutinized musical preferences, the principles they defined appear equally applicable to culinary tastes, as underscored by Warde, Martens and Olsen. Their investigation revealed that more affluent demographics were exploring a wider array of cuisines, even those previously labeled as lowbrow (Warde, Martens, and Olsen 1999, 13). Engaging with black cuisine can be a symbolic act, showcasing one’s open-mindedness and willingness to embrace what was once considered inferior culinary culture, as opposed to “snobbishness which is based fundamentally on rigid rules of exclusion” (Peterson and Kern 1996, 904). In the wider context of racial relations in the American South, this seeming embrace by white patrons of what they consider exotic mirrors Bourdieu’s theory of distinction. Their “omnivorousness” might be less an act of genuine inclusion and more a modern iteration of Bourdieu’s concept, where distinction is achieved by the very act of broadening one’s tastes – a form of culinary colonization, if you will.

Ironically, foods once shunned by rich white plantation owners are now featured at upscale restaurants, attracting the affluent and discerning food savvy tourists who visit the Charleston area. The number of these tourists and their economic impact is staggering. As reported by Megan Fernandes of Charleston’s *Post & Courier* (2023), in 2022 an estimated 7.7 million tourists visited the city, contributing 12.8 billion dollars to the region’s economy. The burgeoning renaissance of Southern cooking across the rest of the US has catapulted okra back into the culinary spotlight. Willis (2014) observes that “Chefs and home cooks across the country are exploring okra dishes far beyond gumbo. Heirloom okra seed packets are finding their way into the hands of gardeners all over the South.” Once dubbed the “poor man’s oysters” (Owen 1960, 20), due to its role as an economical alternative to the pricier shellfish, okra is now reimagined in gourmet dishes in the world of haute

cuisine. In Charleston, one can savor fried okra in the sophisticated ambience of such tony restaurants as 82 Queen, Hall's Chop House, Hank's Sea Food, High Cotton, Magnolia's, and Poogan's Porch. However, the appeal of fried okra is not limited to high-end tourists. It also enjoys popularity in eateries frequented by locals (Page's Okra Grill, Bessinger's, Bohemian Bull, and Smoky Yolk Café) and, of course, fried okra is a staple still served at soul food kitchens like Bertha's, Hannibal's, Eastside Soul Food, and Workman's Café.

The surging popularity of Gullah cuisine, and African American cooking in general, has potential pitfalls. One concern related to the white patronage of black food establishments is the risk of gentrification. This entails adapting, appropriating, and co-opting black foodways to cater to a wealthier white clientele. Southern greens, like kale, collard, and mustard greens, have experienced this trend. *Bon Appétit* magazine designated 2012 "the year of kale," labeling it a superfood. Soon after, in early 2014, Whole Foods Market proclaimed that "collards are the new kale." In 2014, the so-called "kalegate" erupted following a *New York Times* article that quoted an actress saying: "New Orleans is not cosmopolitan. There's no kale here" (Goodman 2014). The local press and online community responded passionately, with locals asserting that kale had been present in their community for years. "Kalegate" illustrates not only gentrification but also the culinary preferences of newer residents. Similarly, in a 2019 article in *EBONY* titled "Hungry for history, collard greens" drew attention to the social media's reaction (Black Twitter) to a Whole Foods' blog headline: "If you're not cooking with these greens you need to be" (#teamEBONY 2019). While seemingly benign, this statement carries undertones of the frequent culinary appropriation of black Southern cuisine by white elites. One consequence: when Whole Foods proclaimed "Collard greens are the new kale," the price of the vegetable soared, and the rebranded collard green began appearing in restaurants and grocery stores nationwide.

Dixler (2016) presents a similar argument regarding culinary gentrification, using the examples of Carolina Gold rice and oxtails, both commonly featured in Gullah cuisine in dishes like Gullah oxtails with ham hocks or the iconic Gullah red rice. Rising demand for black Southern cuisine, along with its staple ingredients, undeniably opens avenues for economic growth for black farmers and producers. Furthermore, increasing recognition of black cuisine may stimulate interracial dialogue and heighten cultural awareness. However, this trend is shadowed by concerns of potential cultural appropriation. Rather than fostering genuine appreciation, there is the risk of black dishes being adopted without proper acknowledgement or respect. As these foods gain popularity, their ties to cultural, historical, or geographic origins may wane or be misconstrued. This form



of culinary gentrification could inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes, reducing diverse and rich traditions to a handful of oversimplified dishes. Such simplification risks commodifying and eventually erasing Gullah as well as the broader African American cultural heritage. Moreover, as specific foods become fashionable, their prices often soar, making them inaccessible to the very communities that traditionally depended on them.

## 5. Transition from Oral to Written Recipes

Today, there is a proliferation of written recipes for fried okra disseminated via hardcopy and digital cookbooks. This is a radical departure from the past. In earlier times, recipes were primarily shared among close family members, especially women. Through close-knit relationships between Gullah women across generations recipes were traditionally passed down orally. As Meggett (2022) explains:

I grew up in a generation that cooked from memory. Africans were known to pass recipes down orally, meaning they rarely wrote a recipe down on a piece of paper. This tradition carried on into the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and when African Americans started creating new dishes in the United States, they would share recipes with their children and grandchildren by mouth, not through writing.

Now, the primary audience for recipes has shifted to commercial consumers, especially through published cookbooks. This transition to written documentation, tailored to fit the demands of the cookbook publishing market, marks a departure from the intimate bond of oral transmission. It was not until the 21<sup>st</sup> century that these cherished family recipes were documented in publications such as *Gullah Cuisine by Land and Sea* (2010), *Mama Doonk's Gullah Recipes* (2018), *Bress 'n' Nyam* (Gullah for “bless and eat”) (2021), and *Gullah Geechee Home Cooking* (2022). A *New York Times* article regarding the woman whose recipes are featured in the latter, matriarch Emily Meggett of Edisto Island, noted the historical significance of the publication with this headline: “A Cook Who Never Used a Cookbook Now Has Her Own” (Severson 2022).

The importance of oral traditions in preserving Gullah culinary heritage is affirmed by the authors in the paratexts of the cookbooks listed above. Theresa Jenkins Hilliard (2018, 8) shares her experience: “I learned to cook at an early age by watching [my grandmother, ‘affectionally known as Mama Doonk’] and my mother prepare meals.” She (2018, 9) fondly remembers that “No measuring spoons or cups were used by either my grandmother or mother. Meals were prepared strictly through the dictation of the senses.” Similarly, Meggett (2022) reminisced: “I didn’t measure ingredients, I learned how to cook my dish by how

it felt.” However, their respective cookbooks include measurements for many recipes, with Hilliard remarking that this is a concession to contemporary cookbook conventions and reader expectations. Nevertheless, she (2018, 9) affirms, “in the true spirit of Gullah cooking, there are a few recipes without exact measurements.” Meggett (2022) echoes this sentiment, saying: “To me, this [intuitive] style of cooking will go further than measurements ever can, but I know those aren’t the ways of today. I provide measurements for most of these recipes, but sometimes, I leave it up to you. I encourage you to put your senses to use.” Charlotte Jenkins (2012, 16) agrees with this approach, recounting in *Gullah Cuisine*: “I’d stand to watch [my ‘mama’] cook. And she’d instruct me. She said I was a pretty good learner. When she prepared something she’d show a person each step. Then she’d do the taste test. If the taste test failed, she’d say, ‘You murdered it.’” Matthew Raiford (2021, 5), the author of *Bress ’n’ Nyam*, says essentially the same thing about his mother, “who always said a recipe was not a rule but a guide.” These cooks embody a tradition that eschews rigid recipes and strict methods in favor of reliance on personal experience, instinct, and creativity; as Meggett (2022) aptly puts it, “Good cooks don’t measure. They use the imagination of the brain. Cook with the brain and heart. If you put in your heart, it will always come out good!”

For generations, the Gullah neither relied upon nor produced cookbooks. They were not needed. Inherited collective memory sufficed.<sup>10</sup> Gullah cookbooks published in recent years – ironically available for purchase in the gift shops of the very plantations their ancestors once worked – document in writing for a broader audience what had once only been transmitted orally within families and the Gullah community. This commodification of Gullah culture aligns with bell hooks’s ([1992] 2015, 44) observation that, in a society dominated by commodity culture, ethnicity often gets reduced to a mere embellishment, a “spice” that adds flavor to the otherwise bland mainstream white culture. This is especially evident in the way white patrons consistently show a fascination with what dominant white culture deems as “lowbrow,” “the Other,” or “primitive.” As hooks ([1992] 2015, 47) observes, when racial and ethnic identities are purveyed for consumption, both the cultural practices and the very bodies of individuals from these groups can become a sort of “playground” in which members of dominating races reaffirm their societal power by selectively engaging with the “exotic” or “other.” Building

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10. In the absence of written recipes, passing down culinary traditions relied on personal knowledge and memory. Through repeated preparation of both everyday and festive dishes, Gullah women integrated this knowledge into practice, becoming custodians of their culinary heritage. As Meggett (2022) remarks, “One of the ways us cooks were able to remember so many dishes and methods of cooking is by using some of the same ingredients over and over again.” In this way, cooking emerges as a rhetorical practice of the kind Kenneth Burke (1969, 26) describes in *A Rhetoric of Motives*: “often we must think of rhetoric not in terms of some one particular address, but as a general body of identifications that owe their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill.”

upon this insight, it can be posited that this white engagement is less about genuine appreciation and more about reaffirming power dynamics. By elevating traditional dishes or ingredients, white consumers not only exoticize them but also reinforce their own position atop the social or culinary hierarchy. This is done without meaningful recognition of the true worth of black cuisine.

## 6. Contested Authenticity

An additional aspect concerning Gullah cuisine pertains to its position within the wider Southern culinary tradition. The integration often occurs without due respect or appropriate recognition, particularly when white Southerners adopt, borrow, or imitate Gullah dishes. Hillary Dixler, in her 2016 *Eater* article, draws attention to the cultural appropriation of Gullah gastronomy by Charleston's upscale dining restaurants, predominantly led by white chefs. Her critique, marked by disapproval, is echoed by Michael Twitty, quoted by Dixler (2016), who admonishes Charleston chefs for "projecting ownership and making it about them, not even considering the people who have been marginalized and exploited." Similarly, in Dixler's (2016) article, B. J. Dennis, a Gullah chef, articulates the link between authenticity and culinary appropriation, asserting that: "You may be able to do it, but somebody who's born into it has the soul for it." This debate over the authenticity of black dishes, co-opted by white chefs to satisfy predominantly white palates, harkens back to the earlier trend of cookbooks written by white Southern authors. Cookbooks as a genre extend beyond mere recipes, incorporating headnotes that elucidate the recipe's purpose. Carrie Tippen (2018) refers to these as "recipe origin narratives," intended to unveil the histories and creators of culinary traditions.<sup>11</sup> However, headnotes in white-authored cookbooks routinely neglect the true origins of these traditions, which are deeply rooted in the culinary practices of the South's black community. This omission of the historical and social context of their dishes' creation can be viewed as a form of "columbusing," which according to Brenda Salinas (2014), is the tendency of individuals from dominant cultures to "discover" elements of other cultures without acknowledging the source.<sup>12</sup>

In the past, Southern matrons were frequently celebrated for dishes that actually originated in black kitchens – a stark manifestation of the columbusing of black

11. Carrie Tippen (2018) remarks that "each cookbook has its own rhetorical agenda when it comes to telling origin narratives; some do so to establish the author's own ethos as iconoclast while others do so to direct attention to unacknowledged or underappreciated figures."

12. John T. Edge (2017, 262) illustrates the culinary practice of columbusing by mentioning Charlie Vergos, the son of Greek immigrants and owner of the famous Charlie Vergos Rendezvous in downtown Memphis. Edge quotes Vergos: "Barbecue was born of black cooks, Vergos said late in life. 'They made it. And we took it and we made more money out of it than they did'."

American culinary repertoire.<sup>13</sup> This appropriation may stem from a desire to enliven their own culinary traditions – a notion resonant with bell hooks’ observations – but it may also be an attempt to disassociate cherished black cooking from its unjust associations with perceived inferiority, lack of healthfulness, and substandard preparation methods. Oscar Wilde’s aphorism, “Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness,” captures the complex dynamics between Southern ladies’ admiration and exploitation of black cooks’ culinary natural talents and expertise. The appropriation of their cooks’ recipes by white matrons, without due acknowledgment or compensation, reveals a dual narrative. On one hand, by adopting black cuisine, these white ladies inadvertently acknowledge the culinary excellence of black cooks. On the other hand, this act highlights their own culinary shortcomings. Their failure to properly honor the original creators of the dishes they appropriated allowed them to gain culinary and social capital, as defined by Pierre Bourdieu.

When black cuisine is repackaged as Southern – or implicitly, white – cuisine, its disassociation with black heritage conveniently serves the interests of those in positions of power. Fortunately, long-standing debate over the authenticity of dishes associated with both black and Southern culinary traditions is showing signs of positive change in two key areas. Recent white Southern cookbook authors are providing “recipe origin narratives” that properly acknowledge the cultural and historical heritage of their recipes. For example, Nancie McDermott’s *Southern Soups and Stews* (2015) pays tribute to Leah Chase, the esteemed proprietor of Dooky Chase’s restaurant, acknowledging her influence on the culinary landscape of New Orleans and the broader South.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to the appropriation of black recipes by white women, Meggett’s cookbook stands as a powerful counter-narrative, addressing and subverting this legacy by ensuring that the origin of the recipes and associated cultural knowledge are clearly attributed to her and the Gullah Geechee community. The acknowledgments section reveals that while Emily Meggett is the central author, the creation of the cookbook was a collaborative effort involving family and friends, including Becky Smith, her white neighbor who initially hired Meggett (2022) to cook while Becky summered in Edisto Island: “I have to give her credit

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13. The appropriation of African American culture by white communities extends beyond the culinary realm. For instance, Black music has played a foundational role in the development of rock-and-roll. Similarly, aspects of Gullah culture have been adopted and commercialized, from their folk tales to the production and sale of rope hammocks inspired by traditional Gullah designs.

14. A notorious example of cultural appropriation in the culinary world involves celebrity chef and Savannah restaurant owner Paula Deen. According to Yohance Kyles in the *Atlanta Black Star* (2024), Deen allegedly built her reputation by drawing heavily on the expertise of Southern cook Dora Charles, without giving her due recognition or fair compensation.

for inspiring me.”<sup>15</sup> Her employer-turned friend inspired Meggett to preserve and celebrate “all this wisdom, recipes, and these stories you [Emily] have in your head.” The collaborative nature of her project, and her expressions of gratitude and humility, emphasize the importance of giving credit where it is due and recognizing the collective effort involved in preserving a community’s cultural heritage. By claiming authorship and credit for her work (“This is my book”), collaborating with her community, and emphasizing the cultural significance of her recipes, Meggett resists the erasure of black culinary contributions. Her cookbook is an important cultural artifact that honors the legacy of Black cooks and ensures their stories and recipes are recognized and valued.

Since the 1970s, other black chefs and culinary historians have called attention to the African roots of Southern cuisine. As Angela Shelf Medearis (1994, xiii) states, “My African ancestors are an invisible but strong presence in my kitchen. Part of their legacy to me and to America can be found in a simmering pot of spicy okra gumbo, in a delicious handful of peanuts, in a steaming bowl of black-eyed peas and rice on a cold New Year’s Day.” For black chefs, culinary historians, and scholars, cookbooks have become instrumental in shaping their contemporary self-image and that of their community. Such cookbooks not only share recipes, they fulfill an educational role by narrating in part the complex history of the black experience in America. Other cookbooks, such as *The Black Family Reunion Cookbook* (1991), are infused with historical insights into the lives of black leaders, while The National Council of Negro Women’s *The Black Family Dinner Quilt Cookbook* (1994) incorporates Harlem’s history as well, and Phoebe Bailey’s *An African American Cookbook* (2002) reaches back to culinary experiences during slavery. However, it is Meggett’s *Gullah Geechee Home Cooking* that frames her as the custodian of centuries-old culinary traditions of the Lowcountry Gullah. She instructs “how to not just enjoy food, but respect its true origins” (Stewart 2023). Stewart (2023) contends that “in her life and posthumous legacy, she [Meggett] should join the ranks of a vanguard of Black women cooks, including Edna Lewis and Leah Chase, who redefined American cuisine through the lens of Black womanhood and cooking.”

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15. Typically, motivations behind a cookbook’s creation are articulated in its prefaces (Notaker 2017, 136-137). Written in a discursive prose style, they often employ a rhetorical device known as “affected modesty,” a concept identified by Ernst Robert Curtius (qtd. in Notaker 2017, 140). Authors position themselves as modest when justifying presenting their work to the public. Writers claim that they undertook the project only because of requests by friends, patrons, or some higher authority (Notaker 2017, 140). Meggett (2022) provides her rationale in the back matter. However, in contrast to typically affected modesty, she embraces her culinary gift while acknowledging her friend’s gentle encouragement: “This is my book, and I have to give her credit for inspiring me. She and I spent years writing down all these thoughts and recipes together because I only had them in my head.”

## 7. Fried Okra: The South and Beyond

Fascination with okra extends beyond plates and palates. Cookbook authors, culinary critics, and scholars from disciplines such as cultural anthropology and history have been pivotal in transcribing traditional oral recipes, such as those for fried okra, into print, thereby extending the reach of and appreciation for, African American cuisine in general, and Gullah cuisine in particular, far beyond its conventional confines in the American South. The geographic and cultural dissemination of fried okra will lead to its inevitable integration with diverse culinary traditions, continuing the American syncretistic impulse that has given rise to such fusion foods as kosher burritos, Mexican pizzas, and teriyaki tacos, or the kimchi okra and okra marshmallows recipes from *The Taste the State* cookbook by Mitchell and Shields. The appeal of okra will find its way to new frontiers outside of the USA as exemplified by establishments like Okra FoodBar in Ho Chi Minh City, honored by the Michelin Guide and run by Jamie Celaya, a Hispanic American graduate of Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Chicago.

Such syncretism, coupled with the widening diffusion of innovative interpretations of okra and Gullah cuisine, underscores the dynamic nature of recipes. Leonardi (1989, 344) explains that it lies in a recipe's nature to encourage revision, arguing that "like a narrative, a recipe is reproducible, and, further, its hearers-readers-receivers are *encouraged* to reproduce it and, in reproducing it, to revise it and make it their own." Thus, readers who cook, be they chefs or amateur cooks, become co-authors of the culinary creation by bringing recipes to life, transforming instructions on page into real-life culinary experiences. Such performance rarely yield similar results as those who re-create recipes bring their own creative flair and privilege their own preferences. Distinctive culinary ways of cooking may not necessarily be hindrances, though. Echoing this sentiment, Meggett explains that finding her culinary voice involved revising some recipes to reflect her individual palate and preferences, ultimately creating her signature dishes: "I learned how to master recipes and make them my own." Meggett (2022) encourages her readers to interact with her cookbook and adjust the recipes to suit their taste, all while discovering the joy of and honoring the heritage of Gullah cooking:

Cooking shouldn't be scary; it should bring joy and love into your home. These recipes are meant to be enjoyed. You can swap seasonings, you can use different proteins, and you can cook things the way you want to. Don't be afraid to make my recipes your own, but always remember the history and people behind them.

Meggett's approach is grounded in her openness to what Floyd and Forster (2003, 2) describe as "subjective intervention and interpretation" of recipes, with an emphasis on respecting the culture from which one is borrowing. This invitation

to adapt her recipes and infuse Gullah dishes with one's unique personal touch is also echoed in Stewart's (2022) observation that the iconic Gullah dish – fried okra – “reflects the spirit of the Black American cooks who have preserved its legacy, while creating their own versions and interpretations.”

## 8. Conclusions

Cookbooks are capable of doing more than merely listing ingredients and conveying instructions regarding how to use them. They “enforce social norms, draw together communities or provide an arena for individual expression” (Floyd and Forster 2003, 6). Meggett's cookbook is an illustrative example of these communicative functions. In part, her cookbook functions rhetorically as a memory text “imaginatively recreating the past” (Floyd and Forster 2003, 7), conserving and celebrating the cultural heritage of the Gullah Geechee people. Through personal anecdotes, traditional recipes, and the reclamation of time honored cultural practices *Gullah Geechee Home Cooking* captures the oral history and embodied identity of her community. This is critically important, helping as it does to preserve those invaluable resources from continued erosion and possible erasure. Continuation of the Gullah's centuries old culture is no longer guaranteed by the isolation of the sea islands and remote rural areas that constitute their historical homeland. They must navigate increasing engagement with and encroachment by the dominant mainstream American culture, to which they are now connected via the mass and social media, by bridges and highways, and through the changing demographics of their once homogenous communities due to an influx of outsiders. Our analysis of Meggett's cookbook offers a case study of the kind of rhetorical means available to marginalized communities that enable them to retain core elements of their traditional culture, rather than abandoning them in response to the dominant society's pervasive and seductive cultural, economic, and social incentives. Such retention cannot rely upon rigid adherence to the past, however. For distinctive communities to endure within the context of today's diverse, multicultural societies they must be adaptive to some extent; living cultures are fluid. This is even true of such tradition-bound communities as the Amish and Hassidic Jews. And it is true as well of the Gullah. Meggett's willingness to render in writing and make public what had once been private oral culinary instructions and family history ensures that those traditions will continue into the future.

Meggett's cookbook also rhetorically serves to “represent, define, revise, claim” (Tippen 2018) and project the parameters of the Gullah culture she inherited. In particular, through paratexts she expresses a view of the world and the place of

her Gullah community within it. These paratexts provide a powerful means for Meggett to reclaim stolen Gullah cultural capital, assert her community's authority over it, and then share it on their own terms with the world. She proudly affirms that it was her enslaved African ancestors, and not the genteel Southern women whom they served, that first cultivated and cooked dishes such as fried okra that are now featured at fashionable restaurants run by celebrity chefs. And it was families like hers who kept that culinary tradition alive. Her approach in asserting cultural ownership is invitational, not hostile. She welcomes the whole world and encourages others to try cooking and eating Gullah cuisine, thus fostering intercultural dialogue through shared culinary experience. In blending cooking instructions with personal and familial narratives tied to Meggett's culture, her cookbook's paratexts offer outsiders a rich, engaging, and informative introduction to the Gullah Geechee, who are relatively unknown beyond the southern American coast.

The current century has seen an unprecedented amount of migration, which has significantly altered the demographic composition of cities, regions, and nations. There has been a consequent transfer, mixing, and mingling of diverse peoples and their cultures, including the culinary traditions which they bring with them, sometimes share with others in the form of ethnic restaurants, and which are then all-too-often appropriated by the dominant culture. This same pattern is also sadly evident in the mainstream's colonization of indigenous cultures as well as those with long local histories, such as the Gullah. This form of cultural plagiarism can be seen in the commercialization of Gullah cuisine and its consumption by affluent cultural omnivores with little connection to, appreciation of, or respect for the cuisine's African American culinary auteurs. The paratexts included within Meggett's cookbook address this cultural erasure and offer a remedy in the form of reclaimed Gullah ownership over the recipes passed down within her family for generations. This rhetorical approach offers a model of positive engagement for other indigenous and immigrant groups whose traditions, including culinary culture, are appropriated by the dominant culture without proper attribution. Given current migratory patterns, and contemporary cultural trends, there will be an increased need for such a rhetorical remedy for the foreseeable future.

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