REVOLUTIONARY FOODWAYS:
A SET OF PATHS AND PRACTICES

CSWS-funded research explores identities in the cookbooks, fiction and poetry of African-American women

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Diners. Transnational Tables, and Culinary Connections.”

Chapter two, “Culinary Conservatives: Cookbooks as Racial Uplift” will consider works including Darden Sisters’ Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine (1978), which records generations of one family’s economic self-determination, and Jessica Harris’s Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons (1989) and High on the Hog (2011), which study African cultural retentions in the foodways of the United States. These works are conservative in the sense that they conserve (sometimes literally in recipes for pickles and preserves) a static black history. With the possibilities of foodways established by two chapters on cookbooks, I will turn to poetry in chapter three, “The Recipe as Poem: Foodways in African American Poetry.” Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Harryette Mullen, and Evie Shockley use culinary discourse and the recipe form to insist on a complex, varied, and specifically African American experience. Chapter four, “Culinary Experiments in African American Fiction” will look at novels like Ntozake Shange’s Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo (1982), which include actual recipes, and novels like Gloria Naylor’s Linden Hills, which thematize food as a site of racial and gendered identity.

Chapter five, “Ntozake Shange’s Culinary Diaspora,” returns to where the fascination with foodways in African American Literature began for me. I argue that Shange’s multi-generic If I Can Cook / You Know God Can (1998) theorizes identity in recipes that ask readers to practice diaspora, to do everyday culinary work as a way of both describing and inviting others to perform an international black identity. If I Can Cook is a gumbo of genre; it brings together recipes, personal recollection, diasporic theory, and travelogue to show that “how and what we cook is the ultimate implication of who we are.”

—Courtney Thorsson is an assistant professor in the UO English Department, where she teaches African American literature. Her book, Women’s Work: Nationalism and Contemporary African American Women’s Novels, was published by the University of Virginia Press in 2013. Her writing has appeared in Callaloo and Atlantic Studies. Professor Thorsson’s current book project, “Revolutionary Recipes,” is a study of culinary discourse and the recipe form in African American cookbooks, poetry, and fiction.