

*Title: "Building Houses Made of Chicken Legs: An African American Scholar Looks at the Links Between Power, Gender, Culture and Food."*

**Questions:**

**How did your academic interest in foodways begin?**

My interests in foodways actually began when I was researching for a, then, professor Dr. Hasia Diner. As I researched information for her book, Hungering for America I wondered if anything had been written on African American foodways. Seeing little, I decided that was the area where one of the gaps existed in the research.

**What do you think distinguishes your approach to the study of African American foodways?**

My approach is rather eclectic. I decided that I would take a multi-disciplinary approach because to me it was the only way to capture the vastness of African American food and foodways experiences. To this end, I decided to incorporate self-ethnography, visual literacy, literature, aspects of popular culture, and material culture and critical race studies.

**What was the genesis for your prize-winning study Building Houses Out Of Chicken Legs?**

Thank you for that acknowledgement. The genesis of this work was really twofold. One, it involves a commercial I heard regarding KFC. The commercial made me wonder whether or not racism was still very much alive in contemporary popular culture. Secondly, my mother had shared with me a number of her life stories. The numerous stories she told me of her life and the lives of my relatives who worked the underground economy piqued my interest even more.

**In Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs you talk about the women of Gordonsville, what can we learn about the power of food in African American culture from their collective narrative?**

It seems to me that one of the many things that we can learn from exploring food relations in this and other contexts is the way that black women engaged in entrepreneurial activities on all levels. In other words, the stories we tend to hear have largely to do with middle-class African American women or women who worked in domestic capacities. Here we have unnamed women, in some cases, who were early enterprisers who capitalized on, their often subservient situation, and made a life for themselves and for their families.

**What kind of role has cooking played in shaping the contemporary identity of African American women?**

Well certainly it seems that cooking has played a number of different roles. Not only has it spawned catering and food vending experiences but it seems it has also informed restaurateurs like B. Smith who have made major contributions to American and African-American society.

**What aspects of African American foodways do you feel need to be investigated, research, or covered? In other words, what does the future hold?**

Well, there is ALOT that still has to be done. The work of scholars like Jessica Harris, Doris Witt, Howard Paige and myself goes far but there is still much more to be done. For example, work has yet to be done in areas of catering, contemporary chefs and restaurateurs, regional foodways including areas like New England, California, Oklahoma, and more. Work needs to be done, it seems, on different kinds of eating patterns like veganism (which is actually being done by a young scholar). The work that you are doing on African Americans who were enslaved and practiced religions other than Christianity. A lot needs to be done and there is more than enough room for all of our voices. Many stories have yet to be told about the eating behaviors, practices, meanings, and content of African American people.

**Dr. Williams-Forson, I learned that your family grew up in the same community that my family did, in Prince Edward County, Virginia. What traditional foods did you grow up with that stick in your memory?**

Well, my sisters and I were raised in Buffalo, New York and then relocated to Farmville, Virginia. We were exposed to a very eclectic palette. We were raised on fried chicken and greens on Sunday and that is still very much a part of our holiday diet. However, early in my life my father developed diabetes and this, in turn, dictated in large part the direction of our family's diet. We began to eat more okra, tuna, and salads. For a while I ate pork but stopped sometime around the 1970s because I had had enough--I mean real pork like hog maws and chit'lins. But after having had enough of that eating one Christmas and also being tired of my head hurting after I ate those foods, I decided to leave the pork behind. About 10 years later I made the same decision about beef. I am clear about how diseases run rapid in not only the black community but my family. My grandmothers both died of heart-related illnesses. So, my family focused more on eating a lot of greens (from collards to poke salad), cabbage, okra, salad, and lots of fish and chicken. That's pretty much my diet now. I tried the vegetarian route but I missed the chicken and the fish.

**What projects can we expect from you in the future?**

In the future I am expecting to continue working in the area of food and foodways. But I also have a huge interest in African American material culture, generally. So, I'm moving in a couple of directions with my latest projects. One will definitely be food-related and the others...well, we'll see!

Thank you for this opportunity!

*Dr. Psyche Williams-Forson's book, [Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs](#) is available through [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) and University of North Carolina Press at [www.uncpress.unc.edu](http://www.uncpress.unc.edu).*