

SWEET POTATO LEAVES

with Eggplant & Butter Beans

by Betty Vandy

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

I always see beauty in eating the traditional staples of my homeland, Sierra Leone. I know that every part of the meal is created to produce the most robust of flavors while limiting waste. Whether nourishing, healing, cleansing, or refreshing, my food legacy is one of complete sustenance. Sweet potato leaves are one of the many green leaves, known collectively as plasas, that are prepared and cooked in Sierra Leone as well as across West Africa. As African as you can get, sweet potato leaves signify the transformation of simple ingredients into a wholesome and delicious meal, reminding us as Africans that we shall never lack. In our Krio language it's known as petehteh leaf, not to be confused with other potato leaves, some of which are inedible and poisonous.

Growing up I assumed the potato leaves we ate came from the humble potato, so visiting my father's farmland and discovering that they were attached to a sweet potato came as a pleasant surprise. When eating good potato leaves we say in Krio, "di petehteh leaves e sweet." Omitting the very word that embraces the sentiment to this delicious dish always has me wondering why we don't start calling them sweet potato leaves. They are not as adored as our other staple tuber leaf and national dish, cassava leaves, but they are just as delicious.

15-ounces dried white
butter beans or red
speckled butter beans, or
2 (15-ounce) cans, drained

1 tablespoon plus
2 teaspoons salt,
plus more as needed

2 onions

2 habanero chiles,
stemmed and seeded

1 teaspoon ogiri
(a traditional West African
stock seasoning similar
to miso, made from
fermented sesame seeds)

 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup water

10 ounces sustainable
West African palm oil or
extra-virgin coconut oil

1 large bunch sweet potato
leaves, washed and finely
sliced, or 2 large bunches
tender spinach

6 ounces fresh okra,
finely sliced

4 eggplants, chopped
into bite-size wedges

Pepper to taste

If using dried beans, soak them overnight in cold water. Add 1 tablespoon of the salt to the water. The next day, drain the water from the beans and rinse. Place the beans in a medium-size pot and add enough cold water to cover along with the remaining 2 teaspoons salt. Bring to a boil and cook at a vigorous simmer for 40 to 60 minutes or until the beans are soft. Drain and rinse with cold water and set aside.

Coarsely chop $\frac{1}{2}$ of the onions and add to a food processor along with the chiles and ogiri and process until the mixture has reached a medium-smooth consistency. Transfer to a medium-size pot along with the water and oil and bring to a boil on high heat for 6 to 7 minutes or until the onions become translucent. (The ogiri has quite a pungent smell as you cook it, but the smell will recede a bit.)

Lower the heat to medium and add the sweet potato leaves, okra, and eggplant. Stir well so all the leaves are submerged. Cover the pot and cook for 6 to 7 minutes more or until all the vegetables are tender.

Finely slice the remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ onion and add it to the pot along with the beans, combining thoroughly, and cook for an additional 4 minutes. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serve immediately.



FOODSTEPS IN MOTION

Migration in Black Food

by Michael W. Twitty

We have always been a people whose history was traced in footsteps, beginning with the birth of humanity. The story of African people is, in many ways, a constant search for subsistence and satisfaction. We migrated with the herds and seasons, danced our way across the green Sahara and fertile plains, into the sacred forests and coasts. We are art in motion, gathering flora, fauna, minerals, and flavors on our way, adorning our hunger.

Across her landscape, Africa would sustain her children with more than 2,000 indigenous food plants, not to mention hundreds of fish, game, domesticated animals, insects, and birds to which was added the bounty of the globe. There were yams, sorghum and millet, cowpeas, rice, watermelons, muskmelons, greens and herbs, and fruits, both oily and sweet. On dhows and junks, across land bridges and seas, and trade routes buried under sand and humus came new resources, making Africa a greenhouse of a new world, a meeting place of food and ideas about food, brought to the place where fire and pottery and cooking first began. From her face to her heart moved plantains, mangoes, sugarcane, bananas, coconuts, and cinnamon and clove trees. There was a new foodscape, and as the generations waxed and waned, it was as if there was no line between the time this feast began and the countless seasons of harvest that led to recurring junctures of joy.

The rivers were highways of chiefdom and empire. These are the places where the herds drank and the tilapia and catfish, hippopotamus, and manatee swam. The food cultures of Kemet and Kush, Old Mali, and Songhai, and the kingdoms of the Yoruba and Edo, Igbo, and Kongo would spread indigenous cuisines with their expansions and flourishing fields. Bodies of water shrank, the searing deserts knew increase, and the movement kept going to thwart lack and ruin. Diets changed or were amended to meet the challenges of a new evening meal, prepared as they always had been, on three stones, shared among family around common bowls just before sunsets that had been reflected in the eyes of these humans longer than any other on Earth.

And yet there was trauma—new invaders came and left less than they took. Trauma moved food as fast as trade and expansion by foot and ship. The African Atlantic would represent the mass transfer of a third of Africa's population to the Western world. More bodies would arrive this way than from Europe until the 1820s, and with them, an entire seventy thousand years of eating, cooking, searching, hunger. Enslavement was the cause of movement. It meant new unfathomable pangs to come—pangs of exile, then an exhausting ache for memory beyond memory to keep the culture alive despite the whip, the gun, violations of body and spirit, and a demand to forget.

The food became the source code from village to dungeon, barracoon to canoe, caravel to colonial town, and to the plantations where sugarcane, rice, cacao, coffee, corn, indigo, cotton, tobacco, and the rest awaited their knowledge, skills, and abilities to stuff the West and resolve its desires.

We kept moving, our footsteps taking on greater significance. Now we were to be assimilated in our tastes to Eurasia's ways, specifically its Western, Atlantic facing coast. Peaches, apples, pork, cabbages and colewort, olives, and wheat drifted into our mouths unasked for and unrequested. We took what we needed as we moved and left behind other ingredients; they were not key to remembering who we were or why we were here. Through the Middle Passage, seeds moved, not in our hair but in casks, boxes, and hogsheads; some were live plants, others dried.

The words changed with the footsteps. Mende, Yoruba, Igbo, Ki-Kongo, Mbundu, Uldeme, Papel, Soninke merged with Portuguese, English, Danish, Spanish, French, and Dutch. A flood of foreign verbiage, but the core words and sounds remained, words and sounds for things no word in their tongues could provide. We made new culinary languages and new nations and new dishes and delicious things out of scraps, treasures, and unknown gold.

We began to rebel and inject our food-steps with joy. Jerk and barbecue emerged. Mothers from all over Africa sat together and worked out a revolution in food—on St. Kitts and in Virginia and Maryland and over in Pernambuco and the Artibonite region of Haiti. We became architects of food in Peru, Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia, Georgia, and Louisiana and in Philadelphia, Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Boston. Okra soups and gumbos; fufus and mofongos; grit cakes, mashies, and mushes; and iron pots full of bones and scraps and heads and tails and torsos of game and

provisions and greens marched from labor camp to labor camp in the hands of fishermen and women, hunters and gardeners, farmers and foragers. We cooked for our captors, cooked for ourselves, and between the two, a culinary grammar and vocabulary developed to name new constellations of food crafts unmatched in the Americas.

In America, the footsteps were thunderous. We were pushed in chains in the largest forced migration in American history—the domestic slave trade. We ran like hell. The footsteps delivered refugees' cuisine—our food pushed beyond the coasts and core areas, to the prairie and frontier and Great Lakes. Across several centuries, little conspiracies made by sailors and crewmen, whalers, pirates, missionaries, servants, artisans, Queer seekers, orphans, and expatriates spread the footsteps when enslavement could not. Our neighbors soaked us up, and we soaked them up—in duress and pleasure—the Irish, the Germans, the Navajo, the Lakota, the Chinese—new dishes were born in the in-between places.

Lowcountry married Louisiana.

Cape Verde married old Black Bostonian and Bajan.

Bahamian married Seminole Freedman.

We became from many, one.

Emancipation came, then westward expansion; Jim Crow led to the largest voluntary migration in American history—the Great Migration. Fried rabbit and chicken and biscuits in shoeboxes and jars of farm-made syrup and jars of succotash and pickled peaches fueled new journeys and fires within us. We used everything we had to resist and to build—new towns, organizations, unions, and everything we needed to be “modern.” Despite the aggression, the violence, the nightmare days, and dystopian nights, we forced joy and passed plates out of

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our backdoors, opened up cafés, barbecued on the roadside. We cooked at Delmonico's, too, but nothing mattered to us more than our family reunions, cookouts and barbecues, Queer family gatherings, rent parties, Sunday dinners, Eids and Passover feasts, days for saints and their corresponding Vodun and Orisha.

We celebrated each other. We practiced culinary jazz and improvised, drawing on things we had always done since time began, classical things, endemic to Africa, and

things we composed with others in mind and creative flourishes dreamed up in the void. We moved back South; we made Brooklyn into the Caribbean and Houston into Nigeria.

No matter where we go, the footsteps will keep coming with creative fire, the character of tradition and a sense of the cool that made for a food tradition armed with a sense of empowerment and renewal that make for fertile grounds for the footsteps of the children of Africa to come.

IT TAKES A LONG TIME

by Naa Oyo A. Kwate, PhD

Ackee is Jamaica's national fruit, and when paired with saltfish, it becomes the country's national dish. It hails from Ghana, where it still grows but is no longer eaten. But common lore about the plant's migration from West Africa to the Caribbean is purely fiction. In its telling, a captain in the British navy in the 1700s brought ackee to the island to nourish enslaved persons. This captain, William Bligh, who sailed the South Pacific and nearly met his end in a mutiny aboard the HMS *Bounty* in 1789, did eventually transport more than three hundred tropical fruit trees from Tahiti to Jamaica in 1793. The British called the progeny of those trees breadfruit on account of its texture, taste, and on how readily ships' crews replaced their bread with the fruit. We know Bligh did indeed execute this mission because slave owners in Jamaica beseeched the English

monarchy to dispatch the starchy crop so that they might use it as feed.

But ackee? No. Bligh clearly took credit for the plant—its scientific taxonomy *Blighia sapida* bears his name. This is surely because ackee was among the plants enslaved men in Jamaica were tasked with carrying from the island's interior to Bligh's ship, whereupon he would convey the plants across the Atlantic to the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London.

Ackee's name alone is evidence that an African hand bore it to the Caribbean; otherwise, it would be called something like butterfruit or eggfruit. Ackee is thought to derive from akye (pronounced AH-cheh), from the Akan. A Twi word meaning "it's taking a long time," it's a fitting description of tropical flora that takes

THE SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY OF BLACK FOOD

by Leah Penniman

Our ancestral grandmothers in the Dahomey region of West Africa braided seeds and promise into their hair, before being forced into the bowels of trans-Atlantic slave ships. They hid sesame, black-eyed pea, rice, and melon seed in their locks. They stashed away amara kale, gourd, sorrel, basil, tamarind, and kola seed in their tresses. The seed was their most precious legacy, and they believed against odds in a future of tilling and reaping the earth. They believed that their descendants would exist and that we would receive and honor the gift of the seed. With the seed, our grandmothers also braided their esoteric and cultural knowledge. For our ancestors, the earth was not a commodity but a family member. They did not tuck a seed into the ground and expect it to grow without the requisite prayer, offerings, song, and propitiation. They did not see themselves as masters of creation but as humble members of a delicate web of sacred beings.

There are those among their descendants who remember the legacy of that seed and honor the spiritual ecology of this lineage. Through traditional African festivals, rituals, and sacrifice, they work to maintain balance in our world.

The Vodun harvest festival of Manje Yam is one such manifestation of that remembering. Last November, at Soul Fire Farm, an Afro-Indigenous training farm in upstate New York,

friends and family gathered to honor the spirit of the yam. They pulled the bright tubers from the heavy, cool earth to the sound of the drum, washed them gently, and rested them on a white sheet to the east of the gathering space. The community members took turns approaching the yams with reverence, to offer thanks for the good yield and successful harvest. They poured offerings of palm oil, rum, and cornmeal to the yam spirit Njoku, the sovereign of all crops, according to Igbo and Vodun tradition. While pouring, they sang, "*Peye peye wan peye!*" a Kreyol song reminding the community of its duty of reciprocity.

Offerings and prayers complete, they covered the floor completely with banana leaves, representing the surface of the water that the magic boat of the loa crosses to reach the holy city of Ife. Banana leaves were selected because they perpetually self-renew from the roots, mirroring the eternal nature of the divine. Many community members were new to the ritual of Manje Yam, so they shifted with awkward anticipation before taking the mystic journey across the sea to visit the land of their ancestors. One at a time, they saluted the four directions and kissed the ground to the West. Then, each lay down on the banana leaves and rolled themselves toward the yams in the East, the land of Ginen, their ancestral home, where the loa would fortify them spiritually for the

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year ahead. After the ritual journey back across the Middle Passage to receive the blessings of their ancestors, the community could prepare and eat the new yams.

Since it is forbidden to eat the new yams in bitterness, relatives and friends took time to settle quarrels and make peace. Folks drifted off in pairs to ask one another for forgiveness and renew their commitments to harmony. The Igbo believe that quarreling on a yam farm, throwing a yam in anger, eating yams with others whom you despise, or defecating near the yam desecrates the yam spirit.

In restored peace, they cooked the yam with salted fish and passed the pots of kwi over the heads of those present. The fish represented the bounty of the sea, and the yam represented the bounty of the land. Bellies satisfied and hearts full, they dreamed forward to the Haitian New Year's Day festival of soup joumou and to the spring Souvenance festival to honor the spirits of nature.

Of course, the festivals honoring nature are just one manifestation of the holistic spiritual approach of African traditionalism. Fundamentally, Vodun, Yoruba, Igbo, and related faiths view the Earth as sacred. "The basis of Yoruba religion can be described as a worship of nature," explains Professor Wande Abimbola, the global spokesperson, or Awise Agbaye, of Ifá. In the Yoruba religion, it is believed that divinities, known as orisas, changed themselves into forces of nature, such as thunder, lightning, rain, rivers, oceans, and trees, after they completed their work on the Earth. Oya became the Niger river. Sango became thunder, lightning, and rain. Olokun changed herself to become oceans, while Osun and Yemoja became the Osun and Oogun rivers, respectively. There are at least sixty-four trees whom the Yoruba people worship as divinities. Every hill, mountain, or river of Yorubaland is a divinity. Numerous birds and animals are sacred to the Yoruba people, who

worship or venerate them. The Earth itself is a divinity. We human beings are divine through our *ori* (personal divine nature) and *emi* (divine breath encased in our hearts) that are directly bestowed on humans from Olodumare, the supreme god.

To acknowledge that we as humans are not the most powerful force in nature and to act accordingly is not always easy. For example, when the founders first came to the land that would become Soul Fire Farm, they were very excited about the potential for renovating an existing overgrown swamp into a pond for swimming and irrigation. According to tradition, they were required to ask permission before moving earth and disturbing the ecosystem. So, they used a simple divination tool called obi abata to determine whether the spirits of the land wished for the pond to be dug. The response was a firm no, as revealed by the patterns made by the obi. Year after year they asked, receiving and honoring a no for eight years. On the ninth annual divination, the spirits of the land responded yes, provided that certain safety features were put in place to protect children and also that the residents committed to regular offerings to Nana Buruku, the grandmother of the universe, whose energy dwells in forest wetlands. Soul Fire Farm now has a beautiful pond and remains in a harmonious relationship with the land, which spares her compliant human guests of accidental tragedy, poison ivy, and most biting insects.

In traditional African faiths, reciprocity is the law of the universe. When people honor the divine forces of Nature, they are taken care of. For example, according to Ayo Salami's compilation of verses of *Odu Ifá*, the farm is a place of refuge from violence. The chapter Owonrin Obara teaches, "The warfare in the city does not get to the farm. When everyone heard about Cricket's house on the farm, they paid him homage. He shrieked, 'the warfare in the city did not get to the farm.'" It is

possible that in our exile from the red clays of the South to the paved streets of the West and North, Black people left behind a little piece of our souls. Forced by structural racism into overcrowded and under-resourced urban neighborhoods, many of us have grown up with profoundly traumatizing exposure to violence. Ifá invites us to reclaim the gift of

rural land as a haven of peace, even as we do the essential work of uprooting violence from our urban communities. Ifá invites us to pick up the bundle of seeds handed to us by our ancestral grandmothers, tuck them into the waiting ground, and reap a harvest of healing and liberation.

A PLACE ALL OUR OWN

Uncovering Traditions of Sovereignty in the Black Church

by Rev. Dr. Heber Brown III

In the waning months of the Civil War, as Union General William T. Sherman led his troops through Georgia and toward South Carolina, the question emerged of what to do with the growing number of formerly enslaved Africans from the state who had now been freed from chattel slavery through military action. The proposed solution would actually come from Black people themselves.

On January 12, 1865, General Sherman and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton met with twenty Black Christian ministers and lay leaders to hear their views regarding what to do with those who were newly freed. The

spokesperson for the group, Baptist minister Rev. Garrison Frazier of North Carolina, said, "The way we can best take care of ourselves is to have land and turn it and till it by our own labor. . . . We want to be placed on land until we are able to buy it and make it our own." Four days later, General Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15, which confiscated 400,000 acres of land from Charleston, South Carolina, through Georgia (including the state's sea islands) and ending at the Saint Johns river in Florida. The land was apportioned to Black families in 40-acre segments.

When given the chance to articulate a pathway to communal self-determination, Black Christian ministers did not hesitate to point to land stewardship and ownership as the necessary ingredient. In fact, they not only

"FORTY ACRES AND A MULE."

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wanted land but they also wanted to live in communities of their own that were separate from white people. (Only one of the ministers present at the meeting voiced a desire to live in a racially integrated community.)

Black ministers continued to see the significance of land and the primacy of communal self-determination as a key expression in the practice of the Christian faith, even after that fateful meeting in 1865, even after President Andrew Johnson revoked the order and returned the land to the white owners later that same year.

Throughout the 1900s, various Christian ministries embraced and employed similar approaches. The Peace Mission Movement was one such ministry. Founded by Mother and Father Divine, the International Peace Mission movement came into prominence during the Great Depression, in part, because of their land- and labor-based communes and cooperatives. In 1935, movement member and domestic worker Clara Budds purchased the ministry's first of many farms in upstate New York, opening the door for the ministry to create a food supply chain that stocked the shelves of their cooperatively run businesses throughout the state. As Divine's influence grew, the ministry expanded across the country and followed similar patterns of farming and embracing cooperative economics as part of its religious obligation.

Some thirty years later in Detroit, Michigan, Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr., inspired in part by the Peace Mission movement, began casting a land-based vision to his congregation—the Shrine of the Black Madonna. A contemporary and close comrade of Malcolm X, Cleage was very much aligned with the Black Power spirit of his era. He outlined the details of his vision in his 1972 publication *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church*. In this work, he set forth a reinterpretation of Christianity that embraced Jesus

as a Black revolutionary, saw Black people as the “chosen people” of the Bible, and forcefully critiqued the Black Church, arguing that it should be restructured into an institutional base for Black Power and for the building of a Black nation within a nation. Farming was central to the plan. He proposed an interregional, land-based solidarity economy that would allow Black people to “distribute goods raised in rural counties of the South on Black farms in northern urban centers, where Black people are now dependent on white merchants for their produce.” Citing the systematic ways in which Black people were (and are) being oppressed, Cleage argued that the Black community needed its own system of governance, along with a Christian theology that provided spiritual fuel for the Black Church to be transformed into an institutional engine that would operate in service to the Black Freedom Struggle.

The Peace Mission movement and the Shrine of the Black Madonna are but two of many examples in a long tradition of the kind of Christianity that runs counter to the more popular expressions that the general public is more familiar with.

To those who have had any kind of interaction with or membership in Black Church communities, the preachers and practitioners who flaunt material possessions and individual, capitalist achievements as signs of God's favor are well known. We've watched televangelists rise to celebrity status at the expense of their local communities floundering in state-sponsored squalor. We've been wounded by the ways Black Churches have demonized those who don't believe or don't practice spirituality in ways that precisely align with what Western white theology has dictated since the days of chattel slavery. Perhaps one of the greatest sins committed by this presentation of the Black Church and Christianity is that it obscures other models of practice of this faith. It's this way or the highway. This could not be further from the truth!

Rev. Garrison Frazier (and the nineteen other religious leaders who met with General Sherman), Mother and Father Divine, Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr. and countless other women, men, and churches stand as hidden monuments to a storied legacy of Christianity: a practice of the way of Jesus that embraces the Black radical tradition and understands God as being on the side of the oppressed. The way they lived out the tenets of this faith provides me—a Black pastor—with a model for ministry that does not require that I leave my Blackness, my spiritual curiosities, or my commitment to the freedom struggle outside the doors of the church.

These ancestors inspired me to establish the Black Church Food Security Network (BCFSN) in 2015 during the Baltimore uprising. That period of social upheaval created an opportunity for us to solve one of our fundamental concerns: access and agency with regard to nutrient-rich food. In the spirit of asset-based community development, BCFSN organizes and mobilizes the existing resources of Black Churches to create Black-led food systems. We help churches start gardens on their land and help them buy in bulk from Black farmers. We also assist with logistics related to the delivery, storage, preparation, and preservation of the food we purchase. We are bypassing the system to help meet one another's needs; co-creating food value chains along the way.

The Black Church community's rich history of land and food-based ministries is propelled by a desire for freedom and communal self-determination. Even if we have forgotten this, it is part of our heritage.

With all of the land, kitchens, vehicles, classrooms, money, and facilities that Black Churches own, it only seems right that we join those outside the church who are actively working to advance Black food and land sovereignty. While the church does not have all the answers, we do have many of the basic ingredients that can serve as a catalyst for some of our wildest and most revolutionary dreams.

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REFLECTIONS OF A GARDEN CHILE

On the Village & Homestead

by Gabrielle Eitienne

At the top of 2018, I made my reverse migration from New York back to North Carolina after almost a decade away. This decision was based on what I now acknowledge as a call back to the land, a call placed by my ancestors, who knew this land well. It was with open arms that I was welcomed back by my family and community. This community, fondly known as St. Mary's, is located on the line between Apex and Holly Springs, its soils are red clay and its population once mostly Black and kin. This community raised me, my mother, and my grandfather. My move home was a way to reclaim some things while preserving our familial foodways and deep ties to land stewardship.

My first stop would be Uncle Lynn's and Aunt Laura's. I melodically knocked on the door, and their daughter, Barbara, answered with a squeal of excitement. Barbara's skin is the color of honey, and her thin coiffed hair sat up on her head. "Girl, you look just like Von." This is a phrase I hear a lot these days, and because my mother is a stone-cold fox, I smile, every time. I walked in through the kitchen, where Uncle Lynn sat with his legs crossed as if he belonged in someone's magazine, selling something. The chain of his pocket watch sat atop his chinos, which held in his beige and

navy plaid shirt. He looked up through his glasses and smiled a smile that sang welcome home. His voice was small like his frame, and his wit sharp, even at the glorious age of eighty-six. I gave soft hugs, as I made my way into the living room, where Aunt Laura sat by the window. The light came in and sat on her smooth cheekbones. Her skin was the color of dried cottonwood, and her hair lay in soft gray plaits. She had just returned home from the doctor, and her feet were elevated on an ottoman, with a plaid fleece blanket draped on her lap and legs. I sat on the plush couch beside Barbara, as the news hummed below our conversation. I talked about New York for a while and then somehow got on the topic of food. My Aunt Laura was known as a great cook, and although I had never had her coconut custard pie, my grandfather's description of it was so vivid that I believed I had. I liked the way she pronounced okra—OAK-ree—and laughingly both complained and celebrated how thick my hair was. That visit would be the first but definitely not the last. Their home was situated diagonally across the road from us, in view from our living room window. Next door to them were my cousins Wade and Netta, with their home full of antiques, the kind you put out and show off, collector's items that roused

my inner child and ignited my imagination. Behind their home was a barn, designed and built by them, with massive accordion doors concealing the antiques that were too large for the house. Most impressive, my cousin Wade went to his room and brought back a large piece of tanned paper the color of a real-life treasure map. Little did I know, it was. This paper was a hand-drawn map of the original neighborhood, each lot outlined and numbered. As I looked over this heirloom, he explained that his mother, my great-great Aunt Issabell, had helped to sell most of the lots in this community—helping to shape a village of kinfolk and friends, people who would look out for one another. There were people like Ms. Annaclyde, now ninety-one, who had started an “outreach club” that several women, including my grandmother Artris P. Woodard, would become a part of. These women would hold yard sales and other fundraisers to buy necessities like groceries and clothing for others in need.

I frequent Ms. Annaclyde’s home, which is made of cinder bricks painted taupe, hemmed in dark brown, and bordered by giant elephant ear taro plants. These visits usually include watching episodes of *The Young and the Restless* and the passing of wisdom and casual conversation during commercial breaks. I walk home through her backyard, where the woods connect to what is now our garden, which sits on about an acre of land that is managed by my great-uncle Andrew. This is my grandfather’s youngest brother. He’s the farmer, artist, and arguably the chef—although the one who is ordained in chef’s whites is Herbert, the eldest brother and the herbal/astrological hobbyist. I want to cook like them, their hands heat resistant. I once witnessed Uncle Herbert eat fire from the palm of his hand, or was it molten gravy? Either way, they are the type of hands that move pots from one stove eye to the next with no mitt and who uncover and let billowing steam waft directly from vessels and don’t blink. Those hands put themselves in

those meals, and you can sense the experience of them if you are lucky enough to get a plate.

Great-uncle Andrew’s kitchen is where I used to spend most evenings—right by his side over the stove, the sink, or a tin tub, as we shelled peas, mashed bronze muscadines for wine, or cut up pears for preserves. Growing up, I knew little of who he really was. I knew he smelled of beer most times and that his voice and anecdotes made me laugh. However, I wouldn’t come to learn that these things, small observations, were in part by-products of a not-so-easy life. One Sunday, over a pot of simmering cabbage-collards, he started to share that he had been drafted into Vietnam in his twenties, had lived in Germany for a portion of his adulthood, and then had returned home to farm for thirty years. I also learned that his labor had been exploited by a local farm, where he was paid very little but managed a lot. I discovered, too, that he is our family’s griot, made some of the most incredible woodwork, and could throw a little Deutsch your way to see if you’d really been listening. All of this I learned right there across the street at the same house where he’d lived my entire life.

I vividly remember the first fall season I spent in the garden with him and Pop. My grandfather Mayfield, now eighty-four, is the resident mechanic and engineer. His mechanic shop, once known as Woodard’s Garage, sits behind our home, surrounded by massive oak trees and truck parts. Answering the phone and greeting customers as they fulfilled invoices with my grandmother was my very first job. The shop is now mostly used for what my grandfather calls piddlin, which means fixing something on his own time, making robotic parts for my aunt’s STEM competitions and working his magic on our old-school Farmall tractors. Since I’ve been home, it has served as a community film screening space, and most recently as a pick-up location for our CSA “Tall Grass Food” box, born in the pandemic and inspired by the work happening right here on our homestead.

Pop stands at around 6 feet 4 inches with a close cut the color of oak ash and a pair of those indestructible hands I mentioned earlier. My grandfather is the middle son of Andrew Jackson Woodard, the great-grandfather whom I never met but learned so much about in the kitchen and field with his three sons. There were lessons in wine making, pit cooking, barbecue alchemy, and figuring shit out, all passed down from him. Though memories of their mother, Cora Lee, are few and far between because she passed away when my grandfather was only twelve, there is one that I hold close. Whenever the symptoms of her blood disorder would flare up, she would send a then-ten-year-old Pop to the community clay bank to collect her medicine from the earth itself.

Another lesson I learned was how to reimagine the word *wealth*. Over a span of three days during one winter week in 2018, I witnessed at least two handfuls of folks drive up to get their holiday greens. One instance that stands out was when Mr. and Mrs. Wilson made their way down our rocky driveway, and even before they could get out of their car, my uncle had pulled a half-rusted hacksaw from the bed of his pickup truck and made his way to the collard patch. After a few moments of deliberation, he walked back toward us, holding two large emerald collards in one hand and his handcrafted walking stick securely in the other. As he approached the Wilsons, I asked whether I could take a portrait of the two of them holding the larger-than-life brassicas, and they stood, still smiling, as I attempted to freeze us in time. Soon after, Mrs. Wilson reached into the car to retrieve a few singles, which my uncle slid into his leather wallet without counting as the Wilsons turned out of the driveway. I could sense that these transactions were more than an exchange of goods; the pride my uncle took in feeding folks is what educated me on what drove his work. This would end up being my uncle's last holiday season in our community. As silly as it may have seemed to the Wilsons that I wanted their portrait with the collards,

it's that portrait and many others like it that have become monuments for the lessons I've learned right here at home.

The reflections below are snapshots from the months leading up to the displacement of several long-standing members of my community. The highs and lows of town hall meetings, where town council members would pretend to know nothing about the impact this highway extension was going to have on their rapidly declining Black population. I felt such pride, a pride mirrored back to me by my mom, my older brother, Antony, and my big cousins Tricia and Nicole, when we stood up and told our truth about this place we call St. Mary's. And what sorrow we all felt, as we watched these homes being demolished, one after the other. Hold this feeling, if you can, as you read these reflections.

November 27, 2018

As a kid, I remember being ashamed of where I'm from. My 13-year-old self, wishing our house was bigger . . . car was newer, completely unaware of how blessed I truly was. I moved to San Francisco for college and didn't see myself ever looking back. It was this time last year, that I started feeling pulled back home, and after seven years in New York, where I had made an entire life, I packed my things into a rented minivan and drove nine hours back to the home my youth had taken for granted. I made this move with the intention to keep what we have, reclaim what we'd lost, and stand with the community that raised me in the midst of gentrification and other changes. This wasn't an easy decision; however, I'm reassured every day that it was the right one.

March 18, 2019

*Our elders are our direct link to who we are. They embody our history and culture, and they keep us grounded . . . if you think for a second, you're hot sh*t, sit down with*

your grandparents. The groundedness is aligned with encouragement to continue to seek; you don't know it all. As a student of the ol'school, I have to stand up and stand with our elders. I ask the community to stand with me tomorrow night at town hall, 7:00 p.m., as we will share our history as we work toward some equitable solutions to protect and preserve our spaces.

March 20, 2019

Our home seems to stretch into all eternity. It's massive, starting at our back door, across into Uncle Andrew's kitchen, then through a small cove of pines into Uncle Lynn's living room, where Aunt Laura and Barbara sit on the plush couches filled with cotton and clouds. It then extends over to Wade's barn full of antiques and dreams. From there, it reaches forward in all its comfy, roomy wideness and wraps around the McNeil's, and pours into Ms. Annaclyde's mangled grapevine, through the fruit trees, and into her/our living room. That's only the first floor, by the way.

April 19, 2019

Three years ago, while I was living in Brooklyn, I had a conversation with my grandfather about a vision to continue the work he had started at his mechanic shop. This work would look different from fixing 18-wheelers and creating parts but would be rooted in the same creativity and wonder that he builds from. I was serious but was not in the position to do the things we discussed. He grinned in support, in semi-disbelief because I'm his "big dreams" grandbaby. Well, on New Year's Eve, 2017, I packed everything into a Toyota minivan [that was rented with faith], hit the highway, and returned to the home that I had grown up in. My grandfather's grin slightly changed . . . this Saturday night, 4/19, will be my first step into this work, which honors our intergenerational legacy as creatives,

designers, and most importantly—dreamers. Y'all know I love to tell a good story, so I'll be screening my first documentary film inside the shop. Pop has helped me clean and prepare for this all week, and I know this is only the beginning of what our family has in store. I hope you'll join us sometime.

May 10, 2019

This home you built. Under a sky that seems to understand you. Frame you, shield you, provide a moon to light your porch at night. You worked for this home. Sacrificed so much. We lost so much. We lost your wife, my grandmother, our lifeline. You both worked so hard for this. Who dares diminish its worth? Appraised, based on a market that never understood the worth of a Black man or his work, or his family, or their well-being, while I contemplate our worth, based on numbers too low, numbers that won't soothe my angst, numbers that won't ever truly understand our compensation. I'll imagine that today never ends. Today, while we are where we are, in this—whole—sense of who we are, I'll stand with you and this home.

SWEET POTATO SNACK

by Howard Conyers, PhD

MAKES ENOUGH FOR A WEEK'S
WORTH OF DAILY SNACKING

My father used the sweet potato to teach my brother and me a work ethic. More than thirty-five years before, an older church member had given my father our particular heirloom potato, variety unknown, for doing a good deed. My father had given the church member the tires from the car he was about to trade in. At the time, the man could neither afford to buy new tires nor was he able to pay my father, but about three or four months before he died, he gave my father a bushel of sweet potatoes for seed and a bushel of sweet potatoes to eat.

My father worked as a welder maintaining the family farm. But on the side, he has been growing these sweet potatoes every year since receiving them, and they are literally the sweetest potato I have ever eaten. While growing up, these sweet potatoes were more than a food to me, they were a cultural classroom. My father taught us how to cultivate and preserve the taters in the same way he had been taught, like many generations before him. From helping to set the potato bed to generate slips (plants), to digging with a mule plow behind a tractor, and storing in a sweet potato bank, growing this sweet potato was just part of life. After the annual sweet potato harvest and curing (drying them for about two weeks is critically important), my mom would make one of our favorite snacks—a whole tray of oven-baked sweet potatoes. Or my father would bake whole potatoes in the ashes on the barbecue pit or in the fireplace. To this day, one of my favorite ways to enjoy the potatoes is as a snack, just after they have been grilled, which I prefer to baking them in the oven. I generally cook 3 to 4 pounds at a time on the grill to eat over a week.

**1 pound sweet potatoes
(should be 3 or 4 cured
potatoes)**

**Vegetable oil for rubbing
on potato skins (optional)**

Salt to taste (optional)

Prepare an outdoor grill for high heat (the charcoal should be light gray in color). Set the grill rack about 3 inches above the hot coals.

Wash the sweet potatoes just prior to putting them on the grill, then toss them with oil and salt, if desired. (I generally cook them plain.)

Grill the sweet potatoes for 45 to 60 minutes, turning them about every 15 minutes. (Turning the potatoes prevents the skins from getting burnt, so you can then eat the skins, too.) The sweet potatoes are done when you can push your thumb in about ¼ inch on all sides.

NOTE: If you do not have a grill, bake on a baking sheet at 375°F for 1 hour.

