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Black women are the future of the food industry

By Tunde Wey



2 of 4

Jocelyn Jackson and Saqib Keval, of the People's Kitchen Collective, use food to nourish but also as a tool for political action and change.

Photo: Jen Fedrizzi, Special to the Chronicle

"Only the BLACK WOMAN can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole [society] enters with me." — Anna Julia Cooper, "A Voice from the South" (1892)

This is a man's world

In the restaurant industry, and everywhere else, a rush of heart-crushing testimonies is felling powerful men. Shame and hurt are spilling everywhere. We are in a pivotal moment, affirmed by the unspooling of men from their positions of power, necessary human sacrifices to deter the wicked rest.

But we've been here before, as recently as a few summers ago when police bullets were dropping black bodies in frightening succession, a reminder of violently present histories. Then there was a similar national reckoning, even if the consequences weren't as swift and permanent. After the broken bodies came administrative reforms, body cameras and procedural changes, lawsuits and settlements — cosmetic fixes with little relevance to the foundational issue of institutional racism.

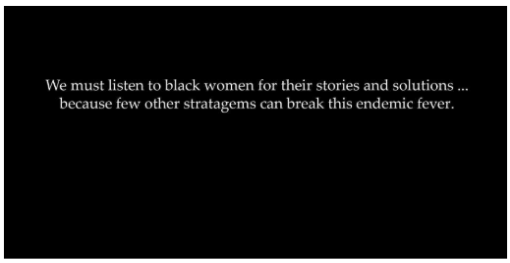
As with one, so with the other. Despite the swift responses to the testimonies from victims of sexual assault and harassment, the resignations of celebrity chefs, politicos and moguls, our resilient system of patriarchy is not coming undone.

Despite the anxiety men are feeling from the fear of our exposure — frantically thumbing through our mental Rolodex of possible crimes hoping for mercy — change is not coming because a few threads are still missing.

Seemingly lost in the dark pockets and harsh folds of this zeitgeist are black women's bodies and voices. Bodies of black, indigenous and other women of color have historically borne more terror than most, and today are still the most vulnerable.

These bodies whose experiences of American life — a bitter millefeuille of racist, gendered, classist exploitation — have created a formidable cannon of resistance. A resistance now required if we truly want to mature past this painful chrysalis.

We must listen to black women for their stories and solutions — not for just our carnal, sonic, cultural and culinary consumption, but because few other stratagems can break this endemic fever.



Words by Tunde Wey.
Photo: The Chronicle

As with one, so with the other

During the last two years of traveling the country hosting dinners and conversation discussing structural racism, my foremost companion has been inconsolable pessimism at the possibility of honest racial progress. White folks are inexorably yoked to their privilege by (conscious and unconscious) choice, despite stating otherwise.

At these dinners, I often heard the same anodyne prescriptions to racism from white people, even as they elided the truth of their own histories. Their words aped sentiments which suggested racial equity while also admitting actions that perpetuated racial oppression. I challenged my white diners to investigate ways to give up power, as corroboration of the transformation they putatively sought. This provocation was usually appraised earnestly and then dismissed just as genuinely. Contemporary racism — the politically progressive kind, polite and understated with mortal ramifications — was vibrant and well.

After diagnosing white people as incurable, I reflexively turned my gaze inward, seeking a personal salvation independent of other people's limitations. In examining my interpersonal relationships and attitudes, I realized that my notion of whiteness — as a

regimen of accumulating, protecting and maintaining power — unreservedly implicated me.



Shelby Austin speaks during the Blackness in America dinner at El Buen Comer in San Francisco, Calif. on Monday, April 11, 2017
Photo: James Tensuan, Special to The Chronicle

The conception of exploitation which I ascribed to whiteness was overwhelmingly consistent with my own masculinity. I was destructive in all the same entitled ways. Playing in the same well-worn grooves of racism, I refused personal responsibility for my own problematic habits, sometimes even claiming victim-hood.

Like whiteness, my masculinity made me more comfortable convincing myself that I was a good person, without malice but susceptible to errors in judgment, rather than a willful investor in a system that benefited me at the expense of others — at the expense of women. In my intimate relationships I was disrespectful; lying, cheating and cajoling women, mixing uneven parts transparency and coyness, just to catch a whiff of personal pleasure, leaving behind memories redolent with deflation.

Finally I understood my pessimism wasn't incited by the incorrigibility of whiteness as much as it was spurred by my unwillingness to alter my patriarchal and misogynist patterns. An unwillingness to give up my privilege.

My mother knew. Long before I was even conscious she could read me. When I was a child, guileless and entitled, she would tell me to stop apologizing for things I didn't intend to stop doing. I kept doing … and kept apologizing.

Black women know because they have had to marry, birth, groom, work for/with, love, defend — and defend against — the wantonness of myriad interlocking exploitations. It's time we listened and accepted their truth.



Activist and writer Shakirah Simley at the Cherry Jubilee on Oct. 14
Photo: Kelsey McClellan

The future (of food) is female and black

Black women since the beginning have been combatting these perversely intersecting strands of whiteness and misogyny, some using food as a framework to challenge these systems and posit better alternatives.

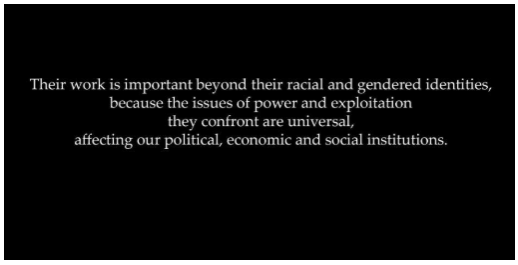
The food and dining industry is where the most vulnerable workers are women and folks of color. It houses a value system of normalized exploitation, euphemistically defanged with a “this-is-just-the-way-things-are” mea culpa. The industry needs to embrace a new agenda of black feminism, which shifts power away from corrosive whiteness and masculinity, and toward a fresh generation of leaders.

It must turn to women in the Bay Area like Shakirah Simley of Nourish | Resist and Jocelyn Jackson of the People’s Kitchen Collective. Both use food as a tool for protest and intersectional equity. Through her food advocacy work, Simley has filled my head with demonstrations of cooperative leadership models that are radically democratic. A day before this year’s presidential inauguration, she helped organize Unpresidented Meal, a community meal and workshops on direct action and protest tactics for students at Mission High School, a majority Hispanic school. Intentionally, Simley’s work chastises the male-dominated hierarchies that are inherently oppressive because they concentrate power in a few (mostly male) hands, and reinforce a system predicated on disposable and invisibilized workers.

There is Stacey Bailey-Ndjaiye, whom I met in Louisville, Ky. In a quiet moment of teaching, without convoluted theory, she transformed my paradigm from masculine neoliberal conquest to coexistence, challenging my idea of the possible. She offered that progress and power (racial or gender) is better understood as an opportunity to make individual sacrifices rather than playing our current zero-sum economic game where the spoils accrue, unsustainably, to a powerful few. Instead of losses and gains, she preaches investment and benefit to create equity. Her organization, Bridge Kids International, is building a kitchen and community resource center to create entrepreneurial opportunities for young adults of color.

In Durham, N.C., I met Shirlette and Shorlette Ammons: talented twin sisters. Shirlette is a musician and TV food-show producer, and Shorlette is a food scholar and educator. Before a dinner we hosted together, they discussed equity as an evolutionary imperative, explaining how the benefits of exploitation diminish and eventually erode to reveal terrible loss. Conceptually, we had to develop new emotional and psychological appendages if we were to climb out of the self-destruction that characterizes racism and patriarchy. Adapt or die.

There are so many more, like Ashante Reese, an anthropologist and professor at Spelman College in Atlanta. Her ethnographic work, building on the perspectives of other black women like LaDonna Redmond, catalogues food-resistance strategies in communities affected by historic disinvestment. Reese argues that when communities, and by extension people, are defined by their challenges rather than their innovations, a facile (and racist) narrative is serviced. In her writings, she reframes “food deserts” as “self-reliant geographies.”



Words by Tunde Wey.
Photo: The Chronicle

These women are representative of the enormous work, implicit and published, being undertaken by black women across our food system and social spheres. Their work is important beyond their racial and gendered identities, because the issues of power and exploitation they confront are universal, affecting our political, economic and social institutions.

I have experienced black women who act so frequently in unrequited grace because their progressive feminism is different in body and spirit from its mainstream white counterpart. Black women who posit a feminism that exists for a purpose greater than the liberation of a single individual or gender ascription. A feminism which, despite personal wounds suffered, is remarkable to me because of its redemption bias. Its insistence that redemption is possible and necessary, but only through rigorous personal and systemic upheaval for the good.

Which brings me to Zandria from Memphis ...

By her grace

Zandria Robinson is a shaman, griot, marabout, holy figure in atypical package. In her professional life she's a professor of sociology at Rhodes College, colloquializing academicized notions of race, black feminism, sexuality with subversive writing: railing, whimpering, laughing loudly.

I saw her for the first time in her hometown of Memphis in the first week in October — almost a year after I was stunned by her brilliant and evocative exhortation of Beyonce's "Formation." I was in Memphis hosting a dinner and Zandria had agreed to be a guest speaker, which included reading some of her previously unpublished writing and designing together the curriculum for the meal, four contemplative readings on race.

It was nearing 6 p.m. and dinner time. The dinner crowd shuttled into the venue and bottlenecked at the bar, appropriately. Right before my diners sat down to the evening's meal and conversation, I went to find Zandria for a drink, a celebratory salute to the evening about to be had. Confessing my anxiety, she smoothed my worries, as if patting down ridges on a wrinkled bedspread. I was relieved, and laid gently on whatever the future would unfold.

It was time to start, and I sounded fork tines against my bourbon-emptied glass, quieting the room. Then I raised up on a chair and faced the crowd of 50 expectants. I made a few jokes, said a few thanks, then I sang a song my mother had taught me as a child, a lullaby. I sang and I clapped, standing as everyone watched me. Zandria's encouragement and the previous drink steadied my ship, so I sang as a way to purge myself of doubt for what was about to come — and I thought about my mother, whom I don't call enough.

Zandria followed after me, replacing me on the chair. She sang as well, less selfishly to purge the room. Her voice was beautiful and plaintive with the story of her blackness and womanness. We were all taken by the renditions, two old negro spirituals, and a Solange song — a recent negro spiritual. The room was silent, listening; my insides were fighting to get out from inside me, to be right up next to Zandria's singing. This woman was singing, I tell you.

I tried to drink it away

I tried to put one in the air

I tried to dance it away

I tried to change it with my hair

The moment before Zandria's last singing breath was everything, the entire room was humid with her spirit, and then it ended too soon in a diminishing vibrato. Clapping; we are all clapping because what else can you do after such a truth? I was up next again. How was I supposed to follow this genius-scholar-singer-thinker woman, dressed in otherworldly glory, I thought to myself.

I stepped back on that long-suffering chair — it creaked, clearly unimpressed as it bore the weight of yet another irrepressible man's guilty conscience. Standing a few feet above the seated guests, who still held smiles from Zandria's final song, I stuttered the setup for the evening's conversation:

My testimony was a blur with many witnesses — I made a few vague revelations about my intimate life, referencing past relationships with women and my current relationship with my wife. I talked, or at least I think I did, about my destructive emotional footprint and the women who have suffered it. Bubbles of awkward pauses marked the parts of my story where I smothered unsavory details and choked down more acute confessions.

There I was, a naked totem stuck standing on a weathered stool in front of strangers, offering full view to some of my noxious masculinity: standing, failing, flagellating but mostly flailing. From the majority-female room there was no applause, only silence when I stumbled to a close. I got off the stool, walked past Zandria, and the high priestess performed an act of redemption.

"And that's why we say men ain't shit!" she said, shaking her head in mock anger.

Her words broke the thick tension, tickling it into hearty laughter. I slunk to a corner, dazed and grateful but undeserving.

This is a man's world

Whenever I offer my mother advice, she ruefully counters that "a child seated at the top of a tree cannot see farther down the road than an adult standing at the bottom of it." Black women have been resisting exploitation while designing parallel systems since forever — we must learn from those who know.



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Photo: The Chronicle

To be clear, this is not a fetishized epistle of black women. Their strength is a necessity, not a magical power primed for our exploitation. This is barely an *oriki*, a praise song, it is hardly exhaustive enough to enumerate all the ways. Like the recent Alabama Senate election, a narrow victory made especially possible by black women voters, this is a warning.

Long before that uncomfortable Memphis evening, before I pled for forgiveness without admitting much, I already understood that inherent good was the internalized lie of the oppressor and exploiter. Yet there I stood, more on my fabricated self-righteousness than the weary chair, hoping to be seen first as a good person, then as a man.

Until we, myself especially, are committed to our own reformations, discarding the lie that we are good; and until we clasp the necessary complexity that is black feminism, a project that embraces the most vulnerable constituencies and by necessity sees the connectedness of all things because it feels the consequences of all ills … this (unfortunately) is still a man's world.

Acknowledgment: Gratitude to the women who helped me review this essay. Also, this writing has been a decidedly cis hetero male perspective. I hope it is valuable, even if slightly, beyond this limited vantage point.