

# Purity, Soul Food, and Sunni Islam: Explorations at the Intersection of Consumption and Resistance

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No other fundamental aspect of our behavior as a species except sexuality is so encumbered by *ideas* as eating; the entanglements of food with religion, with both belief and sociality, are particularly striking.

—Sidney Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom:  
Excursions into Eating, Culture and the Past*

Paul Robeson Park in Los Angeles County was often the designated location for Eid al-Fitr, the obligatory group prayer and celebration following Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting.<sup>1</sup> Families, predominantly African American, would begin arriving around 7:00 am dressed in their best Eid clothing. Well before the crowd began to trickle in, plastic tarps would be positioned in straight rows so that the *salat* (prayer) could be performed facing the Ka'aba in Mecca.<sup>2</sup> Following the prayer and *khutbah* (lecture), the community would hold a celebration that included music, kiosks, and food. While the prayer and lecture usually lasted an hour, the gatherings on the blankets, which included talking and eating, would last up to five hours. At one Eid, I was situated among three cowives who were enjoying one another's company on several large blankets.<sup>3</sup> Also within the group were Safa, Hafiza, one of the few women who veils, and Fatima, a single mother and engineering student at a local state college. The picnic area was clearly a gendered space, although occasionally a husband would wander by and eat a piece of chicken or a plate of salad. The exchange between husband and wife, or wives, would usually last no longer than five minutes at which point he would find his way back to his group of male cohorts.

One of the best and most generous cooks was Safa who brought enough fried chicken to feed five large families. Safa, who often entertained this community

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of women at her house with large quantities of southern fare, had “come into al-Islam” at the same time she was conquering alcoholism. In terms of consumption, the excesses of alcohol were replaced with the excesses of food, but while the former distanced her from friends and family, the latter drew her closer to her large circle of Muslim friends: “Sisters.” As a form of exchange, southern cooking strengthened Safa’s bonds with African American converts to Islam whose personal and social histories mirrored her own. Macaroni and cheese, collard greens, fried chicken, potatoes, okra, curried lamb, corn bread, black-eyed peas, hot links, beef kabobs, barbecued beef (not pork) ribs. In every sense, the preceding list represents African American Sunni Muslim “soul food.” Most of the list references the community’s social history, but the eager adoption of a Middle Eastern cuisine alongside southern fare references yet another set of cultural linkages and histories. At one level, eating was an expression of social, personal, and religious communion, and as such, food was not prepared to simply fill one’s stomach. Cooking was an expression of religious duty, love of community, and love of Allah. The choice of what to eat and how to prepare and serve it, in this respect, could be understood as an expression of resistance or personal agency. At another level, these desires were entangled in historically informed perceptions of subjectivity, citizenship, race, and *habitus* and therefore mired in structural forms that made food and food taboos as structurally predetermined as they were potentially transformative (Bourdieu 1977; Douglas 1966; Harris 1995; Kondo 1997; Mauss 1979).

Our focus on food taboos looks at them as part of a communicative process of social action, in which pragmatic and social dimensions are fused to comment on a particular historical moment. We argue, following Comaroff (1985:5), that practices of the body such as eating can give a cultural form to the principles governing objective orders of power relations. To do this, we look at structural and semiotic entanglements of food and African American social history during three different periods: before Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad’s death in 1975, during the rise of the African American Sunni movement 1975–2001, and after the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center. Each period is marked by a different understanding of African American citizenship: In the earliest period of African American Islam, the religion was seen as a way of differentiating black Muslims from other Americans, and marking those differences with defiance. In the second period, there was a movement toward making a more “American” version of Islam, represented most profoundly by the placement of the American flag on top of the front page of the Muslim community’s journal. Finally, as a result of the demonization of “Muslim terrorists” following the events of September 11, 2001, a new guardedness has emerged with respect to understandings of citizenship and Islam and with it a new set of signifying practices in the Los Angeles Muslim community. Heightened government suspicions regarding African American Muslim links to terrorists have forced the leaders to defend their patriotism, and women converts have had to defend their choices in the context of new attention being paid to practices like veiling.

The semiotic use of the body, in this case, has been as liberating as it has been an act of resignation to a number of powerful discursive and material structures. Performing race, gender, and citizenship through food and consumption while determined in part by structures of power nevertheless offers opportunities for symbolic critique. As Kondo argues, "Meaning is never fully closed, and in those moments of instability, ambiguity, and contradiction may lie the potential for interventions that might destabilize a field, ultimately exposing and throwing into question its constitutive logic" (1997:151). Particularly for the African American Muslim community, the potential for bodily resignification occurred alongside the civil rights movement, affirmative action, and second and third wave feminism.

With respect to agency, the fact that some of the women at the picnic had chosen to be cowives, coupled with the fact that they performed the domestic tasks of child rearing and food preparation, begs the question: Is conversion a reinstatement of patriarchy? Using the example of food and food taboos, we assert that female converts are not simply acquiescing to male domination. Rather, through food, female converts articulate their relationship to a number of ideological domains including race, class, gender, nation, and Islam. As a signifying practice associated with issues of race, authenticity, and group membership including citizenship; food preparation and exchange are vital communicative processes. Women who are generous with food and who understand the dietary requirements of the community, have extensive social networks and are credited with having a greater understanding of the faith. It is through food that women gain membership into various overlapping social networks, and it is through these social networks that women developed organized systems of exchange. Without these exchange networks, many of the women would not have sufficient incomes to pay their rent. The relationship between food preparation and patriarchy is understood by the women to be indirect because the meaning of food extends well beyond the borders of male/female relationships. The quality and preparation of food is about faith, ideology, community, and securing resources. Embodied in the production and eating of food is the performance of an agency owned not so much by individuals, but by a community intent on authoring new social configurations.

This study reaffirms that concepts of polluted and clean should not be understood as binaries, but rather define particular relationships between objects and ideas within particular cultural, social, spatial, and temporal contexts. With respect to this community, the practice of food production, distribution, and consumption clarified each members' relationship to the group and to the intellectual and spiritual project of self-purification. Who brought what food? How much? Was the meat *halal* (in accordance with Islamic law)? Who was eating from whose picnic spread? Who made the best soul food? We argue that for African American Muslim women perceptions of food act as metaphor for an evolving gender, race, class, and citizenship identity politics.

The issue of "politically correct eating" surfaced in the course of ethnographic research on conversion to Sunni Islam in Los Angeles County. Rouse

began her study of conversion in 1991, when she taught math, reading, and video production at an Islamic elementary and junior high school. Since then, she has interviewed over 100 women and men; continues to attend community events including *Jumah* (Friday prayer); and has followed 12 women closely for the past 11 years. During almost all of these interviews and encounters, food was served. After Friday prayer, for example, hot food (e.g., barbecued meats, bean pies, and red beans and rice) was often sold outside the *masjid* (mosque). At larger gatherings, particularly during the month of Ramadan when people break their fast together, southern cooking was typically the cuisine of choice (e.g., collard greens, biscuits, hot links, macaroni and cheese). At people's homes, Rouse would often find herself eating a combination of southern-American, Caribbean, and Middle-Eastern cuisine attesting to the emergence of new race and religious diasporic linkages.

Islam is now one of the fastest growing religions in the United States, and a large proportion of Muslims in America, an estimated 30–40 percent, are African American. African American Sunni Muslims now number some 1.6 million, in contrast to the better known (but much smaller) group called the Nation of Islam led by Louis Farrakhan.<sup>4</sup> While the focus of the study was on issues of gender and politics, a lot of time was spent in kitchens and at feasts. Food was found to be a central medium for expressing religious commitment, and for positioning oneself in relation to a history of slavery and new forms of liberation. During the initial stages of fieldwork, food was taken for granted: The everyday mundaneness of eating seemed *underwhelming* in light of an ethnographer's search for the extraordinary. Over time, however, efforts to understand the relationship between the Nation of Islam and Sunni Islam, forced a recognition of changing perceptions of lawful and unlawful foods, particularly in light of the community's newly emerging desires for historical relevance.

### The Soul of the Nation

Referring to Elijah Muhammad, the founder of the Nation of Islam, Doris Witt argues:

Muhammad used food as part of his effort to formulate a model of black male selfhood in which "filth" was displaced onto not white but black femininity as articulated within African American culture via discourses of gender and sexuality rather than class. He adopted the traditional Islamic ban on pork to pursue this rearticulation, while supplementing it with numerous other dietary recommendations which, through their stigmatization of the foods associated with "soul," seem to have been intended to purify the black male self of black female contamination. [Witt 1999:104]

Witt is not the only one to characterize the Nation of Islam, and by extension the African American Sunni Muslim community, as the producers of new oppressive gendered tropes (Lubiano 1998; Sizemore 1973). Witt in particular argues that, within the Nation of Islam, soul food signified the role of women in the pollution of the black physical, intellectual, and spiritual body. Witt's

thesis fits neatly into a “second wave” feminist paradigm that male and female are a binary opposition parallel to oppositions between public and private, culture and nature, and (according to Witt) sacred and profane (Ortner 1974; Rubin 1975). In these models, relations between men and women are points of contestation and competition rather than uniquely situated at the intersections of race, class, nation, and gender (see Collins 1990, 1998; Mohanty 1991; Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981). Rather than assuming that conversion to Islam is an instantiation of patriarchy, we argue it is more productive to explore how African American Muslim women make sense of their gender.

In pursuit of this goal, discourses about food and food taboos offer an entrée into the various ways in which race and gender are understood in the African American community. The anthropology of food taboos is a long-established field of study, but it has been characterized by a preoccupation with classification, anomaly, and disorder that is usually divorced from concerns with power, history, and social change. Philosophers (Ricoeur 1969), classicists (Dodds 1951; Moulinier 1952; Parker 1990; Vernant 1980), and anthropologists (Douglas 1966; Leach 1964; Tambiah 1985) have long embraced a tradition that identifies the dangerous with “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966), things that do not fit into existing schemes, as if these schemes remained constant, and the only possible response to confusion was ostracism from the system and fear of contagion. As Valeri notes, “the whole field of taboo is characterized by the blending of the physical and the moral” (2000:43) and a position that “taboo” is a characteristic of “primitive” societies, which exist in stark opposition to modern, complex historical societies.

Food is, however, an obsession in contemporary America, the main subject of best-selling books and articles and a key location for the articulation of notions of goodness, purity, and well-being. Dieting is highly politicized, opposing the moral arguments of vegetarians to those of high protein advocates, calorie counters to carbohydrate addicts, fusing notions of health with those of virtue. American cuisine, while highly commercialized, is also amazingly diverse, combining eating traditions from all over the world—apparently the opposite of a homogeneous society preoccupied with anomaly at its borders and labeling these anomalies as taboo.

And yet we propose to argue that food taboos are very much alive in contemporary American society and deserve attention precisely because they bring together a series of political and historical controversies. The study of African Americans who are self-consciously articulating a form of eating that they see as liberating them from the heritage of slavery can show us how a classic anthropological concern with food taboos can be opened up to history and how the experience of the past can be reinterpreted in terms of the struggles of the present. It can also show us how complex societies and contemporary religious movements are not immune to processes of classification but incorporate them into new visions of purity imbued, in this case, with nostalgia for a time before slavery combined with utopian aspirations for transnational religious community.

### Theories of Taboo: From Classification to the Embodied Subject

The most influential anthropological theories of taboo have emphasized ideas of classification and order rather than history and struggle. While we can gain some insight from them, they need to be reformulated to address the dynamics of changing African American attitudes toward the foods of slavery. Durkheim (1915:337) saw taboo as a form of social control, a religious prohibition that divided the world into the sacred and the profane. Radcliffe-Brown (1948:402–403) developed this point by analyzing taboo as the manipulation of sentiments, particularly fear, which was given prominence in ritual. He explained the dangerousness of food by saying that eating furnishes the most intense and primordial experience of the moral power of society over the individual. However, he neglected to examine the motivations for considering certain foods as dangerous, and the cosmological ideas that lie behind taboos.

Leach refined Radcliffe-Brown's ideas by arguing that "taboo serves to discriminate categories in men's social universe . . . in so doing it reduces the ambiguities of reality to clear-cut ideal types" (1971:44). Sacred powers are seen as both contaminating and ambiguous; therefore taboos teach us to avoid the sacred and keep the destructive powers of confusion at bay. Unambiguous categorization is required for successful communication, therefore taboos are necessary to cognitive notions of order. Douglas carried this idea further, seeing ideas of taboo and pollution as ways of "imposing system" in the face of "an inherently untidy experience" (1966:4): "Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (Douglas 1966:36).

Recent critics have noted that this tends to reify both order and disorder to an extent that is at odds with the essentially relational nature of taboo:

To give just one obvious example, the claim that only the dirty dirties conflicts with the belief that pollution may be induced by *inappropriate* contact with eminently clean sources of order, such as gods, sanctuaries, sacred objects, and, in many parts of the world, rulers or priests. The reason is not that notions of purity and impurity are confused in the notion of sacredness, but that pollution is a much more relational notion than Douglas makes out. [Valeri 2000:68–69]

Douglas's most novel contribution is in her associating pollution with taxonomy: "A hierarchical classification in which at each level of the hierarchy all the categories are mutually exclusive" (Sperber 1975:12). Her famous analysis of the abominations of Leviticus argued that pigs and other animals were taboo for the ancient Hebrews because they were anomalous in terms of a taxonomic order that was viewed as an expression of divine order. Pigs, who "part the hoof" but do not "chew the cud," do not fit into the usual divisions of domestic animals, and so they were excluded.

Soler, reanalyzing the same material, countered that what made pigs ritually taboo was that they would also eat meat and were predators, while animals that "chew the cud" are clearly vegetarian (1973:944). In Paradise, both humans

and animals ate only herbs and fruits, but after the Flood, humans were allowed to eat meat as long as they killed animals in a ritual fashion that reserved the blood containing the essence of life for God.

The Old Testament rules for eating derive, then, not from a decontextualized taxonomic impulse, but from a mythical historical development of ideas of sacrifice to compensate for the loss of vegetarianism: Taxonomy came into play not as an autonomous principle or an ideal of classificatory order but as a way to identify whether an animal was herbivorous or not (Valeri 2000:76). The change in food taboos was prompted by changes in the ways of eating and their historical circumstances.

Julia Kristeva has attempted to combine Douglas and Soler with Freud in a study of pollution (which she calls “abjection”) as a progressive historical reinforcement of the “male” principle of symbolic differentiation and order as against the “female” principle of indifferentiation (1983:79–80). The Old Testament is dominated by a God, the father who excludes phenomena related to motherhood such as menstruation and childbirth from his cult as polluting, perhaps because this activity might rival his power as the one and only creator. Since taboos are about food and dirt, Kristeva sees them as about the relationship with the mother as feeder and toilet trainer. In the usual process of constituting the subject, the separation from the mother is a fundamental but never fully completed stage. So she interprets food taboos and other taboos as ultimately modeled after the incest taboo. Kristeva traces an evolutionary sequence from a “primitive” notion of external pollution through the Levitical notion of tabooed foods to the internalized pollution of Christianity. By grounding the experience of pollution in the body and the precultural experience of threats to the subject, Kristeva brings a subjective and developmental dimension into what had been an exclusively classificatory perspective.

Valeri further extends this notion of the embodied subject as resisting the inarticulate by focusing on the constantly moving and transforming body experienced by us in its processes of ingestion, excretion, reproduction, transformation, and decay:

The body is not only a substance to be legislated upon, to be turned into grist for the symbolic mill, but also a constant source of nonsense undermining the affirmation of sense. . . . A subject symbolically constituted, but necessarily located in the body, must be haunted by the fear of its disintegration through the body, since it constantly experiences the body’s resistance to the subject’s symbolic ordering of itself. The embodied subject’s fear of disintegration through the body and by the body is the ultimate basis for the notion of pollution. [2000:109]

### **Resisting Bodies: Bringing History into the Study of Food Taboos**

Disease is metaphoric of social disorder and anthropologists have paid significant attention to the ways in which people resist state-sponsored control by resisting diagnoses and/or treatments (Lock and Kaufert 1998; Rapp 2000; Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). The relationship between disease and resistance is, however, as indeterminate as the relationship between health and

acquiescence. Preoccupation with health enlists the body in a struggle over social value and meaning. Technologies of health (e.g., psychoanalysis, eating) discipline the body while simultaneously providing a conceptual platform on which one can author novel subversive practices and desires (Foucault 1990). Applying Valeri's reformulation of the problem of taboo to contemporary American cultural politics, we can see how subjective experience, especially the experience of subjugation and exclusion, can be transformed into a historical approach to food taboos. Fears of bodily disintegration can also express a historical experience of social disintegration, and efforts to "reform the body" through new eating habits can also be aimed at revitalizing the community.

The groundwork for this has been laid by Sidney Mintz's work on food and its relationship to power. Focusing on the history of Caribbean slavery and its links to the emergence of a new Caribbean cuisine, he writes:

Eating is not merely a biological activity, but a vibrantly cultural activity as well. Under slavery, this activity, like all else in slave life, had to be rebuilt and endowed anew with structure and meaning, by the slaves themselves. Slavery shredded the whole of the material life of its victims, penetrating the very cell of the family, tearing people loose from their cultures, lands, and kin groups. But in the New World the slaves remade their lives culturally. They drew upon their ultimate resources as human beings, and they succeeded by struggle in keeping their humanity intact. They did so, as human beings have always done, by giving meaning to their achievements. [1996:49]

As everyday forms of resistance, Caribbean slaves kept small gardens where a combination of New and Old World plants were cultivated, finding new ways to cook discarded parts of animals that their masters did not want, and developing foods suited to the climate of the region. "Created at the insistence of the masters to reduce the cost of feeding slaves, the plots and then the markets were to become training grounds for freedom, a basis for the eventual rise of a free peasantry" (Mintz 1996:41). A new cuisine emerged from a situation of great adversity and came to be seen as a regional way of eating that included its own repertoire of meats, starches, vegetables, and preparation techniques.

Mintz goes on to consider various regional cuisines in America (1996:92–124), but not the question of a specifically "ethnic" or even "racial" cuisine. However, the foods developed in slavery *were* specifically marketed in the 1960s and 1970s as "soul food," and at that time they became entangled in a complex political struggle over the legitimacy of a menu dictated by poverty and exclusion. Are foods such as pig's feet, collard greens, black-eyed peas, and hominy grits simply "southern home cooking," or should they be identified as the food of slaves? Should they be embraced as part of a lost cultural heritage or banished as contaminated by the shadow of the chains that once bound the cooks? Mintz's argument does not include the 20th-century debates within the African American community—especially among those who were converting to Islam—about what historical significance should be given to the "foods of slavery."



Taboos normally mark events or situations that may threaten bodily integrity and thereby the integrity of the subject. Slaves, who were treated as food producing machines, had to reestablish their identities as moral beings. Sidney Mintz argues that they did this partially through productive activity—through growing and preparing their own foods, an activity that gave them some dimension of autonomy in a world where they were heavily constrained. After emancipation, the descendants of slaves continued to produce these same foods, but these became controversial when African Americans found in Islam a non-Western tradition in which the dream of a free subject could be realized. As Islam became associated with a turning away from the historical experience of slavery, African American foods became linked to a legacy of suffering.

### **The Historical Significance of “Soul Food”**

Food is tied to emotional and sociopolitical processes that shape what we eat and how we eat it (Becker 1995; Counihan 1999; Kahn 1986; Witt 1999). In Tracy Poe’s (1999) article on the origins of soul food, she traces the emergence of what has come to be understood as “authentic” black cuisine to inter- and intra- racial antagonisms. African American migrants to the Northeast who came during and after the Great Migration were often scorned by a black middle class that was both established and integrationist. Southern cooking was a symbol of the “backwardness” of the new migrants, and it threatened what middle-class blacks perceived as their hard-earned acceptance by some of the white establishment. For example, *The Chicago Defender*, a widely circulated African American newspaper, had a number of articles denigrating southern cuisine. The articles written in the 1920s and 1930s associated southern food with poor health and ultimately reinforced binary divisions between north and south: white and black, civilized and uncivilized, educated and uneducated, good and bad. The fact that African Americans were saying this to and about other African Americans meant that food situated itself squarely within the ambivalent terrain of black identity politics. Eighty years after the Great Migration, and forty years after the coining of the term “soul food,” what does southern cooking mean to Muslim converts such as Safa? This history is marked by many switchbacks and dead ends, and the fact that today Sunni Muslims eat southern cooking is the result of overlapping historical processes that have changed the way African American Muslims understand and appropriate their history.

To a large extent, the African American Sunni community grew out of what is called “the transition,” which occurred two years after the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975. Debates over food taboos and eating rituals developed early in the Nation of Islam and occurred at about the same time that the black middle class was rejecting southern cuisine. In his books and in his column “How to Eat to Live,” a regular feature in *Muhammad Speaks*, Elijah Muhammad made the rejection of traditional black southern cooking a practice of faith. Unlike the black middle class who associated eating southern cuisine with a lack of sophistication, Elijah Muhammad argued that southern cuisine

was a tool used by whites to physically, morally, and intellectually weaken blacks. While these two arguments differed in character, both were linked to ambivalence toward an inherited racial identity, and confusion over what constitutes liberation. In 1977, the Nation of Islam split into two factions: one side was eager to adopt Sunni Islam and the other determined to continue the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. The transition marks the period when many converts began to adopt the practices and religious beliefs of what can be described as orthodox Islam. It was during this critical period in the movement that changes in political, religious, and personal identification with Islam and America changed how food taboos were articulated. These changes demonstrate a historical dimension to ideas of purity that argues that relational metaphors of pure and impure are profoundly contextual and temporal.

### **The Nation and Understandings of Purity**

The mysterious and charismatic Wallace D. Fard founded the Lost-Found Nation of Islam in Detroit in 1930 (Clegg 1997; Evanzz 1999; Lincoln 1961).<sup>5</sup> The Nation was based on black self-determinism modeled by the separatist philosophy of the Marcus Garvey movement; as well as the ritual and religious ideology of Nobel Drew Ali's Moorish-American Science Temple. The early Nation borrowed quite openly from these two organizations, including the adoption of Marcus Garvey's slogan, "One God, One Aim, One Destiny." Soon after the movement began, it gained a reputation as a subversive and potentially destabilizing organization. The movement attracted poor migrants who had fled the state-supported violence and economic disenfranchisement endemic to the South. The organization had the quality of a secret club with mysterious rituals of initiation and mythologies about the evil white race. Following a bizarre sacrificial murder performed by a Fard disciple, W. D. Fard was forced by law enforcement to leave Detroit on December 7, 1932 (Evanzz 1999:86–91).

By June 1934 when Fard disappeared for good, the Nation had already lost many members who were attracted perhaps more to Fard's charisma than to his ideology (Clegg 1997:34–35). It was a difficult transition as members left and Elijah Muhammad was forced to defend his title as Messenger. It was not until Elijah Muhammad began to reframe much of Fard's message in ways comprehensible to large audiences of African Americans that the Nation began to take shape and grow in terms of membership and ideology. Elijah Muhammad's success can be traced to his creation of a racially charged agenda for black revitalization that struck a chord with many residents of Chicago's South Side, the location of the Nation's new headquarters following Fard's disappearance (Clegg 1997; Evanzz 1999).

Through the institutionalization of the Nation by means of the establishment of black-owned businesses and the dissemination of the Nation's ideology through various forms of media, Elijah Muhammad successfully transformed the Nation into one of the most important religious movements of the 20th century. Appearing regularly in *Muhammad Speaks* was the column

“How to Eat to Live.” The most striking feature of “How to Eat to Live” is the recategorization of foods as healthy, dangerous, sacred, tainted, or polluted, according to the physiological and spiritual needs of Black and Asiatic people. The Nation’s origin myth stated that whites were created by the evil god-scientist Yacub through the removal of genetic materials from black and brown “germs.” Clegg describes the supposed physiological outcomes of this genetic alteration:

Their bones were fragile and their blood thin, resulting in an overall physical strength one-third that of blacks. Weak bodies made Yacub’s man susceptible to disease, and most future ailments, ‘from social diseases to cancer,’ would be attributable to his presence on earth. . . . Actually, the grafting process had made the white race both incapable of righteousness and biologically subordinate to the black people. [Clegg 1997:51]

A corollary of these physiological differences marked by disease and moral pollution was the urgent need for members of the Nation to construct behavioral barriers to potential physical decay and weakened immunity to white “tricknology” or treachery. Limiting ingestion of particular foods, of course, represented one of the most important methods against disease of the physical and social body. In a published collection of food edicts, Elijah Muhammad warned: “Peas, collard greens, turnip greens, sweet potatoes and white potatoes are very cheaply raised foods. The Southern slave masters used them to feed the slaves, and still advise the consumption of them. Most white people of the middle and upper class do not eat this lot of cheap food, which is unfit for human consumption” (Muhammad 1967:6). Articulating his disdain for another slave food, catfish, Muhammad wrote, “The catfish is a very filthy fish. He loves filth and is the pig of the water” (Muhammad 1972:64). Also rejected were foods used as animal feed, such as sweet potatoes, collard greens, and corn, which would put blacks in the same category with beasts of burden. Refined sugars and flours, scavenger fish, inexpensive meats such as chitterlings, corn bread, cabbage sprouts, mustard salads, beet-top salads, and kale were all on the list of foods to avoid. Alternatively, members were encouraged to eat brown rice, milk, butter, fresh vegetables, the best and most expensive cuts of beef and lamb, but only twice a week, fish weighing between eight ounces and ten pounds, white and red navy beans, asparagus, eggplant, okra, squash, and rhubarb (Muhammad 1967, 1972). By cleansing their bodies through the avoidance of traditional “slave” foods, Nation followers cleansed their minds of the ideological poisons that made them participants in their own degradation (Kepel 1997:29–32).

What ideological shift took place enabling the African American Sunni Muslim community to once again enjoy southern cooking with collard greens, fried chicken, black-eyed peas, and corn bread? This question has more than one answer because looking historically at the transition of food categories within the Nation, one recognizes that food taboos exist simultaneously as a method for blending the physical and the moral (Valeri 2000); as a form of social

control or a way of delineating order (Douglas 1966; Durkheim 1915); as a way of reducing ambiguities (Leach 1971); as a way of embodying resistance to disintegration (personal and social), and as a method for ascribing sacredness (Valeri 2000). In the movement's transition in the 1970s from Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam, the dynamic and changing character of food taboos demonstrates that food taboos are mired in a dialectical relationship between historical memory and identity versus social and ideological change. As a result, most foods occupy more than one category allowing fluidity for constantly shifting subject positions.

In one clear example, Elijah Muhammad, who earlier in the text warns that the hog is a polluted animal, takes the old adage "you are what you eat" to a new level:

Allah taught me that this grafted animal [hog] was *made for medical purposes*—not for a food for the people—and that *this animal destroys the beautiful appearance* of its eaters. It *takes away the shyness* of those who eat this brazen flesh. Nature did not give the hog anything like shyness.

Take a look at their immoral dress and actions; their worship of filthy songs and dances that an uncivilized animal or savage human being of the jungle cannot even imitate. Yet *average black people who want to be loved by their enemies*, regardless of what God thinks of them, have gone to the extreme in *trying to imitate* the children of their slave masters in all of their wickedness, filthiness and evil. [Muhammad 1967:14, emphases added]

In this excerpt the hog shifts from a polluted object to a medicine from Allah to an active agent causing evil behavior and a loss of control. So what does this taboo represent? The hog stands in for itself, for history, for oppression, for negatively valued modes of behavior, for a liberated consciousness, and for poor health. In other words, the taboo on eating hog organizes multiple political, social, and personal locations, and these food categories shift in priority based upon changing spatial and ideological contexts.

While we argue that rejecting soul food was, for the Nation of Islam, ideologically tied to racial empowerment, Witt argues that rejecting soul food is tied to patriarchy and the association of women with filth and moral decay. Witt contends that the iconic figure of Aunt Jemima, the black slave woman, has come to represent soul food and therefore "the perception that blackness itself is irrevocably inscribed . . . by women" (1999:99). Quoting the line that Spike Lee gives to his own character in the film *Malcolm X*, "My trouble is—I ain't had enough stuff yet, I ain't et all the ribs I want and I sure ain't had enough white tail yet" (1999:103), Witt argues that the temptations of pork and white women are often identified as dangerous and threatening to black men. As evidence, Witt cites Elijah Muhammad's *Message to the Blackman*: "The woman is man's field to produce his nation." From this, she concludes:

By reducing all black women to the status of womb-in-waiting and literalizing the equation of womb and dirt, Muhammad's dictum stands as pervasive evidence for the validity of Kristeva's argument that the maternal body provides the paradigm

for that which must be abjected because it threatens the boundaries of the self. African American women were necessary to give birth to this social order of original black men, but they were also the “filth” that had to be othered, lest the purity of that order be undermined. [1999:108]

Witt argues that Elijah Muhammad deliberately demonized all the foods of “Mama’s kitchen” because “Muhammad’s goal seems to have been not just to insert the black father into view but to render invisible the legacy of black women in generational continuity” (1999:114).

This reading lacks an appreciation for the discursive context of the 1950s and 1960s. For Elijah Muhammad, the enemy that needed to be vanquished was the discourse of white supremacy that described the black body as filthy, ugly, and unable to control corporeal desires. At the end of *Message to the Blackman*, Muhammad includes a letter written by J. B. Stoner, an imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, which was addressed to a gathering of Muslims in Chicago in 1957:

Islam is a dark religion for dark people. . . . There are several reasons why niggers should oppose it. One reason is that the Qur’an forbids Muslims to drink intoxicating drinks, whereas most niggers like to get drunk. It says also that thieves should have their hands cut off. How many niggers would be left with hands? . . . One of the main purposes of Mohammedan invasion of white Europe was to capture white women. Only white women are beautiful. . . . They didn’t like their own dark women. The African race has never produced a beautiful woman. . . . If the Africans were as good as whites, they would be happy with their own women instead of lusting for our white women. Your desire for white women is an admission of your own racial inferiority. One reason why we whites will never accept you into our white society is because a nigger’s chief ambition in life is to sleep with a white woman, thereby polluting her. . . . Africans in America are ashamed of their own race. . . . As proof, look at the nigger newspaper that advertise skin whiteners, and so-called hair straighteners. [Muhammad 1965:331–332]

Elijah Muhammad did not simply dismiss the Klu Klux Klan’s characterizations of blacks. He agreed that black men sometimes prefer white women, and that black men and women are altering their bodies out of shame. However, while Stoner attributes these behaviors to an essential moral poverty and racial inferiority, Elijah Muhammad attributes these behaviors to the ingesting of racism both materially and ideologically. Women in the Nation of Islam read Elijah Muhammad’s message to avoid soul food as a warning to the “so-called Negro” to either break from dominant ideologies instilled by the “white man” or suffer continued degradation. Therefore, in opposition to Witt, we argue that the debates about Islamic foods are connected to the particular history of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and unstable citizenship, rather than to the development of the trope of black womanhood as filth.

Theories of taboo require the element of history to understand how practices become meaningful to embodied subjects. As Valeri says,

The strong embodiment of the subject implies that it is intrinsically difficult to differentiate sharply between bodies that are subjects and bodies that are mere objects. . . . More generally, if subject and object are not radically distinguished, being invaded by external agencies must acquire the signification of a potential shattering of one's subjective identity. One loses more than one's health: one loses one's distinct being. [2000:110]

In order to understand how food has been used to return a sense of subjectivity and historical agency to a people who had long been deprived of such notions, we will describe the religious practices of two Muslim women: Afaf, who moved from the Nation of Islam to Sunni Islam, and Hudah, who converted directly to Sunni Islam.<sup>6</sup> For Sunni Muslims, the recasting of the African American in history from object to creative subject meant that southern "slave" food was reappropriated to signify the hopeful embrace of American citizenship.

Afaf's story articulates how her religious "transition" altered her consciousness or sense of self in relationship to society and inspired her to follow new religious practices. Hudah's story demonstrates new ways in which consumption choices are linked to African American social history. Whereas Afaf describes general ideological shifts in Muslim consciousness since the death of Elijah Muhammad, Hudah represents at a personal level how food and consumption are tied to understandings of empowerment and agency.

### **Conversion through the Transition: Women's Experiences**

Afaf lives in a lower-middle class neighborhood in Los Angeles. The neighborhood is made up of well-maintained single-family homes and belies a pervasive assumption by outsiders that black families living in South Central are impoverished, dysfunctional, and victimized by chronic crime. Afaf is a tall woman who dresses in flowing print fabrics accented by ethnic jewelry.

Afaf heard about the Nation of Islam through her brother. She had become disillusioned by what she describes as the hypocrisy of the Church but nevertheless maintained a strong belief in God. Having little patience for the 1970s counterculture of drugs and individualism, Afaf searched for a spiritual community that embodied her values. The Nation, with its focus on hard work, discipline, and community empowerment, fulfilled that need and she joined in 1975. In 1977, she chose to follow Elijah Muhammad's son, W. D. Mohammed, into the practice of Sunni, or traditional, Islam.

When I came, there was a whole lot of glitter to attract people. So when I see people come in now, I say, Wow! I wonder what attracts them. I say there must be something to this religion that makes people want to come to it, although that glitter that was out there, those flashy cars, and those nice fezzes, and those white outfits, and those suits, and that military discipline, and that type of thing, and the stores and the restaurants that was there when I came [are gone]. But I think what made me stay was I just liked it. Even after all the other stuff started breaking down, I just like the fact of Allah being the true God, the sense that it made.

Afaf asserted the importance of connecting consciousness with practice. When she joined, for example, a member's consumption practices, both spending and eating, were considered expressions of personal empowerment. Both the Nation of Islam prior to 1975 and the emerging Sunni community of the late 1970s recognized that embodying faith was a necessary prerequisite to staying "on the job" and "living right," but as new understandings of African American empowerment developed after the death of Elijah Muhammad, "the job" changed. Notably, during Elijah Muhammad's tenure, black nationalism was the ideological foundation on which a spiritual movement was built; but for Sunni Muslims, Islam has become a spiritual quest within which a radical political, economic, and social agenda for the inner city has found legitimacy.

Elijah Muhammad reasoned that the development of a future nation must be preceded by the establishment of a black moral citizenry. To become a moral citizen meant only one thing for Elijah Muhammad, and that was the reclaiming of an authentic Asiatic essence lost in slavery and Jim Crow. Muhammad thought that this essence, which included race consciousness, industriousness, dignity, and resistance to white domination was obscured by the figurative and literal digestion of white supremacy. By linking consumption to liberation and social order, a seeming contradiction, Elijah Muhammad naturalized the need for whites and blacks to have a separate nation. Within a separate nation, blacks could live free from the polluting foods (and ideas) of whites and therefore in a state of purity as ordained by God.

Given how entrenched people can be in the eating rituals and foods of childhood, it is remarkable that Elijah Muhammad was able to encourage an entire community to change their eating habits (Farb and Armelagos 1980), even though the permitted foods were often costlier and harder to obtain in white neighborhoods. After Elijah's death in 1975, Elijah Muhammad's son, in an effort to move the community toward orthodox Sunni Islam, slowly replaced Nation of Islam food taboos with Islamic decrees. Afaf describes these changes:

Afaf: At that time when I came in, before I came in like the book *How to Eat to Live* you didn't eat certain foods like you didn't eat greens and sweet potatoes a lot of . . .

Carolyn: He made them taboo because they were all associated with slavery.

A: Right. So you couldn't eat certain kind of foods, so like this is what I'd heard, so now I'm telling you, "I can't eat that, I can't eat that." And then some people say, "You can eat that." I'm like, "No the book said . . ." Well, they said, "You can." So you really didn't know what to do. So I was going kind of confused, but I was hanging in there you know, and then they started talking in Arabic [laughs]. You know you had to learn your prayers in Arabic.

Clifford Geertz asks, "How do men of religious sensibility react when the machinery of faith begins to wear out? What do they do when traditions falter?" (Geertz 1968:3). For African American Muslims, the machinery of their faith had gradually worn out, and as African Americans began to make their way into spaces closed to them under segregation, black nationalism and Muslim separatism seemed less appealing. After winning institutional reforms in the 1970s, many African Americans moved away from seeing themselves as

unique victims of racism and instead situated themselves universally as victims of a racist, capitalist-industrial complex (Wilson 1980).

Given African Americans' increasing access to power and social status during the 1970s, W. D. Mohammed encouraged his followers to assume some responsibility for their continued marginal economic and social status. The movement's journal, which underwent several name changes from *Muhammad Speaks* to *Bilalian News* to *The Muslim Journal*, began to introduce Islam as a tool for interpreting social problems and authorizing solutions. This shift meant that Islamic ideals of food consumption and purity still challenged Western norms and engendered self-control, but instead of being used as a symbolic marker of race essentialism, these taboos literally went by the Qur'an. Afaf recalls:

I said I was going to hang on in there and see what's going to happen, because like I said, I liked the atmosphere. Then I started learning things. I don't know how I finally learned how to [pray]. I'm trying to remember. I guess what I did was I went home, because I like to read. I had this little book called *The Muslim Prayer Book*. Matter of fact here it is now. Sitting here. This is my second copy, because I gave the other one away to somebody. So I took this little book, and that's how I learned a lot of my Arabic.

The transition for African American Muslims moving toward Sunni Islam involved changes in both language and in symbolic expression. In Afaf's interview she describes the change from English to Arabic in naming and prayers; ritual ablutions; designation of sacred spaces; the elimination of certain food taboos; observance of Ramadan; and the use of the Qur'an as the sacred text. At a deeper level, these changes issued from a new structural relationship between black and white America. The Muslims wanted to reposition themselves as citizens with an ethnic, rather than a raced, identity with a unique set of claims about work ethic, cultural authenticity, and ability to submit to authority (Omi and Winant 1994). Perceptions of the community as "ethnically" Sunni Muslim opened up a set of propositions about social place unavailable when the community was perceived to be a racial project (i.e., as Black Muslims). The replacement of Elijah Muhammad's food taboos with the generalized Islamic concepts of *haram* and *halal* did not reject the marriage between social empowerment and religious practice, but they did resituate notions of citizenship and entitlement.

While the community was developing these new edicts and identities, outsiders, including Muslims from other ethnic and racial groups, continued to identify African American Muslims in terms of race. In response to the stubbornness of race as a predetermining structural object, W. D. Mohammed introduced an Islam that was not entirely lacking in race consciousness, but defined race in nonessentialist ways. Often referring to the Prophet Muhammad's last speech in which the Prophet describes race equality, the Sunni Muslims have created a community that is color-blind but not culture blind. What makes African American Islam unique is the way the ideology is discussed in the context of African American social history and consciousness. Islamic religious



festivals and feasts in the African American community now include fried chicken, sweet potato pie, black-eyed peas, and collard greens; all of which are foods formerly forbidden by Elijah Muhammad. What happened to the earlier consciousness equating traditional black cooking with slave foods and slave mentality? We contend that the elimination of certain food taboos is related to changes in understandings of self and society.

The criticisms lodged at African American leaders of nationalist movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s opened up a discursive space in which members reevaluated the subjectivity of blacks during slavery and Jim Crow. Many followers of Elijah Muhammad eventually came to the realization that there were a number of philosophical and social contradictions within the Nation of Islam that needed to be resolved. One of the most important of these was the idea that individuals can have agency, and even feel empowered, even when they are living in conditions of oppression. The binaries black and white, good and evil, object and subject did not always line up with each other to reflect the social reality of the Nation of Islam in which blacks sometimes treated each other poorly. The acknowledgment of social complexity by women such as Afaf opened up a space for Muslims to view slaves and blacks under Jim Crow as subjects who created a culture to sustain them despite the oppressive conditions in which they were forced to live.

Food taboos therefore reflect the evolution of African American Muslim economic, social, and personal consciousness. Importantly, this shift occurred as African Americans were slowly being ushered from partial to full citizenship with the enforcement of antidiscrimination laws and affirmative action. While Sunni Muslims continue to appreciate the semiotic entanglements of food and oppression and the link between avoidance of certain substances and spiritual and physical strength, purity now is orchestrated around themes of religious orthodoxy and community empowerment. The Sunni Muslims now embrace southern black culture, and accordingly, African American cuisine has been reappropriated as a point of cultural pride. This change accompanies the adoption of American patriotism. As mentioned earlier, African American Sunni Muslims represent their national allegiance by placing an American flag at the top of *The Muslim Journal*; a gesture directed inward to the community as well as outwardly to American society as a whole. When Muslims give *dawah*, or teach Islam to non-Muslims, Islam is represented as complementary to mainstream America. Eating halal is described as not very different from the traditional American diet. The Islamic movement now asks African Americans to try to change the American political landscape from within. This means that their identity as African Americans, as opposed to so-called Negroes, is a point of pride and not shame, and the reappropriation of southern cooking represents that shift in identity.

Unlike Afaf, Hudah converted directly to Sunni Islam in the late 1970s and therefore had no prior involvement with the Nation of Islam. In the 1990s, Hudah ran a marriage class for single and married Muslims, teaching individuals and couples how to work out problems and divide responsibilities according to

the teachings in the Qur'an and *sunnah* (deeds and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad). Hudah thought that faith, gender roles, food, and discipline were necessary tools in the struggle against social and personal decay. In the fall of 1995, I met Hudah at her home on two occasions when we talked for hours about her perspective on Islam. Hudah was a cancer survivor, and while her health was extremely fragile, she said that a combination of prayer, herbal, and alternative medicines, as well as following the Prophet's advice for eating as outlined in *hadith* (sayings and deeds of the Prophet) and the Qur'an, was keeping her healthy. Her diet requirements were stringent, and during each of our interviews, we would have to break every two hours for a meal. Ultimately, our discussions were always peppered with Hudah advising me to eat lamb, honey, meat in moderation, fresh vegetables, shitake mushrooms, and an assortment of food regimens. Hudah, who has since died, was representative of the newer convert in the way she related to her southern identity and food consumption—not as a source of shame but of pride. As she remembers her childhood: “We were too poor to have a lot of meat. We were raised mostly on beans, and I would eat the vegetables coming up. As a result of that, having gotten the potassium I need, when I developed colon cancer, that brought me through.” Unlike Elijah Muhammad, who argued that southern cooking destroys the black community from the inside out, Hudah saw her early diet as the source of her physical resilience. Avoiding the entanglement of food with ideas of race purity, Hudah's eating restrictions literally went by the book:

The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, told us to practice preventive medicine. In other words we should eat the proper foods, so that we don't get sick. He tells us in the 45th chapter and the 13th verse, Bismillah. . . . “He has subjected to you from himself all that is in the heavens and all that is on the earth.” And then in the 20th chapter and the 81st verse, he says, “Eat of the good things we have provided for your sustenance, but commit no excess therein.” Then in the 2nd chapter and 158th verse, he says, “Ye people eat of what is on earth lawful and good.” So there are laws that we have to follow in eating.

Although she never claimed that American food is designed to weaken a specific population of Americans, she did say:

I had a friend that went to the Sudan, drank the milk, and did not get gas. They put some pork products in the milk [in America] that's why it makes people sick. God said he made milk pure and agreeable. God does not lie so it's not milk, it's ilk in many cases as we say. *Halal* milk you can get from the *halal* market and it doesn't have all those chemicals in it and it won't make you sick.

Hudah's sentiment is tied to her critique of the American capitalist system, which, she believes, allows food to be tainted in order for businesses to increase their profit margins. As we closed our discussion Hudah added:

Cancers and tumors are a result of blood stagnation and not having proper circulation. God said he subjected the whole creation to us. If we know the foods that we should eat, the laws we should practice in dealing with our children and our marriage,

we will have peace, because Islam means peace. . . . This is holistic medicine, submission to the will of God, to the laws that he left us.

### Gender and Food

Now that African Americans have embraced Sunni Islam, one might mistakenly assume that current food taboos and consumption practices are doctrinal and therefore fixed. Data from interviews conducted in the summer of 2002 indicate that the community's relationship to food continues to shift. In the Nation of Islam prior to 1975, consumption practices were a symbolic expression of race consciousness and a rejection of American citizenship. In the Sunni community in the 1980s and 1990s, eating practices expressed a sense of personal and social empowerment and an attempt to balance Islam, race consciousness, and patriotism. Current consumption practices, especially after September 11, are expressions of religious individualism which emerge from an even deeper embrace of democratic principles. Many women in the community currently express the view that each Muslim's spiritual journey is unique and should not be judged by others. In addition, many women believe that the Qur'an and sunnah must be subjected to feminist rereadings that stress the spirit of Islam. As a consequence, many women who once believed in the importance of wearing *hijab* (woman's covering) no longer do so. Similarly, many who bought and ate only halal meats, avoided refined flours and sugars, and purchased food in Muslim- and black-owned establishments have eliminated many of their former restrictions and expanded the repertoire of foods they consume.

These changes are related to the fact that African Americans are now recognized as Sunni (orthodox) Muslims in mediascapes and interfaith relations. The use of Islam by terrorists to justify violence opened up a space for African American Muslims to demonstrate the compatibility between American neoliberalism (individualism and capitalism) and Islam. At a Los Angeles masjid in 2002, I heard Abdul, a man assigned to give the Sunday lecture, express great joy about being asked to speak as an expert on Islam rather than being asked to represent "Black Muslims." He was ecstatic that his opinions were being given as much weight in interfaith meetings as were immigrants from the Middle East. The recognition from outside the community that individuals can be simultaneously African American, Muslim, and patriotic has had the effect of quelling any uncertainty or insecurity about how the community should position itself in contemporary American constructions of citizenship and belonging.

Returning to the issue of patriarchy, clearly within the Nation there was a desire to resituate men as the head of household and of the community. Rejecting slave foods was, however, not an association of women with filth so much as an association of southern black cooking with white supremacy, internalized racism (pollution), and partial citizenship. Members of the emerging Sunni community have tried to resolve a number of philosophical and social contradictions and, in this ideological context, southern cooking was reappropriated as a tribute to African American agency during slavery and Jim Crow. Within

the current community, it is important to remember that because food is generally situated in the domestic sphere, consumption taboos continue to have relevance to issues of gender and the division of labor within marriage. For many women, particularly those who work, the pragmatic issues of feeding children and shopping for food have inspired many women to look more closely at men and women's specific gender roles as outlined in the Qur'an and sunnah. These edicts outline the rights and responsibilities of men and women to one another. Many women view these edicts as empowering because they encourage African American men to practice their family obligations that for many include joining their wives and children in healthy eating.

The current state of food taboos within the African American Sunni community speaks to a desire to make Islam more compatible with living in mainstream America. There is currently no consensus about the relationship between the body and empowerment, only that a relationship exists. Being "on the job" now means intellectual engagement with *tafsir* (Islamic exegesis). As the community attempts to build bridges to other Muslim populations and defend the faith against antagonists, African American social history has new relevance and the African American body finds itself awash in new meanings.

### **Conclusion: How Food Taboos Represent Gendered Struggle**

Controversies about the "right" form of Islamic diet are not yet resolved. Most African American Muslims in the Sunni tradition now follow a relatively conventional set of food taboos, but they combine elements of traditional "soul food," while excluding pork and other foods incompatible with orthodox Islam. They are part of a social effort to reform eating habits, decrease the use of alcohol and drugs, and establish healthier patterns that can be maintained throughout life. Our argument is not only that food taboos are articulated in an historical—rather than simply a classificatory—framework, but also that women's agency in cooking and preparing food is particularly marked in this arena. Witt's (1999) analysis of conflicts about renouncing both "pork and women" in the Nation of Islam intersects in interesting ways with this ethnographic material, but her conclusions are markedly different.

Whatever they might write and say in public speeches, the leaders of African American Islam left the work of buying and preparing food to women. While Afaf remembers her efforts to conform to Islamic taboos as initially confusing, she soon began to feel that this was an arena where she could gain control and even take command. Hudah reported that she learned to heal her own body by buying halal products untainted by capitalist greed. In each case, these women felt that their actions in the kitchen were part of a larger emancipatory movement in which food helped define a new subjectivity that had agency at the community rather than the individual level. In each case, Muslim identity, while marked by taboos such as the ban on pork, was also reconciled with family traditions for sharing certain kinds of foods. If Elijah Muhammad's initial aim was to discredit the black slave mother as well as her "soul food," this is not the way in which the message has been understood by female converts.

Contemporary practitioners of Sunni Islam see food taboos as a way of re-affirming their heritage within a much wider religious tradition. African American Muslims who worship in this tradition do not preach a politics of racial separation, and neither do they accept a politics of female subjugation. For them the dinner table is a place to practice an everyday form of purity and religious discipline, in which women play a central role. The disproportionate attention paid to Farrakhan by mass media has given African American Islam a “phallic” face that serves all too easily to confirm practices of discrimination and condemnation for all Muslims. Women such as Afaf, Hudah, and Safa show us how the selection and preparation of foods can also be an empowering religious practice.

Food is always about more than simply what fills the stomach. “An embodied subject necessarily tends to embody itself beyond the limits of its body. This is particularly true of powerful people, but every subject participates in objective correlatives, analogues, or metonymies of itself on whose integrity its integrity depends” (Valeri 2000:110). Eating is one form of creative activity in which subjects are allowed to make choices about what will come to constitute their very being, both corporeally and symbolically. It should come as no surprise that these decisions are politically charged and that they cannot escape the weight of history in their articulations.

### Notes

1. Paul Robeson Park is a pseudonym. This article grew out of a chapter of Rouse’s dissertation that is now a book (Rouse 2004). This article examines some of the same ethnographic material but with greater attention to the theoretical issues of taboos.

2. The Ka’aba was built by the Prophets Ishmael and Abraham and is considered God’s sacred house. The Prophet Muhammad destroyed idols that had been built on the same grounds where the Ka’aba now stands, thus “purifying” it for the worship of God alone.

3. The idea for this article was developed in conversations about food taboos and Islam between the authors. Rouse did all of the ethnographic fieldwork, as part of a long-term study of Islamic conversions among Sunni African American women in Los Angeles. Hoskins felt these materials also had relevance for the comparative study of food taboos and drafted the treatment of theories of taboo, as well as sections of the conclusion. We have worked on this piece together, merging two different field perspectives into a single argument.

4. These figures come from *Time* magazine, “As American As . . . Although Scapegoated, Muslims, Sikhs and Arabs are Patriotic, Integrated—and Growing,” October 1, 2001:5. For a comprehensive list of relevant demographic data see [http://www.adherents.com/Na/Na\\_347.html#2067](http://www.adherents.com/Na/Na_347.html#2067).

5. After W. D. Fard disappeared, Elijah Muhammad began to refer to him as Master Farad Muhammad.

6. Both names are pseudonyms and the stories of these two women were collected through oral interviews by Carolyn Rouse in March 1993 and October 1995, respectively, in Los Angeles County.

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ABSTRACT Contemporary African American followers of Sunni Islam are self-consciously articulating a form of eating that they see as liberating them from the heritage of slavery, while also bringing them into conformity with Islamic notions of purity. In so doing, they participate in arguments about the meaning of “soul food,” the relation between “Western” materialism and “Eastern” spirituality, and bodily health and its relation to mental liberation. Debates within the African American Muslim community show us how an older anthropological concern with food taboos can be opened up to history and to the experience of the past reinterpreted in terms of the struggles of the present. [Taboos, African American history, Islam, food, resistance]