

PSYCHE WILLIAMS-FORSON
Washington, D.C.

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Date: March 4, 2005
Location: David Gregory Restaurant – Washington, D.C.
Interviewer: Karen Cathey, SFA Founder
Transcription: Shelley Chance, ProDocs
Length: 30 minutes
Project: SFA Founders

[Begin Psyche Williams-Forson Interview]**00:00:04**

Karen Cathey: This is Karen Cathey, March 4th at 3:00 p.m.. We're at the David Gregory Restaurant in Washington, D. C., and I'm interviewing Psyche Williams-Forson for the Southern Foodways Alliance Founders Oral History Initiative. Okay, Psyche, I just want to verify that you understand that you're being recorded and that these transcripts and tapes will be available for people to read and listen to and also that you understand the release form and that you signed the release form?

00:00:40

Psyche Williams-Forson: Yes.

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KC: Okay, thank you. Psyche, how did you come to be involved with the Southern Foodways Alliance?

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PWF: Well I came to be involved with the Southern Foodways Alliance through my own research on African American people and chicken. And it was actually—I can't remember if I was solicited or if I saw a notice in the original Southern Foodways Alliance gathering and actually went down before the SFA actually got under way. And I joined some of the other early members and founders, and hearing about Southern food and at that time how it would impact my own research.

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KC: Okay; were you involved in either of the Southern food organizations that pre-dated the SFA? They were the Society for the Preservation and Revival of Southern Food and Culture and the American Southern Food Institute?

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PWF: Actually I wasn't. I—my affiliation with food in terms of organizations really came through the Culinary Oral Historians of Washington, but I was not aware of the other Southern food organizations.

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KC: And did you go to the organizational meeting in Birmingham in the summer of 1999?

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PWF: No, in the summer of 1999 no, I was appointed in 1998 and the 1999 fall meeting, so I actually was unable to—the summer of ninety-nine actually was when we got married. **[Laughs]** So I was unable to go. I remember that conflict, yeah.

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KC: Okay. And what was your vision for the Southern Foodways Alliance when it began?

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PWF: Well that's a really good question because I had hoped that we would be able to join food enthusiasts, as I said earlier, chefs, and academic scholars, if you will, as a group to sort of talk and work through some of the issues that weren't as harmonious. And I'm not necessarily certain that—that was a direction that was shared by everyone at that time—at least it seemed that we were moving more in the direction of wanting to recognize the ways in which food was a unifier. And I don't at all disagree with that but I think that food is much more complex and—and that was my hope for the organization.

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KC: Well has your vision evolved from that and—or do you think that the—the vision, the SFA mission has evolved from that?

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PWF: I think the SFA has done an excellent job at facilitating the mission that it has set forth, which isn't necessarily the direction I wanted to see it go. In terms of exposing people to the sort of corpus of Southern foods and—and recognizing the contributions of Southern artists, clearly artists and—and whatnot I think that the organization has done an excellent job. But here again my own—my own vision hasn't changed. I just don't necessarily think that it's necessarily in line with where the SFA is trying to go.

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KC: Uh-hmm. And you said you had come to the first symposium in 1998. What do you recall about it and are there any particular moments from that gathering or others that stand out in your mind?

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PWF: Yeah, well you know that was—that was a great gathering actually. I met some really good people who were food writers of various magazines. That's when the sort of core group of folks started to identify others who would be considered founders. We were gathered around at John T.'s house you know; it was—it was really a fun time.

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One of the things that was most pronounced was—what's his name—the guy who does the fish fries, he and his wife were there. And I don't think he does that anymore; I think his children have now taken over but there was a huge fish fry as I recall and he was around to tell stories about catfish farming and that was when I learned quite a bit about catfish and its relationship to the Delta.

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And then the next year I learned about tamales in the Mississippi Delta which was really more information for me. So I mean SFA has been really enlightening from that point of view in terms of expanding my own repertoire on Southern food.

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KC: Uh-hmm. Tell us about your role in developing the SFA's mission and vision and programming.

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PWF: Well I guess what I would say is that my own contribution has actually probably been minimal in comparison to some of the others. I'm aware of the vision and the direction and

again, I have sort of shared with them where I would—some of the directions I would like to see us go. But it was a large—you know it was a large Board and actually I think—I ran for one of the Board member positions but wasn't elected. And so I never had a real vocal interaction with them since the last several conferences, you know. Most of my contributions I would say are directly with John T. or something of that nature, but in some ways—I don't want to say that I have divorced myself from the organization because they're not fulfilling the mission that I had but I have definitely seen how our interests are diverging. And so from that point of view, I sort of aligned myself where I think is useful, you know? But I'm not being involved in the day-to-day planning and—and operating.

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KC: Okay; the Southern Foodways Alliance focuses upon food as culture. What does that mean to you both intellectually and personally?

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PWF: Right; well my—my stance to this goes back to what I've already said. I think food—culture is complex; culture is ever-changing, culture is fluid, and I don't see any sort of stasis whatsoever when you're dealing with culture. I mean I study culture every day. Excuse me; that's what I do in my profession.

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Therefore, for that reason, I don't necessarily see foods as being a part of a particular tradition. I see it as evolving and ever-changing. And as we spoke about earlier I see it as infused with politics and power dynamics and food doesn't necessarily, like I said, make us feel warm

and fuzzy, but I don't know that those are the popular discussions that we necessarily want to have around food.

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Just a cookbook for instance, there are all kinds of politics that can be read about that in terms of gender, in terms of class and race and ethnicity and region. And most of them aren't necessarily the directions that we often want. Those aren't the things we want to be reminded of. But they're the things that make culture what it is, yeah. So I would argue that I see culture as very complex both on a personal level and intellectually. I mean my—my own life as a young child, we were always told you know there are people in Africa and other *third world countries* that do not have food. You all don't have the right to waste it. Right away that's connected to some element of politics and it's not necessarily partisan politics; it's cultural politics, you know.

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So from a very early age I probably understood food was very complex and dynamic.

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KC: You mentioned cookbooks; is there an example that comes to mind that you can elaborate on?

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PWF: Surely. One of the things I talk about in my own book is the work of Idella Parker. She was the cook and maid for Marjorie Rawlings, who was a Floridian author. And Marjorie Rawlings essentially took the name of the cook—cooking stories that she heard expressed by fishermen and a large number of them that were cooks that were contributed to by Idella Parker, and she put them in her own cookbook. And you know, Idella said in her own memoir that she

didn't know anything about this until she was shown a copy of the cookbook. And so this is one element of how, you know, many poor women of women of color's recipes were taken and codified them to their cookbooks and middle class, you know citizens.

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And it's not that she took anything away from the cookbook authors but you're definitely denying a voice to those women who contributed those recipes knowingly or unknowingly when you don't acknowledge that and you don't allow that attention.

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KC: So does this bring you to have ideas for the future of the SFA or projects that you would like to see happen, topics of study for the future?

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PWF: Yeah, I mean I would love to see them do a special on food and politics. And I'm not—again, I'm not talking about partisan politics, but you can do partisan politics, if you'd like. I mean it goes back to a bit of what we were saying earlier when I mentioned that, you know, an article came out the other day about First Lady Bush and how her own chef is moving on to do different food, and she has to hire a chef that can cook more Southwestern foods and more spicy dishes and—and I thought that that was very interesting if, indeed, she said that because it's a direct reflection of, regardless of where you live and your station in life, being Southern isn't the first thing that you give up, in fact it's usually the last. And the fact that we have, you know, the leader of the free world and her family who says, “We want want, you know, Southwestern cooking and says, w

“We don’t necessarily want the sort of—always eating the hoity-toity foods of maybe, you know, the D.C. elite and what have you.” I think that—that speaks volumes, you know that—that what people do in the privacy of their own homes, regardless of the—again, their station in life—really does come down to some fundamental things about their own cultural space and positions.

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So in terms of whether or not I’d—I’d like to see—yeah, I’d love to see the—the SFA—SFA do something like that. I would also like to see them now consider the upper Southern region as we’ve talked about earlier, D. C., Maryland, and Virginia, who I think a lot of times get—get left out of those discussions on Southern foodways—to more of the Deep South areas. You know, these areas have really lustrous food history. You know, if you just think about the—a very small example, Frederick Douglass, and the fact that his own ultimate escape was enabled by his wife, he found her—her linens, bed linens and—and table linens in order—that she acquired from her white mistress in order for her husband to ultimately purchase his freedom. And so here then we’re not talking about food directly, but you’re talking about foodways, as part of the system of food, that she acquired and then that had enabled him to work his way to freedom.

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So I don’t know; I’d like to see some of those kinds of things really.

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KC: Sounds very interesting.

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PWF: Yeah, I mean could you imagine? The Frederick Douglass house? We've got it right here. You can—just like the Capital and—and the Watergate and things of that nature, so it's a lot you can do in this area. You know the Chesapeake Bay watermen and the Baltimore—excuse me—the Baltimore Arabers, which had—had died out by then, but you know their history of doing food calls and they sort of clopped through the streets in their horse drawn buggies you know hollering you know cabbage for sale or watermelon or whatever. And we never—that's a history that is not just particular to Baltimore but could be connected to some other parts of Southern food, you know, discussions.

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KC: Okay, now we're going to move onto some personal questions.

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PWF: Okay.

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KC: And could you state the date and the place of your birth?

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PWF: Sure. I was born—I was born in Farmville, Virginia, which is Southeast or South Central Virginia right below—south of Richmond between Lynchburg and Rockingham. *[Laughs]*
[Inaudible] June 7, 1965.

00:13:55

KC: Okay. And tell us about the food of your childhood and who prepared it and—

00:13:58

PWF: Right.

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KC: —what some of the typical meals were and—

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PWF: Sure.

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KC: —describe some of the—.

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PWF: Sure. Sure. I think that's why I—I speak to food and culture as being very intertwined. I mean I was born in Farmville, but at two, my family moved to Buffalo, New York. But being Southern, we maintained, obviously, my impression of our Southern roots. I mean we had things like succotash, which my mother grew up on and—and you know she in fact speaks a lot about her own mother getting up on Sunday morning to make this dish and succotash and fried chicken for breakfast. And then they'd come home and have lunch and so forth. She initially—from what I remember, she did make biscuits every Sunday and things of that nature, but this—this is who I grew find out—because my father came down with diabetes, early in our childhood. And our entire food repertoire had to change. This started you know wheat bread instead of white bread;

we had to cut out Kool-Aid. We drank more water. We began to decrease on the sweets that were in our house and—and for example, Tuesdays, I think, was tuna fish day. You know, so we had to eat lighter in order to preserve my father's health.

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At the same time, when we traveled to Virginia every summer and every holiday you know we still celebrated by having smothered pork chops or as I said, it's one of the things I no longer eat pork because you know by the seventies—mid-seventies we had to move back to Farmville. But one Christmas we had—it was very traditional for, probably, Southern people, hog maws and chitlins and it was just a hog maw and chitlin bad time. And it [*Laughs*]*—*and it didn't sit well with me. Have you ever eaten something you just never wanted again? So that happened and I had the same sort of feeling about cheesecake, you know, you eat it once and it doesn't sit well with you, and then you know I have an aversion to it.

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Then I moved back for example, another thing that we had in Buffalo at home—another favorite was fresh corn off—cut off the cob with fatback you know and our aunt and uncle lived next door to us. And I remember with a great deal of fondness she would send us to the local grocery store to get him a huge slab of sharp cheddar cheese and a huge slab of bacon that was cut right from the rind you know and—and the butcher would cut it for him and everything. And he'd split some of it with us and we'd have bacon sandwiches and things of that nature, so that—that was a time when pork was actually pretty popular in our household.

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Later diets didn't start to change until I moved to the New England area. Still you know I ate grits of course and things of that nature but just a little less. And then when I got to grad school I completely changed my diet and changed over to a vegetarian diet. And that lasted for

about seven years until I got married. And then it shifted again because it didn't—my husband was from Ghana and their diet is very starch-based. And that was very surprising for me when we first got married. I might make an elaborate meal of you know baked chicken and a vegetable or—or whatever and he said, “Where’s my—what’s my starch?” And that used to really freak me out because I’m like, “What do you mean, where’s your—?” I don’t know.

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And so now I realize you know jasmine rice or basmati rice has to be in her house all the time or some other kind of starch. So yeah; so it has evolved, but he’s a perfect example of food and culture I would say because regardless of the fact that he’s been here about twenty—twenty-five years he really only ever eats his own food, the food of his culture or he’ll eat Chinese food which is very similar in terms of rice and salt. So—so I see it as a lot of different transitions around food and lifetime.

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KC: Okay, when did you first cultivate an interest in food and who or what was the catalyst?

00:18:18

PWF: Okay, yeah, I actually was in—just starting with my Ph.D. program at the University of Maryland, and I was asked to be a research assistant for a professor [Hasia R. Diner] whose specialty was Jewish Studies and she was working on a piece on Jewish foodways. And I was you know doing some, what do you call it—transcription of a—a speech she had given. And I did her research. And I was doing this research I said, “Huh, I never heard of this thing called foodways. Let me see if there’s anything called you know African American or Afro-American,” I think it was back in ninety-five you know and I checked. And actually there was very little that

came up—I think it was one source attributed to Jessica Harris. And it referred to her intro—the introduction in—I think it's *Iron Pots and Wooden Spoons* or one of her—her early books.

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And so that's how I actually got interested in food. I started—this is before the days of really—Amazon got off and running. I found a book dealer in New York who had a couple of her books, and he sent them to me. And so that was really my catalyst and as I continued to study what I found was that you had a lot written by archaeologists and anthropologists of what black people ate but not what those foods meant to them, you see. And so, for academic scholars—because I think there are all kinds of community scholars and so forth—but the academic scholars, you searched for the gap. And for me, that was the gap. First of all very little had been done on African American foodways and then secondly, almost nothing had been done on the meaning of certain foods to black people. And so that really was my impetus, so for a long time I just studied food in general and, you know, black people—the focus on chicken didn't really come until the last sort of 1999 until four years later and that was complete happenstance. And it evolved over time since then. But yeah, that's my impetus—was really from working—researching for someone else.

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And she [Hasia R. Diner] published her book on Irish, Jewish and Italian peoples who immigrated, who migrated to America called *Hungering for More* [*Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration* (2003)], and she talks about the reason that they came to the States was because they were hungry, all of these different ethnic groups. And it's a fascinating study, so that was—she's my impetus.

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KC: Okay, great. And how did you get your first job working or writing or dealing with food?

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PWF: Well my first job, as I just mentioned, as a researcher for another—for a historian whose specialty is not really food but Jewish Studies. And ever since then it has just evolved. I’ve done a website for the Smithsonian, *Still Cookin’ by the Fireside*, which can be found under the website of the Anacostia Museum and the Center for African American Life and Culture. I—I got a position at the National Archives, the Records Administration, later and you know, in my spare time I decided to do my own research on African Americans. And it’s interesting because in order to get access to pictures and things, I had to look up domestics. There’s nothing on the African American foodways, but I went to the Winterthur Museum and Library up in Delaware and, you know, I probably was like one of three black people who has ever been there. And some of the local people looked at me like, “Uh, are you finding anything in that literature?” And now we say it’s a whole—we’re talking about classic, European art, collected by the—the du Pont family. And I said — well you know what I had to do was look up domestics. And when I looked up domestics, I did find several different things, because the thing, for example, just moving from—into material culture because that’s really my area of study, Material Culture, the study of objects.

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I—I hooked up with the— received that the DuPont family chose the complete decorative design of the formal room and received it, okay. And everything changed and but that never got talked about by the tour folks who were the ones responsible for doing those changes?

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So again I began to see that this isn't a science; it's the things that do not get said where a lot of the best stories are hidden. And I applied what I learned in those kinds of visits to—to my research on food.

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KC: Yeah, okay. How have you see Southern food evolve in the course of your lifetime?

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PWF: Well—well you know this is really interesting, Karen, because as I started researching African American people and chicken, I would constantly get these reverberative remarks including some audiences at the SFA, that fried chicken is not a black food. And it's very interesting because that's never the argument that I made. I always talked about the relationship, the very particular relationship that black people have to—to chicken. And I mean it's historically documented in postcards, greeting cards, whatever you can't escape it, there's a very serious correlation. So I never argued that black people only consume, but it's interesting because I see how coveted Southern food can be in the way people may hold and claim, to the extent that they're not even listening to you. All they hear is—you know what they want to hear about Southern food.

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Well in the course of doing my research I talked to a group of Southern—a Southern group of church women, African American church women who surprisingly—I would start—whatever audience I interviewed whether it was CHOW, the Culinary History of Washington or African American groups or mixed groups of students at various you know historically black colleges or predominantly white institutions I would always say, “Give me a list of what you

define as Southern foods and whatnot.” And I said, “Now tell me what you think are African—African American foods.” And of course there was very little difference between the two.

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Well this one group of folks told me that true Southern food is only fried. So in essence what they were saying was that in this day and age when diabetes and high blood pressure are critical and widespread throughout the black community and so we’ve changed our diets and cookbooks have come out to reflect this, you know cooking soul food in a new way or cooking Southern food—okra perfect example, frying your chicken now in the oven with some breadcrumbs. They were adamant that’s not Southern food. That’s somebody—I don’t know what cuisine that is but it’s not—it’s not Southern and it’s not soul.

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And—and so that’s like I guess one of the perfect examples of how people assign designations to food and won’t let them go regardless of the changes that you might see. And it’s [inaudible], B. Smith, when she opened up her restaurant she had this piece called Swamp Thing, you know, and it was cornbread and greens and all this stuff. But a lot of people said, “That’s not Southern food; that’s some kind of nouveau riche cuisine, you know.”

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KC: You’re sort of really touching on the next question.

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PWF: Okay.

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KC: And it's basically that a lot of the talk about Southern food is talking about continuity and tradition and in this age do you think that this kind of talk is just romantic or—or is it accurate?

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PWF: Uh-hmm. I have to think there's a lot of continuity and tradition, but what I think we need to allow for is changes within tradition. And—and that's the thing that I see a lot of people do not allow for. Continuity is just that—continuous, but it doesn't necessarily mean that continuously stays the same. Continuity can be movement, constant movement but it's not necessarily the same as that, you know. So when we talk about continuity and tradition it can be a tradition in my household at Christmas to have oysters for breakfast. So does that mean they're going to be fried every year? No, it could depend upon our dietary needs and that changes. Does that mean that the tradition is no longer valid? Absolutely not. It means we have adjusted and rightfully so what we needed to do for our own self-preservation.

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Where I think we run into trouble is when we force continuity and tradition to be static. Or, we don't allow for the ebbs and flows of life. I mean what do you do when you have a Southerner meet a New Englander and the two decide to spend their lives together? I mean how do you adapt and adjust taste. There are going to be times when maybe the New Englander doesn't want bacon and eggs or New England clam chowder, [inaudible] That's real. I mean these differences can cause marital problems. But part of that I think is the beauty of continuity and the beauty of tradition is that we understand how tradition has always been improvisational, you know.

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It's like people X, Y, Z and then they want food, they don't just give the X(es) up but then they go back to them then depending upon where they migrated to. You don't have access to cayenne. You don't have access to certain foods; how do you modify and improvise? But that does not mean you're no longer following a tradition. So yeah, I would argue that tradition and continuity again are far more complex than we give them credit for.

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KC: My final question: describe a meal that you would consider totemic(ally) Southern.

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PWF: Yes; well I think totemic(ally) Southern would be on Christmas and Thanksgiving dinner, which we can never get away from and it's very interesting because I—okay, here's what I think it is for us. And again, this—before I answer this question, I should say that implicit in the question is the sense that the South is one static thing, you know. And in fact, I learned very late in life a couple years ago for example that people really didn't have no idea what collard greens are. They don't cook collard greens. That's not part of their tradition. But it's still the South, you know, and I know that when I lived with a woman from New Orleans and she's like, "I have never eaten collard greens before you cooked them." She makes her potato salad a little different than I do but it's still potato salad. Okay; so having said that then these are the foods that many Southerners I know might say is classically Southern food:

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Macaroni and cheese, greens, cornbread, chicken, maybe fried fish, fried chicken, fried fish, and I mentioned maybe potato salad, sometimes deviled eggs, butter beans perhaps, but

definitely that first core—macaroni and cheese, cornbread, fried chicken and fried fish, and collard greens. I would say those are totemic(ally) Southern in a way.

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KC: Well that sounds wonderful. Thank you very much. This was awesome.

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PWF: I hope this is useful.

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KC: I think so. Thank you.

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PWF: You're welcome.

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KC: Okay, this concludes our interview with Psyche Williams Forson. Psyche, thank you for your time.

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PWF: You're welcome. Thank you.

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[End Psyche Williams Forson]