

Let Them Eat Cake, Caviar, Organic, and Whole Foods: American Elitism, White Trash Dinner Parties, and Diet

So let's have us a little bash, and if anyone asks
It ain't no one, but us trash
You don't know, you better ask somebody
'Cause we're having a white trash party! (Eminem)

On June 21, 2010, rapper Eminem released *Recovery*, an album that, according to *Entertainment Weekly*, sold 741,000 copies in its first week and rode the top of the Billboard 200 for months, ultimately selling 3.42 million copies and becoming the best-selling album of 2010 (Vozick-Levinson). The album also bested JAY-Z's *The Blueprint 3* and The Roots *How I Got Over* for Best Rap Album at the 2010 Grammy Awards. A featured song on the album, "White Trash Party," includes the above lyrics and also references Denny's, coleslaw, trailer parks, Fanta, "wife beater" t-shirts, and drinking Bacardi rum straight from the bottle. If Eminem's wild success is any indication, never before has it been more true that, as Ylan Q. Mui wrote back in 2006, "perfect is out." Eminem's celebration of his own white trash roots and culture, however, radically contrasts the class parody involved in middle- and upper-class themed "white trash" dinner parties. In fact, the latter tend to invite the elitism practiced by many American foodies, for by exaggerating and mocking the types of food eaten by America's underclasses, white trash party-goers announce and reinforce their own exclusive culinary practices, and by extension, attempt to solidify their protected class status.

Upper-class eating is highly regulated both because of the material foodstuff consumed—and all that it ideologically implies—and because of the bodily result and class markers of consumption. Therefore, what the

white trash dinner party highlights is the superiority of party-goers who typically exercise restraint, even as they are on hiatus from such dietary restriction, enjoying themselves in gluttonous slumming. The very act of eating food in the carnivalesque context of a white trash dinner party thus becomes an act of mockery, of insinuating that this is an atypical meal for these consumers.

The White Trash Dinner Party and Food Elitism

Within the last decade of the twentieth and first decade of the twenty-first centuries, we have witnessed the rise in the fashion world of “poor chic” and its various manifestations (for examples, “heroin chic,” “hobo chic,” and “asylum attire”) (Halnon 502). We have also, as sociologist Karen Bettez Halnon notes, seen interior designer Rachel Ashwell and others cash in heartily on “shabby chic” books, television shows, and “op shops” (502). Similarly, neo-yuppies have given their stamp of approval to urban bike culture, Emo style, and even weight lifting, all of which have roots in working class hobbies, values, and fashion (502-3). The transformation of the culturally suspect practice of “tattooing” into the more respectable “body aesthetics” as well as the current popularity of temporary tattoos further evidences that we have reached a new dawn of socio-economic slumming (502). Given all of this ingestion of working-class culture, perhaps it stands to reason that the next obvious move is for residents of the suburbs to costume themselves in the imagined apparel of the white trash they intend to emulate with clothing choices such as wife beater T-shirts, mullet wigs, fake pregnant bellies, and halter tops. Once properly adorned, they create an appropriate covered dish such as a tater tot casserole or a mock apple pie and attend the latest craze in suburban entertainment, the white trash dinner party.¹

Partygoers of the white trash dinner party rave online that this party is a great time, the best party of the year (“White Trash Party Food”; “White Trash Blue Collar Dinner”; “Fun Picnic Games and Themes”; “White Trash Dinner”). But why? In large part, the party delights because of the food served. Gayle Poole asserts, “it is possible to say things with food,” and thus food is “a perfect conveyer of subtext” (qtd. in Bower 3).

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The subtext created by white trash cuisine is multi-faceted. First, the subtext bespeaks a *carpe diem* moment, a seize-the-gluttony ideology allowing guests and hosts alike to consume foods prohibited in their otherwise highly regulated food styles in a carnivalesque atmosphere where the strict rules of restraint which dominate middle- and upper-class diet choices are temporarily removed. In addition, any bourgeois American who has not yet read Michael Pollan's books and seen *Food Inc.* (2009) is not keeping up. Being aware of the food chain and its industrial manipulations is not simply a matter of remaining personally and politically aware; it is also a matter of class. The result of such knowledge translates ideology into practice: vegetarian, flexitarian, simple foods, whole foods, and locavore diets are increasingly the norm amongst upper-class Americans and those middle-class Americans climbing upward. Thus, a white trash dinner party also creates a subtext of safe elitist distance for those who consume white trash cuisine only as part of a performance of poverty, for, as Robley Evans points out, "The preparation of food and of eating can be read as tropes signifying the hierarchical levels of class structure in which an individual introjects—or re-jects—social identity" (141). Similarly, Brad Kessler writes that food "means more than itself. It is symbolic. It opens the door to double and triple meaning" (156). Thus, in a parodied performance of eating, white trash dinner parties allow guests to prepare and eat those foods representing the social identities from which they hope to gain distance.

Middle- and Upper-Class American Cuisine

The social identities most of these partygoers hope to claim fit somewhere in the fluid realms of the middle- and upper-classes. We used to know what upper-class Americans ate: caviar, *foie gras*, lobster, champagne, Kobe beef, *soufflés*, crown roast, truffles, artisan cheeses, and rack of lamb. It was simple enough to imagine the foods Jay Gatsby would have had laden on his tables in order to impress the elusive Daisy. But today's upper-class American cuisine is much more complicated and nebulous.

At a 2007 conference in Richmond, Virginia, food blogger Shauna James Ahern, author of *Gluten-Free Girl* (2007), reported that for a short

time she lived with a group of very spoiled and affluent individuals with little appreciation or understanding of food, yet with all the money in the world to purchase expensive ingredients. They embraced an upper-class diet by drowning everything they ate in pricey truffle oil, much to Ahern's dismay. She was appalled to see delicious food misused in such a way. Her budget at the time was modest; yet she reported that she still ate whole foods prepared tastefully and knew the time and the place for truffle oil.

As the previous example demonstrates, some upper-class American eaters do not consume the most healthy, intricately prepared, or tasty foods. Upper-class Americans are not, in fact, a monolithic group of eaters, and for those attempting to social climb via the food chain, navigating food recommendations, preparations, and prohibitions is only slightly less tricky than navigating the ideologies attached to these various upper-class diets.

The Whole Foods Diet

The whole foods diet is perhaps the simplest of these elite diets to understand. It consists of whole foods, nothing processed or prepackaged, prepared simply. In her cookbook *The Art of Simple Food* (2007), Alice Waters writes, "When you have the best and tastiest ingredients, you can cook very simply and the food will be extraordinary because it tastes like what it is" (3). The term "whole foods" is pervasive in our vernacular, and has been made famous by the chain of high-end food markets, Whole Foods. The most basic of whole foods definitions merely insists food come to the consumer in the form that it came out of the field, farm, or pasture.

A subspecies of whole foods diet, the Slow Food International Movement, testifies to the growing interest in unadulterated foods, and here ideology becomes increasingly apparent. The founder of Slow Food International, Carlo Petrini, says, "Slow food unites the pleasure of food with responsibility, sustainability and harmony with nature" (*Slow Food*). The website for the organization cites its philosophy: "We believe that everyone has a fundamental right to the pleasure of good food and consequently the responsibility to protect the heritage of food, tradition and culture that make this pleasure possible" (*Slow Food*). An example of slow food philosophy appears in Elizabeth Gilbert's bestselling book, *Eat, Pray,*

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Love (2006). Gilbert's world-weary autobiographical American narrator renews her interest in life largely by sampling the many culinary pleasures available in Rome, Naples, Sicily, and Venice. Supplanting her former diet of anti-depressants and yogurt with succulent and caringly prepared dishes, the narrator finds new aesthetic possibilities in her interaction with the world and people who inhabit it. Slow food quickly comes to symbolize the new lifestyle undertaken by Gilbert, one more focused on spiritual growth than on personal and immediate gratification. Of course, it takes a good deal of money to finance the kind of spiritual journey enjoyed by Gilbert, as is likewise true of many slow food diets.

In addition to a philosophy of pleasure and spiritual growth, whole food diets appear to be driven by a philosophy of fear. As more public knowledge about food toxins permeates American culture, people flock to farmers' markets, organic produce, and locally raised meat and dairy products. On an international basis people are resisting the "unrestrained power of the food industry multinationals and industrial agriculture," and this resistance carries with it the desire for full disclosure of all food sources and ingredients (*Slow Food*).

The Locavore Diet

Some whole food eaters have moved to locally grown foods in order to exert more control over how their food is produced, and philosophically to avoid a large carbon footprint through an extended distribution system. The locavore diet is really the whole foods diet on steroids (though not literally, of course). This is where the many disciples of Michael Pollan fit into the food puzzle. Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2006) supports a locavore diet, which means that the eater only consumes foods grown and purchased locally. In a rather obvious fashion, locavores attach ideology to consumption. For example, in her 2010 article for *Newsweek* magazine, "Divided We Eat," Lisa Miller reports that her neighbor, Alexandra, a self-proclaimed Pollanite, ponders, "eating organically and locally contributes not only to the health of her family but to the existential happiness of farm animals and farmers—and, indeed, to the survival of the planet." Alexandra articulates, "This is my charity. This is my giving to the

world.” One food critic has dubbed this blend of food consumerism and altruism “ethos groceries,” noting that some consumptive practices allow the affluent to “reconcile their success with their spirituality, their elite status with their egalitarian ideals” (Serazio 163). Philosopher Peter Singer, as Chad Lavin notes, “opposes locavorism on precisely these grounds: it legitimates a specific interest over the general one, and justifies limiting economic support to an already privileged population that is unique only for its geographic proximity.” The elitism identified by some critics of locavorism creates an ideological battleground over this diet choice. There are dissenters who maintain the diet is beyond the financial means of the average American. Other dissenters say those who espouse this diet use altruism as a crutch to justify their elitist and selfish spending habits. However, those who support this style of consumption use the dual argument of leaving a smaller carbon footprint by limiting the travel of the food they consume combined with supporting the local economy.

Alice Waters adds an additional motivation for eating locally in terms that return, again, to taste. Waters, a classically trained chef, desired to open a restaurant that mimicked the delicious food she experienced while a student in France. She found the answer in the farmer’s market: “[T]he people who were growing the tastiest food were organic farmers in my own backyard, small farmers and ranchers within a radius of a hundred miles or so of the restaurant who were planting heirloom varieties of fruits and vegetables and harvesting them at their peak” (3).

There are at least two reasons, then, aside from overt attempts to class climb, for adopting the locavore diet: its hip new spin on altruism and food quality. In all likelihood, most locavore diets emerge from some blend of the two motivations. Then, too, locavores invoke a recurring thematic in foodie literature that distinguishes the real from the fake, the food from the wannabe food. Pollan, in *In Defense of Food* (2008), articulates this desire to keep dinner real: “[Y]ou’re better off eating whole fresh foods rather than processed food products. That’s what I mean by the recommendation to ‘eat food,’ which is not quite as simple as it sounds. For while it used to be that food was all you *could* eat, today there are thousands of other edible foodlike substances in the supermarkets” (11).

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Moved by the need to experience locavore eating in the extreme, best-selling novelist Barbara Kingsolver relocated her family from Tuscan to the Appalachians, “to live in a place that could feed us: where rain falls, crops grow, and drinking water bubbles right up out of the ground” (3). Her family’s experience in locavore eating is detailed in the New York Times Bestseller *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (2007).

Although the newest incarnation of locavorism is mostly a twenty-first century phenomenon, over 150 years ago, Henry Thoreau encouraged a locavore diet in *Wild Fruits* (1859); “Talk about tariffs and protection of home industry, so as to be prepared for hard times and wars! Here we are deriving our bread stuffs from the west, our butter stuffs from Vermont, and our tea and coffee and sugar stuffs (and much more that we stuff ourselves with) from the other side of the globe” (243). Kathryn Dolan says Thoreau:

alludes to the unsustainable nature of such a dietary system: the food that the mid-nineteenth-century U.S. consumed was coming from farther away than ever before, some of it—western ‘bread stuffs,’ for example—from lands messily acquired over a relatively short period of time, often exploiting the cheap labor of native and immigrant populations. (163)

Thoreau made the connection in the mid-nineteenth century that the American people had shifted their eating practices. Food was becoming a definer of the person. “If the expanding U.S. of the 1840s and 1850s was increasingly identified by what it geographically and politically consumed, so then were its people; they were questioning their burgeoning identity, the possibility of coming to be defined by what (and occasionally who) they ate” (Dolan 165). Thoreau contemplated this new American diet as a burgeoning form of imperialism and saw locavorism as a mechanism for combating such elitist imperialism. Ironically, Thoreau supported eating off the bounty of the land because it was attainable for all Americans, but today’s Pollanite locavorism is seemingly unattainable for the lower socio-economic segments of our society because the required ingredients are no longer easily accessible and affordable—which is one of the major critiques of this style of eating.

Fine Dining/Specialty Ingredients Diet

The fine dining/specialty ingredients dieter brings a new vantage point to examine elitism and diet. These eaters are apt to dine at the trendiest eating establishments, make purchases at Zabar's gourmet emporium and the like, and sometimes douse their food in truffle oil just because they can. Their pleasure comes in being able to afford the best and most expensive culinary delights the world has to offer. To some degree, then, the food consumed within the space of fine dining has much less to do with eating or with nourishing the body, than with having achieved elite social status. The new scope of American materialism, as the late cultural theorist Raymond Williams sought to explain as early as the 1960s, goes far beyond the material reality of what we consume and seeks to replace or announce to the world something intangible (208). Further, Williams explains the ways in which our consumer choices signify:

If the consumption of individual goods leaves that whole area of human need unsatisfied, the attempt is made, by magic, to associate this consumption with human desires to which it has no real reference.

You do not only buy an object: you buy social respect, discrimination, health, beauty, success, power to control your environment. (211)

Though Williams argued that *all* modern capitalist-driven consumptive practices are about more than just the things being consumed, the fine dining model of food consumption makes Williams' point particularly obvious. Not surprisingly, it is this diet that receives the scorn of other upper-class consumers. The hedonism and fanfare of this diet is virtually shouted from the castle rooftop, leaving the altruists of upper-class consumers squirming.

Whole Foods Grocery Stores and Elite Consumers

Whole Foods grocery stores embody some elements of all elitist American diets. Michael Serazio notes, "Whole Foods is one of the first supermarkets to begin pushing 'ethos groceries'—that dazzling panoply of foodstuffs steeped in ideology and marketed to a robust segment of American consumers" (159). For whole foods eaters, this grocery chain is

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a playground of bounty. There is no longer any required sorting or thinking about food because everything in the store has already been screened by the buyers for Whole Foods Corporation. For the locavores, Whole Foods features as much produce as possible that is grown locally. For the fine dining/specialty ingredients diner, the grocery store is full of oddball ingredients that are unlikely to be found in “regular” grocery stores, and any store that has earned the nickname “whole paycheck” because of the pricey groceries it carries has a certain appeal to these diners. Ultimately, as Serazio concludes, the grocery store blending politics and upper-class cuisine is selling much more than just food: “Whole Foods imbues its food offerings with these larger themes of politics, culture, and lifestyle; Whole Foods nurtures this consumer culture of food fetish through its soothing tale of wholeness” (160). Michael Pollan takes issue with the idea of wholesome food priced beyond the means of the average consumer. In talking to *Newsweek*, Pollan notes how inequitable our food supply is in the United States, saying, “Essentially, we have a system where wealthy farmers feed the poor crap and poor farmers feed the wealthy high-quality food” (qtd. in Miller 48). Whole Foods embodies the elitism inherent in our food supply as identified by Pollan and other advocates for a safer and more natural food supply for all Americans.

Dietary Regulations and the American Body

Though the particulars of upper-class American dietary bylaws are new, the prevailing ideology of dietary policing is not. One of the most intriguing ways that American affluence has come to be associated with food consumption since the late nineteenth century is via dietary moderation or restraint. Even the gluttons of the elitist dietary world, the fine dining/specialty foods dieter, are quick to exercise portion control and counteract rich foods with modified fasts, and they are also regulars at spas promoting total body cleansing and liquid diets. The physical result of food regulation is the thin body, a marker of affluence for American women since at least the 1890s and a marker of affluence for American men as early as the 1860s (Vester 39).

Whereas the slender body had previously signaled poverty and

sickness, once surplus food supplies were available to middle and increasingly even many lower-class Americans, the mark of the wealthy became the ability to restrain oneself (Vester 39-40).² As Katharina Vester discovered in researching nineteenth-century American periodicals, the earliest dieting advice in America was directed at upwardly mobile men. Vester found one of the first examples of such advice in the American newspaper *Spirit of the Times*, dated 1855. In the article, men are instructed that “while those born into money have learned to deal with the dangers that come with comfort and have cultivated control mechanisms from early childhood on . . . the newly rich man is especially endangered, since his sudden break with formerly frugal habits can prove fatal” (40). And this particular kind of fatality is largely a social one, for by the turn of the century, to possess a corpulent body meant, at least for men, that they were *nouveau riche*. Harvey Levenstein reinforces this point, writing, “Excess male girth came to denote sloth, immobility, and ill health rather than substantive achievement” (9). Though the appeal of the thin female body was to arrive later on the scene, by the mid-twentieth century, women representing the Victorian ideal body, those exhibiting “the heavily corseted matronly ideal” (Levenstein 9), were increasingly associated with poverty and immigrant or minority status (Vester 47-53). As Jeffrey A. Brown notes, today the thin body “demonstrates that the individual has learned to properly self-regulate oneself The physical traits of [thinness] are metaphors for social traits and desirable behavior” (79). The obese body thus stands in direct contrast and is “emblematic of all things socially unacceptable and hence lower class” (Brown 81). Anna Nicole Smith, when she was still relatively thin, writes Brown, “was characterized as sweetly Southern and small town” (83). Once she gained weight, she was “depicted as a slutty hick who dropped out of school because she was too stupid to be good at anything but sex” (83).

Not only is the slender body associated with the upper-classes, but how one achieves that slender body has become equally classed. To be called “cigarette smoking thin” is to suggest a trashy means of suppressing the appetite. In fact, any means of appetite suppressant is a little trashy, for the whole idea of restraint is based on personal will power, having the

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ability to order and control desire in such a manner that no temptation is acted upon. Bulimia, with its bingeing and purging, represents a lack of control and thus is associated with lower-class women, while anorexia is associated with upper-class food management. As feminist philosopher Susan Bordo asserts, “from its nineteenth-century emergence as a cultural phenomenon, anorexia has been a class-biased disorder, appearing predominantly among the daughters of families of relative affluence” (62). Linking the eating disorder to social hierarchies in general, Bordo explains that in situations of food surplus, “an ability to ‘rise above’ the need to eat imparts moral or aesthetic superiority only where others are prone to overindulgence” (62).

Devouring the Concept of Poverty

A crucial element of the white trash dinner party subtext, one that is practically shouted in every facet of the dining experience, is protection against the ever-present fear of downward mobility. Using Zygmunt Bauman’s notion of tourists and vagabonds but extending it to the fashion world, Halnon argues that by donning the clothing and styles of the impoverished, wealthy (or mostly wealthy) consumers are able to stave off their fear of becoming poor, losing it all. She writes, “Poor Chic protects against sliding into poverty through the rational (controlled, efficient, predictable, and calculable) consumption of it” (502). And if clothes are merely a metaphorical way to consume that which is most feared, food is an even better amulet against poverty, as it offers literal consumption.

We can certainly see the attempt to devour poverty in the white trash dinner party, for in blog posts and chat forums alike, white trash party hosts are counseled to tell the guests what to wear and cook—even how to behave. One hostess said that she included individual recipes on her invitations, with each guest being treated to an entry from *Ruby Ann’s Down Home Trailer Park Cookbook* (“Party Ideas: Trailer Trash Party”; Boxcar). Indeed, a good many party-hosting forum discussions of the white trash or trailer trash dinner party focus exclusively on the food that should be served. Though costuming gets more attention in online images, the food is the thing most often discussed, debated, and detailed, and for good rea-

son: no one seems able to agree on what, exactly, constitutes white trash food.

The White Trash Diet

In many cases, middle- and upper-class party goers' perception of the white trash diet is whatever they deem worst for their bodies and health. As one online contributor to a *Cooking Light* website explains, white trash food is "the stuff you actually love to eat but don't want to admit to anyone" ("Your Best White Trash Recipes"). Thus, processed foods often top the list of white trash dinner party staples. Processed foods have been suspect among the food elite for their relative lack of vitamins and potentially deadly additives since the first decade of the twentieth century, the decade seeing the emergence of the Pure Food and Drugs Act (Levenstein 13-17). Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, Twinkies, Ho Hos, Moon Pies, Hamburger Helper, Wonder Bread, and Miracle Whip currently get lambasted by anyone with even a passing interest in whole foods. These processed foods found in grocery stores, when combined with the highly processed fare served out of drive-thru windows the nation over, comprise what many people understand as the most nutritionally unsound food choices available today. Sally Fallon writes, "Chronic illness in industrialized nations reached epic proportions because we have been dazzled by . . . fast foods, fractionalized foods, convenience foods, packaged foods, fake foods, embalmed foods, ersatz foods—all the bright baubles that fill up the shelves at our grocery stores, convenience markets, vending machines and even health food stores" (xi). Adam Drewnowski makes the connection between this diet and obesity, saying, "The basis of obesity lawsuits is that consumers are deceived or enticed by the food industry into overeating, if not actually made addicted to snacks and fast foods. The multiple legal theories can be characterized as addiction, enticement, deception, and social injustice" (5). Even if these foods are not ultimately deemed physically addictive, they are certainly not the healthiest food sources. Don Colbert speaks of living versus dead food and notes that the highly processed dead foods are "edible, but void of nourishment" (66). These processed foods also comprise the majority of the white trash diet, at least

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in the cultural imagination of America's middle- and upper-classes.

Interestingly, the middle-aged Americans participating in imagining the white trash diet through the lens of the white trash dinner party were part of a food revolution that began after World War II and changed the way the American dinner table appeared for decades. This food revolution featured cheap and readily available processed foods. Neuhaus reports, "Supermarkets gained supremacy in the postwar years, stocked with these products and with newly available processed foods. Consumers in Los Angeles could buy the same soup as housewives in Peoria. Across class lines and geographic distances, Americans shared a taste for meat and potatoes and highly processed comfort food" (532). During this time period, anything that was created by man and machine, including food, was considered much better than anything nature could produce. Endrijonas notes, "Processed food was both a symbol of a burgeoning manufacturing economy and an important indication of technological advancement. Americans did not necessarily eat more, but they did purchase more food items, which theoretically increased the variety of foods they consumed and sped up the cooking process" (158). Long before the health disasters of processed foods were realized, "manufacturers and advertisers touted processed foods as more healthful, but more importantly, as convenient" (Neuhaus 533). This was the advent of the Campbell soup craze where "virtually every soup recipe consisted entirely of adding extra ingredients to canned soup" (Neuhaus 533). The childhoods of the attendees of the white trash dinner parties were likely filled with processed foods that their mothers believed to be healthy and nutritious, the latest invention of the great industry of America. These processed foods made a variety of foods available to consumers across the country and across socio-economic lines. Therefore, not only are partygoers who imagine a white trash diet casting a food judgment on those who currently consume the diet, but they are also casting judgment on the foods of their childhood. They are faced with the mixed emotions of enjoying—at least for one night—foods that remind them of home and comfort amid the sentiment that the processed foods that were once considered a great health benefit and a sign of prosperity are instead a danger to the health of America.

Ernest Matthew Mickler's bestselling *White Trash Cookbook* (1986) carries overtones from the rise of the processed foods of the 1950s, but his cookbook suggests that white trash cuisine may be even more complicated than combining processed foods into a casserole. Though critic Dina Smith reads Mickler's cookbook as rather one-dimensional, noting that it finds great favor with the white middle-class, this is a cookbook that represents a much broader swath of cuisine than do most representations of lower-class diets. Mickler's cookbook includes some recipes made mostly from processed foods but also instructs cooks on the preparations of wild game dishes—such as squirrel, rabbit, venison, catfish, and other more exotic fare—and dishes made from a variety of cheap ingredients, wherever they might be found.

Furthermore, some of the dishes found in Mickler's book appear to be about geography as much as they are about poverty. Southern staples such as fried okra, grits, cornbread, mashed potatoes (three versions, in fact), and fried chicken (also three versions) are included, as are more highly processed foods such as soda cracker pie, four-can deep tuna pie, and a punch using Kool-Aid as its key ingredient. In fact, when it comes to the pre-packaged or canned versus the organic or homegrown, there is fairly wide acceptance for both, whatever seems most accessible. Mickler quotes one of the cooks included in the book, Memphis Wood, on this point: "I use lots of packaged things all the time, if they're good" (40).

A number of the recipes in Mickler's cookbook are also about speed. For example, Mickler includes an entire chapter devoted to sandwiches, most of them, like the "Kitchen Sink Tomato Sandwich" and the "Fried Egg Sandwich," are basic and quickly prepared. Many of Mickler's salads, desserts, and one-dish casseroles are likewise time-savers. Time is a huge factor in food consumption, one often overlooked by dietitians and nutritionists who dole out advice on healthy eating. Foodies, too, seem to miss the time limitations placed on many of the nation's amateur food preparers. Shauna Ahern talks of shopping like the Europeans, going to market each day, buying what is available and freshest that day, and then planning a menu around it. Is that really a practical option for a working mother who has to fit in homework, soccer practice, and household chores

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at the end of her nine-to-five job as well as get a meal on the table for her family? Probably not. Working parents often rely on processed foods and prepared foods to bridge the time gap. Even if they know the food pyramid and what is recommended, sometimes “healthy” is just not a practical option in their lives. The time to shop daily in order to have the freshest foods to prepare is not feasible, so these men and women depend on canned and frozen foods that have longer shelf lives.

Race and the White Trash Diet

Though time factors are often ignored in discussions of healthy eating by food elitists, considerations of culture and the impact that it can have on foodways are often even less discreetly ignored. Discussions of “ethnic food” occasionally run into the topic of obesity, and sometimes the reverse is even true. Rare, though, is the discussion of healthy eating detoured into a genuine conversation about how contrary to health are many of our valued cultural associations and connections to food. However, both professional and amateur cooks the world over recognize the importance of cultural connotation in food preparation, service, and enjoyment. What the white trash dinner party does, albeit in a less than fully informed fashion, is reintroduce this vital component of food consumption, for though the party may be mostly about class, it is also most certainly about race. Matt Wray, author of *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*, notes that “Blacks may have invented and used the term *poor white trash* as an act of symbolic violence and micropolitical protest, but it was literate, middle-class and elite whites who invested its meaning with social power, granting it the powers of social stigma and prejudice and enforcing its discriminatory effects with regard to labor” (43). Most assuredly, regardless who utters the term “white trash,” it denotes people who are white but who have failed to capitalize on white privilege. Wray insists that part of the term’s biting power is that it *is* a racial slur (3).

Mickler’s *White Trash Cookbook*, oddly enough, is sprinkled with soul food recipes, recipes typically treated as synonymous with traditional African American foodways. For example, there are six separate recipes for greens, three of them collard. There are recipes for fried catfish, chick-

en feet, pork chops, and red beans and rice, and several of the recipes list their origins with the ubiquitous “Mammy.” Mickler attempts to draw a distinction between white trash cuisine and soul food, writing in his introduction:

White Trash food is not as highly seasoned [as soul food], except in the coastal areas of South Carolina, Georgia, and North Florida, and along the Gulf coasts of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. It’s also not as greasy and you don’t cook it as long. Of course, there’s no denying that Soul Food is a kissing cousin. (3)

Then, too, there is a startling picture, right in the middle of the book titled *White Trash Cooking*, of an elderly black man dressed in overalls, sitting near an outdoor cooking fire, petting a somber looking hound dog. Perhaps the photo is included simply as a means to suggest a certain kind of inclusiveness, though with recipe titles like “Yankee Cream Gravy,” “Yankee Puddin,” “Baked Indian Puddin,” and “Tar Babies,” the cookbook’s attempt at photographic inclusion seems a bit counterproductive. And lest it seem as though the phrase “white trash” has been so overused that it no longer carries any racial signifier, *Yahoo! Answers* online forum held this conversation:

Question: “I have been invited to a trailer park, white trash party. What should I bring since I will be the only black man there?”

Answer: “You better bring a gun; white folks crazy.” (“I Have Been Invited...”)

The South and the White Trash Diet

In addition to its overt connections to race, the term “white trash” invokes a specified geography much of the time, for, like “hillbilly,” “cracker,” “redneck,” and “lubber,” writes Wray, there are strong associations of the rural South connected to any mention of “poor white trash.” This strong—albeit confusing—connection to the South is apparent in discussions of white trash cuisine. For example, the three ingredients that Mickler argues “set White Trash cooking aside from other kinds of cooking” are saltmeat, cornmeal, and molasses; these are widely acknowledged staples of Southern fare. Mickler also argues that cast iron “skillets, dutch ovens, and cornbread pans . . . are the only utensils that give you that real

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White Trash flavor and golden brown crust” (4). Compare that declaration to the spread in the January 2010 issue of *Southern Living* titled “Fall in Love with Cast Iron,” which asserts that cast iron is “a regional icon that will boost your reputation as a savvy cook” (Natalie Kelly Brown 104). In the same issue, two recipes for chicken and dumplings appear, and Mickler’s “Chicken Stew,” minus a few fresh herbs, is a dead ringer for one of the two. Paula Deen, a television chef star who has capitalized on the spectacle of over-the-top Southern cooking, in her September/October 2010 issue of *Cooking with Paula Deen*, includes recipes for Brunswick Stew, pork chops, and banana pudding, all of which are likewise included in Mickler’s cookbook.

While Paula Deen in her Southern cooking spectacle sometimes presents recipes for unusual meats such as gator tail, it is doubtful these proteins will make an appearance in the more upscale *Southern Living* magazine. However, *White Trash Cooking* includes recipes for possum, cooter (turtle), and gator tail. These ingredients are a little too exotic for most mainstream Southern eaters. And, though soul food has room for some fairly unusual dishes such as chitlins and pigs’ feet, possum and turtle too closely resemble road kill to be considered viable soul food options. It is not even completely clear whether or not Mickler and his contributors honestly eat or expect anyone else to eat these dishes. For example, “Mama Leila’s Hand-Me-Down Oven-Baked Possum” begins with the following instructions:

After you kill the possum be careful not to let him get away. While you’re talking and planning how you going to eat him, he’s going to be slipping right from under your nose. All he was doing was playing possum. Skin him and clean him before you go another foot, then the mess is gone and he won’t get away. (45)

Because these recipes sound more like the proverbial snipe hunt than like dinner, we had our doubts that American Southerners, even the really poor ones, still eat possum. So, too, did Robert St. John, author of *Deep South Staples, Or, How to Survive in a Southern Kitchen Without a Can of Cream of Mushroom Soup*. He writes, “As long as I have lived in the South I have never eaten a possum. No one I know has ever eaten a possum. I have nev-

er seen possum offered on a restaurant menu and I have never seen possum in the frozen meat section of a grocery store. . . . In the South, we might eat strange foods, but possum isn't one of them" (71). We read this passage by St. John and felt validated in our suspicion that Mickler and company were presenting a farce with their possum recipe. However, just twenty-three pages later, St. John admits that though he stands by his claim that he neither ate nor knew of the eating of possums, once he went on record as a disbeliever, "I met people who had eaten possum. A lot of people" (94). Thus, it seems that not only do a good many Southerners eat possum, but it seems equally likely, given St. John's middle-class roots and inclination toward high-end Southern cuisine, that many of the possum connoisseurs he has lately encountered are lower-class. Enter Mickler and "Aunt Donnah's Roast Possum," which directs cooks to "stuff possum . . . truss like a fowl . . . [and] put in roasting pan with bacon across back" (45).

Dinner Partygoers Imagine the White Trash Diet

Stuffed possum, however, is a far cry for what passes for white trash food at the average themed dinner party. White trash dinner party cuisine looks like food popular amongst working mothers of the 1970s. Take this partial menu, for example, suggested online by Squidoo's "Trailer Trash Redneck Theme Party": "TV dinners, Spam, tater tots, pork rinds, pigs-in-a-blanket, macaroni & cheese, and beef jerky." What is strange about this menu is that it does not seem to be about poverty. Or, at least, it is not *just* about poverty. This is not overly expensive food, it is true, but it is also not the kind of food you can hunt or forage, as is a possum, poke salad, or any of the other wild game dishes included in *White Trash Cooking*. It is not particularly Southern, either. It is food that is fast in preparation, stores easily, and does not take much imagination. It is the kind of cooking done by the overworked and underappreciated multi-tasking parent of limited means. This diet is a continuation of the processed food boom of the 1950s, and the widespread acceptance of that diet by the American public during that time period across class lines.

Because it implies a shift away from domesticity that coincided with second-wave feminism, the above menu invokes *That 70s Show*

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(1998-2006) at least as much as *Roseanne* (1988-1997), and perhaps that is the lesson. If Americans' fear of talking about class has made it all but impossible to discuss anything but the highly fluid and ambiguous middle-class, then they likely *do not know* what the very poor amongst us eat. Even Mickler prefers humor and backwoods pride to an outright discussion of the poverty birthing many of the recipes in his book, though one recipe, in particular, ruptures the veil. Called "Pore Folk Soup," it is a recipe that is decidedly about hunger, for its ingredients are milk, soda crackers, salt, and pepper. In keeping with the rest of the book, though, Mickler and/or his contributor has chosen to disguise the pathos behind the recipe by introducing the recipe as a meal designed for "a light supper" (27). Light, indeed! This recipe has the trappings of wolves at the door; it is a cup of milk away from being the non-meal meal of crackers and ketchup offered up in the literary text closely associated with white trash culture, Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*.

Conclusion

In American culture, food is not simply fuel used to fortify our bodies for survival, but has become laden with signification that links directly with social class. Americans reveal and project their lifestyles with the food choices they make on a daily basis. While it seems simple enough to generalize about the cuisine of different social classes in American culture, closer examination of actual consumption reveals that food choice is complicated and burdened with ideology. Among the middle- and upper-classes, three foodie ideologies emerge: the whole foods diet, the locavore diet, and the fine dining/specialty ingredients diet. The whole foods diet signifies a concern for health and a desire for food to provide wholesome nourishment instead of factory chemicals to the body. The locavore diet focuses more heavily on environmental concerns along with health concerns. The locavore desires to leave a smaller carbon footprint by limiting the length of the distribution chain of his food, and at the same time fill his body with locally grown and what he or she considers to be more wholesome nutrition. The fine dining/specialty ingredients dieter has little regard for food ethics, and is more concerned with the message embedded

in the food consumed. For this eater, food signifies the trappings of wealth, and the more rare and expensive the ingredients, the more entrenched he or she becomes in the higher social class with which he or she identifies. However, these are not firm food boundaries, and there exists much fluidity among these eaters. This fluidity is exemplified in the booming popularity of the white trash dinner party where middle- and upper-class eaters join in a ritual of the carnivalesque featuring an evening of indulgence where the food rules that they purport to observe in their daily lives are suspended for the event, and they can ingest foods that would ordinarily be forbidden in the show of control and abstinence with food that they make in their daily lives.

The choice to class slum instead of class splurge with a table laden with expensive, rich, and unusual delicacies is an interesting one. Class slumming through food selection occurs for a myriad of reasons. Many of the attendees can recall eating these foods happily in the processed food-laden tables of their childhoods in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. The white trash dinner party represents comfort food that ties them to their childhood roots. More interesting is the need to distance themselves from what they perceive to be a food disaster, the white trash cuisine. It symbolizes disaster to these eaters because of its heavy reliance on processed food products. By allowing themselves to ridicule their perceived cuisine of the poor through a party meant to parody a lower social stratum, the attendees of a white trash dinner party can create for themselves a feeling of superiority over those of the lower-classes that the food elite imagine do not understand the signifying effects of food. Thus, this temporary food voyeurism into a lower social class creates a glass wall for the attendees, which allows them to enjoy the unwholesome foods they crave in a “safe” environment that promises they are separated and protected from the class these foods represent.

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Notes

¹ On her website, Halnon mentions “White Trash Mockery” as part of the overall “poor chic” movement. She does not address the white trash dinner party phenomenon, though it certainly fits, to some degree, within her definition of White Trash Mockery. Halnon writes, “White Trash Mockery objectifies and stratifies by providing a vivid spectacle of a ‘class savage otherness,’ or a class ‘below,’ in a society where lines between classes are becoming increasingly unclear.”

² This is not to suggest that there were not and are not still Americans who are thin because they are too poor to afford food. Harvey Levenstein is quick to point out that, even amidst the rampant food shortages of the Depression, members of the ruling classes were busy trying out the latest diet fads. In one particularly telling case, while their constituents were rioting over food shortages in the South, bloated members of the House of Representatives ate a “dieter’s menu,” a diet designed by a congressional doctor (3). As Levenstein summarizes the paradox of dieting during the Depression: “In the midst of the greatest economic crisis the nation had ever seen, its middle and upper classes—particularly the female members—continued to regard eating less and losing weight as an elusive goal rather than a tragedy” (11).

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