

Toby S. Jenkins uses the cultural space of the African American kitchen as a guide for creating academic spaces of liberation and inclusion.

By Toby S. Jenkins

The Culture of the Kitchen

Recipes for Transformative Education Within the African American Cultural Experience

THROUGHOUT MANY ETHNIC COMMUNITIES, culture, place, and education have always been important to each other. There are countless creative strategies and approaches to education, inclusion, and personal development that can be derived from studying cultural spaces within any culture. In this article, I look specifically at the African American experience. African American history has been situated within many types of “spaces”—farms, fields, churches, classrooms, courtrooms, juke joints, and homes. Both modest and grand, some have been places of pain. But many of these environments have been spaces of love and cultural inclusion. They have often served as the venues through which the African American community has culturally raised its youth. And they have also been the places where cultural education took place when schools were either segregated or noninclusive. In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell hooks points out that continuing to push disengaged and underserved students to “do better,” “try harder,” and “succeed” in oppressive environments may actually do more harm than good.

As educators, we must create spaces of liberation and inclusion where all students can bring their full selves and reflect on their cultural beliefs and values. Vinathe Sharma-Brymer’s construct of actionable space offers particular insight into understanding space as a developmental process for cultural growth and social resistance. Actionable space frames personal development within four types of personal “spaces”: embodied (valuing one’s personal history), reflective (contemplation on history and new information), dialogue (critical conversations), and actionable space (opportunity to engage and act within one’s culture).

I contend that, within African American culture (and many others), this type of embodiment, reflection, dialogue, and action has often taken place in many spaces outside of schools. Research may not even inform the work that is taking place in these spaces. Instead, the work is inspired by love. Researchers and educators have much to learn from community elders, hip-hop artists, spoken word poets, graffiti artists, and community activists. In addition to examining the work of individual community members to inspire us, we can also glean inspiration from nontraditional spaces themselves. The space alone can teach us valuable les-

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sons about how to create transformative and significant learning. In this article, I will explore the kitchen as a metaphorical space to inspire creative approaches for transformative education. Guided by the actionable space framework, I examine five major components of the kitchen as a cultural space: (1) a space of belonging, (2) a space of creativity and resistance, (3) a space of communion, (4) a space of comfort, and (5) a space of excellence.

Why the Kitchen as a Metaphor of Transformation?

OF ALL THE MANY SPACES that black people have occupied, one of the most complicated spaces of cultural life has undoubtedly been the kitchen. Having served as both a place to be resisted and a space in which to engage resistance, the kitchen is an interesting space in which to explore the cultural experience. From the complicated histories of the enslaved “house servant,” the stereotypical images of the “mammy,” and the use of homes as “domestic traps” for women in later years, the kitchen has in many cases been a space of oppression for women. However, it is also an endearing and beloved space where black women and men have breathed life and refreshing air into African American culture. The kitchen has literally been one of the major centers of culture—the space where culture is lovingly mixed up, given shape, and allowed to rise. In the twenty-first century, what more can we understand about the overall importance of the kitchen as an actionable space of creation, love, and struggle? And how can the kitchen teach us how to better serve and educate traditionally marginalized communities in the same way that it has served these populations for centuries? Though I concentrate on African American culture, many of these concepts intersect and overlap with other cultures and have utility for all underrepresented student populations.

A SPACE OF BELONGING (EMBODIED SPACE)

Come gather at our table.

—Unknown

HOME IS SOMETIMES ALL SOME PEOPLE HAVE. The kitchen is much more than just a room in the house, a space for a stove and fridge. Before all else, the kitchen is probably a space of belonging. When living rooms are too stuffy, family rooms too junky, and bedrooms too personal, the kitchen represents a space where everyone belongs. It is mutual ground. We all know how social gatherings go—everyone gravitates to and hangs out in the kitchen. Even those who can’t cook can eat. But in a broader and more philosophical sense, there is no marginality in the kitchen. Everyone is welcome. And so those of us who work diligently in the pursuit of social justice, equality, and belonging have much to learn from the kitchen. Those of us who value the personal and spiritual development that takes place in spaces that promote creativity and artistic expression have much to appreciate in the kitchen. And those of us who love family and seek to uplift the spirit of community can benchmark best practices right in the comfort of our own homes.

Belonging is about much more than membership and acceptance. According to Merriam-Webster’s online dictionary, to belong means to be in the right place—to be properly suited. When my four-year-old nephew (who lives in Tennessee) came to visit me for the first time at my home in Maryland, he immediately ran around the house and pointed out which room was his. There was no doubt in his mind—he belonged. There is something about a family space that automatically makes you feel that you are in the right place. You know that you are in a space of warmth and welcome. And you feel comfortable enough to stake your claim in it.

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As we understand from bell hooks' work, there are so many places in our society where oppressed and underrepresented communities do not feel welcome, whether they be schools, companies, associations, or neighborhoods. As we work to continue to build a more open, loving, and just society, we can study the foundations of nonformal cultural life spaces for ideas. Places like community centers, performing arts venues, churches, and homes are rich sources of information. These simple life spaces often make a grand impact on people's lives. In her book *Places of Learning: Media, Architecture, Pedagogy*, Elizabeth Ellsworth points to the pedagogical viability of places outside of schools:

Architects, artists, performers, media producers, and designers of content-based experiences, museum exhibitions, and public spaces are inventing . . . with pedagogical intent and they are doing so in ways that emphasize noncognitive, nonrepresentational processes and events such as movement, sensation, intensity, rhythm, passage, and self-augmenting change. (p. 6)

The idea that students can search for purpose, passion, and meaning, or engage in “self-augmenting change” inside of institutions that have historically been oppressive, exclusionary, and hostile, is at the least contradictory. When systems of authoritarian domination, unhealthy competition, sexism, racism, classism, and homophobia create the educational environment, inclusive cultural values have no room to live and breathe. Developing positive cultural efficacy in traditional and static educational environments is difficult and may ultimately be impossible. According to bell hooks' *Teaching Community*, current authoritarian practice “dehumanizes and thus shuts down the ‘magic’ that is always present when individuals are active learners. It takes the ‘fun out of study’ and makes it repressive and oppressive” (p. 43). Educational oppression not only manifests itself as a lack of access or racial and class-based segregation. Oppression is also present in classrooms where student voice and culture are deval-

ued. Again, hooks provides insight: “Many educators are concerned with the fact that, across class, black children often behave as though book-learning and being smart in school makes them ‘less black identified.’ Rarely do these educators acknowledge that equating education with whiteness is a way of thinking that most black folks acquired in predominantly white school systems” (p. 70).

Above all else, community and home “spaces” are inviting students in, keeping students engaged, and affirming students culturally. This is what often happens organically in a kitchen. Why do people feel comfortable in the kitchen, even when it's not their home, even when they can't cook at all? Some feel a sense of belonging because they can smell the aroma from several rooms away and come to the kitchen to taste something new. This has been the experience of many marginalized communities in America. After gaining the knowledge that opportunities exist, that life can be different, or, in other words, that a plentiful stew is boiling, they come forward in society for a taste of opportunity. Smells and sounds invite and draw them into the space. As a child, I can remember being in my bedroom in the afternoons and hearing the sound of ice being put into glasses. That single sound was always my signal that dinner was ready—my mother was at the final stage of dinner preparation and I could finally go into the kitchen. It was time to eat. For others, the smells coming out of the kitchen often compelled them to stop what they were doing and to find out what was cooking. In both examples, the kitchen actively sent out signals for us to come. The sounds and smells of the kitchen extend outward—beyond its walls, up stairwells, and down into basements. They reach us. They welcome us. And we come in. All types of institutions can learn from that. If an organization claims to welcome all, it must do just that. This means sending out the necessary messages, signals, sights, and sounds that entice all to come. What are you doing in your department or institution to let folks know that “Dinner is ready . . . come and get it”? And beyond sending out the signals, we must also evaluate what we are serving.

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Many families have their favorite meals—the handful of dishes that the primary chef confidently knows will elicit praise and cheers from the group. The family loves these dishes because they appeal to their unique tastes. The favorite meal in one house may not be loved next door. Favorite meals embody the particular culture of the family. The kitchen is an embodied space where people unapologetically bring who they are to the table—their likes and dislikes. Even the most brilliant and open of minds can be a stubborn eater. This is because people bring their histories with food, both good and bad, into the kitchen. Based on these experiences, they either choose or refuse to eat. The smell only whets the appetite; it is the composition of what is served that will determine if the meal will actually be consumed. This is often mirrored in K–12 schools and colleges. Educators should be like chefs, picking out the freshest of ingredients, taking time to create a gourmet meal, and finally plating the food as a work of art. When considering our most marginalized and underrepresented communities, how are their personal tastes, their histories, and personal experiences, factored into what we design and offer?

In addition to enticing aromas and appealing dishes, what else fosters a sense of belonging and embodiment in the kitchen? Many people feel a sense of belonging in the kitchen because they have a history of good cooks in their family, so they feel at home in this space. Members of a family that loves to cook and that believes in passing that talent on will probably feel comfortable in the kitchen. They can walk into anyone’s kitchen and feel more at ease in that room than any other. This is why experience and exposure is so important for young children in any field of endeavor. The more exposure that a young child is given, whether it be education, art, language, or engineering, the more comfortable they are when they encounter these things later on in life. Ask anyone who wasn’t taught how to cook how intimidating it is to prepare the first meal.

But even those who do not have the privilege to be exposed to various opportunities as a child might still find their sense of belonging eventually. They may

come to sit in the kitchen (or any space in society) because they are aware that someone in their family has worked hard to cook up an opportunity for them and so they enter and they eat (they go to school and they learn; they go to work and they perform). A previous study I published in 2009 examined contemporary definitions of culture among college-age students. I found that when it came to education in particular, many students had parents or grandparents who were denied access to quality education or any education, and so these ancestors worked to ensure that their children were provided the opportunities that they were denied. For those students, education was a primary cultural value. But the educational environment and the ethic of education were something different to the student participants. Although campus, school, and classrooms were all seen as external and sometimes negative institutional forces, nearly all students spoke about education, learning, and “going to college” as being an important value in their culture. Whether the ideal of education was valued because of the past lack of access to education by parents and grandparents or because pursuing an education was an act of continuing an important family legacy of achievement, education and culture were bound to one another. African American students and families value educational participation. No one seeks starvation—it happens to them as a circumstance of oppression.

A SPACE OF COMMUNION: COMFORT FOOD (REFLECTIVE SPACE)

Comfort food is hearty . . . food that reassures us that we will survive.

—Sarah Ban Breathnach

ASI SIT AT HOME WRITING THIS ARTICLE, I am missing my family’s annual fish fry. It happens each year in Winnsboro, South Carolina. I can remember being in awe of these large gatherings as a child—positively overwhelmed by the big personalities, the

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amazing food, and the abundance of love. It was comforting. The events and memories, histories, and heritage that we associate with food are what actually transform it into comfort cuisine. Acclaimed chef Marvin Woods, shares one of his first memories of comfort food in his 2000 book, *The New Low-Country Cooking*:

My own Southern exposure came when my family took summer road trips to the Carolinas. We'd enter my great grandmother's house to the comforting scent of a wood-burning stove. More often than not there was a meal awaiting our arrival. I savored the aromas and flavors of yellow sweet corn, freshly baked breads, fried chicken, mustard greens, and juicy ripe watermelon. (p. 1)

For many, just reading the food listed above brings comfort. Beyond remembering the savory taste of these dishes, we remember the loving hands that prepared them. We remember the meaningful conversations that were had while eating them. We remember learning critical lessons at the dinner "table" (whether that table was actually a sofa, chair, or spot on the floor). We ate, we loved, and we learned.

In my work, I affirm that one of the most important things a family or community teaches to its young is a "politic of survival." Think back to those times when your parents taught you to speak up, to defend yourself, to not let racist comments hold you back, to value your beauty despite the world around you, to choose your friends wisely, to work hard and then work even harder. At their best and even when they struggle, our families teach us how to survive in a world that seems to be stacked against us at every turn. The young adults in my previous study on culture talked vividly about how their families taught them the art of seeing love in the most loveless circumstances. They shared stories of mothers that worked long and hard jobs, grandparents that found a second wind to raise their children's children, and best friends that became "aunt" and "uncle" and pitched in to help raise a single-parented child. And even in this struggle, this life of constant financial lack, there were abundant life lessons and a pot overflowing with comfort. Home is still home even if it is in a ghetto. And so it is important to wrestle with

the concept of comfort food and the deeper meaning that it holds for us.

Comfort food is rich and it is thick in heart. Many of us are in need of enrichment—of some hearty nourishment in our lives. We associate comfort food with warming chilly climates whether it is the weather or our soul. Beyond our bellies, our lives should be filled with these types of experiences; our work should bring us this comfort, and our schools should warm us in this way. This is true for both students and the professionals that educate them. We all need comfort.

But comfort food isn't always perfect food—it is often unhealthy. Some types of comfort food clog the arteries. It wreaks such havoc that we often find ourselves sleeping after the meal in a total body shut-down. This is sometimes the way with culture, family, and community. Our communities and our lives aren't always perfect. What is good for us isn't always what we crave, and what we crave isn't always good for us. So we must learn the art of balance—to balance indulgence with restraint, individual achievement with community uplift.

We must teach some of our students that it is okay to want more education, money, and opportunity than their impoverished communities might offer, but it is also important to still love and commit to raising up those poor communities that raised them. They must wrestle with the temptation to "stuff their face" and the responsibility to share and feed the family. Too often, people from impoverished communities view success as "making it out." We must transform that into an ethic of "making it better." I believe in a sense of rootedness—despite how far your branches may grow, you always feel connected to home. This means as an educator, I must personally accept that I am not just a "professor"; I am a community daughter. And I must professionally understand that the young man in my class is not simply a "student"; he is a community son. We must appreciate the warm meaning that past recipes (life experiences and previous communities) still hold for us while exploring new healthier ways to engage those experiences in a contemporary world. As educators, it is our duty to set up an intellectual and reflective workspace that will allow all of us (educators, students, administrators) to cook up a new and comforting meaning for our lives.

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A SPACE OF CREATIVITY (DIALOGUE SPACE)

No one who cooks, cooks alone. Even at her most solitary, a cook in the kitchen is surrounded by generations of cooks past, the advice and menus of cooks present, the wisdom of cookbook writers.

—Laurie Colwin

UNDOUBTEDLY, THE KITCHEN IS A CREATIVE SPACE. It is a space of innovation. To take dry ingredients and give them life, give them a new sense of purpose is an amazing thing. And this is what we can do with ourselves, our students, and our friends. We can create a new image of what it means to be a woman, a man, a teacher, a lawyer, an executive, an activist, or a doctor. We can stir the pot of society and shake loose its hold on our psyche. During slavery, it was in the kitchen that black women reappropriated the negative connotations of being the “cook” and made it into something masterful . . . something that we now call soul food. And it was in the small and dirt-filled yard quarters that black women turned the literal leftover mess that was given to them into a meal for their families. For black people, the kitchen is a metaphor of transformation.

Photographer Prince Spells calls this ability to make something out of nothing “ghetto utility” (http://www.princespells.com/2010/09/blog-post_9876.html). Spells travels throughout Africa and Asia capturing images of so-called impoverished communities and reimagining the cultural wealth that is present in disadvantaged neighborhoods. More important, he is shooting the ingenuity of the poor—the genius that it takes to create grub out of garbage. We know now that soul food may not have been the healthiest food, but it did keep us alive. Thank God for the creativity of these women—for their resilience and unwillingness to throw in the towel or put down the pan. They cleaned, fried, baked, and stirred so that we may now roast, grill, sear, and blend.

It is my hope that just as African American quilt-making experienced a contemporary cultural apprecia-

tion, and transcended the social limits that caused them to be made in the first place, so too can the kitchen. The kitchen table was often the place where stories were told and life lessons were taught, where important cultural dialogue took place in families. What is wonderful about a table is that even with two “heads,” everyone is still sitting together in dialogue. Although those with more lived experience and wisdom are present (educators), there is still a spirit of family, love, and safety also present (community). We need this in our educational settings. And so the kitchen must become the philosophical inspiration from which we face the starvation in our lives (physical, mental, and spiritual) and fill ourselves with abundant health and sustenance. It must become the metaphor that allows us to break bread as an educational community and share both food (skills, standards, content) and knowledge (culture, spirit, purpose).

The kitchen is a debriefing space for the day’s encounters with oppression. It is an educational space where young people can be taught those things that they may never learn in school, like how to survive as a black man in America or how to negotiate the world when you are both black and a woman. “Space” to share the frustrations of their experience, to criticize the social structures that oppress them (even if this includes school), and to learn real strategies to resist and destroy oppression must be included in the educational experience for students of color. Our family’s and community’s old sayings, lessons, wise tales, beliefs, and ways of being, knowing, and doing serve as our cookbook for life—educators should not discard them as if they are old, worn books.

A SPACE OF RESISTANCE (ACTIONABLE SPACE)

Meals and memories are made here.

—Unknown

I LOVE THE IMAGERY OF THE KITCHEN, of home, of family as a space of resistance—philosophically and literally. It is more than a metaphor. As

a model and lived experience, family *is* a space and venue through which we learn and view the most basic forms and images of resistance. Beyond appreciating the many ways that black people in general, and black women in particular, have used the kitchen as a tool of resistance, today we need to actually resist the pressure to resist the kitchen. We need to resist the notion that leaders, educators, and artisans reside outside of the homestead. We need to talk about family in school and college. We must begin to give voice to nontraditional knowledge production.

We need to resist the idea that the barometer for intelligence is set outside of our loving homes. I have earned a PhD, but the education that my parents gave me was important—critical, even. We must stop encouraging students to view making a home place and having a life purpose as an either/or scenario and embrace it as a both/and opportunity. We need to resist the idea that to spend time at home cooking and cleaning for a family requires a sacrifice of identity. My mother was her full and authentic self. She never felt the need to choose an identity. Her success was experiencing all of who she was—not privileging the help that she gave others over the help that she offered to her own family.

The kitchen is one of the most important rooms in the house. It is literally the lifeblood, the link to our health. I have spent many years researching the role of diet and nutrition in health care. I also recently faced a diagnosis of both lupus and breast cancer during my first year as a professor. It was a challenging way to start a new job. But of all the professional and life changes that I have made in order to adequately address my health issues, the most important has been transitioning to a vegetarian and organic lifestyle. What I know for sure is that my kitchen is as important as my doctor's office and much more important than my campus office. When preparing a meal for family, cooks are doing more than making meatloaf; they are chopping, blending, and stewing the gift of life. Spiritually, they are doing more than cooking a casserole; they are feeding hungry bodies. And, in a spirit of servitude, all

hungry bodies matter. Many educators will organize an opportunity for students to volunteer at a soup kitchen feeding the homeless a healthy meal, and then feed the students pizza when they get back to campus. We must do better. Whether they are oppressed or privileged, all hungry bodies deserve healthy whole food. The kitchen, whether on our campus or in our communities, is the last place we need to resist. And one of the most essential lessons all of us will learn is how to cook. It is a skill that literally goes a very long way.

When I asked my mother to write a poem to end my article, I was excited to hear her creation. As I listened to it, tears came to my eyes as she talked about our past Saturday night steak dinners and my father (Uncle Bunky) playing “monster” with my cousin Pedro and I. Those are such good memories for me. Those family dinners and family games were important rituals in the small little world in which my cousin and I lived our seven-year-old lives. They were everything. And now at age 35, thinking back on those good times, I realize that they still are everything to me. I cherish them. My parents organically created what so many educators work hard to establish in school systems—a place of comfort, a space of belonging, and an opportunity for multiple generations to engage one another. Bravo, mom and dad—I definitely learned from the best.

A SPACE OF EXCELLENCE: PUTTIN' YOUR FOOT IN IT

For the foot that you put into the life work that you stew, we say thank you!

—Toby S. Jenkins

THE SAYING “YOU PUT YOUR FOOT IN IT” is an African American cultural expression pertaining to excellence. When cooks put their foot in it, they have put every bit of who they are and every ounce of

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skill that they have into the meal. In other words, they have given us all they've got from head to toe. I appreciate this saying because I appreciate the ethic of excellence as a key component of African American culture. When we hear the word *culture*, the concepts that most readily come to mind are food, art, ritual, folklore, and spirituality. But, as my previous study discovers, contemporary generations of people of color are redefining culture in very complex and interesting ways. From culture as a politic of survival to culture as a belief in working hard, "culture" is transcending the basic categories of an experience (food, art, spirituality) to be appreciated for the outcomes of each experience (community, social awareness, and love). Culture is about not only what we do and what we produce, but also what we believe. It is the physical agreement of our "subjects" and "verbs" in life. In other words, culture is the point in which our principles and actions meet. One of the most interesting examples of this is culture as an "ethic of excellence." Undoubtedly, we can look throughout African and African American history and come upon countless examples that illustrate a culture dedicated to excellence, honoring such characteristics as determination, resilience, innovation, creativity, and craftsmanship. We work both hard and well. But what I find most interesting and inspiring is the boldness with which we name and exclaim this excellence. We don't just eat the dinner and think, "This is delicious." Instead, we yell out to the chef, "This is fantastic! You put your foot in this one!"

This saying holds so much relevance beyond the kitchen. It is the ethic that drove families to put their feet to pavement and walk across state lines to find their dislocated families after emancipation. It is the ethic that W. E. B. Dubois spoke of in *The Souls of Black Folk*, when he shared the stories of poor black communities coming together to house the one educated person in the community so they could have a teacher and a school in the early 1900's. It is the spirit that kept so many women and men working in mills and factories under dire conditions. It is the fire

that continues to burn in young black souls that are bringing themselves and their families to college for the first time. It is the heart of the black entrepreneur and the soul of the black businesswoman climbing a shaky career ladder and taking a hammer to a tinted glass ceiling. Excellence is African American culture. And so a dedication to excellence should drive those that educate young people of color. It is not enough to be committed to social justice—be excellent in how you serve justice.

This article is written in a spirit of love and appreciation for all of the sugar and spice that has been poured, shaken, and mixed into the African American experience. This article remembers all of the tactics, strategies, and incredible nuggets of inspiration that culture can offer to educational transformation. We need to do more than just celebrate culture and we must go beyond simply teaching culture—to truly transform educational practice, we must embody culture. We can start by simply turning on the light in the kitchen. And so as an educator, I start by remembering my own cultural experience, philosophically walking back into my mother's kitchen, and remembering what it is like to cultivate an environment of love.

KITCHEN WINDOW MEMORIES

by Joyce E. Jenkins

When I look out of my kitchen window, what do I see?

Visions of the past staring back at me

A garden that's seen many seasons come and go

It feels like it's been such a long time ago

There's the playpen in the middle of our big backyard

Culture is about not only what we do and what we produce, but also what we believe. It is the physical agreement of our "subjects" and "verbs" in life. In other words, culture is the point in which our principles and actions meet.

Little children playing as I stand guard
Steaks on the grill smoking hot
They'll soon be ready for the patio spot
Eating, good laughter, and play
Making memories on such a wonderful day
After eating, the children are ready to play
The "old monster" game in a special way
Uncle Bunky began to roar like a big old creature
Oh how the children loved this feature
Little feet began to run, laugh, and shout
While the big old monster roamed all about
I can see us getting together at the end of the game
Ready for the family evening walk on Downtown Main
I wish I could call those times back into place

But as a mom, I can see it's all a part of life's fleeting race!

To create a true home away from home and to establish an authentic cultural environment, we must create an educational album of beloved memories like the ones my mother shares here in her poem. What cultural memories will you make on your campus?

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