

Chit'lins and Champagne: Food, Class, and Sexuality in Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her*

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Abstract

In her novel, *Loving Her*, which was groundbreaking in its time for its illustration of interracial love between two women, Ann Allen Shockley uses food to reveal elements of African American Southern cultural identity, but also to elevate Black female self-expression and other manifestations of

gender development. Food is also used by Shockley as a vehicle for showing the powerful conflicts and disparities that often exist beneath the surface of romantic relationships, and especially the ways they are informed by gender, race, and class ideologies.

Food habits, rituals, behaviors, and choices, along with the reasons behind them, are fundamental to understanding human interactions. In literature, food practices—including the acquisition, preparation, presentation and consumption of food—help to define characters, illuminate cultural and regional specificities, and shed light on the development of women’s identities. Sometimes food is a central part of the narrative and other times it is not. For little known Southern American fiction writer Ann Allen Shockley, food is used to mark time and place and to reveal disparities of race, class, gender and ideology.

Loving Her is the first novel by an African American author to deal explicitly with an interracial woman-loving relationship and the first to feature a Black lesbian as its central character (Lane v)¹. Shockley spends time in her work detailing commonplace aspects of women’s everyday lives using material and expressive culture, particularly food. Dining rituals and customs serve as subtexts for larger issues and challenge linear views of Black American foodways.² By linear I mean most often when African Americans and foods are discussed, the focus is on those dishes largely associated with the American south: lima beans and corn, collards, kale and other greens, fried chicken, chit’lins, pork chops, and sweet potato pie with whipped cream (Whitehead and Williams-Forson 425-37). Yet Shockley also includes lamb chops, buffalo meat, ham and rye, Hamburger Helper and beer, as well as scotch, coffee and hot tea. This essay suggests that Shockley uses food to reveal tensions between people of different races, genders and sexual orientations and also to reveal more about Black people in America by confronting race, gender, and class ideologies. Moreover, it illustrates how Shockley uses food to highlight aspects of Black Southern cultural identity, female self-expression and gender development, and the conflicts that often exist beneath the surface of human relationships.

¹ For more on the use of the term same-gender loving or woman loving see Cole and Guy-Sheftall (165); Melancon, “Towards an Aesthetic of Transgression” (643) and fn. 2, 3, and 4 for more on the term as an analytic.

² For a reading of some of the ways food operates in another Shockley novel, *Say Jesus and Come to Me*, see Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs*, chapter 5.

Loving Her centers on Renay Davis, a musician, who marries her boyfriend after she becomes pregnant from forced sex on their first date. Over the course of seven years, Renay finds herself in a loveless marriage to a habitually unemployed and abusive alcoholic, Jerome Lee. The novel opens with Renay fleeing her home in the middle of the night after having experienced domestic violence. With her daughter Denise she makes her way to shelter at the home of a wealthy white female writer who Renay met while playing piano at a local supper club, and with whom she has begun an intimate relationship. Upon moving in, Renay is clear that they need to hide this aspect of their friendship by pretending that she is a domestic worker; a role that would have been normal for Black women at that time to assume. To reinforce this, Renay digs “deeply into the kitchen cabinets and huge refrigerator for food. She came up with a dinner of broiled lamb chops, canned peas, instant mashed potatoes, and pear salad. They ate with undisguised delight. It seemed like a banquet” (4). We learn right away that Renay will be assuming the role of primary food preparer since “Terry didn’t like to cook” (4). In one of the few critiques of the novel wherein food is considered, Stefanie Dunning argues:

Her first act upon fleeing her relationship with Jerome Lee is to make a meal. In actual practice this differs little from the way she was expected to cook for Jerome Lee [...] [O]stensibly the narrative goal is to move Renay from a vexed domestic space to a liberatory one; yet the history of servitude which marks Black and white women’s relationships resonates with Renay’s assumption of domestic duties. (76)

While Dunning makes a valid point in that the histories of Black women’s kitchen servitude cannot be disregarded, she also limits all Black women’s abilities to cook for their interracial partners as circumscribed by racial history. As argued by Dunning, this history cannot be overcome by household variation or the ways in which feeding work helps to create gender, sexual, ethnic, racial, and class identities. Reading the

novel in the way suggested by Dunning forecloses on seeing Renay's cooking as a viable contribution to the household. Moreover, it reduces the inclusion of foodways and dining rituals to signifiers of race and gender and overlooks the pragmatic reasons for Renay assuming the domestic duties. She has a child for whom she has concern. More than once, mention is made that Terry and Renay begin eating only after Denise says "Mommy, I'm hungry" (5). In this context, it makes sense that Renay would assume the role as primary cook because she has to care for her daughter first. Additionally, this is Renay's way of contributing to the household in the absence of working outside the home.

This is part of what Candace West and Don Zimmerman mean when they talk about "doing gender". They maintain gender is about relationships and social interactions rather than a set of traits one embodies (140). Renay is knowledgeable about the invisible work involved in feeding others because she is accustomed to performing this task for her family. This is not only because she was forced to assume this role when living with Jerome, but as a wife and mother she was the primary family caretaker. She made the grocery lists, shopped, and cooked and seemingly also performed all of the positive emotional labor. With Terry she again resumes the role of feeding the family but she also takes on the domestic tasks to camouflage the true nature of their relationship. In short, Renay's identification as a woman is not the only reason for the assignment—in this instance doing gender is also to conceal the same gender loving relationship in which she is involved. In describing how one person tends to assume the dominant caretaker role in lesbian/gay households, Christopher Carrington writes: "In most lesbigay families [...] one person emerges as a fairly easily identified meal planner [...] Planning for most families means thinking ahead, perhaps a day or two or even a week, but in many cases just a few hours before a meal" (260). This social and interactional work that Renay employs is directly tied to her desire to please her friend and lover, to feed her child, and to protect the reality of her new family dynamic from curious eyes. Though Terry's writing brings in more money than Renay's piano playing, we cannot assume that their household functions under a patriarchal model of hierarchy. The power here is ambiguous because it is a practical

arrangement.³ Terry offers her home, kitchen, and occasional financial resources, and Renay provides nurturing, partly in the form of meals. The feeding work, then, should probably be read as more multivariant or circumscribed by a host of issues—including sexuality and race, as well as gender.

This is one element of food's functionality—it is capable of highlighting complexities of gender, but also race, class, and sexuality. Shockley emphasizes Renay's skills and expertise in order to disturb the notion that she has simply substituted one space of servitude for another. To accomplish this, Shockley sets up the meals early in the novel. A skilled cook can usually pull together a satisfying meal in a short period of time, with a few ingredients, hence Renay's ability to scrounge around in the kitchen and compose a quick meal of broiled lamb chops, peas, mashed potatoes, and pear salad. In this new family configuration, Renay is given the chance to confront directly what Alycee Lane describes as "the repressive implications of the so-called Black aesthetics of her day" (xv). Though Lane is referring to Jerome's dismay that Renay seems unable to play the kinds of "funky" music he likes, her observation has salience to food. By allowing Jerome to castigate Renay's piano playing (and by extension her cooking), with the intent to demean and hurt, Shockley is exposing the ways in which Black women's aesthetic work is often unnecessarily criticized, belittled, and disregarded. The piano was and still is a symbol of middle-class values partly due to the discipline and perseverance needed to play, but also the significance of these virtues to Victorian society. Renay's ability to play suggests she is different from Jerome in terms of class and awareness. In the Foreword to the novel Lane writes "not only does Shockley take issue with Black cultural nationalism's narrow definitions of what constitutes *Black* art, but more critically reads Black aesthetics as a masculinist, heterosexist discourse, one that constrains Black women's creativity" (xiv).

Because of racist stereotypes surrounding African American food cultures (especially in the United States), it might be assumed that because Renay is a Southern migrant to the North she is only conversant in the particular set of foods that constitutes 'Black cuisine'. But

³ I thank Carole Counihan for this insight.

Shockley defies this limited characterization by giving Renay the ability to generate breakfasts of fried country ham slices, eggs sunny-side up, round German fried potatoes and tomato salad. Through food preparation, Renay is given an opportunity to exercise improvisational riffing in the kitchen and in doing so to give and also to receive pleasure.⁴ Shockley is also allowing Black women the space—within the limited social dictums of the Black pride movement—to self-define and to subvert race, class, gender and sexuality norms and so to expand what we understand *Blackness* to mean. The 1960s and early 1970s (the time period in which the novel was both set and published) witnessed the heterogeneity of Blackness being called into question in many areas, not the least of which was in the kitchen. By situating the novel during this era, Shockley draws our attention to a tumultuous time in American history when a multiplicity of definitions and discourses surrounded what it meant to be a woman, Black, and/or gay. Embroiled in these polemics on identity politics are also those of cultural misappropriation, namely the contested term of “soul food.” Written in response to the statement that African Americans had no distinctive foodways patterns, Amiri Baraka in his collection of social commentaries titled *Home: Social Essays*, describes most of what is known today as typical southern foods—hoppin’ John (black-eyed peas and rice), fried fish and chicken, buttermilk biscuits, salted and peppered grits, dumplings, lima beans and corn, string beans, okra, smoky, hot barbecue, and most anything coming from the pig from neck bones to maw, pork chops to fatback. Sweet tea or lemonade and a large wedge of sweet potato pie round out the description.⁵ But, through the decision she makes to leave her husband (a decision somewhat unpopular during this time period), the ways she manages the household as a single mother, while holding down a part-time job, along with the broadened food choices that she embraces, Renay reveals herself to be somewhat cosmopolitan in her thinking. She has a broad

⁴ Sometimes Terry refers to Renay as “chef,” an accolade that well elevates Renay above a common cook.

⁵ See Amiri Baraka’s essay in *Home* and Doris Witt’s book *Black Hunger: Food and Politics of U.S. Identity*; especially the chapter, “Eating Chitterlings Is Like Going Slumming: Soul Food and its Discontents”. See also her fn. 6 in the same chapter.

aesthetic sense of self and will not be subordinate to either a Black man or a white woman.

As opposed to reading Renay's meal preparation as household drudgery or reinscribing her as a domestic worker, it is possible and maybe even necessary to see Renay's cooking as empowering, full of creativity, and offering a space of an "embodied politics of resistance" (127). This kind of resistance, which often manifests in vernacular traditions, including food and foodways, stems from E. Patrick Johnson's concept of "quare". Quaring acknowledges ready differences among gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color while simultaneously recognizing how "racism and classism affect how the world is experienced and theorized. Quaring "queer" validates ways of knowing as both "discursively mediated and as historically situated and materially conditioned" (3). Of importance to this analysis is Johnson's emphasis that "as a 'theory in the flesh' quare necessarily engenders a kind of identity politics, one that acknowledges difference within and between particular groups" (3). Renay, then, quares the kitchen space at Terry's because her Black queer/lesbian identity challenges ideas of compulsory heterosexuality that is comfortable with women cooking intimate dinners only for men, not other women. Furthermore, Renay's character rejects the controlling image that presents Black women who cook in fancy kitchens as merely 'the help'.

In several instances, Shockley's portrayal of Renay subverts what society—then and now—often thinks of Black women: as either licentious or asexual, overly grateful and accommodating, or as bad mothers who are non-contributors to society unless they are cooking and cleaning. Instead, Shockley presents a character who cares about her child and her domestic tranquility, who is sexually and culinarily curious, and who loves piano music and other fine aspects of living that provide peace of mind. These latter points are illustrated by the way Shockley portrays Renay's sense of contentment as she moves through the domestic rituals of the day. On Monday morning, Renay feeds her daughter an everyday American breakfast of fruit, cereal and milk, and Terry grapefruit juice, eggs, toast, and black coffee. She then drops off her daughter at school and heads to the grocery store, all tasks that most

any suburban housewife or single mother might identify with. But, Shockley takes time to make it clear that Renay is not being ‘kept’ by Terry, even though she and her daughter are living in her house. Renay works part-time, an important addition to the argument that Renay is making clear through the deliberate choices in her domestic arrangements. In the narrative voice Shockley writes, “Yes, she *did* have to *work*. To let Denise know she was contributing to their keep, and to preserve her independence” (41, emphasis in original). This is an important narrative device because Black women have historically been portrayed as lacking in domestic choices other than to work in drudgery for others and, more importantly, being dependent upon the state for resources because they are lazy and do not want to work. Through Renay’s character, Shockley suggests a different interpretation.

Take, for instance, Shockley’s discussion of Renay performing the mundane task of grocery shopping. Renay is captivated as “she took her time wheeling the cart slowly up and down the sparkling aisles, noting the contrast between this market and the markets where she usually shopped” (7). It is more than the physical landscape that is contrasted—clean as opposed to dirty floors, fresh versus decayed scraps of produce and wilted vegetables, red meats rather than those “tinged with brown” (7)—it is also the symbolic representations of Blackness. Renay represents the few Black women who, at the time, managed to live somewhere other than in the government subsidized housing, work in jobs other than back-breaking domestic work, and care for their children in a way that was rewarding to all. Furthermore, the grocery stores Renay has left behind serve as stand-ins to the life of doom and gloom that Renay has escaped.

These contrasts symbolized by the supermarket landscape—brightness and darkness, dirty and clean, rich and poor—actually begin with that first dinner made by Renay at Terry’s and they reflect both an expansion of what is typically seen as a meal eaten by Black people and a return to what is familiar for Renay. That meal was reminiscent of her upbringing where food seems to have been plentiful, provided by her hard working mother and deceased father’s pension. The lamb chops, peas, potatoes, and pear salad reflected a middle-class, well-structured

meal consisting of meat, vegetable, starch, and dessert; the kind that came into vogue on the post-WWII Homefront, especially in suburbia. Many of these meals were made all the more accessible in grocery stores and supermarkets because instant and frozen / canned foods offered conveniences for women who had gone to work during the war and had no desire to return to kitchens and hot stoves.⁶ Terry's instant potatoes and canned peas are soon replaced, however, by fresher ingredients that Renay finds at the supermarket. Alongside lettuce, tomato, root vegetables and meats Renay finds herself drawn to "the exotic food section, picking up caviar, terrapin stew, turtle soup, and rattlesnake meat... Bristol Cream..." as well as "dainty pink and white frosted cupcakes sprinkled with nuts" for her daughter (Shockley 8). It is important here that Shockley does not include foods that are considered stock representations of Southern African American culture at the outset—fried chicken and fish, ham, candied yams, lima beans, greens, macaroni and cheese, succotash, watermelon, cornbread, and so on. It is not so much that Renay has disdain for Blackness; instead, from the beginning Renay's character shows us different versions of what it means to be Black in America. The plethora of new and unusual canned foods represents different choices and options in Renay's life. The much-expanded grocery store, with its many possibilities, enables Shockley to portray Renay as capable of *wanting* more opportunities for herself and her child and of being unafraid of experimentation. Returning to Johnson's formulation of "quaring," the grocery store, like the kitchen at Terry's, can be read as more than simply a repository for foodstuffs. It may be read as a space that allows Renay to transgress the Black community's food norms, quaring her race, gender, and food culture. At the very least, in that space Renay is also able to return to and/or perform an upper middle-class status. Johnson explains:

[T]here exists a politics of taste among African Americans that is performed so as to dislodge fixed perceptions about who one is or where one is from [...] performing a certain

⁶ A good read on the role of convenience foods in expanding women's choices is Inness (17-38).

middle-class style has enabled African Americans to ‘pass’ in various and strategically savvy ways.” (21)⁷

The supermarket and Terry’s kitchen become conduits for different manifestations of self-expression, including the many ways of cooking foods like rattlesnake meat.

On the surface, it might appear that Renay has forgotten her culinary roots, but this is not the case. Nowhere is this better exemplified than when Terry and Renay decide to leave the city for a move to the countryside. To celebrate their move and sense of newfound freedom, Renay cooks a special dinner—a chitterling (chit’lin) dinner—which Shockley introduces this way:

‘What’s that I smell?’ Terry asked, wrinkling her nose.
‘I’m introducing you tonight to what is commonly referred to as soul food. That there what y’all is smelling is known as Black folks’ delight—hog nuts, or Kentucky oysters. Depend on where you are from and what you want to call them.
We’re also having turnip greens, potato salad and cold-water cornbread like my mother used to make’. (Shockley 86)

By invoking her mother and sharing this food, Renay brings Terry closer to learning more about the inner workings of some Black communities. As they eat, Renay instructs Terry on how to chew chit’lins and how to season them—“You know, there’s really an art to cooking [...] You have to cook them slowly with onions, celery stalks and a dash of lemon” (86). After Terry tastes them and frowns, Renay coaches her to “put some mustard vinegar and hot sauce on them. They help to bring out the flavor” (86). With these instructions, Renay is both introducing Terry to more of her cultural background and subverting cultural norms because although this is not a fine dining meal, the women

⁷ This point may well be true for Renay given the description of her childhood home as possessing the furnishings of a middle-class life. It was only after Jerome sold her prized possession, the old piano given to her by her mother—the holder of her “childhood hopes and adult dreams in one treasured package”—that Renay felt a dramatic line had been crossed and she therefore fled her less than ideal marriage. See *Loving Her*, (29); Johnson, fn. 15 (21).

treat it as such, eating by candlelight on a table set with fine linen and silver, while sipping champagne.

This culinary performance, that juxtaposes a modest food like chit'lins being eaten in a setting of elegance and formality, is interesting for its revelations and its disruptions as much as for Shockley's placement of the scene. As mentioned, the chit'lin meal occurs after the couple has moved into a new living space. But it also occurs after Terry's recurring housekeeper mistakes Renay as the new maid. After Renay tells Terry about the incident and Terry apologizes, Renay mockingly replies, "No need, ma'am. Y'all got you' a cleanin' woman right h'yar wif y'all, and sho' nuff!" (54). With the chit'lins and champagne dinner Shockley may be pushing back against those stereotyped images of Black women by allowing Renay to engage in what E. Patrick Johnson calls a 'performance of self' or the ability to control and create the image she wants. As Johnson notes, "For the disenfranchised, the recognition, construction and maintenance of self-image and cultural identity function to sustain, even when social systems fail to do so" (11).

It is a Janus face performance, always looking forward while simultaneously looking backward; hence, the chit'lins and the champagne do the work of both reinforcing oppressive systems but also resisting the reduction of Black food consumption solely to pork entrails. The champagne disrupts the soul food / Southern / nationalist paradigm, which is seen by some as an example of historical oppression inasmuch as it reflects the more modest aspects of African American history and culture. At the same time, the chit'lins disrupt the respectability implied by a fine dining meal because the hog's intestines are not generally considered part of this formal eating experience. The chit'lins bring a kind of tension to this perfectly ordered scene set in the idyllic countryside. This contrasting symbolism may be an articulation of Shockley's ambivalence about Renay and Terry's relationship, especially in the racially charged era in which they are living. The chit'lins serve to remind Terry that Renay *is* Black and that she is aware of her Blackness and what it means for her in this relationship. If at any given moment Renay can be mistaken for Terry's maid then her life is more circumscribed by

racial politics than either of them is willing to acknowledge, no matter if they live in the city or the country.

Although Renay flees to Terry, it would be a mistake to read Terry as a white savior. A better interpretation may be to see Terry as the vehicle through which Renay is finally able to expand her undeveloped but long-hidden desire for other women. With Terry, Shockley suggests that Black women have the right to choose who they want to love, simultaneously speaking back to the belief that women need to be submissive to misogynistic constructions of family. Families come in many forms—Renay, Terry, and Denise are a family. Renay, Jerome, and Denise were less so. In the family triad formulation that involves Terry, all kinds of foods bring joy and freedom. With Jerome, this is much less the case and Shockley uses another food scene to highlight this point. Jerome was prone to disappearing for days and weeks on end. So frequent and erratic was his behavior that Renay was forced to find a part-time job. After one of Jerome's especially long absences he arrives at home with a friend Stew, who asks Jerome "Man, how'd you git such a good-looking woman?" (23). Ignoring his friend, Jerome demands his wife make them a home cooked meal rather than the TV dinners she has warmed. Hurrying to the store, Renay returns to cook a fried chicken dinner. But by the time dinner was ready, Stew had to leave and Jerome had passed out (23-4). In the scene immediately following this one, Renay heads to the supper club for work and is later offered a ride home by Terry. It is the first night that Renay and Terry sleep together and the first time Renay has an orgasm (28).

It is provocative of Shockley to place Jerome's brutish behavior concerning the chicken dinner in direct opposition to the sexual climax Renay experiences with Terry. In doing so, she problematizes the idealized heterosexual family model that many nationalists espoused. Marriage could easily promise Black women a life of violence and subservience instead of harmony and bliss. In an ironic twist, Jerome actually destabilizes the Norman Rockwell 'Freedom from Want' myth by turning his back on the family meal and thus wages a commentary on the narrative of a stable (read heterosexual) Black family. Renay's decision to cook a fried chicken dinner for Jerome and Stew fits with the

soul food/Southern food cultural debates that took place within Black nationalist discourses. On the other hand, it is an impractical food to make at a late hour first because it required her to visit a grocery store and second, it can be labor intensive. Recognizing that domestic violence and abuse comes in all forms, Jerome's late night request for a meal is an assertion of patriarchal power. As Carole Counihan reminds us: "Men may wield power by controlling food purchases and claiming the authority to judge the meals women cook" (*Anthropology* 11). Jerome's inability to eat because he is too drunk only heightens his emotional mistreatment, reinforcing his balance of power. In contrast to the earlier portion of the novel when Renay and Terry eat in "undisguised delight," where nurturing is a central part of that experience, here food serves as a metaphor for unsatisfied hunger. An example of Renay's obedience to Jerome is him forcing her to cook a meal that conforms to the prescribed Black aesthetic—fried chicken.

In opposition to Jerome's rejection of the meal, Shockley positions Renay's new sexual intimacy. It is when Renay reaches outside her race, and her patterned sexual behavior that she finds freedom and equality. In her "Foreword" to the novel, Lane suggests it is the equity between the two that "makes the sex between Renay and Terry so good" (viii). Unlike Jerome who saw the bedroom as a kingdom over which he ruled, Terry cares about Renay's needs. With this displacement of marital bliss—and using food and sex—Shockley rearticulates the nationalist ideal suggesting how relationships can be experienced. She furthers this rewriting in one of the final scenes in the novel that takes place in a kitchen.

When Jerome figures out Renay's living arrangement, he breaks into their house, and confronts her about her sexuality. During the argument, Renay suggests that Terry takes better care of their daughter and he becomes enraged. In the midst of the turmoil, Renay tries to sooth her demoralized husband with a drink of Terry's Ambassador Scotch, which he immediately rejects as "bulldagger's booze". After striking the drink from Renay's hand he brutally beats her. In most cultures, when a man eats in the kitchen of a woman not his wife it can be read as a

form of adultery—whether sex is included or not.⁸ When a woman *eats* in another women’s kitchen—outside of a platonic relationship—it can be considered profane. So, the kitchen is often a site of disruption, fracture, and violence and as Shockley shows, food enables these tensions to come to the forefront of our lives exposing everything from race and gender tensions to sexuality and class discord. Food then can be used in literature to expose how the meanings we attach to this set of objects covers a wide spectrum of human behaviors. Whether used deliberately or not, in literature food signifies interaction, community, inclusion and exclusion. And as a cultural signifier, food challenges the notion that a particular kind of Black (female) experience exists and instead allows for different versions of their lives to be uncovered and articulated.

⁸ See Williams, “Why Migrant Women Feed Their Husbands Tamales”; Counihan, “Mexicana’s Food Voice”; Williams-Forsen, “Other Women Cooked for My Husband.”

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Biography

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