

Trio Marmalade and Hominy Grits: Gullah Traditions and Home Cooking in Ntozake Shange’s *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*

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Abstract

Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo is a novel that focuses on an understudied community in the American South. Ntozake Shange uses food history, recipes, and rituals to acquaint readers with Gullah people. Works of fiction about the Gullah people remain limited within African American literature, but this coastal community is alive and well. In *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America*, Doris dubs *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* a “recipistolary novel” (Witt 11). This notion of recipistolary is what makes the novel unique within the

dynamic realm of Black American literature. Historically, Black women have been excluded from consideration in the culinary arts. By contrast, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* centers Gullah women in Black feminist writing while preserving traditions and tropes that are unique to the Lowland South and daily Black life in the United States. Shange passed away in 2018, and so this study punctuates her legacy as a Black storyteller with food, women, and history in mind.

In her 1982 novel *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, Ntozake Shange maps out the lives of a mother and three daughters from the American Lowland South. This novel sheds light on Gullah (also referred to as Geechee for the Ogeechee River in Georgia) history.¹ The women in the text are the descendants of slaves who inhabited the Sea Islands as well as Georgia and the South Carolina coast (commonly referred to in the U.S. as the Lowcountry). In this study, I assert that the body of the novel and the recipes and beautification rituals Shange embeds constitute an epistemology that reifies Black Southern women's lived experience in a textual medium.² My theoretical framework comes from *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America* by Doris Witt. In this text, Witt explains how the recipes in the novel create a matrilineal legacy between the mother and her daughters in the text, deeming *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* a "recipistolary novel" (11). This notion of recipistolary is more than a clever portmanteau; it is a practical lens for understanding a range of concepts from the title of the book to the history of yams stolen from Africa during the Middle Passage. Through this lens, I want to call attention to the value of the recipe as a literary genre in its own right.

Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo portrays a region of the U.S. that has been neglected by writers of many genres. Works of fiction about the Gullah people remain limited within African American literature. This study is thus an attempt to celebrate and honor Gullah ancestry while situating the community in the broader context of Southern history, filling the gap of Gullah history and identity in literature. While Black American experience is often represented on the basis of North versus South, this population embodies regional distinctions that hold economic, folkloric, and sociocultural weight unseen and unexplored in art, literature, and media. At the same time, Gullah people are conceived of as an isolated populace. In "The Illusion of Isolation: The Gullah/Geechees and the Political Economy of African Culture in the

¹ In the nineteenth century, the term "'Gullah' was used to describe someone from Angola" (Matory 952). "Geechee" is derived from the Ogeechee River in Georgia (953). Over time, "Gullah" was the name given to Black people of the Lowcountry region while "Geechee" referred to its white population (951). Both terms have emerged within the past 30-40 years and were initially stigmatized as signaling rural inferiority (951).

² The capitalization of the nouns Black and white throughout this article have been the decision of the author.

Americas,” J. Lorand Matory explains that because of their linguistic and cultural ties to multiple Afro-Caribbean nations, the Gullah are regarded with a sense of timelessness and viewed by outsiders as a sort of homogenous Africa in microcosm.³

Gullah civilization began in the late seventeenth century, when “165,429 enslaved Africans disembarked in the Carolinas or Georgia” and “built and sustained the lucrative rice plantations of the marshy coastlands and inland estuaries between the Cape Fear River in North Carolina and the St. John’s River near Jacksonville, Florida” (Matory 952). In the eighteenth century, Margaret Washington Creel states, “South Carolina imported over 50,000 into the colony [alone]. This middle period of the slave trade provided the Sea Island region with numerically dominant African ethnic groups” (34). Spoken Gullah, also referred to as Sea Island Creole, shares phonetic, grammatical, and narrative features with West African languages (Matory 954). It is compelling that Gullah people retained so many African practices in diaspora, whereas other slave-descended communities in North America did not. There are practical reasons for this phenomenon. Matory asserts that the topography of the Lowcountry bears similarities to the West African Rice Coast, and so the slaves were able to apply their “methods of exploiting the coastal salt marshes to their own and their masters’ needs” (955). Moreover, because of the gendering of certain crafts and labor, Gullah women have been uniquely positioned as archivists and record-keepers. In Shange’s novel, this becomes apparent in the space of the kitchen, where her characters revisit the past and comment on their travels.

The recipe as a text signals the potential for a finished product as well as a proven method for its creation. As such, we can understand recipes as cultural touchstones with limitless lifespans. Many of the recipes Shange includes are not mere instructions but tight vignettes about family, love, and community. *Sassafrass*, *Cypress*, and *Indigo* centers Gullah women in Black feminist writing while preserving traditions

³ This generalization is often seen outside the African continent, but in this case, the Gullah people are the most “culturally and genetically African among the descendants of U.S. born slaves” (952).

and tropes that are unique to the Lowland South and everyday Black life. Etymologically, the word ‘recipe’ is related to ‘receipt’ since both words were used to describe a remedy formula or a prescription (Clark 153). As such, the recipe illustrates the language of food “not merely [through] a set of instructions, but also contain[s] the imperative meaning through its secondary, ‘unspoken’ aim—the consumption or taking in of a dish” (153). The recipe as a text has “ties to the real and the imaginary,” to the past and future, that imbue it with unlimited potentiality (153). Consequently, the narrative of a recipe can be revisited and reinvented an infinite amount of times. As Patricia Clark states, “historical narratives purport to [...] represent what really happened or could have happened, instead of what might happen, as fictional accounts do” (154). To elaborate upon this point, I argue that recipes always already combine the historical and the fictional. They reflect desires and appetites while pulling from the material reality and cultural context from which they are authored. Therefore, recipes signal the relevance of the imaginary and the illusion of the real through their open-endedness. Coupled with the genre of the novel, recipes and fiction work in tandem in *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* to offer a richer reading experience. The verisimilitude Shange conveys with the inclusion of recipes creates a sense of authenticity and immersion for readers.

While many scholars of African American literature have commented on Shange’s metatexts and indexed the epistemologies therein, my analysis will deal with the specific context of Gullah identity and the importance of recipes and ritual as means of reifying non-white, non-Western aesthetic codes both between Black people and within literature. Since food studies in Black literature is a young subfield, I build upon Doris Witt’s concept of the recipistolary novel to show how and why we need to focus our attention on Black-authored recipes as literary texts. Specifically, I will be calling attention to Shange’s use of metatext and cultural commodities to highlight the ways in which the Black female body itself can be read. Historically, cultural and culinary practices of Black women have been illegible to Western audiences or deemed unworthy of further inquiry or accolades. In the U.S., soul food has only recently entered the arena of haute cuisine. More

attention must be paid to Black foodways and gender if we are to appreciate *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* for all its complexity.

In *Recipes for Respect*, Rafia Zafar explains that by tracing Black American foodways, we can measure social change and progress (2). In the early twentieth century, figures like Arturo Schomburg called attention to the myriad lost and obscure archives that Black people had been authoring since the Middle Passage (2). These archives contain recipes, cookbooks, hospitality manuals, commercial advertisements, agricultural guides, and more. Until recently, these works have been regarded as disparate from American literature. I argue that they are not tertiary but central to understanding Black writing in a holistic sense, and novels like Shange's make this apparent. Similarly, Black writing is often codified in a binary of orality and the written word. If we assess Black Americans' position in domestic, agricultural, and horticultural spaces, then this binary is not so stark. Many of the writings in the archives were disseminated via word of mouth and through the written word.

Additionally, food's ability to signify a specific location is crucial as we think about Black cooking. In *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, recipes work to punctuate the passage of time as well as migration. The recipes and rituals reveal personal details about the character who wrote it. This linkage between Black food, space, and place is worthy of more literary criticism and historical commentary, especially because their point of convergence in the U.S. was decidedly bleak. Slave rations were meager and had limited nutrients, and the theft of food from the masters was punishable by death. However, during the Middle Passage, several commodities on the slave ships were taken from African lands, among which were beans, okra, yams, and rice. This allowed the slaves to pursue methods of farming and cooking that represented those African nations from which they were stolen.

Though these items were initially collected to keep the slaves alive, white colonizers took said food commodities to their respective states where, ironically, they boomed in popularity. George Washington wrote at one point that Virginia was not suited to grow food. Later, he bought 40 bushels of seed so he could grow black-eyed peas: a legume that was formerly deemed unfit for consumption by anyone other than

slaves (Holloway 49). Consequently, with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade came a widespread dissemination of seeds and plants that were otherwise foreign to the Americas.

Coded Cookbook: Writing in the Kitchen

The various recipes Shange sprinkles throughout the story emphasize kinship not only between Hilda and her daughters but also via their extended family and community. The pages of the family cookbook are scattered throughout *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo*, especially in letters from the girls' mother. Multiple critics, like Doris Witt and Patricia Clark, have considered the significance of the recipes in the novel and how they craft a distinctly Black female mode of historical record-keeping. Returning to my earlier point about literary archives, Shange helps us appreciate how Black women have always worked as archivists, especially Gullah women. Witt explains how the recipes create a matrilineal legacy between the mother and her daughters in the text (11). Clark warns against the romantic ideal of a monolithic African past embedded in the recipes and instead calls attention to what "black women's recipes tell about their culinary and other encounters with one another in the creation of themselves as historical subjects in the Western world" (151). In tandem, Clark and Witt's findings allow us to engage with the recipe as a primary source within the novel. With their scholarship in mind, I extend their arguments into a larger conversation about recipes as unique literary and historical genres. Broadly speaking, recipes signal the importance of the imagination through their open-ended format and ability to be repeated and shared. While the recipes that Shange includes are not the primary focus of the text, they can be read as an independent body of work.

Through the sharing of knowledge, Black women form important social connections. Yet these exchanges amongst Black women have often gone unrecognized in African American literature. Shange's novel reveals the "archive that preserves the epistemological and aesthetic connections among black women in the Diaspora" while combating the presupposition that all North American literature conforms to Western

traditions of writing history and making art (Clark 151). The recipes and rituals in the novel constitute an archive in and of themselves. Kitchen texts authored by Black Americans were not just cookbooks; they include hospitality manuals, memoir, poetry, eulogies, elegies, and reviews. Returning to Zafar, she discusses Black women's presumed "illiteracy" (84). It is crucial to mention this to dismantle the widely accepted idea of Black American women not having a literary tradition prior to Emancipation. Literacy is largely accepted to mean the capacity and ability to read and write, but even this definition is mired in European ideas of what constitutes literature. I would argue that dictating, listening, and interpreting are also important facets of literacy, which Black women have excelled in. Thus, considering these facets of literacy, the common description of slaves as 'illiterate' across the disciplines is decidedly wrong.

Shange's archive of recipes shatters notions of Black women's presumed illiteracy, revealing instead an "emergent literacy and [...] a continuum of their appropriations and masteries of technologies—writing, publishing, and performing their own works" (Clark 151). This is particularly revelatory when considering the subjugation of Black women as kitchen slaves and domestic workers. The oral tradition is frequently invoked in the context of Black women's writing. While Black women circulated recipes among themselves predominantly through word of mouth, the "idea of black texts as belonging to an oral tradition alone relegates the power of writing one's own history to someone else," i.e. a white oppressor (156). White slaveholders did not view cooking as requiring a certain literacy, and thus the recipe remained a coded and limitless medium for the inscription of Black women's social history. There are nineteenth century cookbooks authored by Black women, including Malinda Russel's *Domestic Cook Book*. Some of these exist in limited copies, and others are not in circulation.⁴ If we read recipes authored by Black women with these factors in mind,

⁴ While they can be difficult to access, African American women-authored cookbooks have been in production since 1866 starting with Russell's book. Russell gained culinary experience by studying another Black woman, Fanny Steward. Russell went on to work for a white woman and later opened her own pastry shop. As a single mother, these endeavors were all efforts to provide for her disabled child. (footnote continues on the next page).

then we can interpret such texts as historical narratives and retrieve unwritten histories.

Within the novel, there are traditional U.S. Southern recipes authored by Hilda and passed down to her daughters. There are also potions and remedies authored by Indigo. Food writings with health and wellness in mind are frequently omitted in African American history. In fact, there is a presupposition in the American imaginary that Black chefs and cooks do not prioritize health and wellness when preparing food. While the staple dishes of Southern comfort food are known for their richness, there have historically been efforts by Black thinkers to promote good health as well as digestion. For example, agricultural scientist George Washington Carver is well-known for his botanical research and hundreds of peanut innovations, but he also worked to reduce food waste while promoting healthy meals for Black Americans (Zafar 31-3). I mention this to reiterate that the women in the novel write, cook, concoct, and eat for more than just sustenance or pleasure. While the majority of popular food writing today celebrates trends, excess, and indulgence, the private genre of family recipes—as it is also expressed in the novel—encompasses a more holistic discourse about food and wellness.

In Shange's novel, one narrative function of Hilda's recipes is to honor her deceased husband. The recipe titled "*Catfish/The Way Albert Liked It*" names the largely absent character explicitly. The dish also requires seafood, thereby signaling the geographic context of their family heritage and by extension, the role of the ocean in Black life by way of the Middle Passage (54). Sassafras writes her recipes in a similar fashion to her mother. Her "*Favorite Spinach for Mitch #10*" is comprised of mushrooms, rosemary, and hot peppers in addition to Japanese spinach and tamari (74). Like her mother, Sassafras shows her love for her partner through cooking and makes this clear in her naming of the dish. The

⁴ When composing the book, Russell made the decision to share her life story along with tales of harassment, abuse, and violence in the cookbook even though many of her white readers would have found that information irrelevant to the works within. Conventions of her story—like being swindled while fleeing the American South—mirror that of the slave narrative. Russell was perfecting her culinary skills and marketing her book while simultaneously creating a hybrid literary genre (Zafar 20-1).

Japanese ingredients are indicative of her time in Southern California and reflect the large Asian population there. This inclusion coupled with the “#10” signals a revision that is a product of her trial and error with preparation. Since it is unlikely that she would have found and used items like tamari in her native Carolina, the recipe also commemorates Sassafras’ exposure to new kinds of food outside of the American South. The inclusion of Asian ingredients she finds in California marks her travel from the East to West Coast.

Of course, most of the recipes in the novel do not revolve around male characters. One example that overtly privileges the matrilineal cooking discourse of this family is a recipe by Cypress, titled “*My Mama & Her Mama ‘Fore Her: Codfish Cakes (Accra)*” (100). Not only does the title open with a credit to the women of her family, it also makes use of Black vernacular. This can be viewed as an effort to preserve the accessibility of the recipe without dressing it up in the register of haute cuisine. In her 1970 cookbook *Vibration Cooking or Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor writes, “White folks act like they invented food and there is some weird mystique surrounding it—something that only Julia [Child] and Jim [James Beard] can get to. There is no mystique. Food is food. Everybody eats!” (xxxvii). By invoking the easily recognized cooking show host and the chef for whom the prestigious James Beard Award is named, Smart-Gosvenor calls attention to the white standards of honor and propriety that have excluded Black culinary artists. Back in the novel, Cypress lists the Afro-Caribbean name for the dish in parentheses, which underscores its authenticity and its status as a preserved culinary tradition. While in this context “Accra” refers to the fritters, it is also the name of the coastal capital of Ghana. Since this term is used in Trinidad and Tobago and other Caribbean countries, it is fair to assume that the name was carried over during the slave trade from this seafood-rich region. Apropos, this dish’s name creates a geographical link between the Sea Islands and the African continent, as well as a social one amongst cooks of the African diaspora. As such, the recipes in the novel written by Hilda and the sisters can be read as historical narratives that uncover the hidden history of Gullah culture.

Despite the versatile medium of the recipe as a historical account, it is not an exhaustive means of keeping records or answering questions. In Hilda's "*Trio Marmalade*" recipe, she instructs the reader to:

*...have these with your hominy grits. (I know you know how to make hominy grits.) Fried eggs, sunny-side up. Ham-sliced bacon, butter rolls, and Aunt Haydee's Red Pimiento Jam. I'd tell you that receipt, but Aunt Haydee never told nobody how it is you make that. I keep a jar in the pantry for special occasions. I get one come harvest.*⁵ (55)

The direct address in parentheses indicates that Hilda wants to build upon the present culinary repertoire housed in the closed loop of her family. The marmalade is meant to complement a dish that the reader knows how to make, and Hilda does not explain how to prepare the other components. She references an entire meal that catalogues not only her recipe archive but integrates a condiment from another female relative. The fact that she herself is not sure how to prepare the pimiento jam stands as an allegory for the unknowability of slave descendants' history. Since it is reserved for "special occasions," the jam attains a sacred status (55). It can only exist through Aunt Haydee herself, and so that unshared (and perhaps unwritten) recipe remains a privileged document, or a memory lost in time. Finally, Hilda's reference to the harvest suggests a cycle of renewal. While Hilda herself cannot make the jam, the harvest will inevitably inspire new recipes to share and be passed down. Once again, we see the limitless potential of the recipe as a literary genre.

Moon, Land, and Sea: Recipes as Spells

In Indigo's section of the text, unconventional recipes and unique instructional guides are embedded on the page, breaking up the body of narration. Like the recipes in the earlier portions, the instructions and rituals appear sporadically. While Western practices of cooking and

⁵ Italics in quotes is used by the author not for emphasis, but to show that these passages were written by the characters in Shange's novel.

eating are about satiating one kind of hunger, Indigo works to feed her heart and mind as well. As a young girl, she senses that Black people require new epistemologies to make sense of the world around them and to heal from the trauma of slavery. Though she does not yet have the language to express that, Indigo constructs her own remedies and guides for healing and finding happiness. Some might argue that her written rituals are just fantasies penned by a young female character for her own entertainment. To contrast, I read Indigo's sections of the text as legitimate exercises in self-care through meditation and mindfulness. In other words, while the character is not literally visiting the moon, Indigo's practice of writing enables her to record her own fears, needs, and history as a Black woman. Shange's use of metatexts like Indigo's reifies the dynamic and mutable nature of Black women's writing. "Moon Journeys: *cartography by Indigo*" directs the reader to travel to the moon to convene with the ancestors, requiring the reader to:

Find an oval stone that's very smooth. Wash it in rosewater, 2 times. Lay it out to dry in the night air where no one goes. When dry, hold stone tightly in the right hand, caress entire face with the left hand. Repeat the same action with the stone in the left hand. Without halting the movement, clasp left stone-filled hand with the right. Walk to a tree that houses a spirit-friend. Sit under the tree facing the direction of your mother's birthplace. Hold your hands between your bosom, tight. Take 5 quick breaths and 3 slow ones. Close your eyes. You are on your way. (3)

Unlike Hilda's cookbook excerpts, Indigo does not assume that her reader is familiar with the practice she outlines. The cookbook is a closed document meant only for the family, but Indigo seems to speak to both herself and a greater Black female consciousness, as indicated by the "you" in her instructions (3). Indigo focuses on specificity and reverence, stressing that the rosewater-washed rock should sit undisturbed. Her referencing of a "spirit-friend" interpellates the intended reader (3). Simply put, if people do not believe in or convene with spirits, then this guide is not designed for them. This marker of insiders and outsiders within discourse harkens back to Hilda's comment about her

reader *knowing* how to make hominy grits. Both sets of instructions are highly contextualized and meant to index a sense of kinship and set of intentions. Indigo's direction to keep the movement of the practice fluid suggests a familiarity with rituals of this kind. "Moon Journeys" evidences a new tier of literacy and writing crafted by Indigo as a product of her lived experience as a young Black girl.

What is most intriguing about "Moon Journeys" is the fact that Indigo categorizes it as "cartography" (3). In a conventional sense, the ritual does not seem like a map. Yet Indigo clearly marks a path for her reader—albeit one on a spiritual plane—and outlines the goal of the cartography as a healing strategy. To return to my previous comments about Gullah communities, an important feature of African American nature writing and navigation literature is the attention it pays to people and how they have shaped the land (Wardi 131). Anissa Janine Wardi asserts that *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* combines stories of "the Atlantic Ocean, Sea Islands, plants, and herbs" (132). We get most of this content through Indigo's portions of the novel. As such, Wardi reads Indigo as a force of navigation and "a unified body of diasporic memory, who ritualizes her ancestral connection via the natural world" (132). One of the most compelling points Wardi makes deals with the significance of Indigo's name. While all three sisters are named for plants, indigo is significant since it existed as "a cash crop that enslaved African peoples cultivated in coastal areas of the Southeast" and was brought to the region along with coffee and sugarcane (Wardi 132).⁶

An interesting parallel can be observed between plants like indigo and the slaves themselves, since both were imported and exploited within the region. The white Southern planters relied heavily on the agricultural knowledge of the slaves to maximize the yield of the crop. Hence, Wardi interprets Shange's use of the name Indigo not as "a symbol for that which is organic and natural; rather, it [represents] conquest and colonization" (133). Wardi extends her analysis of the character Indigo beyond the significance of her name through a

⁶ Indigo was a plant native to the West Indies and grew particularly well on St. Helena Island (133). Wardi notes that indigo was a particularly labor-intensive crop to harvest and process into dye. Halfway through the eighteenth century, indigo was the second most profitable crop in South Carolina and was in high demand in Great Britain (132).

discussion of cartography via Indigo's spells and healing practices. Indigo crafts special dolls out of various herbs and flowers that link her to various Afro-Caribbean recipes and medicines from her ancestral past.⁷ With this in mind, it is easy to envision Indigo in a room with her dolls operating as “a metaphor for ancestral epistemology”—rather than a child simply playing pretend—and “in this way, Indigo carries the past with her [in] a history that is animated” (Wardi 133).

As characters who belong to a set of North American, African diasporic islands, the sisters all inscribe unique ideas of corporeal existence through art and writing. The politics of self-love and body positivity are defined through the honoring of concepts that are normally separated from notions of femininity and Blackness. Menstruation is a primary example of this. Indigo's part of the text contains a subtext titled “MARVELOUS MENSTRUATING MOMENTS” that encourages the reader to “*smile; for you are about to have an intense union with your magic*” upon experiencing a menstrual period (16). Rather than presenting a laundry list of medical remedies and hygiene practices, Indigo's instructions call for the reader to use her favorite bedsheets, to sleep “with a laurel leaf under your head,” bathing in hyssop and lilies, and to pursue total relaxation (16).

The most compelling part of this passage is the second half, *B. For Disturbance of the Flow*:

Don't be angry with your body if she is not letting go of her blood. Eat strawberries, make strawberry tea with the leaves to facilitate the flow. To increase the flow, drink squaw weed tea. For soothing before your blood flows, drink some black snakeroot or valerian tea. For cramps, chew wild ginger. (16)

The prescribed substances all harken back to Gullah community healers and even some African practices of herbal medicine. Gullah/Geechee “root doctors” are said to have possessed imported African ritual objects, using “herbs and rituals” to “heal their clients physically, to protect them from harm, and to harm their own and their

⁷ Some of the herbs include cotton root bark, comfrey leaves, fennel, ginger, and peach leaves.

clients' enemies" (Matory 960). While the spells are presented as written text, their colloquial style suggests that they are to be read aloud. For example, a portion of Indigo's "SEEKING NOTHING/GIVING THANKS FOR LUNAR GIFTS" prompts the user to "[b]athe casually in a bath scented with cinnamon and vanilla [...] Think of your beloved. Smell your beloved [...] Hold back nothing. Your thanks are mightily received [...] (Very advanced. Wait if not sure)" (13). The inclusion of these food items shows the interconnectedness of Indigo's rituals and cooking. This final segment suggests an intimacy with the user that transcends a normal set of directions. The ritual instructions not only emphasize thoughts, but they also appeal specifically to the user's feelings, romantic ones in this case. While this ritual enlists the help of a partner, most of Indigo's spells only require the self; solo rituals stress the autonomy of the user and create a sense of self-empowerment. She does not need to consult with a deity or a holy text; Indigo herself wields enough power to enact the rituals effectively. By extension, she presents new modes of nourishment for Black American women.

Conclusion

In closing, the combination of Gullah historical framing with matrilineal recipe keeping and African healing rituals allows Shange to imbue the novel with new meaning for Black women. The three sisters all come into their own sense of self through their respective traditions of making meaning. Shange's use of mysticism and magic hints to her reader that the parameters of Black women's literature are actively expanding. Her characters connect to the past through recipes and rituals; readers can try these practices out for themselves, thereby extending the fiction of the novel into material reality in the present. I urge other literary scholars to inspect African American food writings for the intrinsic properties I have described here.

The strength of *Sassafras*, *Cypress*, and *Indigo* is the call to action implicit in the text. Shange not only requires her reader to recognize the reformatted epistemes and aesthetics embodied by the sisters, but also implores her reader to enact their imagined history through an

exploration of metatexts: a map is for travel, a recipe is for cooking. As such, the novel holds layers of meaning that unfold beyond the story itself and into the panels of culinary arts, Black American writing, and women's literature writ large.

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Biography

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