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Posted on Monday, October 31, 2011

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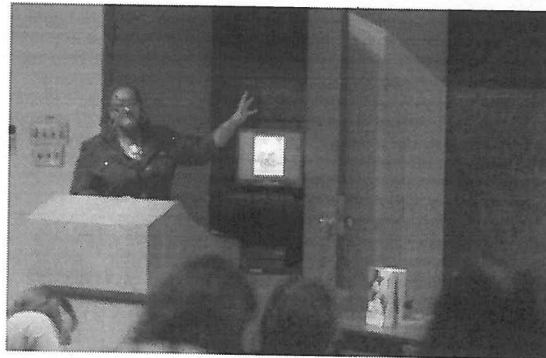
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The Fisher Center for the Study of Women and Men recently welcomed Psyche Williams-Forsen to discuss the nature and roots of African and African-American food cultures in the United States. In her talk, "When the 'World on a Plate' Visits Your Table: Culinary Conundrums of Gender, Nationality, Memory and Marriage," Williams-Forsen detailed the turns in the contemporary moment that have led to the intermingling of African and African-American food cultures.

She discussed the meeting of African American and Ghanaian cultures and cuisines in her own household and the complex gender issues at play as she and her Ghanaian husband negotiated culinary practices.

"The production and preparation of food remains a space of domesticity and also invisibility primarily for women, immigrants, the poor," said Williams-Forsen. "Simultaneously, it is a route to celebrity, wealth and also power for professional chefs, restaurateurs, scientists and fast food conglomerates. Foods encode an entire semiotic system of political, cultural and social significations."

Williams-Forsen explained that food is much more than just something to eat and that in fact, there politics involved with food. During the time of slavery in the United States, food politics affected African Americans, eventually leading to stereotypes, such as the assumed popularity of chicken, collard greens and watermelon amongst African Americans. Through the use of old advertisements, music covers and signs, Williams-Forsen traced how African Americans were viewed during this time, and how these food-related stereotypes first developed.

In the discussion she explored what food means to people. She explained how her husband, a native of Ghana, had spent many years searching for food from his hometown - with little success. "The meals and the hands that prepare them, bind my husband to his country - and by my sharing these foods with him, they bind me to him," concluded Williams-Forsen. "The kitchen space can be synonymous with agency, self-definition and self-awareness. It is a landscape that comes with changing meanings and significance, these fragments of our life experience that speak as much to our particularities and tastes as to issues of group cultural identity."

The following morning, Williams-Forsen led a roundtable discussion centered on sustainability, alternative food networks and advocating for possible alternative food spaces.

Williams-Forsen is an associate professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park. She also serves an affiliate faculty member of the Women's Studies and African American Studies departments and the Consortium on Race, Gender, and Ethnicity.

Williams-Forsen received her Ph.D. of American Studies from the University of Maryland. She is the co-founder and co-director of the Material Culture/Visual Culture Working Group. Williams-Forsen has published four works including, "Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, & Power," "Suckin' the Chicken Bone Dry: African American Women, History and Food Culture," "African Americans and Food Stereotypes in African American Foodways: Explorations of History and Culture." She is the co-author of an entry into the Encyclopedia of Food and Culture with Tony Whitehead titled, "African American Foodways: Encyclopedia of Food and Culture."

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