

# Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power

*Psyche A. Williams-Forson*  
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**Psyche A. Williams-Forson : Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. This book was a great look at the complications of stereotypes surrounding chicken and ...By AiThis book was a great look at the complications of stereotypes surrounding chicken

and Black women, and really resting in those complications and resisting easy answers. It was very tenderly done, and I really appreciated the care with which Williams-Forsen handled the various issues at play: not just the stereotypes and answering them, but also the lived experiences of Black women regarding their relationships to women. For that careful handling, I really recommend this book, even if the subject isn't one that you might immediately think would be interesting. 18 of 18 people found the following review helpful. An original and groundbreaking study. I am truly surprised that nobody else has submitted a review of this book! It certainly deserves to be widely read as an original contribution to African-American studies, to food studies in general, to cultural studies, and most importantly, by anyone who wants to understand how stereotyping works as part of the process of oppression. I also learned a great deal about what 'signifying' means, and how it can be used as an analytical tool. This is not a perfect book. Sometimes I found it moved too quickly from the general to the specific and vice versa. But Williams-Forsen has taken a really tough topic - the way Chicken has been attached to African American women, and she treats it with sensitivity, creativity, wit and an eclectic set of tools from literature, social science and history. In the process she gets to the heart of how stereotypes cut in a lot of different directions; they reveal weaknesses and strengths, solidarities and divisions. She is not interested in passive victimology, nor does she ignore the violence and pain of slavery and prejudice. The result is a book which really does teach you something new about the Black experience. It is the opening, I hope, of a new generation of black history which shakes off some of the old narratives which have served their purposes, and gets into really complex terrain. I look forward to more complex counterpoint with the work being done in the Caribbean and on the Black experience elsewhere in the Americas. I will certainly be using this book in the classroom, and I hope it gets the broader readership it deserves! 6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Brilliantly written book! By A. Harper I highly suggest this read to ANYONE interested in understanding how gender, race, and food are integral to understanding and debunking the stereotype about black people and "their 'natural' propensity to want chicken." It is very rare that food studies books even look at how racism impacts one's relationship to and with food. I am glad that Dr. Williams-Forsen wrote this book! I could not put this book down. This woman is brilliant. She was able to turn a dissertation into a book that is easy and fun to read (which can be a challenge for most dissertations in which the authors want to turn into a book). Her analysis of the movie Soul Food was something I have thought about all the time, but wondered why no one ever brought it up. Basically, she is asking why the health problems of Big Mama are NEVER linked to the type of Soul Food that she eats all the time. If you are a fan of MacArthur Genius, Kara Walker, you will enjoy Williams-Forsen's critique of how chicken is depicted in Walker's art work. I await for her to come out with more books!

Chicken--both the bird and the food--has played multiple roles in the lives of African American women from the slavery era to the present. It has provided food and a source of income for their families, shaped a distinctive culture, and helped women define and exert themselves in racist and hostile environments. Psyche A. Williams-Forsen examines the complexity of black women's legacies using food as a form of cultural work. While acknowledging the negative interpretations of black culture associated with chicken imagery, Williams-Forsen focuses her analysis on the ways black women have forged their own self-definitions and relationships to the "gospel bird." Exploring material ranging from personal interviews to the comedy of Chris Rock, from commercial advertisements to the art of Kara Walker, and from cookbooks to literature, Williams-Forsen considers how black women arrive at degrees of self-definition and self-reliance using certain foods. She demonstrates how they defy conventional representations of blackness and exercise influence through food preparation and distribution. Understanding these complex relationships clarifies how present associations of blacks and chicken are rooted in a past that is fraught with both racism and agency. The traditions and practices of feminism, Williams-Forsen argues, are inherent in the foods women prepare and serve.

From Publishers Weekly The humble chicken has possessed complicated associations for African-Americans from earliest slavery times, especially for women, who traditionally had to cook the bird for white kitchens. Moreover, hawking chicken by "waiter carriers" became a key source of income for poor disenfranchised blacks, while stealing chickens reflected a kinship with African-American "trickster heroism," according to Williams-Forsen, an American studies professor at the University of Maryland. In her valuable though dense and scholarly study, Williams-Forsen explores how the power of food images advanced the rhetoric of black stereotypes in lore and literature, for example, as portrayed in "coon" songs like Paul Laurence Dunbar's popular "Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd" and characterizations of mammies in advertisements in upscale magazines. With the Great Migration, blacks took their cultural practices with them, literally, in shoe boxes containing fried chicken, and their route became known as the "chicken bone express." The author discusses chicken as "the gospel bird" in African-American churches (the strength of one's cooking skills elevated one's status with the preacher), and how eating chicken (or eschewing it) provides a way for blacks to "signify" class and status. Following her hard-going study is a staggeringly thorough bibliography. (June) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From Booklist Despite stereotypes of black people as chicken lovers to the point of thievery, Williams--Forsen offers a fresh

perspective, one that features chickens at the center of acts of affection and self-identity as well as efforts at advancement. As the preparers of the chicken for families, church dinners, activist meals, and commercial enterprises of all sizes, black women have managed to express and self-identify through food beyond nourishment. Acknowledging that women's cooking is often marginalized in the greater society, Williams-Forson explores the complexities of food, gender, and race. Along with fascinating interviews with black women, Williams-Forson relies on travel narratives, film, art, literature, and historic documents and ephemera, including racist depictions in advertisements. She recalls chicken dinners prepared to feed families on long trips when they could not stop to eat in restaurants, dinners sold to support families and communities, and communities that developed among black women in the kitchen. Beyond the place of chicken as racial stereotype and in soul-food gatherings, Williams-Forson offers intriguing interpretations of black history, culture, and feminism. Vanessa BushCopyright American Library Association. All rights reserved "This is a wonderful book, a thoroughly researched, wonderfully conceptualized, and well-written study." Amy Bentley, New York University "I cannot recall an occasion on which I learned so much from a single text." Trudier Harris, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill "Forces the reader to think carefully about the role of food in black women's history. And this alone, as one cookbook author might say, is a good thing." -- "American Historical ""Likely to prove useful to students of cultural identity and stereotype." -- "Western Folklore""A highly informative read. . . . I am sure it will become a permanent part of the foodway canon. Williams-Forson is an excellent writer who has done some interesting research and pieced together a highly readable book." -- "The Journal of Folklore""[Williams-Forson's] interdisciplinary methods--incorporating literature, print culture, history, personal interviews, and media studies--yield fascinating insights. . . . ["Building Houses out of Chicken Legs"] shows the potential of interdisciplinary study of food culture." -- "American Quarterly"