

Cooking in Crisis: Everyday Heroism in Blanche Armwood Perkins's Cookbook *Food Conservation in the Home*

Maximilian Pott
Leipzig, Germany

Abstract: This article examines everyday heroism in Blanche Armwood Perkins's cookbook *Food Conservation in the Home* (1918) through the lens of food history. Centering on the role of eating and cooking for US society during World War I, it argues that the cookbook constructed homemakers as everyday heroines by using food as a means to implement the heroic into daily American life. Armwood Perkins's cookbook represents a rare voice of an African American woman in American wartime food literature. Analyzing this source in its historical context, I explore two correlated aspects. First, I show how the cookbook heroized women's work in the kitchen by stressing their role as nurturers of a nation within the confines of the home. Second, I consider the cookbook as part of African American foodways, demonstrating how Armwood Perkins challenged stereotypical representations of African American women. Everyday heroism served as a strategy to mobilize civilians and strengthen women's national allegiance in domestic spaces, thereby reinforcing 'traditional' gender norms. Ultimately, this article expands understandings of everyday heroism by revealing how seemingly trivial acts like cooking and eating could be considered heroic.

In April 1918, African American educator Blanche Armwood Perkins underscored the importance of saving food during wartime, writing in her cookbook: "Every pound of white flour saved is equal to a bullet in our Nation's defense" (5). Stressing the "urgent need for food thrift," she called upon American households to change their cooking routines and eating habits to support the nation's efforts during World War I (4). In about 145 different recipes, *Food Conservation in the Home* instructed its audience of "housewives and cooks" (5) to economize on valuable resources such as "[w]heat, [m]eats, [s]ugar and [f]ats" (4) and integrate these dietary changes into their everyday lives. Between the lines of recipes like "War' Breads" (8) and "Victory Potato Salad" (32), her cookbook glorified the patriotic duty of every American homemaker to serve their country. To the women

reading her cookbook, she gave a subtle but powerful promise that every one of them could become an everyday heroine simply by conserving food.

Recipe collections, like the one by Armwood Perkins, were widely circulated in the United States during WWI. Endorsed by the US Food Administration—a newly founded agency tasked with the distribution of food—they extended into almost every household and showed civilians how they could contribute to the nation’s victory. As “cultural sites,” these cookbooks not only demonstrated how to prepare delicious soups, salads, and desserts, they also redefined social norms and practices about cooking and eating (Williams-Forsen 3). By proposing new eating rules, *Food Conservation in the Home* taught its readers how to serve their country, how to eat ‘right,’ and who should do the cooking during these times of crisis.

Since most cookbooks in the early twentieth century were written by women, they offered a space where many women could express themselves and, hence, allow for important insights into their lives (Theophano 2). However, the voices of African American women appeared only marginally in early American food literature and first began to gain a foothold in the 1940s (Le Dantec-Lowry, “Reading” 112). In her landmark study on African American foodways, Doris Witt assessed that between 1900 and 1919, only six cookbooks were published by African Americans—half of them by men, and none of them during the First World War (221-22). Considering this, Blanche Armwood Perkins’s *Food Conservation in the Home* is a rare source and one of, if not *the* only, known cookbook authored by an African American woman during WWI.¹

Through the lens of food history, the following article explores the interrelationships of food and everyday heroism in American society during WWI. Analyzing Blanche Armwood Perkins’s *Food Conservation in the Home* in its historical context, I argue that the cookbook constructed homemakers as everyday heroines by using food as a means to implement the heroic into daily American life. This work builds on a growing body of scholarship that analyzes the multifaceted relationships of food, identity, and power, exploring how food discourses produced, reshaped, and contested subjectivities in a historical moment (Vester 2). Armwood Perkins’s cookbook, like other dietary advice manuals, created powerful knowledge systems that expressed social identities and “told readers not only how to eat well, but how to be Americans” (3). Understanding “food as a complex and overlapping system” consequently encourages an exploration of “how power operates through the obvious and the mundane” (Martschukat and Simon 7). With this historical analysis, I do not intend to glorify heroic figures but aim to critically examine how

1 Witt’s list of African American cookbooks is a landmark bibliography in this field’s canon. It does not include Armwood Perkins’s cookbook, nor does any work cited in this article deal with it analytically. I do not claim that her cookbook is the only one ever published by an African American during the First World War, but it certainly is one of the so far only known to this current state of research.

they were produced through mundane routines. In doing so, I depart from understandings of heroism that presume extraordinary feats from exceptional individuals and instead focus on how ordinary acts like cooking could be considered heroic.

The next section outlines the concept of everyday heroism and historicizes Armwood Perkins's cookbook within the food conservation campaign that urged US society to save food resources voluntarily. The main analysis is divided into two parts. First, I examine how Armwood Perkins constructed everyday heroism in her cookbook, demonstrating that she elevated women as everyday heroines by stressing their ability to perform food conservation and confined their heroism to the domestic sphere. Second, I consider her cookbook within the tradition of African American cookbooks, exploring the role race played in her work. I argue that Armwood Perkins destabilized racial tropes about African American women preparing food by displaying her culinary expertise and skills. Ultimately, her cookbook provides unique insights into how the idea of everyday heroism was employed through cooking during WWI and how it advanced the restructuring of American foodways.

THE POLITICS OF FOOD: HEROIZATION AND FOOD CONSERVATION

Everyday Heroism

A prerequisite for understanding the concept of everyday heroism is first defining what constitutes a hero. Heroic figures do not simply exist but are the product of a process called 'heroization' in which a person is imbued with heroic meaning (Falkenhayner et al. 6). As a social construct, heroes are elevated, celebrated, and instrumentalized, embodying an "ideal type" onto which "a community [...] projects its expectations, wishes and fears" (Hoff et al. 11). This holds especially true in times of crisis. At the beginning of WWI, the dominant heroic ideal in American society was that of the warrior hero, meaning able-bodied white soldiers who demonstrated their heterosexual "heroic masculinity" by fighting for their country (Adams 41). Stories about martial heroes, representing a strong, courageous, and virtuous nation, helped solidify public loyalty to the nation-state (Wendt, "Reconsidering" 3).² Considering the ubiquity of military heroism during wartimes,

² These ideals stem from a historical tradition of military heroism in the nineteenth century. During this period, notions about war heroes and revered leaders underwent a process of nationalization and limited democratization, allowing ordinary servicemen to achieve heroic praise (Wendt, "Reconsidering" 3).

it comes as little surprise that large parts of historical research have centered on famous “war heroes, heroic leaders, and superheroes” (Wendt, “Studying” 8).

This article proposes an understanding of everyday heroism that contrasts with established conceptualizations of heroic acts, exploring how seemingly trivial actions can be framed as heroic. Conventionally, heroic deeds are constructed through a dichotomy between the ‘heroic’ and the ‘ordinary,’ following the logic that “if many or even all people were able to accomplish the same feat, the achievement would instead be considered normal or mundane” (Schlechtriemen 17). While this framework effectively examines outstanding acts of bravery, I suggest an analysis of civilian heroism that investigates how the heroic is constructed not in opposition to but within mundane routines.

Everyday heroism challenges the fixation on glorified icons by emphasizing how the heroic is constructed and reproduced in quotidian life. It refers to “a social and cultural construction that is subject to constant debate, reevaluation, and revisions” (Wendt, “Studying” 10) and centers on “ordinary citizens’ heroism” (8). Employing this concept shifts the focus away from conventional understandings of heroism to how common activities, like cooking and eating, can be considered ‘heroic.’ Consequently, this perspective centers on the “life and survival of those who have remained largely anonymous in history” (Lüdtke 4) and encourages a rethinking of what constitutes a heroic act.

This approach is particularly relevant when studying daily life in a nation at war, since “ordinary heroes and heroines were especially in vogue during times of perceived crisis, when societies seemed to lack the type of social solidarity that was believed to have characterized them in the past” (Wendt, “Studying” 13). Subtle acts of heroism reflected the resilience of people who managed to maintain established ways of living and cared for other civilians in their community during times of crisis. By exploring its semantics in US society during WWI, this perspective sheds light on the seemingly ordinary within extraordinary circumstances.

With the rise of mass media, American newspapers and magazines increasingly featured well-selling stories about heroic civilians by the turn of the twentieth century (Wendt, “Self-Sacrifice” 6). This reflected a shift in public perception, as heroism was no longer confined to strong fighters or exceptional politicians but came to include ordinary citizens whose benevolent deeds seemingly demonstrated “the continuing progress of American civilization” (3). However, who could be considered heroic in the eyes of news agencies, social organizations, and public opinion greatly depended upon social categories like race, class, and gender. In most announcements, everyday heroes were white men who were praised for “feats that were active, public, and nationalist[ic]” (Hume 164). While women could also be regarded as everyday heroines, they were primarily celebrated for their domestic roles as caring mothers and committed homemakers (145-47). Thus, the

Cooking in Crisis: Everyday Heroism in Blanche Armwood Perkins's Cookbook *Food Conservation in the Home*

heroization of female citizens reinforced 'traditional' gender norms that highlighted female obedience and confined their heroism to the home. Since civilian heroism was tied to ideas of the "superiority of white civilization," African Americans only marginally received such recognition (Wendt, "Self-Sacrifice" 12).³ With the onset of WWI, reports on fighting heroes succeeded stories about heroic civilians in the headlines (26). Nevertheless, US war propaganda appealed to the civic duty of Americans to serve their country, mobilizing them in a nationwide campaign.

The Food Conservation Campaign

The consumption of food in American society during the First World War was strongly influenced by a new government institution: the Food Administration. This agency was created through the Food and Fuel Control Act in August 1917 and tasked with regulating the distribution of food. Led by Herbert Hoover, the Food Administration launched a nationwide food conservation campaign, urging all civilians to ration their food in order to ship the surplus to the US Army and its allies across the Atlantic. To generate this surplus, they relied on Americans reducing their consumption of wheat, meat, fat, and sugar, as domestic demand had nearly matched the production of key crops just a year earlier (Veit 15). Through this campaign, the agency "reached into every kitchen in America," impacting almost all food products Americans used to cook (Kennedy 118).

The Food Administration depended on the compliance of American citizens. Rather than imposing federal restrictions that dictated food rationing, Hoover counted on the public's voluntariness to change their food consumption for the war effort. The agency only employed three thousand staff members while more than 800,000 Americans volunteered to help implement the new guidelines in daily life (Veit 18). As part of this campaign, the Food Administration popularized 'meatless Mondays' and 'wheatless Wednesdays' to ensure that households met their food rationing commitments. By signing 'food pledges' and mailing them to the Food Administration, Americans could prove their loyalty to the state and devotion to the agency's motto "Food Will Win the War" (14). These pledge cards were widely circulated in American society and could be found in newspapers, magazines, or cookbooks (Kingsbury 36). In late October 1917, Hoover organized a 'Food Pledge Week,' during which a "national army of 500,000 men and women volunteers" went from house to house, distributing food pledge cards ("To-Day"). The

3 The Carnegie Hero Fund Commission awarded US civilians for their everyday heroism in early-twentieth-century America. Of all honorees between 1904 and 1930, eight percent were women and four percent were African Americans (Wendt, "Self-Sacrifice" 20-21). Female obedience was not the primary reason for a woman's heroic status anymore, and the public recognition of African Americans' civilian heroism was unprecedented and endorsed by black newspapers (20, 23).

campaign proved successful, as about seventy percent of American households committed themselves to food conservation (Vester 19). While it was not illegal to disregard the Food Administration's advice, the campaign fostered widespread compliance. Its emphasis on voluntariness created an environment of social control through which American civilians policed themselves and each other.

Out of all Americans, the campaign particularly addressed women. In one cookbook, Howard Heinz, federal food administrator and heir to a condiment empire, wrote that "there is no more important war activity in which women may engage than the careful conservation of our food supply" (Twentieth Century Club of Pittsburgh 4). In *The Ladies' Home Journal*, Hoover asked women to sign a pledge "to carry out the directions and advice of the food administrator in the conduct of [her] household" (25). As a reward for their adherence, those signing the pledge were "entitled to wear" a blue apron with a white cap called "Hoover Helper's Uniform" (Harmon 27). Women wearing these 'uniforms' were presented as "Soldiers in the Kitchen" (Greer vii). Based on 'traditional' gender roles, women were seen as key agents in adopting the recommended dietary changes.

While not all American women embraced the food conservation campaign, it received vigorous support from members of the domestic science movement. This movement consisted mostly of white middle-class women who, since the mid nineteenth century, sought to advance women's positions in society by promoting their authority in the home. Fundamentally, domestic scientists professionalized domestic labor and reinforced norms of white female middle-class domesticity. During WWI, they published cookbooks and trained women in domestic schools according to the demands of the Food Administration. While the majority of the movement consisted of and addressed white middle-class women, African American women also contributed to the efforts (Shapiro 5-9).

One of these domestic scientists was Blanche Armwood Perkins, the author of *Food Conservation in the Home* and the founder of five domestic cooking schools for African American women in the segregated South. Six months after the US officially entered the war, she opened the New Orleans School of Domestic Science and taught about "350 women and 400 school girls" of African American descent ("Cooking" 12, 15). In April 1918, she published *Food Conservation in the Home*, which found wide readership in her hometown of Tampa, Florida (Hewitt 227). One newspaper from Florida praised it, stating: "The cook book is one of excellency and the recipes should be used in every home from a practical and patriotic standpoint" ("Corn"). Her cookbook converted the Food Administration guidelines into recipes useful in daily routines and instructed American homemakers on how to best fulfill their patriotic duty.

Cooking in Crisis: Everyday Heroism in Blanche Armwood Perkins's Cookbook *Food Conservation in the Home*

EVERYDAY HEROISM IN *FOOD CONSERVATION IN THE HOME*

In *Food Conservation in the Home*, Armwood Perkins cast American housewives as everyday heroines committed to serving their nation. Central to her narrative was the construction of two heroic figures, distinguished by a clear gender divide: the American soldier and the American housewife. This section first examines the co-construction of these two heroic figures and then centers on the specific practices that characterized the heroization of homemakers.

First, the cookbook glorified American soldiers as courageous fighters for democracy. “Victory for democracy,” Armwood Perkins wrote, “must be won by hard fighting on the battlefield of Europe,” underlining that American “soldiers [...] will fight valiantly in this struggle for a larger ‘world freedom’” (3). Situating warfare as part of a larger moral battle for freedom, she defined soldiers’ heroism through their willingness to build a more democratic world. With her focus on democracy, she echoed President Woodrow Wilson’s words when justifying the US’s entry into WWI, saying that “[t]he world must be made safe for democracy.” By framing the war as a battle for democracy, she not only underscored US self-proclaimed leadership on the world stage but also highlighted the moral superiority of its fighting soldiers.

Armwood Perkins further underlined the soldiers’ heroism by invoking the famous words of Founding Father Patrick Henry, “[g]ive me liberty or give me death” (3). Referencing this popular “folk hero” (Mayo 2) of the American Revolution, she suggested that the soldiers continued the nation’s legacy of fighting for independence. This rhetoric highlighted the soldiers’ loyalty, even willing to sacrifice their lives “as martyrs to the cause of freedom on foreign soil” (Armwood Perkins 4). The valor of US soldiers was further emphasized by portraying German soldiers as barbaric “Huns” who needed to be taught “the lesson of Christian civilization” (3). In essence, Armwood Perkins’s recipe collection heroized American soldiers based on the principles of higher morality, democratic values, and an unwavering commitment to serve.

Second, the cookbook constructed the American housewife as the gendered home-front counterpart to the heroic soldier. It defined the heroism of housewives not through combat but through their role in sustaining a nation and ensuring a constant supply of food. Following federal guidelines, Armwood Perkins advised her readers to “economize in a way that will allow the surplus needed to ship abroad” (4) and “furnish her [the nation’s] Allies the food necessary to sustain them for the fight” (3). She underscored that soldiers depended on the habitual activities of homemakers, stressing the necessity for food conservation. Her words glorified women doing domestic labor in a way that Gerald Pomper has conceptualized as the heroic archetype of “the nurturer,” whose heroism is quintessentially defined by “their service to others” (19). According to the cookbook, this service required

constant attention and was achieved by changing one's way of cooking. A consistent dedication to food thrift rendered homemakers as everyday heroines and their day-to-day cooking as heroic acts.

The heroization of domestic work was reinforced by linking the home with the nation. Armwood Perkins asserted that “the skillful and economical handling of food and fuel is not only necessary for the saving of income and the success of the individual home, but absolutely essential to the saving and success of the Nation” (3). This elevated female domestic labor and resourceful home management to national importance. Food thrift and cooking became not merely a personal or family concern but integral to the collective effort of securing the country's existence during times of crisis. While the cookbook reinforced gender roles that confined women to the domestic sphere, it simultaneously connected their efforts to the fate of the American public. Addressing this paradox in her analysis on domestic spaces and US imperialism, literary scholar Amy Kaplan demonstrated that nation-building operates through the domestic sphere and is fundamental to forming national identity (583). By casting the individual American home as “the unit of the Nation's strength,” Armwood Perkins positioned it as the backbone of American society (3). In her cookbook, the home and the nation were deeply intertwined, making women's cooking habits imperative to the country's victory in war.

Training homemakers as successful nurturers, Armwood Perkins familiarized her readers with the method of food substitution. This meant that civilians should eat alternative foods with equivalent nutritional value in order to save precious resources for the military. She drew on insights from early-twentieth-century nutrition science, which had introduced analyzing food through categories like vitamins, calories, proteins, and carbohydrates and demonstrated that seemingly different products could be nutritionally similar (Veit 1). Substitution was an important element because it signaled to Americans that they should not necessarily eat less but just differently. Her cookbook prescribed a variety of substitutions: The readers should bake breads using “corn, rye, barley, oats, [and] potatoes” instead of wheat; sweeten their desserts with “honey, cane or corn syrup”; or enjoy a “victory potato salad”—refined with beets, mayonnaise, and gherkins—on meatless days instead of a steak (4–5, 34, 32). Despite the constraints of wartime, her suggestions demonstrated to Americans that they could still pursue a diverse, healthy, and balanced diet.

Fundamental to the heroism of homemakers was their ability not just to substitute foods but to do so on the principle of efficiency. These rational choices were primarily focused on the intake of the ‘right’ nutrients. However, sometimes they led to the era's more controversial food experiments. The substitution of red meat, for example, posed an intricate challenge and was widely debated. Some reformers advocated for eating horsemeat, while others, like the prominent

eugenicist Herbert Popenoe, pushed the mantra of efficient substitution even further. He held dinner parties, called “cat feasts,” and served cat meat to his unknowing guests (Veit 37). Dr. Harry Wiley, another food expert, publicly recommended the killing of stray cats and dogs as a rational way of ensuring one’s nutrient ingestion (38). These propositions illustrated the extremes to which some reformers were willing to go, prioritizing nutritional value above all else. However, such approaches failed to resonate with most American households. Accordingly, Armwood Perkins’s cookbook advised efficiency while embracing tastes familiar to American palates. She recommended the consumption of more seafood, chicken, or vegetables—as demonstrated in her “Mock Sausage” recipe, made from a cream of wheat and egg mixture (30). What united her recipes with the ideas of more radical food reformers was a shared attempt to encourage homemakers to make rational food decisions in order to optimize their diet for the war effort.

Food substitution, however, was not only enabled by the creativity of cooks but also through the increased availability of industrialized foods. The consumption of butter substitutes was a case in point. Armwood Perkins encouraged her readers to use “butterine, oleomargarine, or some other wholesome butter substitute” instead of butter (6). Oleomargarine became part of American industrialized food production in the 1880s, and—like many manufactured food products—it attracted the fears and worries of the American public. In nationwide debates called the “War on Oleomargarine,” opponents demonized margarine as impure and adulterated, reflecting a deep mistrust in the food industry and causing strict regulations (Cohen 97). By promoting the use of plant-based butters, *Food Conservation in the Home* signified a shift in public perception since “saving dairy for the troops” was now considered a patriotic duty (Cohen 104). In all of her recipes, Armwood Perkins consistently talked about ‘butter,’ though she actually meant margarine (6). While not every reader may have liked butter substitutes, the cookbook normalized the consumption of industrial products because it was part of everyone’s civic obligation.

In teaching her readers about food substitution, Armwood Perkins embraced the Progressive Era’s idea that the human body functions like a machine. Promoting the usage of potatoes in place of wheat for baking, she wrote about the ingredient’s qualities: “It burns in our bodies much as any fuel burns in a furnace and produces the ‘steam’ necessary to make us go about our daily duties” (19). Describing food as ‘fuel’ and the energy from food as ‘steam,’ she envisioned the body as a “human engine” (Veit 56). This metaphor was popularized in the Progressive Era and imagined able-bodied individuals as “thermodynamic machines transforming food energy into muscular work” (Mackert 196). This rationalization of human bodies resonated with the ideas of Progressive reformers to advance society based on scientific principles and efficient management. Since the

late nineteenth century, nutritional scientists studied the human metabolism in laboratories, using the calorie as a category to measure bodies, quantify an efficient use of energy, and enhance labor productivity (192). Just as machines in an industrialized society required a steady supply of fuel, so too were productive bodies believed to rely on standardized food consumption—especially during wartime. As a result, the cookbook placed the responsibility in the hands of homemakers to keep this ‘engine’ running effectively.

According to the cookbook, heroines were efficient providers and knowledgeable cooks who ensured that no food went to waste. It stressed that the “real ability on the part of the cook or housewife lies in her skill and originality in being able to reproduce the left-overs” (22). One way to reuse old food was to submerge it in “economical sauces” that should make it taste delicious again (22). Another method was to maximize the yield of a product. Armwood Perkins instructed her readers to slowly render the fat from meat trimmings and to prevent it from turning rancid by clarifying it with potatoes (34). Additionally, she educated them in food preservation techniques—namely, canning, dehydrating, and pickling—so that they could conserve seasonal fruits for longer time periods (36). All of these strategies served to equip housewives with the necessary cooking skills to manage food preparation during times of crisis. Creative efficiency in cooking became an indispensable part of fulfilling one’s patriotic duty.

Finally, *Food Conservation in the Home* characterized homemakers as heroines through their ability to exercise self-discipline. While none of the recipes were compulsory, they conveyed a strong moral obligation. As historian Helen Zoe Veit argued, a consequential outcome of the reshaping of American foodways during WWI was that food choices became moral choices (2). Armwood Perkins’s cookbook demonstrated this by introducing new social norms of eating. Her recipes unequivocally identified what was ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ to consume, and framed food conservation as the morally correct behavior. “Can we say them, Nay?” she directly asked her readers when confronting them with the choice to alter their eating habits in support of the soldiers (Armwood Perkins 5). Her rhetorical question left no doubt that the only appropriate response from homemakers was to do their part and fulfill their roles at the home front.

In summary, Armwood Perkins’s cookbook conceptualized women as everyday heroines and their cooking as patriotic acts by stressing their ability to make efficient food choices that supported US war efforts. Their heroism was constructed as a gendered counternarrative to that of belligerent men but depicted as equally essential to the ‘greater good.’ By educating her readers about food thrift, substitution, and preservation, Armwood Perkins equipped women with the necessary skills to fulfill their obligation as nurturers of a nation. However, glorifying women’s domestic labor consolidated ‘traditional’ gender norms.

Cooking in Crisis: Everyday Heroism in Blanche Armwood Perkins's Cookbook *Food Conservation in the Home*

Although attributed with national significance, women were expected to perform civilian heroism within the confines of the home. Ultimately, *Food Conservation in the Home* situated the food choices made in the kitchen as vital both to individual households and to the nation's success during wartime.

FOOD CONSERVATION IN THE HOME AND AFRICAN AMERICAN FOODWAYS

When Armwood Perkins published *Food Conservation in the Home* in the early twentieth century, white middle-class authors dominated the food-literature market. Although African American women were foundational to the development of food culture, especially in the American South, their contributions have often been diminished by racist stereotypes or rendered invisible when white women appropriated their recipes and claimed ownership over them (Le Dantec-Lowry, "Writing" 134-35).

As a black middle-class domestic scientist and activist for African American communities, Armwood Perkins and her work complicated this condition. Born in Tampa in 1890, she grew up in the Jim Crow South, graduated from Spelman College, and, soon after, founded her first domestic science school in her hometown. Throughout her life, she was an organizer for African American women, creating the first black women's club in Tampa, serving as speaker of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC), and working as a state organizer of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Louisiana (Burke). She based her service to black communities on ideals of hard work and evoked accommodationist politics, for which she was celebrated as the "[f]eminine Booker [T.] Washington" ("Feminine").

Considering Armwood Perkins's involvement in black community activism, this section focuses on the role of African American foodways and race in *Food Conservation in the Home*. I commence by analyzing how the cookbook addressed and challenged racist tropes about African American women, then discuss what the promise of everyday heroism entailed for this group of women, and lastly show how the cookbook picked up the threads of their culinary heritage.

One of the most influential tropes that devalued African American women and their work in early-twentieth-century America was that of the 'mammy.' The roots of this stereotype lay in a romanticized depiction of enslaved African American women, forced to work as wet nurses and caretakers in Southern households (Wallace-Sanders 2-4). The trope depicted them as subordinate and gentle mother figures devoted to serving white families (Tipton-Martin 2). This myth outlasted the institution of slavery and continued to dominate the representation of African American women, as more than ninety percent of them worked as domestic laborers after emancipation—often in the same households that had previously

enslaved them (Le Dantec-Lowry, “Writing” 136). ‘Mammyism’ also shaped American society long after WWI. Five years after Armwood Perkins published her cookbook and sixty years following the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation, the United Daughters of the Confederacy planned to build a ‘Mammy Memorial’ in Washington, DC, intending to ‘honor’ the domestic workers of the Antebellum South (Sharpless xvi). At its core, the trope of the mammy structurally denied African American women self-determination and diminished their abilities.

In American foodways, the trope of the mammy became commodified and personified by the figure of Aunt Jemima. In 1893, Missouri businessman R. T. Davis popularized this fictional character by hiring and exploiting Nancy Green, a formerly enslaved black woman (Wallace-Sanders 60). He presented her as Aunt Jemima at the Chicago World’s Fair “as a Reconstructionist alter ego to the mammy” (4). Aunt Jemima appeared in advertisements for food products like pancake mixes or on cookie jars (Sharpless xv), and the products remained a popular staple in many households until the trademark was discontinued in 2021 (Alcorn). Cookbooks like Katharin Bell’s *Mammy’s Cookbook* channeled this trope by idealizing black caretakers while disguising the economic dependence and power dynamics at the core of their work in white households (Theophano 58). The trope of Aunt Jemima portrayed African American women as nurturers devoid of a desire for self-care and as obedient cooks whose almost mystical abilities made cooking seem natural.

Armwood Perkins subverted these racialized representations of African American women by demonstrating her scientific knowledge as a professional educator. To achieve this, she used the conventions of domestic scientists, whose cookbooks not only reinforced domesticity and ‘traditional’ femininity but also framed domestic work as a profession. Armwood Perkins did so by employing a scientific language, calling her meals “experiments,” and demanding precision through “accurate measuring” (6). When it came to cooking, she left little to chance. Most recipes came with clear instructions, following a systematic approach to preparing food that ensured a reliable and predictable outcome. Her readers were to learn professional skills in order to serve their civic obligation. Relying on acquired skills rather than instincts, she expressed an approach to cooking that demanded conscious and scientifically informed decisions, thereby contradicting the trope of Aunt Jemima.

Furthermore, Armwood Perkins claimed authority by demonstrating her culinary expertise and extensive cooking skills. As the tradition of “Southern cookery literature [...] rarely depicted African cooks’ ingenuity and creativity,” representations of Aunt Jemima marginalized their intellect (Theophano 54). Armwood Perkins disproved this assumption by showing her proficiency in cooking

Cooking in Crisis: Everyday Heroism in Blanche Armwood Perkins's Cookbook *Food Conservation in the Home*

techniques—she told her readers to sauté chicken, taught them how to poach eggs, and described the process of braising a liver (Armwood Perkins 28-30). These procedures may seem trivial at first glance, but they stood as a testament to the culinary skill set of Armwood Perkins. Moreover, she demonstrated her creativity and capacity for innovation. Despite the scarcity of certain foods, she drafted fourteen different menus for breakfast, lunch, and dinner—some of them involving up to seven different dishes per ‘menu’ (37). Offering a variety of dishes and preparation methods to her readers, Armwood Perkins substantiated her authority as a chef and cooking instructor.

She refuted a nostalgic depiction of African American cooks by making use of modern technology in the home. Her cookbook included several advertisements; one of them, which is found on the first page, promoted a gas boiler that supplied homes with hot water from the faucet. As house appliances working with gas gradually replaced those driven by coal since the turn of the century, they became celebrated icons of modernity. While coal stoves were considered antiquated, gas stoves indicated progress (Veit 81).⁴ This advertisement also reflected her long and complicated ties with gas companies in the US South, starting when the Tampa Gas Company hired her as their only African American “domestic science expert” in 1914 (Burke).

On the one hand, the advertisements in Armwood Perkins’s cookbook proved her skills as a businesswoman. Their presence meant that she managed to acquire investors while navigating the segregated landscape of corporate capitalism. An article in the NAACP newspaper *The Crisis* celebrated her financial leadership for attracting \$12,000 from the New Orleans Gas Company to finance domestic education for African American women (“Men” 235). This strongly countered the Aunt Jemima stereotype that did not envision African American cooks as female entrepreneurs.

On the other hand, the gas companies she cooperated with hindered emancipation for African Americans. According to historian Nancy Hewitt, the Tampa Gas Company was organizationally tied to the Tampa Electric Company also known as “TECO, which a decade earlier had been in the forefront of imposing Jim Crow” (169). Establishing cooking schools served the interests of gas companies in the South. Armwood Perkins managed to appeal to them and win over their financial support by evoking romanticized antebellum depictions of black servants in Southern households, proclaiming that “now that the old black ‘mammy’ has had her day and passed on, we are determined not to be cheated out of our rights to serve our people in other ways” (Milt 474). The submissiveness she expressed not only financially benefited the gas companies but also catered to the demands of

4 Modern appliances promised a reduction of labor; yet, since they demanded training, experienced conduct, and careful supervision, they ended up being laborious nonetheless (Veit 81).

white households searching for domestic workers, whose numbers had previously declined (Le Dantec-Lowry, “Reading” 104). Her accomplishments had contradictory effects since she personally gained recognition for opening these schools while accommodating her students to racialized work roles.

By educating African American women, her cookbook called upon them to fulfill their patriotic duties as everyday heroines. While Armwood Perkins endorsed values rooted in white middle-class femininity, her work influenced a more diverse group of women. In her New Orleans School of Domestic Science—one out of a total of five schools she operated—Armwood Perkins trained 1,200 African American women, marking the first time they had access to such education (“Men” 235). In these schools, she taught the principles of food conservation by instructing her students on how to bake “18 kinds of war breads” (“Domestic Science”). According to the NACWC, her cookbook was “used by women of ‘both races’” (Hewitt 227), positioning Armwood Perkins as an advocate for food conservation among African Americans in the South. This is important because it shows that her cookbook transferred the ideals of everyday heroism to a group of women excluded from attaining such recognition. In this light, cookbooks like hers functioned as “technologies of assimilation and progress” (Fretwell 186). The promise of uplift by exercising their civic duty, however, went hand in hand with forcing African American women into the kitchens of white homes. The cookbook’s heroic appeal was deceptive for many of them because it promised perspective and recognition while obstructing emancipation and social mobility.

However, Armwood Perkins’s cookbook destabilized racial boundaries by embedding African American foodways in Southern culinary culture; published in New Orleans, it reflected the cultural heritage of the Crescent City. Dishes like “Creole Omelet” (28) and “Crab Gumbo” (37) stemmed from the regional tradition of Creole cuisine, which blended African, European, Native American, and Caribbean influences and was significantly cocreated by African Americans. The name for the Louisiana staple ‘Gumbo,’ for instance, came from enslaved West Africans (Nobles 98), reflecting the ties to African American foodways in her cookbook.

More than referencing diverse culinary traditions, her cookbook placed them in the context of WWI and underlined their potential for supporting US war efforts at home. Her recipe of “Red Beans, Creole Style,” for instance, illustrated this idea (30). Celebrated as a “symbol of New Orleans” (Leathem and Nossiter 129), red beans and rice emerged from a weekly ritual on Mondays, when housewives and domestic servants would do laundry and cook a dish that required little attention (132). These ‘soul foods’ emerged from conditions of frugality and food scarcity, often using any ingredients available. Such dishes proved particularly relevant during wartime. As food thrift became an indicator of everyday heroism, Armwood Perkins advised

homemakers to prepare dishes with a longstanding history in Creole and African American cooking in order to use food efficiently. Thereby, she not only demonstrated the resilience of these culinary traditions but also their usefulness for food conservation.

By ingraining these traditions in her cookbook, Armwood Perkins emphasized the cooking skills of African American women. Her recipe for “Southern Fried Chicken” (28) was her take on one of the most iconic dishes in Southern cuisine. In popular culture, however, this food was and continues to be deeply permeated by racist prejudices against African Americans and women in particular, because preparing chicken was considered a mammy’s hallmark (Williams-Forson 86). Challenging these stereotypes, Williams-Forson argues that the historical relationship between African American women and chicken was far more complex. A diverse group of black women used chicken to maintain their livelihoods, gain economic independence, or showcase their culinary abilities (1-2). Fried chicken became a symbol for “how ordinary black women have made contributions to African American life and culture” (110). This contribution was not missing in Armwood Perkins’s cookbook. She kept this recipe short and simple. In contrast to other main dishes, she gave no ingredient list and no clear measurements. The instructions encompassed a mere one and a half lines. Such a short recipe presumed a certain culinary literacy from her readership to prepare this meal. Given the dish’s cultural significance for African American women, it seems plausible that Armwood Perkins wrote this recipe with the skills and experience of black women preparing this meal in mind. Though not explicitly referring to them, this recipe nevertheless held a significant place in the recipe collection because it indicated African American cooking traditions at a time when black food culture was marginalized and exploited by white cookbook authors.

After all, *Food Conservation in the Home* voiced a sense of belonging for African Americans within the nation. Armwood Perkins identified with her readers, speaking of Americans as a collective ‘we’ who were “engaged in the most terrible war” (3). Claiming loyalty to a nation that needed civilian assistance but simultaneously deprived African Americans from citizenship was a controversial stance. However, it was not a singular one within the African American community. In a contested editorial in *The Crisis*, one of the most influential civil rights leaders, W. E. B. Du Bois, called upon African Americans to “forget our special grievances and close ranks shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens” (111).⁵ He saw the war as a chance to prove that African Americans were indispensable for victory. The cookbook echoed this sentiment because it not only demonstrated Armwood Perkins’s service to the nation but also claimed her place in society as an American. Since food allowed individuals to express their national

⁵ Du Bois later regretted his call for closing the ranks.

identity in their personal lives (Martschukat and Simon 1), the recipes served as means to express her national allegiance.

In summary, Blanche Armwood Perkins inscribed herself in a food discourse dominated by and catering to white middle-class women. During a time when African American women's voices were seldom represented in culinary literature, her cookbook subverted racial stereotypes about African American women by proving her proficiency, skills, and authority. Using recipes rooted in African American foodways and training African American women in wartime cooking, she extended the ideals of everyday heroism to African American women. Their heroization, however, did not guarantee them liberation or equity, as the ideals for heroines were modeled after white middle-class women. She endorsed a bourgeois "black female domesticity" that reinforced class distinctions by glorifying the homemakers' role (Fretwell 186). While she countered racist representations of African American women in food literature, her work ultimately contributed to cementing their roles within the status quo in daily life.

CONCLUSION

This article explored everyday heroism in Blanche Armwood Perkins's *Food Conservation in the Home* through the lens of food history. Focusing on cooking and eating as mundane practices in American society during WWI, this article demonstrated that her cookbook constructed homemakers as everyday heroines by using food as a way to implement the heroic into daily American life. I focused on two interrelated elements: First, making rational food choices, conserving food products, and substituting ingredients became common practices that defined women's heroism and glorified them as nurturers of a nation within the confines of the home. Second, Armwood Perkins challenged the almost exclusive authority of white women by stressing her culinary expertise, elevating the role of African Americans in the war efforts, and establishing her work in the culinary mastery of African American women.

During WWI, everyday heroism functioned as a strategy to mobilize people in support of national efforts. Convinced of fulfilling their duty, civilians determined and implemented new social norms of cooking and eating. The contribution of housewives stood at their core, resting on gendered and racialized ideas of female heroism. Their heroism, however, was not defined by extraordinary feats but through their adherence to the Food Administration guidelines. Seemingly trivial routines like eating and cooking became valiant acts. As bizarre as it may sound nowadays, eating potato bread, reheating leftover food in tasty sauces, and baking cakes using margarine were deemed patriotic.

Cooking in Crisis: Everyday Heroism in Blanche Armwood Perkins's Cookbook *Food Conservation in the Home*

As one of the only known cookbooks authored by an African American woman during WWI, *Food Conservation in the Home* has yet to receive attention in African American food literature. One factor that certainly contributed to this absence is that Armwood Perkins neither labeled her work as African American cuisine nor mentioned race explicitly. Like other cookbooks by black authors from the beginning of the twentieth century, it had “more in common with domestic science cookery than with what later emerged as ‘soul food’” (Witt 219). By showing how Armwood Perkins employed African American food traditions, this work paves the way for her cookbook to be recognized within this tradition. As part of this heritage, *Food Conservation in the Home* remains a rare and valuable source for scholars exploring American foodways.

WORKS CITED

- Adams, Jon Robert. *Male Armor: The Soldier-Hero in Contemporary American Culture*. U of Virginia P, 2012.
- Alcorn, Chauncey. “Aunt Jemima Finally Has a New Name.” *CNN*, 9 Feb. 2021, edition.cnn.com/2021/02/09/business/aunt-jemima-new-name/index.html.
- Armwood Perkins, Blanche. *Food Conservation in the Home*. New Orleans School of Domestic Science, 1918.
- Burke, Mary. “The Success of Blanche Armwood (1890-1938).” *Sunland Tribune*, vol. 15, 1989. *Digital Commons USF*, digitalcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol15/iss1/13.
- Cohen, Benjamin R. *Pure Adulteration: Cheating on Nature in the Age of Manufactured Food*. U of Chicago P, 2019.
- “Cooking School for Negro Students.” *The Bulletin*, 1918?, pp. 12-16. Armwood Family Papers, box 04, folder 11, University of South Florida.
- “Corn, Potatoes, and Rye Are Wheat Savers for Uncle Sam.” *The Tampa Times*, 26 Apr. 1918, p. 10. *Newspapers.com*, www.newspapers.com/image/332954412/.
- “Domestic Science School Graduates.” *The Natchitoches Times*, 22 Mar. 1918, p. 2. *Newspapers.com*, www.newspapers.com/image/333149388/.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. [published as William DuBois]. “Editorial.” *The Crisis*, vol. 16, no. 3, July 1918, pp. 11-14. *Modernist Journals Project*, modjourn.org/issue/bdr511336/.
- Falkenhayner, Nicole, et al. “Editorial: Analyzing Processes of Heroization: Theories, Methods, Histories.” *helden. heroes. héros.*, no. 5, 2019, pp. 5-8. *UB Freiburg*, <https://doi.org/10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/01>.
- “Feminine Booker Washington Seen.” *The Tampa Tribune*, April 7, 1916, p. 7. *Newspapers.com*, www.newspapers.com/image/326385082/.
- Fretwell, Erica. “Black Power in the Kitchen.” *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Food*, edited by J. Michelle Coghlan, Cambridge UP, 2020, pp. 182-96.

- Greer, Carlotta Cherryholmes. *Food and Victory: A War Supplement to Text-Book of Cooking*. Allyn and Bacon, 1918.
- Harmon, Dudley. "Questions that Women Ask Mr. Hoover." *The Ladies' Home Journal*, Sept. 1917, p. 27. *HathiTrust Digital Library*, hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015018052467.
- Hewitt, Nancy A. *Southern Discomfort: Women's Activism in Tampa, Florida, 1880s-1920s*. U of Illinois P, 2001.
- Hoff, Ralf von den, et al. "Heroes—Heroizations—Heroisms: Transformations and Conjectures from Antiquity to Modernity: Foundational Concepts of the Collaborative Research Centre SFB 948." *helden. heroes. héros.*, no. 5, 2019, pp. 9-16. *UB Freiburg*, <https://doi.org/10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/02>.
- Hoover, Herbert. "What I Would Like Women To Do." *The Ladies' Home Journal*, Aug. 1917, p. 25. *HathiTrust Digital Library*, hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015018052467.
- Hume, Janice. "Narratives of Feminine Heroism: Gender Values and Memory in the American Press in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries." *Wendt, Extraordinary Ordinarity*, pp. 139-66.
- Kaplan, Amy. "Manifest Domesticity." *American Literature*, vol. 70, no. 3, 1998, pp. 581-606. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2902710>.
- Kennedy, David M. *Over Here: The First World War and American Society*. Oxford UP, 2004.
- Kingsbury, Celia Malone. *For Home and Country: World War I Propaganda on the Home Front*. U of Nebraska P, 2010.
- Leathem, Karen Trahan, and Sharon Stallworth Nossiter. "Red Beans and Rice." *Tucker*, pp. 128-39.
- Le Dantec-Lowry, Hélène. "Reading Women's Lives in Cookbooks and Other Culinary Writings: A Critical Essay." *Revue Française d'Études Américaines*, no. 116, 2008, pp. 99-122. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20875820.
- . "Writing Women, Writing Food: African-American Women's Cookbooks in Historical Perspective." *Mapping Appetite Essays on Food, Fiction and Culture*, edited by Jopi Nyman and Pere Gallardo, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007, pp. 132-49.
- Lüdtke, Alf. "What Is the History of Everyday Life and Who Are Its Practitioners?" Introduction. *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life*, edited by Lüdtke, Princeton UP, 1995, pp. 3-40.
- Mackert, Nina. "Work, Burn, Eat: Abilities of Calorimetric Bodies in the USA, 1890-1930." *Rethinking History*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2019, pp. 189-209. *Taylor and Francis*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2019.1607474>.
- Martschukat, Jürgen, and Bryant Simon. *Food, Power, and Agency*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.
- Mayo, Bernard. *Myths and Men: Patrick Henry, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson*. U of Georgia P, 2010.
- "Men of the Month." *The Crisis*, vol. 16, no. 5, Sept. 1918, pp. 235-36. *Marxists Internet Archive*,

Cooking in Crisis: Everyday Heroism in Blanche Armwood Perkins's Cookbook *Food Conservation in the Home*

- www.marxists.org/history/usa/workers/civil-rights/crisis/0900-crisis-v16n05-w095.pdf.
- Milt, Saul. "Record Crowd at Tampa Meet." *The Gas Record*, vol. 9, no. 7, 12 Apr. 1916. Armwood Family Papers, box 04, folder 11, University of South Florida.
- Nobles, Cynthia LeJeune. "Gumbo." Tucker, pp. 98-115.
- Pomper, Gerald M. *On Ordinary Heroes and American Democracy*. Routledge, 2007.
- Schlechtriemen, Tobias. "The Hero as an Effect: Boundary Work in Processes of Heroization." *helden. heroes. héros.*, no. 5, 2019, pp. 17-26. *UB Freiburg*, <https://doi.org/10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2019/APH/03>.
- Shapiro, Laura. *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century*. North Point P, 1995.
- Theophano, Janet. *Eat My Words: Reading Women's Lives through the Cookbooks They Wrote*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Tipton-Martin, Toni. *The Jemima Code: Two Centuries of African American Cookbooks*. U of Texas P, 2015.
- "To-Day Marks Opening of Food Pledge Week." *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 28 Oct. 1917, p. 4. *Library of Congress*, chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045389/1917-10-28/ed-1/seq-4/.
- Tucker, Susan, editor. *New Orleans Cuisine: Fourteen Signature Dishes and Their Histories*. UP of Mississippi, 2009.
- Twentieth Century Club of Pittsburgh. *Twentieth Century Club War Time Cook Book*. Pierpont, Sivitter, 1918.
- Veit, Helen Zoe. *Modern Food, Moral Food*. U of North Carolina P, 2013.
- Vester, Katharina. *A Taste of Power: Food and American Identities*. U of California P, 2015.
- Wallace-Sanders, Kimberly. *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender and Southern Memory*. U of Michigan P, 2008.
- Wendt, Simon, editor. *Extraordinary Ordinarity: Everyday Heroism in the United States, Germany, and Britain, 1800-2015*. Campus, 2016.
- . "Reconsidering Military Heroism in American History." Introduction. *Warring Over Valor: How Race and Gender Shaped American Military Heroism in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century*, edited by Wendt, Rutgers UP, 2019, pp. 1-20.
- . "Self-Sacrifice and Civilization: American Everyday Heroism and the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission in the Progressive Era." *Heroism Science*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1-35, scholarship.richmond.edu/heroism-science/vol9/iss1/12/.
- . "Studying Everyday Heroism in Western Societies." Introduction. Wendt, *Extraordinary Ordinarity*, pp. 7-24.
- Williams-Forsen, Psyche A. *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*. U of North Carolina P, 2006.
- Wilson, Woodrow. "Address to Congress: Declaration of War Against Germany." 2 Apr. 1917. *National Archives*, www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/address-to-congress-declaration-of-war-against-germany.

Maximilian Pott

Witt, Doris. *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity*. Oxford UP, 1999.