

Food For Thought: A Toast to Blondell w/ Korsha Wilson

Joshua Oduga: Hello, and thank you for joining us for this virtual program, Food for Thought: A Toast to Blondell with Korsha Wilson. I'm Joshua Oduga, Public Programs and Exhibitions Manager at Art and Practice, and we are very excited to share this virtual program with you.

This program is organized in association with Art and Practice's current exhibition, Blondell Cummings' Dance as Moving Pictures, a co-presentation with the Getty Research Institute. The exhibition is on view at Art and Practice in Leimert Park until February 2022. For this program, we welcome food writer and graduate of The Culinary Institute of America, Korsha Wilson. She is the host of A Hungry Society, a podcast that takes a more inclusive and diverse look at the food world. She has also written for The New York Times, Eater, Bon Appetit, Vogue, The New Yorker, and Food and Wine. Hello, Korsha.

Korsha Wilson: Hi, Joshua! Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited for this conversation.

Joshua: Yeah. Thank you for joining us. Really excited to have you here. Personally, such a huge fan of your writing.

Korsha: Thank you so much!

Joshua: I've been looking forward to this for a really long time. How are you doing today?

Korsha: I'm doing good. I'm doing good. You know, it's gray and gloomy here in New Jersey, but it's nice to have fall colors outside on the trees.

Joshua: Yeah, definitely. It's starting to feel a little bit like fall here in LA as well.

So to give everybody a little bit of context about this specific program, during Blondell's career, she created a series of dance works, titled Food for Thought. These works included a suite of performances collected on a single tape that represented Cummings' kinetic meditation on the importance and specificity of food. In many of Cummings' other dance works, she often used meals and food as the basis for her dances and the themes that they explored.

For Cummings, food was an entry point by which she explored not only her own life stories, but also the stories of others. For this little program series Food for Thought within our larger program series, we have invited three women who also use food as a way to share stories, cultures, and understanding to share a story of their own with everyone who's participating in this program. So Korsha, do you want to give everybody a little bit of context about the story that you're going to tell and then we can get right into it?

Korsha: Yeah. So as you said, I do use food to tell not only my story, but stories I think are important just in terms of cultural memory. This story in particular is very personally important to me. So I in 2020 had the extreme fortune of getting to go to the Virgin Islands on assignment, so I got to spend a week between St. Thomas, St. John, and St. Croix. My mom grew up in St. Thomas, so I'm very familiar with the island, so I've been going since I was little. And that story was about the French influence in the

cuisine there and how it's just a mashup of French, Danish, African, and even a Puerto Rican influence in the food there as well between the three islands. And it was amazing.

And something I noticed was actually what I didn't see, which is this dish called fungi. I grew up eating fungi. I feel like my grandmother would make me eat it because it's corn meal and okra whisked together with a ton of butter, and it's perfect underneath some stewed fish, and now I've come to love it, but I was just really shocked that I didn't see it on a lot of menus there because it's so traditional and such a big part of Virgin Island's cuisine.

Joshua: Yeah.

Korsha: So I wanted to write a story about that.

Joshua: That sounds great. So we can get into the story. Now, you shared some images as well. I'll share the images for everyone. So let me share my screen.

Korsha: Yeah. So these are two of my favorite pictures I took while I was there last, and I'm dying to get back. But the one on the left is in St. Thomas and it's a statue called Fireburn, and Fireburn was an event on St. Croix. that was actually a revolt against labor laws. And it was led by three women who were captured, but it just speaks to the beauty and resilience that I see in so much of African American food ways and Caribbean food ways in particular, just making a way out of no way.

And so I actually have this as my phone backdrop to remind me of the beauty and brilliance and bravery and resistance that's within black women, period, Caribbean or otherwise. And then on the right, it's just a bit of natural beauty and St. Croix. I actually happened to be there over the course of my birthday and walked to this beach and it's such a beautiful- I wish I was sitting there right now. So I just wanted to share that too.

But the next picture is actually fungi, if you've haven't seen it, and this is how you would make it, you'd make it in a sauce pot and start the okra and then whisk in the cornmeal, keep whisking, keep whisking, add butter, keep whisking, keep whisking until it gets to the consistency that you want it. Some people like it super thick and dense, some people like it with a ton of butter and runny, but just one of those things, that's like one of those delicious starches underneath something that soaks up all the juice.

Joshua: Is it a thing that you eat at any time of day? Can you eat it for a lunch meal or a breakfast meal or is it primarily like a dinner?

Korsha: I primarily have at it at dinner or lunch. I guess back in the day you could eat it in the morning, but it's pretty heavy, so you'd want it to be in the middle of your day or at the end of it. If it's in the morning, you won't be doing much after. You'll need a nap.

Joshua: Totally. Totally. And in Nigeria, we have fufu.

Korsha: Yes!

Joshua: Which is... it's very similar, I think. And in composition, at least, it has different ingredients for sure. But it's just making me think of that.

Korsha: Yes! And it's so funny you mentioned that because in St. Thomas you'll often have fungi with callaloo on top, so like stewed greens and seafood, and it's like [inaudible], like it's a direct tie between West Africa and the Caribbean. It's beautiful.

Joshua: That's really interesting. I'll have to try to track it down here in-

Korsha: Yeah! So this picture is St. Croix view from one of the places I stayed and it was taken the last day of the trip where I was just kind of reflecting on all the things I had gotten to taste and experience. And I had a lot of delicious food, but part of me was like, "Oh, I hope we don't lose fungi". That's such an important part of the culture. I didn't know it'd turn into a full story, but it was just on my mind, so I wanted to share this picture too. Yes. And so this dish, this is actually from a Puerto Rican restaurant in St. Croix. And if you look at this, you see a lot of Puerto Rican influence and that's what's so cool to me about not just Virgin islands, but the Caribbean in general. I think it's one of the most interesting food regions on the planet, because of how many different cultures have touched the Caribbean, and St. Croix, you see a huge Puerto Rican and Trinidadian influence.

And so I really wanted to share this picture too, because I think people often think of Caribbean food as one thing and from island to island, you can touch so many different countries and have so many different influences. And so I wanted to share that too, to show that it's not just fried fish and some beans. That stuff's delicious, too, don't get me wrong, but you know, it looks like so many different things.

Joshua: Yeah. That must have been such an enlightening experience for you to be there.

Korsha: Yes.

Joshua: Especially because as you mentioned, you were on another assignment, then you went there and you were thinking about this. In terms of formulating these kinds of stories, I'd love for you to talk a little bit about being a writer who's working within different cultures and thinking about different cultures in your work and thinking about your own culture. And when you do that, what does it mean to you? How are you gathering these stories and how are you thinking about translating them through written word and making it be something that other people can really connect with?

Korsha: I hope this doesn't sound self-centered, but I found that when I try to do something so it connects with other people that it's not as meaningful as if I just speak about why it matters to me. And so, like the fungi story in particular learning that cornmeal and salt pork was rationed to my ancestors by the Danish government so they could keep working. And our ancestors grew okra out of plain sight, hidden to feed themselves, to make something that they could survive on. That means a lot to me.

And I think that when it means so much, it comes through in the writing. And I think, to tie it back to Blondell, when you look at Chicken Soup, that dance, it's so intimate and personal, but it's universal. I think there's always universality in that intimacy and once you get to the core meaning behind things of feeling pride or feeling gratitude or love, those are things that speak to everybody.

Joshua: Yeah. It's really interesting. And I've thought about that a lot as I've experienced Blondell's work, especially the work in the Food for Thought series itself, the work where she's thinking about different dishes and different ways that it affects people and their culture and things like that. I think what you're saying is really interesting. I think that the best writers probably approach it in the way that you do as well. It's not about creating a universal concept. It's really about thinking about those personal ideas in the way that personal things as us all being humans just can be really universal. I think that that's really interesting.

And one of the things I think that that leads me to, and is where you gather inspiration from, I know in one sense it may be food. It may be the stories that you're telling, but I'd love to think about that, especially because I think of writers as the people that oftentimes other people go to for inspiration. So I think a lot, I'm like, "Where do writers get that from?" And I think after you answer, I'll also follow up and tie it to Blondell as well.

Korsha: Yeah. I mean, I go to other writers too, but I try not to think about people doing that with me, because that's a lot of pressure and I don't want to have that on my mind as I try to create something. But usually for me, it's talking to someone... Part of the reason why I started a podcast, period, is because interviews are my favorite thing to do as far as writing, like the interview process is just my absolute favorite thing. And I wanted a reason to do that multiple times a week and just do that. But also going to museums is always super inspiring, taking time in nature is inspiring, and then also things going wrong can be inspiring.

So I actually am working on a piece about when meals, you know, you have the best intentions for them and they don't come out right. And how we don't usually see the mistakes, the culinary mistakes and how even your favorite chefs make them at home, and in the professional kitchen they happen and there's nothing wrong with them. And that was inspired by me messing up the dinner and I'm a good cook. I can say that I'm a good cook, but you know, sometimes you just don't have the plan fully fleshed out and you have to just go with it. And I find that's where inspiration can kind of creep in and say "You should talk about this because probably other people are dealing with it too."

Joshua: Yeah. That's really interesting. And that really ties me to the thing I was going to say that goes back to Blondell, is being able to take in all of these different ideas, being able to take in what's happening around you and translate them through your own work. And I think Blondell was doing that through her dance and through her choreography. But I think she was also doing that with the ideas that she was coming across, whether it's food or the woman's menstrual cycle or whether it's the relationship between women of different cultures, there's various different things that she was exploring in her work that were ways that it seems she was trying to figure things out as well. And with this story specifically, I think the story that you just shared with everyone about food, it really tasks people to think about their lineage in a specific way, right?

Like, you mentioned that you were on this trip thinking about your grandmother and, and thinking about the work that you were doing and these things were the catalyst for a new idea for a new type of writing- a new story, I should say. And so I wanted to ask you, to wrap everything up really nicely, what's next for you in terms of writing, in terms of those things, and what ideas and what things are you really excited about?

Korsha: Yeah.

Joshua: You just shared one right now, the idea of mistakes, which is something that I think about all the time in the field that I work in, how to turn mistakes into something beautiful. Right?

Korsha: Yeah.

Joshua: What concepts, what stories are you trying to figure out? What's the next phase for Korsha as a writer?

Korsha: Oh man. Well, I mean, I feel like it's interesting to think about, you know, having... Because I was thinking about this a lot in early 2020... what's next, what projects do I want to tackle? And then the world kind of went upside down. And so lately it's been- I will say for 2020 it was just "Okay, one foot in front of the other", getting projects done. I was lucky enough to secure a co-authored cookbook deal, [inaudible] Eric Adjepong and go to Ghana with him and taste food there and see the connections between Ghana and the Caribbean and America. And I'm still processing that it's been a few weeks now, but it was just monumental in terms of... You know, Michael Twitty says if you're a black American, [inaudible] Africa, you feel like you've got people on the other side of the planet with you, rooting for you, and you know, you do the same for them. It just gives you kind of the sense of having come from somewhere.

Joshua: Yeah.

Korsha: And I definitely feel that and I maybe want to write about that experience and going to slave castles on the coast of Ghana, but always kind of using food as a lens to not only talk about what matters to me, but archive the things that are happening right now as well.

I think that's a part of food writing that I don't think gets enough sort of attention is that we're archiving the present moment. And that's such an important thing when you think about who gets to say what history is and what it includes and doesn't include.

Joshua: Yes, that is such a beautiful thing. And I thought about this so much, but working with Blondell's work and specifically, I think, her work that has to do with food, which is really interesting. It was one of the things where a colleague of mine, we thought about this program really early on in the process in terms of food and all of that, because I think these experiences are things that each person is trying to figure out-

Korsha: Yes.

Joshua: On their own. And you mentioned this idea of archiving, and I think that Blondell was a master at that. And I think in all creative people... and I consider you to be an artist as well.

Korsha: Oh goodness.

Joshua: So in all creative people-

Korsha: That's kind of you.

Joshua: All people making things, I think this idea of archiving is something that's so important nowadays.

Korsha: Yeah.

Joshua: Thinking about that and thinking about not only archiving your own work or your own stories, but other people's stories as well, and thinking about the way that in the future, these things are consumed. So thank you so much for doing the stuff that you do to do that and making it be so personal in a way I think, because it's really important. Is there anything else that you want to add before we-

Korsha: Yeah!

Joshua: ...before we pass this down?

Korsha: I mean, it's interesting how in archiving what other people are doing, you kind of show up yourself as a person. And you're listening to my old podcast episodes where I'm figuring out how to interview folks, I'm also talking about things that matter to me at the time. And so it's like this time capsule, which is also, I was going to say, what you're doing with your interview series, is you're archiving not only your subjects you're talking to, but yourself as well and your point in history. So-

Joshua: Yeah, definitely.

Korsha: Multifaceted.

Joshua: It's so important to make these spaces for ourselves and for each other, right? And so in this series, I think Food for Thought specifically, I think it's so exciting to think about a platform for other people to share stories and where they are at this moment. So congratulations on the travels and the cookbook and everything. And we'll all be waiting for more for sure.

Korsha: Yes! Thank you so much for having me. This is such a dope program, and I'm so grateful that you asked me to do it.

Joshua: Yeah, thanks! And we will link below to Korsha's story in The New York Times so that everybody can read it at their discretion. And we'll also share some links to other things that we've talked about in this program. Thank you all for joining us and have a good evening or day, or whenever you happen to watch this.

Korsha: Bye!