Title: "Thug Life" in a White Kitchen: Exploring Race Work in the Language of Cookbooks
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Source: *Graduate Journal of Food Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, (Sep. 2016), pp.19-27
Published by: Graduate Association for Food Studies

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"Thug Life" in a White Kitchen: Exploring Race Work in the Language of Cookbooks

abstract | *Can cookbooks be racist? In 2012, anonymous authors began a vegan food blog to motivate people to eat more healthfully. The blog Thug Kitchen propelled its readers with excessive profanity but not much else. Many assumed the writers were African American. Within two years, popularity promoted it to print, and it became a cookbook. Afterward, the authors were revealed to be a young white couple. Controversy ensued. Critics argued that authors Matt Holloway and Michelle Davis were essentially guilty of "blackface" deception, while publishing CEO Daniel Power defended the cookbook's title, explaining that "thug" does not hold specific racial connotations and the work is meant to be a parody. However, public opinion varies. Origins of the term "thug" may not be steeped in racially derogatory context, but recent uses have taken on a more racially charged tone. This paper examines the controversy surrounding Thug Kitchen and the word's liminal state in American English, using feminist and critical race theory to discuss language tensions in black and white America, particularly in the realm of food culture. Davis and Holloway may have started this blog with innocent intentions, but the decision to use that one word in their title has created a big stir.*

keywords | *language, race, food writing, culture, identity*

AN APPETIZER Food can be just as culturally coded as language. In August of 2012, anonymous authors began a vegan food blog to motivate people to eat more healthfully. The blog, called *Thug Kitchen*, bombards its readers with excessive profanity. A sample from the blog offers a recipe for sugar snap peas, the headline exclaiming, "Oh shit: these high fiber fuckers help prevent heart disease. This snack's got your goddamn back." Another recipe for grapefruit guacamole states that "This simple son of a bitch has vitamin C." As you can see, the major difference illustrated between this food blog and your grandmother's cookbook is the addition of strong language, presumably the element that brands it "thug."

Many assumed the writers of this blog were African American, and for nearly two years the charade held steady. Then, however, the popularity of *Thug Kitchen* promoted it to the world of print, and it became a cookbook. When this happened, the authors were revealed to be Matt Holloway and Michelle Davis, a young suburban white couple from California who were essentially "putting on" a persona to gain more readers. Controversy ensued. Critics argued that Davis and Holloway were essentially guilty of "blackface" deception and a large portion of the public didn't appreciate the authors' choice of title. Protesters boycotted both the book and an evening in New York City that sponsored its publication. In response to these protests, publishing CEO Daniel Power defended the title of the cookbook, explaining that the term "thug" does not hold specific racial connotations and that the work is meant to be a parody. But, were it not for the title, would the volume have caused as much contention?

The underlying problems in cases like the one above tend to be caused by a gaggle of complicating factors. Such factors may involve (among many others) a significant lack of (language) awareness, deep-rooted biases and assumptions passed down from generation to generation, economics, and of course just plain old fashioned xenophobia—the food world not being immune to such issues. This article explores a mixture of reactions from the public and seeks to analyze the rhetorically diverse ways language tensions exist in transitional terms like thug, while situated in the world of cooking.

Feminist writer Audre Lorde would tell us that lack of awareness is not an excuse, that our response to uncomfortable situations and recognizing our misunderstandings should be an open dialogue. She says:

> *Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.*[1]

There is a clear danger with transitional words in that they can often be *more* dangerous than words that are overtly racist, overtly offensive. If a culture or society has generally accepted a term to be a racial slur, every person in that society *knows* that if they use it, it is offensive. They *know* it will stir up a hornet's nest. Using it is a clear choice. However, if a word is in a state of flux the way "thug" is—some groups find it racially stigmatizing, and other groups see no racial connection whatsoever—a person may use it without necessarily intending to cause or knowing it will cause offense. Many people are not using this word to be racially offensive, but the fact is that there are groups who feel offended by the term.

The truth is: thug is a loaded word. It comes with assumptions and cultural associations, which are often at odds with each other. While much has been written about how to deal with overtly racist language within American culture, the rhetorical place of these in-between terms is unclear, especially when they crop up in unexpected places, such as a cookbook named *Thug Kitchen*. Kee Malesky writes for NPR's Code Switch series on the importance of how we communicate and grow as communities through dynamic language. She points out that, "Language is and always will be an essential element in the struggle for understanding among peoples. Changes in the words and phrases we use to describe each other reflect whatever progress we make on the path toward a world where everyone feels respected and included."[2] The problem is that, while language is never static, it still takes time for these changes to occur, for everyone to catch up to new, accepted "norms" in our vocabularies. And, of course, when race is embedded in these transitions, the cultural paradigm shifts can take even longer. One would hope that we are moving more toward that inclusive world that Malesky speaks of. In the meantime, however, we have words like thug that are still caught in the middle.

PLEASE ALERT THE CHEF: A MATTER OF DISCLOSURE Julie Guthman, professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, writes about the "unbearable whiteness" of alternative foodways. She states, "Sullivan (2006) makes the point that the unconscious habits of white privilege are in some respects more pernicious than the explicit racism of white supremacy because it is not examined."[3] Shannon Sullivan,[4] mentioned here in Guthman's piece, talks about the dangers of white people resisting or denying the place of white privilege from which they benefit, that this can often do more harm than explicit racism because it does not acknowledge its relative location. Therefore, as the author of what you are reading, let me be clear: I am white. I come from multiple locations of privilege, race being one of them. I speak from this perspective knowing that I do not have personal experience or knowledge as a non-white reader. However, as a responsible scholar, I feel the need to point to places where rhetorical tensions exist in order to open a dialogue, even if my subjective experience of that tension is necessarily limited.

In her book *Black Looks*, feminist author bell hooks writes that it is not to say we *can't* write about blackness but that if we do we must understand we are doing so from a white perspective.[5] As Davis and Holloway of *Thug Kitchen* unfortunately experienced, their lack of disclosure immediately placed them at a disadvantage to talk about the ways we use thug in our society. It isn't that they are white and are therefore banned from discussing or using the term; it's that the anonymity they hid behind for those first two years allowed them to avoid the conversation altogether. Applying hooks, these writers' decision to remain anonymous undermines their ability or authority on the subject of blackness. By not participating in transparency from the start, Holloway and Davis were not acknowledging their white perspective and its influence on their product. Author Bethonie Butler of *The Washington Post* states, "It's probably safe to say that—at least in the foodie arena—the word 'thug' would be used ironically by anyone of any race. But that doesn't mean that discussions around the use of the word—by people who aren't affected by the word's negative connotation—are without merit."[6] The issue of disclosure seems to be just as much a part of the controversy surrounding *Thug Kitchen* as the first word in its title.

MISE EN PLACE: DEFINING TERMS Given the centrality of language to this project, allow me to take a moment to define my terms. First, while many use the terms African American and black interchangeably, I recognize that just as many readers view them as not, in fact, the same thing and I do not wish to dismiss these differing viewpoints by not addressing them here. I most often use "black" instead of "African American" as a more all-encompassing phrase that *includes* African American, as it also includes a multitude of other ethnic identities that fall under the larger umbrella of "black." When I do use the term African American, it is often because I'm using it in the context or company of a source that uses that specific term. Likewise, there are many sources I pull from that use the term black. Either way, I try to maintain some consistency, given the context.

I also take the term "nonwhite" to stand in as an even more vague or general category, though this is a term that has its own set of conflicts, as it presents a black-white binary or automatically others those who don't identify as white—introducing a white-nonwhite binary, so to speak—as Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic explain in *Critical Race Theory*. These authors state: "The black-white—or any other—binary paradigm of race not only simplifies analysis dangerously, presenting racial progress as a linear progression; it can end up injuring the very group, for example, blacks, that one places at the center of discussion."[7]

"Person of color" also offers up an alternative that likewise stands in a place of transition for some but is also more inclusive of minorities such as Latino/Hispanic, Native American, Asian, Pacific Islander, etc., which may or may not be relevant to the racial implications placed on the word thug in a U.S. setting. The main point to keep in mind is that each of these terms or phrases is contextual, its meaning and connotation nuanced by factors of time, place, cultural understandings, background, etc. That, of course, brings us back to the struggle in trying to understand each other.

The word thug and all its tensions is what this paper explores. Just as the meanings of the terms above are contextual, so too is the meaning of thug. However, since we have little to no frame of reference for contextualizing thug in a culinary setting, we are, in essence, charting new waters here. That makes it difficult to contextualize. So, we resort to understanding the term through the connotations and situations with which people already associate it, something which I will discuss a little further on.

Because hip-hop culture appropriated thug via Tupac, there is an established association between blacks and hip-hop. However, since hip-hop has expanded tremendously since the '80s and '90s to include a larger black culture (not only consisting of African Americans but blacks from communities like Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti, as well as other groups that might identify as black, etc.), it has therefore gained considerable global standing. The term African American excludes a large population of this global hip-hop phenomenon, confining it to nationality, ethnicity, or geography. In the United States, however, many of those outside the hip-hop world still view hip-hop culture, black culture, and African American as equivalent. Hopefully, you can now see why I frequently choose to use the word black as a more generalizable cultural term, rather than using a term serving as a specific ethnic or national marker.

AMBIENCE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT The word thug is in a state of flux—not everyone feels that it is racially charged, and others feel it is the new socially sanctioned (but not necessarily acceptable) way of using the n-word. My goal here is to explore the disputed racial tensions of the word within a given context: food culture.

The emergence of the word thug actually comes out of nineteenth-century India,[8] describing a band of professional robbers and murderers who strangled their victims. For about a century, this is how people understood the term, its implications going no further than to refer to violence on a generic level. It has only been recently that we have started placing racial connotations on the word. In the 1990s, artists like Tupac Shakur, famously championing the popular term *Thug Life* with his title album of 1994, appropriated it for hip-hop culture and defended the word as a location of struggle. "I don't know how to be responsible for what every black male did," he said. "And yes, I am gonna say that I'm a thug, that's because I came from the gutter and I'm still here. I'm not saying I'm a thug because I wanna rob you or rape people and things. I'm a business man."[9] Since then, its recent shift from that location into ethnic slur has become the topic of much troubling debate. The reality is that this established an association between "thug" and hip-hop culture, as was demonstrated in 2014 when Florida resident Michael Dunn stated "I hate that thug music" before shooting an SUV full of unarmed teenagers and killing seventeen-year-old Jordan Davis. Dunn equated "thug" with the rap music playing in the teenagers' SUV. In January of that same year, NFL cornerback for Seattle Seahawks Richard Sherman was called a thug for making a spirited post-game speech to the cameras after winning their Sunday night game. Sherman said he was very disappointed at being called a thug. Each of these current events tells us how little stability there is in this term.

But what made readers of the *Thug Kitchen* blog assume the authors were black in the first place? The majority of text that veers from "standard" non-regional language is that of profanity. Is swearing all it takes to put on a "black voice"? Vegan chef Bryant Terry weighs in on this by admitting: "[T]he more I read through the Thug Kitchen posts, the more skeptical I became about the cerebral and political aspects, if they even existed… Certainly, swearing isn't exclusive to African-Americans. But many of the site's captions, usually dreamed up by Davis to accompany Holloway's striking visuals, rely heavily on phrases from black rap lyrics, stand-up routines and films, which eventually went mainstream."[10] Here, Terry offers specific details that link the language of *Thug Kitchen* to

that of mainstream hip-hop culture, reaffirming the cultural association that we now have between hip-hop culture and African Americans. It also suggests that the authors do not have a detailed, insider knowledge of this discourse; they know only those references which have "gone mainstream."

KNIFE SKILLS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK That *Thug Kitchen* is specifically geared toward a vegan audience is not insignificant. Picture a vegan in your mind right now. You aren't picturing a person of color, are you? Chances are, you see a white person. This is exactly the point Julie Guthman makes when she writes, "many of the discourses of alternative food hail a white subject and thereby code the practices and spaces of alternative food as white. Insofar as this coding has a chilling effect on people of color, it not only works as an exclusionary practice, it also colors the character of food politics more broadly and may thus work against a more transformative politics."[11] In essence, a push from white voices toward vegan cuisine perpetuates a culture of food already grounded in a location of "whiteness." The assumptions are reinforced over and over again and vegans of color struggle to participate in these locations.

Indeed, Dr. A. Breeze Harper would seem to agree with Guthman's assessment of the power dynamics at play, quoting this passage from a *Vegans of Color* blog:"Many vegan spaces seem to be assumed (consciously or not) to be white by default, with the dialogue within often coming from a place of white privilege…Most vegan texts ignore issues of race and class completely…These books' assumed audience is white middle-class heterosexual females living in locations where a whole-foods vegan diet is easily accessible (geographically and financially)."[12] This "coloring" of alternative food ways as primarily exclusive to the white voice predisposes observers to two assumptions: one, that a vegan cookbook would not be written by an author of color; and two, that because of this assumption, an author inserts "thug" into the title of a vegan cookbook in order to distinguish itself as non-white. In other words, if the exclusionary practice that Guthman talks about above normally prevents a non-white author from participating in alternative food discourse, then an author who steps into that discourse from a perspective of color is specifically attempting to engage in transformative politics. Therefore, if it is then revealed that the author of such a text is not part of that transformative effort and is, instead, part of the original white exclusionary voice, those voices who are genuinely competing for a spot at the table feel betrayed.

As Guthman speaks of transformative work, we must also remember that, as Delgado et al. remind us, "Unlike some academic disciplines, critical race theory contains an activist dimension. It tries not only to understand our social situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better."[13] These philosophies work toward actual change, a practical application that attempts to take theoretical ideologies to a concrete fruition. Language and terminology can be part of those transformations, which is why we see terms in those suspended states between one definition and another.

REVIEWS ARE IN: PUBLIC PERCEPTION Once it became public knowledge that the authors of the *Thug Kitchen* cookbook were white, the backlash spread rapidly. Readers felt deceived and immediately saw racist intent behind the anonymity. Akeya Dickson writes for *The Root* in an online article titled "Thug Kitchen: A Recipe in Blackface."[14] She says, "I imagined a calorie-conscious, gangly young black man who's particularly vehement about clean eating, insistently tapping recipes into his blog while Dead Prez reverberates in the background…[i] t was a refreshing idea that a young black man would be the purveyor of not just healthy eating but vegan cuisine at that…" Similarly, Terry wrote:

> *I, like thousands of other people, was intrigued… it was hard to look away. Most compelling to me and my contemporaries was the site's name, specifically the word "thug." As an African-American activist and author working to excite people to eat more healthfully…I have long thought about the important role of pop culture and online media in changing people's attitudes, habits and politics around food…[M]aybe this anonymous writer was a working-class young person of color attempting to engage in linguistically and culturally appropriate cyberoutreach to young folks with similar backgrounds?*[15]

Terry then tries to make sense of it through the lens of Geneva Smitherman's *Talkin' and Testifyin'*, who writes about the language tensions in black and white America. In any case, assumptions were generally the same across the board—most readers pictured a person of color behind the blog. Racial assumptions (particularly those based on language) are nothing new either. We make these racial assumptions all the time based on language and association. For many, the word thug is no different.

What's worse than the lack of disclosure itself was perhaps the intent behind it: critics believed the objective was to profit on a racial stereotype. In other words, exploitation was a conscious decision—or rather, perhaps as Harper would say, an absence of acknowledged "privileged consciousness"—according to these critics. Dickson then prompts: "Is it really any coincidence that the Thug Kitchen bloggers waited this long to reveal their true identity? They had to know that it would be incongruous and wouldn't fly if they told readers from the beginning that they were white."[16] The suggestion is that the lack of disclosure was part of the authors' strategy, that perhaps they would not have been as profitable without the public's assumption that these authors were most likely black. So, then, *would* it have been different had the authors been up front from the start about their identities? Not according to Dickson:

> *It's deceptive and feels a lot like the latest iteration of nouveau blackface…[I]t just doesn't work as well when you discover that it isn't other black people who are the creators…it can feel as if they're not sharing in the joke but laughing at you instead of laughing with you. In effect, their actions are all thug in the way that they completely pilfered black culture and capitalized off of it.*[17]

Dickson calls it "thievery": *Thug Kitchen*'s authors are essentially taking something away from black culture and making a profit for themselves by doing so.

However, if the authors had been African American, would it still be acceptable to use the word thug, or would they still be pushing black stereotyping? Terry offers a way of looking at this by rhetorically comparing other scenarios of disclosure: "If Guido's Kitchen were revealed to be the work not of a blue-collar, East Coast Italian-American, but of an Asian hipster living in the Bay Area, wouldn't his credibility be shattered? The careful avoidance of putting any faces to the Thug Kitchen name for as long as possible (two years) suggests an awareness of the offense."[18] Here, Terry emphasizes the ethos of experience and speaking from a place of what some would term "authenticity." Delgado et al. deem this a "presumed competence," stating that "[m]inority status, in other words, brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism."[19]

Davis and Holloway claim there was no malice in their use of the word, that their blog and its subsequent cookbook was intended simply to catch the attention of those who wish to eat in a more healthful way; certainly, there are plenty of fans of their work who support that effort. However, I would again return to Harper's work on "Vegans of Color," in which she points out the following:

> *Veganism is about harmlessness through consumption…However, when asked to extend this philosophy of harmlessness to reflect on how white privilege and "whiteness as the norm" creates a society in which nonwhite humans are placed in spaces of exploitation and objectification, and how this suffering is made invisible with vegan spaces, the plea is frequently ignored or seen as the responsibility of vegans of color.*[20]

In other words, the authors of *Thug Kitchen*, by ignoring the racial implications of their cookbook's title, have declined to do their own race work. There are no other "thug" indicators in the blog or cookbook, which could be why the term feels innocuous to many readers. Those doubts are what keep the thug-pendulum swinging between offensive and inoffensive.

Audre Lorde speaks to the same type of strain that Harper mentions, which places responsibility not on those who need to do the work, but on those who are affected by it. Lorde writes:

> *Black and Third World people are expected to educate white people as to our humanity. Women are expected to educate men. Lesbians and gay men are expected to educate the heterosexual world. The oppressors maintain their position and evade their responsibility for their own actions. There is a constant drain of energy which might be better used in redefining ourselves and devising realistic scenarios for altering the present and constructing the future.*[21]

This evasion that Lorde speaks of is exactly the type of sidestepping that Davis and Holloway do by not putting their names on their work. As a result, the optics that come from this decision are more open to interpretation and, thereby, more subject to racial connotations than if the couple had simply been up front about their identities.

DAILY SPECIAL: CURRENT CONTEXT Where does this word fit into our current twenty-first-century vocabularies? In the spring of 2015, when President Obama referred to the rioters protesting in Baltimore, Maryland as "thugs," he caused a bit of a public outcry. After the death of Freddie Gray, who died in police custody, many

citizens of Baltimore stood up against police violence and unfair treatment of African Americans. Racial tensions ran particularly high (and still do) and the idea that even the first black president of the United States would refer to rioters as thugs poses serious questions about the controversy surrounding this term.

Talk shows and news networks raced to cover the topic more emphatically after Obama's speech about the riots. Larry Wilmore had a segment on his then-new program *The Nightly Show* on Comedy Central that dealt entirely with the word thug and his surprise at Obama's willingness to use it in a speech. Wilmore even devoted part of another episode of his show to a panel of guests discussing the word. CNN covered the topic a few times, one particularly memorable moment with Erin Burnett as she asked Baltimore Councilman Carl Stokes, "Isn't that the right word to use?" His exasperated response: "Just call them niggers," using the full n-word live on air, which CNN later censored when retelevising it. Councilman Stokes felt the two words were equivalent to each other.

Fox News host Megyn Kelly also took time on her show to ask Baltimore Reverend Jamal Bryant what his thoughts were on the term. In Reverend Bryant's response, he clearly links "thug" to the n-word and feels that whites have started using the former in place of the latter. However, Kelly did not allow Bryant much air time to explain himself further—in fact, most of her talking points drowned out much of the insight he was offering. Unfortunately, this dismissive attitude can sometimes be a characteristic of what A. Breeze Harper describes as the white privileged consciousness, something the Fox reporter was (either consciously or unconsciously) embodying at the time.

Given the political climate, NPR ran several segments discussing the topic of the word thug over several weeks that spring. Responding to Baltimore mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake's indictment of the rioters as thugs, Melissa Block and Robert Siegel interviewed Columbia University linguistics professor John McWhorter, who stated: "[thug] is a sly way of saying there go those black people ruining things again. And so anybody who wonders whether thug is becoming the new N-word doesn't need to. It most certainly is."[22] The program received dozens of angry letters in response. One such letter from listener Shelly Jennings stated:

> *I reject the professor's new definition and usage of the word. But as a black woman of a certain age, I deferred to the new generation and asked my 26-year-old daughter the definition of the word. She replied immediately with the word hoodlum… in my opinion the actions of a few individuals who set fire to buildings, damaged property and looted in Baltimore fit the standard definition of the word thug.*[23]

Many feel the way Jennings and her daughter do, that thug is more closely related to its origins as a violent criminal than a term demeaning black men.

That same spring, I was teaching a food-themed creative nonfiction course. As a small experiment, I asked my small class of eleven students what their opinions were on this issue. I gave them a little context about Freddie Gray and the Baltimore riots; I told them about Obama's speech; I showed them the *Thug Kitchen* blog. Then I listened. Many of them placed absolutely no racial connection to the word. They felt it was simply another way of labeling common thieves and miscreants. Should I mention that each and every one of my students were white? Does that make a difference? Is there a correlation between the color of someone's skin and those who think of the word thug as being racially charged? What response would I have gotten from students in a mixed classroom? If you are a person of color, are you more apt to believe that "thug" implies "black"? If we are to believe President Obama or the mayor of Baltimore, then no. Your likelihood to be offended by the term does not necessarily correlate with your race; however, racial profiling may sometimes go hand in hand with the term, and *that* correlation is what we can find offensive. Asking these questions proves the point to my students who don't have prior knowledge, experience, or vocabulary to discuss these issues: it all comes down to positionality. Obama's use of thug and *Thug Kitchen*'s use of it are not the same. One describes looters and rioters in a very real, very violent setting; the other seeks to satirize a subculture that a large audience think is "cool." But there are always dangers in using satire.

UNPALATABLE: PROBLEMS OF INTENT Earlier I mentioned that the CEO of the cookbook's publishing company came out in defense of the title, stating that it was clearly a parody on the genre of the white suburban cookbook. Here is an excerpt from his statement:

> *I don't share your opinion that the word "thug" (itself a variation of thuggee, groups of assassins that roamed India for some 600 years), is a code word for the N word. Thuggish behavior is fairly accepted as boorish, bullying, and domineering in*

> *character, regardless of ethnicity, and the tone of the book, including the extensive use of swear words, is symptomatic of that behavior; adopting that demeanor in the form and content of a cookbook—a cultural product most often associated with affluent society, perhaps in some gross generalizations some components of white culture, is itself a form of parody…I might add the same methodology was used, to great effect, with Elements of F*cking Style, a "thuggish" parody of Strunk & White's grammar bible.*[24]

First, an interesting point that Power brings up is that of readership. He implies that the audience for this cookbook is not necessarily anyone outside of a white suburban market. And, statistically speaking, he isn't wrong. If we refer back to Julie Guthman's "Unbearable Whiteness of Alternative Food," she admits her "concern is that because alternative food tends to attract whites more than others, whites continue to define the rhetoric, spaces, and broader projects of agrifood transformation."[25] If that's the case, then whites still hold the power and the alienation of a nonwhite readership for this cookbook may be just as harmful, even without the use of such a loaded title.

Second, Power emphasizes parody in his statement, providing Strunk and White as an example for comparison. But the problem with parody is that it can be tricky to navigate for those trying to invoke a sense of irony, particularly in a medium like a cookbook, where space for non-instructive text is limited. The Strunk & White example points to an obvious reference, but what does *Thug Kitchen* refer to? The answer is complicated. How clear is the parody when you're using language that many believe to be racially charged? Most of us understand parody when we see it. Specific "Thug Life" parodies of Tupac's famous phrase (a video of a kitten on the internet knocking a glass off of a countertop with "Thug Life" scrawled across the screen or a photograph of Carlton from the show *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* with the same catchphrase printed underneath) again reference and play on a particular meme that is more culturally understood for it to succeed as parody. We get that these are instances of satirical humor. But what if that humor isn't as obvious? Daniel Power's analogy isn't comparable.

LA Weekly writer Sara Rashkin chimes in on the shaky topic of parody: "[O]thers are puzzled or outraged that the word thug and a heavy use of profanity are presented as 'black culture' in this argument or taken to be indicative of race at all, when race is not explicitly mentioned in the blog. Some always imagined the site was the product of 'frat boys'—college humor written by and for a post-Tupac generation."[26] Davis and Holloway have been quoted as expressing their good intentions, saying that "their use of the word thug describes 'an attitude' about 'being a badass in the kitchen,'"[27] but it looks like some readers are not falling for it. This is otherwise known as the satirist's dilemma, where the author may not reach the target audience. Even if we take them for their word—that there was no racist intent and they meant nothing offensive—they have still risked that their intended audience will misunderstand their humor. If we look back to Terry's commentary on the *Thug Kitchen* blog, he offers to break down the workings of a parody so that we may see how this *doesn't* work if the authors are white, since it could only possibly rely on stereotyping and racial profiling. He says: "The contrast drawn between the consciously progressive dishes shown and the imagined vulgar, ignorant thug only works if the thug is the kind of grimy person of color depicted in the news and in popular media as hustling drugs on a dystopian block, under the colorful glow of various burger stands, bulletproof take-out spots or bodega signs… The worst offense here is the misrepresentation."[28]

Again, this misunderstanding speaks to the larger issue of unacknowledged white privilege and the absence of conscious examination of the situation. It is perhaps because Holloway and Davis were remiss in their consideration of black culture that they also missed out on predicting how their language choice would be received by a community of readers (and not only of the African American community) more attuned to racially sensitive terminology. Harper posits that texts can "engage in a 'colorblind' approach to food politics that ignores the affects of race and class on an individual's circumstances. In a colorblind or 'post-racist' society, it is believed that racism no longer exists because skin color no longer has social significance."[29] While Harper problematizes the word "exotic" in writing about "Vegans of Color," we of course may apply the same philosophy toward an equally problematic word for our purposes here. Regarding the issue of parody, the problem then becomes, as Harper would argue, that of an assumption that the white authors' humor is universal and that the public's opinions are entirely in keeping with their own. She says that white people go forward "with the assumption that their epistemologies are applicable to all peoples."[30] In the same vein, you can substitute "philosophies" or "humor" for the word "epistemologies" here. Just as language is situated in context and, as such, remains dynamic, parody operates on a similarly relative perspective.

In discussing how food alternatives can combat issues of affordability and accessibility, Guthman's article calls out white rhetorical practices for what they are: exclusionary. She argues that whites should strongly consider the application of language to the concepts of antiracism versus colorblindness: the distinction between a proactive, conscious effort to acknowledge difference and promote awareness and blindness toward a power struggle that is still ongoing. Colorblindness, she says, offers its own set of problems and damage. Dismissal of the specific call to attention "erases the privilege that whiteness creates."[31] I would end on an important call—one from which this cautionary tale could have benefited. Guthman insists that:

> *[W]hites need to think about how to use the privileges of whiteness in an antiracist practice. In the realm of food politics, this might mean turning away from proselytizing based on universal assumptions about good food. Perhaps a place to start would be for whites to state how much they do not know to open up the space that might allow others to define the spaces and projects that will help spur the transformation to a more just and ecological way of providing food.*[32]

Perhaps if the authors of *Thug Kitchen* were more consciously motivated to disclose their identities, the open space that Guthman imagines could have been created—albeit satirically—on the pages of their cookbook.

Perhaps the best I can say is that thug is a word to be used with caution—to understand potential audiences, something which is difficult to do in any situation, but especially in an online blog and in widely circulated media like cookbooks. Food and language both have cultural resonance. But when food and language seem dissonant with each other, there creates enormous space for misunderstanding because these terms are not static; they are dynamic. *Thug Kitchen* is such a place where both food and language are visibly in flux. Not everyone wants to eat like a vegan, and not everyone can claim or even use the word thug. This isn't to say sites and cookbooks like *Thug Kitchen* should be censored, but rather that the language of both food and race are deeply intertwined and these sites are locations where those two things occasionally come into conflict. As Guthman claims, "[N]o space is race neutral."[33] The cookbook is not a race neutral space. Therefore, we must be cautious and considerate as we are in all our spaces.

So, have the authors learned anything from all this? In October of 2015, *Thug Kitchen* published its sequel cookbook—*Thug Kitchen Party Grub: For Social Motherf*ckers*. On the day of its release, I walked into a local bookstore and searched the shelves to inspect its new content. And amidst all the celebrity cookbooks, the tomes with chefs presenting their dishes on the cover, the back, or the inside flap, the second of the *Thug Kitchen* cookbooks once again lacked any attribution to its authors. Not only was there no visual indication that this had been written by a human being, but its authorship was credited simply to "Thug Kitchen." It would appear Holloway and Davis are quite comfortable trying to maintain some small level of anonymity.

ENDNOTES

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16. Akeya Dickson, "A Recipe in Blackface."

17. Ibid.

18.Bryant Terry, "The Problem with Thug Cuisine."

19. Richard Delgado et. al, *Critical Race Theory*, 10.

20. A. Breeze Harper, "Vegans of Color," 235.

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