

# SOP IT DRY

OR, HOW TO MAKE  
COUNTRY BLACK  
GIRL MAGIC

BY  
REGINA N.  
BRADLEY



# I'M FROM ALBANY

I NEVER GET TIRED OF SAYING THAT.

More specifically, I'm from southside Albany on Hardup Road, a collection of farms, houses, and nothingness on the outskirts of town in Dougherty County. I'm from the road that strangers and classmates chuckled and asked me to repeat to make sure they heard me right. Yes, *hard up*. As in there are no streetlights. If you wave your hand in front of your face at night, you can't see it. Untamed tree limbs and two plantations flank either side. Hardup Road is close to the Flint River, but not too close. Roads with names like Calvary and Lonesome branch out from Hardup's sides. Hardup Road is connected to Newton Road, which, if you drive long enough, runs into Baker County. Back in the early 1900s (and probably later), that's where folks were dragged to their deaths for being too black or being in the wrong place at the wrong time. When we left Hardup Road to go into the city—whether for food, school, or church—we called it "going into town." When I finally learned to drive, the pinnacle of teenage life, my friends refused to come see me.

"It's too much gas money," they said. "They're not your real friends, then," huffed my grandmother, whom I call Nana Boo. If gas money is the gauge, I had no friends at all.

Hardup Road is flat, bordered by sprawling grazing pastures, melon fields, and cornfields. The cornfields often flanked the back and immediate left side of our house, while the grazing fields went farther down the road to our right. The corn stalks stood tall and subtly swayed with a wisp of wind when I'd leave for school in the morning. By the time I got out of class, they'd be flat and brown. Lone strands of ripened corn silk floated over the windshield and disappeared into the sky as if to announce, "Harvest is done."

The fields turned up and turned over, often perfumed by the funk of lime at night and early in the morning. They kept me company when I waited on the bus or when I returned home from a date. I never appreciated how the fields comforted me,

a military brat, who, before Albany, had never stayed in one place for longer than a few years. The harvest schedule was steady and permanent.

I embraced the particular strength of being a country girl. In particular, country black girl magic manifested in the kitchen as much as it happened during gatherings on the porch. Even though "them books" was my job—I was an honor student and a voracious reader—I would slink around the kitchen trying to catch a piece of gossip, munching on freshly roasted peanuts, swiping biscuits, and pinching off pieces of bacon on the stove. I realize now that I took the final product and the process for granted.

The historical and cultural roots of cooking in our family were always on display. But they were not annotated like in a textbook. Our family recorded our history in practice. My people would say, "My mama taught me how to make this." Our life in the country, adjacent to the cyclical fields that grew and died, offered

Jerry Siegel



# CORNBREAD SYMBOLIZED THE STRENGTH TO KEEP GOING.

a quiet resilience and strength that I learned to love.

## I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME

I asked Nana Boo about why she called hot water cornbread “jailhouse bread.” I walked into the house on the sides of my feet. Pebbles from our then-unpaved driveway had flung themselves into my shoes as I shuffled toward the house. The smell of a hot iron skillet and a live electric current stung my nose at the door. This was pretty much common practice every day after school. I ate McDonald’s once in a while. But most days, Nana floated through the kitchen, from the sink to the wooden island to the stove. “How was school?” she asked as she put on a master class in kitchen arts. She didn’t expect that I would know how to handle a kitchen. “I didn’t learn how to really cook until I got married,” Nana said. I took

notes. The kitchen wasn’t her only space to navigate and be great. It was a complement to her career as an elementary school teacher. Nana didn’t like folks messing around in her kitchen and upsetting the order of things. Her order of things. The kitchen was the brain of our house, the place for family talks and taunts. Our memories rose and settled with the pots and pans, around the kitchen bar.

She loved the stove most of all. Black, still shiny as the latest addition to the kitchen, it had a cycloptic red eye that stayed on until the stove turned off. The other eyes had specific duties. She cooked greens or cabbage in a big silver pot on the back left side. Nana fried everything on the front right eye. Nobody cleaned the surface but her. She used a special cream that she rubbed on and then scraped off with a razor. Her grease stayed under the stove, arranged in order, from solid Crisco to bacon fat, generations old

Denny Culbert

from batch after batch of fried bacon. Bacon drip made the world go ‘round.

“Can I help with the cornbread?” I asked.

Nana thrust her head toward the cabinet underneath the stove. “Get me some bacon drip.”

I shuffled around the can of Crisco and reached for the gray can of bacon grease. I was careful not to tip the similarly colored fish oil can because I liked living—and the smell of fish made me queasy. I put the jar on the island and sat at the bar facing the kitchen. The cyclops eye burned bright red and awaited Nana’s instructions. Nana made the jailhouse cornbread with water, cornmeal, salt, and bacon drip—“this much,” she said, pinching the tip of her finger with her thumb.

“Nana? Why do you call it jailhouse cornbread?” A chuckle climbed over her back.

“That’s what they called it in Leary,” she said. Leary, Georgia, is about thirty minutes down Hardup Road. Uncle Charlie, my Nana’s first cousin and adopted brother, lived there until his death in 2013. Corn stalks and tomato vines leaned against the side of his house. He grew greens and did masonry work in the back. Uncle Charlie always smelled like freshly cut wood and tomatoes and his smile made you want to smile in return. Most of our veggies came from him or the Harvey’s, which was practically a farmer’s market.

Nana’s fingers thrummed the sides of the mixing bowl, guiding the thick corn meal batter into the hot pan. “The folks who didn’t have much and the folks in jail only got a bit of meal and water to eat.”

Jailhouse cornbread was the food of unseen folks. The ones in the farthest part of the back kitchen; the ones who learned to whip something together out of necessity. Nana Boo and Paw Paw, my grandfather, said black folks made do with a little of nothing all of the time. The leftovers. I didn’t understand it then. But I do now. Rural folks’ poverty wasn’t city folks’ poverty. Cornbread was a staple because it was readily available. Just ground corn and a bit of water. Corn was sustenance. Cornbread symbolized the strength to keep going. Like Southern black folks, corn stalks grew in the most adverse and the most random places—lopsided, crooked and in the cracks of neglected pavement on the side of the road, or held up by the side of a house in rural southwest Georgia. The bacon drip in the skillet sizzled in agreement.

“How did you learn to cook it, Nana?”

“My mama, your Ma Mary, taught me.”

“Will you teach me?”

“Sure.”

“When you gonna let me in the kitchen to learn?”

“Let me pray about it and get back to you,” she laughed. ▼

Regina N. Bradley is assistant professor of African American literature at Armstrong State University in Savannah, Georgia. She delivered a version of this article as a talk at the 2016 Southern Foodways Symposium.