

**Ashanté M. Reese**, *Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington, DC*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. ISBN: 978-1-4696-5150-7 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4696-5149-1 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4696-5151-4 (ebook)

**Hanna Garth and Ashanté M. Reese (eds)**, *Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-5179-0814-0 (paper); ISBN 978-1-5179-0813-3 (cloth)

### **Rethinking Black Food Culture with *Black Food Geographies* and *Black Food Matters***

On 21 May 1968, the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) network broadcast “Hunger in America”, a long-form exposé on the deep impacts of hunger and malnutrition across the United States. In the opening scene, the camera focuses in on an emaciated Black infant in intensive care. As scenes of doctors resuscitating the child play on, the reporter, Charles Kuralt discussed how hunger is not a problem of just Africa or Asia, but it was an issue that impacted American children too. Explicitly playing on American imperial fantasies of global food insecurity, the camera re-focused on the infant, and Kuralt remarks with little emotion, “Hunger is easy to recognize when it looks like this ... This baby is dying of starvation ... He was an American ... Now he is dead”, and with little pause, white words appear across the screen “CBS: Hunger in America” (CBS News 2018). The slow and immediate violence that Black children suffer through is not new, and yet I still imagine another world were the death of Black children would not be a public spectacle (Hartman 1997). It is the historic and ongoing presence of hunger and malnutrition that conjures Ashanté Reese’s critical interventions in human geography. The hypervisibility and yet hyperinvisibility of Black people in the food system is just one of the major through lines in Reese’s monograph, *Black Food Geographies*, and collection of essays, co-edited with Hanna Garth, *Black Food Matters*. These pivotal texts argue that the food system is inherently antiblack, which means that true food justice will only result with both reckoning

with that antiblackness and amplifying the insurgent and quotidian food cultures of Black people. It is in these Black food geographies that global questions of food apartheid and food sovereignty manifest. In this way, both *Black Food Geographies* and *Black Food Matters* reveal food insecurity as a Black ecology, and the everyday push for survival as one answer to abolishing food apartheid systems around the world.

In Reese's *Black Food Geographies*, the quotidian practices that Black Washingtonians use to navigate an antiblack food landscape become strikingly present. Reese explores how racism, segregation, and divestment, and low food access collide in Washington, DC's majority Black Deanwood neighborhood. On the surface a book about race and food insecurity may seem commonplace, but Reese acutely highlights how in an abundance of literature on Black communities suffering from low food access, little work centers the experiences or voices of residents who live in areas of food apartheid. Taking a bottom-up approach to history and geography, Reese identifies the different mechanisms and strategies that people create under these conditions. Far from victims or people who make poor food choices, Reese shows how residents theorize the antiblackness of the food distribution system and cope with these inequities by acquiring preferred food through networks and mutual aid. Space and history become critical in this food acquisition process as she shows how history, memory, and placemaking enable people to create meaning in their struggle to access food. It becomes clear that black food geographies are not only shaped by ongoing racism and divestment, but also, and of equal importance, how the industrialization of food systems via commercialized and chain grocery stores have come to determine food access in cities. Through seven years of ethnography, surveys, and participant observation, Reese reveals how Black residents navigate and understand an unequal food system and how these local experiences speak to global processes of white supremacy and antiblackness in food systems. Through such methods, Reese offers the framework of *geographies of self-reliance* to highlight Black residents' historic and ongoing resistance and survival in climates of antiblackness. Black residents' communalism, navigation of unequal food distribution, and unique cultural practices demarcate their spatial realities of food apartheid. Reese's formative book delightfully leaves more questions than answers! It lays

the groundwork for future work to take up questions of Black and Indigenous foodways in urban settings, how antiblackness in food systems is historically and spatially contingent, and the ways in which gender and sexuality operate in Black food geographies (Reese, p.5-11).

Likewise, Garth and Reese's anthology, *Black Food Matters*, takes up questions of antiblackness in food systems to explore the shortcomings and opportunities in food justice organizing. *Black Food Matters* surveys themes of unequal food distribution, divestment, as well as how Black food cultures and Black self-determination offer a "black sense of place" where Black communities produce alternative foodways to resist contemporary restraints in accessing food (McKittrick and Woods 2007). In a series of essays, *Black Food Matters* analyzes how antiblackness is contested through food, how ideas of sustainable food are challenged, and how Black communities create different foodscape imaginaries. Amplifying Black agency over Black deprivation, the essays focus on Black communities advocating for the survival of their food culture. The essays range from examinations of animal husbandry in South Carolina (Gillian Richards-Greaves, Chapter 2) to how Black residents rely on rideshares to ensure access to preferred food choices (Reese, Chapter 1), to Black women's pioneering role in urban agriculture (Monica M. White, Chapter 8), and the Black Panther's free breakfast programs as some of the earliest movements of food justice in California (Analena Hope Hassberg, Chapter 3). The world of Black self-determination and sustenance becomes vivid as do community values, history, and memory making, and the ongoing struggle to affirm Black life. Mediating between the threat to Black food culture and a celebration of it, *Black Food Matters* centers Blackness in a field that has too often framed Black issues through a white-centric lens, offering new ways to think about access, privilege, equity, and justice. In future iterations of this project, I hope Garth and Reese continue to wrestle with questions of Black ecologies, distinctions between the rural and the urban, and how settler colonial logics inform antiblack food spaces (Garth and Reese, p.17-19).

One of the contributions of both texts is their situation of antiblackness in the food distribution system. Drawing on Christina Sharpe (2016), Reese reflects on antiblackness as the climate, seeping its way into global food systems. In *Black Food Geographies* she argues that transnational food corporations such as Safeway have shaped the quality, type, access, and

availability of food for Black residents in Deanwood. Chapter 2, in particular, moves beyond counting the number of grocery stores in a single community to providing crucial historical context to highlight how Black people survived food insecurity before chain grocery stores and how they survive in the aftermath of losing such stores. Chapter 2 zooms in on the Safeway, the closest supermarket in Deanwood, and its contentious and contradictory place in the spatial imaginary of Black residents. Residents' frustrations with the Safeway lead them to critique their foodscape, understanding that it is racism that makes the quality of that particular Safeway so. She argues that residents frame their understandings of antiblackness by either avoiding or strategically using the Safeway to access their preferred foods. Reese's insight on grocery stores seems ever important, even as food studies literature focuses on farmers markets and community gardens. In reality, supermarkets still provide the main source of food for Black residents in Deanwood. Thus, Deanwood residents learn to navigate an unequal food distribution system, ignited by the closing of grocery stores due divestment and de-industrialization (Reese, p.126).

In a similar vein, *Black Food Matters* wrestles with the ongoing legacy of antiblackness in the food system on a larger scale. Analena Hope Hassberg's chapter centers the role of the Black Panther Party free breakfast program and food justice work as foundational to the organization's identity and survival programs. She artfully analyzes how provisioning food ensured that Black folks stayed alive for the pending revolution. Huey P. Newton and other Panther leaders quickly recognized that in order to build a strong liberation movement the community needed to be fortified, and thus needed access to healthy foods. As the Panthers turned to food justice, they contextualized it as critique of the USDA and other corporate food systems that exacerbated hunger and malnutrition in Black communities in cities. They recognized these systems as antiblack and how food insecurity became a weapon for oppressing Black urbanites. Of particular interest is how the Panthers' food justice work softened the more violent image of them. Hassberg's chapter is one of many in the anthology that wrestles with the historic and ongoing presence of antiblackness in the food system (Garth and Reese, p.89).

Even as both texts center antiblackness in both food justice organizing and food systems more broadly, they also center Black agency, self-reliance, and self-determination. In *Black Food*

*Geographies*, Reese contextualizes Black agency as geographies of self-reliance. Geographies of self-reliance spatialize how Black life persists in a system of unequal access. For example, Chapter 5 focuses on the community garden at a public housing complex (see also Reese 2018). She highlights how the community garden provides fresh fruits and vegetables to low-income residents. At the same time the garden also operates as a site of resistance in response to the failures of public housing. The community garden then highlights Black-led food movements and Black residents' acts of resistance against unequal food access. In the end, Reese argues that Black-led food movements are the blueprints for Black food futures – a future Reese insists is one where Black people have more food options that reflect the values important to Black placemaking and community (Reese, p.122).

Similarly, in *Black Food Matters* self-determination and self-reliance become the fabric of Black food cultures. One such example is the case of animal husbandry in South Carolina. Gillian Richards-Greaves makes a case for Black fugitivity and food cultures as a site of self-sufficiency and resistance. Residents of Cool Springs, located in the low country of South Carolina, are descendants of enslaved Africans and are presently a part of the Gullah Geechee community. Gullah culture serves as a direct line from an African culinary grammar where cooking methods conjure ancestral tastes defining the flavor of the dishes and the people who created them. She documents the agricultural and animal husbandry practices rooted explicitly in exchange in kinship networks. It is these food production practices that enable Cool Springs to remain self-sufficient and maintain self-ownership in a post-Emancipation era. In the end, the community draws on hundreds of years of Black knowledge and agricultural expertise to protect themselves against further dispossession and political violence (Garth and Reese, p.65).

In the end, both *Black Food Geographies* and *Black Food Matters* make critical interventions in the fields of food studies, environmental justice, and human geography. By demarcating the spatial imaginaries and constraints of food across Black communities, Garth and Reese make clear that food justice is tied to 20<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist movements, eradicating antiblack racism, and even ending police brutality. Put differently, one cannot have a truly revolutionary food system or food justice movement if Black communities across the world



continue to suffer from the slow and immediate violence of antiblackness and white supremacy. The true beauty of both texts is their accessibility, meaning that these books are meant to be read and taught both inside and outside the confines of academia. Their very structure, the amplification of majority nonwhite scholars, and the themes in the text are meant for the people on the ground who in their activism or their everyday practices of survival embody what a revolutionary food system looks like. As a Washingtonian who grew up food insecure and had similar experiences with the local Giant located at the border of Southeast DC and Oxon Hill, MD as with the Safeway in Deanwood, *Black Food Geographies* in particular read like a love letter to the Chocolate City. I felt both seen and cared for as I learned about the longer history of a neighborhood that many of my family called home. Garth and Reese model what careful and attentive scholarship looks like, but more importantly what scholarship for the people looks like. In the words on Toni Morrison (2020), these books are not to be passed on.

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