



Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Eds. by HANNA GARTH and ASHANTÉ M. REESE, 2020, *Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice*, University of Minnesota Press, 302 pp. ISBN 978-1-51790-814-0

Keywords: Black Space, Food Geographies, Food Politics, Food Justice, Food Deserts

Black Food Matters: Racial Justice in the Wake of Food Justice is an anthology consisting of articles by authors exploring phenomenon around Black food access, food geographies, and food justice, while challenging food justice practices that actively contribute to the cultural erasure and displacement of Blackness for the sake of what alternative food justice movements deem to be adequately “healthy” or “quality.” While explaining what food justice can mean from Black perspectives, authors make a point of including the historical persistence of Black food cultures in America’s food system that has not prioritized sustaining Black bodies since its formation. Mobility, entrepreneurship, cultural resilience, and Black ingenuity are some of the few concepts explored by authors as they define the varying means of how Black food matters in an anti-Black food system.

To introduce the book, editors Hanna Garth and Ashanté M. Reese challenge the misconception that the only way to understand Black relationships with food is through its absence (p. 5). This is often defended with the history of soul food, however, it does not include forms of food access present in several Black communities that are often overlooked by non-community members. The post-slavery importance of Black entrepreneurship for economic security and stability in “Chocolate Cities” (cities with large populations of Black people) has a solid basis in growing and selling food. The formation of “hucksters,” food trucks, and small grocery stores not only created food access in Black districts without chain grocery stores during the Jim Crow era, but also continued food cultures, built community, supported Black economics, and formed resilience. Different authors of the chapters exploring various food geographies provide similar accounts of entrepreneurship within Black food cultures.

Andrew Newman and Yuson Jung successfully evaluate common criteria for defining what must be absent for an area to be deemed a food desert. This includes consideration of how the words “access ” and "quality" are perceived by outsiders that can overlook long-standing Black entrepreneurship which provides food for the community through alternative means other than large-scale grocery stores. Common overlooked methods include mobile grocery stores, and small-scale grocery stores. The authors explain how “quality” in food justice often references the store's aesthetic appearance and environment while shopping. The lack of consideration for smaller-scale grocers while deeming an area a food desert directly discredits Black grocers providing food for the community (p. 141). When gentrification occurs, neighborhood markets unable to upkeep aesthetics against wealthier competitors can no longer survive, in-part, due to a perceived “lower quality.”

Overlooked entrepreneurship is reiterated throughout the book, but significantly in Bill Hall's chapter exploring the displacement and exoticification of Black Food geographies in Miami. Marketable areas for Black food that provide the best aesthetic experience receive government funding to renovate businesses and bring in more tourists. The restaurants and shops able to provide this were largely wealthier gentrifiers who financially invested in businesses because of what the area's history could bring in tourism profits. Older, Black shops providing culturally significant food to the community are greatly affected and displaced by gentrification, as gentrifiers and tourists benefit from a romanticization of “Jim Crow era” Black food geographies in which the Black community of reference is no longer able to financially survive (p. 173). The gentrification of Black food geographies in Miami reveal the importance of food sovereignty within the food justice movements rather than only “quality.”

Food can be a healing means of cultural longevity, and Hanna Garth highlights the importance of avoiding cultural erasure when participating in food justice. Garth was told to not reference her favorite food, macaroni and cheese, because her co-worker deemed it too “unhealthy” to mention to children in a food justice program and denied the food's significance in Black food culture. The co-workers refusal of the food's cultural importance for Black people and enforcement of her own ideologies of “health” are common anti-Black practices in food justice movements. The food

justice movement's emphasis on "justice" fights for food access, but more importantly the restoration of choice for Black populations. The opportunity to choose along with food access allows people to participate in food cultures, build community, and/or health from cultural, psychologically based traumas (p. 84). The restoration of access, choice, and education provides food justice in the form of food sovereignty (p. 97).

The Black Panther Party and Community Services Unlimited (CSU) are uplifted in several chapters for their inclusive and cultural proficiency when fighting for food justice. The Black Panther Party provided food for families and children experiencing poverty as a means of social activism. They were able to acknowledge the interdisciplinary aspects of what makes food culturally important and healing to the community that they were a part of. They avoided cultural erasure or whitewashing and brought food sovereignty to the community. CSU in Los Angeles originates from the initial Black Panther Party food justice program and continues the same cultural understanding of restorative justice through food sovereignty (p. 116). CSU attempts to holistically serve communities with the same mission as The Black Panthers, "serving the people, body and soul" (p. 117). The two organizations' understanding and incorporation of Blackness in food justice programs avoids the cultural erasure seen by Garth when participating in food justice and actively includes the community in each level of decision making.

Growing food for self-preservation and survival is greatly valued by descendants with Gullah Geechee heritage in South Carolina. Gillian Richards-Greaves highlights community members' value of self-sustained food security due to the government's historical forgetfulness of Black people in times of war or political conflict. Their access to land and horticultural knowledge created food sovereignty for individuals and for the community. Access to land greatly aided in the creation of food sovereignty in South Carolina, although land access is scarce in urban environments. Monica M. White details the activism to create urban agriculture in Detroit to increase food access and green space. The ingenuity and activism of Black Women to create urban gardening spaces is another example of resilience against the anti-Black food system. The constant continuation of community collaboration, activism, and entrepreneurship centering food lies within the beauty of Black food cultures.

The authors' research and interpretations of food culture, food geographies, and food justice were extremely enlightening in challenging common anti-Black missteps in food justice and changing how food justice should be approached in Black spaces. Its evaluation of differentiating cultures, geographies, and people reveal the common theme of the outstanding resiliency of Blackness and Black food cultures. Approaching food justice in Black spaces should encompass food sovereignty through choice, education, and access to avoid cultural erasure.

Azure Fisher is an Environmental Science master's student at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Her research focuses on empirical evidence of environmental phenomena alongside the experience of marginalization. She currently works in the CSUDH Office of Sustainability as an education intern, helping to educate community members on various sustainability topics including food justice, environmental injustice, and cultural sustainability.



© 2023 Azure Fisher