Graduate Journal of Food Studies • Volume 7, Number 1

Review: Black Food Geographies

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Published on: Jun 05, 2020

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Ashanté M. Reese. *Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington, D.C.*. University of North Carolina Press, 2019, 184 pp.

In *Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington, D.C.*, Ashanté M. Reese explores how Black communities are left behind in the urban renewal process due to racism, historical geographical segregation and disinvestment of Black neighborhoods, and how these communities navigate low food access. Often ignored by the literature on food access and food security are the coping mechanisms people in these conditions develop to acquire the foods they prefer or need or how people create meaning in the process of doing so. In this book, Ashanté M. Reese makes it clear how structural forces of racism, segregation, and lack of capital investment in Black neighborhoods have come to determine food access in urban areas. By

highlighting Black residents' navigation of and resistance to unequal food distribution systems, Reese lets the reader immerse themselves in her research participants' experience of this unequal system. Linking these local food issues of the majority-Black Deanwood neighborhood of Washington, she connects their experiences to national problems of systemic racism and anti-Blackness in food systems. Based on over seven years of intensive ethnographic fieldwork, Reese is able to document racism and residential segregation in the nation's capital and also tracks the ways transnational food corporations have shaped food availability for urban Black residents. By connecting the stories of community members from multiple generations to the larger issues of racism, gentrification and food access, Reese shows that Deanwood is but a case study of thousands across the country.

Reese presents *geographies of self-reliance* as a theoretical framework to draw attention to and understand agency and anti-Black racism in Deanwood's food environment to offer an alternative interpretation of food deserts and how they come to be. The Black residents' foodscapes, foodways, and navigation of unequal food access are cultural and social and cannot be divorced from their spatial relationship with their neighborhood. Reese is intentionally focusing on Black residents as individuals with agency and desires about their food system, not just passive stakeholders without determination and desires. Presenting *geographies of self-reliance* against the backdrop of traditional deficit narratives of food apartheid, food

deserts, and unequal food access gives the Black community an effective and empowering tool to talk about their experiences grounded in an asset-based approach. Exploring Black residents' desired Black food futures, this book highlights contemporary Black-led food movements and their acts of resistance against unequal food access. This book demonstrates how ethnographic research that grounds its participants with a social justice lens can amplify the lived experiences of Black residents navigating unequal food access across the country. Her approach to neighborhood level ethnographic research that utilizes archival research, interviews, surveys, and observations allows her to uncover how Black residents resist and navigate their food environments.

Reese argues that the same geographical and racial segregation that perpetuate inequalities and unequal access to food and other services is part of the social and identity fabric to which this community has claim. The Black residents of Deanwood have shaped their identity and food access behaviors around this need of self-reliance over decades. Even now, they attach a personal responsibility (and less blame on external and structural factors) to their food access conditions. The author also argues that we cannot ignore supermarkets in any study about food access. When many food studies have focused on alternative food movements, such as farmers markets and community gardens, supermarkets are still the main point of food consumption for most Americans, including African Americans. So, this book is not about how Black people can use the alternative food system to cope with systematic inequalities in the current food system, but how they navigate the unequal food system and how the alternative food system can be unequal as well. With this book the author offers insights on how our privileged access to places of food purchasing and consumption "reproduces power structures that undergird the food inequalities highlighted in this book" (126). The author says that is the perspective this book offers: what self-reliance for Black urban residents looks like under those unequal conditions. The book fulfills its promise as an effective exploration of self-reliance and race of Black residents in an urban area.

Reese's book belongs to a canon of Black food authors and Black food studies writing about the African American experience in the food system, such as Leah Penniman's *Farming While Black*[\[1\]](#) and Monica White's *Freedom Farmers*.

[\[2\]](#) Compared to other food justice publications examining the relationship of race and urban food access, this book is more richly qualitative. This book should serve as an inspiration on how to carry out and present research about often marginalized voices in the food system. As food justice and food studies research has risen in prominence,

few books and research approaches so eloquently and ethically take the time to approach their subjects with deep ethnographic, participatory community research.

The book offers overviews of concepts needed to understand food justice, food deserts, food apartheid and other historical inequalities affecting Black neighborhoods and communities. It is intended for scholars and practitioners interested in food access, food justice, and food systems. In general, however, it is for any reader seeking to learn how racism affects food access. Many non-academics will find this work valuable, especially those working as city planners, policy makers, elected officials and those working in the food system in urban areas and with Black residents. Others interested in centering their community development work around food— such as, health professionals, nutrition educators, community organizers, social services providers and community leaders—will find this book insightful as well.

Biography

Vanessa García Polanco has served at the local, state, regional, and national level to promote democratic empowerment and racial equity in food, agriculture and natural resources. She has worked with Food Solutions New England, MSU Center for Regional Food Systems and at the US Department of Agriculture. She is currently pursuing a Master's in Community Sustainability (Community Agriculture and Food Systems) at Michigan State University. Vanessa is an immigrant from the Dominican Republic, and she brings her identities and experiences to shape her advocacy and research cavities as a scholar. Vanessa is a 2019 NSAC/SAAFON Cynthia Hayes Scholar and 2019 James Beard Foundation Scholar.

Citations

1. Penniman, Leah. *Farming While Black: Soul Fire Farm's Practical Guide to Liberation on the Land*. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018. [↗](#)
2. White, Monica M. *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*. Justice, power, and politics. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. [↗](#)