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Introduction

Black Food, Black Space, Black Agency

I sat on Mr. Johnson's front porch on an October afternoon in 2012, an impromptu meeting after another participant in my research, Lawrence, spent two hours walking with me around Deanwood in Washington, D.C., sharing its history and his childhood memories. What was supposed to be a quick introduction turned into us joining Mr. Johnson on his porch, listening to him more than doing much talking ourselves. Lawrence introduced me as a researcher who was studying food access in the neighborhood and asked Mr. Johnson if he had anything he would like to say about that. As it turned out, he had plenty to say. Similar to other elders, some of whom are featured throughout this book, Mr. Johnson had made a life for himself in Deanwood. That life included gardening. There on his porch, he lamented the increasing reach of industrialized food, critiqued what he presumed to be the failures of parents for not teaching their children to eat healthy, and discussed how growing his own food was one way he combatted chronic illness. On his porch, he was the storyteller. We were his audience. Both Lawrence and I, born and reared in the South, deferred to his knowledge and stories out of respect but also out of genuine curiosity. Lawrence had already explained to me how much he admired Mr. Johnson. I wanted to know why.

"You ever eaten green tomatoes?" he asked me in the middle of describing the peppers, tomatoes, and cucumbers he grew in his backyard garden. "I love green tomatoes. I grew up eating them," I replied. He didn't miss a beat. "They have a lot of nitrate in them. You can eat them fried. You ever heard of that—fried green tomatoes?" When I replied in the affirmative, Mr. Johnson continued: "Yeah. Breakfast food. And that's something. Say maybe in the morning, if you don't want to eat meat, you can eat green tomatoes. That'll fill you up, and a bowl of cereal." Our conversation was part agricultural knowledge transmission, part life history, and part life instruction as Mr. Johnson told me about himself while also giving me directives about how to grow and eat good food. His backyard garden was not a public health intervention aimed at Black families and communities to improve health disparities that develop as a by-product of the wear and tear

of anti-Blackness on the body. It was not a conspicuously consumed or marketable green space tied to a return to urbanism. Despite how media often tout white-led organizations who “bring good food” while obscuring or ignoring the various ways Black residents have engaged in similar efforts,¹ Mr. Johnson was one of many Black people across space and time (and in Deanwood in particular) who had grown food in cities for generations. It wasn’t even an explicitly politically engaged effort. His stories and his garden laid bare practices of everyday life that were neither loud nor attention seeking. He was, like most of his neighbors, simply making a life.

I begin with this conversation on Mr. Johnson’s porch because it, along with others during the first four months of fieldwork, altered my approach to the research conducted for this book. Rather, these early conversations changed what I was listening for. It was not because of what Mr. Johnson said but more so *how* he oriented himself toward talking about food and the work I was doing. At the time, my theoretical orientations, heavily influenced by anthropology, food studies, and sociology, were consumed with assumptions about the influence of the built environment on people’s lived experiences; that the places in which they lived shaped them or were the backdrops against which life happened. My assumptions reflected a static, unidirectional understanding of the role of place in food access inequities—this despite the fact that I, a Black woman, have lived my life among other Black people who, even in the context of anti-Black racism, do not exist in a unidirectional series of events wherein we have no say over some of the contours of our lives.

During that first meeting, there was no way for Mr. Johnson to know that about my training, but he was, of course, an expert on his own lived experience and what that meant in the context of food. Even though Lawrence introduced me as a researcher who studied food access—“you know, grocery stores and stuff like that”—Mr. Johnson spoke very little about grocery stores during that hour on his porch other than to lament that processed foods are harmful to children. I never found out his own grocery store preferences. Instead, I left with questions about how Black residents connected past, present, and future in their experiences with navigating an anti-Black food system and what tools helped them to do so. The flow of his storytelling—reflecting the cadences, humor, and grandeur often evident in Black oral traditions—revealed what Zora Neale Hurston wrote about in *Dust Tracks on the Road*: that research was the blessing through which I could formalize the curiosities that emerged on Mr. Johnson’s porch, and that if I got out of the way, Black people would tell their stories how and when they

wanted. It was not my job to dictate which stories should be told, but if I let them, Black storytelling would lead me places that I had not planned to go.

Following the stories and rethinking my theoretical orientations brought me here to this book: one that is deeply engaged with food inequities produced by anti-Black racism but also concerned with how and where Black people create food geographies within and in spite of it. Tensions emerge when the state fails to meet communities' needs and food corporations justify pulling out of or avoiding Black neighborhoods because of high insurance rates, crime, and low sales. While this failure is oftentimes expected by Black people, the contradictions between the "American Dream" that we are encouraged to embrace and the ways anti-Blackness curtails that fictive dream are stark. We have only to look at the uneven development of neighborhoods across the United States, the historic and ongoing disinvestment in cities with Black majorities, and the current global crisis of gentrification to see how these contradictions are embedded geographically, demonstrating that geography is not race neutral. Instead becomes an important analytical component of understanding the limits of the so-called American Dream and the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness.²

In the most jarring moments, spectators watch Black death on repeat as video after video reveals unarmed Black people shot down in the streets by officers imbued with power through the state. Though often treated separately, these sensationalized Black deaths are inextricably linked to questions of food access, as these different iterations of structural violence and racial terror stem from shared roots that attempt to curtail Black mobility in and access to public space. Instantaneous deaths at the hands of police like those of Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Terence Crutcher, and Keith Lamont Scott are public and incite immediate commentary and sometimes action. In many ways, these deaths are those that insist that anti-Blackness be taken seriously as a frame for understanding the varied assaults on Black life. Others are slow, walking, everyday deaths: the lack of access to healthy, affordable foods, the continuous expansion of multinational food corporations that control not only access but also wages of folks who produce food, and the cutting (and erasure) of social services.

Theorizing racism in the food system deepens our understanding of the extent to which food institutions are implicated in continued disinvestment in Black neighborhoods. Relatedly, studies beginning in the early 2000s have focused on food justice efforts that reveal meaningful, though sometimes fragmented, efforts to combat food injustices. Yet, the everyday lives of people who are neither explicitly calling out racism in the food system

nor connected to organizations that attempt to produce change are often rendered silent, running the risk of reifying the very violence scholars and activists seek to eradicate.³ One of the entry points for this book is that in turning toward the everydayness of anti-Blackness as an analytic for framing the broader structures that produce food inequalities, we theoretically and methodologically challenge assumptions about how food inequities shape Black lives. Though seemingly a small shift, I offer this thinking on anti-Blackness as the condition that produces and reinforces the expendability of Black people have contested across space and time. This opens up possibilities for us to reconsider and imagine constraint and possibility, harm and care, and destruction and community building. If anti-Blackness is, as Christina Sharpe writes, an all-encompassing climate that produces premature Black death and opportunities to tend to those who yet to live,⁴ and the precondition for the perpetuation of capitalism as argued by Adam Bledsoe and Willie Wright,⁵ then what do we make of those who survive? How do we see, read, and document their food lives within, alongside, and against the food inequities anti-Blackness produces?

In “Black Feminist Futures and the Practice of Fugitivity,” Tina Camppt explores what she terms “quiet photography,” or photographs that capture quotidian practices of the subject or the state. Firmly declaring that “quiet” does not mean the absence of articulation or meaning and that “quotidian” is not synonymous with passivity, she asks, “What practices of rupture, refusal, and futurity do these images show?”⁶ In defining refusals within ethnographic research, Carole McGranahan writes, “To refuse can be generative and strategic, a deliberate move toward one thing, belief, practice, or community and away from another. Refusals illuminate limits and possibilities, especially but not only of the state and other institutions. And yet, refusal cannot be cast merely as a response to authority, or an updated version of resistance, or a concept to subsume under already existing scholarly categories.”⁷ She offers four components for theorizing refusal, cautioning us to read and understand each of them within the specific ethnographic contexts in which we are working: (1) refusal as generative, (2) refusal as social and affiliative, (3) refusal as distinct from resistance, and (4) refusal as hopeful and willful.⁸

Thinking with Camppt’s notion of quiet and intentional listening to the everyday and McGranahan’s articulation of refusal in ethnographic work, *Black Food Geographies* focuses on individual, everyday lives rather than institutional actions and organizing. At the heart of this work are ethnographic stories, some captured in interviews, some captured in informational conversations, and others translated through me as a participant observer

making sense of various scenes. For just over four years, I focused on these everyday ways residents navigated food inequities. What emerged are these quiet food refusals: the ways that Black residents expressed agency, care, and dissent in their food procurement practices, in their memories, and in their hopes for the future. These refusals, like those Mr. Johnson expressed, were not loud. They were not hypervisible. But they were valuable. Embedded in the stories included here and others like them are, perhaps, necessary seeds for growing a radically different food system. Thus, *Black Food Geographies* outlines the structural conditions that provide the context for food inequities, but it also examines how residents navigated them. *Black Food Geographies* explores the contours of procuring food by asking, How have Black people been challenged by and resisted unequal food access? How do quiet food refusals show up in everyday life?

Anti-Blackness and the Food System

In 2007, the last remaining grocery chain closed its doors in Detroit, a city that covers over 100 square miles. In the flatlands of Oakland, there is an average of one grocery store for every 93,000 residents.⁹ In a 2011 report, the Illinois Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights stated that while low food access occurred in suburbs, predominantly Black neighborhoods in Chicago carried the highest burden, following the residential segregation patterns in housing.¹⁰ Even in a city like New York, one often heralded as a “melting pot,” unhealthy food environments are correlated with neighborhoods with higher Black populations.¹¹ Across the country, Black neighborhoods and cities have less access to grocery retail and fresh, healthy, affordable food than their white counterparts. This book primarily focuses on Deanwood in Washington, D.C., but it could also be about any number of predominantly Black spaces in the United States and beyond.

There is disagreement on how to name and frame this phenomenon. In popular consciousness and policy, lack of access to healthy food has become nearly synonymous with the term “food desert.” Food desert was reportedly first used in the UK in the 1990s to describe low-income areas that did not have access to healthy and affordable food. Since then, its use has proliferated, and the term is affixed to spatial contexts across the world. The Economic Research Service (ERS), a department of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) developed the Food Access Research Atlas, a mapping tool. In 2011, the ERS defined a food desert as a low-income census tract where a substantial number or share of residents have low

access to a supermarket or a large grocery store.¹² Widely used by academics, policymakers, and organizations, the mapping tool created by ERS allows users to apply different distance markers (for example, one-half mile, 1 mile, and so on) and characteristics (for example, vehicle access) to determine if an area is a food desert. The tool itself is useful, giving a broad view of supermarket access in any given city, state, or region. Noticeably absent are demographics such as race that shift the perspective from what a city, state, or region lacks to encouraging users to consider the systemic patterning of food inequities alongside the racial composition of neighborhoods.

“Food desert” captures the imagination. When people hear the term, many imagine a barren, empty place. That is precisely why the term is inadequate when applied to understanding food access. The focus on what is missing in a neighborhood is central to food desert definitions and often manifests in a narrow focus on supermarkets. Further, with the exception of pointing out the overabundance of corner stores, fast-food restaurants, and liquor stores in neighborhoods that have few grocery stores, analyses often exclude other forms of food retail or means for procuring food, resulting in a neatly packaged product with little understanding of processes—macro or micro—that shape access.¹³ This has far-reaching implications for Black communities because of social science legacies of writing about them as static, unchanging, and without agency.¹⁴ Lastly, as Samina Raja, Changxing Ma, and Pavan Yadav note, the term itself has been used loosely, perhaps because of the lack of consistent measures and empirical studies.¹⁵

As activists and scholars critique “food desert” as a descriptive or analytical framework, some employ alternative language that points to systematic processes that intersect with anti-Blackness to disrupt the assumption that the market is neutral, highlighting how race-related food inequities are embedded in processes and policies that negatively affect Black people and communities.¹⁶ Some turn to the term “supermarket redlining” as an alternative to “food desert.” In a 2001 article titled “In Poor Health: Supermarket Redlining and Urban Nutrition,” Elizabeth Eisenhauer cites articles in *The Progressive Grocer* and *Newsweek* that identify the practice of grocery stores consciously avoiding low-income areas as supermarket redlining. The term “supermarket redlining” predates food desert, but it has much less traction in the academic literature or public use. Naa Oyo Kwate, Ji Meng Loh, and Kellee White draw on similar ideas but explicitly connect the practice of avoiding certain neighborhoods to race, defining retail redlining as “spatial

discrimination whereby retailers, particularly chain stores, fail to serve neighborhoods or target them for unfavorable treatment based on the racial composition of the customers and/or the store operators.”¹⁷ This is slightly different from how Alison Alkon and Teresa Mares define and frame supermarket redlining. In their work, they draw directly on banks’ history of discriminatory lending practices toward Black people.¹⁸

If supermarket redlining names the actions of supermarkets, then food apartheid names the structural conditions that affirm and normalize such practices. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the term “food apartheid” is much less prevalent in popular language and academic literature, though platforms like the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) use it in their work toward Black liberation.¹⁹ In an interview with *Guernica Magazine*, Karen Washington offered “food apartheid” as an alternative to “food desert” because it “looks at the whole food system, along with race, geography, faith, and economics. You say ‘food apartheid’ and you get to the root cause of some of the problems around the food system. It brings in hunger and poverty. It brings us to the more important question: What are some of the social inequities that you see, and what are you doing to erase some of the injustices?”²⁰ Apartheid brings forth visceral connections to the politically and socially imposed racial hierarchies and inequities in South Africa and forces us to grapple with how the state, policies, and practices normalize inequality.

Though few scholars have applied the term to their analyses, Joshua Sbicca, Katharine Bradley, and Ryan Galt are notable exceptions. Describing “food desert” as a neutral term that maintains the status quo of avoiding talk about systematic racism, Sbicca argues that “‘food desert’ often leads food activists to lend charitable support to manage the symptoms of the condition, whereas a term such as ‘food apartheid’ lends itself to an analysis of the structural causes behind the condition.”²¹ Bradley and Galt argue that food apartheid is more appropriate specifically because of “the racially exclusionary practices that have brought the situation into being.”²² The historical and ongoing significance of race at the intersections of capitalist accumulation, dispossession, and residential segregation requires an understanding of how the geographic distribution of food is a reflection of anti-Blackness and oppression as much as it is about class and economic capital. As explored in depth in chapter 1, the increasingly corporatized food system is not simply unequal; it is a by-product of how structural racism touches every aspect of life—even where our food resources are located.

Black Food Geographies: Self-Reliance and Nostalgia in Everyday Life

Black Food Geographies toggles between macro-level analyses of food apartheid and micro-level analyses of how residents navigate the unequal food landscape. The context described above and elaborated on in chapter 1 paints a picture of macro-level processes that influence national and local foodscapes. On a micro level, *Black Food Geographies* examines how people move within this context on a day-to-day basis. Although some assert that qualitative inquiry into how people define, consume, and navigate food is vital,²³ research that highlights how Black people shape place in their pursuit of food is often secondary to macro-analyses that focus on the food system as a whole. Margaret Ramirez suggests that a turn toward Black geographic thought disrupts the presumed whiteness of food justice work in communities of color and offers alternative framings for how to understand Black food geographies.²⁴

A focus on Black geographies reinscribes Black ways of being, knowing, and doing as essential to understanding place-making, an often neglected aspect of what it means not only to acquire food but also to experience one's community in the process.²⁵ *Black Food Geographies* focuses on a Black sense of place to center Black humanity rather than solely focusing on suffering and dispossession.²⁶ This is an effort to examine what is happening rather than simply what is wrong in Black communities, revealing geographies of self-reliance that unfold within spatialized food inequities.

When I use the term “geographies of self-reliance,” I am referring to both how residents physically navigate the food landscape—where to shop and how to get there, for example—and more phenomenological concerns: memory, nostalgia, personal and communal priorities, hope, engagements with history, and racialized responsibility. As a theoretical intervention, geographies of self-reliance center Black agency, particularly considering how this agency becomes spatialized within the structural constraints of food inequities. As is evident in qualitative research concerning urban life broadly and urban food access specifically, how the urban poor and the working class survive preoccupies much of the literature, emphasizing how they make ends meet or how inequities continue to block opportunities to provide for themselves.²⁷ Geographies of self-reliance reveal different yet related experiences, namely, how the everyday lives of residents disrupt the dichotomy between death and survival to reveal how hope and visions for an uncertain future animate decisions on where to shop and who to support, and inspire small-scale food justice work.

Furthermore, self-reliance bridges spatial and sociocultural components of accessing food. Both foodscape and foodways provide frameworks for qualitatively understanding components of food access that are not limited to where grocery stores, supermarkets, and alternative food sources are located. Yet, there is a need to understand the overlap of these two, because residents understand food access through cultural and social lenses that are not divorced from the spatial relations of food resources. Thus, geographies of self-reliance call attention to how spatial, historical, and racial dynamics intersect and insist that Black folks navigate inequities with a creativity that reflects a reliance on self and community. Because of the presumed “nothingness” that is embedded in understandings of so-called food deserts, food justice advocates outside of these neighborhood spaces often overlook or do not see the ways in which residents make “ways out of no way” that are embedded in their own food security and reflect their hopes and desires for their communities more broadly.

Arguably, Black communities’ investment in self-reliance as a political and cultural framework for communal uplift has been central to intellectual thought and activist strategizing. Transitions from mass enslavement, migration from the South to the North and West, and integration (albeit limited) into new consumer spheres from which they were once barred prompted questions about how best to meet Black people’s needs in a nation in which the rights of full citizenship had yet to be granted. These questions were as fundamentally about space and place as they were about accessing goods. Black residents, many of them living in segregated neighborhoods in urban centers, navigated white supremacy daily, using their segregated neighborhoods as places to build as much institutional capacity to meet their daily needs as possible. Self-reliance became a strategy, a manifesto for building communities that were not wholly reliant on white philanthropy or support.

The question of self-reliance was taken up intellectually. Scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois researched unequal access to housing, food, and employment and theorized ways for Black communities to live as self-sufficiently as possible.²⁸ DuBois viewed the question of self-sufficiency as a necessity for building healthy, self-sustainable Black communities and as a fundamental blow to an exploitative economic system under which Black intellectual and physical labor were undervalued.²⁹ Often posited as DuBois’s intellectual opposite, Booker T. Washington emphasized technical and agricultural knowledge as means for developing self-reliant communities. For both, self-reliance was a necessary, community-controlled vision and a process toward liberation.

Self-reliance was not solely an intellectual question, however. Black political leaders and activists working toward Black liberation operationalized self-reliance in their community-based work. Fannie Lou Hamer, for example, founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative (FFC) in 1967. Clear in the belief that Black leadership was an imperative for Black liberation, the FFC developed a multifaceted set of social and political programs to address the needs of poor and underemployed Blacks primarily in Mississippi but also as far north as Chicago.³⁰ Similarly, other activists such as Nannie Helen Burroughs and Anna Julia Cooper (who was also a scholar) argued that without self-reliance, Black communities would not progress. Both were educators and influential women in Washington, D.C., and their visions for a liberated race included a well-rounded, educated Black population—especially Black women—with a diverse skill set. Burroughs founded the National Training School for Women and Girls, where students not only learned reading and writing but were also taught entrepreneurial skills. Indeed, the school itself partially relied on students' skills, as their handmade goods were often sold to help sustain the independent school.

Entrepreneurship as a pathway to self-reliance was not limited to educational institutions like the National Training School for Women and Girls. It was also a foundational place-making strategy central to the development of community identities in the context of anti-Black racism and segregation. Paul Mullins argued that although it raises eyebrows to put entrepreneurship at the center of understanding community identity, the complex network of merchants and consumers that emerged was key to understanding how Black communities have historically functioned, particularly in the first half of the twentieth century.³¹

Improving the “self” as a means of community uplift reflects a form of respectability politics that assumes that performing the right behaviors and having the right education earn rights associated with full citizenship in a racist society, “self” functioning as a proxy for community or representative of the race. This had both positive and negative outcomes, as an individual could be seen as a credit or an embarrassment. It is worth noting that this, too, is a function of living in a racist society in which Black people are hardly given the credit of being an individual—particularly if the outcomes are negative.

However, to dismiss self-reliance as solely about earning the respect of whites obscures the ways in which self-reliance has been woven into the cultural geographies of Black communities across the Diaspora in general, and in the United States in particular. Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods argue that “identifying the ‘where’ of Blackness in positivist terms can re-

duce Black lives to essential measurable ‘facts’ rather than presenting communities that have struggled, resisted, and contributed to the production of space.”³² The reduction to “facts,” particularly the desire to “bring good food”³³ to Black communities, not only erases Black food geographies, but reinforces the belief that these communities have little or no investment in creating their own place-making strategies toward food self-sufficiency. Scholarship on African American foodways and on-the-ground, Black-led food justice efforts has demonstrated the possibilities and limits of agency and self-reliance within the home and in public spaces. From examinations of kitchens as sites of cultural transmission and self-actualization,³⁴ to the legacies of the Black Panther Party’s organizing to combat hunger as a short-term strategy en route to revolution,³⁵ to faith-based organizing around food security³⁶ and current food activism that draws on these histories,³⁷ self-reliance as a practice of refusal shows up across space and time.

Thus, drawing on intellectual, activist, and scholarly traditions that make self-reliance central to Black liberation, geographies of self-reliance as a theoretical framework situate self-reliance in food consumption and production as a cultural, political, and spatial framework for navigating inequality. Black intellectuals and activists have recognized the usefulness of self-reliance, but so too have residents who have embedded the framework within their everyday practices. The residents I encountered during fieldwork, for example, recognized both the uneven spatial development of their food landscape compared to other neighborhoods and their own agency in transforming that landscape. They ground their analyses and their food place-making strategies in the materiality of Black life, real and imagined connections to historical narratives of successful Black communities, hope and love, and a commitment to “the self” as both individual and communal.

Food justice is fundamentally about racial justice, because in the United States, race and racism not only structure everyday experiences, but also influence the (under)development of neighborhoods and the implementation of policies that disproportionately disenfranchise Black communities. Documenting these inequities and eradicating them is essential as we work toward a more just food system. So, too, is tracing Black food geographies. The Black food geographies included in this book are but a few of the ways Black residents navigate food inequities. These geographies are part of a larger archive, stories that tell the ways inequities shape food consumption by Black residents, but they also bear witness to ways of living and being—Black ways of living and being—that are inseparable from how Black residents understand food access.

Black Food Geographies focuses on practical ways that residents navigate inequity—for example, shopping outside of their neighborhood—but the primary intellectual and theoretical offerings of this book lie in the explorations of how memory, nostalgia, and self-reliance became embedded not only in individuals' experiences with food and community but in the geography of the neighborhood itself and residents' evaluations of it. Black food geographies are influenced by the unequal spatial distribution of grocery stores but are not unilaterally defined by them. I offer geographies of self-reliance as a theoretical frame for understanding how residents were not only concerned with getting to their preferred stores but were also making connections among unequal food distribution, agency of Black people across space and time, and contemporary ways to alter or navigate the unequal landscape. The experiences and stories explored throughout the book were deeply engaged in refusal, whether intentionally or not: refusing to accept the boundedness of neighborhood spaces, refusing to give up hopes that another way is possible, refusing to allow the absence of supermarkets to completely define their foodways. What emerges is a Black sense of place that is both cognizant of discrimination and inequity and reflective of a complex web of possibilities, limitations, and hopes for the neighborhood food system. The stories in the pages to follow are not hypervisible or demanding to be heard. They do, however, require us to *listen*.³⁸ *Black Food Geographies* is a love letter to and an affirmation of what is possible when we listen to Black people's food stories beyond an all-encompassing narrative of lack.

A Note on Methods

I used four forms of data collection: semistructured interviews, participant observation, archival research, and surveying. During interviews, participants were asked about individual experiences with grocery shopping, cooking, and eating across time, though the interview structure was flexible to accommodate additional directions in which an interviewee wanted to go. They were also asked to discuss their connections to Deanwood, which included accessing food resources as well as what they considered important aspects of their social worlds in the neighborhood. Specifically, I aimed to understand individuals' choices in a broader social context than what was simply on their plates at dinnertime, heeding Robert Sampson's call for observational and qualitative studies that connect people to their spatial contexts.³⁹ The interviews primarily took place in two locations: Denny's (the only sit-down restaurant in Ward 7) and participants' homes. There were few

exceptions to this. In all, I interviewed twenty-five individual participants⁴⁰ and one group of eight for this study, ranging from age eighteen to seventy, with the median age being fifty-four. Thirteen of those interviewed individually were women, and the remaining twelve were men.

The second form of data collection was participant observation. Participant observation took place in three main sites: the neighborhood recreation center, Community Market (the subject of chapter 4), and the community garden (the subject of chapter 5). During the first four months of fieldwork, I spent the majority of my time at the recreation center. With after-school activities for school-aged kids, a space specifically for senior citizens, a basketball court, and a pool, it was an ideal place to meet a cross-section of Deanwood residents. The recreation center was the only site I chose for participant observation prior to entering the field. The others were chosen based on informal conversations, interviews, and residents' involvement. Community Market was first mentioned in an interview I conducted with a thirty-year-old participant who had returned to Deanwood the previous year. On a walking tour of the neighborhood, he pointed out a barbershop and Community Market, owned by brothers. Community Market came up again in an interview at Denny's with another long-term resident who grew up in Deanwood. After that, I visited the store for the first time. My first encounter with Mr. Jones, the store owner, is described in chapter 4.

Aside from Community Market, corner stores and small markets are noticeably absent in this book, with the exception of discussions of how Community Market functioned in the neighborhood vis-à-vis comparisons to other stores. There is a reason for this. Despite the attention given to corner stores in food access literature, they did not figure prominently in residents' consumption patterns. Only one resident spoke about making a conscious choice between going to a corner store or the nearest supermarket. That is discussed in detail in chapter 2. There may be several reasons why corner stores were inconsequential for the majority of my participants. First, participants almost unanimously considered the nearby Safeway to be subpar, but all shopped there at some point, even if the purchases they made on those occasions were minimal or strategic. Second, all of my research participants—even those who did not own their own transportation—had figured out strategies for procuring groceries that did not require depending on corner stores and small markets. A third and final reason relates to Community Market itself. None of my participants relied on corner stores or small markets for their shopping, but several of them considered Community Market to be distinct from corner stores. Continuously owned and

operated by the same family, Community Market itself represented the possibilities of self-reliance.

I began participant observation at the community garden at a public housing complex in October 2013 after being in contact with the primary gardener for nearly a year. Over the course of seven months, I attended and participated in two planting events, shadowed the primary gardener during planting and weeding, and observed kids' involvement in the daily maintenance of the garden. Five of the research participants I interviewed were affiliated with the garden. Related to observing the garden was the community center in the complex. The center served as a central meeting location as well as the home for several social service agencies in the projects. Dating back to 1976, the center was opened as a resource for community members and continued to serve in that capacity during my fieldwork. Here, I met with two members of the resident council and the primary gardener, and observed a workshop on healthy eating and cooking.

In addition to the main sites, I visited and observed the closest Safeway, which was subject to much critique in almost all the interviews. I also observed the neighborhood and residents more informally by walking the streets, volunteering and participating at the local community center, and attending neighborhood association meetings that I was welcomed to join by the president of the citizens' association.

The third form of data collection was archival research. Deanwood has little written, published history. Much of what I knew about the neighborhood's history I learned from elders in the community. I used archival research to confirm and supplement residents' stories. The Historical Society of Washington, D.C., proved to be a great source of maps documenting how Deanwood grew and changed in the first half of the twentieth century. The George Washington University Library houses Ruth Ann Overbeck's papers, another critical source of data for this project. Overbeck was a local historian who spent much of her career documenting D.C. neighborhoods. Her papers include twenty oral history interviews with Deanwood residents, an archaeological assessment of Deanwood, and home and business directories. The participants interviewed as part of Overbeck's project ranged from age seventy to age eighty-six in 1987. Of those whose gender was specified, eleven respondents were women and eight were men. Eighteen of the respondents owned their homes, and only two rented. All had been married at least once, and seven were widowed at the time of interview. Eighteen of the respondents were at least high school graduates, seven had completed four years

of college, and one had completed more than four years of college. Chapter 1 draws heavily from the sources included in Overbeck's papers.

In 2016, I, along with a collaborator from the neighborhood I had met several years prior, conducted a survey of Ward 7 residents. The survey had a dual purpose. First, for the community, the intent was for the collected data to be used to discuss food access and plan a way forward. At the time, there were several disparate conversations about improving access for Ward 7 residents. The hope was that this data would put some numbers behind the anecdotal experiences that we all knew were true but were not always heard by those in power. Second, I wanted to broaden the understanding of food access in Ward 7 by including additional neighborhoods. One hundred one participants began the survey, and eighty-seven completed it. As discussed in chapter 2, the survey revealed trends in residents' shopping preferences and critiques of Safeway. The data is also helpful for situating Deanwood within a broader geographic and social landscape.

From Middle School Class to Food Access Research

I often tell people that teaching middle school changed the course of my life and career. In the two years prior to entering graduate school, I taught a group of dynamic and curious Black girls at Coretta Scott King Young Women's Leadership Academy, a public single-gender school in Atlanta, Georgia. Having grown up in rural East Texas, I was still relatively new to cities, their organizational structures, and the specific ways inequities shape and unfold within them. One day, I took two students to get sports physicals so they could join the track team. After a long wait and the completed exams, it was nearing dinnertime, so I offered to feed them before taking them home.

A routine trip to my neighborhood supermarket was out of the ordinary for them. Imagine two Black girls who were normally loud and giggly sticking closely to me, silently observing the space. When we got to my house so that I could make dinner, one of them asked, "Why is your store so nice?" There were questions about the types of fruits and vegetables available and comments about how there was not anything "that nice" in their neighborhood. Their neighborhood was a mere 3.9 miles from where I lived. We talked a lot that night, and I was not satisfied with my own naïveté and lack of knowledge about food access. Their questions became my questions, their lives the inspiration for conducting research that would ultimately become this book.

In 2012, I entered the field to start the research that would become this book. During fieldwork, I did not live in Deanwood. I lived about twenty minutes away in Takoma Park, Maryland. I commuted back and forth to Deanwood nearly every day to visit the recreation center, to interview participants, and to hang out. While I did not live in the neighborhood, living in the D.C. metro area afforded me both proximity and mobility to spend ample amounts of time there. To my knowledge, not living in the neighborhood did not hinder the project's development. Generally, people were willing and eager to learn more about my research and me. Over time, people would shout greetings to me, acknowledging my presence when I walked down the street.

In the field, I was a Black feminist anthropologist, coming in and out of a neighborhood where I did not live, but one for which I developed a deep affinity. I gained entry into the neighborhood through volunteering at the recreation center. After teaching middle school, I felt comfortable hanging out with and tutoring children. I called the recreation center to inquire about being a tutor and was welcomed enthusiastically. Being a Black woman helped facilitate my entry into the recreation center (where the staff and patrons are almost entirely Black) and provided some common ground for myself and my research participants. There were many moments, though, when I did not meet the expectations that are sometimes affixed to racial solidarity, especially when it came to having conversations around gender, sexuality, deservedness, and the value of "hard work." These were some of the toughest conversations, and I am not sure I always handled them well. But no one turned me away when I vehemently disagreed or expressed discomfort. Instead, they generally remained interested in my work, and when I'd come around, some would ask something like, "How's that book you're writing?"

At the recreation center, I was upfront about my studies, and I was almost immediately bombarded with requests to teach "healthy eating" skills, something that made me uncomfortable, because one of the things I feel strongly about is how African Americans and other people of color are often reduced to bodies that need to be regulated and changed. I awkwardly consented to doing some things—like making smoothies with the kids—and avoided committing to others. Ironically, though, these requests helped me take a critical look at what I thought about the connections between eating and health in African American communities. I began to think about the myths and realities of soul food, the origins of gardening, and the ways Black folks empower themselves to make decisions about their eating and health in the context of food inequities.

Some people, like Mr. Johnson, were eager to talk. Others were confused about what I was there to do. Why did I want to talk about food and where they shopped? Could I teach the children at the local recreation center about healthy eating? Would my research lead to a new supermarket or grocery store in the area? These questions were not always easy to answer, but they were influential, as they, in some cases painfully, helped me see just how deeply entrenched the idea that Black people need fixing is in our discourses about improving access and healthy eating. When asked questions about if I was there to help people eat better, I learned to say, “I am not here to tell you what is healthy and what is not or to tell you what you should buy. I am here to learn from you and to always advocate for your right to have choices and live the life you want to live.” Ultimately, the uncomfortable and awkward conversations, the familiarity and trust that developed over time, and the generosity that was extended to me were indispensable for the development of *Black Food Geographies*. Where I, theory, or method fell short or faltered, Deanwood residents offered care and insight that you will read throughout these pages.

Summary of Chapters

Black Food Geographies explores Black residents' experiences with and meanings of food institutions in Deanwood specifically and Washington, D.C., more broadly. Chapter 1, “Come to Think of It, We Were Pretty Self-Sufficient: Race, Segregation, and Food Access in Historical Context,” places food access in historical context, tracing the development of Washington, D.C.'s food system in the twentieth century. This chapter explores Deanwood's particular food system, highlighting how self-reliance and race shaped the neighborhood and the challenges of maintaining a self-contained neighborhood within the context of the rise and subsequent decline of supermarkets in the poorest and Blackest areas of Washington, D.C.

Focusing on the closest supermarket as a site for understanding residents' critiques of their food environment and their preferences, chapter 2, “There Ain't Nothing in Deanwood: Navigating Nothingness and the *Un*Safeway,” explores how residents frame, use, and avoid Safeway. First, I examine the many considerations at the heart of grocery shopping: time, money, stores' reputation, transportation, and preferences. Second, I examine how these considerations are connected to socioeconomic status, demonstrating the heterogeneity present in the neighborhood. Chapter 3, “What Is Our Culture? I Don't Even Know: Nostalgia and Memory in Evaluations of Food

Access,” explores how memories of and storytelling about the past figure into how residents understand present-day food inequities. The chapter examines how race, gender, and class (and to an extent age) factor into how residents frame the problem of food access and narratives of responsibility.

Chapter 4, “He’s Had That Store for Years: The Historical and Symbolic Value of Community Market,” examines Community Market as a hopeful symbol of racial progress and self-reliance. Placed within the historical context outlined in chapter 1 and the contemporary realities of low food access exhibited in chapter 2, I examine the paradox of residents exhibiting pride in the store while at the same time not shopping there on a regular basis. I also explore the role the second-generation owner, Mr. Jones, plays in the community at large, making the argument that the position of authority that many residents claim he has is in part due to the longevity of the store, even in the face of gentrification. Chapter 5, “We Will Not Perish; We Will Flourish: Community Gardening, Self-Reliance, and Refusal,” focuses on the community garden at a public housing complex. In this chapter, I highlight the ways this garden operates within a framework concerned with providing fresh fruits and vegetables to low-income residents while at the same time leveraging the garden as a site of resistance in response to the failures of public housing.

Lastly, the concluding chapter, “Black Lives and Black Food Futures,” reflects on intersecting oppressions and what this means in the context of food justice activism and research. It turns to considering the ways participants highlighted in this book and contemporary Black-led food movements are creating blueprints for Black food futures—ones in which residents have more food options that reflect values important to Black place-making and community building.