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"It tastes like heaven": Critical and embodied food pedagogy with Black Youth in the Anthropocene

Introduction

In the current paradigm shift to Earth systems (everything prefaced with geo-), what is the place of Black and other colonized life, human and nonhuman? – Mirzoeff (2016) on the Anthropocene, p. 124

Youth who navigate racial, geographic, and other intersecting oppressions are too often the "objects" of food pedagogy (Guthman 2008). In the United States, food pedagogy motivated by the "childhood obesity epidemic" targets African-American and Latinx youth who claim higher rates of overweight and obesity (OMH 2018a; OMH 2018b). In this article, I explore critical and embodied food pedagogies with Black youth and why reimagining food pedagogy matters in the context of the Anthropocene.

Geoscientists use the word "Anthropocene" to describe the current period of anthropogenic climate change and its myriad environmental, social, and health effects, many of which have yet to be understood. Just *when* the Anthropocene began remains a subject of debate, while some critics question the naming of a new geological epoch (Mirzoeff 2016). Despite debate, the Anthropocene concept now circulates, widely accepted, beyond the geosciences, in social sciences, humanities, popular media, and international development. As both discourse and epoch, the Anthropocene holds particular implications for Black youth whose health disparities are taken to signal overconsumption and "unhealthy" eating. To Mirzoeff's (2016) point, the "place" of Black youth in mainstream Anthropocene discourse is one of *further* intervention: Black youth "require" food pedagogy regarding what and how they eat, not only to ensure personal or national wellbeing, but also because their eating habits presumably impact planetary wellbeing.

By food pedagogies, I refer to Flowers and Swan's (2015) definition of

a congeries of educational, teaching and learning ideologies and practices carried out by a range of agencies, actors, institutions and media which focus variously on growing, shopping, cooking, eating, and disposing of food (p. 1)

As Flowers and Swan (2015) further note, food pedagogies often (re)produce binaries between "healthy"/"unhealthy" foods, "good"/"bad" eaters. Nor is food education bound to classrooms. Food pedagogies may be formalized in school or public settings, or informally transmitted between family and community members. They may involve interventions carried out at clinics, non-profits, or cultural institutions. Indeed, national

anti-obesity initiatives in the United States have explicitly encouraged multisector collaboration (Let's Move 2018). Across settings, food pedagogy involves asymmetrical power relationships and moral judgment, often bolstered by healthism.

As an ideology, healthism emphasizes individual responsibility, equates health with morality, and links personal health with the wellbeing (and morality) of the nation (Crawford 1980; Guthman 2011). Emphasis on individual “healthy eating” elides structural and environmental factors that affect health, including but not limited to racism-related stress and trauma (Harrell 2000; Billings and Cabbil 2011); chemicals ingested via the industrialized food system (Guthman 2011); or gentrification (Anguelovski 2015). Furthermore, “obesity epidemic” rhetoric assumes the neutrality of science. The Body Mass Index (BMI) is widely used to measure weight and evaluate the effectiveness of anti-obesity food pedagogy. However, critics highlight the BMI’s ever-shifting parameters, its accuracy for different body shapes, and industry influence in (re)defining obesity (Guthman 2011). What Jessica Hayes-Conroy refers to as “hegemonic nutrition” prevails. Hegemonic nutrition applies standardized nutrition and measurements without considering differentiation among bodies or lived experiences (in Kimura 2014, p. 39). Together, healthism and hegemonic nutrition maintain reductive understandings of food and health.

Anthropocene discourse also tends toward the reductive. Anthropocene studies link climate change with heightened obesity, without critique of obesity rhetoric, measurements, or its (racialized) implications, while studies emphasize how certain diets exacerbate planetary degradation. Though the Anthropocene concept seeks to challenge the human/nature divide, its focus on “undifferentiated humanity” minimizes uneven social relations, along with the unequal impacts of anthropogenic environmental change (Schulz 2017, p. 49). For example, Black Americans already live in counties with high levels of air pollution, spend more money on energy, and disproportionately face the threat of sea-level rise because of high residency in coastal cities (Shepherd and KC 2015). Each of these holds implications for access to food and to food-related resources such as water. Studies also predict increasing displacement in the Anthropocene (McAdams 2012). For African-Americans, climate-related displacement amplifies existing spatial injustice, from historic forced migration, environmental injustice, to gentrification. Nor are these conditions specific to low-income Black Americans. They impact wealthier Black Americans due to systemic factors such as redlining (Rothstein 2017) and the very precarity of African-American middle-class (Thomas 2015).

A critical and embodied approach to food pedagogy in the Anthropocene, then, urges attention to race/racism and power, along with the cultivation of resilience. I use the word resilience with care, with critiques of neoliberal approaches to resilience in mind (e.g. Chandler and Reid 2016). By *resilience*, I mean access to and practice of 1) community-based power, 2) social, cultural, and “natural” resources, and 3) collective knowledge. Below, I analyze a “Favorite Meals” workshop I facilitated with a youth urban farm and leadership program in Austin, Texas. As part of a broader project carried out from 2012-2016, “Favorite Meals” initiated a 6-week participatory workshop series on the farm with predominantly Black and Latinx youth, ages 15 to 19. Due to intensive anti-obesity food pedagogy with Black youth at local and national levels, and given Black displacement from Austin’s urban core, I ultimately focused on the food geographies of

Black youth in their gentrifying neighbourhood. The overarching project included these workshops in addition to participatory filmmaking, interviews and a focus group.

I reflect on “Favorite Meals” with particular attention to the food diaries of the eight Black youth who participated. Drawing on black geographies, critical food studies and food pedagogies scholarship, I situate the workshop within what I loosely term “critical and embodied” approaches to learning and teaching about food. I then turn to youth food diaries (aka expressions) from the workshop before offering closing reflections. Given concerns about childhood obesity and anthropogenic environmental change on a global scale, this article holds relevance for food pedagogy with marginalized youth across national contexts.

Race, Food, and Bodies

Centering the embodied food experiences and knowledge of Black youth requires a shift in frame from “hegemonic nutrition” to food as relational. By *relational*, I refer to the relationality of Black geographies and to how food is embedded in relationships. Read in conversation, black geographies and scholarship on the embodiment of race and food 1) illustrate these relations, 2) the ways in which food and constructions of race/racism mutually constitute each other, and 3) suggest implications and directions for critical and embodied food pedagogy with Black youth.

Black (food) geographies

As a field of study, Black geographies considers how blackness has been lived, socially and spatially, past and present. Insights from the field are deeply relational: Black geographies of space, place, and time persist in relationship with dominant geographies; blackness is (re)constructed in relationship to whiteness and other racialized bodies; and Black lives are carried out in connection with other people, the built environment, and the natural environment. Black geographies are also dynamic food geographies. And though all living beings require food, I make this statement because of prevailing discourse and practice regarding Black youth and food. Reflective of healthism, research, policies, and pedagogies largely trace Black health disparities to “unhealthy” individual food intake. Food pedagogies with Black youth emphasize what they are eating rather than the broader structural conditions they navigate as they eat, grow, cook, and share food in their daily lives. Research on “food environments” and “food deserts” points to these conditions, while critical analyses further contextualize food injustice (e.g. Agyeman and McEntee 2014). However, food pedagogy overwhelmingly emphasizes lifestyle change without emphasis on structural transformation or collective resilience.

Such discourse and practice matter for food pedagogy with Black youth. One consequence is the narrowing of Black food geographies without considering the breadth of food as a lived experience. Another consequence is minimal attention to the embodied food knowledge that young Black people and adults *do* pass on and practice. Still another is the concealment of racism and the food system, such as historic enslavement in the United States (Carney and Rosomoff 2011), food stereotypes (Williams-Forson 2006), and the stigmatization and surveillance of African-American food ways (Byars 1996; Nettles 2007). As a facet of everyday Black geographies, Black food geographies illustrate the “historical present”: past configurations of sociospatial relationships continue to be (re)lived, (re)produced, and (re)imagined (McKittrick 2006). The built

environment reflects this historical present (again, disinvestment in food resources where African-American populations reside provide an example). The historical present is also embodied and *felt* in ways that hold implications for pedagogical practice.

Though I did not use the language “healthy” or “unhealthy” during this project, for example, youth co-researchers evoked the binary themselves. They especially expressed self-consciousness when they described eating “soul food” or African-American heritage cuisine (Jones 2016). One young woman felt “like a slave” as she worked at the urban farm, echoing comments in other research (Guthman 2008). Ramírez (2015) discusses how Black alternative food and farming non-profits (re)imagine the racial violence of Black food history and land dispossession. To be sure, a sense of the historical present *can* evoke feelings of pride. Youth also expressed pride for “soul food” and other cultural food traditions as emblematic of “who they are”. “Favorite Meals” and food pedagogy practiced elsewhere (discussed more below), emphasize past and present resilience.

Whether associated with shame or pride, acknowledging the historical present entails pedagogical awareness of non-linear, spatiotemporalities of Black food geographies. This awareness forefronts power relations, Black food histories, and one’s own positionality as an educator or co-learner. Research on race and food from a relational and material perspective offers further insight into how the historical present may be embodied and how engaging food through the (racialized) body can support resilience and social transformation.

Embodying Race and Food

Geographic analyses of food as relational range widely, from tracing the interconnectedness of consumers, growers, and producers (e.g. Cook et al. 2004), to unpacking power dynamics within food spaces such as farmer’s markets, school cafeterias, and gardens (Guthman 2008; Slocum 2007; Pike 2010; Alkon 2012), to exploring Black practices of resilience through food (Ramírez 2015; Reese 2018). An extensive body of interdisciplinary scholarship has explored food as a medium through which power, privilege, and identities are (re)produced, negotiated, and/or resisted through relationships, some focused on Black diaspora populations (e.g. Rouse and Hoskins 2004; Opie 2008). Slocum (2011) offers a relational definition food as “all the processes that make animal, vegetable or mineral into something to eat and then all that is involved in what happens next to bodies and societies” (p. 303).

Charting food relations can elucidate global workings of power and resistance. However, Slocum and Saldhana (2013) note a hesitancy to “call these [relations] *racial*” in broader food studies (p. 1). Furthermore, attention to discourse or power dynamics does not necessarily address the *materiality* of race, the materiality of food, or how these entwine. In other words, how are food relations lived and expressed through bodies? Emphasizing food and race as embodied phenomena, Slocum and Saldhana (2013) argue for a material approach that considers how race, among other identities and hierarchies, are (re)inscribed, negotiated, and resisted through food. Following a material approach, Slocum (2008) considers how differently raced bodies interact with each other and foods in a farmer’s market, observing speech, eye contact, and physical movement throughout the space. Embodiment is also biological. Guthman (2014) critiques the use of obesity and metabolic disorders, as motivation for food activism. Guthman suggests biology be

considered an “effect of race rather than a source”, such that environments can be “somatized” (p. 1162). In related work, Guthman and Mansfield (2013) outline environmental epigenetics, or the study of how chemicals within the environment can cause cellular and phenotypic variation. Conditions (re)shape biology and, as Slocum and Saldhana (2013) also underline, may do so over generations.

These points resonate with longstanding and emergent scholarship on how race and racism affect Black wellbeing, from “post-traumatic slave syndrome” (DeGruy 2005), to “weathering” or premature aging due to systemic oppression (Geronimus et al. 2006), to the aforementioned studies on race-based stress and trauma. Biological and physiological approaches importantly turn attention to what happens *within* racialized bodies. Discussed further below, food justice and food sovereignty activists increasingly mobilize the concept of “racial trauma” as they situate food pedagogy within the historical present. But, again, engaging with embodiment biologically (alone) can reproduce a reductive reading of bodies. Western biology emphasizes what can be observable and measurable, often with emphasis on ever-smaller components such as DNA and genes. In effect, biology bypasses embodied experiences that may not be measurable, observable, or considered “real” from a mainstream biomedical perspective. As Eaves (2017) points out, black geographies often involve a “metaphysical component that cannot be rigidly mapped”, or in this case, measured (p. 84). Indeed, my broader research and practice bears this out, as Black youth and adults emphasize intuition, a *felt* presence of ancestors, and ancestral or Divine guidance, while the public food pedagogies discussed below similarly evoke ancestors in the sense of biological as well as cultural kin.

My point is not to wholly discount physical or biological engagement with the body, and nor do I seek to position black food geographies as exclusive of biological and biomedical knowledge. I draw out the implications of practicing and “writing” up embodied food pedagogy with Black youth because iterations of scientific racism persist (e.g. Guthman and Mansfield 2013; Hatch 2017) and to (re)assert the multidimensionality of black food geographies. To more deeply engage the immaterial, and to further trouble the reification of race, I explore Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy’s (2008) concept of visceral geographies.

Tending to the Visceral

Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2008) conceptualize “visceral geographies” as “the realm of internally-felt sensations, moods and states of being, which are born from sensory engagement with the material world” (p. 465). These geographies encompass the “cognitive mind” or thinking and decision-making. Grounded in corporeal feminist theory, the visceral is also *situated*: feelings and thoughts are not pre-social, are more than individual, and disrupt mind/body dualisms. Though Hayes-Conroy and Hayes Conroy do not analyze biological or cellular change, they employ biological metaphors to contextualize the visceral: “[W]e insist a visceral approach is a way to see social difference operating in the body alongside and interconnected to other processes more often recognized as chemical, molecular, or bodily” (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2010, p. 2960). In line scholarship above, Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy consider visceral geographies a conceptual (and pedagogical) tool for social justice, specifically in terms of broadening the (predominantly white) alternative food movement.

The pedagogical possibilities of visceral geographies interest me in three respects. For one, alongside black geographies, visceral geographies stretch the concept of embodiment in a spatiotemporal sense. Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy describe visceralities as non-linear, even “chaotic”, in expression: “[A]n in-the-moment feeling builds from a seemingly chaotic intersection of new(er) and old(er) factors including the moment’s unique molecular mixing and moving in the body” (2010, p. 2960). Among “factors” they list memory. From a black geographies perspective, memory can be understood as historical or collective. Visceral geographies need not stem from *immediate* engagement with the material world but can relate to past or pervasive conditions. As an analytical frame, black geographies engage “a metaphysical component that cannot be rigidly mapped or measured” (Eaves 2017). Tending to the visceral opens up space for Black food epistemologies that counter dominant ways of knowing food or the body.

Furthermore, current food studies and food pedagogy with Black youth stress how they are *subject to* food geographies, rather than how they co-produce them. How might tending to the visceral underscore not only Black knowledge and agency, but also *interiority*? As Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2013) point out, there is still a lack of understanding regarding how internal processing inspires (dis)engagement with food, and the visceral “gets at” actionable feelings or thoughts. Chef-activist Bryant Terry (2009) expresses this potential with a mantra: “Start with the visceral, move to the cerebral, and end with the political”. How can feelings, memories, and thoughts be agentic, resources for personal and collective resilience, creative and generative in the midst of oppressive food geographies?

Lastly, visceral geographies point to diverse embodied food experiences and knowledge. Tending to taste, feelings, and food memories can highlight wide-ranging personal experiences among Black youth, disclosing the difference that intersecting social identities make. Tending to the visceral further disrupts monolithic representations of Black youth. The visceral invites a breadth of feeling about/with blackness and food, including desire, pleasure, joy, and other affirmative states of being currently underconsidered in food pedagogy with Black youth; in doing so, a visceral approach yields mappings of black food geographies that underscore resilience and “visceral possibilities” (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy 2013). Grounded in black geographies and in critical food studies, the “Favorite Meals” workshop engaged the visceral through the senses.

In Practice

Food Diary #1: “Write about your favorite meal using as many of your senses (touch, smell, taste, sight, sounds) as possible. You can draw pictures long with your description too. Feel free to use the back of this sheet or to add another sheet of paper”

What might food pedagogies be grounded in black food geographies and embodied approaches to race and food, look like? How might these cultivate resilience, in the sense of harnessing embodied food experiences and knowledge? For the “Favorite Meals” workshop, I explored these questions using critical participatory action research (CPAR)

methodology and pedagogy. Before offering specifics, I briefly situate CPAR within the theoretical framing above and within the broader landscape of critical and embodied food pedagogy.

(C)PAR as pedagogy

Participatory action research or PAR stresses relationship-building through inquiry, investigates uses of power, recognizes multiple knowledges, and envisions possibilities for social change. The *critical* added to CPAR emphasizes engagement with critical social theory and critical pedagogy, as well as the centering of historically-marginalized voices and knowledge. Drawing on a wide range of theory and practice, CPAR “maps out relationships between social structures and injustice in everyday life experiences” (Cahill 2018). Among theoretical foundations employed to “map out” power relations, feminist approaches figure prominently in CPAR, guiding an emphasis on multiple, situated knowledges and embodied inquiry (Kindon et al. 2007). Critical pedagogy, particularly as articulated by Freire (2000), undergirds CPAR’s emphasis on building critical consciousness of one’s privilege and oppression, or *conscientization*. For Stuttaford and Coe (2008), the learning component of (C)PAR is “vital to remain true to its emancipatory potential” (p. 189). Related to this project, CPAR with has addressed gentrification (Cahill 2006), educational injustice (Torre 2009), and racial profiling (PSP 2018), among other topics. Sumner (2015) adopts the term “critical food pedagogy” to describe pedagogy that builds upon Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed”, situating food within asymmetrical power relations while inspiring informed action beyond the classroom.

“Favorite Meals” initiated a 6-week series with a youth non-profit that fosters leadership through farming. Participants primarily resided in East Austin, a site of historical and on-going segregation, gentrification, and displacement in the city. Due to intensive food pedagogy with Black youth on a national scale and given the impacts of gentrification on local African-Americans, I ultimately focused on the food geographies of youth who identified as African-American or African-American and multiracial (African-American and Latinx). The overarching project involved the workshops, participatory filmmaking, food life history interviews, and a focus group. During the project, my partner and I co-founded an action education initiative (Food for Black Thought). Youth co-researchers shared their film with the greater Austin community at the first FFBT symposium.

Black geographies provided the context for “Favorite Meals” and subsequent workshops in the series. Black and other subjugated food experiences and knowledges were considered instructive for historically-marginalized populations and for the broader planet. This approach holds that “socio-spatial strategies for survival” practiced by Black populations can inform socially and environmentally just food systems (McKittrick 2006). The workshop understood this embodied knowledge as instructive not only because Black food experiences elucidate power relations, but also because of the embodied knowledge African-Americans have practiced and developed in the midst of oppression (Woods 2007, 2009). Again, while the Anthropocene unevenly impacts Black Americans, change driven by external circumstances remains all too familiar for Black and other historically-marginalized populations.

“Favorite Meals” focused on growing consciousness of one’s experiences with food beyond the “good” and “bad” food binary. Though cultivating self- and embodied-consciousness was an intention, the workshop also reflected radical feminist understandings of critical pedagogy. hooks (1994) proposes “engaged pedagogy”, which highlights the well-being of both the learners and the facilitator in a holistic sense. “Favorite Meals” incorporated wellbeing through an awareness of the historical present, along with space for personal and group reflection. Keating’s (2007) “deep listening” further informed workshop “ground rules”, in addition to ones co-created with the youth. Deep listening underscores interpersonal power relations while inviting close attention to one’s visceral responses.

Critical and Embodied Food Pedagogies

In the wider context of food pedagogies, “Favorite Meals” relates to what I loosely call critical and embodied approaches to teaching and learning about food. As in the case of CPAR, finer details reveal a range of intentions and theoretical approaches. I use the term *critical* to their mutual and explicit engagement with power relations and to their emphasis on building consciousness for social change. I devote attention to pedagogies that engage with issues of race and racism here. As Flowers and Swan (2015) note, engagement with race/racism remains lacking in food pedagogy scholarship. However, public food pedagogy practices have engaged race, including with embodied approaches. By public pedagogy here, I refer to “spaces, sites, and languages of education and learning” beyond schools (Sandlin et al. 2010). Carried out by educators such as non-profits, grassroots organizations, and food justice initiatives, public food pedagogies contribute to teaching and knowledge production beyond the academy. I consider “Favorite Meals” in relationship to both food pedagogy scholarship and public food pedagogies here.

In food pedagogy scholarship, Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2010) engage diverse racialized and cultural experiences as they practice and analyze visceral food pedagogies in the context of “slow food”. Still other research on food education does not necessarily practice embodied inquiry but does critically engage power relations. Burdick (2014) applies a “soul food lens” to disrupt racial politics of the mainstream (white) food movement in the United States, while Sumner (2015) operationalizes “critical food pedagogies” to inspire action beyond the classroom. In Australian context, Ma Rhea (2018) theorizes an indigenist, Gaian food pedagogy to deimperialize and decolonize education on local eating. Abarca (2015) discusses the use of “subaltern” food narratives to grapple with and “make concrete” critical social theory in the classroom. These narratives cultivate “transformative food consciousness” as they elucidate, “how subalterns speak through food; how they perform their gender and sexuality as well as their class and ethnic positionalities through the language of their cooking [. . .] and how they manoeuvre socio-economic and cultural power relations to empower themselves by transforming the kitchen into a creative space of their own” (p. 215-216).

“Favorite Meals” similarly sought to lift up, capture, and affirm subjugated food histories and narratives, while subsequent workshops situated personal food geographies in local and historical context. However, “Favorite Meals” took place outside the classroom in a farm setting. The workshop represents public food pedagogy on the rise throughout the country. Along with Ramírez’s (2015) account of Black-led community

garden programs that (re)imagine historical food trauma come to mind. Soul Fire Farm (New York) offers an immersion program and youth education focused on healing from “inherited trauma rooted in oppression” related to food and on cultivating “personal food sovereignty”. In Atlanta, Georgia, Grow Where You Are urges community members to “keep [their] gardens close”, to grow social, physical, and economic health. Conferences such as Black Farmers and Urban Gardener’s (BUGS) host skill shares where Black growers (including youth) learn from each other; BUGS most recent conference lifted up embodied learning.

Farming and gardening remain a primary pedagogical site for critical and embodied approaches beyond the classroom. Following a long history of cookbooks as pedagogical tools, recent cookbooks represent yet another vibrant medium (Harris and Angelou 2012; Terry 2014; Martin 2015), as do food and farm cooperatives committed to anti-racism and liberation (Alkon and Guthman 2017; Gordon-Nembhard 2014). Though fuller account of these public pedagogies is beyond this article, they are by no means uniform. Food binaries occasionally (re)surface in their discourse, and some evoke the “obesity epidemic” or metabolic disorders as key motivators. However, any references to personal behavior are largely grounded in a relational, systemic perspective, and their emphasis on resilience overlaps. Examples noted here seek to cultivate resilience in multiple senses of the word, cultural and spiritual, economic and environmental.

With a critical emphasis on resilience, “Favorite Meals” resonates with these public pedagogies. At the same time, the workshop extends possibilities. Though the workshop took place on a farm, the practice of farming was not central to our embodied inquiry. Rather, “Favorite Meals” engaged the body through reflection, inviting youth to viscerally connect with their favorite meals through individual and group inquiry. As such, the workshop could have taken place in a classroom or another pedagogical space. I emphasize this to suggest the possibilities of critical and embodied practice, and, following critical pedagogy, to (re)assert reflection as action. Next, I reflect on the youth’s “Favorite Meal” responses. While I offer occasional analysis, I especially forefront the youth’s words and art. Four major themes emerged: Bliss, Playing with Food, Eating Out/In with Family, and Eating En Route.

Expressions

Embodied Bliss

Throughout their food diaries, youth co-researchers describe how remembering their favorite foods awakens their senses. Their favorites bring them into the present and beyond, into and out of their bodies. For Isaac, the greasy, soft, and cheesy make of his favorite pizza makes him “drool” and he hears the sound “crunch, crunch”. His sensory experience transports him to “paradise”. For Tonya, the smell of Cajun shrimp over rice is “to die for if you love spicy food”; she uses a figure of speech (“to die for”) to communicate how her most treasured dish brings to mind giving one’s self over to another state of being (the afterlife). Her figure of speech juxtaposes a vibrant description of her body and the meal, with death. She vividly describes the red color of beans against the “bright whiteness of the rice”, and she recalls the “sizzling sound of the shrimp”. This

juxtaposition emphasizes not only how delicious this dish tastes but also how transformative it feels for her.

Food Diary #1: Your Favorite Meal

My favorite meal is Pizza

Write about your favorite meal using as many of your senses (touch, smell, taste, sight, sounds) as possible. You can draw pictures along with your description, too. Feel free to use the back of this sheet, too, or to add another sheet of paper.

When I pick up pizza it is greasy and soft. When I eat pizza it taste like cheese and paradise. When I smell pizza my mouth start to drool. When I taste some pizza I hear the sound of crunch, crunch.

Imagine the setting for your favorite meal. Who do you usually eat this meal with, and where?

The setting I eat pizza's at the most is Mr. Gattis and I usually eat pizza with my mom.

Figure: Isaac's Food Diary

In naming “paradise” and “dying”, Isaac and Tonya both evoke the unknown. Though both of their hyperboles evoke death (heaven and paradise may require “passing”), they do so to express pleasure rather than pain or suffering. They counter map emphases on Black death as they emphasize otherworldly deliciousness. Likewise, a sense of wonder resurfaces throughout the food diaries. For Terek, Stuffed Shells may smell familiar (like pizza) because of the sauces and spices. However, he describes the meal’s consistency as “unlike any other food you’ve tasted”. Terek adopts an air of mystery here. In still other diaries youth reveal a similar sense of wonder. Brittney’s favorite nachos are “so cheesy and good”. Eric does not just describe the Hunny Bun, he beholds the “slick” and “slippery” bun that “looks like a circle that can fit in the palm of

your hand”. For him, the Hunny Bun is a fulfilling meal in early morning hours. He wonders how “something so small” can be so satisfying.

When describing embodied bliss, the youth capture bodily responses. Senses merge. Recalling the smell of pizza prompts Isaac to “water at the mouth” and “drool.” For Trina, a combination of smells makes Nachos with Doritos savory. “Just thinking” about Cajun Shrimp Over Rice makes Tonya’s mouth water. Taste, smell, and thought prove inseparable, suggestive of synesthesia, or “union of the senses” – a phenomenon that disrupts the Western five-sense model of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch (Sutton 2010, p. 217). Sutton offers that “explicit considerations of synesthesia remind us that it is both socially cultivated and produced” (p. 219). In fact, youth responses underscore assumptions within the “Favorite Meals” prompt, with its identification of five, distinct, senses. Pedagogically, how might acknowledging and practicing other “sensory categorizations”, open up still further visceral possibilities?

I want to suggest that youth’s creative responses reflect the openness of the prompt. By disengaging from the “healthy” / “unhealthy” binary, the prompt expressed an interest in youth’s personal experiences without judgement. Their willingness to share about a wide variety of foods suggests how a visceral prompt may loosen stigma or self-surveillance. However, “soul food” did not figure prominently in their favorite meals. (Interestingly, they named “soul food” during the next subsequent workshop that asked about “foods that express who they are”) Again, the youth mentioned “soul food” with a mix of pride and shame during the broader project. Did a lack of “soul food” among their favorites, create ease for the workshop? Was it easier to describe their favorite meals because they did not associate them with African-American (stigmatized) eating?

Playing with food

For fast food and home-cooked meals, youth recalled their favorite meals as playful, ones where they dirtied hands and fingers. Their favorites were hand-held or involved eating with hands, such as breakfast tacos, the cheeseburger, pizza, and nachos. In some diaries, eating with hands is pivotal. Isaac indulges the greasy and soft texture of pizza. Darrell appreciates how soft breakfast tacos are to the touch. Eric’s favorite Hunny Bun is “slippery” and “slick” on his fingers. In these examples, the foods are unpredictable. How the grease will flow or how the cheese will melt, how the eggs and other foods included in the taco will arrange themselves, is uncertain. These meals can be mobile - carried around the restaurant, around home, or between home and school. The youth depict handheld foods as (deliciously) messy. Their favorite meals do not just taste good: they are fun to eat and/or make.

Some of these hand-held foods, like pizza, are associated with young people. Children and teenagers are expected to eat and enjoy these foods, and they are expected to understand “snack” foods as meals (Curtis et al. 2010). Indeed, food pedagogies at the national level in the United States and other overdeveloped countries emphasize what constitutes a “proper” meal (e.g. Metcalfe et al. 2008). But here, play extends beyond what are often situated (and marketed) as “young people” foods. Terek and Tonya describe what might be considered more “adult” meals in terms of ingredients and preparation. Sauces and spices make their favorite pasta dishes playful. For Terek, the sauce creates a unique texture, making Stuffed Shells unlike other dishes he eats at home.

For Tonya, Cajun Rice with Shrimp is “messy and so good to where you lick your fingers every time”. In addition to adding, sauces make these home-cooked entrees messier. With sauce, the pasta is less easily contained on the fork or spoon, or even in the mouth. Not knowing what will happen next contributes to the moment.

Tonya expands on play. As she uses her hands and enjoys the messiness, she is the only one who described cooking her favorite dish by herself, for herself. Tonya’s food diary uniquely includes a recipe for making the meal, demonstrating her intimate knowledge of the dish. Cooking is one way she makes time for herself: “I like to eat by myself due to the fact that I love to reflect and treat me.” Her cooking stood out in the course of the project while highlighting gendered dynamics. Only two other youth, also young women, cooked their favorite meals; one, Kristina, made it a point to learn how to cook fish. However, in most cases mothers and grandmothers cooked the youth’s favorite meals and everyday dishes. Some young men, like Eric, contributed by purchasing ingredients, but they were not expected to cook (or to spend time in the kitchen).

Tonya further savors cooking as a creative process. She considers the meal a creative accomplishment: “The sizzling sound of the shrimp and the steam coming from the pan makes me proud to be able to accomplish such a dish”. Her diary resonates with older women interviewed for the broader project. Eric’s grandmother, for instance, considers cooking as a relaxing activity, one that allows her to express herself. She speaks proudly of being able to make any steak tender, no matter its quality (Jones 2016). Williams-Forson (2006) enunciates “culinary play” in a communal sense among Black women, especially in the context of church activities. Typically, however, the mothers, grandmothers, and daughters who prepared meals during this project cooked for the family: Tonya’s is a meal for one. Youth diaries disclose *play* and *pleasure*, again both underconsidered in food studies and food pedagogy (Rich and Evans 2015). To be sure, food pedagogy based on hegemonic nutrition can and does engage play, though often focused on “(re)training” palettes. The youth engage in unstructured play as they follow their creative impulses.

Eating out/in with family

Tonya’s enjoyment of her favorite meal alone was an exception. Whether describing eating fast food, at restaurants, or at home, youth typically enjoyed their favorites with family. For Isaac and Sheila eating out with family is integral to the meal. Isaac savors pizza with his mom at a local restaurant where customers can sit down and eat together or order out. Sheila uses embellished letters in her food diary to describe group meals at McDonalds, conveying a sense of celebration or play. In both of these cases, time with close family members contributes to the favorite meal. *Who* the youth consume pizza, cheeseburgers, and fries with, matters.

Several studies consider the prevalence of fast food restaurants and marketing in low-income and predominantly Black neighborhoods (e.g. Kwate 2008). Youth food diaries do indicate greater access to fast food. During a focus group later in the project, the youth expressed a desire for more sit-down places where they could eat with their families; during the film phase of the project, they decided to ask neighbors their thoughts on the prevalence of fast food in their neighborhood. They further illustrate the social meaning of fast food restaurants for them: fast food places offer an option for

families to eat together affordably and conveniently. Youth responses countermap lack of access to “healthy” food retail by situating fast food within relationships.

Terek, Maria, and Tonya similarly describe favorite meals with family or near home. Terek and his family consume Stuffed Shells together at the dinner table, while Brittney loves “every meal [her] mom cooks.” Hot wings, nachos, and crab legs are among meals she eats with her mom and brothers at home. Tonya especially enjoys eating Cajun Shrimp Over Rice by herself or with her father, in her bedroom or in the living room where there is a television. Even though she eats alone, family is close by. When other youth noted eating alone, they enjoyed their favorite foods at or near home as well. Eric “munches” on his Hunny Bun, a donut snack, in his grandmother’s house where he and his sister live; Darrell purchases a breakfast taco en route to school, after he leaves his grandmother’s house.

Youth emphasis on family or home underscores their limited agency as teenagers. In another food diary Trina writes, “My mom ask what we want, but get whatever she wants to eat”. No longer considered children, but not quite adults, the youth were subject to their guardians’ decisions. By eating favorite meals alone, Tonya, Eric, and Darrell demonstrate autonomy but still negotiate the eating spaces, meal times, and foods available to them. Lack of transportation mediates their agency as well. In fact, none of the youth had access to personal vehicles. What they ate, where they ate, and where they purchased ingredients depended largely on adults in their lives.

Though recognizing the importance of the guardian/child relationship for some young people, food pedagogies largely maintain focus on individuals: in other words, it is up to the individual guardian or family member to provide proper meals. A critical and embodied perspective reframes relationships as a platform for (re)building relationships through which food is accessed (and enjoyed).

Eating en route

Darrell was the only co-researcher who described eating his favorite meal en route, on the way to school. He describes eating his favorite meal, breakfast tacos, “When I walk to school because it’s a taco stand” (below). For Darrell, the site of his favorite meal is an ephemeral one, a stand that could easily shift locations, rather than remaining fixed in place. Both he and the taco stand connect at a particular place and time because they are both “on the move”. Along with broadening the site of favorite meals, Darrell unsettles the “fixedness” that overwhelmingly undergirds representations of Black youths’ food geographies. These representations further inform food pedagogy focused on Black youth and predominantly Black neighborhoods.

Food Diary #1: Your Favorite Meal

My favorite meal is Breakfast Tacos

Write about your favorite meal using as many of your senses (touch, smell, taste, sight, sounds) as possible. You can draw pictures along with your description, too. Feel free to use the back of this sheet, too, or to add another sheet of paper.

It is soft and smell when ~~it's~~ there cook with all type of breakfast foods. The taste is good that's why I like it. It's ~~white~~ soft tacos with breakfast food in it.

Imagine the setting for your favorite meal. Who do you usually eat this meal with, and where?

I mostly eat breakfast tacos when I walk to school because it's a taco stand

Figure: Darrell's Food Diary

As a primary target population for obesity prevention research and interventions, multiple studies map “healthy” food access of Black youth and adults. Geospatial analysis of African-American proximity to food retailers has been fundamental to the development of “food deserts” as a vibrant area of research and policy. The mapping of “food deserts” also serves as a platform for food pedagogy with Black populations. At the same time, such mappings (re)present Black youth as static and acted upon, rather than as dynamic, mobile co-creators of food in their daily lives. As McKittrick (2006) points out, practices such as mapping, and positivist approaches can “naturalize identity and place, repetitively spatializing where nondominant groups ‘naturally’ belong”; geographic renderings can reify “spatial binaries” along race, gender, and other social lines (p.15-16).

Geographies of young people tend to be treated as fixed “somewhere” as well. In food studies, that “somewhere” typically includes places where youth are expected to spend time, such as home kitchens or school cafeterias. Research on mobility and youth critique this fixedness, noting how young people’s movement shapes urban landscape as well as how young people (re)imagine spaces in-between (e.g. Skelton and Gough 2013). Darrell’s food diary underscores young people’s potential mobility. In doing so, he points up the broader context of Austin. Given rapid gentrification and displacement, Austin’s food landscape remains particularly ephemeral if not precarious for Darrell, other African-American youth, and their families. East Austin has become a coveted site for new, boutique retailers; as in other cities, their inventory, prices, and “feel” do not necessarily serve long-established and lower-income residents of color, and they can perpetuate displacement (Anguelovski 2015). Darrell’s favorite meal underscores spatial (in)justice along with visceral possibilities.

Closing

During the “Favorite Meals” workshop, youth engaged embodied food knowledge through the senses. Follow-up workshops more deeply contextualized these personal experiences in the historical present. “Favorite Meals” played a key role as the first in a series, by establishing a critical and embodied approach from the beginning. Grounded in black food geographies and material studies of race and food, I have argued that such an approach to food pedagogy is vital in the context of the Anthropocene as discourse and epoch. Black youth continue to be the “objects” of food pedagogies based on hegemonic nutrition and healthism, while Black Americans are disproportionately affected by anthropogenic climate change. With emphasis on power relations and cultivating resilience, the critical and embodied pedagogy explored here seeks to acknowledge, affirm, and engage embodied food experiences with Black youth whose bodies, food practices, and food histories continue to be marginalized.

Engaging with favorite meals through the senses from a black geographies/critical food studies frame, I argue, cultivates resilience by loosening food binaries, engaging (racialized) bodies, and practicing awareness of the historical present. I have also situated “Favorite Meals” within food pedagogy scholarship and public pedagogies. Though a dearth of food pedagogy research critically engages race, public pedagogies throughout the United States continue to do so. “Favorite Meals” broadens food pedagogies scholarship on issues of race/racism, while contributing to public pedagogies. At the same time, the workshop expands attention to reflection as embodied inquiry beyond farming practice. “Favorite Meals” also opens up opportunities to “follow the feeling”.

For example, youth expressions shift prevailing narratives about black food geographies, while “writing them up” counters representations in scholarship. As discursive practice, research informs the materialities of black geographies (McKittrick 2006; Woods 2004), and studies on Black youth and food continues to (re)shape the built food environment, including retail development and food pedagogies. Youth expressions disclose a breadth of “visceral possibilities” for (re)imagining the materialities of the food beyond individual behavior change. For instance, what would “heavenly” food landscapes, feel or taste like for Black and other historically-marginalized youth? How

are youth already (re)articulating food geographies by playing with food, or by accessing food beyond the oft-cited sites of home or school?

Other guiding questions emerge. What does heaven *taste* like? Does eating with their families make the food taste *better* to them? How so? I have touched on race/blackness, gender, and age, but what other social identities contribute to their embodied experiences with their favorite meals? In view of anthropogenic environmental change, how do their favorite meals relate with still other lifeforms, plant and animal? Following interventions in environmental pedagogy (e.g. Nxumalo and Cedillo 2017), how do Black food geographies already trace or harness these relations in ways that promote resilience? And what do youth feel they learn (or teach), through playing with food or enjoying food? The latter highlights the participatory boundaries of “Favorite Meals” and the broader project. Though participatory in the sense of co-analysis, there is more need for food pedagogies that not only engage youth but also co-produce knowledge *with* them or co-create critical platforms for youth-led pedagogies.

Critical and embodied food pedagogies can be decidedly generative. Shifting from a hegemonic nutrition and healthism approach, helps shift the “place” of Black and other historically-marginalized youth in the Anthropocene from one of intervention to one of resilience.

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