

Dying to Eat? Black Food Geographies of Slow Violence and Resilience

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Abstract

How are Black food geographies, both geographies of emotional slow violence and resilience? Dominant directions in health-related food research emphasize how Black food choices cause (slow) death from diabetes, hypertension, and other medical conditions. Emphasis on individual behaviors can overlook how a felt sense of the food landscape matters (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes Conroy 2016). Through the frame of slow violence and racial trauma, I consider racial surveillance in the context of Black food geographies. Biomedical studies note the attritional effects of racial trauma on overall wellbeing, while other research and media continue to document racial profiling in food spaces. For this exploratory piece, I bear witness to testimonies of racial surveillance and food geographies using GIF-making, healing arts, and autoethnography. Testimonies drawn from interviews, media, and my personal experiences underscore how surveillance and its effects are very much visible and *felt* for African-American and Afro-Latinx testifiers as they navigate “food while Black.” Beyond countering the “invisibility” of slow violence (Nixon 2011), I explore affective and arts-based approaches to (re)presenting and feeling through Black food geographies. Building on Black geographies, I engage with Black life (not only death) by considering testifiers’ strategies for personal and collective resilience (White 2018).

Keywords

Black geographies; black food geographies; slow violence; racial trauma; African-Americans; Afro-Latinx



Introduction

I have turned to geography and black geographic subjects not to provide a corrective story nor to “find” or discover lost geographies. . . That black lives are necessarily geographic, but also struggle with discourses that erase and despatialize their sense of place, is where I begin to conceptualize geography.

McKittrick (2006, p. xii-xiii)

By slow violence I mean a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.

Nixon (2011, p. 19)

How might I write about Black food geographies and slow violence, without (re)presenting these geographies and violence(s) as lost-and-found, as McKittrick puts it? How can I center racial surveillance in food spaces and (slow) death, while honoring Black life? And, how does witnessing Black testimonies of racial profiling complicate Nixon’s (2011) contention that slow violence happens “out of sight” and “typically not viewed as violence at all” (p. 2)?

These questions guide my reflection on Black food geographies in a felt sense. By “felt,” I mean how African-American and Afro-Latinx testifiers feel as they navigate food geographies: when, where, and how they share, cook, buy, grow, and otherwise experience food in their daily lives. I mean how sight, taste, touch, sensing, and intuiting contribute to their/our embodied experiences, memories, and knowledges of food landscapes. Bearing witness to these testimonies necessitates “thinking in Black” (Padilioni Jr. 2018), and for this piece, *feeling* in Black. Thinking and “feeling in Black” about Black food geographies involves engaging with the spatial and temporal dynamics of food in the United States, dynamics that reflect the historical present in terms of food access, racialized food labor and service, food stereotypes, and assumed lack of food knowledge. Centering feeling is one way, I offer, to acknowledge how Black geographies already exist, lived, known, and experienced by Black geographic subjects. Though disrupting dominant mappings of Black food geographies is part of this work, my deeper interest is how Black emotional experiences with food matters for food sovereignty and Black radical healing.

As a practitioner-scholar who engages with both critical geography and healing arts, I also consider how feelings and poetics entwine. Drawing on Glissant’s “poetics of landscape,” McKittrick (2006) describes poetics as “geographic expressions” of “saying, theorizing, feeling, knowing, writing, and imagining space and place” (p. xxi). In this sense, poetics comprise expressive acts, broadly defined. These acts involve feeling *through* and *with*; they constitute and reimagine landscapes. Tending to poetics of landscape counters dominant mappings of Black geographies, partly by centering how blackness is felt. Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2010a; 2010b) propose that such visceral geographies of can be a tool for social and environmental transformation, especially when contextualized in social structures like racism. Feeling and cognition, spiritual linkages and memories, cultural meaning and identity, they argue, can move people to practice food justice. Lobo (2014) similarly understands affect as “a mobilizing force that increases the capacity of bodies to become otherwise” (p. 102). Likewise, I am interested in how felt experiences (re)present Black food geographies as otherwise visible and very much alive – not to prove Black vitality, but to (re)claim it unapologetically. Too often, Black food geographies, like Black geographies more generally—and here I am thinking of the work of Woods (2002)—are rendered already dead or dying; this, too, is slow violence.

What other work, then, does attention to Black food geographies in a felt sense require? Palmer (2017) points to “the problematic of blackness” when it comes to affect: due to myriad “epistemic,

material, metaphysical, ontological” violences, Black “affective responses are only legible as signs of pathology, further reifying blackness-as-subhumanity” (p. 35). Centering Black emotions, means grappling with (mis)representations of Black affective responses as always lacking, excessive, unintelligible, and/or non-existent. Given this actuality, *can* attention to feeling “food While Black” help realize or reimagine food justice and food sovereignty?¹ While food justice and food sovereignty movements intersect, I refer to both given key differences between them. Drawing on Holt-Giménez (2010), *food justice* tends to focus on access to “healthy,” nutritious, sometimes culturally-relevant foods with emphasis on empowerment, while *food sovereignty* focuses on community “entitlement” to food, land, seeds, and related resources by “dismantling” corporate food enterprise. The food sovereignty movement also emphasizes (re)claiming and mobilizing indigenous and local knowledge (La Via Campesina 2019).

In the context of food work, grappling with Black emotional geographies and their (re)presentation is vital but timely. Black food geographies continue to be mapped materially, charting “food deserts,” fast food frequency, and distance to supermarkets. How navigating food *feels* while Black requires more attention from a critical geographic perspective. Through interviews with African-American and Afro-Latinx youth and adults, autoethnography, and news stories, I focus on testimonies of racial surveillance in the food landscape. For the purpose of this piece, surveillance broadly refers to the close observation, scrutiny, and monitoring of Black testifiers as they navigate food in their daily lives. In addition to blatant racial profiling, this understanding of surveillance encompasses *sensing* surveillance and microaggressions, both of which rely on and speak to the simultaneous (hyper)visibility and elision of blackness in dominant geographies. A focus on racial surveillance in Black food geographies is urgently relevant.

While beginning this piece in 2018, a video of the racial profiling and arrest of two Black men at a Starbucks coffeeshop went viral, and two Black shoppers were killed by a white gunman at a supermarket in Kentucky (McLeary and Vera 2018; Helsel 2018). Profiling in and around food retailers has been well-publicized, including the killings of Jordan Davis, Alton Sterling, and Eric Garner in front of convenience stores (Baker et al. 2015; Dwyer 2018; Zook 2015). In some cases, Black shoppers take it upon themselves to document surveillance inside retailers (e.g. Rashid Polo’s Vine videos, see Robertson 2014). Related scholarship examines anti-Black surveillance in restaurants, grocery stores, and convenience retailers (e.g. Rusche and Brewster 2008; Brewster et al. 2014). These examples of profiling and policing reflect the pervasive surveillance Black youth and adults navigate daily, in and beyond food spaces: Black geographies are geographies of knowing, surviving, and resisting surveillance (see Browne 2015 for more in depth engagement with surveillance and blackness). Surveillance related to food geographies, I press, stands to compromise not only Black food access or Black (slow or fast) death, but also Black living: social networks; cultural, spiritual, and social practices; environmental and culinary knowledge associated with food (for more on meaning and workings of food in Black food geographies, see Jones 2018; Reese 2018; McCutcheon 2016; McCutcheon 2019; Harper 2010).

Through the frame of slow violence, examples of racial surveillance and Black food geographies bring me to poetics of in/visibility and racial trauma (Richards 2018), along with the strategies for resilience testifiers practice. I mean *resilience* radically speaking, rooted in Black healing, collective agency, and community resilience (White 2018; also see Jones 2018). Grounded in analysis of

¹ For more, visit La Via Campesina, who established the term “food sovereignty” (www.viacampesina.com) and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (www.dbcfsn.org). Also see Sbicca (2012, 2016) on radically practicing food justice and food sovereignty, and Cadieux and Slocum (2015) on the importance of accountable use of food justice concepts.

environmental injustice and the Global South, Nixon (2011) theorizes slow violence as attritional and delayed violence, violence that is traditionally overlooked by media and policy because slow violence is not immediately dramatic and impacts historically-oppressed populations over time. Engaging critically with slow violence and trauma in theory and practice requires “a specific kind of reflexivity,” a “way of paying attention to the power dynamics, subjectivities, and meaning involved” (Wertheimer and Casper 2016, p. 7). In this paper, I explore reflexivity through GIF-making and autoethnography. Chan’s (2018) description of a poetics of racial trauma as one that “meditates on the effects of racial injustice in the bodies of traumatized individuals” also informs my analysis and the use of GIFs to feel through/with testifiers (p. 138). As part of an on-going healing arts-based project, this exploratory piece challenges normative representations of slow violence while contributing to affective approaches to food (in)justice and Black food geographies. But first, a note on bearing witness.

On Bearing Witness

The more I witness testimonies of racial surveillance in the food landscape, I find myself—like McKittrick, Woods, and others—seeking poetic methodologies, or affective and somatic approaches to interviews and analysis. Non-verbal expressions and the body language of testifiers draw my attention. So does a *need* to express the movements testifiers share via media reports, in interviews, and from my own experience, while mindful of what it means to (re)present Black feeling. Poetics give rise to poetics, or, said another way, expressive acts inspire expression.

Among identities I bring to witnessing, I identify as a cisgender Black woman and Blaxicana (African-American and Xicana). As a community healing arts practitioner, I facilitate modalities like ceremony, Reiki, trauma-informed yoga therapy, and breathwork. For over ten years, I have primarily held space with/for fellow POCI (people of color and indigenous community) where we breathe, feel, and “root down” into our bodies. At the nexus of geography and healing arts, I understand trauma as physiological and spatial, ancestral and energetic, social and environmental. Together we “feel through” not only trauma but also radical joy and living. In tune with spiritual activism and healing justice movements discussed more below, this is praxis: we address how oppression, power, and privilege affect our whole selves while (re)claiming relationships with our bodies, earth, ancestors, more (for more, see Brown 2019; Keating 2008; Sendejo 2013). Embodied or somatic inquiry has become integral to my methodology and epistemology as a geographer, with close attention to how testifiers and I mutually feel, sense, and intuit. I focus on the breath during interviews and while “writing up” research on racial trauma, aware of *susto*, or soul loss in Mexican/Mexican-American healing ways.

What Brison (2013) writes has been very true for this work: “[I]t is not sufficient for mastering the trauma to construct a narrative of it: One must (physically, publicly) say or write (or paint or film) the narrative, and others must see or hear it, in order for one’s survival” (p. 62). For this piece, I interweave testimonies, breaths, analysis, and GIFs, following a need to express. The periodic invitations to breathe—[*Breathe in, breathe out*]*—reflect the broader process of this research. These invitations also follow Stevens’ (2017) critical and “ritualistic” discussion of trauma, by welcoming the reader (and writer) to feel deeply into the work. They acknowledge how challenging it can be to witness testimonies of slow violence and resilience. This weaving further heeds the call to take poetics and the expressive geographies of Black subjects seriously, one echoed in Black geographies (e.g. Woods 2017; McGlotten 2014; Woods 2007; McKittrick 2006), Black food geographies of historical trauma, spirituality, and self-reliance (e.g. Ramírez 2015; McCutcheon 2015; Reese 2019), and in work on the “slow violence” of climate injustice (Nixon 2011).*

McKittrick (2006) argues that Black geographic expressions such as writing, art, and music describe experiences with space, place, and time while reimagining them. Woods (2017; 2007) theorizes hip-hop and blues musics as expressive epistemologies that teach back about Black geographies and,

more broadly, strategies for global survival. For Nixon, the “narrative imaginings” of writer-activists from the Global South both disclose slow violence and reimagine futures. Because of their positionalities, Nixon argues, they “can offer a different kind of witnessing: of ‘signs unseen’” (2011, p.15). As I problematize below, what remains “unseen” depends on vantage point, but these mutual emphases on geographic expressions highlight ways of knowing beyond conventional mappings of bodies and space. They bring attention to “alternative mapping practices” long produced by Black geographies (McKittrick 2011), mappings expressed and archived through verbal and nonverbal means like storytelling, ritual, and movement.

I approach the testimonies witnessed here as “geographic expressions” as described by McKittrick (2006): through verbal and non-verbal storytelling, testifiers recall profiling and survival, share and perform their stories before witnesses (researchers, news reporters, social media viewers), and inspire creative response (“writing up,” GIFmaking, social movements). I feel through testimonies while grappling with my positionality as a Black witness and fellow testifier, practitioner and scholar. Throughout, I reflect on what my/our testimonies disclose about slow violence and racial surveillance in Black food geographies. The interview testimonies come from research carried out from 2012 to 2017 on Black food geographies in the midst of gentrification. Phase One of the project included participatory workshops with primarily African-American, Afro-Latinx, and non-Black Latinx youth ages 15 to 19, in partnership with a youth urban farm program. Phase Two focused on youth-led participatory film and food life history interviews with Black youth, exploring their embodied experiences with food—shopping, eating, sharing, and growing food—in their gentrifying neighborhood. Phase Two also included interviews with their family members and adult stakeholders. Combined, I refer to these interviews, field notes, and recent news media as testimonies.

Much space remains for poetic methodologies and qualitative inquiry at the crossroads of racial surveillance, racial trauma, and food geographies. For the following testimonies, I engage GIF-making as a methodological intervention and epistemology for witnessing. GIF-making emerged during analysis, while thinking and feeling through interview transcripts, field notes, and recent news media. As part of an on-going project, these GIFs are part of a growing archive presented on-line and via pop-up exhibit (Jones 2019). Theorizing the GIFs is very much in-the-making, as communities committed to food, racial, and healing justice engage with them. Though I begin to explore GIF-making an arts-based medium for analysis and reflexivity here, I especially sit with testimonies themselves, beginning with a sense of surveillance.

[Breathe in, breathe out.]

Sensing Surveillance

Kristina: When I walked in [to the restaurant], like, it felt kind of like - I felt kind of out of place, I guess, even though I am mixed with Mexican and Black. But they’re white. So I mean, like. It didn’t seem right.

Author: How did feel like?

Kristina: Really out. Like, I wasn’t supposed to be there, I guess. . . and they were like staring.

Author: You felt like people were looking at you?

Kristina: Yeah, knowing that I’m different. Like my hair. My skin. So like. . .

- Kristina, 17, African American and Mexican, cisgender, woman-identified

Kristina's testimony surfaces whiteness, underscoring how whiteness "orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (Ahmed 2007). She senses how her presence in the space, disrupts. She locates herself as "out of place" and "really out," and sensing surveillance bring her awareness to parts of her body that, for her, mark blackness: skin and hair. Observations of whiteness in alternative food spaces dovetail her experience (Slocum 2007; Alkon and McCullen 2010). The café she described markets quote "real food," featuring locally-sourced and organic menu items as well as pop-up yoga; its offerings demonstrate "ethical consumption" more readily accessible to wealthier and white consumers due to cost and "taste" (Johnston et al. 2011; Guthman 2003). A sense of surveillance in the progressive retailer compromises Kristina's felt access and incites internal tension.

Slow violence presents a representational challenge, Nixon proposes, due to its tempo, scope, and invisibility. Without immediate, targeted violence to a body or bodies or place, and without the time-boundedness of an event, slow violence enlists multiple scales and long(er) stretches of time. But/and by assuming slow violence is invisible or unfolds "out of sight," Nixon suggests a stable vantage point. Dominant geographies assume "we can view, assess, and organize the world from a stable (white, patriarchal, heterosexual, classed) vantage point" (McKittrick, 2006, xiv). From this dominant perspective, Black geographies are rendered hidden and invisibilized; they are rendered "out of sight" and out of place. Their marginalization underscores their existence. As McKittrick (2006) writes, "Traditional geographies did, and arguably still do, require black displacement, black placelessness, black labor, and a black population that submissively stays 'in place'" (p. 9). For Black testifiers in my research, these (dis)placements are not only visible, but felt. In the context of racial surveillance, to be considered out of place can be lethal.

[Breathe in, breathe out.]

Bearing witness to slow violence in Black food geographies requires a shift in vantage point; it requires, to return to Palmer (2017), engaging directly with the "problematic of blackness" (p. 35). Making this shift explicit destabilizes whiteness while disclosing the twin poetics of Black invisibility and visibility. Speaking from architecture, Richards (2018) proposes that "tracing a poetics of invisibility in its performative aspects could also become a way of tracing how the performance of race makes spaces that have not previously been included" (p. 41). This point also holds for Geography. Again, beyond shifting from margin to center, this involves *feeling* in Black, "feeling in Black" acknowledges the existence of Black food geographies whether they are dominantly "knowable" or not, while situating Black affect as somatic epistemology, felt and embodied ways of thinking through and knowing. Nor is this feeling a singular one, rooted in essentialized blackness. Echoing McKittrick's (2011) conceptualization of a Black sense of place, I understand "feeling in Black" as a "process of materially and imaginatively *situating* historical and contemporary struggles against practices of domination and the difficult entanglements of racial encounter" (p. 979).

Turning back to Kristina, she counters Nixon's notion of slow violence being "out of sight" as she describes feeling hypervisible in a predominantly white food space. She experiences whiteness as an affective pressure, as "a racializing force that exerts affective pressure" on bodies of color (Lobo 2014, p. 102) For Kristina, this pressure registers as feeling hyper-consciousness of her physical features and as an inward tension around racialization. Later in her testimony, she re-iterated how her vigilance stemmed from the difference her *blackness* made. As a young woman who identifies as African American and Mexican, she felt her blackness, not her (non-Black) Mexicanness, rendered her "out of place," as if "she [was] not supposed to be there." She considers her multiracial background protective, as if being "mixed" might shield her from in/visibility and racial surveillance in a predominantly white food space. Her body becomes a stress point per Ahmed (2007), a "site" of social stress that underscores the broader work of whiteness, race, and racism with/in the body (p. 161). Kristina further underscores diverse Black experiences. Most studies focus on African-American experiences with profiling, though limited

research suggests that individuals who identify as Black and multiracial have experienced poor service at restaurants (Parker et al. 2015), and research underscores systemic discrimination for Latinx individuals who identify as Black, Afro-Latinx, and/or darker-skinned (Gonzalez-Barrera 2019; Cuevas et al. 2016).

Witnessed alongside well-publicized incidents of racial surveillance in the food landscape, Kristina's experience may not "seem like violence at all" (Nixon 2011, p. 2). In her testimony, no staff or customers express flagrant racism. She physically survives. Indeed, I begin with her experience because her *sensing* underscores racial surveillance as a felt and pervasive condition, rather than as an isolated incident. Profiling or deaths by racial surveillance in the food landscape have gained (more) media attention and fueled social movement. As Nixon notes, "Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility" (p. 2). Racial surveillance may not end in fast(er) Black death, and even those deaths can have delayed or attritional effects for families and community members (Smith 2016; Kwate and Threadcraft 2018). Affective pressures of whiteness and racial surveillance can act subtly on the body as emotional slow violence, with implications for Black wellbeing and healing.

Emotional Slow Violence and Black Food Geographies

So, okay I'm in this space that feels there's a not a lot of danger and they're my people, but then it becomes this sense of – does this store have the resources? – are they given the resources? – to have the type of product selection and freshness of products that's also – that's also important to me. – Joaquin, 41, African-American, cisgender, man-identified

Black food geographies *are* geographies of (emotional) slow violence and resilience. Material examples include contamination of soil, air, and water resources required for food production (for instance, the Flint, Michigan water crisis); systemic dispossession of land in rural and agrarian African-American geographies (Daniel, 2013; Ramírez, 2015; White, 2019); boutique or "sustainable" food development that promotes spatial injustice in the form of gentrification, forced migration, and/or displacement (e.g. Alkon, Cadji, and Moore 2019; Reese, 2019); and the systemic lack of fresh food retailers where Black, Latinx, and low-income populations reside (e.g. Gordon et al. 2011). Each of these carry structural social, economic, and environmental implications. Their impact, as in the case of high lead concentrations in Flint or Black displacement from urban cores throughout the country, are often delayed and dispersed. They compromise food security and food sovereignty.

Slow violence in the built environment where Black populations reside continues to be mapped with emphasis on "healthy" food access. Research traces the development of retail "food deserts" (Deener 2017) and critique food deserts as neoliberal efforts to provide supermarkets (Agyeman and McEntee 2014). Food sovereignty scholarship and activism lifts up local and cooperative ownership of food resources (Alkon and Guthman 2017). However, public health interventions and spatial research on Black food geographies overwhelmingly focus on individual lifestyle change and nutrition, without deeper attention to historical context or structural change. This approach largely elides how Black food geographies *feel*. This felt sense matters. The built environment is a *felt* environment, and material slow violence can and does affect emotional and mental health. From a biomedical perspective, research considers how food insecurity causes notable stress (Hadley and Crooks 2012), and coverage of the Flint Water Crisis describes on-going trauma for children and families (Gross 2018).

Quoted above, Joaquin further testifies to affective impacts of the built environment. Though Joaquin felt more comfortable in Black-owned or -frequented stores as a cisgender African-American man, slow violence in the built environment also prompts his "rage." If what he is seeking is not available at Black retailers, in this case organic foods, "[T]here's frustration around that. Really just being devalued, and really thinking how blackness is devalued, and just that sense of rage coming up." With

that shift from “does this store have the resources” to “are they *given* the resources” (emphasis added), Joaquin theorizes how systemic processes limit certain food options at Black-owned retailers or in predominantly Black neighborhoods. He underscores systemic oppression, specifically unequal opportunity and access. Joaquin maps a relationship between the built and the felt, between sociospatial injustice and emotional geographies.

Feeling through “food While Black” is also visceral. Theorizing the visceral politics of food, Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2010) argue that “food and food movements come to feel differently in different bodies as a result of inner-connected biological and social forces” (p. 2965). The visceral is relational, arising from “different(ly situated) bodies’ capacities to affect and be affected by other bodies” (p. 2957). These feelings affect how people engage with food in their daily lives. The whiteness and racial dynamics of conventional and “alternative” food spaces matter, affecting how bodies interact; which bodies are excluded, surveilled, or othered; and how privileged and oppressed bodies practice resistance in food spaces (Slocum 2007; Guthman 2008; Alkon and McCullen 2010). Though the visceral can and does involve the built environment, the visceral encompasses inner and internalized emotions, memories, and perceptions felt within/through bodies, that may not more broadly manifest.

Given the significance of the historical present in Black food geographies, tending to the visceral is vital. Just as the built environment reflects legacies of enslavement, segregation, and colonialism, this historical present is also embodied. Researchers note historical trauma around farming and gardening among African Americans due to histories of enslavement, racialized labor, and land dispossession (e.g. Guthman 2008; Ramírez 2015). In my research, Kristina described “feeling like a slave” as she worked at a local urban farm. A Black restaurant owner struggled to find Black youth interested in food service due in part to historically racialized food labor and persistent stereotypes. Black- and people of color-led food initiatives throughout the United States explicitly address historical, collective, and racial trauma (e.g. Soul Fire Farm 2019; Penniman 2018; BUGS 2019). For these and other projects, critically engaging with and acknowledging a felt sense—trauma, healing, joy, and more—is integral to food justice and food sovereignty.

Critical studies and activism are addressing emotional slow violence (and resilience) in the food landscape. Attention to racial surveillance as slow violence further lifts up the implications and possibilities of centering emotions and Black food geographies, especially as the concept of *racial trauma* addresses how a felt sense matters.

Evoking Racial Trauma

“What I want is for a young man or young men not to be traumatized by this, and instead motivated, inspired.” – Donte Robinson, racially profiled and arrested at Starbucks in April 2018

“This is something that has been going on for years and everyone's blind to it, but they know it's goin' on, if you know what I mean.” – Rashon Nelson, also racially profiled and arrested at Starbucks in April 2018

In relationship to racial surveillance, racial trauma has become a circulating public narrative. Mohatt et al. (2014) observe how historical trauma “operates through a layering of narrative terms, including trauma as a concept represented in stories, history as socially endorsed memory, and an internal logic linking history to present suffering or resilience.” These reflections also resonate with racial trauma. In addition to being constituted by historical trauma, I propose that racial trauma draws on historically entrenched hierarchies of difference and functions as a narrative. Activism, media, and an interdisciplinary scope of scholarship increasingly mobilize the concept of racial trauma to press for social justice, referring to *racial trauma* to name grief, lift up resilience, and make white supremacy

tangible (e.g. Ashoka 2018; Nicole 2017; Wortham 2015). Here, I turn to the recent arrest of Donte Robinson and Rashon Nelson at a Philadelphia Starbucks to consider how racial trauma operates as narrative and felt experience.

On April 12, 2018, Robinson and Nelson entered a Philadelphia Starbucks. Nelson asked to use the restroom but was told the restroom was for paying customers only. Then the men, both African American, sat down at a table. When staff asked if they wanted to order a drink, they explained they had water and were waiting for a (white) business partner. About two minutes after their arrival, the manager, a white woman, called 911. She stated that the two men refused to make purchases or leave. Police arrived, and other customers captured the arrest on their cell phones. By the next day, the video went viral on social media. The arrests sparked nationwide protests. In later testimonies, Nelson described wondering if he would make it out alive. One Black witness expressed worrying for the men's lives. Quoted above, Robinson expressed concern about other young (Black) men witnessing the event—in person or by social media—would be traumatized.

What interests me here is what this incident raises about racial trauma as a lived experience and circulating narrative. As Ahmed (2007) points out, “Being stopped [and profiled] is not just stressful: it makes the ‘body’ itself a ‘site’ of social stress” (p. 161). As cisgender Black men, Nelson and Robinson become stress points in the café. Their blackness and waiting renders them out of place, a threat. Their arrest creates a scene: officers move tables and chairs, transforming the microgeography of the café; via social media, their arrest reaches millions beyond the site itself. Their experience has the makings of more spectacular violence, but slow violence in the form of racial trauma shows up here, too. Nelson underscores racial surveillance and vigilance as a condition of daily life. The witness who fears for the men's lives underscores how profiling can and has led to fast(er) deaths. Robinson implies that bearing witness, in person or by video, can “traumatize” other young (Black) men.

From a biomedical and Western psychological perspective, trauma associated with racism can lead to or exacerbate myriad health issues, including hypertension, weakened immune systems, or metabolic syndromes, all of which can, in turn, catalyze “slow” death or morbidity (e.g. Hemmings and Evans 2018; Williams 2006). Kwate and Threadcraft (2018) describe “exposure to racism” as a “racialized stressor” that can “take a significant toll on health,” noting linkages between racial trauma and potential substance abuse (p. 550). In related psychological scholarship on “post-traumatic slave syndrome,” DeGruy (2005) considers how historical trauma paired with on-going oppression maintains multigenerational effects for African Americans. Because racism is a pervasive and structural condition in the United States, racism-related stress and trauma can be chronic (APA 2019). To Robinson's concern above, some scholars argue that racial trauma *can* be vicarious, as media reports and by witnessing the experiences of loved ones affects emotional, mental, and physiological wellbeing (Heard-Garris 2018; 2016). Among affective responses, racial trauma can incite self-blame, avoidance, and rage, among others. Pride in racial or cultural identity emerges as an “internal resource” (Greer 2011), while other coping mechanisms used to minimize or mediate experiences with racism include prayer, ritual, or “sister circles” (Forsyth and Carter 2012; West et al. 2009).

Related to literature on racial trauma, research on microaggressions considers the implications of subtle “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities” for historically-oppressed populations (Sue 2010, p. 5). Sue et al. 2008 use the term *racial microaggressions* to describe “a dynamic interplay between the perpetrator and recipient” with an emphasis on “everyday active manifestations” (p. 329). Similar to Nixon's conceptualization of slow violence, microaggressions maintain a delayed and attritional impact; they are chronic and wearing, subtle and often denied. Comas-Díaz and Hall (2019) note how “[intersectional oppression such as racial gender, sexual orientation, and xenophobic microaggressions contribute to the cumulative effects of racial trauma” (p. 1). Microaggressions can involve emotional after-effects well-beyond the interplay itself (Nadal 2018).

Again, I consider microaggressions integral to surveillance, another mechanism through which dominant geographies are maintained.

[Breathe in, breathe out.]

Evoking “racial trauma,” within and beyond the academy, underscores the pervasive effects of racism and white supremacy on Black wellbeing, mentally and physiologically. If racial surveillance is a mode of slow violence, racial trauma is an effect: attritional and out of sight as the effects may be internalized or internally felt over time, rather than readily visible, spoken, or otherwise outwardly expressed.

But I evoke the concept of racial trauma with care. As with all conceptualizations of trauma, racial trauma carries biomedical linkages. Biomedicine possesses a long history of racialized experimentation on Black and other populations of color (Washington 2008), and this history continues to biologize race in ways that reproduce racism and “biologically determinist racial scripts” (McKittrick 2016, p. 3). Mobilizing *racial trauma* risks (further) pathologizing blackness, such that racial trauma requires medical and spatial interventions, or specific types of evidence to qualify Black affect. Harper (2009) further reflects on how to acknowledge “racialized trauma” without representing blackness as “‘damaged’, unable to heal, while white identified people are presented as being ‘untouched’ by whiteness.” How might *racial trauma* work to legitimate Black experiences with racism? What does it mean to rely on scientific evidence or language to discuss Black emotional wellbeing? As Stevens (2017), points out, “We talk about trauma, we rely on trauma, we reproduce trauma” (p. 26). To write about trauma and study it, is also to (re)produce it.

Furthermore, relying on racial trauma without acknowledging its biomedical linkages forecloses other(ed) ways of understanding trauma and healing. Global indigenous practices, *curanderismo* or Mexican/Mexican-American healing, African-American traditional and faith healing, and the contemporary healing justice movements reclaim and reimagine ancestral ways of naming, witnessing, and addressing trauma and the body, within and beyond the academy (witness / cf. Harriet’s Apothecary 2018; Facio and Lara 2014; Mitchem 2007; Lee 2017). These bodies of knowledge situate healing relationally and communally with emphasis on the metaphysical in a broad sense: a felt connection with ancestors, the earth, Spirit(s), or intuition. Some clinical practitioners incorporate these into their work (cf. Bermúdez et al. 2002; Harvey and Hill 2004), while French et al. (2019) conceptualize radical healing as a psychological framework rooted in collective healing, cultural knowledge, and social justice, guided in part by what POCI already practice. Making racial trauma’s conceptual linkages to biomedicine explicit, disrupts biomedical norms – and discloses how they are already being disrupted. Doing so further opens up possibilities for bearing witness.

Performing Survival



Figure 1: “Joaquin’s Testimony.” Shirt designed by Tameika L. Hannah and Dr. Mitsy Chanel Blot. Use link to access GIF Exhibit: <https://www.nayajones.com/slowviolence> (Photo by K. Thomas, 2018)

[In stores] I want my movements to be clearly seen versus, I think, like when I’m at home I’m not moving products around like that. I’m just kind of like, “Oh, is this what I need?” In the back of my mind, I’m thinking about if people think I’m trying to steal something or be sneaky about something – then I might raise someone’s eyebrows. Versus being very clear, “This is what I’m going to buy.” – Joaquin

When Joaquin described his body movements in food stores, he outlined both the quality of his movements (deliberate) and the pace (slow). He described them as exaggerated. Aware of his hypervisibility, Joaquin moves deliberately. As part of his sociospatial strategy for survival, he crafts a choreography designed to minimize his perceived threat as a cisgender Black man. Reflective of how this choreography is routine, the GIF in Figure 1 repeats without prompting. In the GIF, I stand in an aisle with a basket in hand and retrace the movements Joaquin describes. I wear a shirt that reads “Got Hegemony,” reflective of Joaquin’s determination to wear what he pleases, no matter the response. The shirt was co-created by sound designer and screen printer Tameika L. Hannah (www.coffeeshopblue.com) and storyteller Dr. Mitsy Chanel Blot, who both use creative arts to lift up issues of social justice. Deliberately, I lean down and pick up an item off the shelf with one hand. After

I put the item in the basket, I reach the same hand upward. My action is careful and obvious, to (hopefully) deter suspicion.

In predominantly white food spaces, Joaquin's choreography does not require a specific incident or interaction. The (hyper) awareness of the conditions of racial surveillance, in broader society and within the store itself, are his cue. His movements echo psychic strategies long noted by Black scholars, activists, and writers (cf. Fanon 1967; Du Bois 1994; also see analysis of Fanon by McKittrick (2016) and Browne 2015). Ahmed's (2007) observation is fitting here: "'Doing things' depends not so much on intrinsic capacity, or even upon dispositions or habits, but on the ways in which the world is available as a space for action, a space where things 'have a certain place' or are 'in place'" (p. 153). Food contexts bring limited "space for action," and if Joaquin does practice action or make movements, if he does shift places in an embodied sense of moving through a supermarket or reaching for an item on the shelf, he understands these actions as always already surveilled.

Though he crafts his movements carefully, Joaquin also describes wearing what he chooses, asserting, "I'm doing all this other mental energy. I've made the decision that I'm going to comfortable, at least, with what I'm wearing." For Joaquin, this looks like ripped jeans and do rags. In the GIF, I express this agency by wearing the "Got Hegemony" shirt. My choreography mirrors Joaquin's deliberate movements while testifying to his agency. Joaquin contrasted this choreography and "mental energy" with his experiences in food spaces that are Black-owned or -frequented. When asked about a time when he felt *comfortable* accessing food, he recalled a barbeque shop in his hometown of Los Angeles, in the Crenshaw district. He recalled smells: "There's a sweet, tangy, spicy smell of the barbeque. Even when I recalled it." Joaquin remembered the barbeque restaurant nostalgically, but he pushed me to clarify "comfortable." Though less stressful from the perspective of racial surveillance, he anticipated discomfort in Black-owned and -frequented food spaces as a queer Black man. Any sense of comfort he feels in Black-owned or Black-frequented spaces rests on his blackness. Because he is "read" as a cisgender, heterosexual man, he relies on his saliency of his blackness to survive.

[Breathe in, breathe out.]

In predominantly white settings, the intersection of his blackness and gender identities incite his vigilance. He named multiple sources of surveillance, including cameras, secret shoppers, and store workers. "Too many stories of racial profiling" inspire his vigilance, as well as past experiences. Joaquin described navigating a health food store he frequented for lunch and for "items other stores didn't have":

I can recall being followed by security guard ... I was really looking for – I was engaged in the act of shopping, and doing some comparison shopping about what was in one item and what was in the other. ... But I notice each time I moved to another place, this guy was right there just kind of lurking not too far behind. And so I decided to do a little experiment and move around the store a little bit more. He seemed to be there all the time, not too far behind.

Joaquin identifies an experience in an alternative food space whose marketing emphasizes progressive politics and social justice.

What also draws my attention here is how surveillance shifts how Joaquin navigates the supermarket. He did not originally go to the store for food, but when he suspects he is being surveilled, he intentionally "moves around the store a little more." His decision to move throughout the store, to do a "little experiment," presents a sociospatial strategy. Joaquin ultimately made brief eye contact with the guard, who appeared to be a Black man, and shook his head. By meeting the guard's eyes, by watching the watcher, Joaquin unsettled "the gaze." As with other Black testifiers who video and audio record being followed or stopped, his "experiment" calls out surveillance. In Joaquin's situation, the guard

appeared to be Black as well, underscoring how systemic and institutionalized racial surveillance can be perpetuated by people of color.

[Breathe in, breathe out.]

After this experience, he avoided the store for several months. Both his frequenting of the health food store and his ability to shift food geographies reflect his mobility. Joaquin could remap his food geography with some ease because of his access to a personal vehicle and with his middle-class income. Compared to other testifiers, he expresses broader geographic mobility than, say, Black adults from lower-income circumstances or Black youth like Kristina, who did not have access to a personal vehicle and whose movement depended on parental schedule and availability. His experience elucidates the difference intersecting identities can make, while considering the food geographies of Black middle-income individuals whose experiences remain understudied in food research, where the primary focus remains on low-income, African-American households and neighborhoods. Racial surveillance prevails across class, and Joaquin's testimonial brings important attention to Black food geographies across economic status or privilege (see also Kwate and Goodman 2015).

However, his mobility does not shield Joaquin from racial profiling. His interview suggests his mobility may give him (ostensible) access to predominantly white and wealthier spaces where he is surveilled. Slow violence surfaces institutionally and emotionally here: the security guard puts racial surveillance into practice, moved by assumptions about Joaquin's intentions at the intersections of race, gender, and class. Along with the assumption of Black men's criminality, the guard's actions suggest Joaquin is out of place in a retailer located in a wealthier downtown neighborhood, designed for middle-to-upper income consumers. Joaquin's suspicion of being watched, moves him to strategize his movements. Again, Joaquin survives physically. He makes it out of the store alive, but his testimony surfaces emotional slow violence as the memory of the incident – collated with still other similar experiences - remain with him. During our interview, his stomach clenched as he remembered feeling, in his words, "seen but not seen." After the incident, Joaquin avoided the store for months, remapping his food geography.

The Smile

After bearing witness to Joaquin's testimony, I also avoided the same store. With his permission, I shared his experience with other Black and people of color in my life. If he was surveilled, would I be? Would they be? Would we make it out of the store alive? Spectacular coverage of Black deaths-by-profiling in the media heightened my vigilance. As mainstream media reported on the deaths of Black men by racial surveillance, countermedia and Black feminist scholarship highlighted deaths and incidents involving Black cisgender and transwomen (e.g. Ritchie 2017; Sonoma 2019). These (re)tellings report on slow violence. They raise collective awareness among Black testifiers and other people of color, by spoken word, print, and in social media, effectively creating an emotional map of sites where slow violence and/or resilience are possible.



Figure 2: “Smile.” Shirt designed by Tameika L. Hannah and Dr. Mitsy Chanel Blot. Use link to access GIF Exhibit: <https://www.nayajones.com/slowviolence> (Photo by K. Thomas, 2018)

[Breathe in, breathe out.]

Mindful of testimonies like Joaquin’s and the media, I assemble myself carefully, especially before entering predominantly white food spaces. Like Joaquin described wearing what he wanted as an expression of his agency, I lean deeply into colorful accessories and chunky jewelry; messages on my shirts may be Black- or liberation-centered, though sometimes I wear solid or neutral colors when I do not want to draw (more) attention. If I bring reusable bags, I do not put items in the bag; I place items carefully, deliberately in my basket. But the most important part of my assembly is a smile. In Figure 2, I face the stocked shelves and then turn, smiling at the viewer. In the GIF, “the smile” loops again and again, representing my routine response to an employee, security guard, or fellow shopper. Again, the looping expresses how routine the smile has become. In the course of “writing up” this project, I realized my response was almost immediate: I smiled, even when I did not particularly feel like it. “The smile” does emotional work. On one hand, I fashion myself into a non-threatening Black woman and shopper. Simultaneously, my smiling affect marks social stress. My response to the affective pressure of whiteness and anti-black surveillance, reflects racialized/gendered expectations of what my body *should* do as a cisgender Black woman, especially in the context of food.

As Nettles-Barcelón et al. (2015) write, “Black American women have long sustained a complex relationship to food—its production, consumption, and distribution within families, communities, and the nation” (p. 34). Among the “controlling images” of Black women addressed by Collins (1999), I want to emphasize how each one is bound up with food. The “mammy” prepares food for white families and others, while the “welfare queen” is a single mother who (mis)uses government food assistance; Jezebel, with her promiscuous sexuality, is sexually consumable and also misuses food assistance; her many children as an unwed or single woman are expressions of her uncontrollable sexuality (Masters et al. 2014). While the mammy serves with a smile, Jezebel’s smile is sexualized. Controlling images of Black women and food “[mesh] smoothly with systems of race, class, and gender oppression”; they circulate and saturate via education, government agencies and policy, and media (Collins 1999, p. 84). Controlling images stereotype Black food labor, entrepreneurship, and knowledge, while diminishing the significance of each.

As I navigate the food landscape, I do so aware of controlling images that attempt to put blackness and womanhood in their (dominant) place. Indeed, Black women are expected to occupy food spaces (kitchens, grocery stores, kitchen tables) in dominant geographies and in the context of African-American foodways (Williams-Forsen 2006). Lorde’s (1984) recollection of shopping while Black comes to mind, when “a little white girl riding past her mother’s cart calls out excitedly, “Oh look, Mommy, a baby maid,” and the mother does not offer a corrective (p. 126). In a respect, my ready smile perpetuates dominant geographies of race/racism and gender as I strive to appear non-threatening and law-abiding. My move is protectionist, careful of white fragility (DiAngelo 2018). I am well aware of the implications of not smiling, of not projecting “warmth.” Chef Gillian Clark notes, “Aunt Jemima is always smiling. She’s never brooding or perhaps pensively concentrating. A smile is an easy answer of happy servitude. When a smile is not present questions arise” (in Nettles-Barcelón et al. 2015, p. 36). Skin tone matters here, too, along with racial ambiguity. Occasionally shoppers or employees in food retailers ask me about my racial background, unsure of where to “place” my blackness. How does being considered lighter-skinned or ambiguous, already render my smiling affect less threatening compared to how a darker-skinned Black woman may be “seen but unseen”?

Smiling is a fraught strategy I take up to navigate intersecting, historically-present stereotypes with explicit linkages to food space. At the same time, my friendly demeanor does not deter microaggressions. Let me provide an example from my field notes:

Inside the same food store where Joaquin was profiled, I am standing in the vegetable section where the collard greens meet the carrots. I scan prices, considering what to put in my basket. I can see her from the corner of my eye: a woman who appears, also peering at the greens. She looks askance at me. I know she is about to speak. She asks, “Do you know how to make these?” She smiles, moving closer. “No, I don’t,” I respond. My response is short, and I turn away. “I thought you might from cooking soul food,” she responds. I shift uncomfortably. Now I scan for an exit, seeking a way to extract myself from the exchange. “I actually don’t know how to make greens,” I answer. I am purchasing the collards, in truth, for my partner (a cisgender African-American man) to cook. Growing up, my mother (a Xicana and White woman) primarily cooked in our home. Greens are one of my (African-American) grandmother’s specialties, but I move away quickly, finding my way to another part of the store.

In this moment, the fellow shopper “calls out” my blackness through “soul food,” placing me firmly within dominant geographies of blackness and womanhood. Broadly, “soul food” references African-American social and cultural foodways, and though the contents of soul food are by no means fixed and can vary by region, collard greens figure prominently in understandings and representations of the cuisine (Byars 1996; Rouse and Hoskins 2004). Critiques of soul food as “unhealthy” continue to

inform research, interventions, and food pedagogy targeted to African-Americans. But what concerns me here is not the assumption that I am preparing unhealthy fare, although I have documented multiple interactions where employees assumed my lack of knowledge about “healthy” food. Based on my blackness and assumed gender identity the other shopper claims knowledge of my food practices and food knowledge. She assumes I not only can provide cooking instructions, but that I will—which brings up historically-present appropriation of Black food labor, recipes, and knowledge. I am, to apply Joaquin’s words, “seen but not seen.”

Along with surveillance, sensed (Kristina) and explicit (Joaquin), microaggressions like this scene from my field notes constitute slow violence in Black food geographies. As scholars, news media, and social media commentary further lift up, many of these microaggressions involve food stereotypes around soul food, specific foods like chicken, or Black food labor (Williams-Forson 2006; Harris-Perry 2014). Each of these claim long histories of circulation as controlling images, informing food landscapes Black diasporic subjects navigate, resist, and (re)imagine. Again, the conceptualization of microaggressions resonates deeply with slow violence, with an emphasis on cumulative, delayed, and attritional impacts for Black wellbeing. Smiling is one strategy I employ because I *anticipate* microaggressions; that anticipation alone maintains physiological, physical, and other effects which biomedicine continues to map and that Blaxicana healing ways address holistically. But I want to remember Black life and healing too. To be aware of surveillance and microaggressions without being consumed by that awareness—this is a practice of agency, power, liberation, and resilience, one I (re)claim through healing arts that center the breath. By breathing, I remember I am radically alive.

[Breathe in, breathe out.]

Closing: Still Alive

Black testifiers sense and feel through racial surveillance as they access food. They recount (hyper)vigilance, clenched stomachs, slow movements, liberation, and fear. Their/our sociospatial strategies range widely, from “little experiments” to performing “the smile.” Bearing witness to these emotional Black food geographies, I propose, requires “feeling in Black,” not by appropriating blackness or by “discovering” Black affect, but by witnessing with a Black geographies lens. Doing so (re)frames slow violence as very much visible and known from the perspective of testifiers. Conceptually, slow violence brings attention to structural and systemic, material and emotional, delayed impacts injustice, and Nixon’s (2011) emphasis on writer-activists underscores poetics or expressive acts. “Feeling in Black,” I propose, troubles a normative vantage point while bringing up questions and further pathways of felt inquiry.

[Breathe in, breathe out.]



Figure 3: “Processing.” Shirt designed by Tameika L. Hannah and Dr. Mitsy Chanel Blot. Use link to access GIF Exhibit: <https://www.nayajones.com/slowviolence> (Photo by K. Thomas, 2018)

As I bear witness as a practitioner-scholar and fellow testifier, poetics inspire poetics. Poetic methodologies grounded in healing justice and reflexivity guide how this exploratory piece is written and expressed – and they inspire questions. Following McKittrick, I approach testimonies as geographic expressions composed of verbal and non-verbal acts. GIF-making emerges here from feeling and thinking through, from embodied bearing witness. Unlike flat images sans reanimation, the GIFs disclose how slow violence can surface again and again, in testifiers’ everyday experiences, memories, and bodies. This GIF-making contributes to and extends attention to poetics in black geographies and black food geographies through new media. Nixon (2011) observes how, “In volume and velocity, the new media have made available testimony on a previously unimaginable scale” (p. 278). The Starbucks incident described above testifies to how testimonies can travel rapidly and catalyze movements, amplified by social and new media. Nixon understands these evolving media as “a potential resource of hope” if “deployed with inventive vigilance” for environmental justice (p. 279). GIFs included in this piece continue to be part of exhibits and curated conversations, virtually and on-the-ground.

Moving forward, this project will theorize GIF-making more deeply, with emphasis on food justice, food sovereignty, and Black radical healing. Along with building on bodies of work already mentioned here, engaging with Black diaspora media geographies will also be vital (e.g. Sobande et al. 2019). Grappling with the “unthinkability of Black affect” posed by Palmer (2017), what are the limitations or possibilities of this GIF-making? What grounding – in theory and in body – is required for different audiences to “take in” these testimonies in a meaningful and critical way? From fellow testifiers and grassroots organizers, to store owners and policymakers? And while I focus on experiences with racial surveillance here, how testifiers process *between* experiences, and how they cultivate and reimagine resilience on an everyday basis, deserves more attention. After being followed at the health store, for instance, Joaquin described sitting in his car in the parking lot, thinking and feeling through his experience:

What am I doing wrong? Or what do I need to do differently to make this stop? So some of the process – what’s really helpful about the processing is working that through and out of, [outward motion with hands] of, thinking that [internalization] needs to happen.

As Joaquin expressed “out of” he moved his hands in a circular motion toward and away from his body as though removing something from within himself. Figure 3 recalls his movement. To better connect with the sense of grounding he named, I sit on the earth. My legs are crossed as I move my hands in a circular motion, toward and away from my body. The looping GIF underscores his “feeling through and with” as routine. He described other strategies, like sharing his experience with loved ones or incorporating incidents into teaching. In his words, these “heart opening” strategies help him transform “incidents into fuel”; along with a regular meditation practice, these strategies become responsive rather than reactive.

Psychological literature addresses affect, perceived racism, and racial trauma from a biomedical perspective. How does bearing witness from a Black food geographies perspective draw out relationships between the body and feelings, the social and spatial? How might poetic methodologies grounded in Black geographies and cultural healing ways, further loosen normative vantage points of both slow violence and racial trauma? If centering affective experiences with food can nurture food justice and food sovereignty, what futures might *feeling* Black food geographies of surveillance and resilience, manifest?

[*Breathe in, breathe out.*]

Acknowledgments

Deep appreciation for the testifiers who continue to share their stories. Gratitude to Tameika L. Hannah and Dr. Mitsy Chanel Blot for their creative collaboration. Thank you, Kevin D. Thomas, for capturing video for GIFs. Thank you anonymous reviewers, journal editors, and the special issue editors Caitlin Cahill and Rachel Pain for insightful suggestions. Thank you, also, to the panelists and participants of the *Geographies of Slow Violence* session at the 2017 American Association of Geographers (AAG) Annual Meeting. This research was supported by an American Association of Geographers Dissertation Research Grant; the University of Texas at Austin Social Justice Institute Summer Research Grant; the HRSA T32 Academic Fellowship in Primary Care Research; and by Culture of Health Leaders, a program supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

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