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# Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?: Food Inequality and Black Americans

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GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER?:  
FOOD INEQUALITY AND BLACK AMERICA

Christina Foster

PIM 74

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master  
of Arts in Intercultural Service, Leadership, and Management  
at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, VT, USA.

May 16, 2016

Advisor: Dr. Teresa Healy

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Student Name: Christina Foster

Date: May 16, 2016

## **Dedication/Acknowledgements**

First and foremost, I thank God for creating me to be a vessel of change. I dedicate this work to my son, Cerron, who inspires me to make the world a better place everyday. I acknowledge and dedicate this to my mother, Bernadette, who always dealt with me, even at my worst. To Maurice, for always being there. I would like to acknowledge my dad Furman for pushing me, even when I refused to be pushed, and my dad Carl for putting this fight in me. To my brothers, Abdul, Braxton and Arian, who have helped keep me afloat. I acknowledge my sisters; Maria, Kristal, Chrissy and Adrienne for their continued support. To my nieces and nephews, near and far, I love you. To all my friends who have wished me well and supported me no matter what, and a special acknowledgement to Avelana. To Mark Worthy, Dr. Don Trahan Jr. and Scott Carreathers, for always believing in me. To Cashawn Myers and the entire HABESHA family, for their unwavering support and taking me in. To all my brothers and sisters at SIT who dedicated themselves to be change agents or challenged me to be a better one. To the fallen soldiers that we lost during this process and that touched me and reminded me why we fight every day: Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, The Charleston Nine, and so many, many more. Finally, I dedicate this to all my brothers and sisters, in America or on the Motherland, throughout the Diaspora, that read this or not. You deserve the right to just be...and for that I fight! This is for you. Red, Black, and Green.

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## Abstract

Food inequality is an issue that plagues many people throughout the world. It only requires a brief search on the United Nation's (U.N.) World Hunger Map to determine that this is indeed a worldwide crisis. Conversely, within the United States, the issue of hunger is often treated as "minimal" in comparison to other countries. A deeper inquiry into hunger within the U.S. reveals an even more disturbing connection: the role of white supremacy and systemic racism in regard to hunger. Academic research pertaining to food access is quite recent. Be that as it may, it is of no surprise that issues specific to certain communities remain unnoticed. Additionally, most surprising is the glaring and evident gap in research oriented toward food inequality and, *specifically*, Black Americans.

This research will illustrate how systemic racism has restructured itself in the form of food-related issues within Black neighborhoods. Along with this awareness, the voices of these communities, which are completely missing from this narrative, will be shared. By utilizing the conceptual framework of systemic racism, data collection, in-depth interviews, and observations took place. From this sample of people and locations, within the city of Atlanta, Georgia, it contributed to answer the question: *How do marginalized Black people in America live **with** and **through** food inequality on a daily basis?* This research will answer such a question and more by examining a local organization, HABESHA, Inc., as a solution for the problem confronting specific segments of Black America.

## **Introduction**

Hovering over America is a stationery dark cloud that we call slavery. American slavery was a peculiar institution unlike anything ever witnessed in the world. Not because slavery did not exist outside of America, but because America uniquely tied race, laws, and forced labor together in a way that had not been done before. Thru the legislative process, America created a system of apartheid and enforced it upon people of color in this country, with Black bodies suffering the highest cost. This system created a ripple of damage and trauma, which is still felt today. America is a country that was built on and aligns itself with the idea “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” (Jefferson, 1776). Nevertheless, in reality, many Black Americans have their basic human rights denied completely.

For many white Americans, when they discuss racism, it is common to hear, “I am not a racist.” Their idea of racism is often a white guy in a hood, spewing a hateful word such as, nigger. Racism has evolved to the point of becoming institutionalized. White supremacist ideology, which fuels racism has perpetuated itself in such a way that benefits are automatically provided to white people and this is referred to as systemic racism. I will explain further this concept and highlight some of the ways in which it was created and how it functions today, focusing specifically on food inequality.

When many people think of socio-political economic inequality, food is not the first thought that comes to mind. According to a Yoruba proverb: “The man who has food to eat does not appreciate the severity of a famine.” I decided to conduct this research project upon completing my course, *Decolonization, Food, and Gender* at the SIT Graduate Institute. Our final project required that we investigate an issue that revolved around all three of these topics.

This was uniquely stimulating for me, as I saw the direct link between food and the Black family structure. By that time, I had received my practicum position at HABESHA, Inc. in Atlanta, Georgia, an organization that operates within the food sovereignty movement on behalf of Black families. As I arrived for work, I was immediately reminded of what food inequality is and what food sovereignty can mean for Black people living in contemporary American society. I was reminded how my family lacked food many nights, as well as healthy choices, when accessible. All of these combined elements compelled me to take an in-depth look at food inequality amongst marginalized Black Americans.

### **Statement of Research Question**

As the preparatory research work began to take shape, it became evident to me that my research would serve dual purposes. They are as follows: first, I will explore food inequality as a systemic issue and demonstrate how it has developed over time. Second, I will provide the experiences and voices of marginalized Black people, in America who have endured food inequality. On a personal level I wanted to deepen understanding on the importance of theory and practice. Most importantly, I recognized how research can be used to benefit a target group in addition to securing a credential. My inquisitive nature and my desire to learn all led me to conduct my research focused on the following question: *How do marginalized Black people in America live **with** and **through** food inequality on a daily basis?*



## Literature Review

With a closer examination of food inequality in the U.S., there are many angles from which it can be taken by approaching this condition through the lens of systemic racism, I was able to narrow that focus. I have identified four main themes that I will discuss in detail. They are as follows: History, Socio-Economic Status (SES), Health, and Race.

### History:

To gain a proper perspective of these issues, we must consider historical context. While it is accepted that other non-white groups have had destructive and oppressive histories. For the purpose of this research, I will solely be focusing on marginalized Black people in America. For many Americans, chattel slavery is an era that has passed. Some assert that people, who were slaves, as well as slave owners, are no longer alive, so let us move along, forgive, and forget. While this is true, the latter is false. Slavery has had an *enormous* impact on America and currently affects us, in an area such as food, today. Nutrition (food) and adequate access to it must first be investigated, not as something that we gather for after a long day of work, or on holidays, but also *must* be viewed as a human rights issue.

Slavery, as stated earlier was a forced labor system, but was not a new concept. In variations, it had existed for centuries. Upon colonizing the African Continent and many other places in the world, Europeans controlled land, natural, and human resources; an international labor force. Initially, indentured servitude was the most common method for securing a steady labor source. According to this arrangement, people contracted labor in exchange for food, clothing, lodging, and even travel, for a designated amount. Once these time frames were complete, the servants could terminate the contract or extend their service if they so chose (pbs.org). When colonizers arrived in the New World, they quickly learned that the amount of

land they had to farm was sufficiently serviced by the indentured servants (pbs.org). Simply, it was too costly to maintain a system of indentured servitude. It did not require much time for a free labor source to become the standard method of operation. This became what we know today as slavery.

American slavery was unique because this was the first time in history that laws had been changed and implemented in order to maintain the institution of slavery. Human beings became commodities and decades-old laws were amended to support this new system. (Orwell, pg. 62) Upon the abolition of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in 1807, the enslaved were forced to breed and their white masters raped women in order to mass-produce the slave labor force. Laws were amended to ensure that imposed miscegenation and the property resulting from it were protected. Therefore, lineage followed that of the mother instead of the father; children resulted from rape were automatically and legally slaves.

It can be argued that through this brutal and cruel system, generation upon generation of Americans developed patterns and ways of functioning as a result of this system. Most Americans, including the descendants of the enslaved do not understand, in totality, the impact this system has had on the current reality of life in America, especially from a Black perspective. By viewing slavery simply from the economic foundation that it provided for America, Edward E. Baptist states “The idea that the commodification and suffering and forced labor of African Americans is what made the United States powerful and rich is not an idea that people necessarily are happy to hear. Yet it is the truth.” (*The Half Has Never Been Told, 2014*) Since the system was extensive to the point of perpetuating intergenerational wealth (which propelled America to the status of a world power) would the enslaved (and arguably the ones who partook in their control, directly or indirectly) experience long lasting effects as well?

Slavery was such a well-crafted and impactful institution that created a fabric; a way of life in America that set certain standards. In 1776, founders of this stolen land started, fought, and won a war for their independence, from the British Crown. Ironically a war fought for freedom continued to hold people of African decent in bondage. From the moment of this very deliberate ignorance to the humanity of ALL people, America put the final touches on the creation of this nation. Classism was the division that wealthy Americans wanted to maintain. Racism was the tool used to create this division.

The products that were being harvested and profited off of by this forced labor system were, but not limited to: sugar, cotton, and rice. Not only did the enslaved Africans grow and maintain the crops, but they also were the ones who maintained entire households, by caring for children and the people within the house thru cooking and cleaning and much more. One will be hard-pressed to find something the enslaved people did not do. To uphold this system, the enslaved were prohibited, by laws and by force often resulting in death. They were forbidden to do simple things like: read, write, and even marry. They were not allowed to retain and practice any aspects of their culture. No opportunity was permitted for them to create anything resembling a “pursuit of happiness.” This dehumanizing process continued legally and outright until 1863, when the Emancipation Proclamation was signed, which legally ended slavery in most forms. (Lincoln, Abraham.archives.gov)

Enslaved people were “free” to function and enter mainstream society, or so they thought. Many white Americans resented the idea of a free Black person. During Reconstruction, a new and similar system was legally created to contain free Black people and keep in their place. This was sharecropping. Many formerly enslaved people farmed the land from which they were supposed to be free. They were forced into an intricate system of immediate and perpetual

debt to white Americans by the requirement to borrow the tools needed to maintain the land. Generally, former slave masters often owned this land and the formerly enslaved had to pay taxes or barter to work the land. Laws such as, Plessy vs. Ferguson and the Black Codes supported this era. Essentially, most Black people were prevented from working in any capacity beyond hard labor and usually offered low wages (pbs.org).

When Black people retaliated against this system, white America created another arrangement that rivaled that of slavery in ruthlessness. This was known as Jim Crow, forced segregation was American apartheid. Black people in America were still attempting to establish an economic base and an understanding of liberation when Jim Crow was created. This era in America saw the rise in propaganda as the driving force to relegate Black Americans into a continual system of disenfranchisement and dehumanization (*The Rise and Fall of Jim Crow*). Stories were created and crafted about the character of Black men and women, and then promoted through all forms of media, and even in educational and religious spaces. These well-crafted narratives still have damaging consequences on the American psyche today.

The Civil Rights Movement was Black America's attempt to achieve equality by removing this forced system segregation. For many American, this was the end of racism. Black people, again, gained their right to vote and have jobs as society became integrated. Skipping through the absolute horror and the **many** lives lost that **each** of these systematic states of oppression created, let's look at the numbers.

Legally, slavery began in 1640 and ended in 1865. That is a total of 225 years. Reconstruction's lasted 12 years (1865-1877), followed by Jim Crow Apartheid (1877-1965). America is approximately 240 years. Thus, when you total the entire block of time, from 1640 to 1965, Blacks in America have been in some legal system of bondage for 325 years. Black people

in America have been in dehumanized and oppressive systems for longer than America has been a sovereign nation.

There were many other tactics that created impediments for Black Americans during these aforementioned periods. Redlining laws, which blocked Blacks from obtaining houses and land in America, forced people to live within strategically built neighborhoods. They were built with minimal care and attention paid to a sustainable quality of life. Elizabeth Eisenhower states in her article, *In Poor Health: Supermarket Redlining and Urban Nutrition*, “Over the past 100 years, ethnic minorities and the poor have become increasingly concentrated and isolated in low-income urban neighborhoods.” (2001) America has seemingly done everything in her power to keep people situated in separate spaces, largely based on race and class.

America and a large majority of its Black population were now in carefully crafted ghettos with circumstances seen in “third world countries.” With little to no opportunities for quality jobs, education, food, and health care, there was a rise of organizations and movements, such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party. Focused on creating racial pride and community stability, they were determined to do what America would not; take care of its Black citizens. There was little evidence that America would allow these groups to fulfill their goals considering the history of serial mistreatment consistently visited upon Black people.

America took no chances that this oppressed group would rise to any level of power, as well-documented by government-led groups such as the Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) (FBI.gov). In *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander, she carefully provides evidence regarding the role of COINTELPRO in the death of civil rights leaders, and of the U.S. government’s role for introducing and planting crack cocaine into poor Black communities. There after begin the explosion of the Prison Industrial Complex, or mass

incarceration, that of which Black men are the largest demographic. In recent years, we have seen police brutality rise as the foremost issue regarding race relations in America. As history has shown, there is very little that America has not done or will not do to maintain this high level of power and oppression.

White supremacist ideologies created a system, which many theorists refer to as systemic racism, and are the umbrella that covers all of the various structures that relegates Black people to a second-class status within America. This is where the conversation shifts to food being denied to people as a strategic part of their condition. A component of food inequality is structural racism, and is far less recognizable. This is defined as “the blind interaction between institutions, policies, and practices that inevitably perpetuates barriers to opportunities and racial disparities.” (giarts.org) Next is an examination into a contributing factor of structural racism, socio-economic status.

*Socio-Economic Status (SES):*

There is a voluminous literature that correlates one’s socio-economic status (SES) and the quality of the food that one has access to. Much of the literature connects food inequality to poverty; this being, the lower the income, the lower access and ability to remove oneself from food inequality. Since white supremacy is a system that has placed white males on top, other correlations can be found with low a SES: gender, age, and group ethnicity. Numerous studies confirm that, Black people are the lowest paid demographic in the U.S.; for example, a study conducted by Holt-Gimenez and Harper (foodfirst.org, 2016). They analyzed the estimated 47 million people living below the poverty line in the U.S. and found that less than 10% were white while Black people comprised the largest percentage at 27%.

*Good Food & Good Jobs Reports* found similar results and also investigated who was controlling the food supply-chain, both in terms of production and sales. It found that “ownership of capital in the food chain is primarily white and male.” (p. 7) When it applied work, “whites dominate high-wage jobs in the food system.” (p. 7) Gender and race overlap, revealing that, “almost half of all white men who worked in the food chain were employed as managers and a quarter of all white women performed managerial roles across the entire food system.” (p.7) The resulting mean is “three out of every four heads of food related jobs, being white.” What this indicates is that when it comes to getting food in any capacity in America, Black people are most likely having their food controlled by white people, while simultaneously being the poorest group in America.

#### Health:

Another well-documented correlation pertains to health outcomes and food consumption. The better one consumes, the healthier, happier, more productive one is. I examined three areas in which the lack of quality food negatively impacts health: mental, physical and behavioral.

One’s mental health is vitally important. There have been numerous studies conducted that survey the way people are mentally affected by the lack of quality diet. Many of these studies have focused on children and adolescents. This is used as a marker to determine and highlight concentration and ability to focus when food is not properly or readily available. According to a study by Christen Olson for the *Journal of Nutrition*, he found that there was a “positive correlation found between poverty and level of hunger in school-aged children.” (Olson, 1999) This does not change with adults. In regards to physical health, outward appearances can be deceiving. Olson’s article also found that “...some individuals and policy makers have questioned the validity of the claims of widespread hunger and food insecurity in

the low-income population of the U.S. because of the high prevalence of over weight and obesity in this same population.” (Olson, 1999) What is being overlooked here is the aspect of structural racism. Low-income neighborhoods do not have the capital necessary to persuade the government or to build for themselves spaces that would provide appropriate access to healthy and quality food.

Fast-food chains occupy much of the real estate in these neighborhoods. They market, sell, and derive huge profits from food devoid of nutrients. It has long been proven that these places contribute to disastrous outcomes on the health of people who consume this food on a regular basis. Low-income neighborhoods often have what is referred to as food deserts. They are defined as: “parts of the country void of fresh fruit, vegetables, meats, and other healthful whole foods, usually found in impoverished areas. This is largely due to a lack of grocery stores, farmers’ markets, and healthy food providers.” (Gallagher, 2011) Access is also an issue wherein food deserts are concerned. What these low-income neighborhoods have available are “corner stores”, as they are commonly referenced. Usually these stores have very little fresh foods (usually just a banana or apple that could very well be rotten) and carry a high volume of processed foods. Again, all of these fast and processed foods have been well documented as a contributing source for medical issues such as; obesity, high blood pressure, and heart disease. (Vozoris, Tarasuk, 2003) Limited access to healthy, quality foods also increases levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. (FRAC.org) More than just the physical health, people’s mental health is affected by poor food intake.

In *Community Structure and Crime*, Robert Sampson found that “low-economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, residential mobility, and family disruption... increase crime and delinquency rates.” And in *Poverty, Food Insecurity, and the Behavior for Childhood*



*Internalizing and Externalizing Disorders*, it was found that “Persistent food insecurity is associated with internalizing and externalizing problems.” (Williams, 2011)

Robyn Cox and Sally Wallace found a positive correlation between adults who commit crimes and recidivism rates. One of the main factors in people returning to jail was in fact to obtain a guaranteed meal. Again, it has long been documented that the poorer you are, the likelier you are to go to jail. Thus, if people do not have access healthy quality food, there is a higher probability for incarceration. As it stands, food does appear to be a factor in reoccurring crime.

According to Lacey McLaughlin in *The Poverty-Crime Connection*, she states that a “criminal record reduces ones opportunity for employment, raising the rate for people to re-enter into crime. The fewer resources a community has to invest into their homes, the more likely it is to find vacant houses, vandalism, and burned-out buildings-conditions that breed crime.” Once more, we must revisit the work Michelle Alexander, in *The New Jim Crow*, to analyze the breakdown and connection between poverty and crime and the deliberate role that the U.S. government has played in creating this norm for Black people in America.

If crime, poor health and unhealthy food have a positive correlation to SES (i.e. money), then we can straightforwardly deduce that the poorer you are, the less likely you are going to have access to quality food and healthy lifestyle overall. In conjunction, if the poorest demographic in America is, in fact Black people, we can surmise that the poorest-fed people are also Black Americans.

Race:

While there is a great deal of research that supports the connection among food access, SES, and health outcomes, that which is most surprising is the fact that Black Americans are s

less researched strata. America has a long-standing and unique relationship with racial identity. There are numerous groups that have been oppressed by the white power structure in America, as such, it becomes very easy for people to speak in general terms when discussing the systemic aspects and outcomes of this oppression.

Research has shown that that the structural model of oppression has a functioning top and a functioning bottom. As I have shown in various ways, Black people are at the bottom of this oppressive system. I attribute this to the long and complicated history that white and Black people have had, which is anchored by the institution of slavery. America's deliberate refusal to acknowledge, as well as apologize for the horrific the system created, continues to exacerbate these issues.

When observing the manner in which food affects people, race is the elephant in the room. You know it is present, because it is discussed: however, it is done so in a manner in which I refer to as "comfort terms." These, by my own definition, are references and phrases that allow race to be discussed in a manner that allows white Americans to feel unattached to the system of privilege that was created and from which they benefit. Some of the phrases that appear when looking at these issues are: minority groups, ethnic minorities, low-income people, and poor people, people of low SES, and minority people to name a few. When dealing with oppression there are similarities, but there are vast differences, which must be acknowledged and respected.

Food and the Black experience in America is uniquely tied. Historically, early enslaved Africans cultivated the crops of food of that made America wealthy while also preparing the meals that the wealthy ate. I was surprised upon finding the most glaring gaps in the research were speaking on or about Black people. Scholarly research is ignoring marginalized Black

Americans and their experiences with food inequality. Organizations that are advocating for Black liberation, in the U.S., are specifically incorporating issues related to food, health, and nutrition into their agendas.

Upon reflection, some of these organizations had and have initiatives centered around food related issues; the tactics of the Civil Rights Movement and food sit-ins; the Black Panther's and their free food programs; the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church (PAOCC) land purchases in conjunction with religion, racial identity, and Black liberation. It is clear that within the Black community, the fight for liberation has always been closely tied to food. Part of the reason that this occurs is because of economics.

Priscilla McCutcheon wrote of the few articles that discuss Black people in America and the food sovereignty movement. In *Community Food Security: for Us by Us: The Nation of Islam and Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church* (2011), she emphasizes that Black liberation is tied to food in two ways. "Food is not simply used to address hunger, but also to build community among Blacks. Food is a part of a larger ideology of Black Nationalism, in which self-reliance and the individual achievements of Blacks are linked to the "Black community" at large." (p.3827) In other words, food is used to promote economic freedom which is a key component for Black liberation in America.

For the Black community and those who take on the task of liberation, it has long been apparent that food is a very critical variable. Not only is it a common ground, but it also provides access to economic gain and stability; something that has been lacking since Black people received a degree of freedom. Economic and monetary gains have been the key attributes which were critical for allowing Blacks in America to gain resources needed to properly heal from the

trauma of slavery. As carefully as America created the connection between class and race, it should be of no surprise that this is also seen by many as the key to liberation for Black people.

It cannot go unmentioned that there is a great deal of hesitancy for specifically detailing race or, better yet, racism as a part of the poverty and hunger issues within the U.S. As Rachel Solcum points out in her piece *Geographies of Race: Race in the Study of Food*, she states,

“Despite its pervasiveness, racism is almost never mentioned in international programs for food and agricultural development. While anti-hunger and food security programs frequently cite the shocking statistics, racism is rarely identified as the cause of the inordinately high rates of hunger, food insecurity, pesticide poisoning, and diet-related disease among people of color.” (p. 1)

She goes on to say that, “Recognizing racism as foundational in today’s capitalist food system helps to explain why people of color suffer disproportionately...” (p.4)

The obliviousness toward race in relation to food inequality decreases when speaking specifically about Black people within the U.S. There is much research on Black people elsewhere and how they suffer through poverty and hunger, especially when speaking on the continent of Africa. There is a narrative that portrays Africa as a very poor, unhealthy place that absolutely needs the help of the more developed countries in order for the people to survive. A familiar narrative applies when we recall the slave masters who took care of their slaves in an effort to see them grow from animalistic to a more acceptable human form.

This continuous and dangerous narrative allows white Americans to conveniently turn a blind eye to their racist policies and perpetual oppression. Look no further than the United Nations (U.N.), of which the U.S. is a member. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), operated by the U.N., maintains a website, which serves to highlight world hunger.

(fao.org, 2015) Conveniently, anyone who is a part of what is called the Big Five (the five countries that comprise the permanent members of the security council; U.S., U.K., France, Russia, China) has little to no statistics taken on them. Specifically within the U.S., the map points that data is very low in comparison to other nations. I am curious to know how the U.N., especially the U.S., determines which groups of individuals are worthy of having their hunger recognized as important, and what the standard is for gaging the lack of, and access to, quality food for individuals.

This blind eye that America turns to its own issues is reinforced by the lack of literature that is available and addresses specifically, food inequality within America's Black communities. McCutcheon frankly asserts, "there are no works to date that specifically focus on both the Nation of Islam's and the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church's actions around food and how they contribute to the formation of a community and race-based identity designed to influence not only their membership, but also Blacks outside of the distinct religions denominations." How does it almost completely un-researched that two prominent Black liberation organizations have purchased large amounts of land in an attempt to provide food, economic stability, and freedom to the most oppressed group in America? I began asking myself a similar question when it came to understanding how the voices and the solutions of Black people in America are all but missing from a topic that is so well versed and well understood. I consider this yet another layer of systemic racism, that being the attack on education. What people don't know is a problem, will never be addressed, and easily oppressed groups will remain in a state of oppression.

## **Practitioner Inquiry Design**

### *Framework:*

For this research I engaged participants on perspectives structured around the framework of systemic racism. I chose this framework as developed by Joe R Feagin in his book, *Systemic Racism; A Theory of Oppression*. I used his theory because he acknowledges the importance of a “historical foundation of contemporary racial oppression.” (p.7) His approach also displays how “other racial formations have developed alongside anti-black racism.” (p.7) What Feagin does is use a combination of historical documents and previous concepts related to Critical Race Theory (CRT) to craft an enhanced description of systemic racism that shows the interconnections among race, class, and wealth. His central idea is that American race relations have been designed around Black-white relations. He acknowledges other marginalized groups experience racism, but further advances the idea that American racism is centered on a learned disdain specifically for Black people. He takes time to not only draw these conclusions but also highlight the impacts that this carefully crafted system has on today’s society. He states:

*“While significant changes have occurred in systematic racism over time, critical and fundamental elements have been reproduced over this period, and U.S. institutions today reflect and embed the white-over-black hierarchy initially created in the seventeenth century. Today, as in the past, this oppression is not just a surface-level feature of U.S. society, but rather pervades and interconnects major social groups, networks, and institutions across society.” (Pp.7-8)*

As I build upon this theory while emphasizing food issues, it cannot be disregarded that existing multiple layers of systemic racism are deeply interconnected with quality food and

access. This is seen in the literature review by looking at poverty and not only its effect on food, but health, and exposure to crime.

Definitions:

To understand the relevant issues and the depth of which they affect people, we need to look at some of the various terminology used, because words are powerful. I am discussing food and how it impacts the daily lives of marginalized Black people in America. I am adding an additional layer by focusing on this issue in regard to race. For many, as myself, who study race relations, the topic of race arguably intersects in just about every aspect of American society. It is of no surprise that when I began researching definitions to frame my discussion of food inequality I struggled to find one that corresponded with my lens of systemic racism. I isolated three different definitions while reviewing literature.

One of the first definitions to be used amongst scholars and researchers is *food security*. The U.N. agreed upon this term during a 1999 World Hunger Summit. According to Per Pinstrup-Anderson at the *Division of Nutritional Science at Cornell University*, food security is defined as, and exists when, “all people, at all times have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for a healthy and active life.” (Pg. 1) Thus food insecurity would exist when a household lacks some or all of the above. Nevertheless, I have concerns about this definition.

First, I question the audience and the writers of this definition, none of whom I was able to find specifics. This definition fails to address the larger systemic issues. This can be seen in the framing of the definition. It is framed as food **security** not food **insecurity**. It does not focus on the challenging within communities and households, or even with the individuals. It simply takes the approach that people are doing well as long as these specific needs are being met. This

definition fails to address the everyday lived realities of poor people and people of color within this country, on a daily basis, and ignores the fact that these two areas have a strong correlation.

The most currently used phraseology is *food inequality* and it is defined as “the inability to access quality healthy food due to high levels of poverty.” (Gundersen, 2013) While this definition is commonly used and does address the issue of poverty, it omits race. Furthermore, this definition appears to place blame for the issues faced by the individuals suffering the condition. It specifically states, **inability to**. This very small, but impactful phrase is extremely important. It still does not account for the larger role that food inequality plays within systemic racism. This is not only a form of victim bashing, but also this is irresponsible and unfair to people who live within structurally racist spaces that struggle to access quality food. While this definition does miss the mark where empowerment is concerned, for purposes of complete transparency, this will be the term that is used when discussing those who live with.

The third and final definition is *food sovereignty*, is as follows: “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agricultural systems.” (foodfirst.org) This acknowledges that there are elements of which the people have no control; thus, contributing to the lack of access to quality food. This term does not simply define quality food in terms of actual product. It recognizes that there are environmental issues along with the structural, racial, and cultural elements. The most significant aspect to this definition is that does not render the people who are dealing with the issue, powerless. It not only acknowledges the many areas that are connected to food insecurity, but also it specifically gives people the power to change it for themselves. This is the definition that will serve to advocate a goal, which needs to be reached for marginalized Black Americans.



Methods:

The purpose of this research was to personalize the issue of systemic racism in food access. I conducted a qualitative research study. This took place in Atlanta, Ga, USA. I interviewed six people that are a part of HABESHA, Inc., who will be referred to by pseudonyms, some which were decided upon by the interviewee and some by the researcher. The only individual who will be referred to by his original name is, Cashawn Myers who is the founder of HABESHA, Inc. This organization defines itself as a “Pan-African organization that cultivates leadership in youth through practical experiences in cultural education, sustainable agriculture, entrepreneurship, holistic health, and technology.” (habeshainc.org)

I spent in excess of six months working with and understanding HABESHA: what it does, what its goals are and how it has sustained its role in the food sovereignty movement. It has been committed to the feeding and education of Black families in Atlanta, Ga for 14 years. With a strong connection to the community through implementation and commitment, HABESHA has offered a self-empowered solution to many of the issues that plague Black communities in America. It does so by concentrating all of its incentives on food, with a fundamental saying, “We all gotta eat!” As stated previously, all my participants, with the exception of one, are a part of the HABESHA Works Program.

My first method of research was conducting in-depth interviews that I conducted. This took place by having organic conversations with all of the participants. We discussed their food habits prior to entering HABESHA and what they are now. Our conversation explored the challenges and the benefits of community gardening and whether or not they see it as a form of empowerment and liberation. Additionally, we conversed about family and ancestral history, and how this connects to Black liberation. All interviews were recorded on my laptop computer. The

same set of interview questions was taken to each interview (see Appendix A). Due to the organic nature of the conversations, it was used more as a guide. There was no set time frame for each interview, although it was understood that it would last minimally thirty minutes. Each one went exceeded the suggested time frame.

Along with the in-depth interviews, I also engaged in observational research methods. Atlanta, Ga. has a very large number of food deserts. I spent time observing the spaces that I frequent due to my work with HABESHA, along with some others. I looked at corner stores, and a grocery store chain, one in a lower income neighborhood and the other in A higher income neighborhood. I also looked at the layout of this grocery store and compared them. I also looked at the layout of corner stores and the products available in each store. It was during this time that I also engaged in conversations at a local Atlanta barbershop, with community members native to Atlanta. By using these two methods, observation and in-depth interviews, I was able to compile data to start the process of answering my research question while contributing to a space in the literature that is weak.

The goal of understanding this process, and the role each theme plays, resulted in the break down of two sections; living with and living through. Each theme was assessed in order to determine how it appeared depending on where in the process people were. Through observation I was able to witness what living with food inequality was each day. I reflected on information that was given to me by the participants. Viewing it helped me clarify what living through it meant and what the final goal of food sovereignty can be if expanded for marginalized Black Americans.

*Limitations:*

There are several limitations in my research. I acknowledge that other ethnic groups are in fact suffering with food inequality; however, I specifically focused on marginalized Black people in America. While I respectfully recognize that there is an important connection of Black people throughout the Diaspora, I only use them to highlight the lack of research surrounding Black people in the U.S., and also when discussing the larger ancestral connection. Also, I am looking at marginalized Black people in America as a whole. Therefore, I do not focus on separate nationalities where this population is concerned. One of the most important aspects of this research is defining Black as people of African descent (phenotype-focused). I used other aspects of systemic racism to support my theory on the damages that the lack of food access can have. I only highlight the themes of SES, class, and health in order to support the necessity to draw awareness to food inequality as a legitimate systemic concern. I specifically focused on and singled out Feagin's theory because it addresses the components of history, race, and class; those of which are the pillars of this research.

Another limitation in my research was time. Ideally, I would conduct this research over a lengthier period. My number of participants would be greater, and I would be able to observe larger geographical spaces in the metropolitan Atlanta vicinity. Moreover, while I am aware that there are many solutions to reach the goal of food sovereignty, I am specifically focusing on community gardening and HABESHA, Inc. as a solution that uniquely combines self-awareness, economic stability, and Black liberation. These areas also have a heavy focus in my findings. It must be acknowledged that my participants, being members of HABESHA and the focus of the organization, may have played a large role in the similarities of the results.

Each interview was recorded, coded and then analyzed according to the researcher. This process of analysis was guided by the work of Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy. It was decided upon to replay and listen to each recording numerous times. Detailed notes were taken from each interview and compared with notes taken from the interview in real time. From the information that was studied, several new themes were derived and analyzed in detail. Each theme was given a color and then combined from all the interviews. It was then noted how often each theme was discussed in all seven interviews. This was to determine if there were similarities in information and what were the biggest takeaways. After this was done, each interview was reheard to ensure that the themes, notes, and information that were retrieved were in alignment with the purpose of this research.

Due to the nature of the information, all the themes connected at one time or another. Some traversed completely. Each connection was noted, as well as which themes appeared to intersect the most. The interpretation of certain definitions, according to the participants, was extremely important, as one of the goals of this research was to bring forth the voices of Black Americans. Each theme was analyzed and given a definition according to how the researcher interpreted the data. These definitions also included any subcategories that were necessary for clarity.

In this analysis, information was included about my time with HABESHA, Inc. The bulk of the observational research came from viewing several different places in Atlanta. I spent a large portion of my time studying several corner stores. I explored them to see what the availability of fresh produce was (if any), what type of food they offered, and the quality of the food offered. Along with the inside layout, I investigated the outside infrastructure and the vicinity in which the corner stores are located. They will be referred to as economically unequal neighborhoods. Along with the corner stores, two larger chains of grocery stores were

also surveyed. One was in an economically unequal neighborhood (referred to as S1) and the other was in an affluent neighborhood (referred to as S2). Thereafter, all interview data was combined with the observational data to assess the research question.

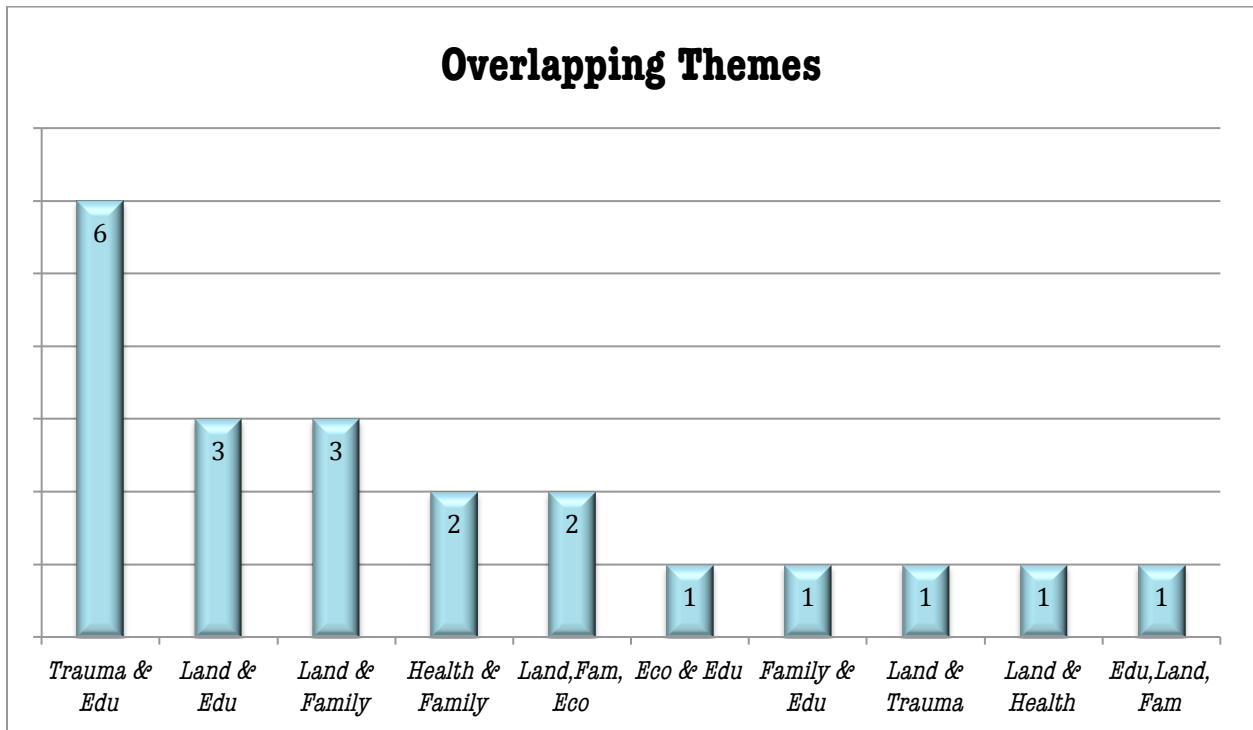
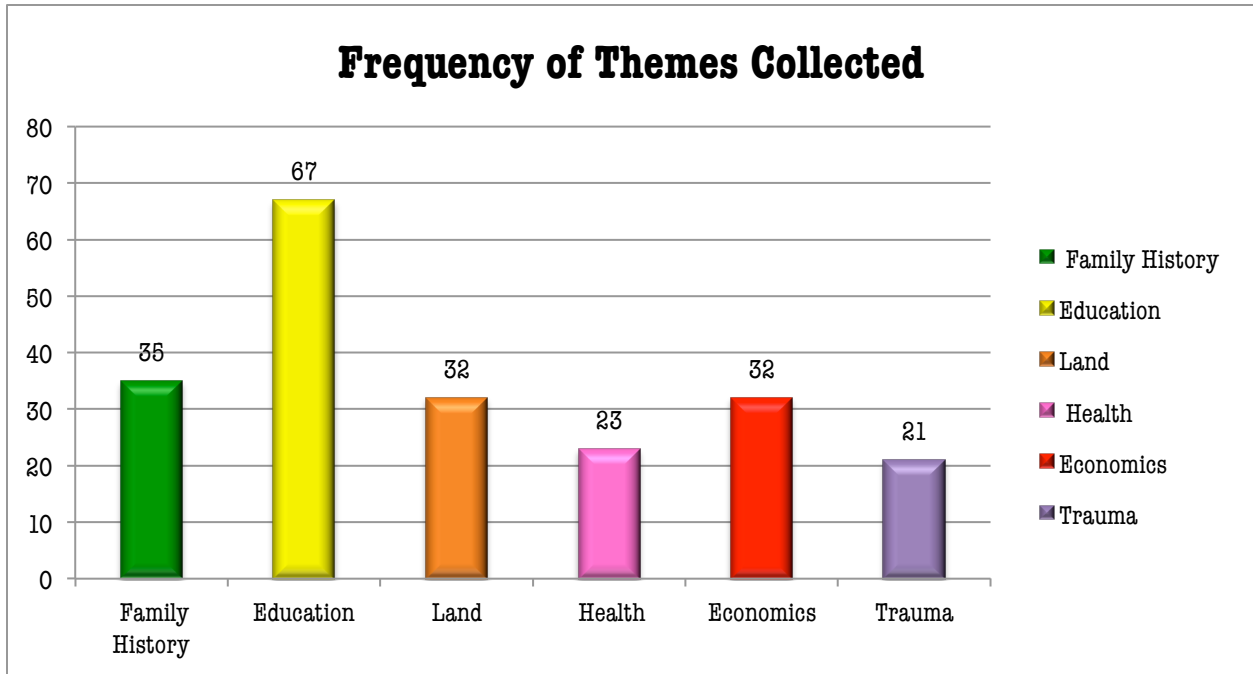
## **Presentation & Analysis of Data**

The definitions of the findings as they appeared within the context of the interviews are provided. A tally of the frequency of each theme and each overlap was collected. They are as follows:

- **Family History:** This covers family ties and ancestral history. These are interchangeable as direct family lineage is seen as part of a larger community history. This was coded for anything with a family focus. Sub-categories include:
  - Slavery
  - Family ties to sharecropping, gardening, and education
  - Family was also discussed in context to a larger ancestral connection: i.e., “back to our roots” meant understanding our connection to Africa, “the ancestors” referred to the enslaved Africans here on American soil. This idea of family and family history is interchangeable between immediate family and larger community but is understood in whichever context it is placed.
  - Family ties were often discussed as part of the larger education process of food preparation and growing process
- **Education:** Anything related to process and understanding in regards to growth: personal, historical, and land/geography

- Knowledge-of-Self: a common term which refers to the process of self-realization, identity, and determination specifically with an African centered base that counters Eurocentric ideals; understanding one's historical and ancestral connection
- Traditional Western Education: Anything that is considered to be “traditional/formal” in education based on Western standards or ideals
- Food Education: Any understanding, instruction, and learning in regards to food; why it's good for you, what is good for you, how to grow/prepare fresh food, where is your food coming from
- Empowerment: Giving power to in the form of encouragement and support (mental, spiritual, moral) to the community
  - Self-Determination: Willingness to loosen dependency on current systems seen as oppressive
  - Culture: Historical traditions passed down from generation to generation both in Africa and America
  - Activism: Work to maintain, educate, and uplift the community
- Land: Connection to the land in both Africa and America
  - Relationship is seen as: mental, physical, and spiritual.
  - Understanding affiliation to land as Black Americans
    - How it can help to achieve goals, what it has and can provide for , how to take care of the land
  - Gentrification: forced disconnection from the land often done to benefit white people and at the expense of Black people

- Food Deserts: access to quality food both monetarily, geographically, and in understanding what is healthy
- Health: Physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of people
  - People viewed in three ways:
    - Individual
    - Immediate Family
    - Larger Community
- Economics: Monetary value of goods and services
  - Self-Sufficiency: The need and desire by the individuals to remove themselves, family, and larger community from what is seen as a systemic dependency
- Trauma: Historically and on-going issues faced by the Black community due to systemic racism
  - Tied directly to healing and liberation





*Living With:*

## Family and Health

“Urban agriculture and gardening may be fun, cool, and trendy for others. But for Black people in America, this is about survival. We need to be clear on that!” Charlie says, as we sit discussing community gardening and Black liberation. He grew up right outside of Atlanta, Georgia. He comes from a family of educators, as well as a long line of cultivators. As is the case for many Black Americans, they have agrarian roots. Charlie tells me about the importance of his family. He acknowledges that there were probably growers in his family of whom he may not have been aware. He knew with certainty that his grandparents grew some of their own food and he vividly recalls his great-grandfather’s work as a grower. He informs me that two of his grandparents have transitioned (died). These events led him on a personal journey to understand his own health. This path mimicked that of the other participants; with close family members becoming sick, or a personal desire to be healthier.

No matter if it was family or individual, health was always the starting point of one’s journey to wellbeing and awareness. For each participant, this educational process was a crucial step. This is where they stepped out of living with food inequality and began a pathway to achieving the goal of food sovereignty. Therein begins the paradigm shift; from an interpersonal perspective to a larger community based one. No matter which route the participants took, the greater communal perspective was not the outcome they necessarily sought, but is where each one landed. For many people living with, they are often at a generational crossroad when it comes to health and what they eat. As Cashawn Myers reminds us, for many Black Americans, food is directly linked to family and culture and there is pride in those traditions.

“Soul Food was always seen as a badge of honor... we ate many of those things because that’s only what we had to eat. We took the worst of things and we tried to compensate and balance it out. That was all we had so it was a coping-mechanism. We continued to pass down those traditions, even after we were physically out of bondage. We never look to see if those things were beneficial for us.”

Zula Mae Hawes is the youngest of all the participants and now works directly within the food sovereignty movement in Atlanta. Her journey was based on her own curiosity about health stating, “It wasn’t something that I could change with diet but it was really something that needed to become my lifestyle.” This lifestyle change is also evident as currently each participant holds a job within the food sovereignty movement. The connection between gardening and liberation grew for individuals as they “gained knowledge-of-self.” Zula Mae states, “Chattel slavery was centered around agriculture and food, that relationship will always bubble to the surface when we talk about getting free.”

### Land

Everyday as I took the freeway exit to my internship, I observed the landscape around me. The landscape was broken and beat down. As I began the process of note taking, I knew exactly where I wanted to go. I drove up and down this four-mile stretch of road to ensure that I was taking in as much as I could. Que is a local barber whom I met. He was born and raised in Atlanta. He spoke in depth of gentrification and what that looked like before and after the 1996 Olympics. Something that Que said resonated within me as I took notes, “We were receiving the basics: food, help with shelter, clothing. If the Black churches were doing their jobs we wouldn’t have lost the land and the communities.” I pondered on this heavily as I saw at least four churches while driving. I had to wonder what exactly what the role of churches currently

happened to be, and if expectations had shifted over time between the community and the church. Land looks different when living with food inequality. It is viewed as the infrastructure and the neighborhood in which one lives. If the community is not in charge of the maintenance, who is?

Driving down this four-mile stretch I saw: three religious institutions, seven gas stations, five liquor stores, four corner stores, three Dollar Stores, seven fast-food restaurants, three hair shops, two nail shops, a strip club, a college and a public library. This is all before I arrive at the grocery store. I made it a point to stop inside each corner store on my last observation ride. The similarities were plentiful. Upon entering each corner store, I took a moment to observe the surrounding areas.

While each one had a comparable layout, my observation of one particularly stood out. The exterior of the building had chipped paint, broken pieces of cement, trash, and appeared soiled and rundown. The feature that drew my attention most was all the windows covered with bars. The atmosphere did not feel welcoming. It was designed to provide quick service, devoid of much human interaction. I happened to see out of the corner of my eye the flickering of a light bulb from a lamppost. Why had it not been changed? Who was in charge of this? Why was it visible in the day and did this change at night when people needed to see? This is government property and something as simple as a light bulb was being neglected. Looking around, most of the other buildings (with the exception of a few) had similar appearances. It was clear to me, at that point, that what Que had told me seemed true. The people had lost control of the land and their communities. Whoever was to blame, one thing was certain, there was no sense of urgency to repair and maintain these streets. Focusing back on the task, my reoccurring thoughts were acknowledging that this is where people in the area get food, to feed their family.

Viewing the outside once more, I quickly scanned the building. The corner stores had signs overhead that appeared lackluster. Some included a name (assuming it was the owner), or just words that were to the point: Groceries, Food Mart, Quick Mart, EZ Mart. Underneath the name was a short list of some of the items available in the store: drinks, candy, milk, bread, eggs, beer. The weather outside was 70° and I immediately felt a chill as I walked inside. Directly in front of me was a massive tub of beer. Cheap and priced at \$99, this was the first thing you saw as you walked in the store. Think about this. In a store marketed as having food, the first thing you see is not food, not water, not even some kind of juice; but beer.

To my left were slot machines. Gambling, in an area that already had high levels of poverty, why? To my right, was the employee of the store, sitting behind a barricade of snacks, cigarettes, and Plexiglas. You could only communicate with him through a small hole, reminiscent of a bank. But bankers were in charge of large amounts of money, multiple registers, and even have access to a vault. The money in these small corner stores surely was not more than what was at a bank. The need to criminalize the community, even without their knowledge was disheartening. Before I had reached the food, there was already reinforcement of dehumanization and it was easy to internalize.

Just taking a stroll down the aisle of food, I felt as empty as some of the shelves looked. There was canned meat, noodles that were loaded with salt, chips, and crackers. Everything was quick, canned, and meant to last a long time. I thought that some of this food would likely be here longer than some of the people who stand to buy it. It looked old. There was more refrigerator space for soda and beer than there was for water or any juice containing nutrients. There was nothing in that store that screamed health or personal care of any kind. Everything in that store was meant to be a quick fix for whatever the problem was. Need to blow off some

steam? Come gamble and grab a beer! Need something for dinner? Quick, warm up some ramen noodles or canned pasta; even grab some ice cream and candy for dessert!

The interesting aspect was that when I walked into all of the corner stores, someone of another race was running them, except for one. I was saddened by the lack of control that the community members visibly did not have in their environments. From one freeway exit to another, I passed more liquor and corner stores, more hair and nail shops and more fast-food restaurants before I arrived at a conventional supermarket. I cannot sufficiently stress that the community have very little involvement with the structural layout of the areas in which they live. Who, then, are the people responsible for the development and maintenance of these neighborhoods?

How easy it is to feel, on a conscious and subconscious level, that you are not a fully welcomed member of society, with all rights and privileges, when every message in your environment indicates otherwise. While conducting my interviews, Aviary Bland echoed similar sentiments. Currently working at a local farmers market, she spoke of the internalization of hopelessness that is visible in parts of the marginalized Black community. She said that there is a lack of control that many communities feel they have. For her, food was a manner in which she could reshape the narrative. When speaking of community gardening, she says, “This is not my street. This isn’t my language. This isn’t even my clothes. To be reconnected to the food in that manner... I don’t feel as lost as I used to because I know who is growing my food and I know what is in it.” When living with food inequality, the very land that people live on each day is structured for nothing more than the demise of those who reside there. Nonetheless, lack of control is not front-of-mind for most people. It is not because they do not care, but because they are simply not given the tools to understand their environment.

## Education

What causes a problem is, arguably, is the most important step in the resolution process. The visualization of food inequality is greater than just emphasizing the poor infrastructure. Education is a key component that is missing in helping to eradicate food inequality in marginalized Black communities. The research has made it abundantly clear that people are oblivious to the process of getting food on a table. Understanding what you are eating is the first step toward making healthy choices and making lifestyle changes. In a consumer society, most people never question and just proceed. For marginalized people, the need to survive far outweighs the need to understand what is being consumed.

Trenea is an educator, has a PhD, and is a wife and mother of three. She home-schooled all of her children and her two youngest are currently enjoying the benefits of an education rooted in community building, gardening, self-determination and health. We spoke in depth about how education appears for disenfranchised communities. “In the areas where we have a choice, we aren’t making the right choice. Not because they don’t want to, because they don’t know.” This is what I walked away with after visiting two grocery stores in two very different neighborhoods. (\*\*As a reminder: S1=grocery store in economically unequal neighborhood, S2=grocery store in affluent neighborhood\*\*)

Upon entering, the appearance immediately set the tone for both grocery stores. There was a vast difference between in each shopping center in which the grocery stores were located. S1 was surrounded by at minimum three different fast food chains, and two different clothing stores. My first question was why was there a need to have fast food chains, especially when the grocery store itself was clearly the focal point of the shopping center. There was nothing, which surrounded this grocery store, which catered to long-term well being in any capacity. The

ambiance of the area was similar to that of the corner stores: get in, get what you need, and get out. S2 was located in a much larger space, with everything from actual restaurants, bookstores, vitamin shops, pet shops, electronic stores, and more nearby. The grocery store in S2 was a part of a grander experience. The options within the shopping center it, made it clear that self-worth was important and this included: mental, internal, and physical wellbeing.

While S1 clearly was there and available for people to consume groceries, I could not help but distinguish between the two experiences and ponder the thought of access. Tenisio, is a participant from Atlanta. He discussed on an in depth what food inequality truly means for people. He is married with children. Similar to the other participants, he too is employed in the food sovereignty movement. He described growing up in suburbia, down the street from Newt Gingrich. His parents worked arduously to provide him and his siblings a home distant from poverty and crime. Due to their SES, and primarily their race, access remained an issue. He stated that all the access in the world did not prevent him from being reminded that he does not belong. His words echoed in my head as I compared and contrasted the idea of access present in each shopping center. He stated, “This country has always been about access. As long as you can access it, then the responsibility is off us.”

With these thoughts in mind, I went inside to examine the access to fresh, healthy, and quality foods. S1 was a learning experience. Upon entering, I decided to take the longest pathway of the two entrances. As I entered, it was truly a visual reminder of the idea of access. Upon entering I saw things like: a full-service store, a hair salon, a barbershop, and nail salon. There was a small Asian fast-food restaurant, and a phone repair shop. While these offerings did seem to be of some convince, they also seem incongruent in a grocery store setting. Along a walkway before reaching the actual entrance where the food was to be purchased sat a barricade

of stores. They all catered to an quick-service consumer. No detail was given for the long-term well being of the customer.

As I approached the primary entrance, there were two displays: one promoting candy and the other offering various desserts. This was what people saw before they viewed fresh foods. While for some, this may not be an issue; we must consider the health concerns mentioned within these communities. This felt like a push in a negative direction rather than guidance toward healthy options. Upon finally entering the store, the produce section is immediately seen. A small section of flowers and balloons for special occasions and a small “organic” section were to the left. The rest was the produce selection, for the most commonly used items; bananas, apples, and oranges. I walked around taking in the visuals. At first, nothing really stood out. I recalled some small differences between the shape and sizes of the items I had seen in the garden while working with HABESHA. For example, the carrots and lettuce were much larger in the store.

I approached the meat counter and spoke to one of the employees. She told me about how the meat is shipped in from all over the world, as far as Indonesia and China. She explained the tracking system and how they ensure freshness. I asked why the store did not purchase seafood and meats harvested locally and at the very least, in the US. I was told that there was not enough grown locally to meet the demand. I could not help but wonder how this need to meet the demand affected the quality of the product. The meat was all pre-packaged. There was not even a butcher in the back to provide freshly packaged meat. The seafood all sat on ice, but it looked completely frozen. It was clearly covered in ice and did not appear to be fresh. There was no bakery and the breads had stickers, which let everyone know that these items could be purchased



under a federal program designed to subsidize pregnant women; Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) ([fns.usda.gov](https://fns.usda.gov))

As I walked into S2, the experience began in a completely different manner. There was only one entrance and upon entering stood before me an enormous display of colorful flowers. Two women were cutting fresh flowers and greeting people as they walked in. To my right, there was a small Starbucks accompanied by a loft with sofas, tables, and chairs. Passing these areas led me into the produce and bakery sections. The produce section was starkly different than S1. The size was enough of a difference. The variety was so varied that the rainbow of colors was enough to induce me to remain in awe for a brief moment. The meats looked brighter. There was no ice covering them as there was in S2. A butcher was ready to cut and package fresh meats for his customers. There was even a small sandwich and soup eater where sub sandwiches were made with freshly cut ingredients. I was not able to speak directly with anyone at S2 other than the produce manager. The only thing he explained to me was that the produce section was a million dollar revenue generating operation. He said they received fresh produce every few days to once a week. I asked if this was the same as in other stores, and he said this was not the same, that it was less frequent because of demand. The most significant aspect of visiting these grocery stores was the consumer. Those shopping in S1 were overwhelmingly Black. The shoppers in S2 were overwhelmingly white.

These observations reinforced to a few noteworthy perceptions. The conversation with Tenisio regarding access continued. “The way that our current food system is set up, it’s an atrocity, to sell food, because we’re selling it in a way to where it’s a luxury and not a right or a privilege and not a right... It’s an abomination now to even sell it because the person that can buy it is in the elite. And they’re becoming more and more of the elite as time goes on.” Access,

in this capacity is also largely correlated with education. It is simply not enough to feed to community or provide its residents with access to food if the quality of that food is still inferior. In this case, quality would include environment, as well as the actual food itself. If the community is not sufficiently educated to identify healthy food, prepare healthy food, understand what is in the food, where it comes from or simply struggles to get to the grocery store; having all that access means little at the end of the day.

### Economics

All of the above themes cannot truly take place without the proper resources. For Black Americans living with food inequality, economic stability is largely the biggest factor in keeping them from achieving the goal of sovereignty. The lack of capital is chiefly what dictates the infrastructure, determines what businesses are created in the area, and helps propel education. Where equality is denied, access is as well. As an individual whose goal is daily survival, making time to know and understand some of these very pressing issues is simply not a luxury that one is afforded.

Tenisio stated that, “Knowing why we need to eat healthy is just as important as knowing how.” I found to be true and it was made clear upon visiting the two grocery stores. The corner store allowed me to understand the idea of convince. Trenea articulated this quite well stating, “When you’re dealing with situations in extreme poverty and you’re really trying to fight to keep a roof over your head and food on the table, whatever that food may be, there’s less of an emphasis on the grandiose let’s talk about where this comes from, no. I mean you’re on the grind trying to live life...”

One point that must be reinforced is that while Black people are targets of a racist and capitalist system, there are some who are endeavoring to create ways to ensure that they are in a

space that fosters healthy productivity in all areas of life. Target does not equate to incapable and helpless. While many people are down trodden and exhausted by the continuous fight to survive, it in no way suggests that they are feeble. It simply means that there needs to be opportunities and access available that will allow the community to survive.

*Living through: HABESHA, Inc.: A Case study*

Living through inequality means that people are seeking to achieve a particular goal; food sovereignty. What this offers is an authentic assessment of theme, which at times completely overlap. For each participant, healing is viewed as necessary component in order to achieve the goal of food sovereignty. This does not mean that people are exactly where they want to be. Sovereignty is viewed more as a step for extricating themselves, where possible, from dependence on a larger system. This is viewed as a very personal process, in which people enter and navigate at their own pace.

Trauma

Every thing that HABESHA does is oriented toward the goal of healing. Trauma was actually the least discussed theme; however, it was quite apparent that it was the overall goal for every participant. Trauma is defined by the participants as; the historical and ongoing effects of racism, which impact the daily lives of Black Americans. It is the result from a long-term fight for freedom. In this regards, trauma cannot be discussed without including liberation. The affects of slavery and what it has done to Black Americans cannot be sufficiently emphasized. The results of “living with” are, in large part due to intergenerational trauma. This is a fairly new concept but one that is receiving a better understanding. A study conducted by Jennifer L. Price,

found that children whose parents served in Vietnam and had PTSD were found to have social, emotional, and behavioral problems. In some cases, they developed secondary traumatization.

Understanding the impact of trauma leads to the healing and liberation process. There are various approaches for achieving liberation. Food is the healing element for HABESHA participants. The members themselves have accepted the task for reducing the trauma that the community experiences, which is in why they all work in the food sovereignty movement in some capacity. Cashawn Myers speaks in detail about trauma. He is not only the founder of HABESHA, Inc.; he is a husband, a father, a mentor, and is also a well-known leader throughout the community. When discussing trauma he asserts, “In order for us to heal, we have to be the primary source of our healing. Our healing can’t come from anywhere else.” HABESHA subscribes to the ideology that Black people must be responsible for community healing.

### Land

HABESHA stresses the importance land in connection to healing. Participants have their own path for understanding land. The HABESHA motto is, “There is no culture without agriculture.” Each participant viewed and spoke of the land from two perspectives: 1) In terms of actual gardening; participants say that they feel peaceful, that principles of life are taught in the garden. It is said by all participants that many wounds came through the land, so healing happens when people re-connect to the land. 2) Land is also viewed on a global scale. From the continent of Africa to lands afar, there must be an understanding of that which has taken place, from one area to another.

Treana spoke of HABESHA and some of what it teaches about the land. “Well, one of the extraordinary things about HABESHA is that, not only do they teach you how to grow and fend for yourself physically as it relates to what you put in your body, but your connection to the

earth and taking care of this planet, but also doing it with the mindset of bettering us as a people.” HABESHA views the land as the place where societies are formed. For this reason, HABESHA believes the importance of the land, both in Africa and America needs, to be studied.

Cashawn has a profound perspective on why Black Americans have been summarily disconnected from the land. He states, “ The further we got away from enslavement, the further we got away from the land. Because many times we equated... working the soil with our enslavement.” He went on to discuss why Black people were enslaved stating, “Because of our abilities to connect with the land is why we were enslaved in the first place. We saw it as it happened the other way around, that we were taken and then we were forced to work the land. But actually we were scouted and surveyed and the Europeans saw how connected we were to the earth and ho we were able to grow and plant and thy took us into captivity because of that skill set.”

### Education

The aforementioned leads to the importance of education. While understanding that the connection to the land is a essential piece for healing, none of this can take place without education. When achieving food sovereignty is the goal, HABESHA’s approach to education is unconventional. It encompasses that, but does what most intuitions of learning do not; it includes a cultural and historical understanding of Black Americans. This becomes essential to achieving the goal. This process is reffered to as “knowledge of self.” It is about understanding the connection to Africa and viewing oneself as more than an enslaved human being. Tenisio states, “Knowledge of self means knowing what you are capable of doing for yourself. It’s about more than knowing what we did.”

For HABESHA, the other aspect of education looks at knowing what to eat and how to grow the food. Again Tenisio says, “Knowing why we need to eat healthy is just as important as knowing how.” All participants agreed that HABESHA helped them increase their knowledge of health, and their knowledge of self. Everyone also stressed the importance of not just knowing what you are eating, but knowing from where it comes. For them, this was also understood as a source of liberation. I recall Treena telling me about some kids who worked with her husband. She said they simply thought, “...you buy ketchup off the grocery shelf. That’s where it comes from. They had no idea it had a relationship to a tomato.”

### Family

Each participant spoke of family on a grand scale. As the result of the educational process that had taken place, family meant more thereafter. Through HABESHA and the operation of programs, each participant left with an understanding that family included the people of Africa. They ultimately viewed themselves as a person of African descent. Cashawn said, “When we connect with our African ancestry, the foundation of that is connecting with the earth and connecting with the land.

He said that a journey of education and understanding about his roots led him to see the family he that he had in the African community. He stated, “ This understanding of our story and our connection to our roots came in understanding what it means to eat healthy. The first step in that process is knowing where our food comes from.” That encouraged him to assess his family and why they grew food. He began to understand that growing food is an act of survival, and was part of his ancestral lineage. Treena addressed survival as well by stating, “ It’s a war and so in war you have to take drastic measures. To think of growing your own food as a drastic measure is a sad thought.” Cashawn understands that this is bigger than just him or his immediate family.

That family now meant all the people of African descent and they deserved the opportunity to have healthier options presented to them.

### Economics

As stated, none of the healing that needs to take place can be achieved without a sound economic base. As research supported in “living with”, economics is the key to survival. When one is “living through”, the practice of growing your own food is tied directly to liberation. HABESHA sees it as a form of self-sufficiency. Inarguably, growing one’s food saves money. Not only does it save, but also it can be used to feed people who may be live without, and can also be sold. Each participant saw gardening as a healthier option, as well as a tool of liberation.

As Zula Mae articulated, “We can’t live without food and so to have our food be so insecure because we are dependent on a system that has never served us, I think brings about more awareness of why it’s so important to grow our own food. And to be aware of what we’re putting into our bodies and into the bodies of our children. To reclaim that power is I think another way in which food is tied to liberation. It’s reclamation of our power.” In this regard, economics encompasses more than just money. It is about liberation and self-determination. Gardening is treated as not only the optimal health goal, but also what is needed to survive historical oppression.

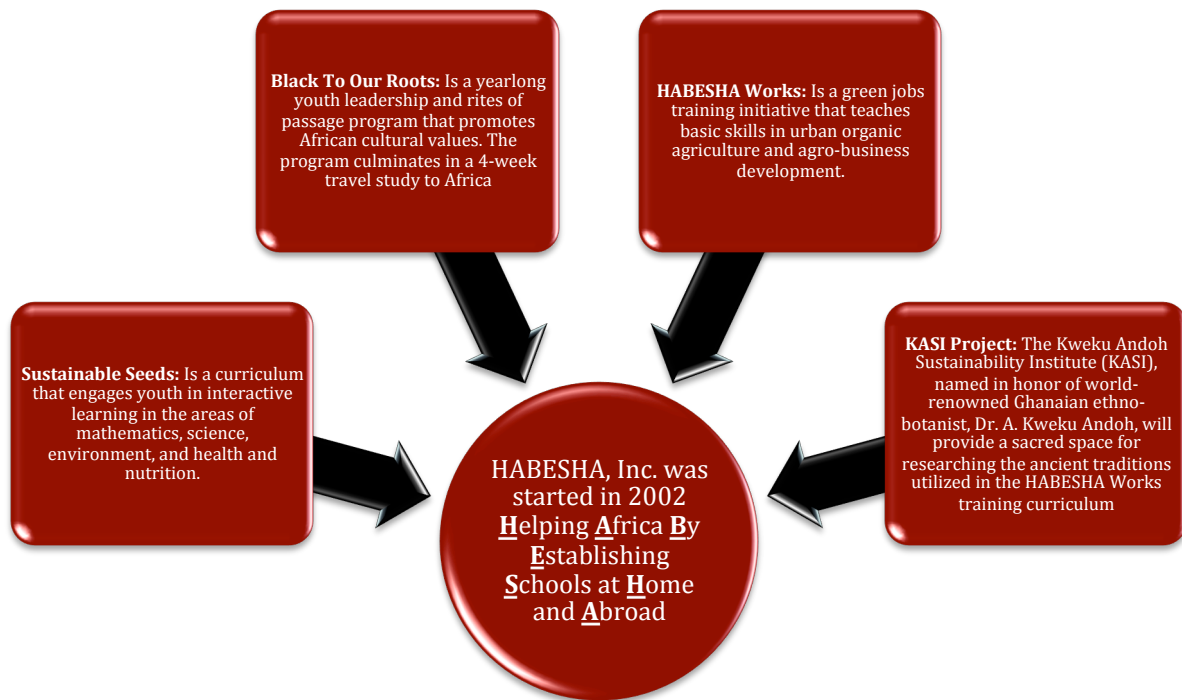
All of the work that HABESHA does is directed toward the healing which many Black Americans need to undertake. Food is not only used as: a common ground, a tie to historical and current understanding, a means of income, and community building. It is seen as the necessary step for overall health and healing. Cashawn discussed this and stated, “ Being removed from our land has caused us to lose out connection to our African selves. We have been traumatized and don’t have good mental health practices. Studies show, bad food affects the brain and we need to

heal. Food is a step of that. We can't be in our right state of mind if we aren't nourishing our minds properly." Charlie reiterated similar ideas and stated, "Black people must see the value in the land. Healing that connection to the land will us as a people." HABESHA also sees food as a necessity for doing any type of activist or social justice work. Treena put it rather simply, "If you're dying from what you're eating, you can't very well carry on the work you're trying to do."

## **Discussion**

HABESHA, Inc. has been discussed throughout this research. What exactly does HABESHA do? I see the work being done by the organization as a key to not only drawing awareness to the food inequality issue as it relates to Black Americans, but also having many of the answers necessary to reach the goal of food sovereignty. Herein, the organization will be highlighted and the most important components as it relates to the literature will be emphasized. Additionally I discuss practical application and other relevant information. HABESHA, Inc. is a "Pan-African organization that cultivates leadership in youth through practical experiences in cultural education, sustainable agriculture, entrepreneurship, holistic health, and technology." ([habeshainc.org](http://habeshainc.org)). Cashawn Myers, grew up in Atlanta, Ga. He had a strong family connection to gardening. Through his personal journey of self-understanding as a child of Africa, and through influences from people such as Dick Gregory, he adopted a plant-based diet. These experiences and connections, along with visible community needs, influenced him to create HABESHA Inc. in 2002. The organization is parent to four subsidiary programs:





Through these programs HABESHA, addresses all of the issues that were raised in the literature review and in the findings. The most important issues that were raised focused on the necessity of historical context, education, economic development and self-sufficiency. Through embracing an agrarian culture, there can be realistic resolution for food inequality as well as other issues inherent in a historically racist society. Through the interviews, data was collected that: 1) induced awareness about food inequality as an issue of systemic racism, 2) recognized where the need for development can happen and addressed that need, and 3) showed how Black Americans not only “live with”, but how to “live through” and achieve food sovereignty. The most important result of this research was allowing Black people to have a voice. It was their forum to be able to express how they see the issues, and more importantly, how they see the resolve.

As the researcher, I entered with a comprehensive understanding of what I believed systemic racism to be. I had studied it in various capacities and in great detail. As I established in the beginning, my knowledge of food inequality was plentiful as and integral part of these societal constraints. What I understood after this research is exactly how systemic racism appears in the form of food. I consider myself highly capable of viewing the constraints that society places on Black communities that help to contribute toward an ongoing disenfranchised state.

I also saw the method for applying community gardening. Throughout this research, I was enabled to tap into a larger group of Black Americans that are finding ways to grow food as a means for self-sufficiency and liberation. For example, during my practicum with HABESHA, I viewed a documentary entitled, *Can You Dig It?*, which illustrated how gardening is implemented in Black communities in Los Angeles, California. From this experience, I was able to view some of the areas in California while conducting field research. Additionally, I understand how HABESHA could be applied in other areas beyond Atlanta.

The introduction an agrarian culture is something that can be applied anywhere. The key is obtaining the education, and promoting awareness to the larger community. This is where the importance of my research can be utilized. As it stands, there is a massive gap and the voices of Black Americans are absent. This indicates that many of the declarations created by and for Black communities are also missing from the larger dialogue. As with most institutions within America, they are dominated a white supremacist ideology; thus, suppressing the voices and needs of oppressed groups. People of color are not a monolithic group that can have food inequality addressed in the same manner. While the focus of *this* research is and *should* be on Black Americans, it cannot be disregarded that this focus on Black people's specific needs will allow room for other communities to assess what their needs are, as well.

Implementation cannot take place until there is a conversation on a larger scale that separates people of color as one group and starts focusing on community-specific needs. I purpose that further research be conducted that investigates the role of racism in food inequality. Accordingly, I assert that if Black voices are not leading that charge, a large historical piece, slavery, will all but be erased. The damages caused by this institution and white supremacy as a whole within the food movement will be missed, and therefore, the healing process for the damage can never begin.

In regard to implementation, in further research, the act of resistance when speaking of community gardening needs to be reviewed. Resistance was heavily discussed with all participants. The study of resistance is import because it will affect the ability to implement. Some of the issues that arose from this research are as follows: 1) age groups that are least/most resistance to the process, 2) why these age groups particularly are resistant, and 3) what were the responses by the HABESHA participants to combat resistance per group.

I further recommend that research take place that examines different sub-cultures within the Black American context. For example, while the importance of culturally appropriate food was discussed in these interviews, it did not find an exclusive space in the research data. Future research should also look at and speak exclusively to communities that are enduring food inequality. It is imperative that Black people in America have a narrative that is theirs solely. Why is this important? Different demographics and geographical areas will have variations on foods that are important to them. These components need to be taken into account.

This research served to be to be a starting point. It is absolutely deplorable that a community, which sacrificed so many lives to propel America to it status a world power, is now the most disenfranchised group within the nation. The first step that is essential in order for

America to heal, as a whole, involves the atonement for slavery. While people of African descent had a **great** and **glorious** existence prior to slavery, the effects that are felt by the children of enslaved Africans is still an essential part of contemporary American society. Black people deserve to know the magnitude of their impact on the world. Should white scholars continue to engage in oppressive ideology and behavior by not bringing to the forefront Black voices in connection to food, the Black scholar must not be discouraged.

This research served to contribute to the dialogue and to augment the community. The most important aspect to understand from this research is that communities do have the tools to uplift themselves from states of victimization and dehumanization. One of the most important reminders for me was the strength of the Black community. The conditions that in, which they reside, and the resources at their disposal are often minimal at best. My ultimate goal was to humanize these conditions. I trust I have done so in an exemplary manner. Nevertheless, no matter how depraved the conditions are, Black people have an unbreakable spirit. They smile, they laugh, they sing, they dance, and they make lemonade out of the seeds of lemon. This research was conducted not to evoke pity. Complacency should not be the end result. It was done in order to elicit awareness, because actively be addressing these issues is long over due.

It is upon white scholars to ensure that responsibility for those leading the investigations and studies rest upon the shoulders of Black scholars. It will serve to inflict greater damage and repeat abuse on the community if white scholars are the ones that are researching and speaking on these very deep-rooted and personable issues. We cannot treat research and employment opportunities, as scholars in white America as separate from white supremacy or its engrained consequences. Growing up in the United States of America means that no one is exempt from the racist foundation that has been laid. This must be at the forefront of any and all research that is

conducted. It is the only way that authentic and genuine work can begin to take place. Everyone has a role in this process. It may not be through food that readers find they belong, but everyone has a role. For Black scholars, it is vital to the healing of Black communities that the lead in those demographics comes from you. Understanding the history for everyone, individually and as a community is essential for human survival. In the words of the Honorable Marcus Garvey, “A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture, is like a tree without roots.”

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview Research Questions:

**\*This process is intended to be organic, all the questions may not be answered\***

1. What is your name? Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. What do you do for a living?
3. What is your highest level of education?
4. Is there a grocery store in your neighborhood?
5. How far away is this store?
6. Do you have reliable transportation to and from this grocery store?
7. What type of products do you purchase from the store?
8. How long have you been a part of the HABESHA family?
9. What are your current eating habits? (Vegan, Pescatarian, Vegetarian)
10. Do you feel like your time in HABESHA has changed the way you eat?
11. What were your eating habits like growing up?
12. What were some of the (if any) struggles that you may have had surrounding food before participation in HABESHA? (ex: purchasing fresh vegetables)
13. What were your first thoughts about growing your own food?
14. What have you learned about yourself through growing food?
15. Do you see community gardening as a tool of liberation, why or why not?