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# Research Brief

# Identifying and Countering White Supremacy Culture in Food Systems

## Executive Summary


Whiteness dominates policy and practice in food systems. Whiteness permeates the food system in the ways it "articulate(s) white ideals of health and nutrition, offer(s) whitened dreams of farming and gardening that erase the past and present of race in agriculture, mobilize(s) funding to direct programming toward non-white beneficiaries, and create(s) inviting spaces for white people."[1] Whiteness helps perpetuate "existing structures of power and privilege within food spaces," enabling white activists and organizations to assume their ideals and emotions are shared by all."[2] Whiteness is an unnamed presence that shapes the discourse and focus of food system reform.[3] Consequently, many historically white-led organizations find that their policies and programs fail to resonate with Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) communities.

As a result of whiteness, white supremacy culture narratives function to reinforce systemic inequity across the food system in the United States. This paper identifies eight messages from food insecurity policies and practice stemming from broader white supremacy culture and whiteness.

This research centered on the question: How does white supremacy culture play out in the food insecurity and food access space in the United States? To become anti-racist, food system actors must understand how white supremacy culture narratives function to center whiteness across the food system, effectively reinforcing systemic racial inequality and by extension disadvantaging BIPOC people. We discuss how whiteness holds white ideals as universal, how whiteness fuels power in decision-making, and how whiteness defines foods as either good or bad.

Project methodology included document and literature review, seven interviews with leaders and members of food justice, food sovereignty, and anti-hunger organizations, and qualitative analysis to identify themes and findings.



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# Key Definitions

## Whiteness

Whiteness is a "powerful social construction with very real, tangible, violent effects."[4] Whiteness is not just a reference to skin color, but is an ideology "based on beliefs, values, behaviors, habits and attitudes, which result in the unequal distribution of power and privilege based on skin color."[5] Whiteness is often invisible to those who benefit from it, but has immense power: "The power of whiteness, however, is manifested by the ways in which racialized whiteness becomes transformed into social, political, economic, and cultural behaviour. White culture, norms, and values in all these areas become normative natural. They become the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and usually found to be inferior."[6]

## White Supremacy Culture

White supremacy culture is the "idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are [inherently] superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions."[7] It "justifies and binds together the United States white supremacy system" and is "reproduced by all the institutions of our society."[8] White supremacy culture is "powerful precisely because it is so present and at the same time so very difficult to name or identify."[9] Society holds characteristics of white supremacy culture as the norms and standards, promoting white supremacy thinking. As a result, attitudes and behaviors stemming from white supremacy culture can be found in any individual, group, or organization, whether it is white-led or predominantly white-led, BIPOC-led, or has a predominantly BIPOC staff.[10]

## BIPOC

BIPOC stands for "Black, Indigenous, People of Color." The term is "meant to unite all people of color in the work for liberation while intentionally acknowledging that not all people of color face the same levels of injustice."[11] The BIPOC term separates Black and Indigenous individuals from People of Color in the United States to recognize that "Black and Indigenous people face the worst consequences of systemic white supremacy, classism and settler colonialism."[12]

## Anti-Racism

Anti-racism is the "work of actively opposing racism by advocating for changes in political, economic, and social life."[13] It starts at the individual level, with individuals working against their own or other's racist behaviors and impacts. It can also be at the organizational level, with organizations reevaluating internal policies and processes to be explicitly anti-racist, as well as organizations working to counteract racist behaviors and cultures in the systems in which the organization operates and actively seeks to de-center whiteness and shift power within the system.

## Racial Equity

Racial equity is the "condition that would be achieved if one's racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares."[14] Racial equity is a component of racial justice and involves "work to address root causes of inequities not just their manifestation," including the "elimination of policies, practices, attitudes and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them."[15]

## Structural Racism

Structural racism is the most pervasive form of racism and basis for all other forms of racism (internalized, institutional, interpersonal, etc.). It is the "normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color."[16] Furthermore, structural racism "encompasses the entire system of white domination, diffused and infused in all aspects of society including its history, culture, politics, economics and entire social fabric."[17] It is not easy to locate within any one institution because "it involves the reinforcing effects of multiple institutions and cultural norms, past and present, continually reproducing old and producing new forms of racism."[18]

**For a more comprehensive list of definitions, visit https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary and https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture.html.**

# White Supremacy Culture Narratives

White supremacy culture is inherent in the way individuals, organizations, and governments discuss the food system and in what ideals the same groups uphold as normative. Some white supremacy culture narratives include defensiveness, perfectionism, "only one right way" thinking, and quantity over quality.[19] All these narratives create oppressive cultures in organizations, perpetuating white supremacy and feeding into systems that hold whiteness and white ideals as the default. White supremacy culture and whiteness are pervasive across systems, including the food system. As such, broader white supremacy culture narratives show up in food policies and programs, as detailed below.

## Individualism

Individualism stresses the needs of the individual over the needs of the group as a whole. Individualism emphasizes that people should be able to solve problems or accomplish goals on their own. In the food space, individualism translates to a focus on helping individuals who have fallen on hard times over structural issues contributing to food insecurity and hunger.[62]

## Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is an ideology and policy model that emphasizes replacing entitlements with market-based solutions to social problems and places value on free market competition. In the food space, neoliberalism is rooted in American ideals of personal responsibility and hard work as the solution to hunger and that it is the responsibility of communities to care for those in need, not government.[65,66]

## Paternalism

Paternalism involves interfering in an individual's or community's ability or opportunity to choose and make decisions. It has the objective of improving welfare of individuals or communities and involves making decisions without the consent of the individuals or communities concerned. In the food space, paternalism focuses on the belief that BIPOC communities cannot take care of themselves and need solutions prescribed to them.[63,64]

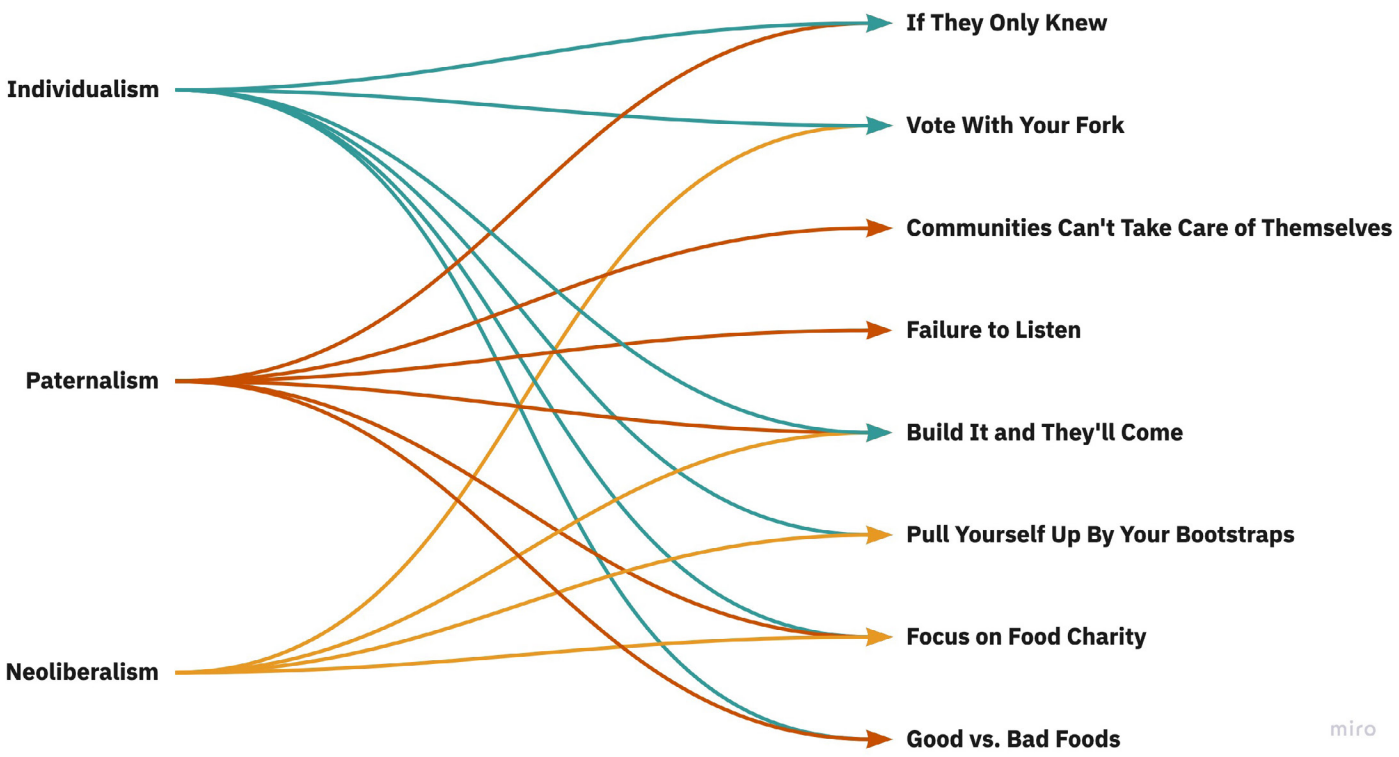
## Universalism

Universalism assumes that values held by whites are normal and widely shared, meaning ideals are grounded in whitened cultural practices. Universalism results in a lack of resonance of these universal ideals and marginalization of those who do not conform to the ideals. Furthermore, it creates a narrative that the non-conforming must be educated on the ideals.[67] In the food space, universalism means whiteness fuels and dominates the conversation on how and why the food system should be reformed, with organizations building projects and programming around their whitened assumptions.[68] As a result, food spaces are "shaped by a set of white cultural practices" that "can inhibit the participation of people of color in alternative food systems, and can constrain the ability of those food systems to meaningfully address inequality."[69]

# White Supremacy Culture Narratives in the Food System

White supremacy culture narratives show up in many forms and exist throughout policy, programming, and practice. They permeate how we talk about issues in the food system, in campaigns for food system reform, and in the day-to-day operations of many organizations. This research brief provides an introduction as to how white supremacy culture narratives play out specifically in the food system.

**Figure 1: Intersection of White Supremacy Culture Narratives and Food System Narratives**




## Narrative: If They Only Knew

"If they only knew" focuses on lack of understanding on the part of the individual and need for education, such as healthy food and cooking classes, as opposed to structural problems, such as inequities in food access and affordability and economic drivers of food insecurity.[20] This narrative is an example of individualism, boiling down issues of healthy eating to individual behavior choices, as well as an example of paternalism, assuming that the decision maker or organization knows more or better than the individual.[21,22] "If they only knew" also reflects the white supremacy narrative of universalism because the organization/decision maker gets to determine what is "good food," which is often steeped in whiteness and ignores non-white cultural influences on food.

EXAMPLE

*Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education* (SNAP-Ed). SNAP-Ed is a program aimed at helping "people lead healthier lives" through teaching "people using or eligible for SNAP about good nutrition and how to make their food dollars stretch further."[23] It also teaches participants about physical activity. These types of programs focus on nutrition education as the way to become healthier, disregarding knowledge participants might already have and avoiding focusing on larger structural forces that can impact healthy behaviors.[24,25]

> *[Education puts] the focus on the people who live in these [food desert] neighborhoods and not on the systems that have impacted the people who live in these neighborhoods.*
> *– Leader of a food sovereignty organization*[26]

## Narrative: Vote With Your Fork

"Vote with your fork" is the belief that your consumption will signal your values in the food system. This ignores structural forces dictating who can access and afford foods and what foods are upheld as "ideal" or "good." This narrative is steeped in individualism and neoliberalism, focusing on individual actions and consumption in the market as the way to signal preferences for healthier, more sustainable food and force companies to shift practices.[27]

EXAMPLE

In the last 10-20 years, environmental and agricultural sustainability campaigns have driven the idea of "eating for change" and "voting with your fork."[28] The focus of these campaigns has the intent of addressing structural issues, such as dismantling factory farming and industrial meat production, ending the exploitation of labor, and reducing meat consumption. However, "vote with your fork" leaves out individuals and communities without purchasing power to "participate" in agricultural sustainability campaigns that rely on individual acts of consumption.[29] It reinforces the idea that environmental sustainability is only valued and shown through individual purchases, and those that are not purchasing, must not believe in eating consciously, locally, and ethically.

> *The notion that the food system can be transformed through individual acts of consumption—rather than through lobbying, organizing, boycotts, mobilization, or direct action—fits nicely within the prevailing neoliberal economic rhetoric: that unregulated capitalist markets yield the most efficient allocation of resources.*
> *– Eric Holt-Giménez and Yi Wang, 2011*[30]

## Narrative: Communities Can't Take Care of Themselves

"Communities can't take care of themselves" is a paternalistic, societal narrative that communities and individuals—especially BIPOC individuals and individuals living in low-income neighborhoods—cannot take care of themselves and therefore are lazy, undeserving, and need to be helped.[31] It is based in negative racial and class stereotypes and reinforces inequitable power dynamics in the food system, with outside organizations and decisionmakers coming into BIPOC and low-income communities and deciding what is best for them. In the food space, this narrative reproduces inequitable power dynamics, centering the conversation around white ideals for solving issues in the food system. As a result, the narrative renders racial histories invisible and ignores structural inequalities driving food insecurity in BIPOC and low-income communities.[32]

EXAMPLE

*Mobile produce markets*. Mobile produce markets are initiatives aimed at addressing "food deserts" by bringing fresh produce into communities via a van, or mobile market. However, such projects often involve white-led institutions coming into communities that are predominantly BIPOC, low-income, or both. As a result, institutions come into communities to solve the "food desert" issue, with philanthropy and funders providing the money to white-led institutions instead of directly investing in communities or funding

projects led by BIPOC community members, creating a power imbalance in funding and decision making. White-led institutions are granted the funding to "solve" community issues, directly supporting the salaries and infrastructure of white led non-profits instead of investing directly in the community.[33] Consequently, mobile produce markets can advocate for improved access to affordable, fresh, and healthy foods, but they take a paternalistic approach by disregarding community assets and opportunities to support community ownership of food security initiatives.

> *"[People believe that] the Black community is deficient and at risk and can only survive by the donations and benevolence of white-led corporations and nonprofits and even government entities and municipalities."*
> *– Leader of a food sovereignty organization*[34]

## Narrative: Failure to Listen

"Failure to listen" occurs when organizations do not trust or listen to the BIPOC communities they aim to serve and ignore the community's ability and power to self-determine solutions for themselves. This narrative is a result of paternalism, in which the organization coming into the community assumes they know better than community members and thus prescribes solutions for them. It also reflects universalism, assuming BIPOC communities are monolithic and that all BIPOC people would want "best practice" solutions determined by predominantly white institutions with predominantly white cultural framing. A failure to listen can result from inequitable power dynamics, with organizations and governments leaving BIPOC and low-income communities out of conversations on food movements, policy creation, and decision making.[35,36,37] For example, a review of 13 community food organizations in the Northeast found that: 84 percent of leadership positions were held by white persons and only 11 percent of board members were people of color.[38] Because organizations lack the representation of BIPOC communities where food system's work occurs, voices of BIPOC individuals and communities "remain almost invisible" in the work.[39]

EXAMPLE

Video - "*Food insecurity proposal causes frustration on Indy's northeast side.*"[40] Food insecurity and "food deserts" (a misnomer, more accurately reflected as "food apartheid"[41] acknowledging the systemic disinvestment in a specific area) are major issues across the country, with many state and local governments trying to figure out how to better connect residents with healthy, affordable foods. However, as shown in the video, local governments failed to acknowledge the community-led solution to food access that was already in place in northeast Indianapolis. As opposed to listening to the community and investing in community assets, the local government proposed solutions that extract wealth from the neighborhood, taking community dollars to other areas of the city.

> *"The issue of participation is often raised, framed as something that can be remedied by conducting "outreach" or building a more "inclusive" project that better engages local residents. In this article I argue that efforts for "inclusion" in community food projects will continue to struggle to build participation in communities of color if they do not shift the power structures that exist within the organization itself."*
> *— Margaret Marietta Ramirez, 2015*[42]

## Narrative: Build It and They'll Come

A "build it and they'll come" approach focuses on establishing a food retail venue as the solution to food issues and centers the conversation solely on food access, rather than on structural causes of food access issues.[43,44] This narrative is an example of paternalism, where organizations and/or governments attempt to bring in large, corporate food businesses rather than investing in existing, local avenues of food procurement and wealth building. Furthermore, communities are often not given the opportunity to weigh in on what food retail they would like, creating a power imbalance in decision making. As a result, extractive policies, such as tax breaks to large, corporate, food retailers to incentivize supermarket placement, are imposed on communities and local solutions are disregarded and inadequately invested in.

EXAMPLE

*Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI)*. HFFI was based on successful state-based food financing initiatives that focus on supermarket access as the determinant for food access and subsequent purchases of healthy foods. HFFI continues to frame "food deserts" in terms of spatial distance to supermarkets and food access as the major determinant of healthy eating and health outcomes. However, research shows that opening supermarkets in "food deserts" does not result in people buying healthier foods.[45]

> "...interest in food enterprises and projects has more recently been used to distance many communities from their power, becoming instead a trend to be capitalized on, with public and private investments in grocery store development, vertical farming, meal delivery kits, or commercial shared-use kitchens - projects with many positive outcomes but that can often exclude low-income residents, are imposed on communities with little input, and contribute to land loss and gentrification, and loss of community identity and cohesion."
> —EFOD Collaborative, 2019[46]

## Narrative: Pull Yourself Up By Your Bootstraps

"Pull yourself up by your bootstraps" is rooted in the belief that people need to take personal responsibility and work harder to get out of hunger and poverty. It is a classic neoliberal narrative, pathologizing the individual, highlighting the exceptional individuals who succeed in spite of "the odds" and focusing on individual behavior and work ethic as keys to economic prosperity. This narrative dismisses structural and institutional barriers[47,48] to economic advancement that systemically disadvantage predominantly BIPOC people and communities.

EXAMPLE

*Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act of 1996*. The Act, signed by President Clinton, substantially reformed welfare in the United State, in an attempt to "end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage."[49] As noted by the name, the Act emphasized a narrative of personal responsibility and working hard as the solutions to poverty and to shrink reliance on the government by "needy parents."

> *Since the 1990s, policymakers have been selling the "bootstraps" myth that if poor people go to work, they can escape poverty. The reality is that women who left welfare for low-wage work in the 1990s found little relief from the grinding poverty they had known when they were on assistance…Tying welfare benefits like cash and food assistance to an obligation to work will always produce hunger and poverty in the absence of a commitment to full employment.*
> *— Maggie Dickinson and Megan A. Carney, 2019*[50]

## Narrative: Focus on Food Charity

Charity solutions to hunger are rooted in the idea that hunger is an individual responsibility issue and therefore the solution to hunger is providing food. Alternately, a food justice approach would address the structural reasons that created a system where significant hunger is so prevalent.[51,52] This narrative fits under the broader idea of neoliberalism which led to the dismantling of federal food assistance programs and proliferation of food banks. It also has elements of individualism, as food charity provides food on an individual/household level rather than addressing poverty or other root causes of hunger.

EXAMPLE

Since the inception of food assistance programs, political narratives around the deservingness of the poor for government assistance have plagued the programs, especially in regards to SNAP.[53] SNAP has been under near constant attack, with politicians and governments attempting to restrict access through stringent work requirements and eligibility criteria. Such efforts increase the difficulty for households to enroll and stay enrolled in SNAP. As the government enacts cuts to the social safety net, the "moral responsibility to care for the most vulnerable among us is being transferred from government to private charity," as seen through the existence of over 60,500 emergency food providers in the United States.[54] The shift from government to charity has served to limit the solution to hunger to food distribution, instead of addressing structural factors of hunger, such as poverty and economic inequality.[55]

> *Pathologizing language and imagery are used to pull at the heart strings of citizens and to motivate charitable food donations. These stories portray hunger as a significant problem that can be solved by individuals 'doing good,' when in reality, the hunger problem is far too vast to be solved by charity.*
> *— Rebecca de Souza, 2019*[56]

## Narrative: "Good" Food Vs. "Bad" Food

White dominant culture determines which foods are "good" or "bad", ignoring the cultural significance of certain foods or insinuating that some foods are bad because of cultural or racial associations.[57] The idea of calling some foods good or bad is rooted in universalism. White dominant culture serves as the basis of the "universal" ideals regarding what foods are "good" or "bad" for a healthy diet, removing culturally appropriate foods from traditional diets. By attributing universal ideals about what is good or bad food, the whitened cultural ideal of good food erases the cultural histories of non-white traditions and eating habits. Furthermore, whiteness glosses over the historical context and racism related to changing eating patterns, ignoring how colonialism and industrialism stripped away indigenous farming practices and foods and violently pushed communities of color away from farming and agriculture by forcing them off their land.[58]

EXAMPLE *Kale vs. collard greens*. Kale and collard greens are nutritionally equivalent, but the white dominant culture holds kale as a "good food," while collards are "virtually absent from the food discourse."[59] In contrast, the same culture associates collards with poor Southerners and Black Americans and a negative, anti-black, and racist association of collards with large amounts of pork lard and salt.[60] Kale is seen as a "good food," while the equally nutritious collard greens are not, resulting in the removal of culturally appropriate foods from the "good food" discourse.

> *"...vast systems of white supremacy and colonial regimes of power and knowledge have [led] to an erasure and devaluation of contributions of indigenous people and cultures. Directions to 'eat healthy' commonly invoke the Mediterranean Diet, for example. The cultural effect is that [...] we are taught the Greco-Roman diet in our food education, ignoring and erasing all other models. Research has shown that when people embrace traditional diets of non-European peoples—such as Native Hawaiian, rural South African, Tohono O'odham, or Aboriginal Australian—their health improves."*
> *– Catriona Rueda Esquibel, 2016*[61]

## Learning and Unlearning White Supremacy Culture in Food Policy Work

To work against white supremacy narratives, organizations must make explicit changes in operations, policies, and practice. However, organizational shifts require individuals to do the internal work to recognize and unwind white supremacy narratives within themselves. White supremacy narratives, racism, whiteness, and microaggressions will still show up in your work and your organization without individual learning and consistent attention. We offer the following questions and resources to begin your individual work in this space or continue to expand your learning:

### Research how racism, anti-blackness and white supremacy are built into the food system, in particular in your local and community food system.

Ask yourself:

- What inequities exist in the food system? How do these impact food insecurity and hunger rates in the United States?
- Whose labor and land was used to create the American agricultural system?
- What historical policies have contributed to food access, affordability, and insecurity issues in your community?

### Understand that "colorblindness" is not real—society and the food system are not race-neutral spaces.

Ask yourself:

- What is the racial and class composition of the food spaces I frequent? Why are these spaces dominated by certain groups?
- Who is repackaging non-white traditional and cultural food practices and earning money and attention based on those practices?

### Pay attention to how whiteness has influenced your experiences in the food system.

Ask yourself:

- How many grocery stores do you have access to in your community and who owns them?
- How hard is it for me to find and afford culturally appropriate foods at the grocery stores I do have access to?
- How difficult would it be for me to get capital to start a food or agricultural business?

### Think through who holds the decision-making power in the food system and who benefits from the actions of those decision makers and institutions.

Ask yourself:

- Who sits in positions of power and leadership at your organization or at other food organizations? How many BIPOC individuals are in these positions? How many are people from the community you are seeking to help involved in co-creation of programming?
- Who most benefits from policy, programming, and capital decisions in the food space? Are these benefits equitably distributed? Why or why not?
- When we make recommendations or best practices, whose best practices are we uplifting?

## Resources for Further Learning and Action

**General Learning**

What is Systemic Racism? Video Series by Race Forward
Thinking Critically about Racism, Whiteness, and Class by Showing Up for Racial Justice
Resource List from Racial Equity Tools
A History: The Construction of Race and Racism from Racial Equity Tools

**Book Lists**

The Anti-Racist Reading List by Ibram X. Kendi in *The Atlantic*
A Reading List For Learning About Anti-Black Racism and Food by Emily Johnson and the Editors of Epicurious
A Food Justice Reading List from the University of California Press
22 Noteworthy Food and Farming Books for Summer Reading in 2018—and Beyond from Civil Eats

**Books**

Black Food Geographies: Race, Self-Reliance, and Food Access in Washington, D.C. by Ashanté M. Reese
Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries by Rebecca de Souza
Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class, and Sustainability by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman
Food Justice by Richard Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi

**Reports**

Applying a Racial Equity Lens to End Hunger by Marlysa Gamblin et al for the Bread for the World Institute
Closing the Grocery Store Gap in the Nation's Capital report by DC Hunger Solutions
The US Farm Bill: Corporate Power and Structural Racialization in the US Food System by Hossein Ayazi and Elsadig Elsheikh for the UC Berkeley Othering & Belonging Institute

**Journalism**

How the Rise of Supermarkets Left Out Black America by Nathaniel Meyersohn for *CNN Business*
Retail Redlining: One of the Most Pervasive Forms of Racism Left in America? by Emily Badger for *Bloomberg CityLab*
How Black Communities Are Bridging the Food Access Gap by Nadra Nittle for *Civil Eats*
Want to See Food and Land Justice for Black Americans? Support These Groups by the Civil Eats Editors
Collards vs. Kale: Why Only One Supergreen Is a Superstar by Rebekah Kebede for *National Geographic*

**Articles**

An Annotated Bibliography on Structural Racism Present in the U.S. Food System, Seventh Edition by Rachel Kelly et al for the Center for Regional Food Systems at Michigan State University
The Color of White Supremacy: Beyond the Discourse of 'White Privilege' by Zeus Leonardo
"If They Only Knew": Color Blindness and Universalism in California Alternative Food Institutions by Julie Guthman
Whiteness and Farmers Markets: Performances, Perpetuations … Contestations? by Alison Hope Alkon and Christie Grace McCullen
The Elusive Inclusive: Black Food Geographies and Racialized Food Spaces: Black Food Geographies and Racialized Food Spaces by Margaret Marietta Ramírez
Anti-Racist Practice and the Work of Community Food Organizations by Rachel Slocum

**Activities**

21-Day Racial Equity Habit Building Challenge from Food Solutions New England
Racial Wealth Gap Learning Simulation from Marlysa Gamblin at the Bread for the World Institute
The Great Unlearn from Rachel Cargle

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