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CHAPTER ONE

# Getting Something to Eat

JONATHAN TOLD ME to come dressed up.

He invited me to meet and have lunch with him and a group of men. The men were part of an elite and exclusive organization called The Boulé, the first African American Greek society.<sup>1</sup> To fit in with them, I had to dress in formal attire. When I arrived at his house, he approved of my black suit and white shirt, but suggested a different tie from his collection. Instead of the skinny and black tie I had on, he lent me a regular-sized cream-colored tie with blue stripes. He wore a blue shirt, a matching tie, and a khaki-colored suit jacket with black pants. We drove to the lunch location in separate cars because I was permitted to stay only for the first half of their gathering. They met on the eighteenth floor of The Capital Club on South Congress Street. “This is what’s left of some of the old, exclusive places in Jackson,” he muttered as we entered the elevator. Referring to Jim Crow laws, his comment was simultaneously an explanation and indignation.

The elevator doors opened to an elegant lobby area through which we walked into a private dining room. Around rectangular tables, a dozen or so older Black men were already eating and enjoying each other’s conversations.

“How you doing, Archons?” Jonathan greeted them. Archon, the title for supreme court justices in ancient Athens, is how they

[1]

referred to one another. He introduced me as the guest for the day and then motioned for us to get something to eat. At the general dining area entrance, an older Black man, a server, stood behind a wooden podium. As we approached him, Jonathan simply said, “Boulé” and gave him a friendly head tilt. In response, the server smiled and invited us to enter. The Capital Club is still a member-only establishment, so this general area was not open to the public. There were round tables covered with beige tablecloths and set with gold-trimmed plates and bowls alongside polished silver utensils in the large, naturally lit dining space. The glass walls were covered with elegant drapes, but behind them was a stunning view of the city. In one corner, a middle-aged white man played solemn classical music on a grand piano.

The room was probably only half full. One Black family of six or so members sat at one table. Another smaller Black family occupied another. The rest of the clientele was white.

“Go ahead and help yourself, man,” Jonathan said to me as he went over to greet the larger Black family.

A buffet of food and an omelet station were to our left as we walked into the room. When I dished out a cup of their vegetable soup, one of the servers hurried to me and offered to take it to my table while I went through the rest of the line. All the servers were Black, and most were men. Each wore a white shirt, a black vest, and a bow tie. For my entrée, I passed on the fried chicken, ribs, and steak and decided on black-eyed peas, scalloped potatoes, and fish.

I was on the side of the buffet opposite Jonathan when he finally made his way to the food, so I thought I was going down the wrong side.

“No, no, it’s both sides,” he assured me. He added, “Oh, make sure you look at the dessert, too. They’ll bring it to you.” When I walked over to the dessert table, two teenaged white girls came over to see about an Oreo pie. They were so excited about it that they nearly bumped into me. Unfortunately for them, there was none left. I pointed to the bread pudding, and the server at that station dished out a serving and took it to my seat.

As we ate, a few more members of The Boulé walked in. One drew salutations because he had not been around for a while. When the mayor of the city walked in, he received the same warm

greeting, including from Jonathan, who I knew would be running to try to unseat him in the upcoming mayoral election. Much of the rest of our eating time, which lasted approximately forty minutes, was filled with cordial conversation and laughter. By the details of their chatter, they seemed to have known each other, including the servers, for a long time. They asked about each other's families and children. The men who were dining had been members of the upper class for as long as the men serving had been in the working class. Despite the clear class divide, members of The Boulé were exceptionally polite to the servers; they always began their requests for service with, "When you get a moment could you please . . ." or, "At your convenience, please . . ." Perhaps, in those moments, their shared racial identity superseded their class distinction.

After the servers cleared our plates, one of the men glanced over to Jonathan and signaled that they were ready to begin the second portion of their meeting. Jonathan gave me a more formal introduction, highlighting my educational background, and mentioned that I was in Jackson to conduct a study for my dissertation. I spoke for about ten minutes about my academic interests, aspirations, and impressions of Jackson. I made sure to mention that W.E.B. Du Bois, a past member of their organization, was among my intellectual heroes. I even read a short passage from a copy of *The Souls of Black Folks* that I brought with me. I then fielded questions, which mostly included specific details about my time in the South. When I finished, Jonathan thanked me for spending time with them and ushered me to the elevators so they could continue with the rest of their meeting.

On the following Tuesday morning, I joined two dozen or so homeless men and women for breakfast at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church. St. Andrew's sits on the same block as The Capital Club. When I arrived, a middle-aged Black man smoking a cigarette greeted me.

"It's cold out here, ain't it?"

"Yeah, man, I didn't expect it to be this cold," I responded.

"You gonna need a bigger coat—one with a hood," he advised.

“Yeah, you right. When do they open?” I asked.

“They standing in line up there, but it won’t be open till 7:30 or so.”

It was only 6:30 a.m. I walked up the stairs to take my place in line. Larry, a man with a round figure, recognized me and came over to stand by me. We kept each other company until they let us in.

When the doors to the cafeteria finally opened, we filed into a fellowship hall and took our seats at the tables. Almost all the homeless men and women were Black. A church volunteer, a white man, opened the breakfast with a prayer. The others—three white men and two white women, all retirement-age and wearing white aprons—formed an assembly line and dished food on paper plates. They were kind and careful, but also piteous, or something close to that. A room full of Black folks who could not provide for themselves was no doubt not far from their images of blackness in their Mississippi. They served biscuits, scrambled eggs, grits, and sausage patties with the option of water, orange juice, or coffee. At the end of the line, they gave us one packet of salt, one packet of pepper, one packet of butter, and a plastic fork rolled in a white napkin.

The eggs, which I imagine came from a carton, were rubbery and soaked in a tasteless, clear liquid. The sausage was salty, tough, and greasy. The biscuits were hit-or-miss—some were fluffy and buttery; others were hard and dry. The grits were tasteless. I traded my eggs and sausage for more grits and biscuits. Larry, who sat next to me and was used to such deal-making over meals, took some of my eggs. Another guy, whom everyone called Black, took the rest. A third guy accepted my sausages. In return, I got more grits and biscuits than I could eat. We each drew on different strategies to eat our food. I sprinkled some salt over the grits, though I wished for some sugar and cream—that is how we ate grits in my Ghanaian household. Larry mixed butter into his and put just the right amount of salt and pepper over them. He ate as quickly as possible so he could be among the first in line for seconds. Black mixed all his food together—the eggs, the grits, the sausages, the butter, and the biscuit, broken into smaller pieces—and topped it off with some salt and pepper. The third guy added salt and pepper and scooped his grits onto his biscuits. He got up for a second helping and put the extra food in a to-go container.

These two groups, members of The Boulé and members of the homeless population, represent the well-to-do and the down-trodden in Jackson. The upper-middle class, to which Jonathan belongs, are those for whom the multigenerational Black struggle for civil rights had borne some fruits. Jonathan's father used his GI Bill benefits to go to college and graduate school. Affirmative action policies opened the doors for him to work his way up the corporate ladder. During Jonathan's childhood, his father founded and ran his own business. Jonathan grew up among the Black upper-middle class, who quietly existed near the vast and intense poverty that most Black Mississippians endured.

Jonathan is a member of this private organization and eats at this private club because he has risen along the path his father set forth, even inheriting his family's business. He sustained the company and now can provide for his daughter what his father gave him. Like other upper-middle-class Blacks, he lives far away from poorer Black folks, literally and figuratively, even if he is not oblivious to their struggles.

Larry and others who are experiencing homelessness exist in the shadows. There is the underclass with which most Black Americans in the South are associated. He, and other persons who are homeless, are under the underclass. They live in plain sight, but often go unseen, walking the streets, sitting in parks, taking the back doors to eat in church basements, surfing the Internet at libraries, and sleeping in abandoned buildings. Hundreds of others hide their homelessness even more carefully by sleeping on couches of family and friends or in their cars.

Larry, originally from Yazoo City, had been in Jackson for only four weeks. He had caught his wife cheating, so he beat her. He ran when she called the police. He revealed to me that he had also cheated on her several times before that day. His contradictory behavior and loathsome abuse were entirely lost on him as he relayed his story to me in forthright righteousness. He abandoned his steady job and came to Jackson. He was now learning the routes of other unhoused men and women in the city.

I went to Jackson, Mississippi, to live with and learn about Black folks like Jonathan and Larry. My entrée into their lives was through food.

The lives of Black folks in Mississippi exist prominently in the imaginations of most Americans though not in detail, but in old, blurred pictures. Black folks in Mississippi are often out of focus because popular understandings of their lives are stuck in the past, in the 1960s, and their stories are told with images of protests and sit-ins. These retellings are so ubiquitous that it seems as if life has not been moving forward in Selma, Memphis, or Little Rock since the Civil Rights Movement. But, it has and continues to. This book is one telling of what has been happening on the streets, in the kitchens, and in the living rooms of Black folks in Jackson.

I also got to know the lives of low-income families and middle-income families. I spent months with a young mother and her sisters who lived well below the poverty line, were regularly unemployed or underemployed, and relied on social welfare programs. I spent time with them at their apartments and accompanied them to work, church, funerals, family gatherings, welfare offices, and job interviews. I also became part of the life of a grandmother who worked two jobs—as a school bus driver and as a cook at a day care center—to raise two grandsons and an adopted son. I attended church and funerals with her, rode on the school bus with her, and went with her to her grandsons' football games. Most importantly, for this book, I spent countless hours shopping for food, cooking, and eating with her and her family.

While attending a weekly community forum at a local coffee shop, I met a middle-class couple who had relocated to Jackson from Washington, DC a few years prior to start a BBQ restaurant. They are the return migrants about whom social scientists are beginning to spill so much ink.<sup>2</sup> After patronizing their restaurant a few times, I started volunteering in the kitchen, sweeping floors, and washing dishes. Over time, I became close to their family and took part in the family's social life—I had dinner with them more times than I can remember. At their BBQ restaurant, I also befriended one of their loyal customers. A few months after I met him, he decided to become a vegan in hopes of losing weight and regaining his health. I followed him through this journey, visiting eateries in the city that catered to his new diet and learning how to cook quinoa and tofu at his home.

I followed the lives of these socioeconomically diverse African Americans in Jackson to understand their everyday eating



practices. More specifically, I wanted to learn about the foods available to them, how they choose among what is possible, and how they prepare and enjoy their meals. I use what I learned to understand their lives as socioeconomically diverse Black Southerners in contemporary urban Mississippi. *Getting Something to Eat in Jackson* is about the South and, more centrally, about food and race. In the next pages, I zoom into each of these foci.

### *Sociology of the South*

The earliest sociology writings in the late 1800s were responses in favor of and in opposition to slavery.<sup>3</sup> These writings were works about the South that also contributed to national conversations. Similarly, from the time of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 through the Civil War and Reconstruction, social scientific writings (including sociological ones) about race relations in the region were reflections of national concerns.<sup>4</sup> They included some of the discipline's best works. Here, we can think of masterful works like Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South* (1892), Ida B. Wells's *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892), and W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935). A sociologist of the South, Larry J. Griffin, calls these types of works "sociology *in* the South," or "sociology aimed at advancing general knowledge about human affairs by exploiting what the South had to offer." They differed from the sociology *of* the South, "sociology aimed at deepening understanding of the region *per se*."<sup>5</sup>

At some point, the South's role in illuminating national problems changed, so scholarly exploration of the South became less about the country and more about just the region. Sociology *of* the South became less aligned with sociology *in* the South. When millions of Southern Black folks moved to other regions in the country at the turn of the twentieth century, they took with them the fight for full citizenship in the United States. Their struggles were no longer set in Birmingham, Columbia, or Greensboro; they were also now set in New York, St. Louis, and Denver. So, beginning around 1950, sociological research about the South, including ethnographies, slipped out of the center of the discipline. As the Civil Rights Movement spread to the rest of the country, as Martin Luther King, Jr. moved

to Chicago to campaign against housing inequalities, and as the Black Panther Party took hold of the movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, the central domestic conflict, race relations, no longer solely lay in the American South.<sup>6</sup> Large-scale clashes and riots that were ignited by racial animus, dreadful living conditions, torturous state-sponsored and sanctioned brutality, all once equated with the South, also were now part of the social fabric in various other regions in the country.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps, the South disappeared.<sup>8</sup> Or, perhaps, the United States became a Southern nation.<sup>9</sup>

To be clear, sociology's focus away from the South was not just about the movement of Black people in the United States. It also reflected a disciplinary shift. After the Second World War, sociology shifted away from descriptive, ethnographic, and folkloric research, popular among sociologists of the South. It moved toward using sophisticated statistical methods that were often inaccessible to general audiences. The discipline also became interested in making more general universal-like claims, which was at odds with Southern sociologists' focus on particular contexts.<sup>10</sup> So, scholarly exploration of the South became less about the country and more about just the region.

The alignment of the sociology of and in the South has waned over the years, but it is returning. For one thing, fortunately or not, the sun has set on the exclusive dominance of quantitative, large-data research that aims to make claims that can be replicated. Ethnographic and other qualitative methodological approaches are, once again, in fashion. This shift invites scholars like me to evoke and build on the ethnographic (and folkloric) traditions of sociologists of the South from decades past such as Anna Julia Cooper and Howard Odum.<sup>11</sup> This disciplinary turn has already produced path-breaking qualitative Southern sociological work by the likes of Zandria F. Robinson (race, class, and regional identity in Memphis), Vanesa Ribas (race, migration, and labor in rural North Carolina), Sabrina Pendergrass (race, culture, and Black return migration), Karida Brown (the history of racial identity in Appalachia), and B. Brian Foster (race, place, and community development in rural Mississippi).<sup>12</sup>

More critical than transformations in the world of sociology, sociological research about the South is returning to the discipline's

center because, once again, the South is central in social and political debates in the United States. Some of the nation's recent provocative issues either are playing out in the South or are old, unresolved national contradictions with deep roots in the organization of Southern life.

For example, Georgia's 2018 gubernatorial election, along with voter ID legislation and other acts of voter suppression especially after the 2020 presidential election, has brought back into focus the history of the battle for the vote. These voter constraining measures are not just being implemented in the South—Midwestern states from the Dakotas to Ohio all have various versions of such laws—but they harken back to struggles in the South, including the symbolic and violent clash on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.<sup>13</sup> During the 2020 presidential elections and in the subsequent US Senate runoff, all eyes were on Georgia. National politics lay in the hands of Southern voters. During the same election cycle, Alabama's abortion law, the most punitive and restrictive in the country, made women's health and reproductive rights even more central in political debates.<sup>14</sup> A few years prior, North Carolina's HB2 statute provided the stage for furthering public conversations about human rights for transgender peoples.<sup>15</sup> Police brutality against unarmed Black American citizens has recalled centuries of government-sanctioned torture and lynching of the Black body. Recent discussions about the causes of deepening economic inequalities begin with slavery and include racially discriminatory New Deal policies engineered by Southern Democrats.<sup>16</sup> For these and many other crucial social problems, the South casts a large shadow over the nation. This book exists in that moment and offers a deep portrait of a Southern city while pointing to pressing national social patterns and problems in research on race and food.

### *Race (and Blackness)*

There once was a time when Black Americans of varying class backgrounds lived in and around the same neighborhoods. Racially discriminatory federal, state, and city housing policies, such as exclusionary Federal Housing Authority practices and racially restrictive deeds and covenants prevented Black folks who had the financial

means from living anywhere else.<sup>17</sup> During the 1960s, Georgetown (southeast of Hawking Field Airport and nestled between Woodrow Wilson Avenue and Fortification Street) was one such neighborhood in Jackson. One afternoon, a lifelong Georgetown resident, Mr. Figgers, drove me around and pointed out who lived in which houses. Doctors and lawyers were down the block from schoolteachers and shop clerks. His parents were among the well-to-do, so he did not attend the local Lanier High School. He went to a private Catholic school, but the rest of his social life was in Georgetown—he lived a socioeconomically integrated life.

Just as these neighborhoods existed, scholars also once studied Black life up and down the socioeconomic ladder. The blueprint of such works is W.E.B. Du Bois's landmark *The Philadelphia Negro*.<sup>18</sup> In his study, Du Bois sought to understand whether the Philadelphia Negro was as free as other European immigrants and if they were more oppressed in this Northern city than in the South. Du Bois took to the streets to attend to these objectives—he was among the first to conduct research in such a manner. His work was unique for not treating Black people's experiences as one homogeneous group but outlining variation within Philadelphia's Black communities. He studied four groups of Blacks: "the submerged tenth," perhaps the homeless of his day; the working poor, people who were barely making it; laborers, people who had consistent work and made a decent living; and the well-to-do, the people he famously called "the talented tenth."

Decades later, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton published *Black Metropolis*, which sought to answer these questions: "To what degree is the Negro subordinated and excluded in relation to white people in the society? What are the mechanisms by which the system is maintained, and how do the lives of Negroes reflect this subordination and exclusion?"<sup>19</sup> Like Du Bois, the authors examined the lives of different classes of Black folks, looking as much into the lifestyle of the upper class and the world of the lower class as they did into the way of life of the middle class.

Today, Georgetown and other neighborhoods like it, once socioeconomically integrated, are now centers of concentrated poverty. The conditions of these neighborhoods are a result of tragedy—deindustrialization and destructive urban renewal

plans—and triumph—the loosening of Jim Crow policies.<sup>20</sup> Those who were able to have left; those who remain do so only with others who are poor like them and cannot move. In Georgetown, empty lots sit next to the abandoned houses that sit next to homes with leaky roofs. Mr. Figgers would like to fix the house in which he grew up, but he does not have the money to do so now, so he boarded the windows. The neighborhood is no longer what it used to be; the experiences of blackness are not either.

In this book, I look at the lives of those left behind, the inner dynamics of the poverty and homelessness they now face, as well as the ways they confront and deal with them. I also study the lives of those who escaped such neighborhoods, both those who moved just a few blocks and those who moved across town. Finally, I attempt to understand how their differently classed life experiences shape their shared racial identity. I want to know how the different class experiences shape what it means to be Black in Mississippi today. I do all this by examining how they go about getting something to eat.

My approach draws on the long-abandoned tradition of studying Black life across class groups. It is different from recent ethnographies that often focus on just one segment of life, usually those in poverty, but it draws inspiration from two works by John L. Jackson, Jr. and Zandria F. Robinson that go against the trend.<sup>21</sup> Jackson's *Harlem World* explores how African Americans in different classes live and interact with one another in what was once known as the Mecca of African American life. It shows how common it is for many Black people to cross class boundaries because of proximity and family ties to people in different class categories. Despite this, he argues, middle-class Black Americans still belong to a world not traversed by their lower-class neighbors or family members. Robinson's *This Ain't Chicago* seeks to identify how race, class, gender, and region converge to shape racial identity in Memphis. Robinson finds that in what she calls "the post-soul South," Southern Black people up and down the socioeconomic ladder engage in a "country cosmopolitanism." They blend rural values with urban sensibilities to create an identity that is both folk and modern.<sup>22</sup> I follow from these authors' examinations of intraracial class diversity among Black Americans, but I am even more explicit in organizing the study around the experiences of different class groups. What

is more, I include in this analysis the experiences of people who are homeless, a population that is often ignored. In what follows, I investigate what types of foods are available to these diverse Black Southerners, how they choose from among what is available, and how they prepare and consume their meals.

### *Food*

Most of us eat every day. We must; we need the energy. But, we also eat because we want to. It makes us feel good. It brings us to the people we love. Eating certain foods makes us happy; it triggers feelings of home, feelings of belonging. What and how we eat reflects how we imagine ourselves, which reflects how we imagine the world.<sup>23</sup> Food helps to delineate the social groups to which we belong. In this book, I use what and how people eat to investigate how race and class overlap in the South. I focus on food availability, choice, and consumption in the lives of people inhabiting different social classes within the same racial category.

Food availability is very much about people's living circumstances. Their encounters (or lack thereof) with various social and economic structures, including institutions, shape what is available for them to eat.<sup>24</sup> Whether someone is poor or affluent, employed or unemployed, or lives in a poor or rich neighborhood all come to matter in what kinds of food they find available. The homeless men I followed had exited or been pushed out of the city economic structures—many did not work. Whatever meagre income some might have had came from their piteous relationship with a stringent welfare system. They also had various levels of interactions with the criminal justice system. They lived under constant threat of harassment from the police and parapolic officers. Some had returned back to society after having spent some years in prison—they often returned worse off than when they entered. Most obviously, these men I followed were also unhoused. These sparse encounters with many of the city's social structures left them without much control over their food availability. As such, the shelters and other service-providing institutions essentially determined their food availability. They ate what the service providers decided. On top of this, and perhaps more subtly, the cultural structures in

which people are born or choose to participate also influence what foods appear to us as available.<sup>25</sup> In a place like Mississippi, Black and Southern food traditions loom over everyone's options. The meals I ate with the homeless men often included macaroni and cheese, greens, and fried catfish—all foods that most other Mississippians, regardless of race and class, also enjoy. There were some differences as well. Sometimes, the differences were qualitative. More affluent folks ate refined versions of foods that poorer people also ate. Other times, the intersections of race and class swayed their participation in various branches (e.g., slow, organic, or local food) of the modern food movement.<sup>26</sup>

If social and economic structures, including ones that shape employment chances and housing conditions, significantly shape food availability, studying food choices shows how people navigate the structures they encounter. Food choices are about seeing how ordinary Black Americans circumvent constraints and deal with historically (and regionally) rooted oppressive social and cultural structures in the contemporary South.<sup>27</sup> These explorations reveal both the ingenuity and the human costs of deprivation. They display that Black folks in different class groups have different living circumstances and therefore approach their food decisions differently. This, in many ways, disrupts the assumption that soul food and other Black American food traditions of the past are responsible for unhealthy eating behaviors among Black Southerners. Food choices are not motivated just by habits and traditions in their pasts. They are also the result of paradoxes and problems people face in their present context. And, they are reflections of people's outlooks and projections of themselves into the future.<sup>28</sup>

So far, I have suggested that food availability reflects people's living circumstances and that food choices reflect how people navigate their circumstances. Food consumption, what people eat and how they eat, illustrates how people think about themselves. This follows the popular saying that people are what they eat. For the various Black folks I got to know in Jackson, the foods that sit in front of them reflect who they are and where they fit in the world in which they live. When the homeless man stares at the fried chicken that the church is serving him at eight o'clock in the morning, he takes a deep breath before taking a bite. In between his inhale and

exhale, he thinks through how and why his life has gotten to a point where he must eat such greasy food early in the morning or risk going hungry. When the mother of a middle-income family watches her child eating a piece of fruit that she purchased from her nearby grocery store that she knows to be bottom-barrel produce, she wonders why members of her family and her community are valued less than those who live in a different zip code. Also, I pay attention to eating as a social activity, one imbued with symbols of class and race performances.<sup>29</sup> I study how people serve their taken-for-granted preferences for certain foods and restaurants (including the plates and utensils they eat with) and how they eat (including the space in which they eat, the people with whom they eat, and the time of day and for how long they eat).

*Getting Something to Eat in Jackson*, then, is a book set in the contemporary South that shows what we can learn about food by studying Black life in the South and what we can learn about race (and blackness) by studying food in the South. I began the research with a two-week visit in June 2011, returned for most of 2012, and again in the summer of 2016. I focused on distinct class experiences in my fieldwork: homeless, working poor, middle class, and upper-middle class.<sup>30</sup> I thought of class as a subjective location and a relational explanation of economic life chances and accordingly assigned participants to each class group as I came to know their day-to-day living circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

I observed the experience of homelessness among people who, during the time of my fieldwork, had virtually no stable source of income, consistently were without housing, and did not have the capital (cultural, economic, or social) to improve their lives. The working-poor experience was represented by those who frequently had housing, but were at times unemployed or underemployed and relied on social welfare benefits during my time in Jackson. While they had the know-how to navigate the maze that is public assistance, they often lacked the educational background or networks to permanently lift themselves out of poverty. Middle-class people in my research were those who did not need social welfare benefits.



They lived on the wages of their employment. While some financially struggled, they had enough financial resources to squeeze by or relied on their educational backgrounds and networks to permanently survive. I observed the upper-middle-class experience among people who appeared to have significantly more financial resources than they needed to cover their month-to-month expenses. They were also self-employed or held managerial positions at their workplaces and held various leadership positions in the city. In all, I got to know about thirty African American men and women who were living in different corners of Jackson.<sup>32</sup>

The book's four main parts are based on the four class groups I studied and the conceptual components of foodways: availability, choice, and consumption. Part I focuses on the experiences of those who are homeless. In those chapters, I focus on food availability. Part II focuses on the experiences of those who live in poverty and covers food choices. Part III is about the experiences of those who are middle-class and also about food choice. Part IV is about the experiences of those who are upper-middle class and covers food consumption. In each of these parts and with its corresponding component of foodways, I investigate one aspect of Black American life in the contemporary South. Through analyzing food availability, I look into the various structures that Black folks in the South encounter. By exploring food choice, I illustrate how they navigate the structures they encounter. From studying food consumption, I provide a social-psychological analysis of Black folks in the South as they face and navigate today's cultural, social, and economic structures.

In the next chapter, I first provide a historical account of food and Black American life. Then, I review the historical significance of Jackson, Mississippi, in the history of race in the South and why it makes for a suitable place for this study. Finally, I share how I entered my research setting, how I met people and became part of their lives.

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