

“D.C. is mambo sauce”: Black cultural production in a gentrifying city

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Abstract

Centering mambo sauce as both a cultural staple and a metaphor for struggles over ownership in Washington, D.C., this article explores mambo sauce’s role in constructing a D.C. identity. Drawing on data from ethnographic interviews and newspaper headlines, I argue that, against the background of intense and consistent gentrification that has left the city’s population younger, whiter, and wealthier, mambo sauce becomes a lens through which to examine larger tensions related to race, class, and power. Specifically, I examine mambo sauce as a form of Black cultural production to explore the dialectical relationship between how mambo travels well beyond the carryout restaurants in Black working-class neighborhoods and the displacement of Black residents in the gentrifying city.

Keywords

Black food culture, Black food geographies, Black cultural production, critical food geographies, Washington, D.C., Black Urban Geographies

“DC es salsa de mambo”: la producción de la cultura negra en una ciudad en proceso de gentrificación

Resumen

Centrando la salsa de mambo como un elemento cultural básico y una metáfora de las luchas por la propiedad en Washington, D.C., este artículo explora el papel de la salsa de mambo en la construcción de una identidad de D.C.. Basándome en datos de entrevistas etnográficas y titulares de periódicos, sostengo que, en el contexto de una gentrificación intensa y constante que ha dejado a la población de la ciudad más joven, más blanca y más rica, la salsa mambo se convierte en un lente a través del cual se pueden examinar importantes tensiones relacionadas con la raza, la clase y el poder. Específicamente, examino la salsa de mambo como una forma de producción cultural negra para explorar la relación dialéctica entre cómo el mambo viaja mucho más allá de los restaurantes de comida para llevar en los vecindarios de clase trabajadora negra y el desplazamiento de los residentes negros en la ciudad en proceso de gentrificación.

Palabras claves

Cultura alimentaria negra, geografías alimentarias negras, producción cultural negra, geografías alimentarias críticas, Washington, D.C., geografías urbanas negras

Introduction

During fieldwork in Washington, D.C. in 2013, I met Kameron (pseudonym) at Denny’s, the only sit down restaurant in Ward 7 at the time. Our conversation spanned several topics: what it was like for her to leave for college and ultimately return to the neighborhood; which families had lived there for several generations; and where she liked to shop for

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food. When we began discussing gentrification, however, the conversation turned away from the interpersonal and day-to-day aspects of her life to analysis and critique of the city's social and cultural landscape: "Washington is government. It's politics. It's the capital. D.C. is east of the [Anacostia] River. D.C. is carryouts. D.C. is mambo sauce. That's the *real* D.C." (emphasis added)

The distinction between "Washington" and "D.C." is not uncommon among those who claim the city as their hometown, especially Black residents. For years, many have experienced the tensions between "Washington" as an epicenter for politics and "D.C." where Black people live, imagine, and create while navigating inequities that threaten, constrain, and sometimes shorten Black life. The Anacostia River, which divides Wards 7 and 8 from the other six wards, is a symbolic and literal divide between rich and poor as well as Black and white. Bearing the heaviest burdens of food insecurity, health disparities, joblessness, and ineffective public schooling, the region east of the Anacostia river is a site of historic and contemporary inequalities about which long-term residents express concern (Asch and Musgrove, 2017; Prince, 2014; Reese, 2019; Summers, 2019; Prince, 2014). However, my conversation with Kameron went beyond the ways the city has been carved up politically to shed light on spatial inequities that can be understood through foods that Black residents find meaningful—even as they are adopted and commodified in gentrifying spaces. Mambo sauce, a condiment of elusive ingredients and origins, is one such example. Known by many Black Washington, D.C. natives as a staple, mambo sauce, also spelled mumbo,¹ is a condiment served with chicken wings at local D.C. carryout restaurants—most of which are owned by Chinese and Korean immigrants. Adapting to the tastes and preferences of predominantly Black communities in which they are located, each carryout offers a slightly different version of the sauce, which contains some mixture of ketchup, barbecue sauce, hot sauce, and sweet and sour sauce. Though mambo sauce's origins are contested—some say that it originated in Chicago (Vargas, 2011)—its association with D.C. is undeniable, as mambo sauce's prominence in the city is connected to both its role in everyday consumption as well as its status as an identity marker that distinguishes "the *real* D.C." from its government, transplant-centered counterpart. By injecting mambo sauce into the conversation, Kameron made a connection between food and place that deserves further exploration, particularly through a lens that brings critical food geographies and Black geographies together to highlight its significance beyond conversations about health and nutrition—a limitation that is often applied to Black food consumption.

In their concerns for a socially justice world, critical food geographers turn to questioning, critiquing, and upending normative structures as one way to understand the perpetuation of systematic oppression and the existence of a powerful elite. Specifically, critical food geography literature that

focuses on cities has largely explored inequity through unequal food access, food justice efforts to combat food apartheid, and the racialized and gendered labor that fuels our food system (Bradley and Galt, 2014, Broad, 2016; Mares, 2019, 2017; Minkoff-Zern, 2019; Reynolds and Cohen, 2016; Sbicca, 2012, 2018; Trauger, 2017; White, 2011). Critiques of so-called obesogenic environments (Guthman, 2011) and the hyper focus on the obesity epidemic are especially relevant here, as the call for "healthy" food has focused on a narrow definition of such, often ignoring culturally appropriate or sensitive foods or the role taste plays in pleasure and feelings of connectedness. These key areas of struggle and resistance have implications for local and national food systems and help frame the power dynamics against which activists, advocates, and academics fight.

This work, often focused on organizations or organized efforts, also raises a question of and about the politics of scale in critical food geographies: what can we learn at the level of the everyday, through analyses of culturally important food items that also reveal nuances in the spatial struggles critical food geographers are interested in? This article turns to this question by exploring the role and meanings of quotidian food spaces and consumption in the lives of Black residents. These sites—the everyday and seemingly benign—are important for critical food geographies because in their material and metaphorical forms, they reveal what is at stake for the populations with whom we partner and on whose behalf we claim to work. How they reveal themselves, however, may not always easily be seeable, knowable, or measurable if we only look to narratives of dispossession or spaces that we have traditionally turned to for understanding food inequity or justice (see Jones, 2019b for an in-depth exploration of the relationship between slow violence and the politics of visibility).

Critical food geographies and Black geographies are rarely brought into dialogue, though the moments when they are, authors make significant contributions to understanding not only food in all its sociopolitical and cultural dimensions but also the layeredness of Black life more broadly. Kameron's declaration of the "real" D.C. reflected, for example, what Naya Jones articulates as a much-needed intervention in critical food geographies: an attention to the emotional dimensions of Black food geographies as an avenue for opening up what it possible for food justice and food sovereignty (Jones, 2019a). Her words also reflect Margaret Ramirez's assertion that "black geographies and other alternative geographies possess a differential knowledge and spatial politics that can radically reimagine the uneven geographies of the present" (Ramírez, 2015: 765).

This article is written in a similar vein as that of Jones and Ramirez, drawing from Black geographies and critical food geographies, using mambo sauce as an opportunity to explore differential knowledge and experience of D.C. Black geographic thought insists that understanding Black life in geographic terms requires an engagement with what Black

people produce as forms of embodied theorization of the conditions in which we live—that that creation itself can be a form of geographic knowledge and critique (McKittrick, 2006; Woods, 1998; Wright and Herman, 2018). These ways of knowing can be understood as artistic expression, but they can also be understood as responses to spatial inequities or improvisations, providing an alternative way to understand space and place (McKittrick, 2006). To look beyond and outside these spaces is to look for the ways “the black subject is produced by, and is producing, geographic knowledges” and how they “reveal how ideas—black and nonblack—get turned into lived and imaginary spaces that are tied to geographic organization” (McKittrick, 2006: 7). Mambo sauce—product and metaphor—offers such an opportunity.

Throughout the article, I move between discussing mambo sauce as a material substance and mambo sauce as metaphor, putting ethnographic data and storytelling in conversation with newspaper articles as a way to illuminate mambo sauce’s affective, spatial, and cultural significance in D.C. This way of narrating the spatial, cultural, and social life of mambo sauce is not uncommon in food studies more broadly or among those who focus on blackness and Black material culture in particular. Scholars turn to recipes, cookbooks, metaphors, and stereotypes to understand the materiality of Black life (Nettles-Barcelón, 2015; Walker, 2015; Williams-Forsen, 2006; Zafar, 2019). Neither overly celebratory nor condemning, these scholars’ works provide a methodology for interrogating the ways Black people narrate and understand our lives through a variety of means. These texts, alongside cookbooks that infuse both recipes and narrative storytelling, turn fragments from the archive and personal experience into offerings.

Working from a similar framework, this article follows mambo sauce’s movement from historically Black and low-income neighborhoods to upscale and mainstream restaurants, illustrating how material associated with everyday Blackness is understood, embraced, commodified, circulated, and condemned. Second, this article considers how the spatial and economic changes spurred through and by gentrification create the conditions under which mambo sauce becomes a marker for belonging for long-term Black residents while also a marketing tool for others, with the places of consumption playing a role in how authenticity is deployed and understood. Finally, I end by exploring mambo sauce’s role in framing of critical food geographies, arguing that efforts to (re)claim Black cultural production, particularly within a rapidly gentrifying city like Washington, D.C., are opportunities to explore the radical possibilities of the everyday.

Research methods

Beginning in 2012, I conducted 4 years of ethnographic research in northeast Washington, D.C. In addition to

participant observation at local grocery stores, a recreation center, and in public spaces, I also interviewed residents and food justice activists in the city. The majority of the interviews focused on grocery shopping, urban agriculture, and the role of food in everyday life. The discussion of mambo sauce that is presented here comes out of those interviews. While it wasn’t the specific focus of the larger research project, over the 4 years that I was in the field and in the 8 years since I have been engaged in D.C. as a researcher, a friend to those who still live there, and an advocate for the residents I met during research, references to mambo sauce have been consistent. In addition to formal interviews and informal conversations, I include news articles to analyze the broader appeal of mambo sauce in the context of D.C.’s gentrification.

D.C. is mambo sauce. That’s the real D.C.

We ain’t goin’ nowhere
 We ain’t goin’ nowhere
 We gon’ be right here
 We ain’t goin’ nowhere
 We gon’ be right here
 We ain’t goin’ nowhere
 Welcome to D.C.

—“Welcome to D.C.,” Mambo Sauce

In 2007, the D.C.-based band Mambo Sauce released one of their most popular songs, “Welcome to D.C.,” on Myspace. The lyrics are an invitation to some and an affirmation for others, taking its listener on a journey that includes references to former Mayor Marion Barry, the city’s water pollution, and D.C. slang. One of the most poignant aspects of the song is its repetition of “we ain’t goin’ nowhere,” with the “we” presumably referring to Black residents whose presence has been in steady decline. Critical work on gentrification and displacement underscores how the lives of the cities’ most vulnerable populations are adversely impacted by increased policing, skyrocketing housing, and economic policies that favor middle and upper class newcomers (Bonds, 2019; Kate, 2017; Ramirez, 2019; Sassen, 2013; Shange, 2019). As Katherine McKittrick notes, even as cities develop and change, questions about their futures are bound up with interrogations of (and silences about) how racial orders that are embedded in cities themselves influence spatial arrangements (McKittrick, 2013). Washington, D.C. is no different. According to the US census, in 2010, Black residents were barely the majority, representing 50.7% of the population with white residents making up 38.5%, despite its reputation for being “chocolate city,” a moniker adopted and embraced to not only reflect its long-standing Black majority but also the artistic and intellectual presence of Black people in the city. By 2018, those numbers had changed. Black residents had declined to 45.5% while white residents had increased to 42.2% of the overall population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

A study conducted by the Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity concluded that Washington, D.C. had the worst gentrification trend and a strong active displacement, with nearly 36% of D.C. residents living in neighborhoods already experiencing displacement (American Neighborhood Change in the 21st Century, 2019).

In the context of gentrification, Black cultural production occurs alongside contestations over displacement, as many residents, scholars, and journalists alike point to the ways the city benefits from what Black people produce while also systematically encouraging economic growth plans that disregard the city's Black and working class populations (Hyra, 2017a, 2017b; Mock, 2019). So while the city capitalizes on and promotes Black history, it also actively attempts to erase it. Barry Farms, established on over 350 acres purchased by the Freedman's Bureau to provide affordable housing to free Black people after the Civil War, is one example. The former home of Frederick Douglass, Barry Farms had come to represent concentrated poverty and crime in contemporary D.C. As a result, families have been forcibly relocated after losing several public battles. Its demolition makes way for 200 units of mixed-income housing, despite the many studies that show that these housing arrangements do not largely benefit previous tenants specifically or poorer residents in general (Darcy, 2010; McCormick et al., 2012).

In the wake of organized displacement coupled with ubiquitous narratives of lack that are inscribed in Black people's bodies and foods, long-term and native D.C. residents' understandings, experiences, and ownership of the city are in part expressed through material forms like mambo sauce that legitimize and reaffirm their claim to the city. As Hunter and Robinson (2018) argue, mainstream ways of framing, mapping, and knowing cities often obscure "chocolate maps," or the ways Black people move through, understand, and produce space and place. Looking at current maps of D.C. what they revealed are not only the demographic shifts that leave the city wealthier and whiter but also "the erasures created by White maps and explorers" (Hunter and Robinson, 2018: 175). This is applicable to food in particular. Elsewhere, I have argued that "nothingness," in part shaped by deficit narratives of neighborhoods that include but are not limited to food access, is important to analyze, precisely because beyond labels such as "food desert" are practices of everyday life that give meaning to the city in general and food in particular (Reese, 2019). Functioning as a sort of social commentary, very rarely did "nothingness" actually mean void of any activity. Instead, it reflected the impact and imprint of hierarchical schemas of value.

Yet, lifelong residents know and reveal (when comfortable or expedient) the chocolate maps that are ignored or obscured. One evening, I took a walk around his neighborhood with Deon. In his mid-thirties, Deon was born and raised in D.C. and remained connected to the institutions, neighborhoods, and culture of the neighborhood where he grew up, even though he had since moved from Ward 7 to a

neighborhood with more amenities west of the Anacostia River. As we walked down one of the main streets, Deon offered commentary on different businesses, circling back to the absence of food retail:

There's nothing to eat around here really. There used to be a carryout that I used to always eat at. It was called Wonderfults Carryout. It was on the Maryland side. It got burned down like six years ago. I used to love that carryout.

Deon must have either sensed my hesitation or noticed a confused look on his face, both indicators that I, as a relative newcomer to D.C., was confused about something he had just said. Deon stopped to ask, "Ok, when D.C. people say carryout, do you know what they mean?" I shook my head "no," and he went on to explain:

Ok, it's like takeout or Chinese takeout...usually when we say carryout you're talking about strictly takeout Chinese food. But for the most part, we're not eating Chinese food. We're eating chicken wings and french fries. Chicken wings and fried rice....so wings and fries. Have you been put on to mambo sauce yet?

Again, I shook my head no. Deon prompted me to try it:

different places have different recipes. Every place has their own recipe....ketchup, hot sauce...depends on who makes it, but those two are in almost every version of mambo sauce. The thing about mambo sauce is mambo sauce is nice because different restaurants have different tints of mambo sauce...like some places have orange mambo sauce, some will have a dark dark red, some will have like a light red. some of them are thicker than others.

As Deon describes, mambo sauce is a condiment most often paired with fried chicken wings. The inexpensive duo—chicken wings and mambo sauce—are common in carryout restaurants in working-class Black neighborhoods. Deon's disclosure highlighted why Kameron's initial declaration of "D.C." as being distinct from "Washington" was significant. By mentioning mambo sauce, Deon firmly placed it as part of the chocolate city map of D.C., signifying its cultural and spatial significance by describing it and then later, instructing me on where to find it—in a carryout in Ward 7. When talking about "nothingness" like Deon did at the beginning of our walk, residents inevitably came around to discussing the alternatives to "nothing," namely institutions or foods like mambo sauce that served as cultural and social markers of the space. In one conversation, Deon revealed a stop on the chocolate city map, and it is this map that forms a crux for Black residents' claims to the city. In revealing mambo sauce as a part of that map, Deon welcomed me to "D.C." in a manner that proclaimed his

authority on and right to it. As the band Mambo Sauce's "Welcome to D.C." lyrics boast:

*I'm from the city, the district/I own up to it/But, right now
I gotta real big bone to pick/When this industry gone let us
get some ownership?/We gotta take it huh/Well we own it
then...We ain't going nowhere/Welcome to D.C.*

Circulating blackness

[Black people] are never in place but on display. Curiously the dynamism of these circumlocutions are the wellspring of culture in the Americas and with the dubious help of mass marketing they are the creative legs of an even more dubious globalization. Let me break it down. What is called Black culture, including aesthetic tastes and sensibilities, is used daily as creative backdrop to multinational markets. But more interestingly, what is produced in Black homes, and neighbourhoods, the simplest exchanges in communities—expressions, gestures, understandings, dress—these are taken up in the generalizing, homogenizing culture. (Brand, 2001: 51)

In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, Dionne Brand disrupts the Eurocentric map and way-making through a series of meditations that explore Black people's relationships to space, each other, our own bodies, and to power—relationships that are fractured and understood through the Door of No Return and the transatlantic slave trade. In the quote above, Brand calls attention to how what is produced for and by Black people as part of everyday life moves beyond the spaces that produce them, becoming a creative base for mass marketing enterprises. In this way, blackness circulates. In 2011, *The Washington Post* captured pieces of this significance in an article titled, "Mumbo Sauce: The Flavor of Washington that isn't the President or the Politics." The article opens with a scene of Arsha Jones, a pregnant former D.C. resident, who traveled from Annapolis, Maryland to D.C. to have the sauce, a taste of home that she had been craving. Unable to wait until she arrived home, she ate the wings and sticky sauce in her truck in the parking lot. In the article, the author notes that "Mambo sauce, the condiment served at carryouts (which the article refers to as "holes in the wall"), owned by predominantly Korean and Chinese immigrants, tells a story of roots—particularly African-American roots—in a city full of transients" (Vargas, 2011). At the time the article was written, 60% of African Americans in D.C. were born in the city compared to 15% of whites. The article referred to mambo sauce as a condiment that can "distinguish" two types of Washington: "It's the Washington that if you didn't know where to look, you might never see" (Vargas, 2011). McKittrick argues that Black geographies

like these cannot fully be understood through their "invisibility" but instead illustrate "real, lived dispossessions and reclamations" (McKittrick, 2006: 7). For Arsha and her husband Charles, the desire to preserve and share their love for mambo sauce and D.C. culture led them to found Capital City Co., a business that sells bottles of mambo sauce developed from a recipe Arsha created and other items that represent D.C. Among them are t-shirts with various slogans that include mambo sauce: "Mambo Sauce the best kept secret"; "Chicken Wings, Mambo Sauce, & Carryouts"; "Mambo Sauce on Everything"; "Mambo Sauce, Go-Go, & Half Smokes"; and "Too Much Sauce."

Writing about young people navigating the local food system in Austin, Texas, Naya Jones argues that visceral geographies reveal feelings, thoughts, and experiences that can be obscured within larger discourses around food consumption that focus on obesity or position Black people as objects rather than co-producers and knowledge creators (Jones, 2019a). More than a matter of meeting a biological need, Arsha's cravings for mambo sauce points to the role taste plays in how people remember, experience, and feel a place. These connections—between taste and place—further highlight the possibilities for understanding sociocultural and political shifts (or slippages) that emerge in unlikely places, especially when we look beyond the healthy/unhealthy paradigm. In this case, the physical craving for mambo sauce mirrored a longing for home that the Joneses were able to capture in a sellable product. Writing about the role food plays in creating feelings of belonging and home, Lorena Munoz defines "productive nostalgia" as an embodied practice that is "not only making use of the past to embody the present but also facilitating the acquisition of micro capital in the form of packaging the past to sell in the present" (Munoz, 2017: 289). While some products become popular because of their association with healthiness and reflect classed dimensions of consumption (see Guthman, 2003, for a more robust discussion), mambo sauce's popularity bucks against that trend with its success being largely tied to its association with D.C. identity.

While the Joneses' intention was to create a product that would "give a taste of home to Washington, D.C. metropolitan natives," the company's success means the sauce finds itself in kitchens and restaurants in places far from D.C., and its consumers are not always the D.C. natives they envisioned. Summers (2019) argues that part of gentrification in general and gentrification in D.C. in particular is the ways Blackness gets retooled and used to frame what is "cool" or "unique" about the city, despite the ongoing threats to Black life vis-à-vis displacement and city policies that disproportionately shut Black entrepreneurs out of opportunities to be competitive in changing consumer market.² Just as the Anacostia River has long been understood as a physical dividing line between "Washington" and "D.C.," mambo sauce enters mainstream conversations as another marker, another contested and contestable space, another way that

Blackness and authenticity get framed, packaged, and sold as part of the D.C. narrative. Ramirez (2019) argues that gentrification and the urban restructuring of capital create spaces of cultural exclusion in cities. These exclusions, intimately connected to and dependent on carceral logics that police Black, Latinx, and indigenous people, constrain while also expanding possibilities for capital venturists. This builds on the work of Wilson (2012) who argued that tapping into Black consumption in segregated neighborhoods was an important strategy for white businesses who wanted to expand their clientele. Thinking with these three together, D.C. is not only a city in which urban change is happening. Instead, gentrification creates contested spaces in which bodies and tastes are conscripted to maintain (or liberate) borders and to stake claim on a changing city.

Gentrification in D.C. has a longer history, but it is its transition from “Chocolate City” to “Latte” or “Cappuccino” City (Hyra, 2017b) that captured nationwide attention because by 2012, Washington, D.C. no longer had a Black majority for the first time in nearly 60 years. It is in this context that mambo sauce’s significance moves beyond one of cultural food identity or novelty. Three years after the article detailing how nostalgia for a D.C. staple led to the founding of Capital City, *The Washington Post* ran another story about the condiment: “Mumbo Sauce Gets Gentrified,” detailing how the sauce ended up on the menu at The Hamilton, a restaurant on 14th Street NW, less than a mile from the White House (Judkis, 2013). Rather than the average \$5 for six whole chicken wings, mambo sauce, and fries that is typical at a carryout, the price was \$11 for an appetizer portion, sans fries at The Hamilton. The restaurant’s chef was looking for “something different” when he heard a local artist mention mambo sauce in an interview during which he discussed how the condiment reminded him of home. Unfamiliar and questioning if it was a “D.C.” thing, the chef hopped in a taxi, sought out the nearest carryout, fell in love with the sauce, and then developed the version that later accompanied the \$11 wings. The popular “D.C.” condiment had made its way to menus in “Washington.”

If borders (real and imagined) set up the paradigm for evaluating what is safe and what is not, if they distinguish *us* from *them*, if they create bounded territories that are policed and protected (Jones, 2019a; Ramirez, 2019), then food is one way that (white and middle class) people contest, traverse, and play with these boundaries. It is within this context—the encroaching of “Washington” onto the physical and food geographies of “D.C.”—that mambo sauce becomes exceptional or noteworthy. For some, the chef from The Hamilton was being creative, demonstrating ingenuity when he decided to visit a carryout to try mambo sauce. However, when viewed within a broader history of struggles over ownership and cultural appropriation, he acted within a well-established practice of wealthy and most often white people taking foods associated with particular racial and ethnic groups and making them marketable and palatable to broader

audiences. In his work on nonwhite restaurateurs, Krishnendu Ray argues that much of the literature had not taken into account their interest in taste,

as if immigrants are creatures only of political economy who never think about taste, beauty, and how such things might intersect with their practical moral universe. The propensity to ignore immigrant bodies in the disciplinary discussion of taste may be a product of the tendency to see discussions of taste as marginal to the real lives of marginal peoples. (Ray, 2014: 374)

Dionne Brand argues, the afterlives of slavery demand that blackness be public property “belonging to a public exclusive of the Black bodies which signify it. One is aware of this ownership. One is constantly refuting it, or ignoring it, or troubling it, or parodying it, or tragically reaffirming it” (Brand, 2001: 50). Taken together, Ray and Brand’s arguments form a basis from which to understand how easily the chef elides public reckoning with the ethical or moral dimensions of “borrowing” from the foodways of the urban poor, working class, and Black because they are read as readily public and consumable—with a bit of intervention/invention.

It is not only that these foods travel to menus in more upscale places. It is also that in the traveling, the food items take on different price point and meaning, while also being marketed as a taste of D.C.—the very tastes that, when consumed by Black people, are marked as unhealthy and unrefined. This is one of the accompanying, though sometimes unintended, effects of gentrification that sheds light on forms on inequity that are built in and perpetuated by its processes. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues, “capitalism requires inequality, and racism enshrines it” (Gilmore, 2007). In its traveling beyond the palates and carryouts of “D.C.,” it is not the condiment itself or even its origins that carry significance for those for whom it is not a marker of identity and claims to the city. Instead, it is the ways whiteness attaches itself to this particular consumer product, marketing it as quintessential D.C. sans black people, sans carryout, sans inequities that shroud and undergird its consumption and meaning in Black neighborhoods.

Blackness consumed or denied

The ways Black cultural productions travel while Black people themselves experience the ongoing, daily violence associated with gentrification is a component of the makings of the “new” D.C. In describing the logo for Chocolate City Beer, in which the designer draws from imagery of Tommie Smith and John Carlos’s raised fists in protest at the 1968 Olympics, Summers argues that the logo portrays blackness as “edgy, cool, creative, resistant, unruly, and commercial” (Summers, 2019: 11). Its ability to be commercial, however,

rests on the absence of actual Black people or image, as the fist itself is red and bears no resemblance to the Black people that earned D.C. the nickname “Chocolate City.” Blackness, again, as (readily revised) public property (Brand, 2001: 50). Building on Michael Omi and Howard Winant, Naa Oyo Kwate argues that the build environment is not the backdrop against which people understand race but is a racial project itself that teaches residents and consumers what Blackness means (Kwate, 2019: 25). Images and products that feature subservient Black cooks, for example, circulate and are readily consumed precisely because of stereotypes about southern life that northern city residents have long used as evidence that the south is more regressive. As Hunter and Robinson argue, however, there is no south and north; just multiple souths with their own specific manifestations of anti-Black racism and Black resistance (Hunter and Robinson, 2018).

When Kameron explained the distinction between “Washington” and “D.C.,” she was repeating what other Washingtonians have articulated as how they experience the bifurcated city. While physical, financial, and social barriers prevented many of Ward 7’s residents from easily traversing these two worlds, mambo sauce traveled freely. The palate and “taste” became an embodied, contested borderland in itself. While Deon proudly and patiently explained mambo sauce to me on our walk through his neighborhood, what sold for less than \$10 in the average carryout—chicken wings and mambo sauce—had a different register once it traveled to the Hamilton and became Capital City’s signature sauce, which is now available at Safeway, Giant, Wegmans, ShopRite, and Walmart as well as Papa John’s and Amazon.

Not everyone in “Washington” sees mambo sauce as a representation of D.C., however. In November 2018, Mayor Muriel Bowser posted the following status on her Facebook page: “is anybody else annoyed by Mumbo sauce? I wish people would stop suggesting that it is quintessential DC. I’m just saying I was a full grown woman before I had heard of mumbo sauce! So there, I’ve said it.” Seizing the moment, *The Washington Post* used Muriel Bowser’s statement and responses to it as a third opportunity to write about mambo sauce: “D.C.’s Mayor Disses Mumbo Sauce and the Reactions Say a Lot About the Changing Face of Washington.” After offering some comments on Muriel Bowser’s background—a Black woman who grew up in Northeast D.C. and attended private school—reporter Tim Carman suggested that it was not simply that Bowser offered an opinion but that she made clear the divisions between old and new, wealthy and working class, Black and white:

to some on Facebook, Bowser had, with her late-night mumbo-sauce trolling, just aligned herself with the influx of newcomers and gentrifiers who have changed Chocolate City to Latte City. Few, if any, would be familiar with mumbo sauce, let alone would have grown up with the sticky wing sauce. (Carman, 2018)

Further, he argues, “with her short, perhaps insensitive Facebook post, Bowser just discounted [several generations of Black Washingtonians’] history” (Carman, 2018).

Mayor Bowser’s Facebook post questions the authenticity of mambo sauce as a part of D.C. identity and reveals more about her social distance from the spaces in which mambo sauce is ubiquitous than the sauce’s significance. Mayor Bowser’s comments highlight the class aspect of mambo sauce in ways that are different from the nostalgia bound up in Capital City’s sauce, the upscale menu of the Hamilton, or the various ways other entities have extracted mambo sauce from its carryout roots. Bowser straddles a line between making her own claim to the city as someone born and raised there and speaking from a seat of power as the mayor of a city with some of the most rapid and entrenched gentrification in the country. As the former, Bowser is one of many middle and upper class Black D.C. residents whose everyday lives take forms and routes apart and away from carryouts and mambo sauce. As the latter, Bowser’s post raises the question: who and what are the D.C. of her imagination?

Conclusion

These positionalities and struggles over the meaning of place add a geographic dimension to practices of black reclamation. (McKittrick, 2006: 3)

Though its origins are murky, mambo sauce is a recognizable cultural staple for many long-term, Black residents in D.C. More than that, however, mambo sauce represents a part of D.C. identity that, prior to the ravishes of gentrification, had received very little attention in mainstream media, though Black residents claimed it as part of everyday life. It was, for many, something unique to D.C. that they could boast about; a product of the everyday lives and creations produced and circulated within Black spaces. In my relationship with Deon, mambo sauce was a conduit through which I gained some entryway into the “real” D.C. that Kameron knew and loved. For the Joneses, it was a way to give a taste of home to those who may no longer live in D.C. In all these cases, the meanings and circulations among other Black people, sometimes tacitly, pointed to how Black people create home in inhospitable places—how they create meaning where others have seen nothing. These strategies of making home in spaces that have been ignored or denied equity are part of a longer history of Black fugitivity and placemaking (Wright, 2020). That is part of Black life in the United States: making ways where others see none; insisting on life in spite of displacement, surveillance, and erasure. Yet, processes of gentrification are such that the unseeable, the uninhabitable, and the formally unknowable become the most readily desired and devoured (McKittrick,

2011). Land speculators, businesses, and new residents follow colonial logics of capitalist markets that emphasize buying and selling over people and equity. Within this context, mambo sauce acquires another meaning: one that asserts itself as a D.C. staple, despite the displacement of the people and spaces that produce, consume, and claim it as their own.

Stuart Hall argues that any examination of Black popular culture or production must begin with an interrogation of the moment in which said production is being explored (Hall, 1993: 104). Though mambo sauce has a history in D.C. that predates gentrification, its meaning and circulation in the current moment is, at least in part, bound up with the shifting demographics of the city such that even in its continuity, it is not simply a replication of itself from earlier moments. An examination of its role in this period of intense gentrification unearths how long-term D.C. residents understand the divides within the city and how this condiment associated with working class Black neighborhoods travels well beyond those neighborhoods.

It is the tensions between how mambo sauce is celebrated as part of Black D.C. culture and how mambo sauce travels while Black residents experience displacement that has resonance with critical food geographies. As the McKittrick quote above illustrates, these tensions are not merely about a condiment but are struggles through which Black residents (re)claim space. Power struggles in a city that is quickly changing are expressed through its circulation and consumption. On the one hand, in its traveling, it demonstrates the ease with which blackness gets decoupled from mambo sauce as it circulates. On the other, lyrics like those from the go-go band Mambo Sauce and declarations like those of Kameron and Deon firmly declare both an identity and a claim to D.C. Critical food geography literature, though varied in scope and methods, has been concerned with transforming sociopolitical and spatial arrangements in order to create a more sustainable, equitable world. Black cultural production like Mambo Sauce's lyrics and the circulation of the sauce itself are opportunities to explore the dialectical relationships between identity, belonging, place, and power. Moreover, attention to what might otherwise seem unimportant to spatial analyses orient us toward being accountable not only to our intellectual and political interests but also to those expressed by communities themselves—even if they trouble our tidy theoretical claims. This is, perhaps, an underexplored aspect of food justice and food sovereignty that poses a question that may not be easily answered: how do we reconcile communities' preferences for and attachments to foods like mambo sauce with a broader movement that often—even if unintentionally—reifies narrow notions of health and healthiness? More than an extension of sociohistorical or socioeconomic circumstances (Rose, 1992), mambo sauce, in its mystique, is a representation of the worlds in which Black people can

live. In physical form, it is a set of improvisations that—outside of commercial commodification—is not easily standardized as each place has its own recipe. In metaphor, it demonstrates the enduring legacies and impact of Blackness in the city: “We ain’t going nowhere/We gon’ be right here/We ain’t going nowhere/We gon’ be right here/We ain’t going nowhere/Welcome to D.C.”

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Notes

1. I use “mambo” throughout the article based on its use in other forms of cultural production (the band and company referred to in this article, for example, both use this spelling), guidance from long-term D.C. residents, and observation of carryout menus.
2. For more discussions of these policies, Paul Schwartzman’s “Whose H Street is It, Anyway?” published in the Washington Post on 4 April 2006. Also see Chapter 4 in Summers’ *Black in Place*.

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