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Can you have it your way? The consequences of racial capitalism in fast food in America

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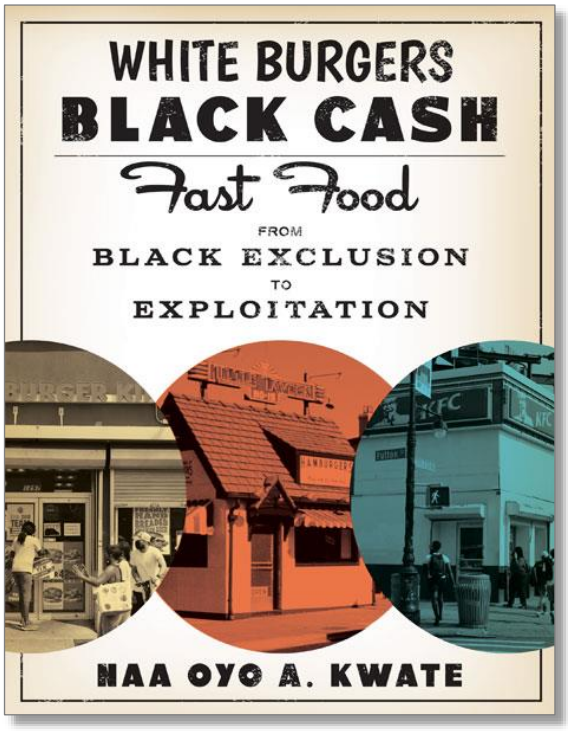

Review of *White Burgers, Black Cash: Fast Food from Black Exclusion to Exploitation*, by Naa Oyo A. Kwate. (2023). Published by University of Minnesota Press. Available as hardcover and Kindle; 472 pages. Publisher's website: https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/white-burgers-black-cash

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White Burgers, Black Cash deftly traces the intertwined history of fast food, race, and capital in America. The goal of this monograph is to chart the racial and spatial pathways fast food has traveled, from its genesis in the early twentieth century to the contemporary moment—where it has become heavily concentrated in Black communities. From the onset, Naa Oyo A. Kwate sets the tone for the rest of the study, stating, "Fast food has always been a fundamentally anti-Black enterprise" (p. xiii). The introduction shows how the anti-Blackness of fast food goes beyond health disparities, and instead is rooted in the subordination of Blackness throughout history. The book sets out to outline the history of fast food's color line, with an emphasis on three cities: New York, Chicago, and Washington D.C. The book is segmented into three major sections: "White Utopias," "Racial Turnover," "Black Catastrophe."

In "White Utopias," the history of what is re-

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ferred to as the "first and second generation of fast food" is told, with reference to the first restaurants that established the culture of fast food in America. This first section emphasizes the Whiteness of these initial restaurants, noting that the names (e.g., White Castle), the staff, the neighborhoods in which they were located, and even the bread adulated and prioritized Whiteness. The section goes on to expand on the ways Black people were excluded from these spaces as patrons, staff, operators, and owners.

The second and third chapters demonstrate how fast food restaurants avoided Black space by placing their restaurants in areas where Black customers could not be reliably served. As fast food moved to the suburbs, Kwate argues that it continued to espouse a racial logic in which Black people were not welcome in the suburban oases created to advance the American dream. Fast food companies sought to escape what they understood as the fraught space of urban areas—simultaneously dodging Black clientele. Respectability politics proved to be a force that meant that, although fast food was not readily available to Black patrons, it was not welcomed unequivocally, either. Part of this ambivalence was due to scholars who espoused dietary modification as a means of racial progress. Avoidance of fast food could be used as a tool to bolster respectability in Black families. It was thought that eating appropriately could "discipline their bodies for political purposes" (p. 42). W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington were among the Black scholars who encouraged Black people to attain racial progress through avoidance of unhealthy foods and "knickknacks" (p. 42; referring to cheese, crackers, desserts, and pork). "White Utopias" convincingly charts an argument that reorients the assumption that Black people lacked the taste and self-control required to resist fast food. Instead, Black people were excluded from fast food and were included only once it became profitable.

The second section, "Racial Turnover," expertly details how real estate, capital, and the object of celebrity were used to further subjugate Black communities. This section demonstrates the shift into what is called the "second generation of fast food" wherein fast food companies began to see urban centers as problematic, thus favoring White, suburban locales. However, the second-generation fast food chains began to encounter regulatory and community challenges to the installation of new fast food restaurants in the suburbs; unsurprisingly, their attention turned back to urban centers. Once fast food chains realized that there was money to be made off Black communities, there was an influx of locations popping up and advertising dollars being spent catering to Black customers. "Racial Turnover" illustrates the willingness of corporate fast food chains to offload financial risk to black operators.

The final section, "Black Catastrophe," details the disastrous consequences of fast food's racist legacy on Black communities up to the contemporary moment. From their exclusion from fast food spaces in the 1960s, to their subjugation and exploitation in the '70s and '80s, this section emphasizes the shift in the purpose of fast food, that is to say, the shift from fast food as a simple business to fast food chains using real estate as a means of territorial demarcation. Fast food's cultural imagery began to shift from that of Whiteness to that of Blackness. Fast food's expansion into Black spaces was facilitated by the systemic racism that kept real estate values where Black people lived low. This allowed fast food chains to spread into Black communities despite contestation.

The argument of this section can be summed up as it is articulated in Chapter 12: Black urbanites became casualties of the war between fast food chains in the corporations' attempts to secure capital. Fast food chains were sure to take advantage of the increased poverty and joblessness, and the crack cocaine epidemic of the '80s. To borrow a term from Kwate, the effects of this "Blaxploitation" in fast food are still seen and felt in the current day. "Black Catastrophe" presents the third and current "generation" of fast food—a gentrified version of fast food that uses clever marketing and celebrity endorsements to its advantage in order to continue attracting customers. Recent examples include female rappers Saweetie and Megan Thee Stallion featured in McDonald's and Popeyes commercials and social media campaigns, respectively.

In the book's conclusion, the contempt shown for Blackness through the medium of fast

food is sharpened to a knife edge. This is achieved by reiterating how fast food controls territories, segregates markets, and extracts resources, all to the detriment of Black communities. The narrow definition of fast food employed in this book—limited almost exclusively to fried chicken and hamburgers—creates a more focused argument in regard to the cities presented; however, the consideration of the full scope of fast food across diasporic communities in the U.S. may complicate the arguments presented in the book.

While not stated as a primary goal, this book offers little in the way of potential policy changes or solutions to abate the ravaging of Black communities via fast food. That being said, *White Burgers, Black Cash* is critical reading for those interested in the racialized histories of food and the interactions of capital, race, space, and consumer culture. Additionally, it should be required reading for any food historian, or food studies scholar.