

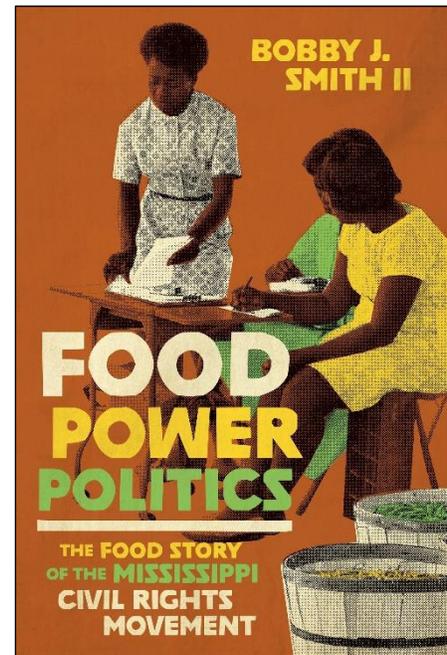
The political power of food: Food justice in the Mississippi Delta

Book review by

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Review of *Food Power Politics: The Food Story of The Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, by Bobby J. Smith II. (2023). Published by The University of North Carolina Press. Available as paperback, hardcover, PDF, ePub, and Kindle; 216 pages. Publisher's website: <https://uncpress.org/9781469675077/food-power-politics/>



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Bobby J. Smith II's book, *Food Power Politics: The Food Story of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*, traces the journey of food justice efforts in the Mississippi Delta during the Civil Rights era. Smith builds on work already produced in Black critical food studies but charts his own path, investigating food and the civil rights movement. The Mississippi Delta was and is one of the poorest regions in

the United States, with its poverty's roots linked to the systematic oppression of African Americans. The author writes about the food story of the Mississippi Delta and how the white power structure used food as a weapon to oppress African Americans. This account is possible via his interdisciplinary approach using history, sociology, and oral historical accounts to tell the food story of the Delta region. Smith does not make this book a story solely based on oppression; he gives agency and power to the ways African Americans in the region resisted white control over their food systems and diets.

Smith opens the book with an analysis of the Greenwood Food Blockade that occurred in 1962–1963. This was when the white power structure of Leflore County, Mississippi (MS), voted to stop

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offering the Federal Surplus Food Commodity Program in response to voting rights activism in the county. Smith states clearly how food played a role in whites holding on to the political control of the Delta region, with food becoming a weapon that white supremacists could wield to hold onto power. Despite the efforts of those in power to silence African American political rights, Smith demonstrates how Black citizens resisted the control over their diets with the help of civil rights activists, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). Both of these groups launched the Foods for Freedom Campaign, riling up support for food donations to the severely impoverished Mississippi Delta region. Smith uses this time in history to mark the continuation of African American efforts to sustain their food systems despite white-imposed control.

In Chapter 2, Smith delves into the rise of the food stamp program and how it replaced the federal surplus commodities program. The Federal Surplus Commodities program sustained Black sharecroppers during and after the Great Depression but left white grocery store owners upset over the loss of business. The Federal Surplus Commodities program was replaced by The new Federal Food Stamp Program created in 1961 now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). The Federal Food Stamp Program aided Black sharecroppers to attain food but required recipients to earn a minimum amount of wages that many sharecroppers could not meet due to unemployment and poor pay. Smith makes his contribution to scholarship on food stamps by analyzing the role of white grocers who were more concerned over making a profit off of impoverished Black laborers. Smith proves how the Federal Food Stamp Program was another tool in white supremacist exerting their power over Black bodies and controlling access to food.

Chapter 3 is grounded in the spirit of cooperative action focusing on The North Bolivar County Farm Collective (NBCFC) that was a response to the struggle for food security in the Mississippi Delta region. . Smith points to how the cooperative was created in response to a worsening food crisis in the Delta caused by the production of cotton

over food and the increased uses of farm mechanization. This left many African Americans—who were once employed into a system of debt peonage unemployed and struggling even more to meet their nutritional needs. Smith binds the intellectual thought of creating a food cooperative to earlier movements of Black agrarianism starting with Geoge Washington Carver and other African American agricultural thinkers of the past. The merging of traditions and ideas creates a continuing legacy of what it means to work the land as an African American. The author elevates NBCFC as a social-change solution providing jobs, nutrition security, and education to community members, thus creating a successful Black food economy. The author does not shy away from the national agricultural trends that presented difficulties for the cooperative’s goal to produce food crops over cash crops.

Chapter 4 describes the modern-day solutions and activism to reduce Black food insecurity in the Mississippi Delta region by taking a close-up look at the North Bolivar County Good Food Revolution (NBCGFR). Smith is not quick to say that food insecurity has lessened; rather, he reflects on the continued industrialization of agriculture that began in the 1960s. NBCGFR is fighting to reestablish Black food communities in a region dominated by fast-food stores and a scarcity of fresh food. What makes NBCGFR special is the participation of youth in the organization’s leadership. Thus Smith illustrates a transfer of power from older generations of farmers to younger generations to continue the fight for food sovereignty.

The concluding chapter is a strong reiteration of the important contribution the Mississippi Delta food story has contributed to the fight for Black food sovereignty. Clear distinctions are noted between the violence initiated through food and the emancipatory movements led to achieving food sovereignty. Smith reiterates how the right to healthy food is part of the Black freedom movement bound into the will of liberation. Smith interrogates the type of “power” that African Americans want and states that a distinction needs to be made in this subject matter

Food Power Politics is a well-written book crafted in the spirit of Black food justice. It is a must-read

for current food justice scholars and activists seeking to address the challenges people face in an inequitable food system. This book does not only build off of current Black food justice scholarship but presents new ways to think about Black food geographies and the role of politics in shaping food systems. Smith challenges scholars, policy makers, and activists on their idea of food justice and Black

food futures in an industrialized food economy. Giving agency to one of the poorest regions in the country (the Mississippi Delta, specifically in the genre of civil rights), this book adds to current literature by bringing forth a new lens for how African Americans have fought historically for their rights in the discipline of food.

