

“Checking In with Your People”: Food, Mutual Aid, Black Feminism, and COVID-19

APRIL 20, 2020: OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

In the early months of this pandemic, we are experiencing layered crises. Millions of people are “essential” workers in hospitals, grocery stores, and on farms, unable to shelter. The U.S. State Department hastily relocated me from the northern Italian town where I study food, migration, and ecology. I am somehow back in Oakland, a place I’ve lived intermittently but that has sadly never felt like home.

Neither my family nor work is in Oakland. But there are people I love here. When I returned here in mid-March, as travel bans went into effect, these friends welcomed me with warmth and resources: *Do you have somewhere to stay? What do you mean, all of your things are in Italy? Can I bring you groceries?*

Most of those friends lost their jobs in the days following my return. Shelter-in-place orders clarified my loved ones’ tenuous professions. So many of us work in kitchens, on land, at markets, and in bars and event spaces across the East Bay. Some work from home, navigating health needs already requiring a version of shelter-in-place. Back in Oakland, I grapple with displacement and upheaval that, as a food worker, is always at the front of my mind, as well as in sore, tired places on my body.

I heard murmurs of mutual care immediately. Delency Parham and Blake Simons of *Hella Black Podcast* describe mutual aid as “checking in with your people ... any skill you can offer to support someone’s survival.” Mutual aid is rooted in black feminist thought, grounded in the mechanics of care, interlocked fates, and a commitment to the most vulnerable among us. Expanded forms of mutual care have emerged from the people and places made most vulnerable in the face of COVID-19. I am inspired by the swift, intimate ways food workers, mostly running on empty, have emerged as imminent care providers in a crisis whose demands far exceed what our

governments provide. I feel anxious thinking about what this lack of sufficient state care says about how our local and federal governments value us, in crisis or beyond.

Still, the network of care is profound. Those who currently have safe access to food and shelter anxiously navigate rent and utilities demands in the wake of record-breaking unemployment. Millions of food workers have lost their jobs, and are still asking how they can be of service. Folks used to having little are checking in with each other even *more*, making sure hot water is kept on, and coordinating grocery and toilet paper deliveries.

Small businesses are also engaging in acts of mutual care. Diaspora Co, a queer, women-owned sustainably sourced spice company, reallocated resources to community kitchens in need. After sheltering-in-place began, Diaspora Co.’s Sana Javeri Kadri reached out across her platforms, seeking names of food businesses in dire need. Days later, Javeri Kadri posted receipts sharing where she had sent thousand-dollar relief grants, critical support as businesses struggle to pay some of their most at-risk and precarious workers. We want each other to survive.

Reem’s, an Arab street corner bakery in East Oakland’s Fruitvale neighborhood, was one of those businesses. Reem’s was also the first woman-run restaurant to take me on as a line cook, the first queer kitchen that found me. I remember long days on my feet, and the deep gratitude of being welcomed into a humbling meshwork of food, people, activism, and place.

Reem’s closes by the end of March, one of many heartbreaks in this time. It stings. Days later, I learn of the closing of Mamacitas Cafe, a woman-owned social food enterprise that empowers women with good food jobs, and whose kitchen I managed right before moving to Italy. I lose sleep speculating about who else won’t return whenever and however the rest of us do.

I’m held up by Reem’s and *Colectivo Reem’s*, the bakery’s emerging workers’ collective. As the pandemic ramps up,

Colectivo Reem's strategizes long-term survival and a "transition toward greater collectivity, transparency, and democracy in the workplace." As Reem's converts itself into a commissary kitchen to prepare hundreds of meals for the most vulnerable families across the East Bay, *Colectivo* leads the push for increased worker participation and a new sustainable restaurant model. Though Reem's may not be itself any longer, I know the space finds altered yet meaningful form.

Not all of us can stay home. With shelter-in-place orders announced, West Oakland-based People's Breakfast Oakland (PBO) continued packing and coordinating hot meals and hygiene packs for homeless encampments. Addressing the inadequate space at shelters amid increasing COVID-19 cases, PBO collaborated with Freedom Clinic to expand their capacity to feed people while implementing safety and distancing precautions. PBO's network has gone from packing meals once a month to serving two hundred meals a day, three times a week, to Oakland neighborhoods with high levels of homelessness.

On Hella Black Podcast, Parham and Simons, who also run PBO, reflect on community-run food infrastructure as a

vehicle of mutual aid. Parham says, "Contributing to the survival of poor black folks is a reciprocal [act]...; them surviving makes our relationship reciprocal." Simon audibly agrees, as do I. Mutual aid among food workers becomes a tool to redirect the rage that spills out of the body. Pandemic or not: if we don't take care of each other, no one else will.

Like most mornings, I'm unable to kick the habit of waking up to my phone. I check for updates from relief funds and small businesses providing dire public services that our cities can't, or won't. I see if anyone I know needs anything I can offer. Unemployed workers, especially food workers, continue to be urgent infrastructure in the pandemic's wake. In all of this, I heed activist-acupuncturist Mark Anthony Johnson's prayer, that "black wellness is the antithesis to state violence." Resiliency is threaded across our networks, formal and informal. Community expertise and lived experience perspectives will be critical to reinvesting in the Bay Area's food economy, enacting a much-needed ethics of deep, mutual care in a precarious time. In the meantime, I check in with my people, offering any skill I can to support someone's survival. 🍷