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Feeding the Other

Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries

By: Rebecca T. de Souza

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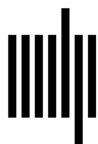

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1 Introduction: Neoliberal Stigma, Food Pantries, and an Unjust Food System

> Like so many things, it [WIC] really played a vital role in being able to get food and keeping my kids and myself fed. At the same time, there was always stigma attached to it. From the case manager to what they would call the "income maintenance" people. So you go into the government services building and you fill out this form and the person on the other desk is not nice. Not always but often and actually outright cruel a lot of times. I've had that experience. And then you go to the grocery store and with your food stamps, you buy soda and chips, people look at you and glare at you. But if you buy fruits and vegetables, they're pissed off at you because you're buying things that they can't afford. And so, no matter what you do, there's always this "hmmph." ...
>
> I mean, if you look back historically what we were founded on, the Puritan beliefs, you work hard and you're going to get somewhere. That's a myth. I mean, the truth is that it is a wonderful myth and it's a wonderful thing to believe in because a small percentage of people will work really hard and everything is going to fall into place. The majority of people are going to work really hard, but they're not going to have opportunities to meet their needs. So they need assistance. There's this idea that you've got some kind of character flaw or there's something wrong with who you are and the decisions you've made. That's unfortunate. I don't know if that has changed at all. It's been a long time since I've had food stamps. It's been a long time since I've had WIC.
>
> —Trinity, African American female, Ruby's Pantry client

Trinity has certainly hit the nail on the head. Trinity is an occasional client of Ruby's Pantry (RP), a food pantry run by a faith-based organization (FBO), where she pays twenty dollars in exchange for a large quantity of industrial food. Trinity was just one of the many women interviewed for this study who articulated so precisely the many ways in which she experiences stigma today. A shortage of resources means that Trinity must utilize

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charitable and government food assistance programs to feed her family. Quite ironically, the burden of stigma is most deeply experienced in her attempts to alleviate food insecurity. It is not the lack of food but the interactions she engages in to procure food that are stigmatizing. Suspicion surrounds her. As described in the excerpt, as a young working mum struggling to make ends meet, Trinity signed up for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) government food assistance program that provides food support to pregnant women. The WIC office was just one of many places where she felt devalued. But this was not all. Negative assumptions follow Trinity around multiple sites and spaces—from the benefits office to the grocery store. We are not privy to exactly what happened at the grocery store but may wonder what about Trinity makes her a "mark"? Is it because she uses an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card that disburses her food benefits? Is it because she has three children? Is it because she is Black[1]? Or is it because she has potato chips in her cart and fresh fruit? Most likely, it is a combination of all of the above.

Trinity identifies puritanical beliefs, the myth of the American dream, and more recent public health discourses as reasons for the stigma—and she is exactly right. Erving Goffman (1963, 3), who pioneered the scholarly work on stigma, defined *stigma* as a "deeply discrediting" attribute, by which stigmatized individuals are believed to possess a characteristic or a trait conveying a "devalued social identity." However, Goffman also argued that the issue at hand was not the attribute itself, but how such attributes came to be devalued or discredited in society. More recently, sociologists Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, in their work on the stigma of HIV and AIDS, argued that stigma was not so much about marks, but about social processes linked to power and domination that conferred negative meanings to marks, a phenomenon they referred to as the "political economy of stigma" (Parker and Aggleton 2003; see also Parker 2012). This is certainly the case here. Trinity is caught in a web of powerful political narratives, in which deep-seated ideologies interwoven through politics, religion, and race come together to justify negative perceptions about people like her—poor people, women, welfare recipients, and Black women on welfare. To be clear, stigmatizing narratives follow poor whites around as well, but they are intensified in the presence of darker skin tones.

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What Is This Book About?

This book is about *food justice* and, more precisely, the stigmatizing narratives that surround people who are hungry and food insecure. Gottlieb and Joshi (2010, 6) define *food justice* as "ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly." This is clearly not the case in the United States, which has one of the highest rates of hunger and food insecurity among developed nations. That rate increased from 10.5 percent in 2000 to about 12.5 percent in 2015 and has stayed roughly unchanged since then. Poor households, single parents, and communities of color are disproportionately affected. Food insecurity is almost three times higher among African American households (26.1 percent) and Hispanic households (23.7 percent) compared to white households (10.6 percent). Food insecurity is at 23.1 percent for households with children headed by a single man and a whopping 34.4 percent for households with children headed by a single woman (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, and Singh 2014). Regional and local-level data put food insecurity among Native populations anywhere between 30 and 50 percent (Blue Bird Jernigan et al. 2013). Food insecurity also results in health disparities—dramatically different physical health outcomes for different populations—thus violating the basic human rights of individuals (Chilton and Rose 2009).

In this book, I argue that stigmatizing narratives about those who are hungry and food insecure—that is, poor people, women, and racial minorities—serve to uphold and legitimize the unjust food system. I use the term *neoliberal stigma* to refer to a particular kind of Western and American narrative that focuses on individualism, hard work, and personal responsibility as defining attributes of human dignity and citizenship. When people do not live up to these parameters, for reasons out of their control, they are *marked* as irresponsible, unworthy, and "bad citizens," creating the "Us and Them" phenomenon. This book speaks to the burden of stigma that people who are raced, classed, and gendered face at the intersections of these identities in their attempts to manage hunger and food insecurity. This research project adds to the growing body of work on food justice by analyzing the stigma of food assistance—as well as the neoliberal turn that stigma takes within these contexts. Stigma is a sharp, poisonous undercurrent that runs rampant in the lives of the hungry and food insecure in the United States

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and yet one that is concealed and underestimated. By unpacking and interrogating discursive practices within food pantry spaces, this work continues the long journey toward food justice.

Despite several decades of calling for a new food system, issues of food access continue to be met with technical, informational, and therapeutic solutions focused on distributing surplus industrial food, increasing health awareness, and building food skills among poor citizens. These are small-scale and short-sighted solutions that place the burden of solving the problem of hunger on local communities and individuals, while state and corporate actors renege on their responsibilities. In this book, I argue that stigmatizing narratives that circulate around the hungry serve to uphold the unjust food system and forestall systemic change. Therefore, to bring about broader systemic change, we first need to shift the narratives around *what causes hunger* and *who the hungry are*. Just as racial ideologies and representations hold the racial structure in place (e.g., Hall 1997), so too do stigmatizing ideologies about the hungry hold the food system in place. This book is about unpacking how these discourses emerge and the expression they take so as to reconfigure the food system in the interests of justice.

Building off the political economy of stigma framework, this book shows that the process of stigmatization is entirely dependent on access to social, economic, and political power, which allow groups to identify difference, construct stereotypes, and separate people into categories. Scholars point out that stigma is as much about power and privilege as it is about marginalization and disenfranchisement (Link and Phelan 2014). The process of categorization after all is an exercise of power, although one that may be subverted by those who are marked (Crenshaw 1991). Stigma is about white privilege and systems of whiteness—the ordinary power ordinary white people have to control values, institutions, and environments. Stigma is about systemic patriarchy and the unearned privilege and priority given to male voices, issues, and worldviews.

Communication is central to the production of stigma, and thus stigma is about *discursive privilege*—the power to tell a story about who the Other is and who "We" are. Stigma is about the power to create narratives of similarity and difference, narratives of Us and Them, and use these stories to legitimize oppression. Stigma is witnessed in the way the media show up after the big food festival in North Minneapolis is over, a festival which was

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attended by several hundred “bright, shining, beautiful Black and brown faces,” as food advocate Aliyah said, to write about the one gunshot that rang out six hours later. Aliyah exclaimed: “We sent them press releases, why did they not write a story about the festival, but came running with their cameras when they heard about the gun shot.” Stigma is about the power to present and represent—the power to mark, assign, stereotype, and frame issues, people, and situations in particular ways. Stigma is about the power to levy accusations, to cast suspicion, and to be heard. Stigma is the power to shut up and silence others.

Trinity’s words in the opening excerpt get at the many ways in which people who use food assistance programs are stereotyped and caged within discursive boxes today, such that they are symbolically and materially violated even before they can speak. In her voice, we hear the multiplicative burden of oppression that food insecure women of color face. We hear logic and reason. We hear vision. However, this is a voice we rarely hear in the public sphere—a voice that is silenced, eclipsed, and invisible amid the frenzy of political discourses out to trap her. From a food justice lens, it is my argument that her voice must no longer be silenced, but instead be central to all discussions and actions surrounding food policy.

In this study, food pantries provide the starting point for the analysis of neoliberal stigma because they are the cornerstone of the government’s strategy to “end hunger.” Today, rather than legal entitlements, charitable food assistance programs have come to *stand in* for the state and function as arms of the government (Poppendieck 1999; Riches and Silvasti 2014). Although food pantries are at the very bottom of the totem pole in the food system, they are vital components in the system. Food pantries, though small individually, provide the largest-scale means to manage hunger. Of those needing emergency food assistance during the year, 92 percent obtain food from food pantries (Comstock and Pesheck 2013). Feeding America (FA) is a nationwide network of two hundred food banks operating sixty thousand food programs, of which approximately thirty-five thousand are food pantries. These programs alone serve roughly forty-five million people each year. In addition to these programs, there are pop-up and ad hoc food pantries that do not belong to the FA network. Despite the number of food pantries around, this colossal structure of the food system is frequently sidestepped in the literature. Food pantries are often exempt from critical interrogation because they are run by charitable organizations and

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enshrined in religious and moral discourses; 51 percent of FA programs rely entirely on volunteers, and 62 percent are run by faith-based organizations. Discourses of charity and good works make it really hard to critique these spaces, and, as a result, the many injustices of the food system remain hidden from view. Furthermore, because the functions of food pantries have been narrowly described in terms of "collecting and distributing food," they are rarely viewed as sites for organizing and activism.

This book is an invitation to think about food pantries not as charitable spaces, but as political and politicized spaces with the potential for activism and advocacy. I use the term *political* to refer not to voting behaviors or identification with political parties per se, but to deeply ingrained worldviews and ideological assumptions we hold about the world—in this case, views about the problem of hunger and food insecurity, its causes and solutions, and perceptions about who the hungry are. People who enter these spaces as donors, volunteers, or recipients bring with them deep-seated ideologies, social identities, and subjectivities, all of which inform practice. The organizations themselves have particular worldviews and visions that reflect underlying political ideologies. In these charitable enclaves, kindness and care coincide with racism, paternalism, and systems of poverty governance, as well as resistance to these systems. Although politics is typically concealed in spaces of charity, it does not disappear. Alongside moral and religious values, political ideologies remain an important subtext influencing thoughts and practices. It is my argument that all of these sacred cows need to be made visible and unpacked if we are to move toward a vision of food justice and reimagine food pantries as centers of activism.

This book is about prioritizing and foregrounding the voices, experiences, and realities of people who enter the food system through the backdoor—the food pantries. In a secondary definition, Gottlieb and Joshi (2010, 6) identify *food justice* as "a language and a set of meanings, told through stories as well as analysis, that illuminate how food injustices are experienced and how they can be challenged and overcome." This book, by documenting the voices, experiences, and realities of those who enter the food system through the backdoor, contributes to a more equitable way of knowing the food system—and hopefully a more equitable way of shaping policy. Hunger drives and fundraisers commodify the suffering of the hungry by presenting pathologizing images of the poor, while political discourses portray food insecure people as lacking in discipline, enacting poor food choices,

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and unconcerned about their health. Food pantries, food banks, hunger coalitions, and even those involved in advocacy such as Feeding America and Hunger Solutions rarely have people who have actually experienced hunger sit on their executive boards; here, too, voices of privilege dominate. Racism and elitism are embedded in the very structure of the food system. Communication scholar Mohan Dutta (2008) argues that the erasure of the voices of people living with hunger is critical to their marginalization. Social change is thus achieved by exposing systems of domination that privilege some forms of meanings over others and replacing them with new sets of meanings.

In this book, the voices of the hungry are foregrounded as they emerge within systems, organizations, and other voices of privilege. This research project interrogates the complex moral judgments made about those who experience hunger at food pantries operated by two faith-based organizations (FBOs) in Duluth, Minnesota (United States), and the ways in which these judgments are expressed organizationally and interpersonally, and internalized within individuals. Through a comparative case analysis, this book presents a rich and layered account of the ways in which neoliberal stigma is produced, reified, and resisted at each food pantry. Two primary research questions guide this study: In what way does the experience of neoliberal stigma intersect with embodied experiences of class, race, and gender? And how do organizational discourses and practices produce, create, and disrupt neoliberal stigma? Scholars argue that there is a tendency to generalize the effects of the neoliberal metanarrative, thereby missing all kinds of ethical and political activism in organizations (Barnes and Prior 2009; Cloke, May, and Williams 2017). Sensitive to this critique, this study unpacks the ways in which ethical engagement is practiced in these settings. So, if food justice is “a language and a set of meanings, told through stories as well as analysis, that illuminate how food injustices are experienced and how they can be challenged and overcome,” then my hope is that this book will provide a new set of meanings, stories, and analyses in the interests of justice.

Neoliberal Stigma

The concept of *neoliberal stigma* offers a way to think about stigmatizing narratives in the contemporary political and economic context. David

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Harvey (2005, 2) defines *neoliberalism* as "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human wellbeing can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade." Neoliberalism has been described as "capitalism with the gloves off" because it promotes the aggressive expansion of business forces without the mitigating balance of nonmarket and democratic forces (McChesney 2003, 8). In a neoliberal era, business forces are more aggressive and face less organized opposition than ever before. Politically, key values of neoliberalism include freedom of choice, market security, laissez-faire, and minimal government intervention; in terms of subjectivities, the main markers include hard work, self-help, and self-reliance (Larner 2000). In the Western context, the neoliberal metanarrative is also linked to notions of citizenship, providing prescriptions about what it means to be a good citizen, where citizenship is tied to economic productivity and making good/ healthy choices, while those who are economically underproductive are marked as lazy, deviant, and irresponsible citizens (Holborow 2015; Rose 1999).

Neoliberal stigma occurs when markers of hard work, personal responsibility, and economic citizenship are applied in a variety of contexts, creating social distance between groups. Within a neoliberal mindset, systemic problems are recast through the process of subjectification, such that a problem like hunger is reframed as a problem *of the hungry*. So when Trinity says, "There's this idea that you've got some kind of character flaw," it falls right within the conceptual framework of neoliberal stigma. Neoliberal stigma can be identified in the discursive practices of framing, blaming, and shaming that cast suspicion on the motives, intentions, and moral character of Others and in so doing silences them. Centering the analysis on neoliberal stigma means attending to the ways in which these communicative processes circulate around the food insecure and operate in the service of power: structures of capitalism, racism, and nationalism.

The concept of neoliberal stigma draws heavily upon the age-old Calvinist distinction between "deserving and undeserving poor." Calvinism, a Christian denomination found in seventeenth-century England, viewed work as an absolute duty, a spiritual end in itself, and the best way to please God. In this European theological framework, later transported to America, those who did not work were damned regardless of whether they were rich

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or poor, although economic success was seen as a sign of God's election (Waxman 1983). In the 1990s, these distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor were deployed in the United States to justify welfare reform and usher in a new era of aggressive neoliberal policies. Indeed Parker (2012, 166) notes that "stigma is not a free-floating social phenomenon." Instead, "the period in which a stigma appears and the form it takes are always influenced by historical circumstances" (166).

In using the term *neoliberal stigma*, I cast a wider and more contemporary net. Neoliberal stigma prioritizes work, where work is tied to values of self-sufficiency, personal responsibility, and freedom of choice. In this framework, wealth *is* valued for its own sake—not necessarily because it is an indicator of hard work. Wealth equals accountability. Wealth symbolizes personal responsibility regardless of how the wealth was produced. Wealth humanizes individuals. In the framework of neoliberal stigma, the underlying basis for evaluation is not spirituality alone, but moves between spiritual, economic, and nationalistic worldviews. Thus, the binary of "deserving and undeserving" gives way to the language of hard work, responsibility, entrepreneurialism, nationalism, citizenship, and self-sufficiency. Morality and ethics are not debates about inherent values, character, or behavior, but about the ability to produce value in the marketplace or, conversely, not to detract value from it. Furthermore, neoliberalism, though it purports to be neutral—judging all equally based on economic logic—is in fact not. All are *not* treated equally even in the marketplace. Drawing on the work of critical race scholars, I argue that in the case of neoliberal stigma explicit interpersonal racism, "color-blind" racism, and the racism inscribed in rules and governance procedures are used to discriminate against people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Goldberg 2009). Business, legal, and administrative rationalities become fronts for racism, sexism, and classism. Because of its alleged neutrality, neoliberal stigma finds expression among conservatives, liberals, and across the political spectrum.

The effects of neoliberal stigma on those who are hungry and food insecure are multiple and occur at emotional, social, and political levels. At the emotional level, embarrassment and shame are central to the experience of hunger in the United States today (De Marco, Thorburn, and Kue 2009; Dutta, Anaele, and Jones 2013; Garthwaite 2016). The stigma of hunger leads to a double burden: the economic burden of trying to put food on the table and the psychological burden of knowing that society stigmatizes

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you as deviant, abnormal, and a bad citizen. Psychological aspects include worry, anxiety, and sadness about the family food supply, feelings of having no choice in the foods eaten, and shame and fear of being labeled as poor (Connell et al. 2005). In general, people who internalize negative stereotypes may experience psychological effects such as poor self-esteem and self-concept, which can result in anxiety and depression (Corrigan, Larson, and Rusch 2009; Miller and Major 2000).

Socially, for individuals whose "spoiled identity" is not known or visible to others, managing information about themselves is a constant struggle to avoid rejection; this might mean concealing information about oneself or preempting stigma by disclosing information about oneself (Goffman 1963; Meisenbach 2010). Stigma fractures communities and keeps individuals disconnected and isolated from each other and mainstream society. Stigma has the ultimate effect of enhancing perceptions of social distance and keeping people away from other people and spaces. Neoliberal stigma and the narratives that come with it are divisive because they script how we think about, communicate, and relate to the paradigmatic Other. Neoliberal stigma creates suspicion and doubt, and it has a silencing effect on individuals and communities.

At the political level, stigmatizing ideologies are sedimented within laws and institutions. Thus, even in the absence of person-to-person stigma, macrolevel structures control and discriminate against communities—a phenomenon referred to as "stigma power" (Link and Phelan 2014). When individuals attempt to remedy their food insecurity, it unleashes the force of these moralizations, be it at the benefits office, the grocery store, or food pantries. Stigma can thus prevent people from accessing and demanding their legal entitlements. This is why Trinity says, "It's been a long time since I've had food stamps. It's been a long time since I've had WIC."

Food, Discourse, and the Political Economy of Stigma

Food *communicates* (Greene and Cramer 2011). The discursive practices surrounding food create and convey meaning and are therefore easily linked to stigma processes. From the absence and presence of food in our daily lives, from the type of food we eat to the quantity and quality of food to where we get our food, food marks us out as rich/poor, weak/strong, intelligent/ignorant, cultured/uncultured, careful/careless, moral/immoral,

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and healthy/unhealthy. Food communicates through physical inscriptions it makes on and "in" bodies through conditions of emaciation, starvation, anorexia, overweight, and obesity. Particularly with regards to obesity, in the present historical moment, this hypervisible condition is presented as evidence of poor eating habits for which individuals are held personally responsible. Individuals marked by weight are blamed for their intrinsic laziness, lack of desire for self-improvement, weak character, and recalcitrant bodies, meanings which are intensified at the intersections of class and race. In short, our bodies communicate. They tell stories about us—stories that serve as a sharp reminder of how the human body is not a given reality; rather, bodies are inscribed with social and biomedical meanings (Lupton 2003).

Food is political. According to Spurlock (2009, 7), discursive practices surrounding food are neither neutral nor apolitical, but rather "capable of constituting communities and imaginaries, simultaneously drawing and obliterating boundaries." In contemporary society, the relationships among social identity structures of class, race, and gender are increasingly tied to particular food practices. Critical rhetorical scholar Helene Shugart (2014, 8) argues that it is through the realm of food that class is constructed and performed today: "contemporary discourse around good food functions to reinstate and recalibrate the culturally resonant national mythology of class, with a particular eye to the restoration of a middle class." Research by Dougherty et al. (2016) suggests that the way people communicate about food has become a marker of social class. People from different class backgrounds talk about food differently—and especially for middle-class families hit by hard times and unemployment, food represents a particular discursive struggle to manage class location and class slippage.

Food is a marker of citizenship. Through food and food practices, we come to understand who is prioritized and who is an "ideal citizen." Using a rights and responsibility framework, good citizens are those who work hard and do not use food assistance or welfare—a belief that can be traced back to the Calvinist tradition in seventeenth-century England (Waxman 1983). In the UK, geographer and policy analyst Kayleigh Garthwaite (2017) observes that the rise of food banks has been accompanied by myths, moral judgements, and misconceptions about people seeking food. Political narratives—in particular, conservative government rhetoric—invoke Calvinist distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor and responsibilize

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individuals for their food bank use. Food pantry users are characterized as selfish and lazy, as those who do not pay for their rent or provide food for their children, but instead spend their money on alcohol, drugs, and large televisions. Similar themes are found in the United States as well. A study by Dutta, Anaele, and Jones (2013) found that stigma was a key reason participants did not use food pantries, *despite* hunger. Perceptions of being lazy acted as barriers to seeking out food pantry support and other resources. As one participant noted: "You are on food stamps, lot of people look down on you. They think that you are lazy." Another participant noted that because of this stigma, "people think that they can just throw food at us" (11).

Food is a marker of *health* citizenship. Good health citizens are expected to care for their bodies so as to limit the harm they might cause to other citizens and the nation state (Petersen and Lupton 1996). Historically, the notion of citizenship has meant participation in political and collective life, but today citizenship means the exercise of healthy and morally sound lifestyle choices even amid the oppressive forces of racism, class inequities, and unhealthy environments. Good citizens are those who make good food choices and do not burden the public health system. While seemingly positive and benign, the "new public health" has shifted the meaning of citizenship to focus on individual and internal responsibilities for health and wellbeing, while sidestepping the role of governments and institutions (Petersen and Lupton 1996). The "good food movement" today, with its directives on what to eat, has broadened the gulf between "good health citizens"—those who follow public health directives and "bad health citizens"—those who do not, the so-called cultural dupes who are enslaved to the system of industrial agriculture (Shugart 2014). This is why Trinity is chastised for "choosing" bad food; the implication is that she is not motivated to take care of her health. Trinity is also chastised for choosing good food, because as a Black woman she falls right into the discursive trope of the "welfare queen," a trope that goes all the way back to the welfare debates of the 1990s. It refers to a woman, usually Black, who in the public imaginary shirks work and abuses the system by buying so-called luxury foods using public tax dollars (McCormack 2004). So, damned if you do, damned if you don't. A variety of discourses come together to stereotype or "fix" Trinity in place—her complexity, her desire, her intellect, and her creativity erased.

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The Entrepreneurialism of Hunger Solutions

One of the earliest indictments of the emergency food assistance system was made by Janet Poppendieck (1999) in her book *Sweet Charity? Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement.* Her work examined processes through which emergency food assistance had become a stable and institutionalized feature of the economy to solve the problem of hunger in the United States. She wrote provocatively that "fighting hunger has become a national pastime" (24). The emergency food industry, with its explosion of food banks and church-basement food pantries, holiday giveaways, mail-carrier drives, and soup kitchens, exploded on the scene during the 1980s in conjunction with the government's "roll-back" neoliberal policies that deflected responsibility away from the government. She argued: "The resurgence of charity is at once a *symptom* and a *cause* of our society's failure to face up to and deal with the erosion of equality. … It creates a culture of charity that normalizes destitution and legitimates personal generosity as a response to major social and economic dislocation" (5; emphasis in original). In her critique, Poppendieck laid out the "seven deadly ins" of charitable food assistance: insufficiency, inappropriateness, nutritional inadequacy, instability, inaccessibility, inefficiency, and finally indignity or the stigma and Us and Them dynamic present in food banks.

Poppendieck's book is one of the most comprehensive critiques of food pantries; however, it has been nearly two decades since she wrote her treatise. Since then, hunger has been on the rise, as have food pantries and food banks. SNAP benefits have been inadequate at meeting people's food needs, so charitable assistance has expanded. In the last decade, the need for charitable food support increased 166 percent, with 92 percent of those needing food during the year obtaining it through the charitable food system (Comstock and Pesheck 2013). In Minnesota, the state where I have lived for the last ten years, food shelves are visited by approximately nine thousand people each day; in 2017, Minnesotans visited food shelves 3,402,077 times, which was the highest number of visits in recorded history—about fifty thousand more visits than the previous high set in 2014 (Hunger Solutions 2018). Hunger Solutions, an advocacy organization notes: "This [2017] marks the seventh consecutive year with more than 3 million visits to our food shelves. In other words, since the recession, over three million food

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shelf visits has become the "new normal" in Minnesota" (Hunger Solutions 2018).

Indeed, charitable food assistance is a big business today, which takes place through a complex set of public and private/profit and nonprofit partnerships. In his book *Big Hunger*, Andrew Fisher (2017) refers to this as the "hunger industrial complex." This network is made up of private, public, corporate, and community actors who come together to deliver, distribute, or cook food for the hungry and food insecure. Fisher argues that the problematic relationships between government and nongovernment entities have resulted in a self-perpetuating hunger industrial complex, in which antihunger advocates have failed to hold corporations and the government accountable for these larger problems.

A Deer Caught in the Headlights

Although Poppendieck and a host of scholars and activists have called for dismantling the hunger industrial complex and food pantries, this has not happened. In fact, much work is being done to make them bigger, healthier, and more "entrepreneurial" through the use of business practices. There are food pantries that have started to charge a small fee for food, pantries that encourage "work for food," and pantries that use marketing and sales techniques to promote healthy choices. I attended the Food Access Summit 2014: Organize for Equity, held in Duluth, at which only three panels addressed food pantry issues. Despite the *organize for equity* subtitle, each panel focused on the question of how to *improve* food pantries, rather than how to question the inequities that undergird them. The first panel centered on how to operate community gardens for food shelves, another focused on how to promote healthy choices, and a third discussed how to procure culturally appropriate food for African immigrant communities. The Minnesota Food Charter also was presented at this conference, a document which noted the rising problem of hunger; however, here too solutions were restricted to providing healthier and more culturally appropriate foods at food pantries. The charter applauded Minnesota for being a food and farm economic powerhouse—the fifth-largest agricultural economy in the United States—and, no surprise, most of the solutions presented served the interests of agroindustries.

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At the same Food Access Summit, a telling moment occurred that highlighted the superficial interpretation of the phrase *organize for equity*, as well as the problematics of white liberalism. One of the four white female panelists was discussing how she procured meat for her food pantry clients—*even venison*, she noted excitedly. After she finished, a hand went up in the audience, from a woman who identified herself as Native. She went on to explain the irony of how she, an indigenous woman, could get a pound of venison from the local food shelf, but not through her own traditional hunting practices. She pointed out that her family was forced to go through numerous hunting and fishing regulatory procedures, including paying for a butcher to carve up the animal. She scoffed, "You know, my community, we were doing that long before anyone else, as if we need to go to a butcher!"

The panelists were caught off-guard by this woman who, like Trinity, in one brief moment had hit the nail on the head: she'd identified a commodified food system that makes those who hunt, grow, and produce food starve, while those who have never produced food thrive; a food system that destroys traditional food systems, replaces them with industrial food, and then frames exploited communities as dupes; a food system that is not racially neutral, but that both steals the labor of people of color and then starves them; a food system that is a prime example of the twin forces of capitalism and racism at work. A food system that is made of various actors, who dutifully play their roles and in so doing keep it in place. Yes, there it was. In one fell swoop, this woman challenged centuries of being discursively "fixed in place" to make one of the most astute comments at the conference. But her question was met with blank stares, awkward silence, a proverbial deer caught in the headlights moment, and an inevitable topic shift. This was whiteness at its worst: silent, innocent, fragile, powerful, and oppressive. This interaction captured for me the vast social distance that exists within food pantries between givers and receivers and Us and Them; it is a distance that stems from the tyranny of whiteness, color-blind racism, and neoliberal mindsets.

The Study

Relatively new to Duluth at the time, my spouse and I were driving back to our home when we saw a long line of people carrying laundry baskets

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outside of the First United Methodist Church, locally known as the Coppertop Church. The line went through the parking lot into the street, causing a traffic jam at an already busy intersection. The car registered -5°F, cold even for a December evening in Duluth. We later learned that this line was for the Ruby's Pantry (RP) food distribution, a place where people could pay fifteen dollars and receive thirty to forty pounds of food; the price went up to twenty dollars two years later. The long line, the laundry baskets, and what seemed to be a lot of people lugging pounds of food created a spectacle that was both disturbing and intriguing. I grew up in Bangalore, India, a city of eight million, where hunger and food insecurity are still commonplace experiences. However, the breadlines—and the indignity of breadlines—in a country of wealth, abundance, and the "American dream" were disturbing.

This project is based on four years of ethnographic field work, including in-depth interviews, field work, informal conversations, and surveys with staff and clients.[2] The two food pantries featured in this project—Chum and Ruby's Pantry—vary in religious and political orientation, organizational structure, quantity and quality of food distributed, clientele, and relationship to the state. Chum might be categorized as a traditional food pantry, whereas RP is an example of a type of entrepreneurial food pantry, which uses a quasi-market model to provide food support. Chum is a more politically liberal organization, which applies a social justice orientation to its work and receives funding from a variety of sources, including government funds. RP, on the other hand, is rooted in evangelical conservative leanings, makes no claims about social justice, and positions itself in opposition to government programs.

Reflexivity in the Research Process

My interest in issues of marginality stem from my own markings that occur at the intersection of nation, culture, religion, and race. Growing up middle-class in India meant that structural deprivation was never part of my story, and even today I remain an outsider to poverty—but I understand what it means to be "different." I moved from India to the United States almost fifteen years ago, already inscribed with a complex postcolonial history and biography. In India, my first name was always an immediate marker of my Christian roots and my last name a marker of the nearly five hundred years of Portuguese rule in Goa, the place where my ancestors were born. As part

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of a Christian minority in a predominantly Hindu country, I grew up knowing that Christianity was the language of the white colonizer, but also that Indian Christians were hardly that. The Christ I knew was a “God of the oppressed,” to borrow a phrase from Black theologian James Cone (1997), the God of struggle, the God of the poor, the God that I rejected many times to fit in. I grew up experiencing the discursive erasures and microaggressions common to any minoritized community, but also the radical multiculturalism of an ancient and experienced civilization with porous national borders and easy nationalism—although this is quickly changing with the rise of Hindu nationalism. Later, as an immigrant in the United States, a woman, a woman of color, the vector of my marginality was no longer religion but rather the color of my skin. In graduate school, even as I was serving myself cheap food from a buffet, a friend of mine—yes, a Black friend—observed quietly: “You walk around as though you don’t know you’re different.” In many ways, coming to America was a story of learning how to be raced, learning how to be hypervisible and invisible, and learning how to be vigilant about my body, my voice, my accent, and the meanings they convey to the white people sitting in my head and in the playgrounds my children run around in. Across both continents, patriarchy has been like sinking sand in my life slowly pulling me down and structuring my thought and behavior through its hegemonic norms and deft disciplinary tactics.

As is true of most people who share my categories, I am sensitive to the fact that my body betrays a story, which shows up in the research process. Indeed, Harding (2004, 138) argues that “understanding ourselves and the world around us requires understanding what others think of us and our beliefs and actions, not just what we think of ourselves and them.” As I went about doing this research, I found that people of color were more likely to disclose their experiences of being raced and racism, whereas whites were more cautious. Given my visible markers, people were more likely to assume that I was politically liberal, although for whites this meant a particular brand of white liberalism, whereas for people of color, liberalism was less about politics and more about an embodied worldview that emerged from shared experiences of oppression. A few people engaged with my identity as an immigrant and outsider. For instance, when an African American man Xavier disclosed to me that he was Muslim, he asked expectantly, “You know about that?” To which I shrugged saying, “Yes I’m from India.” He nodded, pleased to have found someone for whom being Muslim was normal and an everyday occurrence.

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In my writing and thinking about issues of food justice, I employ a rather heterodox approach, drawing on social scientific research as well as critical and feminist theorizing about food, race, and the political economy. This interdisciplinary approach provides richness and interpretive power to my analysis, allowing me to bear witness to the meanings, moments, and possibilities that characterize the lives of my participants. That said, I should note that this book is written and produced within institutions of privilege—mostly white and mostly middle class, so the explanations presented are excruciatingly detailed, well accounted for, and painfully justified for the benefit of this audience. Every claim, in particular about whiteness, privilege, and charity, though grounded in data and in the voices of my participants, has been overturned, questioned, and critiqued formally and informally by institutional authorities as well as by budding institutional authorities—my students. I have channeled my frustration into lengthier well-cited explanatory sections. But for this, I apologize to Xavier and many of the other interviewees, for whom these claims would resonate immediately and be commonsense assumptions not requiring detailed explanations. The process has brought to light for me the vast difference in commonsense itself between the privileged and the oppressed.

Feminist theorizing draws attention to how knowledge production is deeply embedded in sensory experience, in which bodies combine with other actants in an environment to become producers of knowledge (Ellingson 2017). In the food pantry spaces that I visited, the material, physiological, and technocratic reality of hunger was palpable. Here rich and poor bodies combined with food, discourses, papers, files, ID cards, badges, numbers, and clips. Hunger showed up in emotive expressions on the faces of mothers and children, in the size of bodies—whether too thin or overweight—in the use of canes, respirators, and wheelchairs, and in the smell of old buildings, stale food, and well-used toilets. On several occasions, this sensory data seeped through my skin, reminding me that discourse and materiality are hopelessly intertwined with bodies in spaces even when we do not mention it. On several occasions, my spouse and I threw away the food that we brought home from RP because we just couldn't bear to pick out the good potatoes from the rotten ones; it was a sign of our class privilege, as well as how marked that food was in our eyes.

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Of Sacred Cows and Trigger Warnings

The purpose of this book is not to denigrate the few food pantries, volunteers, or whites depicted in this book, but rather to shed light on a systemic issue: the more than thirty-five thousand food pantries that make up the bottom rungs of the food system. I use the case study methodology to point to specific organizations, pantries, individuals, incidents, and events; however, these data points are meant to illuminate structural patterns of injustice within the food system and to show how individuals and entities participate in these structures. As one food justice advocate I spoke to said: "It's easy for people, especially for white people, to think that institutional racism is a system, that's in this big cloud and that nobody's up there operating it. But what they don't realize is that it's a system built up of tons of people. And that they are part of that system. And, that it's not just about, oh, this person's a Trump supporter, so that's clearly someone that's racist. If you're not actively contributing towards liberating people that have been oppressed, you're part of that system. And, that doesn't make you any better than the person out there saying 'make America great again.'"

This book will make some readers uncomfortable because it might interfere with their sense of selves, their attachment to markers of their own identity, how they were socialized, and their faith beliefs—in particular, if they have worked at, donated to, or volunteered at food pantries. For some, shifting the gaze toward white people will feel uncomfortable—an indicator of their attachment to privilege and the wages of whiteness. For some, the critique of conservative values and the questioning of "good white liberalism" will also hit a nerve—in particular, when pointing out the links between politics, race, and faith. It is my hope that people will push through this discomfort because addressing the issue of hunger and food insecurity necessitates this kind of reflexivity. Talking about injustice necessarily means addressing many of the sacred cows in American life and life in general. The voices of the hungry presented in this book will certainly help with this process.

A Note about Interpretation

Qualitative and ethnographic research, even when it follows specific protocols for data collection, analysis, and presentation, is plagued by questions

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about interpretation. Readers might ask: How do you know this is what your participants meant? Aren't you reading too much into this? These are good questions because meanings are *polysemous* in that different people take away different meanings from messages. Having said that, reading the data too much (and too deeply) is precisely the power of ethnographic work. As lay people, we do not always have the opportunity to steep ourselves in the voices, the histories, the geographies of other people to figure out what it all means. However, as researchers we do: we get to sit with these voices for years trying to make sense of them. Thus, in this context, the term *interpretation* is not used to refer to personal opinion in an "everything is relative" sort of way; instead, it is a systematic technique to organize, make sense of, and reduce the data.

In this study, I used Charmaz's (2001) constructivist approach to grounded theory to analyze the data.[3] In general, the process involves identifying patterns in the data and substantiating those patterns with internal and external checks (e.g., does this meaning show up in multiple places in the data, and how does this meaning relate to things outside of the data set). This means that any claim made in the study has been substantiated by multiple data points—and I present examples of these in the book. The interview excerpts and quotes are presented mostly verbatim, with a few modifications to allow for readability and clarity. These data points will allow readers to judge for themselves the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis. That said, whether in constructivist or more positivistic forms of research, the researcher is never a spectator but always implicated in the creative process of doing research, which both presents and constructs events, experiences, and even what comes to be called *data*. Importantly, in my interpretative work, I strive to maintain a social justice sensibility. Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, and Murphy (1996, 115) observe: "The social justice sensibility does not even pretend to be objective, neutral, or dispassionate. … Rather, social justice research makes an explicit "preferential option" for those who are disadvantaged by prevalent social structures or extraordinary social acts; it emerges from and channels the emotions of the researcher."

The Place

Duluth can be characterized as a socially liberal, midsized city, with a history of deindustrialization, but also with a viable medical, educational, and

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cultural economy. Duluth is similar to other deindustrialized cities in the Rust Belt, which have experienced economic decline, population loss, and urban decay, but also different because—as Chum's executive director, Lee Stuart, points out—Duluth continues to have a substantial postindustrial economy and a cultural vibrancy. According to Pine (2016), Duluth has done quite well in reimagining and repositioning itself as a postindustrial city. Although unique in many ways, Duluth is not that different from other cities in the nation. Poverty, income and racial disparities, residential segregation, and hunger and food insecurity are significant challenges facing the region.

Duluth lies within St. Louis County and is the third-largest city in Minnesota after Minneapolis and St. Paul. The original inhabitants of the region were members of the Sioux and Ojibwe tribes. Today, Duluth has a population of approximately one hundred thousand. European Americans make up 90 percent of Duluth's population, "two or more races" comprise 3 percent of the population, Native Americans 2.5 percent, African Americans 2.3 percent, and Asians and Hispanics 1.5 percent of the population each. Duluth has a median income of $45,950, about 30 percent lower than the statewide median income, with a median income of $19,844 for people of color (St. Louis County Public Health and Human Services 2013). The prevalence of food insecurity in the state of Minnesota is 10.8 percent, but a Duluth survey found that 20.4 percent of participants were "worried they would run out of food before they could buy more"—an indicator of food insecurity (Kjos et al. 2015). A study in the Lincoln Park neighborhood, classified as a food desert, found that a significant portion of the population (10–15 percent) experienced barriers accessing food. Residents overpaid for food at local convenience stores, and many used food pantries and SNAP benefits to provide for their families (Pine and Bennett 2014).

Duluth is a socially and politically liberal city; even as Trump was elected into office in 2016, the city elected its first female mayor, Emily Larson, who often bikes to work. Duluth tends to have high civic participation and is home to several social service organizations. Rev. David Bard, the former minister of the First United Methodist Church, which hosts RP in Duluth, talked about "a kind of quality of care about folks in Duluth," but said that the city had a long way to go to become that beacon of light Jesus talked about. Indeed, hidden beneath the cloak of white liberalism,

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most well-to-do residents remain largely illiterate about the ways in which structural racism, classism, and institutionalized patterns of exploitation occur.

The gulf between volunteers and clients at food pantries such as Chum is clear evidence of this kind of socioeconomic and racial separation that exists in Duluth. On the one hand, there is a set of well-to-do, mostly white folks with an interest in the arts, the outdoors, and craft beer. These folks tend to be well-connected to each other and institutions, giving Duluth a small-town feel. They also tend to be socially engaged and put their ethical sensibilities to work in the form of volunteerism and activism. On the other hand, you have a set of people (white and people of color) too poor to participate in the lifestyle the city has to offer, folks who are excluded from full citizenship in the city because of poverty, mental illness, drugs, and homelessness. The people who show up to RP each month are an indicator that poverty and food insecurity are very much part of the white experience as well.

Duluth is often referred to as the "city on the hill" by local residents, an apt phrase because the city is located quite literally on a hill that ends at the shores of Lake Superior. The magnificent lake full of beauty, promise, and irony is visible from almost all corners of the city. During the late nineteenth century, Duluth was the only port in the United States with access to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and as such became the site of the prosperous steel, lumber, and shipping industries. The economic downturn of the 1970s and 1980s brought with it the closure of the steel plant and a dwindling population and economy. Bulk carrier ships come in and out of the Duluth harbor for at least nine months of the year, carrying iron ore, coal, and stone from the lower lakes through the Saint Lawrence Seaway and the Soo Locks at Sault Ste. Marie. Today, fog horns can be heard almost all year round; silos loom in the harbor and over the horizon, as do giant piles of taconite, iron ore pellets, and limestone. All this is a ready reminder of the city's industrial heyday, but also of a tenuous present.

Defining Hunger and Food Insecurity

Hunger is the extreme effect of the prolonged and involuntary lack of food, resulting in "discomfort, illness, weakness, or pain that goes beyond the usual uneasy sensation" (USDA 2017a). Typically, by the time someone has

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experienced hunger, they have already suffered considerable harm, so the term *food insecurity* is used to capture the nutritional, emotional, and mental trauma associated with this broader phenomenon (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, and Singh 2014). The term *food security* originated in the hallways of international organizations such as the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) in response to global threats of hunger, famine, and starvation in the early 1970s. Initial understandings of food security showed concerns for the production and supply of food at a global level; however, in later years, the term *food security* shifted to include a whole nexus of concerns around purchasing power, nutrition, and social control (Patel 2009). Today, the most-cited definition of *food security* in the United States comes from a World Bank (1986, 1) report, which defined it as "access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life."

An Unjust Food System

The problem of hunger and food insecurity in the United States is surprising because there is no shortage of food in the country. According to the FAO, world agriculture produces enough food to provide everyone in the world with at least 2,720 kilocalories per person per day (Carolan 2011). The United States not only has an abundance of food, but also has the cheapest food in the world: people spend less of their annual income on food here than in any other country. Hunger is not caused by the lack of food in the world but by the inability of people to gain access to the plentiful food that exists—and this is a systemic issue. One of my participants Lara, a woman of color and a local food systems advocate, used a very apt analogy to talk about how far-reaching the food system is, saying, "It's like a weed, where you think you're just getting the little flower, and then you pull it out and it's like a big bulb. And, you pull it out and the weed goes all the way down there [signaling to the other end of the room]." In the food system today, the levers of power are operated not by those who grow and produce food or even by the public who consumes food, but rather by multinational corporations, transnational agencies, lobbyists, and federal and state governments, which together create hunger—with devastating consequences.

Hunger persists because of a variety of interlocking reasons, ranging from the industrialization of agriculture to neoliberal trade agreements to

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a lack of adequate legal entitlements. Over the last fifty years, there has been a radical shift from viewing food as a public good to viewing it as a commodity to be bought, sold, and traded on the global market. According to environmentalist Vandana Shiva (2008), the food crisis today is the result of the convergence of climate change, peak oil, and globalization, all of which have devastated people's access to food and livelihoods. Agricultural trade liberalization has resulted in a concentration of landholding across nations: while large, export-oriented agricultural industries emerge as winners in the system, small farmers and communities lose their lands, their intellectual property rights, and their rights to grow food (de Souza et al. 2008). In addition, government cuts in agricultural input subsidies have forced farmers to pay more for agricultural inputs while receiving less for their output. As a result, the food system today is highly concentrated, with a small number of companies owning a large market share of grain, meat, and agrichemicals. For example, chickens used to be raised in small flocks by many farmers, but today most are factory farmed in large numbers and are under contract with a few companies, like Tyson.

These processes have had devastating effects on the everyday lives of people—in the United States and globally. As noted earlier, approximately 12 percent of the US population faces hunger and food insecurity, and around forty million people access food assistance programs. Advocates even talk about the fact that farmers in the United States are now using food assistance programs because they are food insecure; farmers grow commodity crops, not food, and as a result cannot disperse food locally to feed people and are food insecure themselves. In India, the country of my birth, the food system has led to an epidemic of farmer suicides; farmers who are unable to pay off debts are killing themselves leaving behind emotionally devastated and financially indentured families and communities (Rastogi and Dutta 2015).

Overall, the fact that not even the richest country in the world can guarantee food security for its citizens signals a failure of public policy. Worldwide, activists have called for restructuring the food system, increasing minimum wage, and increasing legal food entitlements as necessary solutions to hunger. They assert that policy should be centered on a "food-first" principle, rather than a profit-first principle, and should be informed by the right to food, health, and a clean environment (Riches and Silvasti 2014). In the United States, advocates note that changing the food system will

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require campaign finance reform because our current political representatives speak on behalf of corporations, not people. Food justice requires not only increases in entitlements and wages, but specific policies to advance equity and fix the problem of food deserts, food swamps, residential segregation, and grocery gaps. The good food movement has offered urban gardening, community-supported agriculture, farm-to-school programs, and farmers' markets as solutions to food access, although it notes that such strategies are only possible when resources of money, time, and land are available to communities (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Allen 1999).

Legal Entitlements and Entitlement Failure

Hunger is neither natural nor inevitable, but rather the product of social and political design. This idea of "entitlement failure" was proffered more than thirty years ago by Nobel Prize–winning economist Amartya Sen (1983), who observed that famines across the world occurred amid ample food supply, even in countries exporting food—a clear example of people's legal rights not being fulfilled. He asserted rather controversially for the time that "the law stands between food availability and food entitlement" (166). This is why butter and wheat were exported during the Irish famine of 1840, even when poor Irish people could not afford these foods. This is also why three million Indians died during the Bengal famine in 1943, even as British Prime Minister Churchill ordered the diversion of food from starving Indians to well-fed British soldiers (Mukerjee 2010).

So what is a legal entitlement? In general, government programs are considered entitlements if legislation requires the payment of benefits to any person or entity. Entitlements are binding obligations on the government, and eligible recipients have legal recourse if the obligation is not fulfilled. Just as employers have legal claims to tax credits, so too do entitlements confer people with *legal* rights to particular credits (Jost 2003).

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is the government agency that manages the issue of hunger and provides nutritional guidelines for the country, among its many other roles. The USDA administers one of the largest food-entitlement programs—the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) program, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program. SNAP provides cash benefits to millions of eligible, low-income

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individuals and families, which can be used to purchase food. SNAP is a needs-based legal entitlement (similar to Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income), which means that SNAP allocations are made through "mandatory spending" and SNAP exists outside of the annual appropriations process. So to say that SNAP is a federal "entitlement" program means that anyone who is eligible can receive benefits; moreover, receiving benefits does not mean someone else is going to lose them.

In 2016, about forty-five million people living in 21.8 million US households participated in the SNAP program, but the rates show decline (Oliveira 2018). There has been a steady decline in SNAP spending due to lower participation rates and a reduction in average benefits. In fiscal year 2017, 42.2 million individuals on average participated in the SNAP program each month—almost 5 percent fewer than in the previous year. The per-person benefits averaged $125.99 per month, which represented a 7 percent drop from 2014 after the end of the Recovery Act benefit increase (Oliveira 2018). According to the SNAP outreach coordinators I spoke to, reasons for low SNAP participation rates include strict poverty governance procedures combined with rock-bottom benefits not worth signing up for, personal shame or embarrassment for using benefits, and moral quandaries people experience due to feeling like they may be taking benefits away from others.

The USDA has other mechanisms by which it provides food support; these programs do not provide cash benefits like SNAP, but provide food—typically industrial food—based on eligibility criteria and need. These programs include The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), which provides "emergency food" to people through charitable food support programs such as food pantries and soup kitchens; the Women, Infants, and Children program, which provides food support for pregnant women and children; the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which provides free and reduced lunch to kids in school; the Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), which provides food support to elderly people; and the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations (FDPIR), which was set up as an alternative to SNAP for American Indian and non-Indian households living on Indian reservations without easy access to SNAP offices or authorized grocery stores.

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Industrial Surplus Food

There is little debate today that federal food support programs were developed during the Depression to solve the problems of hunger *and* surplus food. Food is created in such overabundance in the United States that simply redistributing surplus food to the hungry is enough to stave the physiological sensation of hunger—and this is exactly what the government does. Historian Elizabeth Sanders (1999) argued that in the early years, the role of the USDA was to serve the interests of the people that worked the land, but over the next century, it became more involved in overhauling federal farm policy. Policy overhauls were oriented toward supporting industrial agriculture, which employed the use of inputs such as pesticides, fertilizer, and hybrid seeds. Industrial agriculture resulted in the mass production of food and created surpluses of certain kinds of food. By the 1970s, there was a push toward expanding commodity crops (e.g., corn, wheat, rice, and soybeans), with the government subsidizing these crops. The result was more surplus food. In this protectionist system, the government buys back surplus foods from agroindustrial players like Cargill to distribute to vulnerable Americans through a mash-up of food assistance programs designed to manage hunger, such as TEFAP. Gottlieb and Joshi (2010, 77) point out that the USDA combined big agriculture and social welfare programs in a way that said, “Feed the poor and feed school children, but do it with the surplus commodity crops, surplus meat and dairy products.”

Aggressive neoliberal policies rolled out in the 1990s, such as the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 and Charitable Choice Legislation in 2002, have meant that in recent years social services including food assistance are almost exclusively delivered by nongovernmental organizations (Bielefeld and Cleveland 2013). In the hunger industrial complex, agricultural and retail industrial players like Dole, Del Monte, Target, Walmart, and Tyson sell or donate surplus foods to food banks, which channel these foods to food pantries, soup kitchens, and other service providers to distribute to the poor. These surplus foods may be commodity crops, foods deemed unfit for retail because of manufacturing errors or damage during shipping and handling, or even failed new food products. Food banks employ high-tech and sophisticated logistical apparatuses to transfer surplus food from the point of origin to the hungry. In the United States, roughly 80 percent of all

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food banks are affiliated with Feeding America (FA), a national network that procures and redistributes surplus and unsalable food from agrobusinesses and the USDA. Founded in 1979, FA comprises two hundred food banks, which distribute food to around sixty thousand food pantries and meal programs. The majority of FA's partner agencies and food pantries are run by faith-based organizations (FBOs). Across these charitable arenas, thousands of dedicated organizations, staff, and volunteers donate their time and labor to coordinate the delivery of surplus foods to the hungry and food insecure.

The distribution of surplus foods has become increasingly contentious with regards to health. The hunger-obesity paradox—the fact that hungry individuals can also be overweight and obese—is associated with disordered eating, a poor diet, dietary nutrient deficiencies, and low fruit and vegetable intake, all of which increase the risk of obesity and health problems (Dinour, Bergen, and Yeh 2007; Drewnowski and Darmon 2005). To maintain adequate energy, people with limited means select lower-quality diets, consisting of high-energy, inexpensive foods. The frequency of fruit and vegetable consumption declines significantly as food-insecurity status worsens—so the hunger-obesity paradox can at least partially be explained by the fact that low-costs foods are higher in fats, added sugars, and refined grains. These industrially processed foods tend to be cheaper per calorie than nutrient-dense foods such as certain fruits and vegetables. Using food pantries may also contribute to health problems for the same reason; food pantries typically distribute highly processed food with high levels of sodium, fat, and sugar, which can be transported, shelved, and distributed easily, but these foods also result in health issues. There has been research linking programs like SNAP to increased risk of being overweight, although these findings have not been consistent and vary by program and other aspects of the food environment (Dinour, Bergen, and Yeh 2007).

Public health researchers Chilton and Rose (2009) sound a clarion call for hunger and food insecurity to be viewed through a rights or entitlements-based approach. They observe that though the USDA collects data on food insecurity each year and has been publishing its findings for decades, there has been very little change in the prevalence of food insecurity; in fact, the numbers have gone up. The question of who is responsible for creating or enabling a state of food security remains unclear. Chilton and Rose

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write: "Accountability also implies that, in cases where government does not follow through on appropriate reference goals, there is legal recourse for those affected" (1205).

Poverty Governance and SNAP Fraud

Not only do government entitlement programs provide inadequate food support, but they also subject claimants to harsh systems of *poverty governance*, a term that refers to the way in which the poor are surveilled, disciplined, and brought into submission through stringent and less than adequate social programs. Political theorists Soss, Fording, and Schram (2011, 1) in *Disciplining the Poor* note that poverty programs are not designed to eliminate poverty, but rather "to temper the hardships of poverty and ensure that they do not become disruptive for the broader society." Indeed, the poor are both marginal and central to the social order; marginalized because they are isolated and ignored and exist at the periphery of society, but central, because the burden they bear is necessary for the rest of society to enjoy the life that it does. Given this social structure, social programs are designed to make the poor "more manageable" and to secure their cooperation. To do this, a wide variety of policy and administrative tools are used, including surveillance and penalty systems to keep recipients in check. Soss, Fording, and Schram argue that the convergent forces of poverty governance and neoliberalism have resulted in a "muscular" form of governance that is more normative, dispersed, and diverse in its organization.

Pine (2016) similarly argues that poverty and economic inequality in the United States have been growing in recent decades; however, food assistance programs are strategically designed to keep people food insecure. These programs serve low- and no-income individuals, providing a carefully calibrated ration of food that preempts the physical pangs of hunger but is insufficient for achieving food security. They provide just enough food to keep poor people from starving or protesting in the streets, but not enough for people to live healthy, stress-free, and happy lives. For instance, Pine (2016) observes that maintaining eligibility for SNAP benefits is a time-consuming but necessary part of the lives of food insecure people. The eligibility criteria across multiple programs intersect to create a "porous continuum of care" within which people experiencing food insecurity

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must constantly maneuver without seeing any real change in the quality of their lives. These programs diffuse disruptive political demands but do not protect people from the nutritional, mental, and emotional trauma of hunger.

Feminist scholar Nancy Fraser (1987) uses the phrase "juridical-administrative-therapeutic state apparatus" (JAT) to theorize the current welfare system that depoliticizes social problems and renders them into individual problems to be administered by highly regulated state machinery. Consistent with the theme of poverty governance, the *juridical* element positions recipients according to a legal system by allowing or denying them rights based on market-driven definitions of citizenship; for instance, in an increasingly neoliberal landscape, the poor only have the right to assistance if they are engaged in economic production. The *administrative* element requires that subjects petition and prove their need to a bureaucratic institution, which decides their claims based on administratively defined criteria. The final *therapeutic* element transposes public and political problems into problems of "mental health" or "character problems," such that solutions to hunger also include attending nutrition classes and mothering instructions. Fraser argues that the JAT "positions its subjects as passive clients or consumer recipients and not as active co-participants involved in shaping their life-conditions. ... It is a form of passive citizenship in which the state preempts the power to define and satisfy people's needs" (115).

Because SNAP is a needs-based entitlement program that *must* be allocated, the only way the government can change the amount spent on the program is by manipulating eligibility criteria and restrictions. So, though the government must provide SNAP benefits, it can control *how much* of these benefits to provide and *to whom*. The criteria can be set to exclude or include more people and/or to be more or less generous in benefits to eligible recipients. As a result, potential SNAP beneficiaries are subjected to rigorous screening procedures to verify eligibility based on income and assets. Households must report their income and other relevant information; the process involves a state eligibility worker, who interviews a household member and verifies the information using third-party data matches, paper documentation, or by contacting a knowledgeable party, such as an employer or landlord. Households must reapply for benefits periodically, usually every six or twelve months, and report any income changes.

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SNAP requires that all recipients meet work requirements unless exempted because of age or disability. In addition, Able-bodied Adults Without Dependents (or "ABAWDS" as they are referred to in policy) between the ages of 18 and 49 must meet special work requirements to maintain their eligibility.

Despite the fact that SNAP has one of the lowest fraud rates for federal programs, which fell from four cents on the dollar in 1993 to about one cent in 2006–2008, there is a robust setup to prevent against fraud and abuse (Dean 2016). Per the USDA (2017c), *SNAP fraud* occurs when benefits are exchanged for cash or when people lie on their applications to get benefits—or more than they are supposed to get—or when a retailer has been disqualified from the program for past abuse or falsifying information. In 2014, approximately forty-six million individuals received SNAP benefits, of whom only forty-five thousand individuals were disqualified for fraud—a drop in the ocean. Still, the USDA has over one hundred analysts and investigators across the country who analyze retailer data, conduct undercover investigations, and process cases, including issuing fines and administrative disqualifications. In 2012, SNAP investigations resulted in 342 convictions, including a number of multiyear prison terms and approximately $57 million in monetary results. The USDA website encourages the reporting of fraud stating: "If you see or hear about SNAP fraud, tell us. Help us protect your tax dollars ... We appreciate the help of concerned citizens ... Your report is confidential. Help us Fight SNAP Fraud." Neoliberal ideological formations can also be seen in this clincher on the USDA website: "While SNAP is intended to ensure that no one in our land of plenty should fear going hungry, it also reflects the importance of work and responsibility" (USDA 2017b).

Dominant Hunger Narratives

Dominant hunger narratives in the United States mirror the contradictions and tensions embedded in the food system, a system controlled by the vested interests of multinational corporations, nongovernmental agencies, and federal and state governments. In this political economic context, portrayals of the hungry tend to be informed by the *kinds of solutions being talked about*. Food insecure people vacillate between being portrayed as sympathetic, relatable, and empathetic, or as dishonest, untrustworthy,

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and shameful welfare abusers, depending on the context. When the context is charity, hunger drives present sympathetic images of the hungry for fundraising purposes and easily sidestep the systemic and political dimensions of food access—often not even known to those participating in the drives. Pathologizing language and imagery are used to pull at the heart strings of citizens and to motivate charitable food donations. These stories portray hunger as a significant problem that *can* be solved by individuals "doing good," when in reality, the hunger problem is far too vast to be solved by charity. When the context is policy and political change, such as an increase in SNAP benefits, then hungry people are demonized and framed as "fraudulent abusers." Charitable solutions are applauded, but broad-based structural solutions—such as increasing the minimum wage, employment, and benefits and restructuring the food system—are met with disdain. The switch between sympathy and disdain in not based on any real difference between "people who are hungry" and "people who are on welfare," but rather this difference is a *socially constructed difference* deployed to justify political projects.

Adding insult to injury, not only are recipients of food drives framed in negative ways, but those who contribute to food drives and food shelves are framed in positive ways. A study by DeLind (1994) interrogated the discursive practices of "commodified giving" used by Michigan Harvest Gathering (MHG), an antihunger campaign, which was a partnership between public, private, and nonprofit institutions. She found that donors and corporations were applauded for their compassion, care, and social responsibility. The givers were framed as "winners" and given public recognition and rewards. Missing from the discourse however was any mention of the profitable partnerships between state, government, and the corporate sector. For instance, the fact that the food bank council employs government grants to clean, sort, haul and transport second grade produce to then deliver to the food banks. DeLind also found that those who experienced hunger were completely absent from the discourse. Press releases did not give the public a sense of the nature, extent or human dilemmas that constituted hunger. While compelling statistics were used to show the extent of the problem, she writes: "Such information does not contribute to the public's ability to understand hunger better. It merely documents hunger's worthiness as an opponent" (61). MHG produced a recipe book for sale, but there were no recipes by the hungry or for hungry people; in fact,

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ingredients were expensive and elite. No one with any experience of hunger sat on the MHG planning board, instead there were only “distinguished leaders”; the hungry were not present at the celebration receptions, and while mingling with others was encouraged, this did not include mingling with the hungry. DeLind concluded that MHG “selectively dehumanized (or technified) the issue of hunger, while at the same time it personified corporate structures, and justified commercial interests in humanistic terms” (59).

Relevant to this discussion are how portrayals of the poor in a neoliberal era shift between stereotypes of the poor, who are unable to reverse their circumstances to images of the poor as entrepreneurial (Clair and Anderson 2013). For instance, in their study of Heifer International, a religious nonprofit based in the United States, Clair and Anderson (2013) found that the organization portrayed poor communities in Africa as happy, healthy workers, and as “enterprising” people on the cusp of capitalism, who just needed the donation of a cow (or other such animal) to succeed, while complex histories of colonialism and American imperialism were sidestepped. Harter et al. (2004) studied the discursive practices of Streetwise, a Chicago- based nonprofit, who through the publication of a journal by the same name, provides employment opportunities to homeless men and women. They found that the paper was filled with personal stories of men and women recovering from addiction and adverse life experiences. The stories highlighted that it was important to the men and women not simply to be given a handout for selling papers on street corners, but to be treated as business vendors. Homeless individuals were framed as “independent entrepreneurs working their way toward success” (412–413).

Today, charitable organizations face pressure to incorporate business practices and construct the poor as “entrepreneurs,” but in so doing engage in practices that forestall systemic transformation. Individuals are portrayed as entrepreneurial, but the enormous challenges that poverty presents to entrepreneurship are ignored. For instance, according to Forbes (2013), the eight key skills successful entrepreneurs require are resiliency, focus, investing for the long term, finding and managing people, sales, staying up to date, self-reflection, and self-reliance. Other skills include personal branding, financial management, stress management, the ability to experiment, and design thinking. Indeed, to expect that a person living in poverty, given a cow or a stack of newspapers, will magically acquire the resources, capital,

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and networks necessary to move from indigence to becoming a successful entrepreneur of the Forbes-caliber kind is simply insincere.

Across dominant discourses, what is clear is that portrayals of the hungry and the poor are always partial, incomplete, and lacking in depth. Individuals experiencing hunger are either completely erased from the narratives or are stigmatized as victims, perpetrators, and morally flawed individuals. Even when individuals are portrayed positively as entrepreneurs, these portrayals are incomplete as they erase the context within which poverty occurs. These portrayals are unrealistic—and a good example of how the American dream is continuously being repackaged.

Overall, dominant narratives fail to connect with the desires, concerns, complexities, and contexts of hungry individuals. The voices of the hungry are erased and displaced by voices of privilege—and their corresponding values, assumptions, and ideologies. Today, ideological assumptions about how charity coupled with capitalism can solve social and structural problems dominate the discourse. Dominant narratives fail to educate the public on the injustice that permeates the food system. Because of these erasures, stories fail to unite tellers and listeners in ways that illuminate issues of power and control and food injustice; instead, the stories reinforce the division between Us and Them. The result is that well-intentioned people participate in hunger drives and tell their children not to waste food; but since hunger and food insecurity are depoliticized in these discourses, the opportunity for systemic transformation is lost. Delind (1994, 61) describes what an alternative discourse about hunger would look like: "It would mean, among other things, allowing the reasons and relationships that surround hunger to emerge from peoples' lives and not have them institutionally prescribed. To do this would require admitting the perspective, or standpoint, of those who are hungry. It would mean making them visible, validating their insights into the nature of hunger, and honoring their behavioral responses to it."

Hunger in an International Context

In *First World Hunger Revisited*, Riches and Silvasti (2014) show internationally how the rise of neoliberalism in rich, food secure, industrialized nations has been accompanied by the rise of the institutionalization, corporatization, and globalization of charitable food banking. Since the 1990s, food-banking procedures have been institutionalized in countries such as

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Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand, a process pioneered by the United States. Food banking is also on the rise in the welfare states of Finland and Denmark—surprisingly, because food banking runs contrary to the Nordic ideal of universalism, which highlights the public responsibilities of society toward its citizens based on democracy and a commitment to reducing inequities (Silvasti and Karjalainen 2014). In Finland, similar to the United States, food pantries were triggered by a depression in the 1990s but soon became a way to silently fix the holes in the social security system. Even when the economy stabilized, the state argued that it could not afford to increase social security funding. Riches and Silvasti observe that when food aid becomes part of the mission of the third sector, it becomes very difficult to reverse.

In Europe, the growing reliance on the redistribution of surplus food acts as a safety valve for global food markets. For example, the European Union's food distribution program Fund for European Aid to the most Deprived (FEAD) buys up agricultural surplus to balance market fluctuations; this overproduction is later delivered as food aid to Finland and other countries. Riches and Silvasti (2014) argue that the public legitimacy of charitable food assistance points to an interesting contradiction: on the one hand, these governments deny and belittle hunger as a social problem, but at the same time they are involved with strengthening the corporatization and global outreach of food banks through public funding. Of course, where there are welfare cuts and roll-out neoliberalism, there you will also find stigmatizing rhetoric; rhetoric in which welfare and legal entitlements are presented in terms of the moral decline of recipients, who are typically depicted as shirkers—and this is happening across industrialized nations, which have abundant food supplies (Garthwaite 2017; Silvasti and Karjalainen 2014).

The Problem with Charity

From a political perspective, charitable food assistance programs are popular because unlike legal entitlements, they do not rock the boat. As many officials I spoke to said: "Democrats like them because they feed the poor, and Republicans like them because they help big business." In this system, corporate and government interests are promoted, but not the needs and interests of clients. Corporate donors win big: they get to donate outdated, expired, and unsaleable foods to food banks, receive tax write-offs, and be

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protected from liability via Good Samaritan laws. Food banks and food pantries further contribute to corporate welfare by sparing corporations disposal costs and landfill fees and helping companies forge an image of corporate citizenship (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003, 2005). However, taken together, the hunger industrial complex represents a form of *systemic charity*, a term I use to refer to the large scale and methodical manner in which money, labor, and the good intentions of people are harnessed and channeled in service of the Other through the complex arrangement of people, materials, and organizations. In this hunger industrial complex, charity does not exist outside of a capitalist/neoliberal market logic, but rather charity is very much "capitalism at work." Clair and Anderson (2013, 558) note that charitable organizations "necessarily prop up the weak rafters in a capitalist structure without most donors realizing this implication."

There are several reasons that charity is not an appropriate solution to end hunger. Charity depoliticizes the issue of hunger, making it a personal and a private issue, not a public one (Chilton and Rose 2009; Poppendieck 1999). Unlike entitlements, charity does not confer upon people guaranteed rights, but rather traffics in the language of gratitude. Charity legitimizes the distribution of substandard products and services and makes it impossible to question the giver or the gift. Farmer (2005) observes that charity typically means "doling out the leftovers" in a piecemeal fashion and asking recipients to be grateful for it. He makes a rather chilling observation: "Those who believe that charity is the answer to the world's problems often have a tendency—sometimes striking, sometimes subtle, and surely lurking in all of us—to regard those needing charity as intrinsically inferior. This is different from regarding the poor as powerless or impoverished because of historical processes and events (slavery, say, or unjust economic policies propped up by power parties)" (153). Charity reinforces social distance and hierarchy between givers and receivers and Us and Them (Bourdieu 1990). Consequentially, charity silences civic participation and resistance from those on the receiving end by creating subject positions that furthers their political and communicative disenfranchisement.

Charity is not justice. Communication scholars Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, and Murphy (1996, 111) observe that "social justice is not done when 'we' in our largess donate some of our disposable resources to 'them'; it is done when we act on our recognition that something is amiss in a society

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of abundance if some of us are well off while others are destitute." Having a social justice sensibility means identifying with others from a position of solidarity; a solidarity that is grounded in the realization that we share a world with others and are thus ethically obligated to listen to and respond meaningfully to their stories. A social justice sensibility requires engagement and action to redress structural inequities, not simply doling out the leftovers. Contrary to dominant discourses about the altruistic nature of charity as "doing good" and "serving the community," charity in its systemic form is an agent of stigma because it produces and reproduces the subordination of particular groups of people through macro-level policies and microlevel practices, and in so doing, charity represents both the outcome of and a precursor to stigmatization.

Rights-Based Perspectives

Rights- and justice-based perspectives focus on equity and therefore provide a counterfoil to charitable approaches to hunger. Poppendieck (1999, 69) notes: "The justice model is associated with dignity, entitlement, accountability, and equity. Its essence is the creation of rights, not only moral rights that may be asserted but also justiciable rights that can be enforced through legal action." Specifically, the right to adequate food, food sovereignty, and community food security perspectives provide a useful entry point for how to think about justice-based solutions. These perspectives outline the root causes of hunger and identify *who* is responsible for facilitating and creating conditions of food security.

The right to adequate food (RAF) was adopted by the United Nations in 1948, when food was seen as a necessary condition to achieve a minimum standard of living: "The right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding to the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear" (United Nations Human Rights 2010, 2). The RAF framework maintains that food must be "available, accessible and adequate" (2); thus, violating the right to food can interfere with the fulfillment of human rights, such as the right to health, education, or life, and vice versa. The RAF delineates the role of government in ensuring people's right to food.

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Importantly, the right to food is not a right to *be fed*, but the right to *feed oneself* in dignity. The RAF further stipulates that because the private sector plays a significant role in the food system in food production, processing, distribution, and trade, it must also be held accountable for food insecurity, as well as environmental contamination (Patel 2009).

A global movement, *food sovereignty* is defined as "the RIGHT of peoples, communities, and countries to define their own agricultural, labor, fishing, food and land policies which are ecologically, socially, economically and culturally appropriate to their unique circumstances. It includes the true right to food and to produce food, which means that all people have the right to safe, nutritious and culturally appropriate food and to food-producing resources and the ability to sustain themselves and their societies" (NGO/CSO Forum for Food Sovereignty 2002). The notion of food sovereignty arose in the 1970s with a group of Guatemalan Mayan peasant farmers or *campesinos* trying to establish agroecological alternatives to industrial farming practices. Food sovereignty advocates for communities' rights to grow and produce rather than depend on global markets. This movement is not necessarily antitrade but is against dominant global agribusiness systems that devastate the livelihoods of farmers (Patel 2009). The movement rallies against policies from the World Bank and International Monetary Fund that push for neoliberal deregulation and privatization of the agricultural sector. It argues that land grabs by big agribusinesses in the context of an expanding neoliberal agenda have resulted in the consolidation of land ownership and created a peasantry dependent on agribusiness for its survival.

The community food security (CFS) framework emerged in the United States in the early 1970s, inspired by the food sovereignty movements in the Global South (Hamm and Bellows 2003). Food studies scholar Patricia Allen (1999) traces the movement's domestic origins to the 1960s and 1970s civil rights movement and Black power organizations concerned with problems of nutrition for inner-city children. In the CFS framework, food security is defined as follows: "all persons obtaining at all times a culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through local non-emergency sources" (39). CFS is concerned with ownership of food production and provides a rallying cry against the charitable response to hunger. A CFS approach includes an emphasis on economic and social rights, self-reliance, and a systemic understanding of sustainable natural resource use. Although CFS

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accounts for the role of government, its primary focus is on culture-centered community solutions and transforming local and regional food systems: the argument being that solutions must go beyond government entitlements to create long-term independence for communities.

Chapter Overview

Through a comparative case analysis, this book presents a multifaceted look at how neoliberal stigma plays out in food pantries. Each chapter showcases the opacity of deep-seated ideological formations; the versatility of neoliberal stigma (how it is used in a variety of contexts); and how race, class, and gender inform the experience and expression of stigma. When the data allow it, the chapters highlight moments of possibility for resisting neoliberal stigma. Each chapter highlights a different facet of injustice that occurs in food pantry spaces and it is my hope that each chapter will provide a slightly different framework for reflection, discussion, and action. The chapters conclude with implications for practice and policy, with the caveat that these are incomplete lists to be used as starting points for further analysis by organizations and advocates.

Chapter 2 charts the key conceptual and interlocking themes in the book: ideology and discourse, neoliberalism, and the stigma of poverty, welfare, race, religion, and gender, all of which work together to produce neoliberal stigma. Chapter 3, the first data chapter, begins by foregrounding the voices of the hungry and food insecure. In the voices of the hungry we hear stories of desire, ambition, and complexity. We hear about the struggles that poor people, people of color, and mothers and fathers face. We also recognize how the problem of hunger is intertwined with physiological health problems, disability, anxiety, stress, depression, lack of social support, institutional failures, and even violence and sexual abuse. Chapter 4 explores the ways in which whiteness, and the problematics of white liberalism play out in the Chum food pantry. Volunteers are caught between multiple discourses of individualism, hard work, and market vocabularies on the one hand and social justice discourses on the other. The chapter highlights the racial distance between volunteers and clients, as well as the discursive practices within Chum that reinforce racial distance. Chapter 5 explores the complexity of neoliberal stigma as it moves between the

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conservative evangelical Ruby's Pantry home office and the more politically liberal RP food distribution site in Duluth. The chapter highlights discursive practices at RP that make distinctions between the "good kind" of hungry people and the "bad kind" of hungry people—the subtext for which are often age-old racial and gender stereotypes.

Chapter 6 shows how neoliberal stigma surrounding the hungry creates a "culture of suspicion" in food pantry spaces. Clients are vigilant about how they speak and behave, always feeling the threat of stigma against them. The chapter highlights discursive practices that create solidarity and unity on the one hand but fracture communities on the other. Chapter 7 demonstrates how food insecure individuals perform health citizenship despite the crushing burden of material constraint. In the voices of the hungry, we hear how important good food is to them, how they feel more energetic after eating good food, how they enjoy gardening, and the lengths they go to in order to get nutrients into their diets.

The concluding chapter, chapter 8, draws out key findings from the study and ends with ways in which food pantries can be reconfigured in neoliberal times so as to move in the direction of food justice. Drawing on existing theories of social change, I argue that we must use the voices of the hungry and food insecure to reformulate identities and shift dominant narratives that surround the issue of hunger. I present examples of organizations and coalitions, including the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition (JRLC) and Appetite for Change, the work of which is useful for thinking about how to reenvision food pantry spaces.

The Hope: Food Pantries as Allies in Shifting the Narrative

As discussed in the review of the food system, food pantries are small actors in a much larger and unwieldly food system in which the biggest players are federal and state governments, multinational corporations, and transnational agencies and organizations. Food pantries are at the very bottom of the pecking order and in many ways beholden to the system and its rules—at least as far as food collection and distribution is concerned. However, food pantries are also necessary allies in dismantling the food system. Given their ubiquitous presence, food pantries have a tremendous opportunity to define what social justice looks like from a faith-based and humanist

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perspective and to engage in activism. There are over forty thousand food pantries in the United States. They all have a wide circle of influence because they employ staff and volunteers, serve clients, conduct outreach in their communities, and interact with government stakeholders. Added to that, most food pantries are run by FBOs and have small and large congregations in tow, with well-intentioned folks genuinely interested in reaching out to others. Business has shown itself irresponsible and government has shown itself as business, so FBOs are some of the last spaces to offer countercultural and noncomputational models of living and social exchange. It is my argument that food pantries must organize and assert their moral and ethical power in the food system for change to occur; they must shift the dominant narratives surrounding hunger and take steps toward systemic transformation.

Although it is true that food pantries have few resources to spare and are beholden to the larger food system in place, they can be a formidable force in influencing food justice. Food pantries are at the very frontlines of the hunger epidemic, closest to the people who experience the violence of hunger, so it is my argument that they can be centers for the production of new narratives. They can play an important role in disrupting the stigma that circulates around the poor and hungry—stigmatizing narratives that emerge from politics, religion, and race and that uphold the unjust food system. Fortified by the stories of their clients—clients like Trinity—food pantries can take small steps to act as points of resistance and to eventually bring about the vision of food justice. Food pantries could raise consciousness among their communities with regard to class, race, and gender dynamics. They could be more vigilant about the stories they tell and they could create counterdiscourses to resist political and religious ideologies that stigmatize the poor—themes that are taken up in chapter 8. In the midst of injustice, food pantries could bear witness to the power, agency, and desires of the people who walk through their doors. Although we cannot always claim to understand what hunger and structural violence feel like and we cannot exaggerate our roles as witnesses, we *can* act upon what we have finally recognized with both eyes wide open—as described by Eduardo Galeano in "Celebration of the Human Voice/2": "When it is genuine, when it is born of the need to speak, no one can stop the human voice. When denied a mouth, it speaks with the hands or the eyes, or the pores, or anything at all. Because every single one of us has something to say to the

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others, something that deserves to be celebrated or forgiven by others" (25). In an unjust food system, food pantries can play a role in recovering the silenced voices and creating new and richly humanizing narratives filled with complex truths and contradictions. In an unjust food system, food pantries can come together and bring disconnected people together to ask questions, to judge, to critique, and to join together in demanding justice, and, in so doing, create great joy, great, great joy in food.

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