

4 The “Good White Women” at the Chum Food Shelf

I make her do the interviews with me when I interview folks, and then she really gets the point that they are no different than her, they are no different than anybody else in the world. They just don't have as much money. So it takes away the stigma that so many people, especially kids that grow up surrounded by wealth, have that *those* people are so different. You know, “I am not going to deal with those people, they have got their problems and I have got nothing to do with them, and they are nothing like me.” I think that she has really come to realize that they are absolutely no different than her and I. We have just been lucky enough to keep our jobs for years and there is no other difference. So those conversations have come up a lot or she has commented that, “Wow, mom, if dad lost his job we would be at the food shelf.” Oh yeah, we would. “Oh well, that's really scary, mom.” It is. Yeah, so it comes up, all of it, and a lot just to do with the fact that everyone's really not that different and yet we are always one step away from being in one or the other category or camp, so to speak.

—Lisa, white female, volunteer at Chum

Lisa and Her Daughter

Lisa is a long-term volunteer at the Chum food shelf, and a regular one at that. For the past five years, she has packed food for clients every Wednesday evening—the evening assigned to working families. A highly educated white-collar professional, Lisa works long hours each day in a high-stress job and then, once a month, gives up a precious Wednesday evening to volunteer with her eight-year-old daughter at the Chum food shelf. Lisa says her reason for volunteering at Chum is a selfish one. Her family lives in a rich neighborhood, all their friends are wealthy, and her daughter goes to the best school in the city. Volunteering at Chum is a way to expose her

daughter to people who are not wealthy and do not live like they do. The pedagogical goal is to show her daughter that They are just like Us and that moving between one “category or camp” and another is simply a matter of employment and who gets to keep their jobs. From Lisa’s perspective, this kind of exposure takes away the stigma that rich kids who grow up in wealthy neighborhoods have about poor people. For Lisa, the Chum food shelf has opened up a rewarding dialogue with her daughter. They can talk about how fortunate their family is to be employed and how thankful the families are who come to the food pantry.

Lisa’s lesson plan is incomplete, however, for two reasons: (1) she overlooks the history of white domination that continues to privilege whites and (2) she frames charity as a fruitful way to help people in need—overlooking systemic interconnections and the need for more empowering, rights-based approaches. Lisa adopts a color-blind discourse to talk about difference, stating that people who use the food shelf are “absolutely no different than her and I” and that “there is no other difference.” But there is a difference. Most Chum clients identify as Native or African American; in the interviews, approximately 60 percent of clients identified as people of color and about 50 percent suffered from high food insecurity. In a city like Duluth with extreme racialized poverty, there are indeed stark differences between Lisa’s family and the clients at Chum. Even if we sidestep slavery and genocide, in more recent history discriminatory housing policies ensure that Lisa lives a racially segregated life with other well-to-do white folks just like her. Lisa’s daughter goes to the “good school” in the city, lives in a home that her parents own, and has the benefit of watching successful white role models represented in the media. Lisa’s daughter will never be gunned down by police officers for hanging out in her grandma’s backyard; she will never watch from the backseat as her mom’s boyfriend is shot seven times by a police officer. Even as communities of color prepare their three- and four-year-olds for the white terror that will be unleashed upon their bodies, Lisa’s daughter is spared an education in systemic racism because it does not affect her.

Is Lisa ignorant? Is Lisa a racist? Does she think her daughter is too young to understand racial issues? Is she being politically correct? There are many ways to rationalize Lisa’s discourse, but even so we must at least recognize two key points. First, Lisa speaks from a racialized position of whiteness. Perched high up on the rungs of the social system, being charitable

is central to her identity and a fundamental way she knows how to “do good.” The particularities of her worldview correspond to her systemic location, which simply means that as a pattern one would expect white women in the United States to use this kind of color-blind yet compassionate and charitable language. Ruth Frankenberg (1993), in her groundbreaking work on the racialized identity of white women, described whiteness as both a position of structural advantage and a “standpoint” or place from which to look at oneself, others, and society. Whiteness has “everything to do with not being black, with living in privileged and virtually all-white neighborhoods, with ‘good’ schools, safe streets, and moral values to match” (Kobayashi and Peake 2000, 394).

For white middle-class women in a post-civil-rights era, doing good works and self-sacrifice are central to their identities (Fothergill 2003). Behaviors of reaching out, caring for others, and “doing good” are the result of socializing females into caregiving roles but are also intertwined with class status. As members of the middle class, women like Lisa are able to give time and resources toward charitable causes. Lisa is not simply a good woman, she is a good *white* woman. A small difference in words, but one that will grate at her and cause much discomfort to her and women like her who are not accustomed to being viewed as raced. As a white person, she has only ever seen herself as normal, a human being, a good person, and a good woman. Identifying her as “white” makes visible her racial identity and marks her with color, history, and all sorts of racial baggage linked to white supremacy and the colonial doctrine of manifest destiny.

A key problem with charity is that it results in outpourings of gratitude on the part of givers, but never quite moves in the direction of food justice. Charity allows white middle-class women to reach out to the Other and to feel sadness for the Other, while also summoning up intense emotions linked to personal gratitude—as heard in the oft-repeated refrain: “I am just so grateful for what I have.” Lisa is a good person. Lisa is a good mother. Lisa is a good woman. Lisa is grateful and thankful. Lisa is performing the role of the “good white woman” in American society. Through a three-hour weekly exposure in a highly regulated environment, she socializes her daughter into doing the same—to do good, to give back to society, to learn how to connect with Others, and to recognize her personal good luck and fortune. This discourse of gratitude occurs in the absence of any consciousness that the same system that accrues benefits to white people marginalizes

communities of color. Lisa and her daughter are privy to the multiple wages of whiteness, wages that are the result of historical and ongoing exploitation of communities of color, but these facts remains unacknowledged.

This brings us to the second point that begs our recognition—the gaps and discursive erasures in Lisa’s pedagogical activities, whether intentional or not, undermine the role of structural racism in society. In an environment in which all the volunteers are white and most of the clients are people of color, these discursive erasures reinforce white superiority, virtue, and moral goodness while continuing to otherize people of color, albeit in compassionate ways. In what she says and does not say, Lisa sidesteps the racial organization of society that holds whites and people of color in place. Lisa’s charity does not extend beyond doling out food to actually invert the axis of oppression. Indeed, if it came to it, she may even vote against policies that do so in the interests of keeping things “fair” and “balanced.” Simply put, Lisa does not ask *why*: Why is there food at the food shelves but not in people’s homes? Why do we distribute food we would not eat ourselves? Why are there so many people of color here as clients but not as volunteers? And, a question closer to home: Why do I (Lisa) get such great satisfaction bringing you (my daughter) to the food shelf, while for clients who come here with their kids, it is a shameful experience? Lisa does not talk about the capitalist food system that creates hunger and then redistributes surplus food to remedy physiological pangs. She does not discuss food sovereignty and how communities of color have been denied their rights to grow, produce, fish, and hunt for food—even in Minnesota. She does not talk about the fact that even hungry people yearn for fresh food and whole foods and worry intensely about there being too much sodium in canned corn. She does not talk about women like Trinity, the African American woman for whom racism gets in the way of her employment. Instead, she talks about how clients are so thankful for the food they get at Chum and how they—the volunteers—should be so grateful for what they have.

Poverty and racialized poverty are endemic to Duluth. Here, white residents tend to have few interactions with people of color. As Lee Stuart, executive director of Chum, observes, these interactions are limited to situations in which whites are almost always in positions of power. The power, privilege, and unspoken norms associated with whiteness are intensified in this region, as are experiences of stigma for people of color. Some might argue that whiteness is inevitable in a setting in which there are

so many white people, but as food scholar Rachel Slocum (2007) notes, this runs counter to the idea that whiteness is hegemonic in the United States, regardless of the number of bodies in a certain place. She notes: “Studying whiteness ... is not about counting all the whites and arguing that whiteness is ‘more’ or ‘less’ in places with greater or fewer of them” (521). Whiteness is part of race and central to theorizing race, racism, and antiracism, and studying whiteness helps us understand how race operates in the United States, regardless of numbers.

The study of whiteness problematizes whiteness by turning the research gaze from its traditional, exclusive focus on the racialized Other to those at the center—those on the top rungs of the racial system: white people. The title of this chapter purposefully identifies “good white women” to shift the lens on issues of hunger and food insecurity; the overarching argument is that hunger (like racism) is less about those who are marked and more about those who participate in assigning marks. Furthermore, food pantries obscure the fact that the hunger industrial complex is built on the good intentions of a lot of good white people—mostly women. Lisa may be a good woman, but, as John Biwen (2017) puts it plainly in the final episode of the award-winning *Seeing White* series: “So all white supremacy needs to keep chugging along, even here in the twenty-first century, is for most white people to go about our lives being nice and being good nonracists. ... So, and that includes people working, you know, doing the good work of working in the caring professions and social services and even charity work, right? If we just go about our lives, we can have a white supremacist society without individual racists. As it happens, we have individual racists, too.” Moving toward a place of food justice beyond oppressive forms of charity necessarily requires food pantries to engage in antiracism work—not by problematizing brownness, but by interrogating whiteness. In the absence of critical thinking into the types of good works that whiteness brings, food pantries are just another vestige of structural racism in the United States today.

Goal of the Chapter

The goal of this chapter is to unpack neoliberal stigma as it emerges in the context of whiteness and doing good. *Neoliberal stigma* refers to the ideological formations in which parameters of hard work, accountability, and

individualism are used to mark people as inferior or superior. Importantly, the chapter situates whiteness in relation to organizational discourses and larger systems of neoliberal governance that extract discipline from clients and volunteers alike; in other words, whiteness is not just evident in individual people like Lisa but at organizational and institutional levels. The questions posed by this chapter are: How do Chum's mainly white volunteers construct, reinforce, and disrupt neoliberal stigma through discourse and practice? How is whiteness reflected in organizational discourses and structures? With regard to practice, I am particularly interested in how whiteness wields its power through policies and procedures that discipline poor citizens and people of color. The chapter also highlights moments of possibility scattered throughout, possibilities for food pantries and good whites to join in the long march toward food justice and rights-based approaches.

Contradictory Discourses at Chum

Although Chum tends to be more politically liberal and strives toward a vision of social justice (i.e., a state of equality, equity, and redistributive justice), its official discourses are mixed in terms of ideological orientation. Waxman (1983) notes that over the last fifty years at least two major explanations have been offered for the existence of poverty; in the cultural argument, poverty exists because the lives of the poor are different from the nonpoor both economically and in "cultural" respects, including patterns of behavior and values. In the structural argument, patterns of behavior that manifest in the poor are not the result of unique values of the poor but instead the consequence of the poor occupying an unfavorable position in the social structure. The latter argument tends to be less stigmatizing, although, as we will discuss, Chum employs both arguments in its official discourses.

Chum produces several public relations materials, such as brochures, annual reports, newsletters, and emails sent to donors and community members, which identify the various social and economic factors that bring people to use their services. The structural or basic needs of clients are foregrounded in this excerpt: "The Food Shelf operates with the philosophy that people in need of food should have **access to this most fundamental of human needs.**" Justice and compassion are important to the work of

Chum, as is clear in its vision statement. Chum is "People of faith working together to provide basic necessities, foster stable lives and organize for a just and compassionate community." In official discourses, Chum uses faith-based arguments to encourage a particular response to poverty rooted in social justice, as highlighted in an excerpt from an annual report: "Supported by at least 10,000 faithful people, from 38 diverse congregations from neighborhoods 'east, west, downtown and over the hill,' the staff at Chum is guided by the question: *Given this unique and God-given person in front of me at this moment, how can I respond with the most love, the most generosity, the most compassion, and the greatest mercy? How can our work together help heal the broken world and bend the moral arc of the universe a little bit more toward justice?*" This excerpt invokes Rev. Martin Luther King's (1965) sermon at Temple Israel, in which he examined the "mountain of racial injustice."

Although the language of structures is sometimes employed in official publications, a neoliberal, market-driven language of self-sufficiency, independence, and personal responsibility is also found in the discourse. For example, organizational materials clarify that Chum's focus is on moving families from dependence to independence. The title for a brochure announces, "Help us to help others help themselves," and another commentary reads, "Chum maintains these food programs with the goal of guiding people toward self-sufficiency, to a place where they no longer need assistance." Another brochure presents a profile of an employee, Richard, who has served as a housing advocate for more than a decade. Richard's role is described as that of a "part parent," reinforcing a paternalistic relationship between Chum and its clients. The theme of dignity is central in the writing; Richard is quoted as saying, "Dignity is a personal thing ... You cannot make someone have dignity. You can treat them with dignity, and that helps, but real dignity is something that operates from the inside out. You have to create it for yourself." Later in the article, Richard emphasizes the importance of humility and inner worth: "If I can get someone to understand humility where they can become somewhat humbled by the service they're receiving, they can then start to go, 'Wow, I can do it.' That's when the esteem building starts. That's where the self-respect starts to germinate. That's when you start to see some kind of self-worth, not outer worth. And I'll tell you there have been some significant experiences here with people who have absolutely done some 180s, and that's what keeps

me in the business.” The notion that poor citizens, people who are at the bottom of the social hierarchy, need to learn humility is unsettling to say the least.

Lauding Richard for this work, the brochure states, “More specifically, he’s helped a lot of people to help themselves. He shows love, respect and compassion, while at the same time calling for accountability. It’s an important balance designed to help individuals discover something precious—their dignity.” The individualization of poverty is clear across these official discourses, in which even when structural factors are presented as the cause of the problem, solutions are framed in individual and moral terms, captured in the words *dignity*, *humility*, and *inner worth*. Consistent with neoliberal logic, the focus is on the individual—the individual’s character, independence, accountability, and self-sufficiency—and the solution is framed therapeutically using the language of personal healing and restoration. Instead of revealing the complexity of poverty and poverty governance today, these discourses validate suspicions people hold with respect to the motives, intentions, and moral character of those who are poor and food insecure. These stories erase the complexity of human beings who walk through Chum—how they give back to their communities, their aspirations, their heightened sense of consciousness about the world around them, and their visions.

Official discourses demonstrate painstaking discursive erasures with regards to historically patterned racial inequities. Mirroring Lisa’s color-blind discourse earlier, racial inequity remains the unarticulated subtext in official discourses as well. Between the years 2009 and 2013, I found only one annual report with references to minoritized groups, albeit in color-blind language: “But increasingly, Chum will be seeking new ways to break through the barriers that marginalize and isolate so many of those we serve. This cannot happen without your initiative, prayers, and involvement.” The barriers alluded to here are racism and structural racism. Explicit language about the problem of racial inequity was absent, but the accompanying imagery clarified the meaning. A cursory glance provides an immediate sense of which social groups are being served and which groups do the serving. The annual report zooms in on volunteers, staff, and board members who are white, whereas clients are represented by a mix made mostly of African Americans and Native Americans, plus a few white men and women. These images of people of color are beset with paternalistic taglines

such as “Offering a hand to those in need,” “Supporting friends from crisis to need,” and “Food, shelter, dignity, hope.” In one of the main brochures, there were six images of clients either alone or in groups, of which four images noticeably depicted people of color. Thus, like Lisa, who failed to draw the connections between race and class, official discourses also do not articulate these intersections. Race, though visible, has been made irrelevant, relegating the systematic oppression of minoritized communities to the backdrop.

Institutional Pressures

For Chum’s executive director, Lee Stuart—a scholar who has spent her life in activism and organizing—these contradictions are reflective of the complexity of the organization itself. Lee started at Chum after spending nearly two decades as lead organizer of the South Bronx Churches, where she directed large-scale community-rebuilding projects. Chum does not have its roots in radical social action, however, but in traditional top-down service delivery. Chum has only recently begun to move into advocacy work. Chum is what might be referred to as a “corporatist welfare organization” because of its hierarchical structure and formal separations between managers, volunteers, and clients (Adkins, Occhipinti, and Hefferan 2012). Chum began in 1973, when ten Central Hillside (Duluth’s inner city) congregations pooled resources to assist low-income people in Duluth during a regional recession. Chum today is made of about forty member congregations with a range of denominations and political leanings. Organizational decisions are influenced by member congregations, which can be limiting. Lee notes: “I mean there are liberal, conservative, Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Baptist ... Lutherans see the world quite differently than the world of Gloria Dei, and St. John’s is very different from a place like St. Ben’s, both theologically and ritually.” Lee is engaged in antiracist work herself, but talks about how difficult it is to get the so-called good white folks in member congregations to get on board. Even as Chum creates spaces for ecumenical dialogue and provides for the needs of the poorest in Duluth, the “throwaway” people, recognizing and intervening in whiteness is an uphill battle. Lee observes that rarely has the work of member congregations gone beyond the realm of charity, which she argues is the downfall of faith institutions overall: “I think that the declining reliance on faith institutions in our country is

partly because people stopped at charity, and weren't given the tools to express those values and those visions, you know, make straight the highway, make the rough places smooth, make the valleys gentle, make the mountains ... make the obstacles low. Those are powerful, powerful images. Now, how do we do that?"

Broader food system arrangements inform how Chum runs its food shelf. Chum receives grants from the federal and state government and is engaged in private-public sector collaborations to deliver services. In addition to procuring food through the Feeding America network, Chum receives food through personal donations and food drives held by various organizations in the city of Duluth, including the university where I work, the local co-op, and schools. A variable amount of food stocked at Chum is USDA commodity food that comes via the federal TEFAP program. Because Chum distributes TEFAP food, clients must go through intake procedures mandated by government policies to ensure eligibility and prevent overutilization of services. Chum only allows one visit per month, although this rule is sometimes broken on a case-by-case basis by volunteers.

Every time I talk to food shelf directors, my head hurts. The job is incredibly tough. It is intense and different every day. There is always a freezer that needs fixing, food that is rotting somewhere, a new procedure to follow, new volunteers to deal with, fluctuations in food prices, something that needs to be ordered, a problem that needs to be solved. They sit for hours with lists of food sent to them by the food bank and then try to determine the cost-effectiveness of buying products from the food bank versus directly from a retailer. The food shelf at Chum is no different. It has only one paid staff position and relies mostly on volunteer labor. The food shelf director at Chum is Frank; his days are spent dealing with either a shortage of food or an abundance of food, both of which require crisis management. He has to find a way to distribute food that was dumped on him, manage the food needs of his clients, and get rid of expired food. Frank often went into lengthy diatribes about food waste in the system, the emotional connection that donors have with food shelves, and micropolitics that occur between Chum, Second Harvest, and corporate donors. Food shelf directors are caught up in the business of moving vast quantities of surplus food while also being plagued by uncertainties about supply. Frank feels that he has little control in the hunger industrial complex—that the

system benefits too many people for anyone to want it to change. It is in this context of managed chaos that whiteness and neoliberalism wield their power.

“Good (White) Women, Basically”

Unlike clients, the Chum food shelf volunteers all identified as white and from a middle-class background—typically older, retired, or semiretired women, and none had experienced hunger or food insecurity in their lifetimes. One of the volunteers described it in this way: “We are pretty much the same. I think we come from similar backgrounds. We have had opportunities in life which other people haven’t.” This is consistent with research that shows that volunteering is typically a middle-class activity because these individuals are able to give time, energy, and other resources (e.g., travel to the location) toward charitable causes (Fothergill 2003).

These white women showed great insight when talking about the connections between the economy and food insecurity. When asked about what brings people to the food shelves, volunteers like Lisa talked in great length about the struggles that families go through—homelessness, unemployment, retirement, health issues, divorce, and even the single calamitous event that brings families down. Linda, a retired social worker, who was a regular volunteer at the food shelf, talked about how the steel plant brought manufacturing jobs to Duluth, but when that left there were only professional and service jobs available. The lack of jobs training meant that people could not get those jobs. “So, then what is the solution? We sent them home, we gave them a check.” She added astutely: “So then you say, okay on the ladder of life you are the type that goes to the food shelf, you are the type that gives to the food shelf. You know, I mean, is that how we rate ourselves, you know?” A few volunteers, in particular the older women who had been at the food shelf for a long time, articulated critiques about the institutionalization of food banks. Linda, referring to Chum, said, “I mean, they were just in a little corner; I mean, they were never a building!” Another, an elderly octogenarian, Joanne, who used to be a teacher, elaborated upon the risks of charity: “That’s a risk of providing any charity; it becomes institutionalized, if you will. I have been here twenty years and, you know, our goal always was to be redundant and I have not seen much progress in that direction. There are some people who would say

that just by the very nature of our politics in this country that we need an underclass to make the system work. I think it's horrible. I mean, I am a very liberal person politically and I am probably close to being a social democrat."

For all these women, volunteering at the Chum food pantry was a way for them to do good in the world. For some, volunteering was driven by faith beliefs; they used Biblical parables of the Good Samaritan and "loaves and fishes" to support their volunteerism. For others, it was more about social engagement, citizenship, and postsecular ethics. For Tracy, "deeds are more important than creeds," so making a better world by feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, working for immigrant rights, and supporting gay, lesbian, and transsexual people were all part of her spiritual growth and progress. Good citizenship meant giving back to the community. It also meant passing on values and life lessons to children, as in Lisa's story.

Volunteering also comes with advantages. The fact that volunteers do not get paid means a lot of flexibility in terms of schedules and job expectations. Volunteering allows these white women in Duluth to live their middle-class lifestyles and give back; as Cindy observed: "I don't have a paid job and I just wanted to be a volunteer as I wanted to find useful things to do. My husband is a doctor. I don't need the money and so I wanted to contribute and do something. Also, when you are a volunteer you have flexibility, because when you cannot come, you cannot come, and so I don't have to worry about travel plans." Volunteering was a way for these white women to socialize and bond with each other. Volunteers may not initially feel a sense of belonging to each other, but after seeing each other on a regular basis, they form a social collective of sorts—a collective formed not necessarily based on phenotypical characteristics but because of the seriality of their interactions, interactions afforded to them because of white economic privilege. By engaging in the task of distributing food to others, volunteers spend time with each other, enjoy meaningful social interactions, and become friends. Penny, a retired librarian, explained that distributing food to people in need was indeed only part of her motivation for volunteering: "I do enjoy the group of people that I am volunteering with. You know, we have [the] opportunity to converse and check in with each other, and joke and laugh and tell stories and stuff like that. You know, that's really good and it does feel good that you are putting food into people's mouth, that's part of it." Consistent with the white racial frame,

volunteers held each other in high regard, referring to each other as kind, generous, courteous, respectful, and faithful. Penny ended the interview by saying, “I just stand in awe of the people that work in these organizations and their dedication. They are saints and they are just basically such good people and I just feel so honored to have been part of that in my time here.”

Reaching Out and Breaking the Rules

Although volunteers bonded easily with each other, forging genuine connections with clients was a challenge at the food shelf, where interactions took place in a highly regimented manner. Charity reinforces social distance, hierarchy, and asymmetry; social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) averred that it is through the act of giving that relations of power and domination are metamorphosed into legitimate and moral relations. Before the food shelf opens, there is typically a line of people waiting, a line that winds along the sidewalk outside. When the doors open, clients wait in the waiting area until their intake interview, after which they are taken back to the “shopping area” to pick out food. This is a small room with shelves of canned food, a table of fresh food, and a freezer of meat. The interviewer is the first person the client interacts with at the food shelf. If there are many clients that day, then numbers are given out to keep track of who should be served first. In keeping with poverty governance procedures, at the intake interview clients are asked about their income, types of federal or state assistance received, number of members in their households, and if they need referrals for anything else. This is the time to ascertain the person’s income and eligibility for using the food shelf. If the individual has been to the food shelf before, their card will be on file, and the interviewer will cross-check it against what the client is saying, updating details as needed. Within the enclosure of the Chum food shelf, both clients and volunteers obeyed the arrangements of space and time, each following their roles precisely. On a busy day, the process of receiving food could take between two and three hours.

Volunteers acknowledge that the administrative procedures at the food shelf can feel demeaning to the client, but they do their best to forge connections and make the process more amenable. Poverty governance procedures demand that a particular intake interview question be asked: “Why

are you at the food shelf?" A volunteer explained that people typically will say something like, "you know, I have no food" or "I am hungry." Once in a while people may go into more detail, saying things like "I just moved," "I have to come up with a rent deposit," "my food stamps got lowered," or "I have children coming into my household." These questions can sound judgmental, so volunteers make adjustments. Linda, for instance, does not question clients' responses, even when there is a discrepancy. "I just kind of leave that as, you know, whatever they say is the truth, maybe they forgot to write something ... Well, it isn't really for us to pry or to make people feel uncomfortable."

Volunteers reached out to clients with kindness and compassion by way of empathic conversation. In the context of alternative food movements, Slocum (2007, 524) writes that whiteness builds its own closed, cordoned arena, yet there are many instances in which whites come into close proximity with non-white others and reach out in "appreciation, curiosity and hopefulness." This "desirous proximity" was certainly true at the food shelf, where volunteers tried to forge connections. For instance, Lisa, the mom introduced in the opening of the chapter, talked about striking up a conversation with a client—asking them how they were doing or inquiring about a new job. Cindy pointed out that there were clients who came in on particular days because they knew a particular volunteer was going to be there. "At this time, you remember that the client has a sick child or someone had a surgery, you can say, 'Oh, how is your mom, last weekend you were here you were upset because she was in the hospital.'" Cindy characterized these incidents as moments of friendship.

Another way in which volunteers showed empathy was by breaking the rules and procedures. In these instances, volunteers challenged the neoliberal governance structures that disciplined their interactions and behaviors. The amount of food distributed at the food shelf is set by food shelf policies, government regulations, and the amount of food the food shelf has to offer at any time, which circumscribes the autonomy of volunteers. Volunteers broke the rules by handing out more food than allowed or giving something extra. Gayle, the former food shelf director, explained that if a family needed assistance more than once in a month, they would try to see if they could skip the following month's supply, but this negotiation was up to whoever was there at the time. Pamela, a retired nurse, talked about why she might hand out extra food: "I have nursing as my background,

so somebody will come through and say that their child has a cold and I suggest extra fluids. They are not going to go to the doctor because there is no way to afford that. You know volunteers, we are kind of savvy that way, sticking an extra thing, you need more juice this week for your child, that kind of stuff.”

Previously, the packers would go to the pantry to pack up the food for the client, but a few years ago, a new “client choice model” was put in place. Clients are now escorted around to choose their own food; this has helped build connections between volunteers and clients. Pamela explained: “In some ways there used to be more of a disconnect between us because we would only literally pack stuff. The person interviewing the clients would give us the packing stuff and we would go back and pack it up ... we would really be simply assuming what other people wanted. But that changed. The new process now involves clients coming back and choosing what they want off the shelf according to certain guidelines and limits.” Linda noted that there is dignity in “making your own choices” and not having anyone looking over your shoulder. On a more pragmatic note, with this new system, clients go home with what they want to eat and will eat. Pamela continues: “Yeah, we try to give somebody an apple that doesn’t have any teeth—I mean, come on, let’s make apple sauce or let them juice their apple—and that was the stuff we did not see before.”

Volunteers were excited to offer options and influence clients to make healthier choices. On many occasions, I heard volunteers encourage clients to take the fresh vegetables and fruits when available. The food itself provided an entry point for volunteers to build relationships with clients. One day, I observed Leslie, a long-time volunteer and a retired health care worker taking a man of African descent, a recent Somali immigrant, around the food shelf. He came to the food shelf every month, so she knew him from before. Even as he went through the intake procedures, Leslie carefully got double bags ready in the shopping cart for him, because she knew that he would be walking home. They went around picking out food, all the while engaged in friendly banter. Leslie encouraged him to take vegetables, saying, “You don’t eat enough of your vegetables!” or “Why don’t you try this, I know you like to cook! Come on, take something besides your ramen.” There was such a pleasant quality to their conversation. I could not quite hear what the man was saying because he was soft-spoken, but there

was a warm tone to their interaction, a bit like a bossy grandma conversing with an over-accommodating grandson.

White Fragility

Although there were moments of friendship and desirous proximity between volunteers and clients, the structure of the food shelf meant that this was a fragile space rife with conflict, both hidden and expressed. The interactions between volunteers and clients were structured by class, race, and organizational policies, and procedures. The numerous restrictions in place regarding the amount of food distributed was the common cause of conflict between volunteers and clients. During the intake interview, a small sheet of paper was filled out by the interviewer, which let the packer know how much food the client was allowed based on household size. This “slip” was usually at the center of the conflict. Clients felt that they were not getting enough food to feed their households and at times expressed this in ways deemed inappropriate by volunteers. In these situations, the white female volunteers were forced to come to terms with their own limitations for “doing good.”

It was illuminating to see just how hard it was for these white women to negotiate these contentious interactions. Cindy recognized the unequal material relations that existed between clients and volunteers and worked hard to alleviate this dynamic. She explained: “Well, ideally, and I work very hard at this, I try to make it a friendly comfortable experience for people, like we are more coequals. I mean I know we can’t be coequals but that I am a sympathetic listener and I can give them the time to tell me what their issues are, I can affirm them, I can give them a referral if I think that’s appropriate, because most people don’t want to be there.” Penny described a conflict-ridden experience, which for her has been a turning point in her life.

Well, there was actually one client, a lady in particular who was a little more prickly. Another packer had come in at noon and she had not gotten the information that I had, so as the two of them were going through the room, picking out the food, they got to the dairy items. The packer was going to let this person take something that she was not supposed to, you know it’s supposed to be two points rather than one, so I said to her “you know we are supposed to limit this to larger families.” The person actually intimated or inferred that I was being racist because she was Black. You know, I was like really shocked and anyways I just walked

away and then I continued to help the other packer. I was really offended and she came around and she said, you know, “I am sorry,” and I said, “you know, I wouldn’t be here if I have an issue,” I mean, “I’m not, I wouldn’t be here,” and she said, “you know, I’m just having a bad day.”

In the following paragraphs, I analyze this incident in more detail to show how racial and neoliberal ideologies cohere in this interaction.

Significantly, Penny starts out the story *without* identifying the lady as African American. However, in her use of the term *prickly lady*, I was already primed for the race of the client, because in this context, the term prickly fit precisely within the trope of the “Angry Black Woman” (ABW). The ABW stereotype is one that characterizes Black women as aggressive, ill-tempered, illogical, overbearing, hostile, and ignorant without provocation (Walley-Jean 2009). Professors of Law Jones and Norwood (2017, 2049) point out that the ABW, a combination of Blackness and nonconforming femininity, is innately intersectional: “This so-called ‘Angry Black Woman’ is the physical embodiment of some of the worst negative stereotypes of Black women—she is out of control, disagreeable, overly aggressive, physically threatening, loud (even when she speaks softly), and to be feared. She will not stay in her ‘place.’ She is not human” (2049). They observe that Black women in the United States are the frequent targets of bias-filled interactions in which aggressors both denigrate Black women and also blame women who elect to challenge the aggressor’s acts. When Black women challenge assumptions about their second-class status, they disrupt the racial and gender comfort in which their white aggressors exist and upset notions of racial and gender superiority. The exercise of voice provokes a range of emotions including anger and argumentation from the aggressor. Aggressors respond by shifting attention from their acts and deflecting blame to Black women.

Also relevant to this discussion is the notion of *white fragility*. White fragility is defined as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium” (DiAngelo 2011, 54). DiAngelo observes that because whites live in a racially insular environment, it creates expectations for racial comfort while simultaneously lowering their ability to tolerate racial stress.

This is certainly the case here. Penny, instead of working out her own privilege, adopted a defensive, power-laden attitude showcasing white fragility. Consistent with the aforementioned definition, she demonstrated “emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.” For Penny—a good white woman, a white liberal—to be called a racist was the worst possible insult she could have received; it disrupted her racial and gender comfort and she became defensive. Penny then proceeded to tell the Black woman who exercised her voice: “I’m not a racist ... I wouldn’t be here if I had an issue.” More precisely, what Penny is saying is that there are so many clients of color at the Chum food shelf that she could not be a racist and continue to work there. This of course is not true and is exactly the way in which institutional and structural racism operates. It is quite possible to work and volunteer in a variety of state and nonstate institutions that “serve” people of color and still hold racial ideologies.

Critical race scholars point out that it is especially hard for whites—in particular, whites who think of themselves as good people doing good work—to reconcile themselves to the idea that implicit bias, stereotypes, and messages about race are part of their thinking, even when they do not recognize it (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Doane and Bonilla-Silva 2003). It is also difficult for whites to be able to see the interconnections between individual- and structural-level racism. They tend to agree that racism exists “out there,” but not with regard to themselves. The fact that Penny can tell this story and use the words *race* and *racist* is a positive step toward a power-sensitive discourse; however, her defensive response minimizes the depth and scope of structural racism. Penny has not been socialized into developing the kind of empathy necessary to step across the perception gap, to adopt an antiracist position, or to stand in solidarity with this woman of color. Penny fails to recognize that the woman in front of her has experienced the crushing burden of racism in so many ways and so many times that she is in a very good position to recognize and name the source of her oppression. Penny juxtaposes her own calm and nonconfrontational behavior of “walking away” with that of the so-called prickly lady. In Penny’s racial comfort zone, she views it as taking the higher ground, but from the vantage point of those on the receiving end, it is not. This was whiteness at its worst: silent, innocent, fragile, powerful, and oppressive. The better course of action for Penny would have been to stay, to talk, to break

the rules immediately, and to recognize the thousands of years of white supremacy that in this moment they are both caught up in.

Although Penny is unable to come to terms with being called a racist, she does recognize the fallibility of neoliberal forms of governance. Initially, she dons the mantle of the neoliberal regime and uses its rules to wield power over the Black woman, but after the interaction she begins to think about ways in which to modify and reinterpret the rules: “I realized what I needed to do was to be not the person who was saying no, to be the person who was saying ‘you can choose this and, you know, this is the way you can work around our system’ or that getting to the slip and saying, you know, ‘I didn’t decide this, I am not the decider,’ so this is just the way it is and if you want to talk to someone else about that, you can. That helped, that helped a lot.” Here Penny is able to blame the system for its rules, but yet not recognize how her whiteness and racial comfort are also part of that same system. The difficulty Penny shows in accepting her own whiteness is telling. We are left to imagine the impact this interaction had on the life and livelihood of the “prickly lady,” whose name we do not know and who is only spoken about. We are left to wonder about that moment in which this Black woman decided to speak out and the courage she would have needed to brace herself for the consequences of white fragility, knowing full well that she would be categorized as the “Angry Black Woman playing the race card.”

At Chum (and most food shelves) the needs, voices, and complaints of clients were silenced both by the presence *and* absence of administrative procedures. Because food distribution occurs within a framework of charity, clients cannot complain about what they receive or how they receive the food; they must show gratitude (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003). There were no suggestion boxes at Chum in which clients could leave feedback about the food or service they received. There was a dilapidated notice hanging on the wall that explained how to file a grievance about Chum’s programs, the first step being face-to-face communication with the program coordinator, and the final step being a written appeal to the Chum Grievance Committee—either of which would be threatening to any individual, let alone a vulnerable and food insecure individual. Even if the so-called prickly lady wanted to lodge a complaint about her experiences at the food shelf, there was no entity that she could turn to for a fair and empathic hearing. In sum, though the desire to reach out to

clients was strong among volunteers, they did so from a position of privilege as white women in the in-group, and the structure of the food shelf supported this inequity.

The Hardworking, the Regulars, and Discourses of Suspicion

The language that stigma employs to demarcate the worthy and unworthy is constantly shifting. Across history, “stigma theories” have been used to justify the inferiority of the stigmatized, control meaning about groups of people, and warrant discrimination against the poor and racial groups. One such ideological formation has been the Calvinist distinction made between the “deserving and underserving poor.” In the case of the Chum food shelf, volunteers did not use the terms *deserving* or *underserving*, but they came up with new language to draw distinctions. Volunteers used the terms *hardworking* and *regulars* to categorize clients, terms that move us from a morality grounded in spirituality to a morality grounded in neoliberal logic. Even as these mostly politically liberal volunteers were adept in the logics of economic injustice, they reinforced more conservative ways of thinking on the subject. Volunteers in one breath expressed compassion for clients but also discursively reinforced social distance, otherization, and the Us and Them phenomenon.

The hardworking group of people was constructed as comprising those who you would never “expect to see” at the food shelf, whereas the regulars were clients for whom using the food shelf was “a way of life.” Sight, sound, smell, and the way in which bodies moved in this space played an important role in volunteer perceptions and expectations. Volunteers expected to see people who looked poor; when clients did not meet this expectation, they were surprised. Scholars note that the stigma of poverty is shaped by how visible a particular mark is; for instance, homelessness is often more visible and disruptive (Phelan et al. 1997). This was true at the food shelf. Tracy recounts the experience of having a well-dressed gentleman come into the food shelf, who surprised them by writing his income as “60,000.” After talking with him, she learned that he had made that money the previous year working two jobs and that his wife had just had their eighth child, so he gave up one of his jobs to be home more. She cannot remember ever seeing them again. Pamela had a similar experience:

You know, sometimes when you do this volunteer work it seems a little frustrating because you do it day after day and you still see people coming in or some of the same people or the same type of person with the same problem. But I remember this, it was two o'clock, it was time to close shop, we had been busy and everybody was let's get out of here, and this guy walked in and he was dressed very well and he had a slip for seven people, five children in the family, and we were looking at each other and we roll our eyes, why is this guy here? Then when I went home I thought I know why, he was just so embarrassed. I knew that he had probably either lost his job or something was going on in the family because he certainly didn't look like a regular.

An important difference between the hardworking and regulars was in the amount of shame and embarrassment volunteers attributed to them. To the hardworking group were attributed feelings of shame, humiliation, and indignity for using the food shelf—and these were seen as good things. These attributions were not made of the regulars. People within the hardworking category were portrayed in a positive light and seen with hope and optimism; external factors, such as the recession, were usually identified as their main reasons for using assistance. The hardworking people were seen as taking pride in their ability to be independent and support themselves, but this was not a feeling or intention attributed to the regulars. Tracy described the difference between the hardworking and regulars in this way: “There certainly are some regular clientele that show up, yeah, pretty much once a month. Then there are the folks who've just found themselves in such dire straits and those are the folks who are most reluctant to come ... sometimes they tell me the story of you know I donated to this food shelf for years and now I have to use you, but when I'm back on my feet I'll donate again. You know, people who've got lot of pride in being able to support themselves and now can't so are really very embarrassed to be there.” Volunteers found the shame expressed by these clients as refreshing; as such, this group of people drew more attention, goodwill, and care from the volunteers. Cindy observed that these were folks who all of a sudden found themselves at the food shelf and were ashamed, and so “you just need the time to be kind to them and help them understand that it's okay and that it won't be forever, without giving them false hope.”

Conversely, a “discourse of suspicion” was used to talk about the regulars. Here, the doctrine of compassionate conservatism and “benign suspicion” typically associated with conservative ideology were found, in which

compassion refers to unconditional love and care of those in need, whereas *conservatism* is a reference to the personal accountability and responsibility required for compassion to work (Elisha 2011). Evangelical author Marvin Olasky used the term *benign suspicion* as a recommendation for how charitable organizations could protect themselves from fraudulent assistance seekers (as cited in Elisha 2011). In the present study, there were several ways in which the regulars were constructed as “scamming the system.” People scammed the system, volunteers said, by expanding or “embroidering” the size of the family so as to access more food. Cindy told a story that has become somewhat of a legend at the Chum food shelf. A family had come in and said that their family included a husband, a wife, and eight children and that they were temporarily staying at the drop-in center. Cindy went to the former food shelf director, who checked across the street at the homeless shelter and found that there was no such family there. Instead, they learned that only the mother and father were there; the children were in a different state. I heard this story told in a variety of contexts and by different people with the terms *sneaky*, *misconstrue*, *misrepresent*, *embroidering*, and *lying* used frequently to describe the event—all indicating a complex form of neoliberal stigma.

Another scam, volunteers explained, was people selling or trading the food they received. Lisa took great pride in her ability to verify this deception, although she too bookended her explanation with compassion:

Lisa: My shift is only with the working families, so the vast majority of the folks are very hardworking, making ends meet that aren't quite meeting, very hardworking, extremely appreciative, very appreciative; there are always a few scammers that I personally enjoy because they can't out-scam me.

Interviewer: How do they try to scam, though?

Lisa: I had a client come in and claimed that she needs diapers for her baby, and I said, “Really, your baby, your baby is in foster care and you're not getting diapers for that.” “How do you know?” Because I know, I know what happened to your baby, you are not getting diapers. What she would do is, she would get diapers and she would sell them on the street or trade it to somebody for some other stuff, so people certainly will push no sooner you start giving, they are gonna push and take as much as they can.

Interviewer: They do that with food as well?

Lisa: They do, I mean to a degree. “Oh, this is 3 points, I only have 2 points left. Can I please, can I please please have it?”

Thus poor citizens, already inundated with the checks and cross-checks of poverty governance procedures, are subjected to even more checks at the food pantry by enterprising volunteers. Ironically, Lisa is at the food shelf to teach her daughter what it means to be poor and to destigmatize poverty; unfortunately, she is also teaching her daughter what it means to be recruited into neoliberal governmentality and exercise surveillance over the Other. Lisa is the gatekeeper, policy enforcer, and food shelf police unleashing jurisprudence on clients based on a neoliberal calculus. She is more interested in being right and in condemning this woman, who for whatever reason has lost her child, rather than allowing her to access what she should be legally entitled to. Steeped in her whiteness, she does not find the loving kindness, the *caritas*, the *agape*, the vision of justice necessary to resist, bend, and break the rules. Indeed, she practices a harsh form of charity.

It soon became clear that the term *regulars* was populated by gendered and racialized assumptions. Families that were not traditional nuclear families and families without homes were at the center of the regulars: “For the most part we certainly will have some other relatives, adults living there, or sometimes it will be more than two adults but we certainly have the families that have two adults and then four, five, six kids, things like, we do have the uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters living with the adults and then the various kids so, we get all different living arrangements and all different family sizes.” The discourse surrounding regulars focused on single women with their multiple children and their disordered lives. Feminist scholars Fraser and Gordon (1994) argue that discourses of welfare are contoured by their association with women, poor women, and unwed mothers, as well as notions of irresponsibility, illegitimacy, and promiscuity. Even at Chum, an organization with a social justice orientation, discourses surrounding female clients encapsulated these tensions, as seen in Tracy’s observation: “Sometimes you do see the same type of people and you think, will they ever get out of here? You will see a young woman in her twenties with three kids and you think, when will they get out of this cycle? and you try not to judge, but you know how difficult that is.”

In this space, race was a physical mark that carried meanings, meanings associated with poverty and filtered through neoliberal logic. Geographer

Arun Saldanha (2006) argues that movement, smell, phenotype, and practices within particular spaces, in combination with certain material objects, separate and connect bodies and create race and racism. He writes, “Race is a whole event, much more than just a statement, important though that statement may be in the emergence of the event” (12). This was true of the Chum food shelf, where rich and poor bodies, calm and stressed bodies, healthy and unhealthy bodies, thin and overweight bodies, and white, Black, and brown bodies were separated by the architecture and disciplines of the food shelf. Because Black and brown bodies are not linked with all sorts of wealth and ways of life in the same way that white bodies are, expectations were met and ruptured based on phenotypical traits. This is the same reason why I, despite my education, income, and inherited wealth, expressed in good clothes and jewelry, was often mistaken for a client in my early days of volunteering at the food shelf. In this setting, when the body did not perform to the stereotype of who is poor based on markers of class-based identity—dress, manner, language, behaviors, and body type—expectations were ruptured.

A Discourse of Hopelessness

Although the hardworking group of people inspired hope and optimism in the volunteers, a “discourse of hopelessness” was typically used to talk about the regulars. Pamela, for instance, talked about a sense of hopelessness she felt because of the increase in numbers of people, children, and entire families at the food shelf. Previously, the volunteers would have a chance to sit down and chat around the table. But these days when she goes to the food shelf, she is ready for the day because she knows she is going to be busy. Linda described a similar sense of hopelessness: “It’s actually more depressing now because you know when you start off you are oh, I will help and I will do all this, but then after many years you will look at it and say, well how much longer are we going to do this? So then it’s depressing from the standpoint of ‘Is this all it’s going to be?’” The discourse of hopelessness, though seemingly benign, hides an ideological formation about the poor that can be far more distancing, otherizing, and demeaning than direct aspersions. Although compassionate, these articulations imply that poor individuals have become dependent on the system, are unable to transform their circumstances even when given the right

opportunities, and, in effect, have completely lost their ability to be fully human. The following articulation by Linda reinforces the culture of poverty argument:

I would say probably the hardest for me to see is the survival mode that some people are in and that they are fine with that. You know that’s what life has become for them. I will go over to the food shelf and go get my food, I will go over here and get this, and I will go and do this and I can get that and that’s how I exist. I am not saying they shouldn’t have these things, though that they are okay with that, that they have gotten to the point that they can’t push themselves past that, they probably can’t. I mean a lot of people we have in here probably wouldn’t be employable, for a number of factors probably wouldn’t be employable. So this is it. This is where they are at and that’s kind of depressing to imagine well, this is what life is for these people. And it is for a lot them.

A little later, Linda reinforced the same point, saying: “Yeah, there is lot of people that come in regularly because like I say, this is how they live, this is what they are doing now, so okay it’s time to go to the food shelf and get my packet of food and at Christmas time I go to the Salvation Army. I will get my Christmas presents and I will go to the free dinner you know at Thanksgiving. I mean they know how to go and how to do it and that’s how they live.” It is not hard to see that Linda speaks from a position of privilege. Poverty is never convenient, ordinary, or easy. In my interviews, there were no poor people who were “fine with” or “okay with” their poverty. Poor citizens “know how to go and how to do it” because their lives depend on it. What is also relevant here is how the policy environment strategically makes the poor hyper-visible, Rather than allowing people access to legal entitlements, public policy is set up in such a way that the poor have to beg at multiple charitable spaces to fulfill their basic needs. In doing so, they become visible and marked as people who “enjoy” getting handouts.

In some instances, even when volunteers articulated structural arguments as the cause of poverty, these structural arguments very quickly morphed into cultural arguments situated within a discourse of hopelessness. This sudden, almost imperceptible mutation from structure to culture was vivid across the volunteer interviews. Here is how Cindy put it:

There is a lot of multigenerational poverty. There are a lot of people who were there because they are not easily employed because they don’t have an adequate education. Duluth has an awful lot of entry-level jobs and sometimes there are people who are working but not earning enough, and there are some people for whom again it’s that multigenerational thing, where it’s almost a culture that is

passed on from one generation to the next, so you might have a mother who is welfare dependent and whose children are raised to anticipate a similar life, and so it becomes a cycle. Those cultures are very hard to change because the children seldom get praised for academic success. There is no role model, no wanting to get a high school diploma or go to college, so then it can be really very tough on them. There are also people who are there because they are actively alcohol or drug abusers or they have a disability, either physical or psychological or intellectual, that prevents them from being employable and they are dependent on society taking care of them.

This morphing from structure to culture resonates with Waxman's (1983) thesis about the stigma of poverty. Waxman observes that the structural argument is not that different from the cultural argument because when a pattern that began as a situational adaptation is transmitted over generations, it becomes a cultural pattern. This means that even many situational or structural arguments inevitably end up blaming or attributing the cause of the problem to the individual or community. Waxman's larger argument is that neither cultural nor situational theories are sufficient to explain the stigma of poverty; what is needed instead is a relational perspective that accounts for both the intra-action and the interaction of the poor and the nonpoor. In other words, stigma is not about a mark or devalued trait but about how particular bodies and attributes are given meaning in the service of power.

Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire (1970) argued that discourses of hopeless, disillusionment, and grief are unfortunately quite common among people of privilege, who have little to gain by systemic change. Freire criticized the kind of hopelessness expressed here by the volunteers—the idea that conditions in the world were static and immutable—and urged people not to be pragmatic and adapt to the reality but to dream, to envision, and to imagine a new and different world. This imagination was a necessary condition for activism and social justice. He wrote in no uncertain terms about the fundamental role of elites in joining the struggle for justice. For true solidarity and liberation, the oppressors must be willing to rethink their way of life and to examine their own roles in the oppression: “Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly” (60).

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that though white volunteers have the right political stances, social distance coupled with institutional pressures mean that they are easily recruited into neoliberal logics. In the space of the Chum food pantry, neoliberal stigma flourished because of discursive practices, as well as discursive erasures, silences, and absences. The racial and economic distances between volunteers and clients meant that organizational narratives responsabilized clients while remaining silent on issues of racial and economic advantage. Race was eclipsed in the discourse while at the same time providing the subtext for claims. Volunteers did not understand their power, privilege, and positionality in relationship to clients. They were able to articulate social justice concerns in the abstract, but in the everyday turmoil of the food pantry with its processes and procedures, they were recruited into the neoliberal juridical rationalities of discipline and punishment. Volunteers were charitable in donating their time and energy to distributing food, but less charitable in making sense of and normalizing the behaviors of food insecure people. This paradox is exemplified in the fact that Lisa on the one hand brings her child to the food shelf to teach her about the poor but on the other takes great pride in rooting out the scammers. This chapter also shows that whiteness wields its power through innocence, fragility, and passivity. When white innocence encounters systems, rules, and procedures, it assumes them to be fair and therefore enforces them, all the while failing to work out how privileged individuals participate in oppressive systems and structures. With the best of intentions, volunteers expressed personal gratitude for their own circumstances and pity for the Other, but also ended up surveilling and policing poor citizens and creating new languages to demarcate the so-called deserving and undeserving poor. The subversion necessary to advance equity and justice was for the most part absent.

It is my argument that the food shelf, in its everydayness, obscures the racialized poverty that is at the heart of the unjust food system. In one of the richest countries in the world, food shelves are humdrum, normal, and routine; however, they remain unquestioned because they distribute food and have good people working within them. These enclosures hide the fact that the food pantry system, and the hunger industrial complex overall, is built on the good intentions of a lot of good white people. Amid all this

goodness, the voices of poor citizens and people of color remain unheard. The Chum food shelf is an unremunerated teaching tool used to guide a vast variety of people on a variety of journeys to self-discovery, not unlike Lisa and her daughter. It is used by institutions such as churches and universities to promote the practice of citizenship, ethical engagement, and giving back to the community. In the city of Duluth, where 90 percent of the population is white and where there are gross racial inequities, volunteering at food pantries is yet another way in which white people and people of color live racially structured lives. In these spaces, white people and people of color come together to serve and be served, as independent and dependent, as rich and poor, as superior and inferior, as marked and unmarked. This is why Lee so aptly says, “Poverty breeds social isolation, but so does privilege.”

Implications for Practice and Policy

From a policy perspective, it is clear that what is needed to end hunger is a radical transformation of the food system, increased entitlements, and increased opportunities for people to provide food for themselves (Allen 1999; Poppendieck 1999; Riches and Silvasti 2014). The food shelf is not a solution to end hunger but another structure that contributes to class, race, and food inequities. Food pantries legitimize and prop up the capitalist food system governed by the corporate food regime that serves powerful stakeholders while the needs of individuals and communities are ignored. Food pantries can play a vital role in the march toward a rights-based approach to food. Most food pantries see their job as primarily to distribute food—not necessarily to be involved in antiracist and gender work. This is problematic given the direct connections between race, gender, food insecurity, and health outcomes, as evidenced by statistics about who is hungry in the United States (Slocum 2006). In charitable settings, the problems of racism and gender equity are seen as peripheral to the technical problem of distributing food, when in fact they are at the heart of the unjust food system. Food pantries must be reminded that the food system in the United States was built on genocide and slavery and continues to be organized around racism: people of color disproportionately experience food insecurity, lose their farms, and face the dangerous work of food processing and agricultural labor (Slocum 2006). Food pantries need reminding that in the

United States, problems of poverty, illness, addiction, and mental illness in communities of color can be tied to historical traumas, more than two hundred years of slavery that brought African men and women in chains to serve a dominant white master and half a millennium of occupation of Native lands and genocide. Indeed, it is this kind of collective forgetting of history that facilitates the production of neoliberal stigma—and food pantries as a solution to hunger.

To be clear, the problem is not one that concerns only the Chum food pantry and the few white women depicted in this chapter. I use these women to showcase a much larger problem: the thousands of white men and women who serve in these roles across the length and breadth of this nation, who unintentionally come together to form the “food system.” Indeed, 51 percent of Feeding America’s sixty thousand food programs rely entirely on volunteers, and 62 percent of these programs are run by faith-based organizations (Feeding America 2014; United States Department of Health and Human Services 2014). I should also point out that this case study with its critique of volunteerism should not be used by those who stand on the sidelines, never having volunteered or lifted a finger in service, to justify their inaction; this would be antithetical to the spirit of this chapter. I use this particular case to point to future possibilities. Indeed, one can only imagine what would happen if all the white women serving in food pantries today put on their activist and advocate hats tomorrow. What walls of silence would crumble? White women are powerful, and given the way the electorate is set up they are powerful and necessary allies in dismantling the unjust food system.

Slocum (2007, 532) argues that whiteness should not be dismissed completely as ineffectual to bring about broader social change; she writes that whiteness “has progressive potential and can transform itself and change its tendency to produce and reinforce racial oppression.” The volunteers all showed a desire to reach out and engage with the paradigmatic Other. They all brought with them good intentions: faith beliefs, ethical motivations, beliefs about citizenship and giving back, and a commitment to doing good. In rare moments, these “basically good white women,” liberal and progressive and with faith beliefs, carved out spaces of resistance, subverting neoliberalism. They did so by interpreting and reinterpreting procedures and policies, renegotiating their own expectations and values, and balancing faith/ethical commitments with the rules. They sympathized

with clients and reached out to them with kind words and actions. Even if they did not engage with whiteness, they engaged with neoliberal rationalities. All of this points to possibilities for transformation. The food pantry, a dead end of sorts, can be a site of possibility, of progressive potential—but for this, good white women (and men) will have to engage in the grueling task of reformulating their identities: from “saints” to belligerent citizens, advocates, and antiracists, who see themselves as raced and part of the unjust food system. Creating visionary counternarratives and transforming the identities of people who volunteer within these spaces will be required, as seen in the Chum annual report, to “bend the moral arc of the universe a little bit more toward justice.”

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/11701.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11701.001.0001)

Feeding the Other

Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries

By: Rebecca T. de Souza

Citation:

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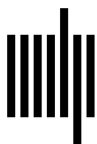
DOI: [10.7551/mitpress/11701.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/11701.001.0001)

ISBN (electronic): 9780262352789

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2019

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from MIT Libraries



The MIT Press

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: De Souza, Rebecca, author.

Title: Feeding the other : whiteness, privilege, and neoliberal stigma in food pantries / Rebecca de Souza.

Description: Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, [2019] | Series: Food, health, and the environment | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018036775 | ISBN 9780262039819 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780262536769 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Food banks--Minnesota--Case studies. | Poor--Minnesota--Case studies. | Stigma (Social psychology) | Social stratification. | Paternalism. | Racism.

Classification: LCC HV696.F6 D399 2019 | DDC 363.8/8309776--dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018036775>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1