

## 6 A Culture of Suspicion: Making the Invisible Visible

**Interviewer:** Do you believe there are some people that use government assistance that don't need it?

**Darlene:** She doesn't need it. So, yes.

**Interviewer:** They abuse the system?

**Darlene:** Yes, right. That's why I don't like to use it. I told my girlfriends that I kind of feel about government services the way white women feel about being fat. It's like your worst fear. ... The thing is, I found out after the fact [that] if I had applied right after I got laid off even though I was getting unemployment ... that I probably would have qualified. But I didn't know and I was too proud.

**Interviewer:** So do you feel like there is a stigma attached?

**Darlene:** Definitely. I don't know if it's especially for women of color, but I feel like it is because I am a woman of color. I guess, I don't know.

—Darlene, African American female, RP client

### The Queen Is Dead, Long Live the Queen!

Darlene is a thirtysomething Black woman with three young children; she is also one of the few people of color at RP–Duluth. Her first and only experience at RP was fairly pleasant; the staff and volunteers were friendly, and she recalls a volunteer apologizing because there was not much food that day. “I was like, oh great, my luck! The day I need it the most.” Luckily for her, this was also the day they were giving out books, and she felt like she had won the lottery. A voracious reader, she was happier with the quality of the books than with the food. Darlene initially tried RP because she was laid off in 2009 and needed help making ends meet. She is well-educated

and uses humor and metaphor in powerful ways, like when she says: “I kind of feel about government services the way white women feel about being fat” or when she says “Right now I’m working a full-time temporary job, which I can’t wait to end, really. It’s a lot like dating somebody you’re never going to marry, you know? I’m done, emotionally.” An eternal optimist, Darlene always felt that she would find a job again, but she has faced a lot of rejection. Her husband does freelance writing work, but there is not much money in it. For these reasons, when she heard of RP she thought it would be a good idea.

Darlene is extremely health conscious. In response to the question “Do you perceive yourself to be a healthy person?” she says: “I do ... Because I don’t smoke, I don’t drink. I make my own foods. I drink a lot of water. I don’t always drink pop. I started drinking coffee at work. I never drank coffee before. I drink three cups of coffee a day now. It helps me focus, I’m not kidding.” Darlene has started buying only whole grains and whole-wheat tortillas. She bakes all her own bread, and usually it is brown bread. In fact, some weeks ago her husband begged her to make white bread, which her seven-year old said “tasted funny.” She adds, “He thought something was wrong. And all it had ... was a teaspoon of sugar, but he said it tasted sweet.” Darlene makes massive meals on the weekends and freezes them for later. She also freezes single portions to bring in her lunch container to work. Because she is health conscious, she never went back to RP; the quality of the food was too poor. She says, “I only used it that one time. I didn’t feel like the food that I got was food that I would buy if I had twenty dollars.”

Just as Darlene is health conscious, so too is she keenly conscious of the negative racial stereotypes that circulate around her. Her thinking is informed by the flood of welfare discourses floating around in American society that violate her on a daily basis. These discourses, though emergent in welfare arenas, also find their way into charitable food assistance settings. Darlene remembered that once when she told her coworkers that she used RP, they said that they preferred to use coupons. She said: “I’m like, I use coupons. You can do both. There is no law.” Darlene manages racial and neoliberal stigma by always policing her words and actions. During the interview, when asked whether she uses food pantries besides RP, Darlene responded, “We have, we’ve gone to other food shelves. I won’t lie.

Probably once a month we go to a food shelf at the Vineyard or Salvation Army." The question was not intended to assess overutilization of services, but by using the phrase "I won't lie," Darlene revealed her awareness of the negative assumptions that follow her around. The phrase is typically used when people recognize that what they are about to say has negative meaning in the broader culture. It is a technique to "manage stigma," as Goffman (1963) pointed out, by directly addressing the stigmatized attribute— in this case preemptively taking ownership for something perceived to be contentious in the public eye—the overutilization (or abuse) of benefits. Age-old welfare discourses have also impacted Darlene's participation in legal entitlement programs. As seen in the excerpt that opens this chapter, she did not sign up for SNAP, to avoid stigma. In fact, rather than sign up for SNAP, Darlene sells her blood in downtown Duluth as a way to make ends meet. She has donated blood plasma four times now and has made \$115—money that she is saving for the future.

Not only does Darlene evaluate, regulate, and police herself according to parameters set by racialized systems of poverty governance, Darlene also evaluates other people according to those parameters—including other Black women. In the opening excerpt, when Darlene says "she doesn't need it," she is referring to her husband's ex, who she claims is abusing the system. In her portrayal of the ex, Darlene taps into the trope of the quintessential "welfare queen," saying: "Because I know my husband's ex, they never got married. She got pregnant, decided she was done with him. I think she just wanted another baby, but anyway. It was her second one out of wedlock. So she doesn't work. She lives in public housing. I was complaining recently to John, my husband ... and Jake heard me. My stepson. He went and told his mom. It made me seem like I was the bad guy. I'm like, how is that fair? First of all, honestly, I think she just uses the money for cigarettes." In Darlene's portrayal, the ex has become the paradigmatic cigarette-smoking Black welfare mother undeserving of public assistance—a trope that was widely circulated during the welfare debates in the 1990s (McCormack 2004; Seccombe 2011). More specifically, Darlene is drawing upon a nearly forty-year-old political discursive strategy used by President Reagan that framed welfare recipients as manipulative, dishonest, and not interested in working hard.

During his campaign rallies in 1976 and all through his presidency, Reagan regaled his audiences with stories of people, women in particular, who

deceived the welfare system and were living the highlife—as in the story of the “Cadillac-driving Chicago welfare queen,” who Reagan proclaimed had “eighty names, thirty addresses, twelve social security cards and is collecting veteran’s benefits on four nonexistent deceased husbands. ... Her tax-free cash income alone is over \$150,000” (McCormack 2004). The welfare queen was a con artist, lazy, and Black in the story, and unashamed of taking money from hardworking citizens. Using these stories, Reagan marked millions of poor citizens as scam artists and in doing so promoted a neoliberal agenda, which ultimately led to the passage of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 and a more muscular and punitive era of poverty governance. The putative “welfare mother” served clear political interests; these stories had a strong moral component, linking hard work to citizenship and making the welfare queen a scapegoat for the economic and social changes threatening the middle and working classes (McCormack 2004; Seccombe 2011).

These discursive practices were powerful in that they established a commonsense understanding of welfare, such that people across social arenas—politicians, caseworkers, and welfare recipients—came to share these understandings. McCormack (2004, 358) writes: “Ronald Reagan was instrumental in constructing the image of the Welfare Queen, the penultimate abuser of a system designed to help the poor. The welfare queen lied and cheated to take money from the state while she lived well, drove expensive cars, and owned a nice home. While the welfare queen in Reagan’s speech ... was shown to be a fabrication, the image of the welfare queen lived on, long past Reagan’s presidency.”

In her study with women a year after the passage of welfare reform, McCormack found that even while women on welfare understood the hardships of economic deprivation, they too echoed the sentiments of the lazy, manipulative welfare mother. McCormack (2004, 360) found some differences in how women responded to these discourses based on where they lived and their position in society, but for the most part, the women all “acknowledged the power of the welfare mother and employed various tactics to escape from the damaging effects of this putative Other.”

Astonishingly, more than twenty years after the passage of welfare reform, these discourses still affect and influence the everyday lives of people who receive public assistance and live in spaces of poverty like food pantries. New language may be attached to these issues, but they are grounded in the

same ideological assumptions about welfare users. This is seen in the case of Darlene, a woman who has experienced hardship herself, but who portrays her husband's ex as the quintessential Black welfare queen and welfare mother who is lazy, manipulative, and unhealthy. In this moment, Darlene becomes an agent of governmentality, surveilling and exerting discipline on others. In this moment, a collective history of oppression is replaced by racial and neoliberal ideals of citizenship perpetuated over the course of several centuries.

The persistence of these discourses through history can be attributed to the fact that neoliberalism is not just political doctrine but an ideology that creates a shift in identity and relationships—that is, how we engage with each other and in community. Neoliberalism influences identity through the creation of *neoliberal subjectivities*, a term denoting the ways in which market logic increasingly pervades the thoughts and practices of individuals (Del Casino and Jocoy 2008; Rose 1989). In this situation, the ideals of individualism, efficiency, profit, and self-help become internalized within individuals such that all other determinants of well-being are overlooked. Larner (2000, 19) writes: “Political power does not just act on political subjects, but constructs them in particular ways.” Economic identities become the new basis for political life, displacing social citizenship and creating in-groups of hardworking individuals engaged in the market and out-groups of lazy people framed as a burden to the in-group. This neoliberal shaping of identity informs and influences the ways in which individuals conduct themselves in society—how they relate to each other and systems of poverty governance. This influence is discernible in the kind of self-regulatory behaviors individuals display. Larner argues that in a neoliberal era regulation occurs through practices designed to “facilitate the governing of individuals from a distance” (6). A key characteristic of neoliberal governmentality lies in the process of creating citizens capable of self-regulation (Rose and Miller 1992). For instance, Darlene, caught up in the trope of the Black welfare queen, will not sign up for SNAP. She disciplines her own behaviors and informs on the behaviors of her husband's ex. In so doing, Darlene has become an agent of governance: an autonomous agent surveilling and exerting discipline on others—discipline that she herself has been subjected to.

Drawing on this notion of neoliberal governmentality, I argue that neoliberalism, through its discursive practices (ideology and institutional

frameworks), reformulates personal identity such that even exploited people can be recruited into conservative political projects. This is why people across social locations can be found to reinforce neoliberal ideologies, even when these positions are clearly against their own self-interests. The constant barrage of demonizing neoliberal discourses turns individuals into self-policing agents, who become increasingly conscious and self-conscious about how they talk and are constantly engaged in surveilling themselves and others. Some psychological aspects of self-policing involve self-surveillance, self-discipline, and self-censorship of behavior and opinions. As in the case of Darlene, citizens begin to compare themselves favorably to their fellow citizens who are not living up to the ideal of good economic citizens. Notably, in the stigma literature, Goffman (1963) referred to these sorts of self-policing behaviors as *stigma management* and documented various strategies individuals used to preserve impressions and manage their “spoiled identities” in the face of stigma (e.g., directly correcting the stigmatized attribute, seeing stigma as a blessing, reframing nonstigmatized individuals as actually needing help and sympathy, and using humor to break the tension).

In a neoliberal era, this kind of self-policing, monitoring, and managing of stigma does not occur everywhere and among all people, but is most alive in spaces in which the state has the strongest hold—typically spaces of poverty and disenfranchisement. These behaviors create and reinforce a culture of suspicion in these spaces, which destroys a sense of community and solidarity among people. These policing behaviors pit people against each other and replace what should be communal forms of living with suspicion, resentment, and paranoia. Importantly, the culture of suspicion exists not because poor citizens are uniquely different from the rich but because they are subject to more governance procedures that surveil and threaten action against them. Cultures of suspicion typically manifest at the point at which relations of power are exercised, such as between volunteers and clients, the state and claimants, and the researcher and participants; this is why even some portions of the interviews were rife with stigma management strategies. In these moments, ordinary citizens engaged in processes to defend against neoliberal stigma by highlighting their own self-worth, comparing themselves favorably to others, or pointing to and informing on others.

## Goal of the Chapter

The goal of this chapter is to show how neoliberalism creates a culture of suspicion in spaces of poverty through its ideological formations and institutional frameworks. The chapter demonstrates ways in which hungry and food insecure citizens, living in conditions of fear and scarcity, become agents of discipline. Age-old welfare discourses inform the way in which food insecure people think about themselves and others who are like them such that they are constantly engaged in self-surveillance. In these spaces, people are always surveilling themselves and others for behaviors that are inconsistent with dominant values.

This is a story that remains invisible to a great many people who donate to, volunteer at, and work in food pantry spaces and the broader food system because these meanings only emerge in deep conversation and dialogue with citizens. By highlighting activities such as self-surveillance, self-discipline, and self-censorship, the chapter shows how stigma impacts not only people's access to food, but also their sense of identity and belonging to a community. It shows how individuals both reinforce and resist neoliberal narratives. As seen in the opening excerpt, Darlene demonstrates an oppositional consciousness with regard to neoliberal logic but simultaneously deploys neoliberal stigma to mark some people as unworthy.

## Scarcity Model at the Food Pantry

The hunger industrial complex runs on surplus food created by capitalist modes of production; indeed, the food system is set up to produce excess food and then redistribute the surplus to the hungry. Yet many food pantries still operate within a food scarcity model, in which rationing food given to clients by setting time limits and eligibility criteria is normative. Instead of viewing people's access to food in terms of rights and legal entitlements, food is rationed, controlled, and subjected to governance procedures. This means that though fraud and abuse do not exist in a real sense at food pantries, these discourses find themselves here as well. Shaye Moris, director of Second Harvest Northern Lakes Food Bank, acknowledged that food pantries were rife with myths and misperceptions about fraud. She said: "I hear that people are selling product. I don't know, I don't know that to be true. It's not something that we've experienced or witnessed firsthand

... so to me that's a myth that you hear." In an earlier chapter, we saw Chum volunteers circulating these stories at the Chum food pantry. Volunteers invoked discourses of fraud and abuse while remaining silent on more deeply rooted issues of structural racism and their own whiteness. Typically, in this setting, fraud and abuse were constructed as selling food pantry food, lying about how many people were in the household, overutilization of the food pantry, and lack of genuine need. However, as Shaye pointed out during our interview, there is no such thing as fraud and abuse in food pantry spaces because industrial food is not scarce and their business is about giving away surplus food:

**Interviewer:** So in terms of Feeding America, then, and Second Harvest, there's no notion of fraud and abuse? This does not exist? Is that what you are saying?

**Shaye:** Correct. Yeah, there really isn't ... We're here to supply food that's otherwise going to end up in the landfill so we want it to be utilized ... If that means one household needs a lot more food than another household, we're happy just to make sure that they have food.

**Interviewer:** So there's this perception of scarcity—

**Shaye:** I was just going to say the scarcity model, yep. Yep, we see that definitely in our communities. Can't understand it, scratch our head about that because even we'll hear a news report where a food shelf says we don't have any food and whatever. And we think, "Oh my gosh! Call us if you're ever at that point because we have a warehouse full of food and we have relationships with these agencies." I think there is that scarcity model of there's never going to be enough food to provide needed food to people who need it.

**Interviewer:** Right, that's not something you believe, it's not scarce.

**Shaye:** No.

**Interviewer:** So you're saying there's an abundance of food?

**Shaye:** We feel that there's adequate resources. There might be volunteer scarcity, where it's hard to find people to help with the food shelf, certainly. But in terms of food, there are abundant resources.

Chum's food shelf director, Frank, also talked about the scarcity mindset among volunteers. His goal is to give food away—as much as he can—but this often conflicts with how volunteers understand their roles. For



example, they currently have an abundance of bread, so they give it away for no points—this means giving as much bread as people want. They ended up moving the bread to the waiting area to prevent bottlenecks. “We just said, it’s free if you want it, and when you walk by you can grab your bread. You want bread, take bread. You want just a loaf of bread and walk out the door? Do it.” The volunteers were horrified and could not stand the lack of control. There was fear that people would take too much bread—even though that was the whole point- to get rid of surplus bread. Frank asserted: “In a grand scheme of things, it all has a perishable date. The cans will last five years. But if you’re sitting on milk or eggs, they’re just dying. Every day that they’re not out and given away, is another day they’re dying ... The goal is to literally get rid of it.” Frank added: “It’s this hard thing ... And it’s taken a while. There’s only a few volunteers left that are super, super sticklers. It’s hard. You have to shift the entire dynamic of everything.”

In talking to food shelf directors, I have learned that a much harder problem to solve is one of logistics: food is not scarce, but how to keep food flowing in and out at a steady pace is challenging. Although there is an abundance of food “out there,” it is harder to bring the food to the food pantry for a variety of reasons: insufficient space to store the food, insufficient refrigeration, lack of staff to pick up available food, the wrong kind of food ending up at the food shelf, too much fresh food arriving at one time. It is easy to give food away, but harder to ensure a steady supply of the food that people want. Food pantries also have to be on the lookout for the best deals for food because food banks do not always get the best prices for products. For food pantry staff, if they take a few extra but tedious steps, they can do better and get more food for clients. This speaks to the tenuous relationships among actors in the hunger industrial complex—the food pantries, food banks, and Feeding America, which controls most of the operations. Each of these stakeholders has somewhat different priorities and agendas, which in the end makes the food pantry a complex and chaotic place to work.

### **Reluctant to Complain**

Clients at Chum spoke warmly about the volunteers; they appreciated the food and the extra steps volunteers took to help them. They typically did not linger on the negative interactions at the food shelf but tended to put

them down to a volunteer having a bad day. Ashley talked about her appreciation for the volunteers because they give her as much fresh fruit and vegetables as she wants. "I know they really make an effort to allow you to take as much of the fresh stuff, which is cool." Gabrielle said: "They have always been sweet and respectful to me." Clients attributed faith and ethical beliefs to volunteers' motivations. Violet referred to volunteers as "missionaries" doing God's work. Scott, a white elderly man, was full of praise for Chum volunteers, saying: "I'd say they're very giving and have empathy ... I'm not saying the trick word but they're definitely religious people, Christian, whatever you want to call them there. They're nice people. Nice people do and trying to do ... Love God and love people, so they treat people wonderfully." The volunteers were there by choice, which clients marveled at. Renee, a Native woman, stated: "They can be on vacation, spending money or whatever, but they're here helping the people that need help in this community."

Although clients showed gratitude to volunteers, the language of charity created a spiral of silence in which some were hesitant to complain and policed their language. Even the few participants who mentioned any dissatisfaction obfuscated it. Their articulations illuminate the complexity of being under the dual threat of poverty governance procedures and charity. Xavier, a fortysomething Black man, said that volunteers do the best that they can, but sometimes things go wrong. When asked if he has had any negative experiences with the volunteers, he said, hesitantly: "You have people that go off on you, say things to you because they maybe can't get an extra bag of beans or something, because being on that side, I've seen that and you can only do what you can. For myself, personally, if a person came and said they had twelve kids or a rough situation and asked if I could sneak them a bag of something, I would try to do it for them. I'm a firm believer of karma, you know. I believe that what you put in is what you get out. I tell my kids you don't put nothing in, no deposit. No return. Even if you put in, it doesn't always mean that you get back." Xavier was one of the few participants who inverted computational neoliberal logic, noting that we should give, *even when you may not get something in return*. Susan, a middle-aged white woman, was the most blunt about her experiences: "When you volunteer, you work ... You should not snap at people. I have no idea. Sorry to say, I know there are the people who have been there and

that stay there, they are like helping out but then I can hardly tell why they are there.”

### **Cadillacs and Lincolns: Making Favorable Comparisons**

In the context of scarcity and poverty governance procedures, it is no wonder that Chum clients engaged in self-policing strategies to present themselves in a good light. In a typical pattern, clients justified their own food assistance patterns and compared themselves favorably to others, often telling or “informing” on these others to prove their point. Stereotypes of welfare recipients as lazy, greedy, bad health citizens, and selfish came up in client characterizations of each other. Food assistance was talked about as though it were a zero-sum game, a scarcity model, in which taking food for oneself meant that someone else was not going to get it. Indeed, a similar belief restricts potential SNAP recipients from signing up. Clients made moral judgements about why people should and shouldn’t be at the food pantry based on perceptions of other people’s “genuine needs”—a moral discourse of need. People were deserving of the food if they “genuinely needed” it, but what constituted genuine was never made clear.

For Ashley, a young white woman who worked as a janitor, accusations of fraud and abuse applied to other people, but not to her. She avoided public assistance programs as a way to manage stigma. She explained: “I feel like there’s sort of that image of people that abuse the system or are lazy. I know that is the case in some situations, but I don’t feel like that’s my situation. I try to do my best not to use it.” She added: “Some of them, people here that I know, I feel like they could figure out a way not to use it. To some extent I feel like they’re a little lazy. I think it’s a bit of both. I feel like more often there are people that are just sort of maybe not trying to intentionally take advantage of the system, but they are. They are being overly grabby about it. That’s not everybody.” Ashley is aware of the negative stereotypes surrounding her—a poor, white, working-class woman—and both defends herself and compares herself favorably to others as a way to manage stigma. Like Darlene, against her own self-interest, she does not use assistance until she crosses some personal threshold for pain and suffering.

Across the interviews, moral discourses of need were employed to compare oneself favorably to others. Victor, a thirtysomething Native man, detailed how some people sell their food stamps to pay rent and phone

bills and buy alcohol and cigarettes. When asked if he sees a lot of it going on, he responded: "I don't see a lot of it going on at all. I know it's happening, though. It is, it's happening out there. I've been asked to buy some. That's how I know what the price is. No, I don't sell mine. I never will." He adds: "I get a little upset at some of them that I know have a lot of money and don't need to be here. Like I said, since I started working I have not been here yet. I'm still behind on bills and everything. There's other people out there that need it a lot more than I do ... This guy has a Lincoln for sale for \$3,000.00. He does! A brand-new 1999 Lincoln." Here Victor invokes the scarcity model, making judgments about who needs it more. By invoking the "brand-new Lincoln," Victor draws upon the forty-year old conservative trope of welfare recipients owning expensive cars like Cadillacs. In her book *So You Think I Drive a Cadillac?*, Karen Secombe (2011) addresses misperceptions about welfare recipients and how these racialized discourses influenced the passage of the Welfare Reform Act of 1996.

Jermain, an elderly Black man, similarly invoked the Cadillac trope, clarifying that he only used the food shelf sparingly. He said, "I get \$2,700 a month, and I only use this when I need it. I don't abuse it. I don't." When asked what he meant by "abuse," he explained: "I've seen people that come here and go to one of the other food shelves the same day. I see cars pull up, nice cars. I'm saying if you can afford an eighty-thousand-dollar car, and you're in a line where somebody else is just pulling a cart, looking as though they do need it, you know. And that's what I mean. People abuse it." Despite the already oppressive system of governance, a few clients felt that there should be stricter controls at the food pantry. Paula, a middle-aged white woman, wished there were tighter regulations because of the "Cadillacs": "I see 90 percent of the people need it, but then I also see people pull out with Cadillacs using the food shelf, so that really kind of gets me a little bit. I've seen it few times here. Forty-thousand-dollar cars coming here to the food shelf, really."

### **Constructing "Us and Them" at RP**

At Chum, clients tended to distance themselves from other clients, but at RP clients reinforced their similarities with each other. Contrary to the culture of suspicion forged at Chum, at RP a culture of unity was created.

Participants found it easy to relate to each other, and perceptions of social distance were minimal. “Everyone is in the same boat” and “RP is for everyone” were common refrains heard. *Everyone* in this context was *not* a nod to marginalized groups but a nod to more well-to-do folks. Julie, a white middle-aged woman, noted: “When I first started, before, I thought it was only for poor people but it is not. It is for anybody.” Tony observed that there were a lot of different kinds of people at RP, but “we’re pretty much all in the same boat.” Participants met people they knew at RP, which contributed to feeling like this was a program for Us. Chris described the clientele as “just regular people just come in trying to get by and find a great deal. You have students in there from colleges. You have seniors in there. You have mentally disabled. Physically disabled.” There was a well-instituted practice of helping friends, family, and neighbors at RP—an outcome of the connection they felt with each other. Families and friends came to RP together, and people picked up shares on behalf of neighbors.

At the center of this perceived unity was the ideological formation that RP was a place for “nice people,” “working people,” “the working poor,” “people doing the best they can,” and “people with pride.” Bernadette saw herself as similar to the other people at RP “because they all need help with their budget and stretching things any way they can, and they’re willing to pay for it, and they’ve got a little more pride in what they’re doing. I just feel it that way ... We’re all in the same boat.” Chris pointed out: “They all seem nice, working people. They all have families. They’re all just trying to provide. It’s a great deal ... I didn’t see anything wrong with some of the people there. They all seemed like nice people. They sat there all interacting with each other and talking with each other. There wasn’t any negative energy in the air or anything. It was great. They’re all open. It’s just like, ‘Oh, hey. How’s it going?’” And Claire similarly said: “I think pretty much we’re all the same, we’re just trying to make ends meet and do the best with what we have ... I just don’t see the economic difference in anybody, anywhere, I try not to. I try not to see color or race or social and economic difference.” In short, the people at RP were normal, Us, and there was nothing *wrong* with them.

Clients thought RP had a lot of diversity in terms of income levels, age, and ability. The fact that RP was a nearly all-white space was not mentioned;

in fact, race was rarely brought up among RP clients. Dennis, a young white man, observed that unlike the food shelf, which has a more homogenous population in terms of income, RP is much more diverse. From the looks of it, Jennifer thought that the people who came to RP were generally middle income. Darlene observed that RP clients seemed to be “the working poor” and people who were not on food stamps—different from the folks at Chum.

**Interviewer:** What are your impressions of the clients who use Ruby’s Pantry?

**Darlene:** Ruby’s Pantry, I think, is unique in that it’s a different clientele that goes to a food shelf like Chum. They are a different group of folks that get assistance from food stamps ... The majority of people that are in Ruby’s Pantry, I don’t believe that they get any food stamps or anything that. They just don’t appear to be in that same category of financial situations. I think that those who come to Ruby’s Pantry tend to be, just a strange word or term, the working poor. They tend to be folks that have jobs, in fact, they might be juggling two or three jobs, but it’s just not enough. And so they are accessing this program.

Because RP is open to “everyone” and there are no eligibility requirements, the primary ways in which fraud and abuse are thought of in traditional food pantry spaces were erased here. In this arena, there was no need to discuss how many household members one had or how often one used RP or even if one *really* needed food assistance. In a letter, Lyn Sahr, director of RP, urges people not to judge each other—ironically, given that conservative discourses over the last five decades have been geared precisely toward fueling such judgment toward others. His letter, however, demonstrates the power of discourse to interrupt age-old ideologies: “Some people are still stuck on looking around at who comes and judging whether they should be using the program or not. I still have people saying, ‘They’re just using you!’ My answer is always the same, ‘That’s why we exist, to be used!’ Please remember that Ruby’s Pantry is for everyone that eats. It gives people an opportunity for dignity. Ruby’s Pantry is a hand up, not a hand out program ... Therefore, be thankful for a program that no one has to pay for with their tax dollars and is totally funded by the donations of the guests who use the program” (August 19, 2015). According to Sahr, because no tax dollars are used to fund RP, it is a dignified form of assistance and

one that actually “gives back” to the community. In these articulations, individuals are invited to think about themselves in a new way: they are not welfare recipients of a government program, but “guests” of a private entrepreneur.

RP creates frames of reference for clients that they now can use to construct their identities differently from traditional food pantry recipients. Clients brought up moral issues of overutilization and lack of genuine need, but then rejected those allegations in line with Sahr’s exhortations. Pat was initially surprised by who came to RP, but does not judge anymore. She explained: “I mean of course you get to see many people who you think that you know they really need this. You can just tell. You can see it by the clothes they are wearing, what they look like, but then are these people that are surprising like. I have seen clients like my mailman and I think that person is supposed to be paid decent, *but it’s for everybody, so you don’t judge.* You think that maybe they are having or going through some problem or something.” Chris has seen clients with expensive cars at RP—the Lincoln again—but he too does not think any less of them: “It’s very mixed. I know a lady that goes there, she’s not a close friend but I would consider her a friend, who gets a new Lincoln every year. She comes to Ruby’s Pantry in her Lincoln ... We are all there for the same thing. I don’t think any less of them because they are there.” In these articulations, we catch a glimpse of how age-old stigma *can* be interrupted through strategic communication that intervenes upon these negative perceptions.

Apart from Darlene and Trinity, the two Black women who talked about racial stigma, white clients did not experience stigma in their use of RP. Austin, a thirtysomething white man, said that in fact it was quite the opposite, with people always asking about RP. People want to know, “What did he get?” Does he like it? They are very inquisitive about RP. And when he tells them that he got a massive bag of potatoes, six boxes of ice cream, or six energy drinks, their jaws drop. In response to a question about why he feels there is no stigma, he says: “Probably because they know it’s a good deal, especially with things today in the economy.” According to Bernadette: “With Ruby’s Pantry nobody says anything because you’re paying for your food. You have a sense of pride about it, and, I mean, it’s the American way. If you can get a good deal, you go for it, you know.” The twenty-dollar fee was significant in shaping clients’ sense of identity and dignity. Janet, an elderly white woman, clarified: “I mean, you pay for the food. Pretty much

everybody in my life knows my situation. So it's not that they would say anything, but like the girl whom my roommates work for was afraid she would run into someone. If you did, they are here for the same thing you are ... I pay for what I get here, and that gives you a little bit of dignity as well."

### Denouncing "Them"

We could argue that the creation of this space of unity at RP was positive, except for the fact that it reinforced social distance between "guests" at RP and clients of traditional food assistance programs. RP participants were comfortable using RP, but not so comfortable receiving food assistance through SNAP or from traditional food pantries like Chum. This was despite the fact that 80 percent of clients across both sites received some form of government assistance. Similar to Chum clients, RP clients were careful about their language and actions and engaged in self-policing when it came to government and charitable forms of food assistance. Claire observed that though she uses RP, she would never use the food shelf. She is trying to find work, and using the food shelf would hurt her chances: "I just don't want the people to think, 'Oh, you're going to the food shelf' because I'm not trying to diss people who go to the food shelf at all. They can use it. Go for it, but for my style, I'm very talkative and I just don't want to be looked at wrong." Her impression is that people who use food shelves are looked down upon and that only poor people use food shelves. Ashley has used food stamps in the past when her husband was unemployed, but she does not qualify now. However, even when her family did qualify for food stamps, there was always a feeling of guilt—a feeling that there were other people who needed it way more than they did. "I mean, there's people that are way worse off than we ever were ... Sometimes, I would feel kind of guilty for using it. You know, we always feel kind of guilty but it's like I tell my husband, you have to put pride aside, every once in a while, and just do it. You need to do it if it's just a couple of days, once in a while, it's not like we're making a nuisance out of ourselves."

Participants at RP directed suspicion toward people who use SNAP and traditional food shelves, like those at Chum. Katherine noted that though many people need support, there are some who abuse the system: "Naturally, there's going to be people that they don't really need it. Maybe a



drug dealer is capable of working but he's out selling drugs instead and he might get food stamps, whatever the program is. I don't know if they still use food stamps or not." The reference to drugs is reminiscent of the stories of welfare recipients manufactured during the welfare debates of the 1990s. Some RP clients were much more explicit in their disdain for people who used traditional food pantries, as seen in a conversation with Bernadette, a white, middle-aged woman and a longtime volunteer at a local food shelf:

**Interviewer:** Do you feel people look down at other people for using food shelves?

**Bernadette:** I think sometimes it's the ones that are constantly abusing it, and there are people that will abuse it. Like I said, I helped manage a food shelf for about three years for the Salvation Army and I know of the different abuses because Northern Star would call us and say, "Did this person come over?" Then they got a network going that you'd have to put it on a computer every day and they'd have which ones came to this one and which ones went to the other ones, and knowing that one. They'd go to hit the same places sometimes at the same time so they could track them that well then.

**Interviewer:** You saw it firsthand.

**Bernadette:** Mm-hmm [affirmative sound]. We have one at our church right now—a food shelf too. Like I said, yesterday there were forty-one people or forty-one families that came through. They know that the food drive just went through too where you get a lot more, so they figured they're going to get a little more right now and they come out in droves then.

In this excerpt, Bernadette chastises people for taking advantage of the opportunities available to them to provide security for themselves and their families. In using phrases such as "hit the same places" and "come out in droves" and in her eagerness to police the abusers, we catch a glimpse of the deep-seated and negative ideas running through her head about people who use traditional food assistance programs.

### Suspicious Skin

For people of color, racial stigma and the stigma of food assistance were inseparable. They had negative experiences riding the buses, conversing

with neighbors and coworkers, and even just walking home from the food shelf. People of color who used Chum felt hypervisible at Chum and in the streets; their darker skin color marked them as suspicious in the eyes of others. They policed themselves more intensely and were also more subject to policing by others. Jermain, an African American man, clarified the racialized nature of stigma, saying that sometimes when he is riding the bus or sitting somewhere, he hears people say that “only Natives and Black folks use the food shelves, you know. I hear it, and I go, you know, if they feel like that, and if they don’t use it, well ... [laughs] ... it would be more for us.” Citizens talked about feeling hypervisible in the streets, like people were staring at them, when they used the food shelf. They also noted that perhaps it was simply paranoia that made them feel that way. For instance, Michele, a young Native woman, doubted her own perception of reality.

**Interviewer:** Do you think people might sometimes look down on you for using a food shelf or a food program?

**Michele:** No, no. I get that feeling, it might not even be true.

**Interviewer:** Where do you get that feeling?

**Michele:** When you take your little bags from here and get on the bus with them. Maybe it’s just me thinking, “They’re just looking at my food shelf food.” But I don’t care. I’m still going to get it. I don’t care what people think.

Renee, another young Native woman, talked about people looking at her “funny” on the street and saying things like, “There, she’s going to the food shelf,” or, sarcastically, “Already at the food shelf today?” In these instances, the psychological impact of neoliberal stigma is clear; it oppresses people in terms of access to food but also shapes their identity and impacts how they live out their lives in community with others.

When asked if he felt people looked down on him for using the food shelf, Isaiah, an older Black man, responded: “I don’t know if they look down on me. They were probably thinking that you know I might have sold my food stamps or made a mistake. They really don’t know I only get sixteen dollars.” Like Darlene, not only did clients use food assistance less because of neoliberal stigma, but they were also more vigilant about how they talked about receiving assistance. Gabrielle, in telling her story, started

to describe how long she had been using the food shelf, but then, realizing that this made her look “irresponsible,” stopped short:

**Interviewer:** So, when did you first use the food shelf?

**Gabrielle:** It has to be, my baby girl is twenty-two and we came here when she was two. So, I’d have to say, I’ll give it eighteen years ago, maybe.

**Interviewer:** So, you’ve always used the food shelves for eighteen years?

**Gabrielle:** Always, always, always. *You know, I probably, just let me clarify this* (emphasis added), I’ve always used it but there was a time when I worked. I’m now looking for work again, and there’s been a time I’ve worked so I might not have used it for a long time because, man, it was like, “We haven’t seen you,” you know, like that. So, it’s not like consistently, just lately consistently because I’ve been out of work. August will be a year.

There was no need for Gabrielle to clarify this in the interview (or to anyone for that matter), but in doing so we see how the state and its multiple arms create powerful technologies that force individuals to position themselves as defendants in the system (e.g., Fraser 1987).

For Darlene, whom we met at the start of the chapter, stigma occurs at the intersection of her gender and color. She experiences it in government and charitable food assistance settings. Darlene has two boys, so she has used WIC—a government food assistance program for families with little children. Through WIC, she gets four gallons of milk and about twelve dollars’ worth of vegetables, juice, eggs, and cereal for the month. “Some days I just go up to the store for WIC and it’s wonderful. I come back, they love eggs. The kids will live on cereal if I let them. So that’s nice. I appreciate that.” But she has had multiple experiences of stigma at the WIC office, mostly revolving around her ability to be a good mother: “One lady, I don’t know if it was just a bad day or what, but she asked me if my little one is drinking out of a bottle. I said, well yeah, he’s eleven months old. She’s just like, well, you know that they need to stop drinking at one year of age? And I was just like, all of my kids have stopped drinking at one year of age. At their birthday, they get no more bottles. And they’re fine with it. I was just like, ‘wow, you are so judgmental.’” Darlene, a Black mother on welfare, carries the burden of her demographic markers. Falling into the trope of the “Black welfare queen,” neoliberal stigma is intensified for her because of the racial subtext. In the last decade, the new public health paradigm inscribed with neoliberal values of self-help, personal responsibility, and “choice” has

also heightened stigma experiences for women like Darlene (Kirkland 2011). In this paradigm, good health is maintained through proper diet, exercise, adequate sleep, a healthy environment, and good child-rearing practices. In this responsabilization narrative, mothers must institute proper eating habits for children, such that they do not become an economic burden on society. Nearly twenty-five years after the passage of the Welfare Reform Act, a scapegoat is still found in women of color and mothers. Finding legitimacy in science, these mothers are accused of bad parenting and bad decision-making, as shown in the bottle-feeding discussion at the WIC office.

Trinity described the intense stigma she confronted while trying to sign up for SNAP. She explained that there was a four-year period in her life when her kids were little and her marriage had ended and she found herself in need of public assistance. For each month of those four years, Trinity found herself interacting with several county offices while seeking assistance. For Trinity, “the cruelty was extraordinary” when her son fell sick and she still had to beg to receive her assistance in a timely manner. Her thirteen-year-old son had a snowboarding accident and ruptured his spleen. She tried to apply for food stamps, but the caseworkers gave her the runaround. She finally had to threaten them with legal action, after which she received her food stamps pretty quickly, but it had taken a month to reach that point. Trinity was disrespected, stigmatized, and abused. Her gender, motherhood, and marital status played an unquantifiable role in the multiplicative forces of oppression she faced in the public assistance system. Indeed, as Secombe (2011) points out women like Trinity, separated from their male partners with multiple children, “the welfare mothers” and “welfare queens,” were at the heart of public discourse leading up to the Welfare Reform Act. These discourses helped secure public support for the removal of welfare entitlements, as well as the mobilization of a series of punitive workfare programs that continue to oppress women today.

**Field Note: Racist Talk**

There was a lull in clients today. I noticed Frank, the food shelf director, and Cindy, a longtime volunteer, shooting the breeze, so I went to join them. They talked about fish for a while. Cindy said she hated freshwater fish and could not understand how people in Duluth love walleye. After a while, I politely changed the subject by asking what they do with all the client data collected

from the intake interviews. Cindy explained that it was all entered into a database and kept on file. Frank is not sure why they collect the data or what it is used for. Cindy mentioned that the data helps them to keep track of who is getting what. This reminded her of an article in the newspaper a few days ago about two people in Wisconsin committing food stamp fraud. She said with relief: "It wasn't at our level [meaning the level of the intake interviewer], but at a higher level." Frank remembered the story and said that the woman was in jail and had sold her EBT card for pennies on the dollar, to which Cindy replied, "Oh yes, for a cigarette here or some cocaine there."

At this point, a white female client came in, a thirtysomething, wearing a tank top and jeans, about forty pounds overweight, and wheeling a pushcart to carry out her food. She was flustered, out of breath, and consistently wiping her brow, and she gasped in a loud voice, "I haven't been in here in a while." Cindy replied in a friendly voice, "Go grab a form, fill it out, and I'll take care of you right here." Frank said, "Take a breath, we're in noooo hurry [giggling]." When I saw her come in, I moved to the other end of the room so that she could have privacy while being interviewed, but I was still hovering around. She stated in a loud voice, "I'm pregnant, that's why I'm so hot."

While she was filling out the form, Frank and Cindy continued their conversation about food stamp fraud. She overheard the conversation and, a moment later, scanning the room and finding me in the far corner, chimed in: "I don't mean to be like that or anything, I don't mean to offend anyone, I mean I don't mean any disrespect. Seriously, I have a ton of Black friends, but really it's the Blacks that do it. I mean, they're the ones that do this stuff and then turn to you and say, 'You are a racist.' You know, they do the same thing with cops, they do that stuff and then look at the cops and say, 'You're the racist.' I mean, I literally do not have any food at home, that's why I'm here. I'm pregnant and so I need food. I literally do not have any food at home, this [pointing] is all the food that I have." Frank had a thoughtful smile on his face as she said this, although it was hard to read what that smile meant. Cindy asked her for her ID so they could go through the procedures. I said nothing. Life just seemed to move on at the food shelf that evening without skipping a beat.

I went back into the pantry, my heart pounding as I waited to escort her around the food shelf. I welcomed her, but I was still shaky from the symbolic violence that had just occurred. I should note here that while I call it symbolic, the effects of racism are physical and embodied. Quite simply you feel its effects coursing through your body. Your heart rate increases, your body goes cold, your palms start to sweat, you can feel blood rushing to your brain—and, in my case clouding it over, your hair stands on end, your voice catches in your throat, and you feel as if someone just dug out your stomach with a blunt instrument. This is not something white people in their racial comfort zones ever experience in the presence of racist talk, but it is a commonly shared experience for people of color—and it shows up in the health

disparities literature as increased cortisol levels, heightened stress, and lowered life expectancy.

The client was bubbly as we went around, polite, and continually apologetic because she kept forgetting how many points she had left. I had to repeat everything over and over again. She said it was her ADHD and said many times to me, “You’re awesome, you’re so awesome.” When it was time to pick her grains, she said, “Nope, I don’t want cereal, I’ll take the pasta because I have WIC, so I am already stocked up on cereal.” When we got to the milk, she said the same thing: “Nope, I don’t need milk because I am already stocked up on that because I have WIC.” It made me think back to her earlier statement, now seeming more and more disingenuous: “I literally do not have any food at home, this is all the food that I have.” Usually, this would not have bothered me. In fact, having only milk, eggs, and cereal in a context of relative deprivation is indeed literally nothing; however, her racial accusations made me evaluate her statement more harshly.

By the time we got to the end of her “shopping,” I had forgotten about her racial aggression and ended up giving her a lot of extra little hygiene items: conditioner, shampoo, and soaps. I even picked the best name brands from the lot to give to her because I knew clients appreciated brands they could recognize. As I write this entry, I am angry at myself. I wish I had the presence of mind not to have given her extra stuff. Maybe there is something about my own colonized mind that cannot hold on to hate. At the time, all I was thinking about was the fact that she was pregnant and how awful my own pregnancy was. Nice-smelling things like a new shampoo or soap felt so good in those months—a little respite. And I wanted desperately to be able to give her that. A clean body and a cup of tea. But even now I remain puzzled about why, even after she saw me, she continued to air her ugly racial aggression. Sure she made several disclaimers before she spewed her nasty comments, but the fact that she named out loud the “Blacks” as the “ones who do it” is disconcerting to me. If she had thought I was Black, surely she would not have singularly identified Black people as perpetrators. Perhaps I coded Native to her and she is privy to the tensions in Duluth between poor Native and Black populations. Or perhaps she correctly profiled me as being from India and knows that Indian culture carries within it colorism and severe anti-Black racism. So either she thought I would agree with her claims because I harbored anti-Blackness within me or she just did not care what I—a brown, female, immigrant-looking body—thought. Either way, I was just too insignificant in her eyes, except for some pitiful “I have a Black friend” type disclaimers. I am also grateful that I am usually not in the room when such racist talk occurs. This incident illuminated for me the racialized subtext for the discourses of suspicion that exist in food pantry spaces.

### “White Folks Used to Whip Black People, and ... Now They’re Living Together”

Consciousness as a form of agency and resistance is an important theme in Black feminist thought. Patricia Hill Collins (2004) writes about consciousness as a sphere of freedom and a sphere of activism for historically oppressed groups—in particular, Black women, who in their material realities are forced to conform to the prevailing social order:

If Black women find themselves in settings where total conformity is expected, and where traditional forms of activism such as voting, participating in collective movements, and officeholding are impossible, then the individual women who in their consciousness choose to be self-defined and self-evaluating are, in fact, activists. They are retaining a grip over their definition as subjects, as full humans, and rejecting definitions of themselves as the objectified “other.” ... People who view themselves as fully human, as subjects, become activists, no matter how limited the sphere of their activism may be. By returning subjectivity to Black women, Black feminists return activism as well. (114–115)

In her work on marginality, bell hooks (2004) argues that for oppressed groups, the margins can be spaces of creativity, radical openness, and possibility—the possibility to develop a radical perspective from which to see, create, and imagine an alternative world. She points out that there is a difference between marginality imposed by oppressive structures and marginality that one chooses as a site of resistance and radical openness. The margins as a site of radical openness is not a mythic space but one that comes from lived experience—a place that the oppressed come to through struggles, through suffering and pain. The margins provide those who are within them with an *oppositional world view*, a mode of seeing that is unknown to the oppressor, that sustains oppressed peoples and enables them to transcend poverty and despair and build solidarity. She writes: “For me this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a ‘safe’ place. One is always at risk” (156).

The voices of Black women and men in this study revealed complexities and contradictions that went far beyond Us and Them dichotomies and in so doing revealed sites of radical openness. Indeed, the small-minded naked racism that they encountered at government offices, in employment situations, in stores, in the neighborhoods where they lived, and on streets

and buses stood in stark contrast to their own rational, progressive, and educated articulations. In their voices, the notions of consciousness and oppositional consciousness through the pain of lived experience rang clear. Jermain noted that the racism in Duluth really “gets under my skin.” When asked to elaborate, he explained:

Well, it's up here. You got your Scandinavians, Swedes, and, you have your Black folks, and Natives, and they look down upon them. They think that all Indians drink, you know, get drunk. And they think that Black folks are not supposed to own anything. That's how they were raised, that's how they were taught. All behavior is learned. Nobody's born a racist, that's learned. So, I just look at them and I just wonder, I know what their parents were like. Because, it's all learned. I mean, when I was growing up ... I remember my aunt and my grandparents saying, “You have to watch yourself with white folks,” because of their past experiences; back before civil rights, they experienced the white and the Black bathrooms, and all of that stuff, so it's hard for people to change. It's hard. How could you experience how white folks used to whip Black people, and then believe that now they're living together. It's hard for them to comprehend that.

In this astute sociological analysis, which links racism that exists today with the violent brutality of racism of the past, Jermain articulates a deep understanding of the role of structural racism. Toward the end of the interview, Jermain disclosed that he had a biracial daughter and that explaining racism to her has been challenging. He said: “So, she's well-rounded. She's well-rounded. It tickles me, because a couple weeks ago, she came into the house, and she said, ‘Dad, a red truck just went by, and called me a nigger.’ And we were laughing, because that was the first time somebody had called her a nigger. And she was laughing. It stamps her Black side. She's like, ‘I am Black.’ We laughed about it.” In this instance, we catch a glimpse of the margins as a site of resistance. Here father and daughter use humor to resist the brute force of racism hurtling toward them.

For many of the African American women and men in the study, the phrase “we all bleed the same” came up over and over again as way to make sense of, live with, and transcend everyday racism and structural racism. Consistent with hooks, this was not some clichéd vision imposed on them by the oppressive structures around them, but a vision that they chose as a site of radical openness through embodied experiences of discrimination. Clayton methodically described four of his most recent experiences of racism in Duluth, which included the “N-word,” being followed around in a



store, and having his possessions checked for stolen items. In a typical pattern of whiteness, someone reported him as being suspicious. He recounted: "Well someone told us that you were probably doing some stealing.' I was like, you know what, let's go back in the store and I want you to look through each and every bag, I want to see what you see that's not on this receipt of purchase. Excuse me for getting melodramatic, but it burns me up when people are that ignorant, very ignorant." Despite being enraged, Clayton offered a vision of racial unity and interconnectedness, using the phrase "we bleed the same": "I don't see it being a Black and white situation. I don't see that because like I said we're all human, we bleed the same blood, we have dreams, we have nightmares, we cry, we laugh, we eat, we sleep, we live, we die, we fall, we buy dessert—I mean, what's the difference between our skin color? It's not where you come from, it's who you are right now and what you can do later on down the road of life." Gabrielle, who used to be a certified nurse assistant has experienced plenty of racism in her life and, like Clayton, boils it down to ignorance. She said: "I always say to myself they're ignorant, and they're ignorant because we all bleed the same."

Antoine, a fiftysomething African American man, noted that he has lived with racism for so long that it does not bother him anymore. He grew up in the Deep South with memories of Jim Crow fresh in his mind:

**Interviewer:** When did it stop bothering you? How do you get to that place?

**Antoine:** As a child. I was in a cotton field, so I've seen what my grandparents went through. You know what they had to go through with the color?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Antoine:** Be it N-word or whatever. My grandmother said don't you never hate nothing because of the color. Because you don't even know nothing until you talk to that person. I can't hate nothing. I can hate what you hate, because you hate it, but I ain't never going to try to ... I don't have it in me. I'll just leave you alone. If you hate me it's all right, but you got to deal with that. I can go on with where I am because we're all connected. That's what people don't know. We're all connected. We're all different colors. We're all connected and a lot of people don't know that ... Once you learn that then you can accept whatever color, I love you either way.

He goes on to provide a spiritual solution to the problem of racism, while also noting that the markings of race can be a blessing:

**Interviewer:** What do you think would change minds? How would you, for instance, teach a white person everybody's connected? When is that going to happen?

**Antoine:** I don't know when that's going to happen. You have to get that for yourself. You have to really look, you have to really sit down and talk to somebody and everybody isn't the same. Everybody's different, but you're going to have to learn to be different yourself ... You just can't hate because of a color because you can't judge anything by the color. We hate because something looks different. It can be a blessing to you really. Somehow you have to get there for yourself. Number one, it's valuable to you. You have to start praying; nobody will give it to you. That's how I got it. I know that the Bible, I can say Lord helps that person. Then they'll know we all connected from the beginning. I hope you know that. I'm glad I know it.

Despite the crushing burden of racism that Antoine carries, the interconnectedness of human beings across racial lines and the power of prayer create a site of radical openness.

People of color typically expressed a sense of solidarity with others at the food pantry. They inverted neoliberal logic and discourses of fraud and abuse by demonstrating empathy and trust of people's motives. Antoine provided a thoughtful analysis of who was at the food shelf: "If you got kids you got to feed them first and they always will pull your coattail. I'm hungry, I'm hungry. That's not good to hear. I think some of them are worse off than me, especially when you have kids. They're pretty much doing the same thing I'm doing—trying to stay alive with food." Renee, a young Native woman, also described a similar understanding of why people were at the food shelf, without offering any caveats: "I really have no impression; if they need food, that's it. They need some help; I don't think they're just doing it because they're just doing it, they need food." Clayton expressed empathy with others at the food pantry: "I mean, they are here for the same purpose I'm here—to survive, to eat, to make sure they have enough food on the table for their family. They are the same as me." He adds: "People that stay in glass houses should dare not throw stones. If you are in the same situation as they are, then don't criticize and don't belittle

because you're in the same boat." In using the phrases "in the same boat" and "they are the same as me," Clayton powerfully speaks to the possibility of unity and community even in spaces of scarcity.

## Conclusion

This chapter shows how age-old welfare discourses can still be found in food pantry spaces today, with a few updates to the language. These discourses, when deployed, reinforce separations between Us and Them—the paradigmatic Other. In this chapter, neoliberal narratives were at the front and center of the ways in which clients processed their identities; economic identity became the primary parameter through which citizens evaluated themselves and others. Neoliberal stigma created a culture of suspicion at Chum, where people were hypervigilant and self-conscious about their language, opinions, and behaviors. Clients engaged in continuous self-surveillance, self-discipline, and self-censorship and, by the same token, cast suspicion on the motives, intentions, and behavior of others. For people of color, the stigma of race intersected with the stigma of welfare, multiplying the effects of stigma but also creating sites of radical resistance, by which Us and Them dichotomies and neoliberal logic were disrupted.

In this study, the suspicion that citizens levied against each other resonated with the phenomenon of horizontal violence described by Brazilian adult educator and organizer Paulo Freire (1970) in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire's life's work involved organizing working-class people to achieve political freedoms—people who were primarily descendants of African slaves brought by Spanish colonizers to Brazil. Drawing on Marxist theory, Freire observed that *horizontal violence*, violence perpetrated by people in the same economic class against each other, emerged for two reasons: divide-and-rule strategies employed by the oppressor, and a lack of class-based consciousness among disenfranchised groups. He argued that because people do not have any consciousness of themselves as an oppressed class, each man retained his individualism and desire for property, conditioned by what he has seen before him. All in all, divide and rule strategies turned people within a socioeconomic class against each other and were necessary for colonizers to achieve their goals.

At Chum and RP, Reagan's "Cadillac-driving Chicago welfare queen" story was still the discursive and ideological linchpin that severed the

community. This forty-year-old antipoor agenda was taken up by citizens who turned on each other and did not see themselves as being in the same boat. In this context, however, what made a difference to collective identity was whether or not organizational discourses directly addressed this linchpin. Organizational discourses played an important role in reformulating identities. For instance, RP engaged directly with welfare discourses by constructing clients as hardworking, responsible, and proud Americans. Through talk, text, and practices, RP situated itself as separate and different from traditional government assistance programs, stating boldly that there was no fraud or abuse to be had at RP. RP brought people together in ways that affirmed their identities, relationships, and class positions in society while otherizing citizens who used more traditional food assistance programs. On the other hand, Chum did not engage in any meaningful discursive work to reframe its food pantry or clients as such age-old welfare discourses ran full steam ahead. In the absence of counternarratives, citizens continued to perpetuate discourses of Black welfare queens, Cadillacs and Lincolns, and fraud and abuse. Whereas RP brought people together, creating a culture of unity and community, Chum reinforced a culture of suspicion, in which feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety were ever present among clients. The problem with cultures of suspicion is that they work actively to prevent people from joining together.

### Implications for Practice and Policy

The system of public assistance in the United States has inscribed within it a variety of oppressive ideologies. Food pantries cannot and will not end hunger, but what they do instead is manage hunger and control the poor through the perpetuation of neoliberal forms of stigma. The problem with entrepreneurial pantries like RP is that they reinforce neoliberal logic when it comes to food taking us further away from rights-based approaches and legal entitlements. Traditional food pantries would do well to tackle neoliberal stigma by shifting stigmatizing narratives surrounding legal entitlements in the United States, where the term *entitlement* has often been cast in a negative light, being associated with welfare discourses, government overspending, and national debt. However, the term itself is inherently positive, connoting security and collective solidarity (Jost 2003). These new narratives are important to interrupt the culture of suspicion, which

prevents the creation of spaces in which people can gather, discuss, and organize resistance in solidarity with each other.

In comparing Chum and RP, we find that stigma is not natural or inevitable but created and disrupted through discursive practices that mark people. Instead of creating stigmatizing narratives like RP, pantries can create new stories and narratives that identify and debunk common tropes and stereotypes about welfare recipients (e.g., the Cadillac trope, moral discourses of need, etc.), and point toward prosocial positions of antiracism, antisexism, legal entitlements, and citizenship. Food pantries should replace stigmatizing narratives with narratives inspired by Clayton, who from his site of creativity, radical openness, and possibility was able to say, “We’re all human, we bleed the same blood, we have dreams, we have nightmares, we cry, we laugh, we eat, we sleep, we live, we die, we fall, we buy dessert.” Food pantries should replace narratives of fraud and abuse with those that emphasize the right to adequate food, food sovereignty, and community food security perspectives. Educating staff, volunteers, and clients about the meaning of legal entitlements would go a long way toward shifting how they perceive their roles. In time, these new stories using the language of justice, equity, and rights may eventually displace the neoliberal language of fraud and abuse, hard work, and personal responsibility.

