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7 Health Citizens: Choosing Good Food amid Scarcity

Interviewer: What do you typically pick up from the food pantry?

Victor: I pick up cereal, cheese, milk, bread, vegetables, yes, that's what I get from here. Peanut butter, of course. Peanut butter, and tuna … What else is there? Ramen noodles, ramen noodles and macaroni and cheese.

Interviewer: You get canned vegetables?

Victor: Canned vegetables and fruit also. I try to get fresh vegetables also, green peppers, onions, tomatoes, and cucumbers.

Interviewer: When it comes to getting food from food shelves, what are you thinking about when you choose that food?

Victor: I'm thinking about how many different meals I can make with the certain foods I'm getting. I'm not used to cooking for one or two people. I'm used to cooking for the kids also and all of that. How many different meals can I make with these kinds of foods? I quickly glance over everything and see what's on the shelves and then I go from there. Basically, when I have the kids, it's basically all about them. What will they eat? I can eat anything and the kids won't. That's how I looked about everything when I first came in. You always get the milk, cheese, bread, and cereal, you always get that stuff no matter what. I do, at least.

Interviewer: What about food from the grocery store when you're using your own money or SNAP, what's important to you?

Victor: Same thing. Same thing, yes, same thing. You treat yourself a little better with your food stamps; you can buy anything, basically. Some things I do not, there's generic stuff that you can buy that's just as good as the regular stuff …

Interviewer: So cost is important to you as well?

Victor: Oh yes, that's basically the biggest thing. If it's not on sale, I don't go shopping … I try to get the best deals and the best coupons for everything.

—Victor, Native male, Chum client

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Politics, Public Health, and Citizenship: America's Harvest Box

Victor is a thirty-seven-year-old Native man and a single dad who shares custody of his children with his former partner. Victor represents the group of single parents with children that suffers disproportionately from food insecurity. Although the average rate of food insecurity in the United States is about 15 percent, for households with children headed by a single man, food insecurity is 23.1 percent; for households with children headed by a single woman, it is 34.4 percent (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2014). As we see in Victor's interview, he is thoughtful, enterprising, and judicious in how he procures food for his family. The Chum food pantry does not distribute enough meat, so he buys meat from the store with his SNAP benefits. At Chum, he gets milk, bread, and any available proteins, like tuna and peanut butter. Victor uses his SNAP benefits carefully to get the best deals on food. He has a car, which allows him to compare deals at different stores almost daily. SNAP allows him a bit of dignity, because unlike the food pantry he gets to choose what he wants at the grocery store. As he notes, "You treat yourself a little better." His top priorities are "what is going to last longer" and "what do the kids want."

Discourses surrounding men, and Native men in particular, rarely if ever portray them as caregivers—dads involved in taking care of the kids. Welfare and SNAP recipients are further demonized, with suspicion cast on their character, choices, and morality. In this snapshot, we see Victor, the paradigmatic Other, at the heart of family, caregiving, and food. We see Victor making careful choices, balancing cost, nutrition, and the desires of his family as he picks up food at the grocery store and food pantry.

Even as Victor goes about making careful food choices every day, the political system continues to denigrate his character and decision-making skills. In February 2018, the Trump administration unveiled a proposal for America's Harvest Box as part of the 2019 budget. In one fell swoop, the proposal called into question Victor's agency and hard work and the care that he takes to procure food for his family. In one fell swoop, the modicum of dignity that Victor experiences at the grocery store has been placed in jeopardy. The proposal plans to replace half of the money households receive via SNAP with a box of government-picked, nonperishable foods

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every month (Thrush 2018). Instead of allowing people to choose their own food, the plan is to give them a box of prepackaged industrial surplus foods—USDA foods. The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) wing of the USDA purchases a variety of American-produced and American-processed commodity food products, which are delivered to schools, food banks, and households across the country to be used in federal assistance programs; these are called *government commodity foods* or *USDA foods*. USDA foods are typically subsidized through the Agricultural Farm Bill and thus are subject to government priorities and the availability of surplus; therefore, they serve government and corporate interests. The plan developed by the USDA was praised by Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue as "a bold, innovative approach" (as cited in Thrush 2018).

Significantly, in addition to "saving the government billions," America's Harvest Box is being touted for its capacity to provide more nutritious food to poor people than they typically have access to. How does the foremost agency responsible for addressing hunger and nutrition in the nation propose a plan that serves up cheap industrial food to forty million food insecure people and call it nutritious? Marion Nestle (2002), in her landmark research on the relationship between the government and the food industry, pointed out the conflict of interest created by the USDA's dual mandate to protect agricultural interests and advise the public about healthy diets. The government subsidizes food production via price supports for sugar, corn, and milk and facilitates lower tax rates and marketing programs for commodity foods. Agricultural corporations benefit from these subsidies and lobby Congress to continue this support, which becomes sedimented in the Farm Bill and other agricultural policies. Thus, as Nestle notes, "Dietary guidelines necessarily are political compromises between what science tells us about nutrition and health and what is good for the food industry" (30).

America's Harvest Box puts on display the double standards related to food in the United States. Similar to food pantries and soup kitchens, America's Harvest Box is just another receptacle to channel industrial surplus food to the poor. The good food movement has done much to show how whole foods, fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, and minimally processed foods are the kinds of foods we should be eating—good food—yet access to these foods is consistently denied to the poor, who are then blamed for making bad choices—a key logic of neoliberal stigma. In a neoliberal

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era, the doctrine of *health citizenship* is deployed to control the bodies of the poor and food insecure. Health citizenship uses the language of "rights and duties" and encompasses the idea that people should take responsibility for their bodies by eating good food and limiting harm to others through lifestyle changes (Zoller 2005). Sidestepping issues of access, good health citizens contribute to the economy and do not burden the health system with excess sickness and disease. Conversely, when people are seen as irresponsible and not making good choices, they are blamed for it. These negative attributions serve to legitimize the less than adequate legal entitlements provided to the hungry.

In the case of America's Harvest Box, the bodies of Victor and his family are used as sites of control to serve the interests of political and business entities; as Dickinson (2013, 9) points out, the trap of cheap food is an "embodied form of discrimination." The distribution of bad food is normalized, even justified, because people like Victor are deemed irresponsible. The idea of America's Harvest Box continues down a well-worn path of removing access to good food for the poor and replacing it with cheap, high-fat, high-sugar, processed industrial foods. It also follows a well-worn path of casting aspersions on the choices, responsibility, and moral fiber of people on welfare. For Native people, this is not a new phenomenon. Native communities have identified America's Harvest Box as the same type of federal food assistance that tribes have historically received as part of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, with devastating implications for health and stigma (Thrush 2018). Indeed, the Food Research and Action Center noted that America's Harvest Box would be "costly, inefficient, stigmatizing, and prone to failure" (Evich 2018).

It is clear today that poor citizens do not get to choose or make genuine choices about what they eat; they have different economic means and therefore differ in their ability to purchase certain foods. Nestle (2002, 15) writes: "We select diets within the context of the social, economic, and cultural environment in which we live. When food or money is scarce, people do not have the luxury of choice; for much of the world's population, the first consideration is getting enough food to meet biological needs for energy and nutrients." There is a complete failure to acknowledge political and systemic factors that remove choice for people. In the absence of adequate entitlements, proposals that serve up boxes of industrial food to

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families are just another vestige of stigma against the poor—stigma that is antithetical to the goals of food justice. Although the proposal will likely never be enacted because it is so impractical, it has already had an effect. It communicates a stigmatizing message about people like Victor, which goes something like this: "We think you make bad food choices, so we'll continue to give you bad food, but food that is slightly better than if you had to choose for yourself."

Goal of the Chapter

Against a backdrop of top-down political proposals and stigmatizing discourses, the goal of this chapter is to show how hungry and food insecure citizens navigate food choices and perform health citizenship amid material constraint. The chapter sheds light on how citizens choose diets in the context of social, economic, and cultural environments, even in the absence of genuine choice. The chapter reports on what *good food* means to food insecure people and the strategies they use to stretch food. In the meanings attributed to good food, we find that food insecure individuals have a good understanding of what foods they should be eating and what foods are bad for them; however, in practice, their food choices are constrained by context and access to resources. The chapter shows how stigma is tied to the quality of food, which is implicated in visible markings on the food—either through rotting food or name brands. In the voices of the hungry, we hear about the importance of good food, the occasional treat, gardening, and nutrition; how they feel more energetic after eating good food; and the shame they feel when given bad food.

Quantity and Quality of Food at Chum and RP

The food distributed at Chum falls into the categories of grain (bread, pasta, rice, cereal), protein (frozen meat, peanut butter, and canned tuna/salmon), dairy (fresh milk, powdered milk, and yogurt), canned soup/meals (mac and cheese, condensed soups, hamburger helper), and fruits and veggies (canned and some fresh). Canned veggies include corn, peas, a variety of beans, spinach, and even sauerkraut. Much of the food is processed (boxed and canned) to allow for a longer shelf life and ease of transportation, but because of this it also has higher levels of sodium, sugar, and preservatives

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compared to fresh foods. In terms of fresh produce, there was a range of freshness depending on which "generation" the food was. At Chum, I saw fresh brussels sprouts, apples, pears, butternut squash, pallets of red tomatoes, potatoes, and multicolored peppers, but I also saw rotten produce and vegetables that were past their prime. Chum might receive fresh heirloom tomatoes directly from an urban garden, in which case the vegetables were in excellent condition. However, if the produce came from Second Harvest, which got it from another donor, which got it from a third donor, then this third generation of food was of much poorer quality. Other than produce, the range of food choices that clients encountered each month was the same: grain, protein, dairy, canned soup/meals, and fruits and veggies. There were typically no sugar-sweetened beverages distributed, but clients could get ground coffee (four ounces), tea (four to five tea bags), hot chocolate (a couple of small packets for the household), or bottled/canned water (one per individual in the household). Most chose the coffee because even a little was unaffordable to them at the grocery store. Depending on the size of the household, clients took away anywhere between twenty pounds of food (for a one-person household) and 150 pounds of food (for a seven-person household).

Although both food pantries relied on industrial food, there was a big difference between Chum and RP food in terms of quantity and nutritional value. At RP, clients paid twenty dollars for a share and received one hundred dollars' worth of food, which they carried away in laundry baskets, suitcases, and cartons. The quantity, even for a single person and regardless of family size, ranged from between seventy-five to one hundred pounds of food. RP typically distributed some protein, dairy, grain, and fruits and vegetables, but the exact form, quality, and nutritional content of these items was not certain. For instance, *vegetables* could refer to a twenty-pound sack of potatoes or a ten-gallon Ziploc bag of carrot puree—the kind that a restaurant would use. Consistent with RP's conservative agenda, there were far fewer regulations and restrictions on the kinds of food distributed. This meant that food quality was really hit or miss. You could get a twenty-pound sack of potatoes, but more than half of those potatoes could be rotten. Volunteers spent a lot of time sorting through bad food, but even so one could end up with a lot of rotten food at home. In addition, the nutritional quality of the food was also hit or miss. For instance, RP often distributed large tubs of ice cream, whipped cream, and packs of soda; ice cream

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counted as dairy and frozen cakes and bakery items counted as grains. RP did not have a nutritional breakdown of food and, unlike Chum, nutritionists were not involved in ascertaining food requirements.

Meanings of Good Food

The meaning of the term *nutritious* has undergone several shifts in the past century, from vitamin-enhanced processed foods being good for you to these very same foods being seen as responsible for atherosclerosis and other "diseases of civilization" (Dixon 2009). Client articulations reflected these shifts, uncertainties, and anxieties. Clients talked about nutrition as comprised of (a) the biochemical components of food and/or (b) whole, nonprocessed, and nonindustrial foods. With regard to biochemical understandings, the role of vitamins in nutrition was stressed. Michele, a middle-aged Native woman, noted: "The definition of nutritious to me would be something that's healthy, that gives you your vitamins and stuff that you need. Your vitamins. It feeds your body more than just making you full." Claire, a white woman, enjoys barbecued chicken, fish, baked potatoes, and fresh tomatoes. In her family, she says, "nothing is cooked too much, because it takes the vitamins out of it." There were several men who, concerned about getting enough nutrition, took vitamins to supplement their diets. Gary reached into his bag and pulled out a bottle, saying: "I take these vitamins every day. There is a regular multivitamin, and thiamin, and Vitamin B1 or something. If I really don't eat that well, I'm still getting some vitamins." Taking these supplements was more affordable for these men than buying good food.

Jane Dixon (2009) writes that nutritionism has given rise to the "nutricentric citizen," whose life is ruled by abstract biomarkers such as "good" and "bad" cholesterol, daily calorie and protein requirements, and the body mass index (BMI). Tyrone, a young Black man, around twenty-two years of age, is an apt example of the nutricentric citizen. He is careful, even anxious, about his food choices, making sure to eat fruits and vegetables with as many meals as he could. Tyrone used to be a "big guy" but was determined to lose weight; he lost over eighty pounds by walking and biking one whole summer when he was out of school. These days, Tyrone "gets his nutrition" in whatever way he can, including vegetable juices, which he finds is a more cost-effective way to consume fruits and vegetables. He

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explained: "Yeah, because sometimes I don't eat it as much so, like I say, I try to buy the juices that has all of it in there so I can get the intake more instead of me eating just the apple or an orange and eating broccoli, spinach. I can buy two different kinds that either have one of the same things or both of them together."

Different from nutricentric clients, other participants talked about good food as food that was "fresh" and "nonprocessed." Ashley, a young white mother, explained that good food was "not overly processed" and a "balanced diet." She makes sure to have at least three food groups with every meal and food with a lot of nutrients. "I try to get fresh veggies, low-fat meats, and stuff like that." Ashely is health conscious and started a "cleanse" a few months ago, in which she cut out all meats, sugars, and processed foods. Paula, a middle-aged white woman, noted that she had become more conscious of consuming processed foods after her husband passed away from cancer: "Yeah. I try not to eat processed foods if I can. Pizza or something, every once in a while is alright. Yeah. Processed foods are going to be bad for you. I've been eating more vegetables and leanest cuts of meats."

Across race and gender, participants articulated a mind-body connection when it came to food. Rick, a thirtysomething white man and a client of RP, noted "feeling the difference" after eating a balanced meal compared to fast food. Unfortunately, as a teacher, he rarely got time to prepare his own food, and even buying lunch at the cafeteria was too expensive, so he eats fast food a few times week. Bill also noted feeling the difference when he had not eaten right:

> If you're not feeling the best because you haven't been eating right, or you haven't had a meal, you're a little stressed about that, or you're tired, and a little bit worn out, because you've lost energy from not eating. And of course, that not only saps your physical strength, but it saps your mental strength as well, and you're much more susceptible to mood swings and other people's mood swings and, you know where you'd just turn around and walk away from somebody if you were feeling good, because they're being such a pain in the butt and you want to grab them by the neck and squeeze them till their head pops, you know. But, which is totally socially unacceptable

Trinity discussed the positive effect good food had on her body and mind: "Instead of buying for $3.33, a McDouble, a small fry, and a large pop, for that same three dollars, you could buy a banana, half a pint of milk,

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and a package of peanuts and you would feel so much better. Your body would actually have energy and your brain would be crisp and refreshed. Where with the soda and the fat is going to bog down and slow down your brain, bog down, slow down your body." Trinity was also quick to acknowledge the difficulty of maintaining a healthy diet. While she tried to be health conscious, there were times she did not have the resources to do so.

People of Color and the Long Arc of Food Injustice

People of color articulated anxieties linked to eating industrial food—concerns that were linked to their histories and biographies. Jermain showed a distrust of scientific experts and encouraged a return to traditional and cultural foods:

> Well, I don't listen, I remember they used to say, "an apple a day keeps the doctor away," then I heard them say apples wasn't as good for you as they said. And, it seemed like everything that they used to say was good for me, well now it's bad for you. So, I don't know. I know, they say fried foods are not good for you. I don't know, but my grandparents, they lived on fried foods. They lived to be ninety and eighty-seven years old. You know, if I live that long, I'm good, you know. So, I think you can over, over-analyze stuff, you know. It is what it is. You know, God gave us this for nutrition, for us to eat. So, why should I find fault?

For Jermain, nutrition should not be overcomplicated but should involve following traditional food ways. His views resonate with Dixon's recommendation to follow a "preindustrial ecological nutrition approach," which moves beyond the biochemical orientation to include social, cultural, and environmental dimensions.

Antoine grew up in the South, where he learned how to grow food as a son of a sharecropper. He does not trust the industrial capitalist food system; for him, growing your own food is the only real solution. In his words, we catch a glimpse of the intersection between hunger and history as Antoine evokes Jim Crow segregation and white supremacist policies of the USDA:

Interviewer: Have you ever done gardening?

Antoine: I've done that. I come from the South. That's how we ate. We had to get out there and dig in the dirt. It isn't easy, but it sure pays off. Food really is good when you get it when it comes up. That's a blessing.

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Interviewer: If somebody gave you a little piece of land over here you would be …

Antoine: Willing to get out there and do it? I like to watch it grow. I like to see stuff grow, especially food. I could get out there and do that. I did it when I was a child. When I was a little boy, I used to get out with my grandmamma. In the South you had land; it wasn't our land, but we worked it. We ate from it. Corn, okra, watermelon, cantaloupe, all that stuff. I'd love that. That's the best food you can get, straight from the ground, the earth.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Antoine: I don't know what the government is feeding us now, but I know it sure as hell [ain't good] … I think that's why most of the people have diabetes. Half the world has got diabetes, I believe.

In this brief narrative, we glimpse the long arc of injustice that people of color confront when it comes to food. Hinson and Robinson demonstrate how the Jim Crow era brought years of intense oppression for Black farmers, who, unlike white farmers, were unable to get assistance from the government and therefore could not purchase or own land (Hinson and Robinson 2008). Thus, many were forced into a system of servitude called *sharecropping*, in which Black farmers would rent land from white landowners in return for a share of the crops but often remained in debt and indentured to their landlords. Indeed, US agriculture and labor relations are predicated on structural racism: land was given to white people and taken away from African Americans, Natives, the Chinese, the Japanese, and Latinos (Guthman 2011). This was Antoine's story—and the story of many others as well. Antoine is hungry today, even though he spent his youth doing backbreaking work in the fields, producing wealth for rich white capitalists. However he still sees gardening and "getting it straight from the earth" as a way to protect against an untrustworthy food system. When asked where he had garnered this knowledge of food, he explained: "I think I got it from the South. When we were growing up, we had to grow our food and that's the best. You know what you putting in there and you know what you got. You know what comes up out of the ground, but once somebody else got it and you got your factories you don't know what's in it. I've worked in factories and I've seen people put all kinds of stuff in food and it's not right, but what can we say? I don't have a job any more. I eat nothing but a little bit here and there."

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This racialized history is invoked in James's interview as well. James also grew up in Jim Crow South. The grandson of sharecroppers, he grew up growing and eating what today is commodified and sold as *organic*, which, ironically, he cannot afford:

Interviewer: What does the term *nutrition* mean to you?

James: Nutritious food. If I just go back in time, it's your freshly grown and freshly prepared foods. Everything now comes through a processing plant and whatever, so you can only trust that people are making things healthy for us since we've got to go in the store and just pay cash for what we need off the shelf or out of the bins. It's just that trust factor. Nutritious, that's just what I think, fresh foods, like growing your own vegetables, having your own chickens, getting your own eggs fresh out of your own barn. Nutritious, to me, is just country living. It's not city living because what I heard was everything has become instant … That nutrition thing, it's iffy in the world today. Again, if you were not farm raised or whatever, you've got to deal with what our food processors put out here for us to eat.

Interviewer: What do you suggest us city people do who don't grow all our own stuff?

James: Woo-ee, city people. All I can tell us city folks is, "Hey, when you go to the grocery store, just shop for the best." Organic is so high, and they need not be taxing us for wanting to take care of ourselves. I think everything is just overpriced. They're making it so hard for people to take care of themselves. It's just really hard. When they came out with organic, that just said all the other food is crap. Then they charge you an arm and a limb for organic, so I don't even bother. I've been growing up eating this food all this time. Y'all don't need to be making me spend this extra money that I don't even have to go organic. I can't afford to go organic.

James knows the value of eating good food and wants to eat fresh, whole, and organic foods but cannot afford it. Equally importantly, history and biography make paying such high prices for what should be everyday food—the norm—an added travesty.

In Context: Good Food Is Safe Food

While participants at Chum and RP showed ample knowledge regarding what counts as good or bad food and what is healthy or unhealthy, they

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adjusted how they thought about healthfulness when confronted with material and physical realties. For instance, Chum clients were health conscious, food conscious, and concerned about industrial food, but when they were at the food shelf, *food safety* was their number-one concern. Industry experts note that expiration dates are rarely used anymore; instead, "best by" dates are used, which tell us that food is still safe to eat past the date, even if it may not look or taste perfect—yet another practice that works in the interests of corporations rather than poor citizens. After all, which one of us, if our child asks for food, would offer them a can of tuna that has lost its flavor, texture, and color? At Chum, clients were aware that they could eat food beyond the best by date, and many did so; however, personal experiences with food poisoning had made them anxious about doing this.

Lived experience had taught clients that food safety should be their top concern at the food pantry. For Isaiah, the quality of food at Chum was fair, so long as he spent time checking the food before bringing it home. He has suffered from food poisoning in the past, so he is careful about what he eats. Victor noted that the food at Chum was okay with some adaptations: "Yes. It's edible, yes, especially if you cook it right." Charlotte pointed out that Chum food was not very good: "It's been sitting too long or it's bruised, and then it starts to ... especially some of the vegetables or fruit, it's rotten." Renee has gotten bad food several times: "Just fresh vegetables and stuff like that that go bad, the milk is sour sometimes." Ashley has even come up with her own strategy for choosing safe food: "I've had issues with noodles, where you get mac and cheese in the box and there's been bugs in them. That kind of stinks. I tend to shy away from the ones that are in boxes because I've had that experience. I look for things that are sealed and a date, or shrink-wrapped or something, so I don't have to worry about that." Xavier was concerned about falling sick from unsafe food: "So, you know, I worry about that kind of stuff because I guess you can get sick. You know what I mean? You see some things like, you might see a spot on a bell pepper or an onion and you cut around it and work with what you can, but that kind of stuff makes me feel like, well, why is this?"

Clients were troubled by the quality of food given to them and where the food came from. These factors made clients anxious about their health. Receiving food that looked bad and was unsafe to eat was not something they took lightly. It communicated to clients that they were not worthy

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or deserving of decent food. It made them feel otherized, like third-class citizens, and negatively valued. Gabrielle is appreciative of the food from Chum, but feels mistreated when confronted by unsafe food: “I do want to say one thing, that maybe … Just to say that, maybe the people that volunteer here and that do that food stuff, that they look … That they don’t put stuff out here that’s expired. I mean, I could see one or two days, maybe you could work it, but I don’t know where it was from, but one time, I was giving him these noodles, and it had bugs in it … Don’t put something out that you wouldn’t eat. You know what I mean? You know what I’m saying?”

Clayton is appreciative of Chum, but his food choices are constrained by safety: “Program, thumbs up. In some cases, forgive me, you know, some items are a little out of date, like if it’s expired by let’s say a few days, a month or so, but I don’t relish on it, because if you see something that’s outdated, you have a choice, avoid it, improvise, go onto something else, no hard feelings, but I believe whoever is giving them the food should look over the items and say, ‘I don’t think they should have this one.’” Clayton has concerns about E. coli and salmonella and fears that he or his children will fall sick: “That is very important, because not only am I going to consume it, my children will consume the food as well, so it’s very important to ensure the safety of your food.” In a statement telling of the experience of stigma, Clayton said: “Just because people need food it doesn’t mean that they need any old food. Just don’t get them anything. That’s just like tossing a bone to the dog with no meat on it. You don’t know how long that bone sat on the kitchen table.”

In Context: Good Food Is “Fancy Food”

Clients at RP evaluated the food there in the context of their overall foodways; as such, even highly processed industrial food was seen as good food because it was part of a “balanced diet” and because it was food they would usually not have access to. A few clients talked about the poor quality of food from RP. For instance, Katherine worried about the healthfulness of RP food, saying: “Sometimes I feel that … Sometimes I think the programs set up to help people aren’t really giving them the right kind of food. At Ruby’s Pantry there’s a lot of fattening food that they give, and I just think it would be good if they could give people more fresh produce. There’s very

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little fresh stuff that's ever given out." Notwithstanding critiques, many clients, including those who valued whole foods and fresh foods, thought RP food was of high quality despite how industrial it was. Claire exclaimed that the food was "awesome" in taste: "Everything is really incredible." She added, "I think it's very good quality. Some of the things like tater tots have calories, but those are healthy calories rather than eating a bunch of French fries from McDonald's. I think it's very good quality." When asked about the quality of fruits and vegetables, she said: "I think it's really cool, I'm very thankful for anything we get there because then I don't have to put my pennies for it in the big store, which is expensive." Bernadette also enjoyed the food from RP: "It is good. I don't think they hand out much that is not nutritious except for the cookies one time were really good, another time they handed out so many poppy-seed muffins. Those were so good … I think they do their best to hand out a well-balanced option, staples, like I said, potatoes and onions and egg, some sort of meat, usually chicken and then other things." The quantity was so vast that people felt they had struck a good deal even on one item. A prime example of this was chicken. The cost of a large pack of chicken thighs or breasts ranges from eight to twelve dollars at the grocery store. RP often distributed two packs of frozen name-brand chicken, a retail value of at least twenty dollars, so clients no doubt saved a lot on just this one item.

The phrases *balanced* and *a good mix* came up frequently. Tony made accommodations for the quality of the food, stating: "All things considered, when you see what's in each delivery, you know, it's pretty much well-balanced. There's usually meat, dairy, some kind of bread product, quite often a pasta, potatoes, vegetables. It's pretty much all around well-balanced." By using the phrase "all things considered," Tony implies that there are other factors to consider beyond quality when assessing the value of food. For Penelope, getting treats from RP was justifiable, given that there was a "good mix of everything": "They try to do a good job of making sure it's a good mix of everything. They try to give you basic staples and they'll like throw in something fun, like the last time we went in, there was ice cream. That's something we normally don't put on our grocery list. You have a lot of good stuff but then you have that treat thing. You know that, everybody needs a little treat once in a while. Or another time, it was cookies, we'd have a ton of cookies." Bernadette admitted there was not much produce at RP, but added, "I mean, it's nothing you can help, but then I can

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make that up by going to the grocery store with my food stamps and I don't have to worry about that." Here too we see Bernadette making adjustments to her way of thinking about healthy food because of the context in which food was received.

Participants appreciated RP because it gave them access to big-name brands and "fancy food" items that were otherwise unaffordable to them. Although the food was not in the best condition or past its best by dates, the fact that these were name brands made recipients feel valued, special, and like they were getting a good deal. People's eyes would light up on seeing brands like Coke, Malt-o-Meal cereal, Gold'n Plump chicken, and Dole strawberries. These were brands they couldn't afford usually; they usually bought store brand and off-brand foods instead. I heard a little boy exclaim, on seeing the Coke, "Sodas! Oh, that's the best part!" His mum was also excited that they got to take a twelve-pack can of sodas home with them—and they could choose from a variety of products: regular Coke; Coke Zero; Sprite; Dr. Pepper in regular, diet, vanilla, or cherry variants; Mello Yellow in diet or regular variants; and Fanta in diet or regular variants. Another mum shrieked in delight on seeing the sugary kid's cereals, saying, "Well, I don't know who wouldn't like those Choco dynos." Getting name-brand items—even if they were snacks, sodas, and treats—was exciting for families because they were novelties; it made them feel normal and mainstream. Penelope gushed: "It's nice to have sweets in the house once in a while too. That's kind of a good thing for us. Wow … Oh, I can't even … Gosh, I can't even … I know there was yogurt and there was granola and oh, my God, we just died and gone to pig heaven." Claire enjoyed coming to RP because of the "fancier" foods—including juices—that she otherwise would not have access to:

Claire: I always have a meal for myself but this is fancier food that I would have never been able to buy at the store because I live in the dollar store … Tater tots seemed fancy.

Interviewer: If you didn't have this food from Ruby's Pantry, would you substitute it from somewhere else?

Claire: Definitely, I would be buying cheaper things but having those hamburger patties they had one time, that was a big treat. Nothing like that at my house usually. It's usually a sandwich for dinner and I put the veggies on that. Never fills you up enough compared to a hamburger, to be honest … I think it's helped me just to have some nicer quality things that

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my family doesn't have to buy for me. I don't have to spend fifteen dollars on some hamburger patties at work, that's expensive! I can have fifteen dollars of fancy things for myself.

Claire made her food budget work by cobbling together a variety of resources, but she still could not afford name-brand items—or anything special, for that matter. She said: "Yeah. The Coke was awesome. The fancy juices were nice, not typical that I go to a gas station every day to buy a fancy bottle of juice. Wow, that was really fancy for me. Just have a nice sit-down juice."

Field Note: Two Purple Eggplants

Two eggplants per share! These were the fresh vegetables that RP gave out today. It caused quite a riot! I got a variety of responses from people to these eggplants. Some people had no idea what they were—not even a guess. They looked at me and said, "What's that?" This surprised me because they are always available in the grocery stores in Duluth. With many people, their eyes opened in amazement at how big and beautiful the purple eggplants looked—big smiles for the most part. Some had seen an eggplant before but never eaten one, many did not know how to cook eggplant, and some said, "Ah, there's fancy stuff here today." For people at RP, it was not just the industrial foods that they found fancy, but also vegetables like eggplants that were culturally unfamiliar and that would have been too expensive for them to buy at the store. Most people accepted the two eggplants; there were only three people who refused the eggplants from me point-blank. One person asked me if I had a recipe sheet for how to cook the eggplant. Today, I am reminded about the joy of trying out new and culturally unfamiliar foods.

Stretching Food and Health Concerns

Similar to Victor, who we met at the beginning of the chapter, other clients at RP and Chum were also strategic in how they spent their food stamps at the grocery store and how they used their points at the food pantry. Michelle uses sales and coupons and buys family packs to save money. She is preoccupied with keeping count of how much she has left on her EBT card and in coupons. She explained: "They are on my mind a lot because you can break them down and you've got to count. I am counting because every

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thirty days to get meat is a long time so I want to stretch it as far as I can." Clients hated to go grocery shopping because of the stress and anxiety of not being able to afford food, let alone good food. A deciding factor in what to pick up was how long the food could be "stretched." Foods that could be extended across multiple meals and made people feel full were best. Isaiah explained:

> Well, I look at the fact of what I need to take to be full. So I allow myself to have a decent meal. You know, sometimes I take chicken, which would last me if I cut it in half, it would last two different meals, so I freeze half and cook half … They give you one pack of meat, according to how many people you have in your household, so that is kind of hard. They say it is a week's worth of food but that's one pack of meat a week, you know. So then you have to get other things like macaroni, things that stretch your food.

For Isaiah, making right choices at the store is important, so he does not go to the store when he is hungry. "So a lot of times I drink water before I go. You know, so it fills me up and I make better choices."

There were several health concerns and dietary restrictions running through clients minds at the grocery store and the food pantry. Morgan is diabetic and has Crohn's disease and cardiac stents, so she is on three different diets. Gabrielle has type 2 diabetes, so she stays away from sugary foods, pastas, breads, and potatoes and tends to eat a lot of greens and meats. Gabrielle gets twenty-three dollars in food stamps, which she uses to get milk and bread at the grocery store. "Sometimes I'll buy salad stuff because I love salad. So, lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers. In Super One, I bought two tomatoes and crackers for almost two bucks." Renee uses her SNAP benefits to buy meat at the grocery store and uses the food shelf to get sides. She has high blood pressure, so she tries to cut down on salty and fatty foods. Instead of salt, she uses seasonings and steams or bakes her food. She is also conscious about the meat she buys: "I try to stay off the pork, but that really is the cheapest stuff; the beef stuff is really high, so it's a struggle there." She usually ends up buying chicken and ground beef. James understands that as an African American he is more susceptible to heart disease and diabetes, so he watches his sugar and salt intake. He likes to eat a well-balanced diet of fresh and whole foods, something he has been doing since his younger days as an athlete. Michelle's entire family suffers from diabetes, so "she knows the drill," although it is a challenge: "I know what to eat. I've been diabetic for years, so I know the whole carbohydrates, and the sugar … to

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be honest. I do to a certain extent. I'm not going to have pops, pops I don't do. The Kool-Aid they'll do, I won't do it because of the sugar. I'll do the regular juices. I already know that you're not supposed to eat a lot of pasta and whatever, so I don't eat a lot of it."

Food insecurity for households with children headed by a single woman is a whopping 34.4 percent (Coleman-Jensen, Gregory, and Singh 2014). Ashley, a working-class, single, white mum, belongs to this group. She is exemplary when it comes to being a good health citizen. She is extremely health conscious and picks up a lot of fresh and whole foods at the food shelf. "I got a lot of whole grain stuff because I've been trying to do that as well. There were beans and stuff like that to get protein from a nonmeat source because, I guess, it's better for you." She added: "I try to make sure that half our plate, like they say in the picture, half a plate of veggies, then a grain and a protein. I'll do lots of veggies and then just use the grain." Here she is referring to MyPlate, the USDA fruits and vegetables campaign. Ashley buys at lot of oatmeal at the store because it is nutritious and filling. For someone who is both food insecure and health conscious, oatmeal is a staple for her:

Ashley: Oatmeal, I'll always buy oatmeal; because oatmeal I can even use water. It fills you up and it keeps you full for a while. Outside of that there's never any leftover fruits or veggies. There's never that. It's usually always at the end of the month we're not eating fresh fruit, until we get the money to buy more groceries.

Interviewer: You might even eat oatmeal for a meal?

Ashley: Yes, oh yes. Often that's probably like the last two weeks that's probably what I eat for breakfast and sometimes lunch.

Disordered eating is typical in Ashley's household. Typical of food insecure families, Ashley encourages her daughter to eat sparingly and eat a little good food along with fillers so that they can stretch out their food. So she explains to her daughter: "Don't eat the whole bag of grapes in one sitting; you won't have any left for tomorrow. Eat some grapes and eat some crackers and something else; you know, it's stuff like that." Ashley rations out the food, but by the end of the month, there is no food left, so they spend the last week eating mostly industrial food. She explained: "I know that what we eat changes as to what we have in the fridge. At first we're eating all fresh stuff. The minute we get our food we're usually eating the fruits and

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stuff like that right away. Towards the end it's sort of like a lot of the cheap processed foods towards the end of the month."

Clients varied widely in how many fruits and vegetables they picked up. Some clients did not take any fresh produce, while others took a lot. Many clients opted for the fresh fruits, such as bags of grapes, apples, and pears from the grocery store. They enjoyed fresh leafy greens, as well as the convenience of bags of salad. Salad bags, when in good condition, tended to move quickly. One evening we ended up giving away six gigantic butternut and spaghetti squashes to one client. Clients who did not opt for the fresh produce at the food pantry did so for a variety of reasons: their families would not eat the vegetables and they did not want to see them go to waste; or they carefully picked through the vegetables and, not finding any that looked good, moved on to the cans; or they felt like they would not be able to cook and eat the produce in a timely manner. For others, the issue was one of storage. John and Morgan live at the Chum homeless shelter across the street, so the only food they picked up was canned and microwaveable food that could be easily stored.

Making Adjustments: One Bad Potato and Tomato Bisque Soup

There was joy and delight when clients talked about what they liked to cook and what their favorite meals to eat were. They were adept at figuring out ingredient substitutions and how to stretch meals. Clients from Chum and RP had knowledge and cooking skills consistent with most Americans, but unique to this group was a keen knowledge and ability to stretch food and to make food choices based on nutrition and what was going to last longer. With a big smile on his face, Clayton said: "I don't think I'm a good cook, I *know* I'm a good cook." He has taught his kids to cook, and they even cook for him on special occasions. Participants talked about cooking "American classics" such as mac and cheese, hamburger, and stews and soups; when resources were available, they also cooked gourmet, slow-food, and foodie-type meals. Soups, stews, and roasts were favorites because they could be made in a healthy manner with a medley of ingredients from the food pantry. They were also relatively inexpensive per meal per head. These dishes were not tied to particular ingredients and allowed for easy substitutions: swapping one vegetable for another, one meat for another, and even fresh food for canned foods and vice versa. Renee loves to cook pot roast: "You get some roast and you just simmer that down and then there's

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a bunch of vegetables; it's really simple, really. Put your fresh vegetables, sometimes it's hard, I just use the canned vegetables." Jermain loves red beans and rice because it is filling, and when he has a little extra to spend he flavors it with catfish, ham hocks, or smoked neck bones. "And then you can season … you have it hot this time and spicy maybe next time, something different, you know. But, I like that, because everything is right there, and you are full."

Participants had learned to make do—to adjust their cooking based on what was available to them with their meager food assistance. Jermain has a special signature dish called *messed-up eggs*, made with eggs, onions, and other vegetables, which he loves to make and eat. Janet enjoys cooking "slow food" but is still learning how to adjust ingredients: "I just like to cook. I love soups, anything that kind of takes a while, I like to chop things and I like to simmer and you know unfortunately again the things that have fresh vegetables for making soups, I used to make it all the time and I am a little limited now, although I am learning to adapt, but yeah I like to make food for people." Rick likes to make a good soup, but this can be problematic with food pantry food: "Sometimes it's hit or miss and sometimes you know if you are working through Ruby's Pantry, specifically you get one of those large things of mashed potatoes or if you got one bad potato in that bunch, it's going to taste like that one bad potato. So I mean you know sometimes it turns out as fantastic, other times its wow, what happened? So I really enjoy playing with soups and spices to be able to make it more exciting or interesting yeah."

Pasta was a staple as it was filling and could be used to stretch more expensive foods. Tyrone's favorite meal is spaghetti and meatballs, but he is health conscious, so he uses a mix of ground beef and turkey sausage for the meatballs. Like many, Violet uses hamburger and potatoes as a way to make food last longer: "If I get a small thing of hamburger, I might use a sandwich bag or something to divide that up and take it, thaw it out, and then use a little potato that I got. I just make a portion just for one person. I'm sort of good at stretching until I can actually go to the grocery store or whatever." Portioning and freezing were common techniques used to stretch food. Morgan used to be a chef at the country club, so she has tremendous cooking skills and knowledge. She made what she called "natural soups"—soups with a lot of fresh vegetables and whole grains. She is also adept at making and freezing pasties—typically a batch of twenty-four.

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The language of fresh, whole, and simple food, with allusions to Mediterranean and low-carb diets, showed that participants were influenced by foodie discourses. Rick explained that his favorite food to cook varied by season: "If its summer time, I like making simple bruschetta that has tomato and cucumber topping. It's real simple. Its butter, olive oil, garlic, let's see here, mustard. Anyhow, you slice up your bread, you put a little dollop on each slice of bread and a little bit of parmesan cheese, bake that in the oven, you chop up your vegetables fresh and for me it just tastes like summertime. So that will be my favorite summer time meal." Darlene talked about her favorite dish to make, Alton Brown's Baked Brown Rice: "It's so good. I don't know. And it's so easy. You just boil the water with olive oil and whatever seasonings you want. You pour it over your rice, throw in the oven for an hour, and it's done. They like it too. They were so anti brown rice when I first started this, but now they're coming around. Probably because I don't serve white rice anymore unless John makes it." Her husband, John, also likes a tomato bisque soup she makes, but since they are health conscious, she does not use heavy cream and does not strain the soup; this retains all the nutrition. There are nights they have tomato bisque soup for dinner; on other nights, when Darlene is ferrying her kids around to their evening activities, they have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. This is also a way they save on food.

Urban-Rural Gardening

There were many folks who had interest, skill, and experience in growing food—and there was much joy in these conversations. In the city of Duluth, which is in close proximity to more rural regions of the state, clients spanning age and racial categories were experienced with growing food, although white clients had more access to land to do so. This disparity, even in a relatively small sample, spoke volumes about the lasting legacy of the discriminatory practices of the USDA—one of the biggest contributors to the decline in Black farming and Black wealth in contemporary US history (Hinson and Robinson 2008). Overall, across groups, clients knew the health and monetary values of growing their own food, having either grown up with vegetable gardens and farms or tried their hands at gardening themselves.

Penelope, a white female client of RP, maintains a lush organic garden that does not use any fertilizer. "It's all organic," she says. She grows

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potatoes, onions, squash, and tomatoes, as well as herbs like oregano, basil, lemongrass, and chives. She still runs out of vegetables, so she has to buy the rest from the store. Bernadette, also white and a client of RP, has a raised-bed garden, which she calls a "garden in a box." In this box, she grows peppers, lettuce, carrots, beets, onions, kale, zucchini, and radishes; she also has fresh herbs growing indoors. Gary's dad grows all kinds of different vegetables and fruits in his garden and also has a raspberry patch and apple tree. Gary receives some of this bounty in exchange for helping his dad around the house, which he says "helps quite a bit" with his food security. John, when he lived in Minneapolis, had access to a 20 × 40 square foot plot of land from the city, surrounded by deer fencing. He grew everything on this land: potatoes, corn, broccoli, cauliflower, carrots, and cucumbers. He said if somebody gave him a plot of land, he would be delighted to grow a garden again.

Many clients of color said they would love to grow a vegetable garden, but the lack of land and resources were obstacles. Renee, a Native woman, loves plants and the outdoors and thinks a garden would be therapeutic for her anxiety issues—but she does not own her own house, so having a garden is impossible right now. Victor's dad, also Native, was a potato farmer, so Victor is very comfortable gardening and farming. In the past, he has grown tomatoes, cucumbers, and other vegetables. "That was a lot of fun … it would save you money too." He is confident about his gardening skills, saying, "Oh yes, I've been gardening my whole life straight through." Violet would like to grow a garden, but lives in an apartment building and so cannot. She recognizes the value of having a garden, both in terms of nutrition and cost benefits. Some clients attempted to garden, but without success. Darlene explained that when they first bought their house, they were excited about growing a garden. "But then the soil wasn't really prepared for that, and we didn't have the money to do so, so it's just something we will revisit when we have more money, I guess."

Commodity Foods

Similar to RP clients, Chum clients also enjoyed getting name-brand foods. Once there were Tyson frozen chicken nuggets available for families to take, but because the exterior branded box had been removed, clients did

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not know it was Tyson chicken. I recall showing multiple clients the large, empty cardboard box as evidence that it was really Tyson-brand chicken. Their faces lit up. Receiving familiar name brands took them from politely appreciating the food to delighting in it—as was the case at RP. Conversely, on several occasions clients at Chum would stop short when they saw the huge blocks of cream cheese at the food shelf. The reactions were almost the same each time: first excitement that they were getting cream cheese, then puzzlement, and then disappointment when realizing that these were the dreaded government commodity foods.

In the 1960s, government commodities suffered a poor reputation and were highly stigmatized. In fact, until the 1990s, USDA foods were branded with distinctive white-and-black labels that simply said "CHICKEN" or "BEEF" with a sketch of a chicken or cow. Today USDA food items retain their private labels, so it is much harder to tell which foods are commodity foods and which are regular foods for retail. This was done to remove the stigma, but also because it ended up being more economical for the USDA. Most commodity foods do not say USDA on them today and look like regular retail products, but since the labels were not familiar, clients guessed that they were USDA foods. On some days, with some convincing, I could get clients to take this food, but not always. These reactions serve as an important reminder that food is not just about chemical components but is inscribed with memory, histories, and political meaning, all of which influence food choice.

In her poem "Why I Hate Raisins," Natalie Diaz, a Native Should poet and writer, Mojave and an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian community, captures the profound simplicity and complexity of what it means to be hungry and food insecure in the United States. Her poem also captures the stigma of having to eat government commodity foods, most likely commodity foods that arrived in a box as part of the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations—a program similar in form to the proposal for America's Harvest Box.

Why I Hate Raisins

And is it only the mouth and belly which are
injured by hunger and thirst?

Mencius

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Love is a pound of sticky raisins
packed tight in black and white
government boxes the day we had no
groceries. I told my mom I was hungry.
She gave me the whole bright box.
USDA stamped like a fist on the side.
I ate them all in ten minutes. Ate
too many too fast. It wasn't long
before those old grapes set like black
clay at the bottom of my belly
making it ache and swell.

I complained, *I hate raisins.*
I just wanted a sandwich like other kids.
Well that's all we've got, my mom sighed.
And what other kids?
Everyone but me, I told her.
She said, *You mean the white kids.*
You want to be a white kid?
Well too bad 'cause you're my kid.
I cried, *At least the white kids get a sandwich.*
At least the white kids don't get the shits.

That's when she slapped me. Left me
holding my mouth and stomach—
devoured by shame.
I still hate raisins,
but not for the crooked commodity lines
we stood in to get them—winding
around and in the tribal gymnasium.
Not for the awkward cardboard boxes
we carried them home in. Not for the shits
or how they distended my belly.
I hate raisins because now I know
my mom was hungry that day, too,
and I ate all the raisins.

In this childhood reflection, the family does not receive cash benefits that are sufficient to meet their food needs. They cannot manage their food insecurity by simply going to the store and using legal entitlements to purchase food of their choice. Instead, Natalie and her family must eat government food predetermined for them. In this poem, the invasive, paternalistic, and marked role of the government in the lives of poor communities is evident when she discusses the bright box of raisins with "USDA stamped like

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a fist on the side." These are USDA commodity food boxes, which restrict food choices for poor citizens. Instead of being able to eat a sandwich, the young girl is forced to eat a box of sticky black raisins. The most likely scenario here was that there was a glut of raisins in the market and the price of raisins fell; to avoid farmers losing money, the USDA bought the raisins and distributed them as commodity foods to food insecure households. But the little girl wants a sandwich—a staple of the American diet, but as I learned through this study, for most poor citizens bread, ham, and cheese were some of the most unaffordable items at the grocery store—and these items because of their restricted shelf lives were also not easily accessible at food pantries. Diaz's poem reminded me of Ashley's story—Ashley, the extremely health conscious mum who eats oatmeal several times a day to save money and is forced to say to her child, "Don't eat the whole bag of grapes in one sitting; you won't have any left for tomorrow. Eat some grapes and eat some crackers." Eat raisins.

Diaz's poem bears witness to the multiple effects of hunger. Hunger means facing the very real physical sensation of pain, a kind of gnawing in the belly that won't go away and will not let you do much else, but it also means experiencing complex feelings linked to what it means to be oneself, what it means to be the paradigmatic racial Other in a world of white privilege, what it means to be poor and isolated in a world of commodified middle-class lifestyles, and what it means to look at yourself through the eyes of those higher up in the social hierarchy. The young girl cries: "At least the white kids get a sandwich. At least the white kids don't get the shits." The poem illuminates the physical pain of hunger, as well as the meanings that hunger carries in the social and political world. Being hungry means suffering not alone, but in the context of family and community—at times sharing the pain and shame with loved ones, but often hiding these feelings from them or arguing with them. Being hungry is about living in an unjust system grounded in white supremacist and neoliberal "capitalism with the gloves off" policies such as America's Harvest Box, which affects people of color and poor white folk in devastating ways.

Conclusion

Dominant political and cultural discourses demonize SNAP recipients, portraying them as lacking in discipline, enacting poor food choices, and

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unconcerned about their health and well-being. This chapter shows food insecure individuals like Victor, Violet, and Ashley—parents, who perform health citizenship in extraordinary ways. Participants showed tremendous skill in navigating limited food choices. Individuals were preoccupied, anxious, and concerned about eating well and were particularly concerned about eating unsafe and industrially processed foods. Citizens like young Tyrone took great pains to try to get the most nutrition that they could out of the food available to them. Many recognized the value of growing their own food, in terms of both nutritional quality and financial savings. People of color talked about their food choices in the context of history and biography; there was a lack of trust in the dominant industrial food system—not only because it delivered bad food to people, but also because it was steeped in a long history of racism. These themes also were reflected in how clients responded to seeing commodity foods at the food shelf. Foods that were fresh—and looked fresh—as well as name-brand foods took away some of the stigma associated with hunger and poverty. Name-brand foods, whether Tyson or Coke, made recipients feel special because they were foods they would not typically buy for themselves. Unique to food insecure families, participants cooked stews, natural soups, “messed-up eggs,” and tomato bisque soup, using recipes that allowed them to use food pantry food in creative ways. They ate filler foods like bread, pasta, and crackers to help stretch out more nutrient-dense foods over a longer period of time. Food choice *should* depend on a family’s preferences, culture, dietary restrictions, health consciousness, and contradictory desires; however, for food insecure families, “choice” is determined by what is available through charitable capitalism and meagre SNAP benefits.

Policy Implications

Food policy, enacted through government and charitable food assistance programs, forces people to rely on cheap industrial food as a way out of hunger. SNAP benefits are inadequate for purchasing good food—fruits and vegetables, whole grains, nutrient-dense foods, culturally acceptable foods, foods for the body and the mind, foods for a balanced diet, and foods that allow you to live, work, and play better. Indeed, cheap food is an “embodied

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form of discrimination" that should result in new kinds of policy actions, as Dickinson (2013, 9) points out. The USDA currently uses the Thrifty Food Plan to make recommendations about what SNAP entitlements should look like. The plan is a race to the bottom for the cheapest food possible and holds stigmatizing assumptions about who the poor are. The Thrifty Food Plan, like America's Harvest Box, is in effect a sedimentation of the double standards and contradictions of food assistance policies: we want people to eat nutritious food, but not too much, for fear of incentivizing "welfare." In a typical pattern of neoliberal stigma, the poor are consistently denied healthy options and are then blamed for making bad choices. So the first step to rectifying an unjust food system is to increase SNAP entitlements for households, such that people can eat good food and an adequate amount of food every week of the month.

In this chapter, people's forays into urban gardening resonate with food sovereignty discourses, which argue that communities' rights to grow and produce food are critical to the long-term food security of communities (Alkon and Mares 2012). There is a growing body of literature on urban gardens, which on the one hand argues that this is a vital strategy for enhancing food security, but on the other cautions that as a strategy, it is only possible when resources of land, money, and time are available (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Ghose and Pettygrove 2014; Levkoe 2006). In the case of urban gardens, care must be taken to ensure that programs are not subject to the same paternalistic forces of poverty governance found in the rest of the food system. Furthermore, from a policy perspective, it is important not just to create new urban farming and gardening programs, but also to work on redressing historical travesties. For instance, farming in Black communities today garners contradictory responses because of its problematic associations with slavery and sharecropping. With regard to racial equity, the fight must be for reparations for communities that have lost their farms, their lands, and their livelihoods to white supremacy. In an ethnographic study of the voices of Black farmers, Carter (2017) found that though the USDA has a well-known history of racism, farmers were able to point to instances of incremental progress, such as the *Pigford Settlement*, one of the largest civil rights settlements for Black farmers in the history of the United States. More settlements like these for African American, Native, and Hmong communities, are required to shift the compass

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on racial equity. In short, even as we continue to think about and enact food justice programs and policies, it must be done carefully and with a view toward racial equity. This means not quickly jumping onto new strategies, but methodically and passionately working for reparations, rights, and representation for exploited communities—remembering that the unjust food system has a long arc that reaches deep into history and that the way people eat is just the tip of the iceberg.

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Feeding the Other

Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries

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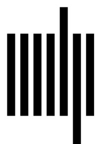
Citation:

Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries
By: Rebecca T. de Souza
DOI: 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



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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

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