

8 Conclusion: Imagining a Future for Food Pantries

But ... it is also easy to see the shortcomings in the conduct of the Samaritan. There is no suggestion that the Samaritan ~~organized~~ sought to investigate the lack of police protection on the Jericho Road nor did he appeal to any public officials to set out after the robbers and clean up the Jericho road. Here was the weakness of the Good Samaritan. He was concerned [*merely?*] with temporary relief, not with thorough reconstruction. He sought to sooth the effects of evil, without going back to uproot the causes. Now, without a doubt Christian social responsibility includes the sort of thing the Good Samaritan did. So we give to the United Appeals, the Red Cross, to all types of unfortunate conditions ... But there is another aspect of Christian social responsibility which is just as compelling. It seeks to tear down unjust conditions and build anew instead of patching things up. It seeks to clear the Jericho road of its robbers as well as caring for the victims of robbery.¹

—Martin Luther King Jr., “The One-Sided Approach of the Good Samaritan,”
Montgomery, Alabama, 1955

Neoliberal Stigma and the Problems of Hunger and Food Insecurity

The problems of hunger and food insecurity are problems of food justice. If food justice means “ensuring that the benefits and risks of where, what, and how food is grown and produced, transported and distributed, and accessed and eaten are shared fairly” (Gottlieb and Joshi 2010, 6), then clearly, for approximately 15 percent of the population food justice is not a reality. The lack of access to adequate and affordable food means that households are disenfranchised not only in terms of food, but also in their physical, emotional, and social well-being. The lack of food means that families are forced to enter the restrictive and punitive world of government

and charitable food assistance, in which shame, humiliation, gratitude, servitude, and “embodied forms of discrimination” take a toll on their social identity formations: how individuals see themselves, how others perceive them, and their capabilities for political action.

As pointed out in the introduction to this book, the problem of hunger in the United States is not natural or inevitable. Nationally, there is no shortage of resources; we have sufficient food, technology, expertise, and information (Carolan 2011; Sen 1983). Hunger is the outcome of neoliberal “capitalism with the gloves off” policies that commodify food but fail to provide decent living wages or entitlements for people to access those foods. The government has a legal obligation to ensure “access by all people at all times to enough food for an active and healthy life,” but this obligation has not been met. Hunger is a problem of entitlement failure and a democratic system that does not represent the people it serves. In a neoliberal era, charitable food assistance programs are central to the government’s solution to end hunger. When food banks emerged in the 1980s, they were meant to be stopgap measures, but charitable assistance today is necessary for supplementing meager SNAP entitlements (Fisher 2017; Poppendieck 1999). Indeed, unlike Deuteronomy 15:7–10, which proclaims that “you shall open your hand to him [the poor man], and lend him sufficient for his need, *whatever it may be*” (emphasis added), these programs deliver just enough food to prevent bloated bellies, but not enough for people to achieve their aspirations, to live “a good life,” and to be *citizens* in the fullest sense of the word.

Specifically, this book has argued that the phenomenon of *neoliberal stigma*, by which people are marked by negative meanings centered on work, personal responsibility, citizenship, economic productivity, and wealth, is the ideological fulcrum that legitimates entitlement failure and food injustice. Neoliberalism offers a set of neutral rhetorical resources necessary for the justification of the social order, in which hard work and personal responsibility are foregrounded while history and structural forces are dismissed as irrelevant. In an era of health citizenship, the food choices people make are subject to intense scrutiny and discipline; individuals are chastised for their alleged lack of motivation and desire for self-improvement. They are the so-called bad citizens, who harm themselves, their children, and the national debt by not taking care of their bodies. Individuals are held responsible for eating industrial foods and for their

purported lack of food-related information, knowledge, and skills. All these stigmatizing discourses come together to justify neoliberal and racial projects while masking the real issue: exploitation that takes place at the hands of a global capitalist food system. Stigmatizing ideologies are inscribed and reproduced in policies and procedures at global, national, and local levels—even the level of food pantries.

The effects of neoliberal stigma on people who are hungry and food insecure are devastating. Neoliberal stigma is pivotal to the Us and Them mindset so rampant in food assistance spaces today. For people in positions of vulnerability, this means managing stigma by distancing themselves from people and places. It involves processes of blaming, shaming, and silencing that take a toll on identity and social well-being. For people in positions of power, this means constantly trying to discern who is deserving and underserving, what counts as fraud and abuse, and identifying scammers. Neoliberal stigma pervades food assistance spaces, unleashing a culture of suspicion in which volunteers are suspicious of clients and clients are suspicious of each other. Neoliberal stigma results in less access to food and good food, reductions in SNAP benefits, and the excessive monitoring and policing of clients through poverty governance procedures. Stigma has the ultimate effect of enhancing perceptions of social distance and actual distance among groups of people—keeping people away from each other. Stigma is divisive and silencing: it builds a solid wall of separation between those on the giving and receiving ends, as well as within class groups, and in so doing it reinforces the status quo. Stigma in any form is dangerous because what starts out as symbolic eventually leads to the building of real walls: border walls, sanatoriums, mental asylums, and prison-industrial complexes, to name a few.

Because my research is focused on food pantries, my recommendations are geared toward change at this level, although there is work to be done at every level of the food system. As I noted in the introduction, food pantries are small actors in a much larger food system, but because there are so many of them, they have the potential to become formidable allies in dismantling the food system. This means redefining their function. In addition to collecting and distributing food, I argue that food pantries should become centers for the production and distribution of new narratives. Specifically, in this chapter, I argue that a genuine food justice approach to hunger requires developing new versions of food pantries, ones

designed not just to dole out food, but to develop the *critical consciousness* of people who enter them as donors, staff, volunteers, and clients.

Critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (1970) referred to this process of consciousness raising as *conscientization*, or the process of developing a critical awareness of social realities through reflection and action. We might also think of these as processes geared toward developing an *oppositional consciousness*—a consciousness trained to invert dominant paradigms of thought, whether they be religiopolitical, white supremacist, sexist, or capitalist. It is “an empowering mental state that prepares members of an oppressed group to act to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination” (Mansbridge and Morris 2001, 5). It is a consciousness that counters dominant ideologies, directs attention away from personal explanations to structural and institutional forms of oppression, and provides “symbolic blueprints for collective action and social change” (Morris and Braine 2001, 26). Dr. Martin Luther King’s sermon, excerpted at the beginning of this chapter, is a powerful example of what an oppositional consciousness looks like. Aptly titled “The One-Sided Approach of the Good Samaritan,” King ([1955] 2007) applauds the Samaritan for caring for the victim but chastises him for not taking steps to “uproot the cause” and to “clear the Jericho road of its robbers.” The Samaritan did not talk to public officials or the police; there was no advocacy, no protest, no demands made of public officials. Indeed, King’s theological orientation is not the theology of Sahr, which brings him to categorize people into three types, but the cumulative voices of people of color and people of faith speaking from below, inverting dominant paradigms of thought, oppositional and nonviolent at the same time.

Goal of the Chapter

The goal of this chapter is to first summarize key findings from the study and then provide a framework for how food pantries can start moving toward new versions of themselves that exert influence in the wider community and upward through the food system. Grounded in theories of social change, in which a key requirement is dialogical processes geared toward recovering, centering, and foregrounding the voices of the hungry, I present particular steps pantries can take to move toward the future, which involves consciousness-building and the creation of communicative

or participatory spaces in which bodies and voices flow easily. To be sure, this is not a transformational approach—I am not recommending that food pantries be dismantled, at least not yet—but it is a pragmatic approach to move us one step closer to achieving that vision. To do so, food pantries and organizations must first build their capacity for antiracism and advocacy grounded in reflection and action. This chapter presents examples of the kinds of allies that food pantries can seek out as they move toward more justice-based versions of themselves. The chapter ends with an analysis of Appetite for Change, a community-led organization centered on food justice issues, as a vision of what food pantries can become.

Key Findings

Voices of hunger are powerful, complex, and full of desire.

Amid oppressive systems, this book bears witness to the complex, contradictory, and nuanced lives of the hungry and food insecure. In these recovered voices, we see personal responsibility, rational decision-making, critical consciousness, and agency. College degrees, work, volunteerism, giving back to the community, physical pain, mindfulness, prayer, and spirituality all constitute the “lived lives” of participants. We hear lives full of meaning: remembering and forgetting, reflection and action, regret and anticipation. Participants talked about the important role of God in their lives—a God of the oppressed who saved them from death and despair even as they moved through dark and lonely places of poverty, disability, unemployment, violence, anxiety, and depression. Participants described sticker shock at the grocery store, unemployment, homelessness, migration, physical and mental health issues, jumping through hoops, and histories of racism going all the way back to the Jim Crow era. Participants used complex, rational, and creative processes to juggle government and charitable food assistance. They showed skill navigating the complexities of food and nutrition even as they struggled to protect their families. They showed immense gratitude for public assistance but recognized how oppressive these forces were in their lives. They cared for each other—for children, sick relatives, family, and friends—but also battled with each other and with oppressive forces in their lives, like systems of poverty governance. Individuals inverted neo-liberal logic on a daily basis but also reinforced it when it worked in their self-interest.

Overall, participants disrupted the binaries of knowledgeable/ignorant, moral/immoral, healthy/unhealthy, and good/bad citizens, often used in political discourses, and showed lives lived outside of discursive boxes and categories. In a letter written by Sahr (discussed in chapter 2), he placed people into three categories: those who are not able to work, those who are not able to find jobs, and *those who do not want to work*, with his wrath reserved for the last category. However, in the voices of the hungry, I found that people cycled through the first two categories many times in the course of their lives. *I never found people who did not want to work*; in fact, work was always talked about with great joy, as a source of positive identity formation and a source of privilege. Interview after interview, not one of these citizens could be placed in the third category. I soon began to realize that just like the “welfare queen” and “angry Black woman” stereotypes, this category of people does not exist. It is a socially constructed category with no basis in reality, but rather is constructed in the service of a powerful political project.

Stigma is intensified at the intersection of race and gender.

At Chum, Native and African American clients articulated far more experiences of neoliberal stigma than white participants. They felt it more and internalized it more. Racism, sometimes color-blind, was an important subtext for their experiences related to food assistance, which occurred in their own neighborhoods, in food pantries, and in government assistance systems. In their articulations, clients linked experiences of depression and anxiety directly to being negatively marked by their color. They used an intergenerational lens to make sense of racism and used a variety of ways to cope with racial oppression. Most often, they turned inward and looked to themselves for answers and solutions: long walks, prayer, hanging out with friends, using humor to diffuse the situation, and counting their blessings. Importantly, these stories were completely concealed and made invisible at the food pantry. They did not show up in the interactions between clients and volunteers. Citizens came in, waited, got their food, and left. Volunteers did the same. Time, procedural constraints, and racial distance played a role in concealing these narratives. So, shockingly yet inevitably, volunteers often had no idea who was standing in front of them—the vast history and biographies of the people who came there. They did not realize that some of the people they were serving grew up as indentured sharecroppers,

had grown organic food, made tomato bisque soup, and had lived several lifetimes before they got to the pantry.

The study also showed that women faced a heavy burden of oppression. Because of the gendered division of labor, women were often the primary caregivers for children and grandchildren, and because of these caregiving roles they were more visible at the food shelf and at the welfare office, making them easy targets of stigma. In households with single female parents and even in two-parent households, women typically were accountable for food preparation; the onus was on them to prepare healthy meals that maintained the family budget. Women of color, Native and African American in this study, experienced racism at government offices, at the workplace, and in their communities. Their stories were amplified by the violence of relational abuse, loneliness, addiction, and depression, thereby illuminating the broader context of structural violence within which hunger occurs. Even as women aged and became grandparents, they continued to shoulder the burden of providing food for food insecure children and grandchildren; this was true of both white women and women of color.

Food pantries function as whitened neoliberal enclosures.

Pantries like Chum and RP are a kind of “neoliberal enclosure” in which time and space are orchestrated to achieve particular mentalities, behaviors, and disciplines. In a Foucauldian vein, enclosures as a technique of governance act like machines, transforming and exerting control over people not by direct coercion but by creating self-regulating bodies through procedures of supervision, assessment, and evaluation (Foucault 1995). Within the enclosure of the Chum food pantry, with its rules and spatial barriers, both clients and volunteers were obedient to the arrangements of space and time, each following their roles precisely. There was a stark division in this space; clients queued up outside the food shelf waiting for it to open, while volunteers set up food and other formalities inside. Volunteers entered through a separate door and had their own space to take breaks, eat snacks, and chat, but clients were not allowed access to this space. This kind of disciplinary enclosure reaffirmed the separation between racial and class-based groups at Chum. Within these neoliberal enclosures, volunteers and clients were easily recruited into neoliberal modes of being and action, where ideals of individualism, personal responsibility, efficiency, and self-help were embraced.

In these enclosures, stigmatizing assumptions penetrated the subjectivity of people across a variety of backgrounds: people in positions of privilege and at the bottom of the social order. At Chum, age-old stigmatizing beliefs about poverty, race, and gender alongside neoliberal discourses of accountability, responsibility, and hard work were prevalent themes. These themes remained somewhat masked in this enclosed space. In other words, simply walking into the food pantry you would not know that forty-year-old stigmatizing beliefs about “welfare mothers” and “Cadillacs” were floating around in people’s minds, but these themes came up consistently in interviews with volunteers and clients. It is no wonder then that people sat around subdued and in silence as they waited for their food—with no sense of community and not much cross talk or conversation. RP, on the other hand, was a very different kind of neoliberal enclosure; here paying twenty dollars offered clients a way to *buy* themselves out of the indignity of oppressive neoliberal narratives and construct themselves as hardworking folks. These unifying discourses created an open and welcoming space for clients but reinforced stereotypes about people who used traditional food assistance programs like Chum.

Religion produces charity but not advocacy.

At both sites, the power of religion to bring a great number of Good Samaritans together to do the most unsavory of jobs, like pitchforking their way through raw frozen fish and rotten potatoes, was notable. The question remained, however, how to refocus the energies of these Samaritans toward systemic change. A number of volunteers and clients at both sites had strong faith beliefs, which influenced their worldviews and actions. At Chum, religious beliefs often were described as the key motivation for volunteering. Volunteers talked about the role of Jesus in the lives of the poor and saw themselves as fulfilling a God-given mandate. At RP–Duluth, volunteers also saw themselves as doing God’s work by reaching out to the hungry and opening their church space to the poor. These faith beliefs were not made explicit in the everyday bustle of collecting and distributing food; instead, the physical food distribution occurred in a secular and even postsecular way, in which humanistic values were applauded and only loosely tied to Christian doctrine. At Chum and RP, discourses of helping others and charity were prominent and seen as central to Christian social responsibility, but unlike King’s sermon, rebuilding and creating new equitable structures

were not part of volunteers' faith beliefs. Many volunteers talked about the importance of advocacy but did not tie it to their responsibilities as Christians, and their identities had not changed because of it. In this space, their work was framed as "doing good" and there was mutual admiration and appreciation among them. Although volunteers did not make their faith explicitly known, clients assumed that volunteers were there because of faith commitments, although at RP this was complicated by the fact that volunteers were getting something in return.

Communication builds and fractures communities.

The study shows that stigma is neither natural nor inevitable, but created and disrupted through communicative or discursive practices that mark people in explicit and implicit ways. This is the work of discourse or, in the case of RP, *strategic* communication. The phrases "RP is for everyone" and "we're all in the same boat" created solidarity among people. Sahr put a lot of effort into addressing beliefs and assumptions clients had. Through strategic communication, he created a sense of community and destigmatized the RP food assistance program. At Chum, in the absence of strategic communication about who the hungry were and the causes of hunger, age-old ideologies hitched their carriages to new languages and events to create a culture of suspicion. Chum failed to articulate a coherent ideological project in which religion, economics, and politics could be brought in line with the value of social justice. Indeed, many voices could be heard at Chum—some reinforcing stigmatizing ideologies, others countering them. The lack of coherent narratives dealt a deathblow to community building and solidarity. Thus, Chum, even with its social justice position, was far less effective at creating a sense of collective identity and solidarity among its various internal stakeholders.

At both sites, "collective forgetting" and discursive erasures reinforced social and racial distance between Us and Them. These spaces were racialized not because of what was present, but because of what was absent. At Chum, the failure to remember the bloody and brutal enslavements of racial minorities in the past reinforced a neutral reading of Black and brown bodies in those spaces. There, the fact that all the volunteers were white reinforced the idea of white superiority; these were "good white women" reaching out to poor brown folks. At RP, focusing on the role of miracles in receiving surplus food but overlooking the role of the industrial food

system reinforced the idea of hunger as a personal issue. There, the mostly white bodies in that space reinforced the social imaginary of whites as hard-working, proud, and responsible Americans, proud because they were paying for what they were getting, not simply taking so-called handouts. This occurred even though most people at RP also received government benefits in some shape or form—food assistance, unemployment, disability, or social security. This reinforces Fraser’s (1987) argument that the US welfare system is a two-tiered system biased by gender, race, and class, in which participants in the “masculine” subsystem are positioned as rights-bearing beneficiaries and purchasing consumers of services, whereas participants in the “feminine” subsystem are positioned as dependent clients, welfare recipients, freeloaders, and morally defective.

Neoliberal ideology is flexible.

As scholars have previously noted, the values associated with neoliberalism are fluid and flexible and able to fit in with a variety of political orientations (Hall 1988; Larner 2000; Springer 2016). Simply put, there is something for everyone in neoliberal ideology—and it can be used by anyone for any purpose. This fluidity also has something to do with the opacity of ideology in general—the fact that individuals are typically unaware of the ideological dimensions of the positions they occupy and therefore not committed to them (van Dijk 1993, 2001). Holborow (2015) underscores the fractured and contradictory nature of social consciousness as it manifests in practice. She writes: “A dominant ideology may say one thing about people’s lives which their immediate life experience contradicts and leads them to say something different” (6). The fluidity of neoliberal doctrine was seen in this study, in which values of hard work, economic productivity, and personal responsibility were able to slide around easily amid social justice discourses at Chum and conservative discourses at RP. At Chum, the mainly white volunteers easily articulated neoliberal rationalities of hard work, self-help, and accountability alongside ideals of justice and equity. At RP, the fluidity of neoliberal ideology was seen in the convergence and divergence of beliefs between actors at the home office and the local site. Actors varied widely in terms of their political and religious leanings but agreed that charging for food contributed to dignity and a destigmatizing environment.

Subversion is necessary but insufficient for transformation.

The literature suggests that frontline staff in public services, as well as people who use those services, act to modify, disrupt, or negate the intended processes and outcomes of public policy. Barnes and Prior (2009) identify three ways in which this counteragency can occur: *Revision* occurs when objectives are modified to lead to different outcomes than those the policy initially demanded. With *resistance*, actions are taken to develop alternative strategies to achieve outcomes other than those prescribed in official policies. *Refusal* is a more passive mode of response to problematic situations and occurs when individuals decline to become engaged or involved in official strategies. Examples of each of these modes of counteragency are shown by volunteers at Chum and RP. Chum volunteers showed resistance when they adopted the choice model and engaged in breaking the rules by handing clients more food than they were allotted. At RP, steering committee members engaged in refusal when they refused to have religious content on site because they believed that people would not feel respected. In using the site for purposes other than food distribution, such as signing up people for health benefits, RP-Duluth also engaged in a form of revision. These acts of counteragency subverted official policies to the extent that they made accommodations for clients and attempted to better their experiences at the food pantries; however, they did not go far enough to be transformative or to activate against dominant structures.

Telling an Alternative Story

Drawing from the findings, I contend that at the individual, organizational, and community levels, dismantling neoliberal stigma can only come about by *listening to the voices of the oppressed*, allowing these voices to *change identities, our very being in the world*, and then using these reformulated identities to *shift dominant narratives about Us and Them* that hold the food system in place. These three processes are cyclical and unending, always feeding back into each other. If discursive formations operate to hold the system in place, then changing these narratives is important for the end goal of systemic change. Specifically with regards to identity, there are two important shifts that need to happen: consciousness raising with regards to racial oppression and racial equity, and shifting dominant modes of thinking from charitable to rights-based perspectives, in particular for faith-based

communities. I make these recommendations while drawing on social movement theory and the work of three scholar-activists in particular: Paulo Freire (1970) and his method for conscientization, Nancy Fraser (1992) and her theorization of subaltern counterpublics, and, more recently, communication scholar Mohan Dutta's (2008) explication of the culture-centered approach (CCA). These theories of social change taken together provide a sense of what the pathway to more equitable decision-making and policy might look like.²

Unique to these approaches is the utmost importance of creating participatory spaces and anchoring our actions to the voices of the oppressed. In a world where we are always much more likely to listen to and believe those in positions of power, these approaches amplify the voices of those on the bottom rungs. Taken together, these theories demand the development of a critical or oppositional consciousness that recenters, refocuses, and reframes thinking and actions around the oppressed. The formation of collective identities leads to the telling of new stories, new frames for thinking about problems and solutions, and new demands, like the ones made by Dr. King "to tear down unjust conditions and build anew instead of patching things up." In sum, social change begins through dialogue and listening that foregrounds community voices as sites of knowledge production and implementation (Dutta-Bergman 2004). Through this process of *listening to the voices of the exploited and oppressed* we are changed; identities are reformulated to provide an unshakeable base from which to shift, resist, and invert stigmatizing discourses and structures, creating new stories and obliterating old ones.

What does this mean from a practical perspective? First, I should point out that this is not just the work of food pantries, but also the work of organizations and the broader communities that they are embedded within. We should not shift the labor of solving this problem to one entity. As a first step, organizations and communities should create participatory forums in which silenced voices can be recovered and brought back into focus. In most food pantries I visited, people often sat alone or with kids waiting for their numbers to be called. There was not a whole lot of interaction going on; people simply waited for their food. Following the CCA or Freire's method for conscientization, this time could be used to bring people into dialogue or discussion with each other and with staff and volunteers as equals. A starting point might be to ask people for feedback on

the quality or quantity of food provided. This conversation could be used as an entry point to talk about stigma, welfare, the oppressive state apparatus, and dynamics of race and whiteness. Food pantries could even use available food justice documentaries to unpack these themes. This dialogical activity would provide insights into not only a client's caloric needs but also the kinds of meals they aspire to cook and how they think of themselves and their identity in the world. As these voices emerge, they will work to change and revise the identities of people in and around those spaces. Volunteers will no longer see themselves as Samaritans and saints, but as advocates—people of privilege who can use their privilege to tell new stories and advocate for the needs of people. Clients will no longer see each other as unworthy and undeserving scammers, but as citizens with legal rights. Through this participatory process, a collective *Us* can be brought into being, and political action becomes a possibility.

A second role food pantries can play is to produce discourse for internal and external audiences geared toward shifting cultural and political narratives. Social justice organizations must do the communicative work necessary to produce a coherent organizational identity, in which faith beliefs, economics, and politics are brought in line with the work they do and the broader vision of social justice. The goal of this discursive work is to create a counternarrative to the problem of hunger and food insecurity that moves away from individual-level causes to structural and systemic issues. Organizations must codify their ideologies—identifying core values and “values in action.” Similar to Lyn Sahr, who produced discourse to serve a powerful political project, social justice organizations should produce careful discourse to serve the interests of poor citizens. Developing an organization's theory of change is important to ensure that everyone in the organization, from staff to volunteers, recognize and build self-awareness and system-level awareness. Producing discourse for public consumption is equally important; this means creating newsletters, antistigma campaigns, community forums, media stories, speaker bureaus, and memes, if necessary. Although social movements are punctuated with embodied and highly visible events such as marches and protests, much work also occurs in mundane but thoughtful communicative acts, like letter writing. Quite distinct from fundraising, the goal of all this discursive work is to invert dominant logics, frameworks, and narratives through a process of reflection and action centered on the voices and meanings created by the

oppressed. This goes beyond organizational mission and vision statements to articulate a theory of change—and to show how this theory is different from dominant ones in use. Ivan Illich, a philosopher and Roman Catholic priest, once asserted: “Neither revolution nor reformation can ultimately change a society, rather you must tell a new powerful tale, one so persuasive that it sweeps away the old myths and becomes the preferred story, one so inclusive that it gathers all the bits of our past and our present into a coherent whole, one that even shines some light into the future so that we can take the next step. ... If you want to change a society, then you have to tell an alternative story” (as cited in Springer 2016, 2). Food pantries need to develop new, powerful stories grounded in the lived experiences and aspirations of the hungry. Food pantries need to capture the ellipses, the gaps, the silences in dominant narratives surrounding hunger. These counternarratives will play an important role in shifting the identities of people within food pantry spaces, such that even as volunteers dole out food, they can employ counternarratives to disrupt stigma.

Third, organizations and communities must find ways to channel citizen voices into the realm of policy grounded in rights-based thinking. This requires an explicit shift from thinking about individuals as clients, recipients, and guests to thinking about them as citizens. This could mean starting with small steps like setting up phone stations with ready-made scripts that people can read or having postcards that people can write and sign. Advocates note that small political acts such as these, though they do not take much time, can be extremely important for policy change. These are activities that can be done as people wait for their food, but they can also be made open to the wider community, so that in the same physical space people can learn how to come together to become citizens. These acts will serve to create a culture of advocacy and rights-based thinking among food pantries and stimulate discussions on the right to food, food sovereignty, and community food security perspectives. These stories can also be collected and curated for political purposes. Stories or oral histories from clients can be recorded and edited in traditional and digital media formats. Students from local colleges and universities can work on these projects, giving something of value back to organizations through their volunteering. Similar to photovoice methodologies, these stories can be directed at policy organizations such as Hunger Solutions or Feeding America. I have been at far too many meetings in which advocates have asked for stories;

we should always know and carry these stories with us. The purpose of these stories is to allow the wider public and policymakers an opportunity to bear witness and act upon what they hear.

The Challenge to Participation

In engaging with any of these activities, there are multiple challenges that organizations might face, a primary one being resource constraints. The question here is how organizations might garner resources to do the work of citizenship. This is something for organizational boards and committees to think about seriously. There is a need to think creatively about how to leverage resources not just to distribute food but for sociopolitical outcomes—for citizenship goals. How can organizations use neoliberal logic in their interests to apply for grants to achieve broader goals of social citizenship? Is there a way to use neoliberal parameters such as “accountability” and “assessment” in the interests of clients? Is there a way to use strategies of resistance, refusal, and revision to modify official policies such that the work of citizenship can occur in these spaces? How can the wider community be involved in this work of citizenship?

Another important debate that arises with participatory forums is whether they can actually lead to policy change given the complexity of power structures, issues of representation, and the dynamics of participation in these spaces. For instance, a common issue pointed out is that disenfranchised communities do not show up to participate. This is often framed in a negative way that perpetuates neoliberal stigma. Some may not be able to participate because of physical or mental disability, and some do not have the time or resources to expend on these kinds of activities. The onus is on organizations to make ways for people to engage that do not burden their lives even further. This means meeting clients where they are at in the course of their lives. This could mean paying participants for their work of citizenship, facilitating safe and quality childcare, and paying for meals and gas. It also means respecting people’s rights to sit on the sidelines, just as well-to-do folks do, either because they are complacent or because they are afraid of retaliation—although I saw fear, fatigue, concern, interest, vigilance, and passion much more often than I ever saw complacency among the poor citizens that I spoke to. Finally, with regard to participation, it should be remembered that listening to the voices of citizens and implementing

the changes they ask for will go a long way toward building trust in a group typically not used to being listened to.

Partnerships and Allies

To build the capacity of organizations and communities to facilitate successful and ethical participatory forums, it is essential to partner with institutions that have expertise navigating issues of race, class, and gender. Food pantries should *not* assume that they know how to do this work; indeed, no one should. In the emergency food assistance arena, there is a great need to build capacity with regard to antiracism and advocacy—in particular, with respect to Christian social engagement. Evoking consciousness and an oppositional consciousness with regard to these areas is a necessary condition to imagining future possibilities.

Racial Equity

With regard to racial equity, it is vital that food pantries seek out partnerships with institutions that are invested and committed to racial justice. These are organizations that use deep information and precise pedagogical techniques to teach adults how to “re-read” the world through the lens of racial equity. All racial equity workshops are not equal, so great care must be taken to partner with the right organizations—organizations that are committed to racial equity and not beholden to institutional power structures. For instance, even universities today offer several opportunities for “diversity training,” but these trainings are geared toward creating “respectful” work environments rather than truly dismantling the underlying logic and structures of racism (Chun and Evans 2018). Although diversity officers have the ability to conduct more incisive workshops, they are constrained by dominant forces within the university that prefer the status quo, as well as by very real material threats posed by legislators, boards of regents, alumni, and donors. Especially when it comes to antiracism trainings, I believe it makes sense for organizations that exist in these troubled waters to outsource their work to racial equity institutes that have been vetted by communities of color to ensure that they are getting the right kind of consciousness raising. Some such institutes include the Racial Equity Institute (North Carolina) and the People’s Institute (New Orleans), which are acclaimed for “going there” and doing the deep and hard work of building

critical consciousness around issues of whiteness. Other organizations that have always done this kind of work are the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the YWCA. In the future, I hope that universities will play a much larger role leading the diversity shift not just within their compounds, but in their communities. For instance, in my vision all land-grant universities will fund chapters of these organizations in their states, the role of which will be to build the capacities of local people for antiracist work—these may even become part of university extension programs, which are currently geared toward providing practical education and training to people in areas related to agriculture, food, and natural resources to name a few.

In the absence of racial equity institutes in Duluth, an example of a relatively new coalition that could fill this role is Showing Up for Racial Justice (SURJ). SURJ's goal is to mobilize an expanding base of white people into racial justice action. At the national level, SURJ was founded in 2009 in response to the anti-Black sentiment resulting from President Obama's elections, as well as state-sanctioned brutalities against Black and brown bodies. SURJ has a chapter in Duluth called *SURJ-Northland*, which has been active over the last three years. SURJ's ideological position is that white supremacy is integral to economic injustice, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression, so destabilizing white supremacy is critical to ensuring all forms of justice. A central part of SURJ's theory of change is to maintain strong accountability relationships with communities of color, leaders, and organizers; however, SURJ does not believe that it is the role of people of color to teach or educate others about racism. Its goal is not to displace or silence the voices of people of color, but to be allies in antiracist efforts and to share the burden.

The methodology of this group is unique in that much of the work takes place through conversation and dialogue, often in small-group settings or even in one-on-ones, in which people can process collectively racialized events or incidents and uncover barriers to change. Unique to SURJ is that they have seen firsthand the workings of racism in their white bodies, homes, neighborhoods, and institutions, so they are able to reach people where they are. According to the SURJ Northland website, their work involves building "skills and capacity necessary for interrupting racist moments and conversation, and for engaging in multi-racial organizing without doing more harm than good."³ Nathan Holst, a SURJ leader, observes that showing up for racial justice is a long process, which involves

honesty, humility, and reconciliation. Individual realization and reflection are necessary to move forward to action and activism. Integrating the work of entities like SURJ into the work of food pantries can play an important role in raising racial consciousness and decentering whiteness. At Chum and RP, volunteers wanted to make a difference but did not realize how problematic their good (white) intentions were in a space of racialized poverty. Joining a group like SURJ (or participating in antiracist trainings) has the potential to reformulate identities—to change how volunteers perceive themselves and their own positionalities, as well as how they reach out to other clients.

From Samaritans to Citizens

A big challenge for food pantries is to shift organizational culture from one of charity to one of rights-based thinking. The goal is to push donors, volunteers, and community members from thinking of themselves as good people engaged in good works to political actors enacting policy—from saints and Samaritans to citizens and advocates. Here too shifting direction requires the help of professionals—people who know how policy and advocacy work and can provide assistance in an ongoing manner. Examples of organizations that do this kind of work include the Joint Religious Legislative Coalition (JRLC) in Minnesota and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism (RAC) in Washington, DC. JRLC is the largest nonpartisan interfaith public-interest group in Minnesota, and it brings people of diverse faiths together to lobby for the poor, whereas RAC identifies itself as the “hub of Jewish social justice work”—a nonpartisan group that mobilizes around federal, state, and local legislation. Some priorities for these organizations include increasing minimum wage, extending child care assistance to more families, and expanding tax credits for working families.

In the course of their legislative work, both organizations produce discourses that highlight linkages between faith and advocacy. For instance, JRLC stresses that serving the poor and human dignity are foundational beliefs among Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions; thus, poverty is a violation of God-given dignity. It uses dictates from Scripture and religious leaders to underscore these connections, such as “O believers, stand up firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even against yourselves or your parents or kin” (Quran, 4:135) and “Politics is one of the highest forms of

charity, because it serves the common good" (Pope Francis). JRLC acknowledges the role of charity but reinforces the fact that policy is necessary to shift root causes. In a paper titled "No Poor among You," JRLC (2010) lays out how change is possible, thereby intervening in the sense of hopelessness that middle-class folks typically experience. RAC also uses scripture to validate the need for advocacy work around issues of hunger, such as Isaiah 58:7, which says, "God commands us to "share [our] bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into [our] house." It too reinforces the fact that policy can make a difference to hunger: "The United States could cut domestic hunger in half within 2 years, and lead a global effort to cut world hunger in half by 2015, by spending approximately \$7 billion more annually, or 7 cents per American per day. Many people believe that ending hunger in America is entirely possible." These are examples of the kinds of discourses required to build oppositional consciousness. Integrating these discourses into food pantries can create the much-needed culture of advocacy and activism in these spaces. Chum and its member congregations already work with JRLC; indeed, it was because of Chum that I was first introduced to JRLC. However, for conservative food pantries like RP, which are socially engaged, such nonpartisan faith-based discourses could play an important role in reformulating identities and practices.

Appetite for Change and Free Spaces

Poppendieck (1999, 317), in the final section of *Sweet Charity* wrote: "In my most optimistic scenarios, I envision turning our kitchen and pantries into free spaces, places where people can meet and interact across the gulf of social class and the divisions of race and ethnicity, not as givers and receivers in ways that widen the gulf, but as neighbors and fellow citizens in ways that strengthen social bonds."

Appetite for Change (AFC) and its restaurant, Breaking Bread Café, spoke to that vision for me while also raising critical questions. In this section, I provide an analysis of AFC, a community-led organization that "envision[s] sustainable, local food systems, created and led by thriving, socially connected families and communities."⁴ Founded in 2011, AFC uses a complex blend of neoliberal ideology and social justice to nudge the food system in a more equitable direction. AFC is not a food pantry, but rather one of the many organizations spurred by the good food movement in the last

decade to address issues of food access and equity. In this analysis, I highlight some themes and tensions running through AFC that are relevant to key arguments in the book. Some might see this blend of business and justice as negating the transformative capacity of activism. However, I point to ways in which justice, for the moment, retains the upper hand at AFC despite neoliberal constraints. I believe that AFC remains mission focused by being deeply conscious of the dominant forces that surround the organization and by staying grounded in the voices of marginalized communities. Quite different from Ruby's Pantry, which is set up to reinforce the Us and Them dichotomy, AFC is set up to reinvigorate the identities of people with long histories of oppression. Also unlike RP, which uses wealth as a proxy for personal responsibility, AFC assumes that people are responsible and designs programs to create economic opportunities and wealth. AFC operates very differently from traditional food pantries, so, indeed, I am comparing apples to oranges; however, my point here is to precisely raise the question of whether oranges can become more like apples and apples more like oranges.

Founded by a small, multiracial group of women, Princess Titus, Michelle Horovitz, and LaTasha Powell, AFC uses a social entrepreneurship model that focuses on building community, economic development, and jobs. It is located in a neighborhood in North Minneapolis comprised mostly of African American and ethnic communities. A site of disinvestment, North Minneapolis has been historically redlined and kept segregated from the rest of Minneapolis through housing and urban policies. In 2015, North Minneapolis made national headlines for the police shooting of an unarmed Black man—Jamar Clark. The area is a food swamp saturated with fast food, fried food shops, liquor stores, and corner stores. In addition, 40 percent of the residents do not have access to a vehicle, thereby exacerbating the problem of food access.

Operating in this context of exploitation and oppression, AFC states boldly on its website: "We grow food, families, leaders and community. Planting seeds to build social change and justice." AFC has several social enterprise initiatives, including Fresh Corners, which builds the capacities of urban farmers from the community to channel their produce into local restaurants, corner stores, and farmer's markets; Community Cooks, which gives families—in particular, moms and youth—an opportunity to come together to grow food, cook, eat, and learn; and leadership training on food systems and policies through the Youth Training and Employment Program

(YTOP). In addition, the Breaking Bread Café serves food inspired by the cultural cuisines of North Minneapolis and is used to train and employ adults from the community. Kindred Kitchen is a shared commercial kitchen open to small food operations looking to launch or grow their business. And finally, Northside Fresh Coalition is a partnership working on food justice policy and advocacy efforts in the area.

Voice and Political Representation

Foregrounding the voices, interests, and cultural commitments of community members is an ongoing priority for AFC, which makes it different not only from food pantries but also from other hunger groups and coalitions. The founders, longtime residents of the North Minneapolis neighborhood, held cooking workshops in the process of forming AFC during which over 250 residents cooked, ate, and discussed what changes they wanted to see in their community. Through these conversations, AFC learned that people wanted more access points to food. There was a complete lack of diversity in food options and no capacity for people to make healthy choices. Michelle Horovitz, a white woman and the executive director of AFC, pointed out that this had nothing to do with people not knowing how to eat healthy or not wanting a home cooked meal but with the lack of any good food options in the neighborhood. Lara, food justice advocate and staff person at AFC and an African American woman, pointed to the intersection between food and other stressors, saying: “If you’re a mother and you have to choose between gassing your car, paying your rent, or buying kale, what are you going to do?” Michelle noted that since they began their work, people have become more open to accessing food in different ways; farmers markets used to be thought of as a “white thing,” but this perception is shifting. She believes that since they started, there has been a notable difference in how people feel about their own power to change the system.

Consistent with theories of social change described earlier in the chapter, the process of reaching into the community and then out into the wider public for advocacy is important to AFC. However, even as community voices are foregrounded within AFC, there are concerns about how these voices are taken up in advocacy—something not usually described in the literature. Lara points out that most people in the community do not know how policy works and don’t have the tools to navigate the political system. Furthermore, a lot of policy work happens beneath the surface and

is structured by racism. She says, astutely: “And, you’re entering a game where you did not draw the board and you did not make the rules. If you’re coming to that game, with a set of rules that don’t fit into the game, you might have a great set of rules, and you might have a great amendment to the way the game is played. But there are a number of players right now that like the way the game is played, so it’s not going to work.” She continued that even with grassroots advocates, there are entities with more political power because they have larger budgets, more privilege, and political capital. Many large hunger-relief organizations today engage in advocacy but have their own histories of perpetuating institutional racism, antiblackness, or antiqueerness. So though they might advocate for helpful changes, their work often does not produce equitable outcomes (alleviating hunger/poverty) specifically for those most marginalized in the country. In the end, indigenous people and people of color are called to the table and asked for their ideas, but there are no outcomes. This is extremely consequential, as Lara notes: “But, if they don’t incorporate the things that we’re actually saying, then it’s useless. And, it’s just perpetuating white liberalism. And that in itself is destructive to the communities that need changes for their livelihood and for the sustainability of their own generations.”

White Liberalism: “Getting More Than It Gives”

Across this book, the capacity of white liberalism to bring about emancipatory change in the interests of people of color has been called into question. Lara explained the concept of white liberalism so powerfully and eloquently that I will provide the excerpt in its entirety:

Interviewer: What do you mean by “white liberalism”?

Lara: Oh, the concept of white liberalism. It’s like a person who wants to march at the Women’s March, and purchase their pink pussy hat, and has a Black Lives Matter sign in their front yard. But they’re so quick when they hear the bass running down their street, and they see that Black man get out of the car. They’re the person that calls the cops and gets scared. Or they’re the person that crosses the street because they feel uncomfortable. They want to get defensive and say that they voted for Hilary. Or that they voted for Obama twice.

And that’s the kind of thing where, instead of embracing and understanding that, just like we have to suffer from the destruction of our history,

we're all suffering because of decisions that your ancestors made. And it's a disappointment, and nobody wants to be sitting here blaming white people, but that's just how it is. Because those are the decisions that were made. And you perpetuate the negativity. We can see it in the news, and we can see it with our people that have been killed, and shot, and aren't present with us anymore because of things that were out of their control.

And, so, that's why I call it white liberalism. Because, in all honesty, it's not like it's those that have the MAGA hats and the confederate flags that I'm scared of. Because I already know to stay the hell away from them. It's the people that are in my everyday work life that greet me and smile at me at Breaking Bread Café, that sit next to me at the legislature ... Because they're the ones in the [Twin] Cities that are influencing policy. And they're the ones that are here trying to say they're building relationships with communities of color, but they're not. And they're not for Black liberation. If they were, the way that they structure their program, the way that they handle PR, the way that they have the person design the flyer, and the representation on there, it would be different.

Lara's articulations are a very precise articulation of how color-blind racism operates today and is very similar to the tensions faced by food pantries described in a previous chapter—the problem of “good white women.” Because of their own racial blind spots, many food pantries (and people who work there) do not recognize this tension. Furthermore, given that they run entirely on volunteers, they often have little control over this situation. This dilemma is top of mind for AFC. The AFC staff talked about the struggles they have with white volunteers. When they started programs, many folks assumed they were “teaching poor brown folks how to cook” and showed up. Michelle explained: “You know what I mean, they were like the stay-at-home mom coming because she loves to cook and thinks that she's gonna come and share a bunch of knowledge with folks from North Minneapolis, and it just sets up this Us and Them. It ... perpetuated white supremacy throughout ... They didn't see themselves as participating in the workshop, they saw themselves as leading it.” They also got dietitians coming in to volunteer, who were critical of the ingredients they were using because they were not as healthy as they could be. This reinforced stigmas like, “Oh, you poor brown folks don't know what healthy eating is. You don't want healthy eating. You can't cook.” The staff has also been concerned about experts coming in to do surveys and community health

assessments, as well as college students doing projects; these are exploitative processes that occur especially when outsiders do not involve the communities or bring information back to the communities.

In all of this, there is a clear recognition that volunteers pose a threat to the communities they serve and typically get more than they give from the experience. To manage this problem, AFC has been protective of its communities by intentionally not having many volunteers in their programs and, when they do, ensuring that volunteers have had some consciousness raising occur. They hold orientations, trainings, and one-on-one conversations with individuals to learn more about why they are there and what they hope to get out of it. In fact, another staff member noted that their youth are too precious, so they do not let anybody near them unless they have had that orientation. For Lara, the dilemma is “not wanting it to be a closed club, but also wanting to make sure that you are holding your heart close and not leaving it open to being wounded.” However, there are institutional—neoliberalizing—pressures that come with this. Volunteers lead to donors, and funders like volunteer programs: a bottom-line issue. So they are currently in discussions about how best to have a volunteer program but also protect communities. Michelle observed: “We want to find ways that they can actually add value to the organization, or remove things from people’s plates that we don’t have the capacity or time to do. But at the same time provide an education and training for them on how to be better volunteers.”

Entrepreneurship and Justice

In terms of revenue, at AFC 35 to 40 percent is earned revenue that comes from five different sources (catering, café sales, renting the kitchen, produce sales, and selling cooking workshops), while 60 percent comes from grants (private foundation grants, government contracts, corporate foundation grants, and individual donations). An interesting detail here is that two of AFC’s private funders are Cargill and General Mills (GM). Cargill and GM are, of course, big players in the hunger industrial complex and heavily implicated in industrial agriculture, commodity foods, and welfare politics. These multinationals are part and parcel of the very forces that AFC is fighting against. Michelle notes that this was initially a source of concern among the founders; however, in light of AFC’s goals and place in the food system, it made sense to take their money. She explained:

And when we first took funding from Cargill it was like should we even be doing this? And we were so small back then that we couldn't say no. We were like, you know what, they helped create this system, and they should pay for fixing it, and if we were part of the solution then, you know ... "Yeah they caused this they should pay for it." It's easy for a white female liberal to stand and say, "No we shouldn't take money from Cargill." You know what I mean, it's like, okay, well, can we really afford not to?

In nonprofit settings, there is a burgeoning literature on how actors resist neoliberal imperatives amid scarce resource (Barnes and Prior 2009; Cloke, May, and Williams 2017). Individuals interpret and reinterpret policy in light of their own values, identities, and commitments, as well as questions of what they consider to be right. In these settings, the ethical agency of staff and clients modify, disrupt, or negate public policy processes in the interests of their communities. This certainly seemed to be the case here. The argument reminded me of the fact that even the Black Panther Party, which was ideologically opposed to capitalism, in practice relied on redistributing the fruits of capitalism; its ultimate goal was to reduce dependencies and allow for self-determination in Black communities (Broad 2016). This also follows along with the idea of "microreparations"—the idea that the very least these corporations can do in light of historical and ongoing exploitation is redistribute some of its profits among communities it has violated. When I asked about whether AFC experienced pressures from these companies about keeping to their mission, Michelle pointed out that both corporations knew that AFC was involved in advocacy and, in fact, some of the funds to build local food systems in North Minneapolis came from them. She said: "I think they are glad they can say that they're supporting organizations that do this work, even if they are perpetuating the system." The intertwining of Big Hunger and grassroots resistance programs is an ongoing tension, and one that will need to be constantly reexamined.

In sum, the work of AFC provides an entry point to think about how entrepreneurship, accountability, and "vocabularies of the economy" can be used in conjunction with goals of equity and justice. AFC's work resonates with J. K. Gibson-Graham's (1996) claim that community economies are expressions of "diverse economies," which cannot be pegged as capitalism because they contest and resist particular features of neoliberalism. These economies can be spaces of ethical action, not just places where we submit to the bottom line. This point is reinforced by the fact that besides

Cargill and GM, Colin Kaepernick, the controversial African American quarterback, also donated \$25,000 to Appetite for Change.

Blackened Shrimp and Grits, a Kale Salad, and a Latte

One of the first things I did at AFC was eat lunch with a staff member. She recommended the blackened shrimp and grits with a side salad of kale. It was incredible! It was tasty and made me feel good: a chef-prepared meal and authentic at the same time. I gave thanks (internally) that I was not eating another cold ham sandwich or a tasteless wrap—staples of the whitenened diet I have come to suffer in Duluth. It was a perfect lunch and I did not waste a bite. Although the most expensive item on the menu was \$13, this café would not be an option for some of the extremely food insecure folks at Chum, like John, the environmental chemist who could only afford the occasional dollar for a plate of fries. But, as Michelle noted, this restaurant provided an important access point for good food in a food desert and changed the look and feel of the neighborhood.

The day I visited, there were people sitting at most tables in the restaurant—people of color and a few tables with white folks. There was a group of African American men and women engaged in a serious business discussion, a white couple with their two young kids, and a couple of young women—perhaps Hmong—who after lunch took out their computers to work. I learned from my host that folks from the neighborhood often use the café for business and community meetings. The servers were African American, as was the chef and other people who operated the kitchen. The place was a typical restaurant, professional to a tee, but you just got the sense that there was a different set of rules being followed here. The air was set at the perfect temperature—not too cold, as restaurants sometimes are. There was an openness, a sense of fluidity to the space, people coming in and going out. There was some cross talk among tables. Most people appeared to be professionals, perhaps in the low- to middle-class income bracket. And for the first time in a long time, I was not the only person of color at a restaurant.

Breaking Bread reminded me of a space reconfigured to look not like it existed outside of capitalism and neoliberalism, but like it existed *despite* neoliberalism. It seemed to bend the rules of racist structures, white liberalism, and capitalism. The decentering of whiteness was palpable in the bodies present and how they moved in that space. Saldanha (2006, 22) argues

that “race shows the openness of the body, the way organisms connect to their environment and establish uneven relationships amongst each other.” Whiteness is about the “the sticky connections between property, privilege, and a paler skin” (18). Saldanha uses the term “viscosity” to capture the material ontology and performativity of race: “Viscosity means that the physical characteristics of a substance explain its unique movements. There are local and temporary thickenings of interacting bodies, which then collectively become sticky, capable of capturing more bodies like them: an emergent slime mold. Under certain circumstances, the collectivity dissolves, the constituent bodies flowing freely again. The world is an immense mass of viscosities, becoming thicker here, and thinner there” (18). In using terms such as *sticky* and *viscosity*, Saldanha is referring to how (white) bodies under particular conditions coalesce or disaggregate—like “emergent slime mold” (I love that imagery!). At *Breaking Bread*, I got the sense that white bodies became unstuck, looser, and “bodies were flowing freely again” (18) because whiteness was decentered.

Astonishingly, *Breaking Bread* reminded me of a restaurant I once used to hang out in fourteen thousand miles away in Bangalore, the city I grew up in. It was a place that decentered class and culture in similar ways. Although the food was not cheap, the small cups of coffee were, so it was a place where people would sip coffee for hours, talking, working, reading, and writing. There were folks from a range of social locations, rich and poor, different cultures, and you could always hear different Indian languages being spoken—not typical of the elite spaces I usually inhabited. You could sit there alone. You could joke around with friends. And while there may not have been cross talk, eavesdropping in this noisy space was the norm. Some people thought it was a bit pretentious because it was a hub for Bangalore intelligentsia, artists, and playwrights. But it was perfect because it seemed like everyone was trying to work out life in that space through and with others. And the thing is, you felt completely comfortable, even if you bought one cup of coffee and left six hours later. *Breaking Bread* reminded me of that place: not quite there yet, but perhaps in the process of becoming.

The different set of rules became clear to me when I ordered a latte after lunch. Michelle picked me up from the café, but because it was noisy and I was recording, we went back to the conference room. Perhaps nervous, I quickly packed up my stuff and followed her—without paying for my

latte. I forgot to pay! Halfway through the interview, I remembered. I was embarrassed for having broken a pretty simple and key rule of capitalism. Two hours later, I went back sheepishly to the café to apologize, to explain, and to pay for my drink, when the woman behind the counter, who I did not know, said with the most generous and casual smile: “Oh no, you’re good, you’re good!” and waved me away. For me, the most important point of this story is that I forgot to pay—and, next, that they did not take my money. Because I wonder what would have happened if this was Starbucks? No doubt I would have been chased down and, as we know today, cops might have been called. But frankly, I would *never* forget to pay at Starbucks or any other restaurant. It just doesn’t happen. Somehow, being in that space, what felt like a community (a “community economy”) changed my identity. It moved me from a state of hypervigilance to *normal*; for a brief moment, I was not ruled by a capitalist or racial calculus. I wondered if that happened often, and the accountant in me hopes that it does not, but it was a powerful reminder that the way things work is not the only way they *can* work. There is always something deeper, more fun, and much more interesting below the bottom line—and we should always be interested in exploring that.

A Final Word

It has been nearly twenty years since Janet Poppendieck (1999) observed that fighting hunger had become a “national pastime.” We are at an impasse. The prevalence of hunger continues at the same rate and is worsening. Indeed, in a nation of abundance, it is quite extraordinary that people are forced to eat a plate of fries for a meal, even as they are incredibly knowledgeable about the roles of vitamins, minerals, and fresh foods in their health. Food pantries manage the immediate problem of hunger but do little to solve the long-term problem of food insecurity and its intersecting needs and oppressions. They are just not set up to do that; they are set up solve logistical problems related to collecting and distributing surplus foods.

For me, the Chum food pantry represents the past, RP a problematic and tenuous present, and AFC a hopeful future for food access and assistance: ironic, of course, because they all exist at the same moment in time to remedy the same problem of hunger caused by economic deprivation. They

are all also beholden in some way to the systemic pressures of industrial agriculture. On the one hand, AFC provides a good example of what food pantries might look like in the future, but is there a way for AFC to distribute *good food* to people right now, people who need it, like Trinity and John? Can AFC do the work that food pantries do, but with the same deep critical consciousness and connection to the histories and biographies of citizens? On the other hand, can food pantries like Chum and RP develop a deep critical consciousness like that I found at AFC? Can food pantries get away from the language of charity and good works? A language that silences the voices of those who are on the receiving end and leaves in its wake a culture of suspicion, dread, and disillusionment?

I began this book with an excerpt by Trinity, an African American woman who captured the essence of neoliberal stigma. Here she is again, capturing the essence of why we're at an impasse with charitable food assistance:

It's not charitable to give it to poor people because it's crap. It's processed, it's full of fat, it's full of salt, it's full of chemicals, and that aren't really going to help a person ... And so there's a part of me that's quite jaded and grumpy and that part of me says, "It's just a way for people to feel good. Look at us, we've salvaged this food and we're making sure people will get this food ..." But the fact is that it's going to go somewhere. And if it fills people's tummies, then I have to put on my other lens that says it is a tremendous thing to do. I mean, it's a huge undertaking to repurpose or salvage, whatever that is. It's a huge undertaking, obviously, they come with those huge trucks, they have to load those trucks and go to the sites and unload those huge trucks. And it's a great service. At the risk of sounding bipolar, on one hand, I think it's awful, and on the other hand, it is really a good thing.

It is precisely this "bipolarity" that we are trapped within. Trinity is not bipolar; the system is bipolar. On the top, you have the Goliaths—the corporations, governments, and transnational neoliberal institutions that make the rules. At the bottom, you have smaller players that dole out food in the service of faith and personal fulfillment. Concealed within charitable discourses, the many injustices of the food system remain hidden from view. The language of saints and Samaritans hides the injustice of legislation, corporations, structural racism, and the benefits received by millions of donors who participate in the hunger industrial complex. Food pantries are small players at the bottom of the food system, but they are not innocent bystanders—not anymore, not thirty years later. How can food pantries change their roles to work toward a vision of food justice? How can

these individually insignificant players come together to bend, modify, and break the rules so as to chip away at the systemic forces they are entangled with? How can they create more liberating spaces where people can feel at ease, where there is a sense of joyfulness and moving forward, not suspicion, dead-ends, and standing still?

I believe that food pantries can become spaces of empowerment if they think of themselves more broadly as centers and sites for activism and the production and reformulation of new narratives. Food pantries are at the very frontlines of the hunger epidemic, closest to the people who experience the violence of hunger, and therefore are in prime position to generate new stories. For this to happen, the language of possibility, social action, and activism needs to enter spaces of food assistance and create identity shifts. Fortified by the stories of their clients—clients like Trinity—food pantries can take small steps to act as points of resistance and to eventually bring about the vision of food justice. We can only imagine if the thousands of food pantries were to actually become cognizant of and participate in building the critical consciousness of their staff, volunteers, clients, and broader communities; then the margins would truly become spaces of liberation and dissent, able to stand up to the crushing burden of neoliberal stigma.

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Feeding the Other

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By: Rebecca T. de Souza

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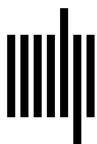
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