Food for Freedom: the black freedom struggle and the politics of food

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FOOD FOR FREEDOM:
THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE AND THE POLITICS OF FOOD

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation situates concerns of food access and nutrition at the center of United States struggles for racial justice during the long civil rights era. The persistence of widespread hunger amidst agricultural abundance created a need and an organizing opportunity that proponents of black freedom readily seized, recognizing the capacity of food to perpetuate oppression and to promote human equality.

These efforts took many forms. Chapter One examines the dietary laws and food economy of Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam. Muhammad’s prohibition of pork, processed commodities, and “soul food” aimed to improve the health of black Americans while elevating them morally and spiritually. Muslim food enterprises established to provision the Black Muslim diet encouraged black industry, autonomy, and self-help by mirroring the white capitalist food system. Chapter Two analyzes the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s Food for Freedom campaign of the early 1960s. In response to local efforts to thwart voter registration by withholding federal food aid from Mississippi sharecroppers, SNCC launched a nationwide food drive. SNCC’s assessment of food security as a civil right, directly linked to the ability of the rural poor to exercise
the franchise, resonated with northern sympathizers, prompting the development of Friends of SNCC chapters to support those starving for freedom. Chapter Three investigates the Black Panther Party’s community food initiatives. Beginning with free breakfast programs for schoolchildren and culminating in spectacular food giveaways, these endeavors worked to neutralize the power of hunger to inhibit the physical development, educational advancement, and political engagement of the urban poor. In doing so, the Panthers forged unlikely alliances while sparking police and FBI repression.

Programs and campaigns such as these acknowledged and resisted the function of hunger in maintaining structures of white privilege and black oppression, politicizing hunger and malnutrition by construing them as intended outcomes of institutional racism. This study offers revealing historical precursors to twenty-first century debates about hunger, food security, food deserts, childhood nutrition, obesity, agricultural subsidies, and federal food aid, investigating the civil rights era through the lens of food politics while adding historical context to scholarship of food justice.
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INTRODUCTION

“Bigger Than a Hamburger”

In April 1960, lifelong organizer Ella Baker convened a national meeting of student activists to coordinate the growing number of direct action protests for civil rights across the American South. Inspired by four black men enrolled at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College who on February 1 sat down at a segregated Woolworth’s lunch-counter and refused to leave until served, African Americans and movement allies had hurriedly staged similar demonstrations in other cities across the state, as well as in Richmond, Virginia and Nashville, Tennessee. The protests, which employed tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience and selective buying while playing upon the politics of race respectability, resonated with many black southerners who had for years endured the humiliation and dehumanization of being denied the right to sit and eat while shopping or traveling, even in their own communities.¹ Conference organizers aimed to bring the students together to build a comprehensive crusade against American apartheid, channeling the momentum of lunch-counter demonstrations into a vision for a radically different nation.² Though several such actions had successfully ended segregation in

¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham explicates what she terms the “politics of respectability” in her study of black Baptist women during the four decades after Reconstruction. She contends that her subjects “equated public behavior with individual self-respect and with the advancement of African Americans as a group….The Baptist women’s preoccupation with respectability reflected a bourgeois vision that vacillated between an attack on the failure of America to live up to its liberal ideas of equality and justice and an attack on the values and lifestyle of those blacks who transgressed white middle-class propriety.” Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920 (Harvard University Press, 1993), 14-15. For more on black responses to segregation in the South, see Leon Litwack, Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

² According to biographer Barbara Ransby, Baker hoped the conference—held at her alma mater, Shaw University in Raleigh—would “bring the sit-in participants together in a way that would
specific locales, Baker reminded those present of the need to keep moving and to expand their agenda beyond desegregation. In the context of restaurant sit-ins, food functioned as a symbol of justice denied, an instinctive impetus for action, and an immediate goal. Baker insisted, however, that the movement must seek an end far greater than the right to be served at a public eatery. These crucial demonstrations played an indispensable role in delivering the deathblow to legal segregation in the South, but they did not, and could not, as Baker saw it, ultimately “rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination—not only at lunch counters, but in every aspect of life.”

She famously implored her youthful audience to consider that the struggle for black liberation demanded “something much bigger than a hamburger or even a giant-sized Coke.”

The success of early student sit-ins demonstrated not only the power of direct action to force negotiation but also the efficacy of food-centered protests to attract widespread interest and to inspire large-scale participation. Just as critically for

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sustain the momentum of their actions, provide them with much needed skills and resources, and create space for them to coalesce into a new, more militant yet democratic political force.” Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Struggle: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 239.


4 Ibid. In his 1962 work *The Negro Revolt*, black journalist Louis E. Lomax termed the approach Baker outlined the “theology of desegregation.” In Lomax’s view, “[M]ore significant than the stale coffee and soggy hamburgers”—the tangible fruits of these piecemeal victories over Jim Crow—“was the brand of Negro that was emerging. They were no longer afraid; their boldness, at times, was nothing short of alarming. And although few people knew it, a new religion, peculiar to the Negro, was being born….The result was a faith that …inspired Negro college students to make a moral crusade out of their right to sit down in a restaurant owned by a white man and eat a hamburger.” Qtd. in Louis E. Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and the Black Muslim World* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1963), 88.
movement strategists, struggles against acute and chronic hunger evoked visceral opposition from segregationists and white supremacists, displaying the brutal instincts of those working to maintain the white supremacist socioeconomic order. The symbolic and economic centrality of food and the spatial significance of lunch-counters to these early demonstrations illustrated the utility of food as a goal and the food economy as a forum to forge political resistance. Food-centered campaigns promoted a broad inclusive focus, a democratic means of achieving democratic ends. Activists harnessed the simple fact that everyone needs to eat, and everyone experiences hunger in some relative sense when they do not. Hunger might be acute, as when the body reminds the brain to refuel, but hunger can also be chronic, stemming from a frequent or constant state of insufficient caloric intake or malnourishment. The universality of sensations of hunger, and yearnings for satiation, render demands for food morally compelling across lines of race, gender, class, age, region, and even species. Moreover, processes and practices of feeding and nurturing bond generations. Children look to their parents for food, and parents feel responsible for ensuring their children can eat.

Given the inherently sensual nature of eating, experiences of episodic hunger, such as memories of smelling and desiring foods that one cannot consume, frequently surface among recollections of black childhood in the Jim Crow South, often interpreted as early flickers of racial consciousness, a dawning sense of injustice manifested in

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physically painful and psychologically lasting ways. More damning than momentary hunger, chronic intergenerational hunger threatened to reproduce social inequalities and pass them on to subsequent generations. In such contexts, hunger constituted not merely physical discomfort or inconvenience, but a threat to personal, familial, and communal survival. The rhetoric of hunger produces action and demands response precisely because it evokes a shared human experience and a collective human fear, though the degree, frequency, and physical, physiological, and psychological ramifications of individual hunger certainly vary greatly. Quite simply, because everyone cares about food, it offers a relatable avenue for understanding the broader implications of social inequality and political subjugation, as well as the vital potential of collective action. Movement leaders knew this well. By the end of the 1960s, activists and organizers spanning a range of tactics, strategies, ideologies, constituencies, and geographies, focused on the function of food in the fight for a new racial order.

This project situates hunger and the politics of food at the center of struggles for racial justice during the long civil rights era. While popular and political campaigns as

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6 Chris McNair, whose daughter Denise was one of the four girls killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham during September 1963, recalled the pain of having to tell her she could not eat at a segregated lunch counter “because she was black.” He insisted that that moment “couldn’t have been any more painful than seeing her laying up there with a rock smashed in her head,” as he did after her murder. 4 Little Girls, directed by Spike Lee (HBO, 1997). See also Anne Moody, “Childhood,” *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Random House, 1968); James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 12.


diverse and complex as those for integrated schools and public accommodations, equal employment opportunities, fair housing, legal justice, and cultural autonomy dominated the agenda of both activists and reactionaries, movement organizers explicitly recognized the function of food in both promoting human equality and perpetuating racial oppression. The politics of food—here defined as personal, local, organizational, and national power struggles driven by fundamental concerns of who can eat what and under what conditions—came to be viewed by movement activists as both a means of social control and, conversely, as a call to arms to recruit the hungry for political organization at its most basic level. Therefore, the food politics of the black freedom struggle shed light on the political dimensions of hunger and the human dimensions of organizing, illustrating the unceasing need for what some organizers called (at times pejoratively) “welfare work” as a prerequisite for achieving higher political aims.

Various proponents of black liberation emphasized the cultural, economic, and political significance of food, often explicitly calling attention to the interlocking structures of racism and social inequality embedded in the politics and culture of food in the United States. Acknowledging the influence of historical context in creating political opportunities and circumscribing political options, this study examines three distinct organizational and tactical approaches to advancing racial equality through food activism and organizing. The Nation of Islam (NOI), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Black Panther Party (BPP) each worked to harness the power of food to convey various conceptions about the value of black bodies, the inhumanity of federal food policies, the rights of all citizens to food security, and the
necessity of food in drives for social and political revolution. These efforts insisted that political rights had little meaning for those whose material deprivation or poor health limited their range of practical options to those most likely to keep them alive. Moreover, they affirmed that those without a voice in the realms of politics or economics often suffered the physical, social, and psychological pains of hunger and malnourishment in relative silence.

This study analyzes the manner and extent to which a range of constituencies, including religious radicals, student organizers, destitute sharecroppers, and champions of Black Power situated the cultural politics of food within the social context and public discourse of racial discrimination, economic injustice, and institutional inequality. In doing so, it offers new frameworks for understanding struggles to explode racist views of black personhood, resist systemic deprivation and political marginalization, and ultimately, to challenge the role of the capitalist system in perpetuating American hunger. By the mid-1960s, black leaders, organizers, and activists increasingly recognized and worked to address basic questions of food and hunger, kneading bread and butter concerns of daily survival into a recipe for a new America. These efforts variously manifested in refusal to eat foods deemed unfit for consumption by white Americans; demands for reform of federal policies and redress of local structures of hunger; boycotts of food companies and grocery chains that exploited black communities; and perhaps most radically, direct service food programs wedded to the belief that, in order for higher revolutionary aims to be feasible, the most basic human need for nourishment must be met. Despite significant differences in tactics and approach, leaders and organizers
aimed to ameliorate the spiritual, political, and corporeal hunger of black Americans by using food in a tangible sense to fuel the political and ideological aspirations of others to demand their share of the American banquet. In addition to the basic human right to eat, these organizations and their campaigns asserted the prerogative of impoverished African Americans to influence the type and quality of one’s food as well as the conditions under which he or she eats.

The centrality of food to personal expression, cultural identity, and group association is tightly connected to the essential need of all living beings to eat. Eating as an exercise of personhood—and hunger as a marker of one’s exclusion from a polity with the most abundant food supply in world history—is an ongoing imperative, a constant reminder of one’s place in the social order. Although concerns of food are among the most intimate considerations, they are fundamentally shaped by socialization, cultural expectations, public policies, economic systems, and global realities. As a result, food studies erects an important framework through which to investigate the persistent, if problematic, relationship between culture and politics, a tension embedded in the history of racial conflict in the United States. Emphasizing the utility of food as a site of conscious and concerted social activism, this study, and the stories it tells, complicates intersections of the “racialized political economy of food production and distribution” and the “cultural politics of food consumption” in the United States.⁹ In doing so, it engages with historiography of the black freedom struggle and the interdisciplinary enterprise of food studies, investigating the civil rights era through the lens of food

politics, while adding the historical context of the movement to emerging theoretical and practical enterprises of food justice.

The “food justice movement” consequently provides the theoretical framework for this investigation. “Food justice,” according to Alison Hope Alkon and Kari Marie Norgaard, “places the need for food security—access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate food—in the contexts of institutional racism, racial formation, and racialized geographies.” The food system, Alkon has elsewhere argued, is “implicated in many…political and economic undertakings through which racial hierarchies are established and racialized subjectivities are created.” Building upon the food justice movement’s central claim that “food access [is] a product of institutionalized racism,” this research demonstrates that conservative, liberal, and radical proponents of racial justice targeted the perils and possibilities of the postwar food system—spanning the stages of production, distribution, regulation, and consumption—as an arena of racialized economic oppression and a forum for organizing and activism.

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11 Alkon and Agyeman, *Cultivating Food Justice*, 5. Historian Warren Belasco’s analysis of the radical politics of food in the Sixties counterculture exhibits the value of food studies as an approach to examining movements for social change, demonstrating the manner in which the quintessential mantra of the decade—“the personal is political”—was figuratively ingested by substantial segments of American society. Belasco contends that “food is a metaphor for what we like most or least about our society” and “throughout American history, food fights have often accompanied grass roots political struggles.” Asserting the central “role of food in 1960s activism,” Belasco analyzes the counterculture’s perception of “diet as a way to transform consciousness, to reintegrate mind and body, to overcome personal alienation, and to take social responsibility.” Groundbreaking and insightful, Belasco’s focus on the counterculture, however, permits only a fleeting discussion of questions of racial justice, while his emphasis on the personal choices surrounding decisions about what one eats precludes discussion of those segments of society concerned less with what they eat than whether they are able to do so. My research thus complements Belasco’s seminal study of countercultural foodways by focusing on
The dietary laws and food enterprises of the Nation of Islam are the focus of Chapter One. Founded in 1930, the Nation of Islam, a black supremacist theocracy led for four decades by Elijah Muhammad, self-proclaimed Messenger of Allah, advocated an alternative diet for black Americans. By rejecting pork and traditional southern foods high in fats, sugars, and starches, and low in protein and nutrients, Muhammad’s dietary laws promised physical health, longevity, and spiritual redemption. Moreover, they created a need for a separatist food economy, which advanced black uplift while modeling the possibilities of black industry and enterprise. The Nation’s leaders and members quickly worked to meet this need, erecting a vertically integrated capitalist food system that generated wealth and employment for the faithful. Drawing heavily on Muhammad’s manifestos *Message to the Blackman in America* (1965) and the two-volume *How to Eat to Live* (1967, 1972), as well as other instructional literature and news sources, this chapter argues that food production and politics provided the adamantly apolitical organization with a meaningful outlet to contest white cultural influence and economic dominance by engaging with issues of health, spiritual purity, and economic empowerment.

Scorning what many celebrated as “soul food” as remnants of the “slave diet,” Muhammad’s separatist vision of black liberation acknowledged the symbolic and physical power of particular foods to operate variously as tools of oppression, forums for self-definition, and expressions of collective identity. Muhammad shrewdly conceptualized food as cultural product, biological need, and economic commodity.

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Though not routinely identified as an arm of the black freedom struggle except insofar as it produced Malcolm X, widely acknowledged as the cultural and political forefather of Black Power, the Nation of Islam in fact espoused a culturally-specific, politically vitriolic critique strikingly similar in aim, if not approach, to other efforts to contest the racially and socially repressive structures of food politics in the postwar era. In prohibiting pork, processed grains and refined sugars, and, most adamantly, “soul food,” Muhammad’s dietary gospel heightened intersections of food, gender, and religion, while vocally resisting the politics, economics, and culture of the mainstream (white), middle-class American diet. To a greater extent than other movement leaders, Muhammad emphasized the hidden or externalized costs of the U.S. food system for black Americans, denouncing the health consequences of American foodways as tantamount to genocide.12 Meanwhile, Muhammad’s food politics performed his teachings of black superiority. Though his food politics influenced, or at least challenged, the views of African Americans outside the NOI with regard to pork and soul food, his message was not widely embraced, as many refused or were unable to abstain from the foods of the traditional Southern diet. Moreover, because the Nation’s parallel food institutions in many ways mirrored the structures of the postwar industrial food system, paving the way to the middle class for a number of believers, NOI food politics failed to challenge the underlying social inequalities at root of issues of food access and food insecurity in the United States.

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Muhammad’s gospel of dietary reform certainly offered little more than food for thought to the many hungry and food insecure black Americans more concerned about when and if they would eat than what or with whom their next meal would be. Chapter Two thus turns to Mississippi, where local leaders and movement organizers quickly recognized and targeted hunger and food insecurity as implements of black political disfranchisement. Scholars of U.S. history, particularly those focused on labor, agriculture, and the American South, have long observed the crucial interplay between struggles for civil rights, particularly the franchise, and the region’s history of sharecropping, poverty, and hunger. Less studied have been the responses of local people to conditions of food poverty, and the manner in and extent to which organizers seized hunger as a politicizing force. Certainly the situation in much of the Mississippi Delta during the 1960s stood in stark contrast to the circumstances that spawned the lunch counter sit-ins and permitted food choice as a vehicle for resisting systemic and inherited racism elsewhere in the country. Quite simply, many poor residents of the Delta, regardless of race, often went hungry.

In a very real sense, local officials in the Delta towns of Greenwood and Ruleville manipulated human hunger to keep poor black Americans politically and socially subordinate. In response to voter registration work in Greenwood in the summer and fall of 1962, local officials withdrew the county from the federal commodities program on

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which many of the hungry poor relied. The move aimed to increase black economic
dependence on white landowners and, ideally, expedite black migration out of the state.
Directly and consciously playing upon the very real fear of hunger among African
Americans seeking to vote, white Mississippi leaders exploited the human need to eat as
a means of curtailing black demands for inclusion in the national polity, all the while
demanding and accepting continued federal subsidies for big planters. In much the same
way that the National School Lunch Program has historically catered to the interests of
agribusiness over the nutritional welfare of school children, officials in the Delta
demanded support for farmers while opposing, even thwarting, efforts to feed the
hungry.\textsuperscript{14} The immediacy of the food issue was painfully clear. In contrast to demands
for voting rights, equal job opportunities, and social inclusion more broadly defined, the
realities of hunger necessitated swift action or dire earthly consequences.

Quickly identifying this strategy, and astutely recognizing the potential to
mobilize outside support against efforts to inflict hunger upon the disenfranchised poor,
SNCC engineered a widespread food distribution network, a project powerfully dubbed
“Food for Freedom.” Subsequent food drives, which collected donations from northern
allies and “Friends of SNCC” affiliates in cities like Chicago, New York, and Boston,
brought national attention to local abuses of power in the South. SNCC’s calls for food
aid created an immediate, compelling, and relatively easy way for concerned citizens to
support the movement from afar. Moreover, food relief offered a tangible incentive to
entice war-weary Mississippians to participate in the movement, as SNCC rewarded

\textsuperscript{14} Susan Levine, \textit{School Lunch Politics} (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press,
2008), 108-120.
those who attempted to register with priority access to free food. Drawing on memoirs, movement news sources, photographs, organizational literature and meeting minutes, and local newspapers, I argue that Food for Freedom marked an early gesture by SNCC toward demands for economic justice, calling attention to practical impediments to political organization. Though clearly endeavoring to engage the state both to guarantee voting rights and demand delivery of federal entitlements, these liberal efforts radicalized a number of organizers and local Mississippians, sparking official condemnation and retaliation before winning reinstitution of the commodity program in Leflore County. Many who contributed to this work followed the lead of SNCC Chairman Stokely Carmichael in replacing campaigns for black “rights” with demands for “Black Power.”

This study concludes with an examination of the Black Panther Party’s community food initiatives. Widely known for its early efforts to combat abuses of local law enforcement officials, the Party soon shifted emphasis from tactics of defensive violence toward community organizing around service programs, the most popular of which aimed to combat food insecurity and rampant childhood hunger. Whereas the Nation of Islam erected parallel institutions to channel black capital to black businesses and SNCC targeted the policies of the liberal state that enriched and fortified white landowners at the expense of disenfranchised blacks, the Black Panther Party’s philosopher and political theorist Huey P. Newton positioned capitalism at the root of the people’s suffering and physical vulnerability, attacking it as the immediate cause of their hunger. Newton therefore believed that the urban poor must develop a sense of class-consciousness before an armed social revolution might be possible. Toward this end,
Panther leaders utilized a series of free food programs to meet a practical need, win community support, and model socialism, ultimately challenging the legitimacy of capitalism to determine the fate of the masses, regardless of race.

These efforts began in January 1969 in Oakland, California, site of the Party’s founding and national headquarters, with the first of many Panther-sponsored free breakfast programs for schoolchildren. Through these popular initiatives, the Panthers forged alliances with local churches and other community organizations to counteract the deleterious effects of hunger on the physical and mental development and educational performance of children from ghetto communities. While Panthers’ efforts to work with young children attracted some controversy, critics’ ire focused on the tactics by which the Party procured donations. These included not only verbal pressure and confrontation, but also printed attacks and even organized boycotts of businesses that refused to participate. Charging that businesses in black communities robbed and cheated black residents, the Panthers aimed to hold capitalists accountable to the needs of those who patronized them. The sustained boycott of black entrepreneur Bill Boyette in 1971 constituted the most dramatic and revealing of these efforts. In deploying these tactics, Panther food programs not only demonstrated the potential of community-run social programs to address pressing symptoms of urban poverty but required that community members participate in efforts to further their own survival. Whereas Elijah Muhammad’s critique of the food system encouraged the creation of separate capitalist enterprises to supply the dietary needs of his followers, the Panthers positioned agents and beneficiaries of “black capitalism” as forces furthering social division and human suffering.
As police and FBI repression intensified in response to Panther’s community work, it became increasingly clear that revolution in the streets would result in the massacre of black dissidents. The Panthers thus changed their survival strategies, if not their revolutionary rhetoric, by honing in on the electoral system as a meaningful avenue for advancing economic justice. The mayoral campaign of BPP co-founder Bobby Seale, launched in early 1972, marked the peak of this shift. Though Panther candidates did not win office, their efforts successfully encouraged underserved residents to register to vote and to question the bread-and-butter politics of those elected to represent them. Panther food giveaways, which often accompanied voter register drives, emphasized the relationship between political action and engagement and the pressing daily toils to promote individual, familial, and communal endurance. The permanent authorization of a School Breakfast Program in 1975 spoke to the value of the direct service programs the Panthers established, while signifying the neutering of a movement nearly decimated by the death, incarceration, and exile of its leadership, many of whom toiled in the same streets they aimed to save. Food programs targeting hunger and food insecurity attracted followers and sympathizers, but did not and could not ameliorate accompanying problems of street violence, crime, poor public schools, and widespread unemployment.

The production and procurement of food remained a central concern of proponents of African American freedom and civil rights who, through their various approaches to advancing community food security, recognized and resisted the historical power of hunger and malnutrition to operate as tools of racial oppression in a broader
sense. The Nation of Islam, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Black Panther Party each acknowledged the potential for food as both a physical need and a cultural expression to serve a variety of functions vital to the project of black liberation. Concrete food politics and food programs held potential to win sympathy, to spark outrage and advocacy, to mobilize the hungry for economic and political ends, and, in every case, to anchor demands for concrete improvements in the lives of black Americans. Certainly, these organizations advanced remarkably divergent visions of black progress while navigating varied regional economies and geographies, political obstacles, and cultural and social milieus.

These case studies thus reveal distinct visions of freedom and a variety of innovative tactics to challenge centuries of neglect, abuse, and exploitation of black bodies by not only calling attention to the realities of their persistence, but by devising businesses, political campaigns, and service programs to address these injustices in an immediate sense. The food politics and programs of each organization demonstrated the potential of food to empower the oppressed as both an expression of black pride and an assertion of black humanity. Regardless of the form or function of food-related protest and resistance, activists drew on a shared recognition that the systematic biases of local and federal policies, white capitalist food industries, and their attendant cultural components not only stemmed from racial oppression but also operated as crucial tools in the maintenance of social inequality. Comparative analysis therefore illuminates organizational singularities, disparities, conflict, and discord, as well as more muted, nuanced moments of cooperation, influence, and exchange. The evolution of food
activism during the black freedom struggle tellingly mirrors that of the movement more broadly, as activists shifted their aims from more liberal concessions such as the right to eat at an integrated lunch counter to far more radical goals—namely, the nourishment of black bodies in the quest for “survival pending revolution.”15 This trajectory thus reveals a radicalization of goals with the passage of time, while underscoring the enduring power of food as both a symbol of social equality and a practical cause around which movement could be fomented. The politics of food and the structural dynamics of hunger thus illuminated the contested terrain on which activists waged battles over definitions of personhood, citizenship, and human rights. These historical episodes speak directly and forcefully to the capacity of food and food security to create and reinforce group identity, to spark contentious action, to entice political resistance, and to foster creative efforts to correct the abuses of capitalism and the failings of the state to meet the most basic need of all citizens.

CHAPTER ONE

“Eat to Live”:
Black Nationalism and Black Bodies
in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam

In 1938, sociologist Erdmann Doane Beynon documented the curious influence of Wallace Fard Muhammad, a mysterious peddler who appeared in Detroit in 1930. Working as a door-to-door salesman hawking silks and fabrics, Fard aimed to introduce black Americans to a new view of the world by encouraging them to return to their “original” religion of Islam. One individual who encountered Fard before his unexplained vanishing in 1934 recalled that during these visits and house calls, Fard graciously accepted invitations to dine with his hosts and willfully partook of their victuals. Fard then framed the meal, and his hosts’ offerings, as an occasion to teach. The witness remembered Fard’s words: “‘Now don’t eat this food. It is poison for you. The people in your country [Africa] do not eat it. Since they eat the right kind of food they have the best health all the time. If you would live just like the people in your home country, you would never be sick anymore.’”

Fard’s lessons intrigued his audiences. Beynon’s source recalled, “…we all wanted him to tell us more about ourselves and about our home country and about how

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16 Erdmann Doane Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants in Detroit,” American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 43, No. 6 (May, 1938), 894-907. Fard operated under many aliases, and his background and fate remain the subject of much speculation. His successor, Elijah Muhammad, also went by several different names in efforts to dodge other Muslim leaders seeking to hijack leadership of the Nation of Islam following Fard’s disappearance. See Karl Evanzz, The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad (Random House, 1999), 6, 4-5.

17 As a result of this tactic, Fard often became acquainted with the females of a household before meeting the males. Rosetta E. Ross, Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights (Fortress Press, 2003), 141-162.

18 Qtd. in Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult Among Negro Migrants,” 895.
we could be free from rheumatism, aches and pains.” Fard, later revered by his followers as the incarnation of Allah, thus used communal bread breaking as a platform for lessons about the relationship between black Americans’ history of violent subjugation and their present state of sickliness and deprivation. The Nation of Islam (NOI), the black nationalist religion Fard founded, interpreted many fundamental tenants of orthodox (Sunni) Islam, including its prohibition of pork, alcohol, and tobacco, in ways that made sense of the plight of black Americans and the continued domination of whites over the “original” black race. The enormous influence and popularity of the Nation, especially during its rapid expansion in the 1950s and early 1960s under the leadership of Fard’s successor, Elijah Muhammad, attested to the power of this message, which advocated black supremacy, racial separation, and black self-help through

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19 Ibid. In his autobiography, Malcolm X described hearing a similar story from his mentor Elijah Muhammad about the early years of the Nation of Islam and, specifically, its founder, Fard. Malcolm X with Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley* (1965; Random House, 1992), 238. African American journalist Louis Lomax contextualized Fard’s message in 1963, explaining, “The black Detroiter who heard Fard [during the Great Depression] were starving, living in overcrowded slums. They were victims of police brutality, the continuing symbol of the power of the white establishment. They were bitter toward the white workers who took over ‘Negro jobs’ as work became more scarce. Even the white welfare workers in Detroit…deliberately abused Negroes by making them wait long hours in line before passing out pitiful supplies of flour and lard. All this fear resulted in deep resentment and despair. The words of Fard began to make more sense than ever.” Louis E. Lomax, *When the Word is Given: A Report on Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and the Black Muslim World* (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, 1963), 50.

20 According to Claude Andrew Clegg III, Fard’s brand of Islam “was obviously influenced by Christianity, orthodox Islam, black nationalism, and other faiths and doctrines. However, its originality and power to proselytize lay in its unique appeal to race and racial destiny as well as its attempt to explain in religious terms the history of the world and its impact on the present.” Clegg, *An Original Man: The Life and Times of Elijah Muhammad* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 41.
economic uplift. Overshadowed by the group’s more radical pronouncements against integration, police brutality, and the racism of Christianity, the Nation’s dietary laws operated as the basis of its broader black body politics, which both demanded and forged opportunities for black self-respect and self-sufficiency in a world dominated by white economic structures and interests. In addition to teaching followers “how to eat to live,” NOI food laws created a need for new black-owned businesses that respected and catered to the strict guidelines espoused by Muhammad. In addition to offering important models of black economic success, these food enterprises created valuable sites for community building, group policing, and proselytizing. Muhammad, who led the Nation from 1934 until his death in 1975, expounded upon the vital function of food as a tool of white oppression and an essential forum for collective identity and racial survival in a way that framed spiritual matters in pressing earthly terms.

**Making a Movement**

Infamous and outspoken in its disdain for American (and particularly African American) foodways and the cultural systems that produced them, the Nation of Islam

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21 Fard first met his protégé Elijah Muhammad at the behest of Elijah’s wife, Clara, who, inspired by the prophet’s message, invited him to dinner at their home. After the meal, Elijah lamented that he and his family “didn’t have good food to eat” or share with their guest. Qtd. in Evanzz, *The Messenger*, 74.

22 Muhammad emphatically denounced the dietary habits of “the Christian race,” a term he used to refer to white people, citing their inglorious history “roam[ing] the caves and hillsides of Europe…for 2,000 years, eating raw food. They did not know how to cook anything, or the use of fire until Moses taught them.” Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book One* (Atlanta: Messenger Elijah Muhammad Propagation Society, 1967), 64.

23 According to Muhammad biographer Claude Andrew Clegg III, “the imperative to maintain economic expansion resulted in an aversion to both doctrinal innovation and various forms of activism…. [H]is leadership, and the movement in general, were increasingly shaped by both a stress on material concerns and the larger economic patterns behind American society.” Clegg, *An Original Man*, xiii.
was, according to journalist and NOI collaborator Daniel Burley, “[v]ery unique in the history of American Negro leadership…” Unlike other black organizations and religious denominations, the NOI offered an original “program…established on a premise of what Negroes can do for themselves without support from white people—a program that fires the latent embers of intense black nationalism with a clear-cut glorious goal…to deliver the black man from his present economic, political, and social shackles.”

Situating the role of religion in this liberation project, Messenger Elijah Muhammad proclaimed in his 1965 Message to the Blackman in America that Islam “dignifies the black man and gives us the desire to be clean internally and externally and for the first time to have a sense of dignity.” This notion strongly appealed to black Americans, especially young males afflicted by poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, and racial violence.

NOI theology held that Allah created black people to rule the earth. It explained the state of the modern world, in which white supremacy inflicted suffering and destruction upon the black masses, through the story of Yakub, a mad black scientist who had grafted white man from black as an evil trick. Contending that heaven and hell coexisted on earth, the Nation taught that the invented “white devils” had used

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24 Burley helped to edit some NOI publications, but was not a member of the organization.
26 Ibid., 85.
27 Lomax, When the Word is Given, 63. See also Herbert Berg, Elijah Muhammad and Islam (New York University Press, 2009), 85-88.
“tricknology” to subjugate the inherently superior black race.\textsuperscript{28} White treachery took myriad menacing forms. Certainly the institutions of slavery and sharecropping most blatantly abused and exploited black bodies for white economic gain, while lynching and other acts of racial terrorism mutilated them to maintain white supremacy through black fear and subservience. But white deviousness also took more subtle social and cultural forms, including gambling, alcohol, drugs, fornication, adultery, and poor diet, introduced and encouraged by whites to keep lost black Americans in a bumbling state of penury, ignorance, and servitude. Despite this view, the central precept of NOI theology, which held that Allah would overturn white rule at a predetermined time in the near future, deemed ineffectual any political action or activism for the sake of racial equality.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{28} In his 1966 article “The Making of a Black Muslim,” sociologist John R. Howard explained, “Allah, in anger at Yakub’s work, ordained that the white race should rule for a fixed amount of time and that the black man should suffer and by his suffering gain a greater appreciation of his own spiritual worth by comparing himself to the whites…The Nation of Islam must encourage the so-called Negro to give up those habits which have been spread among them by the whites as part of the effort to keep them weak, diseased, and demoralized. The so-called Negro must give up such white-fostered dissolute habits as drinking, smoking, and eating improper foods. The so-called Negro must prepare himself in mind and body for the task of wresting control from the whites.” John R. Howard, “The Making of a Black Muslim” (1966), \textit{Society} (January/February 1998), 37. Despite his own vehement disagreement with many of the Nation’s central tenets, African American author James Baldwin recognized that Muhammad’s formulations—particularly the notion of “white devils”—made sense in light of the experiences of many blacks in the United States. “Most Negroes,” Baldwin wrote, “cannot risk assuming that the humanity of white people is more real to them than their color. And this leads, imperceptibly but inevitably, to a state of mind in which, having long ago learned to expect the worst, one finds it very easy to believe the worst. The brutality with which Negroes are treated in this country simply cannot be overstated, however unwilling white men may be to hear it. In the beginning—and neither can this be overstated—a Negro just cannot \textit{believe} that white people are treating him as they do; he does not know what he has done to merit it. And when he realizes that the treatment accorded him has nothing to do with anything he has done, that the attempt of white people to destroy him—for that is what it is—is utterly gratuitous, it is not hard for him to think of white people as devils.” James Baldwin, \textit{The Fire Next Time}, (New York: Dial Press, 1963; Vintage Books, 1992), 69.

\textsuperscript{29} Clegg, \textit{An Original Man}, 67. Though Elijah Muhammad prohibited direct efforts to engage the white government of the United States, Edward E. Curtis has persuasively argued, “Often times,
Moreover, the black nationalism at the core of the Nation’s message fundamentally opposed growing local and national efforts during the 1950s and early 1960s to achieve civil rights through civil disobedience and racial integration. In lieu of efforts to integrate into a white society of vice and corruption, Muhammad and his followers sought to achieve black supremacy by leading healthful, productive, righteous lives. In doing so, they worked to ensure their redemption as Allah’s original chosen people. NOI dietary laws, foodways, and food enterprises anchored these efforts.

The most influential black nationalist movement during the postwar years—and the religion of the NOI was powerful precisely because it was simultaneously a form of political activism and religious expression.” Curtis, of course, conceptualizes “political activism” broadly to encompass power struggles of social and cultural form rather than merely those waged through conventional electoral channels, which have historically worked to thwart black agency. I share Curtis’ inclusive understanding of both politics and activism. Edward E. Curtis, Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 6.

Historian Jeffrey Ogbar argues that black nationalism’s focus on racial difference “reflected…and simply inverted the doctrine of white supremacy. It was, in fact, a declaration of white inferiority.” Jeffrey Ogbar, Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 3. In Clegg’s view, “…what sometimes passed as religion among the faithful was no more than recycled racial dogma objectionable to most African-Americans in its original form. The similarities between Muhammad’s ideas and those of white racists, in some instances, could be quite chilling” (152).

The positioning of the NOI at the nexus of religious movement and black nationalist organization poses a historiographical challenge. The broader theological strictures of Islam—for example, against pork and alcohol—as well as the central role of fasting in displays of spiritual devotion, imbued Muhammad’s social and cultural agenda with the weight of prophecy. The highly racialized rhetoric employed by Muhammad to advance black dietary reform unequivocally spoke to the history and present conditions of blacks in the United States rather than to specific theological tenets or inherited religious practices. Muhammad infused Islam’s dietary restrictions and practices not only with a disdain for black culinary heritage but with scathing critiques of American foodways and the industrial food system, repeatedly attacking the gluttony of Americans, the profit motives of food industries owned and operated by white capitalists, and the complicity, if not outright conspiracy, of the federal government in a campaign of black genocide. While Muhammad’s interpretation of Islam excluded Muslims of non-African descent, his nutritional wisdom and dietary pronouncements explicitly situated the physical, social, and spiritual needs of African Americans in the historical context of slavery, sharecropping, and Jim Crow social structures, which intentionally denied those needs for the advantage of America’s ruling class of “white devils.”
second in the twentieth century only to Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), the basis of much of its black nationalist ideology—the Nation of Islam espoused vivid, often violent, rhetoric but encouraged little in the way of a practical political program.\(^{32}\) Given the racial and spiritual preeminence of the black race, blacks cooperating with systems of white evil—even if trying to reform them—imperiled their own spiritual salvation. Instead, Muhammad spurred black Americans, Muslim or otherwise, to focus their resources on survival as individuals and as a people by building

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\(^{32}\) Elija Pool joined the UNIA shortly before Garvey’s conviction on charges of mail fraud in June 1923. Muhammad biographer Karl Evanzz offers the decline of the UNIA as the beginning of Muhammad’s personal troubles with alcohol, unemployment, and marital strife, which stemmed from his want for a sense of purpose and belonging. After his arrest for public intoxication in March 1926, he “changed the spelling of his name to accompany his new resolve” to stop drinking. Evanzz, 60-61. In addition to revelations about Muhammad’s marital infidelities and other transgressions, Malcolm X’s objection to the Nation’s policy against political engagement fueled his official break with Muhammad in early 1964. Malcolm, widely credited with forcing the NOI into white mainstream consciousness, explained, “[P]rivately I was convinced that our Nation of Islam could be an even greater force in the American black man’s overall struggle—if we engaged in more action. By that, I mean I thought privately that we should have amended, or relaxed, our general non-engagement policy. I felt that, wherever black people committed themselves, in the Little Rocks and the Birmingham and other places, militantly disciplined Muslims should also be there—for all the world to see, and respect, and discuss.” X with Haley, Autobiography of Malcolm X, 334. Lomax, too, lamented the lost potential for alliances between the Nation of Islam and liberal civil rights organizations, remarking, “Their promise of a separate state...is but another of the mirages that has kept the American Negro from digging water in the land that is his and under his feet. Black Muslims are forbidden to vote; thus they cannot help us overcome such men as [Democratic U.S. Senators James O.] Eastland [of Mississippi] and [Herman] Talmadge [of Georgia]. They are against all forms of integration; thus they cannot help us in the fight for better jobs, schools and housing.” Muhammad began to soften this policy at the Nation’s national convention in 1963 when he declared, “There will be no real freedom for the so-called Negro in America until he elects his own political leaders and his own candidates.” The Nation’s news source explained, “The Movement of the Muslims towards the political front was said to have been occasioned partly by the woeful lack of Negro representation in the [U.S] nation and by the critical need for courageous champions to oppose and expose the genocidal assaults now leveled at many Negro sections of the population.” Lomax dismissed this as “a policy of active wait-and-see.” See “The Honorable Elijah Muhammad Tells Why We Must Elect Our Own Candidates,” Muhammad Speaks (18 Mar 1963), 3; Lomax, 91, 96. Muhammad Speaks, the official NOI newspaper, will hereafter be abbreviated “MS.” See also E.U. Essien-Udom, Black Nationalism: A Search for An Identity in America (University of Chicago Press, 1962), 7, 84.
separate, autonomous black institutions, thereby advancing racial separation in economic and cultural, rather than physical or political, forms. At the interstices of these seemingly separate realms of social being—spiritual identity and economic status—food and the politics of its production, distribution, and consumption fused these imperatives into what food historian Warren Belasco has referred to as a “digestible ideology.”

At the peak of the Nation’s influence and development during the late 1950s and early 1960s, Muhammad and his ministers produced a variety of literature and gave countless public speeches expounding the relationship between black dietary habits and the history of racial oppression in the United States, vividly positing the centrality of food to prospects for individual, organizational, racial, and spiritual survival. Although contemporary social commentators and historians alike have noted the difficulty of ascertaining accurate tallies of the Nation’s membership rolls at any given point (estimates of peak membership range from 25,000 to ten times that amount), the organization’s skillful utilization of the black press spread its message to black Americans throughout the United States, including those attracted to the Nation’s outlook and image but perhaps put off by its strict code of conduct. The Nation of Islam

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34 By the time of the Greensboro sit-ins in February 1960, the NOI had established nearly seventy temples in the North, as well as a variety of business enterprises, schools, and employment agencies. At his death in 1975, Muhammad purportedly led between 50,000 and 100,000 followers who worshiped at 76 temples across the country. Philip Norton, “Black Nationalism in America: The Significance of the Black Muslim Movement,” *Hull Papers in Politics* No. 31 (University of Hull, April 1983), 11; “Religion: The Messenger Passes,” *Time* (10 Mar 1975).

35 In 1962, Nigerian political scientist E.U. Essien-Udom noted the complications of counting members and defining membership. Not everyone who attended NOI meetings, even on several occasions, officially joined the Nation. Moreover, prisoners, a large base of NOI influence during
featured regularly in black periodicals such as *The Chicago Defender* and *The Pittsburgh Courier*, the latter of which published from June 1956 to August 1959 a regular column entitled “Mr. Muhammad Speaks.” These papers targeted a broad cross-section of African American readers, delivering insight into the Nation’s views on such topics as family and gender roles, civil rights and urban unrest, foreign policy, and—repeatedly and emphatically—food etiquette and diet.

**Food, Race, and Spiritual Redemption**

The intimate nature of food as an economic commodity, a tangible cultural product, and a biological imperative commanded the obedience of Muhammad’s followers and garnered the interest and esteem of outsiders. While Sunni Islam has for centuries demanded adherence to strict dietary guidelines and periods of ritual fasting, the

the 1950s and 1960s, could not submit an official application for membership until their release. Finally, nationwide circulation of *Muhammad Speaks*, including among circles outside the NOI, suggests that Muhammad’s teachings and the Nation’s activities likely reached numbers far beyond official membership rolls. See Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism*, 71. Reflecting upon NOI meetings during which all in attendance would agree with his points but few would convert to Islam, Malcolm X noted, “I knew that our strict moral code and discipline was what repelled them most. I fired at this point, at the reason for our code. ‘The white man wants black men to stay immoral, unclean and ignorant. As long as we stay in these conditions we will keep on begging him and he will control us. We never can win freedom and justice and equality until we are doing something for ourselves!’” After X separated from Muhammad and instituted plans to establish his own Organization for Afro-American Unity, things changes dramatically.

“Telegrams and letters and telephone calls came…from across the country. Their general tone was that this was a move that people had waited for. People I’d never heard of expressed confidence in me in moving ways. Numerous people said that the Nation of Islam’s stringent moral restrictions had repelled them—and they wanted to join me.” X with Haley, 225, 364. Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panther Party and an ardent follower of Malcolm X, described early meetings of the Party, during which members shared soul food. “I cooked our meals of piles of spaghetti or neckbones and greens, and while we ate, sucking and shining our neck bones, I raised jokes about the Muslim’s organization not eating pork, with everybody sucking and cracking loose at [comedian] Nipsy Russell’s famous line of not having a grudge against the hamhock. Our grudge was against the white power-structure.” Bobby Seale, *A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of Bobby Seale* (New York Times Books, 1978), 159.

Nation of Islam, a religious organization unique to the United States, imbued food with heightened significance as a means of promoting earthly survival, socio-economic advancement, moral uplift, and spiritual purification for the “lost-found” members of the Nation of Islam in the Wilderness of the United States.\textsuperscript{37} In this context, the Nation’s dietary laws, food enterprises, and food politics created crucial outlets for members to work to better their lives and to ensure their redemption after the overthrow of white rule. Requiring personal discipline and public displays of commitment to the faith, the Nation’s prescribed diet and its steady discourse about processes of food production and regulation promoted the physical health and economic independence of Muhammad’s faithful. By reframing a seemingly mundane aspect of daily life in striking racial terms, Muhammad encouraged followers, interested listeners, and patrons of the many successful Black Muslim food establishments to examine the manner in which American systems of racial oppression, past and present, infiltrated every aspect of their lives.\textsuperscript{38}

To prepare for the Day of Judgment, Muhammad taught, black Americans must accept Islam as their “original” religion and work to purify their bodies by following a strict code of conduct that barred alcohol, drugs, and tobacco, as well as sexual

\textsuperscript{37} This term evoked the NOI’s belief that black Americans had been forcibly separated from their original religion of Islam and that believers had been “found” by Muhammad, who saved them from the damnation that awaited the white race as well as blacks who continued to be corrupted by white society and Christianity. For discussion of Sunni dietary laws, see Carolyn Rouse and Janet Hoskins, “Purity, Soul Food, and Sunni Islam: Explorations at the Intersections of Consumption and Resistance,” \textit{Cultural Anthropology}, Vol. 19, No. 2 (May, 2004), 226-249.

immodesty. These points of decorum attracted the most notoriety, and harshest punishment when breached, in part because they required absolute abstinence from many common behaviors. By demanding discipline, Muhammad pronounced, Islam “destroys superstition and removes the veil of falsehood. It heals both physical and spiritual ills by teaching what to eat, when to eat, what to think, and how to act.” Here tellingly situating the task of learning “what to eat” and “when to eat” before the process of learning “what to think” and “how to act,” Muhammad highlighted the practical significance of dietary practices as the foundation of the project of racial liberation.

Indeed, while many religions preached temperance and modesty, the Nation of Islam stood apart from other movements for black liberation by espousing strict dietary laws that required that many converts completely transform their eating habits by abstaining from foods rooted in memories of childhood, family, regional background, and racial identity.

In order to avoid the damnation that awaited the white race, Muhammad taught black Americans to cleanse themselves spiritually by emancipating their bodies from the earthly vices introduced and encouraged by whites since the time of slavery. The deceit

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40 Speaking generally of Muhammad’s efforts to reframe the history of Americans of African descent by re-centering them in Africa and identifying them as Muslims with roots in Asia, author James Baldwin protested, “…in order to change a situation one has first to see it for what it is: in the present case, to accept the fact, whatever one does with it thereafter, that the Negro has been formed by this nation, for better or worse, and does not belong to any other—not to Africa, and certainly not to Islam. The paradox—and a fearful paradox it is—is that the American Negro can have no future anywhere, on any continent, as long as he is unwilling to accept his past. To accept one’s past—one’s history—is not the same thing as drowning in it; it is learning how to use it. An invented past can never be used; it cracks and crumbles under the pressures of life like clay in a season of drought.” Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 81.
and kidnapping of Africans by European slave traders and their African coconspirators and the chaining and starving of captives during the Middle Passage only began this struggle. Muhammad characterized African American foodways as a daily manifestation of the legacies of slavery, an inheritance responsible not only for white perceptions of black lowliness and inferiority but also for growing public health concerns like diabetes, heart disease, and obesity. By learning what to eat and when, Muhammad reasoned, black Americans would develop the ability and sharpen the desire to be masters of their own bodies and, thus, their own fates. Furthermore, when ultimately repossessed from the white captors who had stolen and mutilated them, those bodies promised to become productive economic tools, fertile reproductive vessels, and proud, dignified soldiers of Allah.

Recognizing that his dietary regulations might confuse or overwhelm his followers, especially Muslim wives responsible for preparing meals for their families, Muhammad regularly offered instructions, urging members to come to him personally with questions about the permissibility of specific foods. In the late-1950s, the Chicago temple

41 For more on the diet of African captives before and during the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas, see Stephanie E. Small, Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora (Harvard University Press, 2008), 43-49. Herbert Covey and Dwight Eisech document the function of food as a tool of control in the slave system of the British North American colonies and the early republic of the United States. Herbert C. Covey and Dwight Eisech, What the Slaves Ate: Recollections of African American Foods and Foodways from the Slave Narratives (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood Press, 2009). See also Frederick Douglass Opie, Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America (Columbia University Press, 2008), Chapters 1-3.

42 Muhammad believed the poor diet of black Americans stemmed from the refusal of white Americans to grant them the full rights of freedom. “After telling the slaves they were free, America kept them here in order to prey upon them. Now today, many of the slaves wish to be free of America, but her reply by her actions to our wanting to be free is ‘no.’ And America continues to give the so-called Negroes the same bad food and drink that her (America’s) fathers did in the days of slavery.” Muhammad, How to Eat to Live: Book One, 93.
distributed an eighteen-page mimeograph outlining acceptable and proscribed foods, but as the Nation expanded, so, too, did the need for widespread clarification of its dietary laws. Of all the regulations and standards set forth by the Nation, those pertaining to food were sufficiently important and complex to warrant a regular column by Muhammad responding to the inquiries of loyal followers striving to abide by the most minute of his dietary directives. Unlike tobacco and liquor, which Muhammad forbade outright, the nature of food required that followers learn how to navigate a complex set of guidelines using known or improvised techniques of cooking and preparation.

Moreover, because chronic diet-related ailments such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes evolved over years and did not stem from a single identifiable source, followers might not appreciate the seriousness of Muhammad’s warnings against foods that contributed to them. Therefore, Muhammad found it necessary to repeatedly invoke his authority as prophet and Messenger of Allah to advise followers to abstain from foods he associated with poor health and to sanctify dietary laws without clear basis in Islamic tradition.

Shortly after publication of its first issue in 1961, the Nation’s official newspaper, *Muhammad Speaks*, began offering lessons to black Americans about proper dietary

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43 Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 98. In 1959, Muhammad outlined penalties for violating the Nation’s laws. He declared those found guilty of the most serious offenses (“Class F” violations) would be subject to suspension from the temple for a minimum of thirty days. By this standard, Muhammad rendered consumption of pork as egregious as fornication, adultery, and even disrespecting the Messenger of Allah himself. Essien-Udom, 307.

44 Like many others, literary scholar Doris Witt notes the centrality of improvisation to African American culinary heritage, which has historically operated “as living knowledge rather than static artifact.” As a result, the innovative dishes concocted by Black Muslims seem very much in keeping with traditions of Southern cooking. Witt, *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999), 13.
practices. In August 1965, the paper began publishing a regular column entitled “How to Eat to Live,” which Muhammad advised readers to clip for easy reference. Muhammad collected and reprinted these dietary lessons in a two-volume manual titled How to Eat to Live, published in 1967 and 1972, which, at the height of soul food’s popularity, offered the clearest evidence of the role of food politics in the Nation’s quest for racial liberation. The organization’s approach to food represented a conservative critique of American “Christian” culture, social structures, and values, conceptualizing food as a central forum for contesting and resisting white supremacy and black oppression.

Interestingly, Muhammad did not always simply speak about Christians but often directed his comments to them, a rhetorical style that reflected his desire to reach black readers outside the Nation’s membership and characterized his writings as both tools of

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45 Muhammad, “For Long Life, We Must Be Careful What, When We Eat,” MS (7 Jan 1966), 11; Muhammad, “The Benefits of Eating Once a Day,” MS (3 Sep 1965), 11.

46 In his study of soul food, Frederick Douglass Opie found that “mom-and-pop operations, bus stop lunch counters, and bars and grills represent the modern origins of the restaurants that started appearing with the phrase ‘soul food’ in their signage and other marketing materials in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.” Opie employs a revealingly malleable definition of “soul”: “Soul is the style of rural folk culture. Soul is black spirituality and experiential wisdom. And soul is putting a premium on suffering, endurance, and surviving with dignity. Soul food is African American, but it was influenced by other cultures. It is the intellectual invention and property of African Americans. Soul food is a fabulous-tasting dish made from simple, inexpensive ingredients. Soul food is enjoyed by black folk, whom it reminds of their southern roots.” Opie, Hog and Hominy, 118, xi.

47 Legal scholar Christopher Alan Bracey convincingly situates the NOI within the long history of black conservative thought. “When one thinks of proponents of black conservatism, rarely does one consider the Nation of Islam,” he acknowledges. “Yet throughout its history, the Nation of Islam has embodied much of the tradition of black conservatism. In a manner not unlike Garveyism of the 1920s, the Nation of Islam sought to combine the best of black conservative thought with a radical, albeit religious, doctrine of black, separatist empowerment.” Bracey, Saviors or Sellouts: The Promise and Peril of Black Conservatism, from Booker T. Washington to Condoleezza Rice (Beacon Press, 2008), 97. Curtis explains, “One might say of the NOI what historian Darlene Clark Hine said of Afrocentrism: it blurs easy distinctions between conservative and radical because it fosters liberation and fuels essentialism, empowers people and polices boundaries.” Curtis, Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 9.
instruction for followers and as instruments of propagation to reach the unconverted.\textsuperscript{48}

The malleable and ever-evolving nature of foodways and traditions allowed Muhammad great flexibility in crafting his message.

The cultural significance and sensory pleasures of food threatened to dampen the appeal of Muhammad’s dietary dogma. Consequently, he framed his guidelines in graphic, even nauseating terms. He reserved the most vivid details and colorful imagery for the most “divinely prohibited” pork, asserting a pig “[e]ats [a]nything,” “[c]ontains worms,” and “is [p]oison.” Filthy, brazen, and noxious, the flesh of the swine shortened the earthly lives of those who consumed it, meanwhile condemning their souls to suffer with the race of white devils for whom the pig was created. Grafted from a rat, a cat, and a dog as a medicine to treat white ailments, hogs “carrie[d] 999 poisonous germs” which rendered their flesh “not 100 per cent poison, but nearly 1000 per cent poison.”\textsuperscript{49}

Anticipating objections from those who had consumed pork their entire lives, Muhammad acknowledged, “…Christians have been eating the swine for four thousand years. Now, their punishment is total destruction by fire…The white race was not made to obey the divine law. They were made to oppose it, therefore following after them and

\textsuperscript{48} In a typical example, Muhammad writes, “…I do not care how good a Christian you are, or how much you would love to see Jesus, or how much you would like to go to Heaven to see Jesus and sit down beside him, as the Christians teach you will do (smile), you never make any preparations to hurry to go out of this life to find another life.” \textit{Book One}, 47.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{Book One}, 110-111. Clegg writes, “This section of the narrative was as much—perhaps entirely—the creation of Elijah Muhammad as it was of his teacher [Fard]. Its purpose was to give ideological support to Elijah’s claim of being the Messenger of Allah and to establish him as the intermediary between the movement and its God…[T]his part of the Muslims’ story also encouraged the adoption of certain orthodox Islamic practices by followers, using myths about names and the contents of swine flesh to ensure adherence.” \textit{An Original Man}, 63.
doing what they do is getting you the hell.”

Pork was not merely unhealthy, but intrinsically unholy, unsuitable for Allah’s chosen race. “The swine was not made for Black People,” Muhammad insisted. “It was made only for the white race. And, the white race teaches everybody to eat it, because it is a Divinely prohibited flesh; and they break all the Laws of God…They have their own law, because they are the gods of this world.”

In addition to health and respectability, Muhammad cunningly appealed to readers’ vanity (which he elsewhere characterized as immoral), insisting that the flesh of the pig would “destroy three one-hundredths per cent of the beauty appearance of the eater, besides giving him fever chills and headaches.”

A cartoon published by Muhammad Speaks in July 1965 illustrated the connection between diet and physical appearance, social position, and moral character while highlighting the consequences of eating the “poisonous swine.” The drawing portrayed a black man and a black woman eating at opposite ends of a dining table. The balding

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50 Elijah Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book Two* (Atlanta: Messenger Elijah Muhammad Propagation Society, 1972), 19. Opie contends that young people, with less firmly formed dietary traditions and preferences, were likely more receptive to Muhammad’s “antiswine message.” *Hog and Hominy*, 164.

51 Historian Michael A. Gomez contends, “In some ways, the struggle between Christianity and Islam for the allegiance of black folk came down to this animal, and whether one was prepared to do without it; in other ways, the pig was simply emblematic of a much broader and complicated conflict, and it became invested with the values of the opposing camps.” Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 322.

52 *Book Two*, 37.

53 *Book One*, 110-111. The first edition of *How to Eat to Live* included a chapter dedicated to “Beautiful Appearance and Long Life,” in which Muhammad warned, “Beauty appearance is destroyed in us—not just our facial appearance, but the most beautiful appearance about us, our characteristics (the way we act and practice our way of life)...Stay away from the hog, of which 10 ounces takes away from you, God has said, three one-hundredths per cent of the beauty appearance” (103).

54 “Table of Filth,” *MS* (9 July 1965). For Curtis’ reading of this image, see *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 102.
male stares blankly ahead, juice dripping onto his tie and shirt from the hog’s foot he holds in his left hand, a large belly protruding from his hefty frame. His uses neither cutlery nor napkin. Amid the clutter of crumbs and morsels sits a bottle of whiskey, two-thirds empty. The plate before him overflows with various parts of a pig, a snout and foot clearly discernable. At the far end of the table, facing the viewer, rests the female of the house, hair unkempt, back slouched, tummy distended, and eyes glazed, puffing a cigarette. She may be pregnant, or perhaps just fat. The rest of the pig’s dismembered carcass, including a hambone and bowl of tails, litters the table. The head of the animal, sitting whole on a platter, occupies the illustration’s focal point. Faint, undulating lines signify a foul odor emanating from the table and possibly from its occupants. A young girl of perhaps two years perches cross-legged on the floor in the place one might expect to find the family dog, eagerly awaiting the scraps. Clad in white rags knotted over one shoulder, her hair in frizzy braids, she, too, suckles a tail. The adults do not speak or even look at one another, and their daughter seems far from mind. The title mast encapsulates the moral of the scene. It warns, “EATING THE WRONG FOOD: IT FORMS YOUR FEATURES, AND YOUR CHARACTERISTICS…” Much like the swine, the “ugliest animal, the filthiest animal,” the family appears slovenly and overly indulgent, unclean, and unconcerned by the poisons they hastily ingest. The image attacks stereotypes of African American family life as dysfunctional, stifling, and poisonous—a view detailed months earlier in the U.S. Department of Labor’s notorious Moynihan Report—not to deny the veracity of those images but to demand that readers
work to refute them. To do this, the cartoon indicated, one must begin by abstaining from the meat of the pig. The array of arguments embedded in such imagery supported Muhammad’s overriding pronouncement against pork: “Please, for our health’s sake, stop eating it; for our beauty’s sake, stop eating it; for our obedience to God and His laws against this flesh, stop eating it; for a long life, stop eating it and for the sake of modesty, stop eating it.”

The absolute prohibition of pork resonated in its simplicity, as illustrated by another *Muhammad Speaks* cartoon published in October 1969. The drawing depicted a conversation between two black boys. The first youngster, clad in a white sweater and cap (attire suggesting his alignment with “white” American viewpoints and behaviors), casually suggests he and his friend stop for a hot dog. The second boy—marked by a black suit, bowtie, and fez as a member of the Nation’s Fruit of Islam (FOI)—declines the invitation, seizing the opportunity to lecture his friend. “[W]e are forbidden by

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56 *Book One*, 17.


58 Established by Fard, the Fruit of Islam (FOI) served as a paramilitary unit, providing security for the Nation and its leadership. Sociologist C. Eric Lincoln referred to the FOI as “the secret army” and characterized it as “the most powerful single organization within the Movement.” Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 199.
Allah to touch swine…” he explains. The hungry youth counters with several typical grievances against the logic of the Nation’s dietary laws, including the incredulous suggestion that food producers and distributors would not “sell it if it was bad.” The Muslim boy patiently replies, “Brother, the white man sells many things that are not good for us…Look at all the bad meat…including swine…sold in our neighborhood.” The prohibition of pork, he continues, stems from the Bible, which commands, “Of their flesh shall you not touch[;] they are unclean.” Visibly agitated, the non-Muslim boy cites the example of his own preacher, who lauded the pork chops served by the boy’s mother during a recent dinner party. Undeterred, the FOI youth insists, “That preacher is the devil’s number one tool used to keep your mother and all our poor people in the diseased condition they’re in! He knows what the God says about swine, whiskey, beer, & wine, but he goes along with the enemy of God who taught us to eat the wrong food when he brought our people over here in chains!” Painting white people as “the enemy of God” and black religious leaders as agents of black disease and oppression, the cartoon commented on a variety of historical factors and contemporary social ills stemming from or related to black Americans’ supposed predilection for pork. The cartoon emphasized the need to spread this dietary wisdom, known but repressed by such authoritative sources as Christian leaders and “truthful medical scientists.” The boys’ exchange touched on an array of important issues in addition to health and food safety, including exploitative food industry practices, the vices of black Christian ministers, the role of

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59 Many NOI youth learned Muhammad’s dietary lessons as students at the University of Islam, which emphasized “the observance of dietary laws and the development of a child’s character.” See *The Messenger* (1959), 5.
slavery in expediting the decline of black health, and the collective benefits of patentizing black-owned businesses. The scene concludes as the two head to a Muslim restaurant to “eat food that’s good-tasting and good for us!”

From Slave Food to Soul Food

Though cultures and societies are often shaped, even defined, by the types and quantities of available food, the violent dislocations suffered by Africans in the context of New World slavery imbued food and foodways with heightened significance, a means of reviving the past and surviving the present. While slave owners worked to control food allotments to maximize the productivity of their human investments, slaves exercised their restricted capacity to maintain a sense of their own humanity by making the most of their provisions, supplementing their meager lot of corn and pork by growing their own food when possible or by stealing foodstuffs here and there. Amidst the rising black cultural nationalism of the late 1960s, African Americans increasingly embraced and celebrated the legacies of this inventiveness as “soul food.”

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60 Cartoon, MS (3 Oct 1969); underlining in original.
61 Drawing on WPA slave narratives, Covey and Eisnach found that though slaves “relied heavily on pork and corn,” “there was tremendous variance among slaves as to what foods were available to them.” Covey and Eisnach, What the Slaves Ate, ix, viii. For an engaging discussion of stereotypes of black thievery in response to historical conditions of hunger and food insecurity, see Psyche Williams-Forson, “More than Just the ‘Big Piece of Chicken’: The Power of Race, Class, and Food in American Consciousness,” in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds.), Food and Culture: A Reader, 3rd Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 107-118.
62 As a young man, Muhammad sought to escape the dire economic prospects for black men in the South. In 1923, he followed his parents and siblings and moved to Detroit with his young wife Clara. He did not soon look back. Given the centrality of farming to the toils of poor black sharecroppers and of foodways to regional identity, particularly in the American South, it seems reasonable that Muhammad associated “soul food” with the historical oppression of black Americans. As several contemporary commentators and scholars have noted, the variety of foods disdained by Muhammad included dishes, for example collard greens and sweet potatoes, consumed by black and white Southerners alike. Thus Muhammad’s initial aversion to soul
greens, fried catfish, black-eyed peas, sweet potatoes, and the like reminded Southern migrants of home—the site of both legally inscribed racial oppression and of the kin networks that evolved over generations to survive and resist that oppression. Black sociologist Adrian Dove explained, “Soul food traveled in a shopping bag on the train with the big move from farm to city and from South to North. The black man found all kinds of fancy new food in the new places, but it wasn’t what he liked. It wasn’t strong-flavored and it didn’t fill you up the way Soul food does. It still doesn’t.”

Thus, defenders of soul food heralded it as a bittersweet emblem of communal identity, comfort, and familiarity rooted in a history of collective struggle, suffering, and endurance, the legacies of which pervaded every facet of life from family structures and sexual mores to economic opportunities and personal and community health.

Indeed, because slaves, and later sharecroppers and other blacks in the rural South, subsisted on foods of inferior freshness, nutritional value, and quality than average white southerners—eating, for example, the less desired, and thus less expensive, cuts of meat—Southern foodways evolved to form and embrace a diet often low in protein and nutrients and high in cholesterol, saturated fats, and starches. Commenting in 1968 on

— though ultimately supported by arguments about its dangerous health consequences—likely reflected his own distaste for all things Southern, an aversion that positioned the South as a backward land of black suffering and subjugation. Muhammad biographer Clegg writes, “In the years to come, Elijah would make few trips back to the South, and would have even fewer pleasant things to say about Georgia in particular.” Evanzz, 51; Clegg, 7, 13; Gomez, 309.

Adrian Dove, “Soul Story,” New York Times Magazine (New York Times Company, 1968) in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (eds.), Black Protest in the Sixties (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 250. In 1968 Dove designed an assessment to demonstrate the cultural biases of standardized intelligence tests. Officially named the Dove Counterbalance General Intelligence Test, the assessment was tellingly dubbed “The Chitling Test,” a testament to the centrality of foodways to cultural literacy and group identity. In recent years, the test has been deemed racially offensive. See, for example, Joe Burris, “Arundel apologizes after students shown test during lesson on racial differences,” Baltimore Sun (10 Oct 2013).
the rising popularity and subsequent commodification of soul food, Dove acknowledged, “It’s all a little funny, because Soul food was originally nothing more than leftovers.

When the slaveholder down on that old Southern plantation ate turnips, slave got greens.
When it was ham or bacon for the big house, slave got innards to make chitlings or the hard end of the nose to make snout (pronounced ‘snoot’) or the tips of the feet to make trotters.”

Black cooks and servants, of course, transferred dishes such as barbecued ribs and pork chops, fried chicken and catfish, sweet potato pie, and collard greens to the plates and palates of white Southerners, a fact that made them even more objectionable in Muhammad’s eyes. Scoring the retention of practices that had emerged under oppressive conditions, Muhammad decried the symbolic and physical power of particular

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64 Dove noted the cultural and economic consequences of soul food’s commodification for poor and working class blacks. “ Plenty of super-sophisticated whites already know about chitlings,” he wrote. “ ‘Soul food’ restaurants have sprung up in places like Hollywood and lower Manhattan. So black people started calling chitlings ruffle steaks, out of the need of black privacy; now whites are picking up that term and the ghetto has started calling them wrinkles. Of course, privacy is only part of it. We know that when ruffle steaks become a gourmet dish, the price goes up.” Dove, “Soul Story,” 250.

65 Like millions of black Americans who left the South in the first half of the twentieth century, Muhammad quickly encountered more veiled, but no less menacing, forms of black marginalization in the North. Louis Lomax wrote, “Of all the disenchanted Detroit Negroes, Elijah Poole [Muhammad] was probably the bitterest. The lure of Detroit had proved a nightmare…” When the Word is Given, 52. Therefore, as it did to many others, Fard’s message spoke to Muhammad’s life experiences as a black man in America. Muhammad thus decided that he must affirm his physical escape from the archetypal land of black enslavement by psychologically and culturally divorcing himself from the South as well. To continue to feed one’s body the traditional foods of that land of toil and misery meant repeatedly returning there, transplanting Southern cultural practices to the so-called “Promised Land” of the urban North and West. Endeavoring to foster nostalgic images of black self-respect, healthfulness, and strength, Muhammad deemed it necessary to denounce the authority of historical realities or memories of degradation, enslavement, and “savagery” to influence their present lives. Food, as a universal and recurrent physical need and as a regularly recreated and often improvised cultural product, constituted a vital forum for daily rituals of self-definition and racial resistance. That Muhammad infused food with spiritual dimensions and implications only heightened the power of foodways and food politics to shape a group identity characterized by contestation of hegemonic definitions and values of white supremacy. Clegg, 45.
foods to operate as tools of social exclusion and markers of inferior status. Muhammad’s assertion that black bodies deserved better than that which poverty and racial segregation had for centuries forced them to ingest appealed to many blacks seeking to resist white supremacy without compromising their physical and economic survival.66 As one follower attested in 1969, “All I can say now is, Islam is my soul’s food. It gives me strength as well as physical and mental health to enable me to do my duty to the Nation and the Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad.”67 The popular designation of black Southern foodways as food for the soul naturally lent itself to interpretations of the spiritual dimensions of sustenance, as well as the relationship between earthly and ethereal facets of being.

In keeping with efforts to detach African Americans from the heritage of slavery, Muhammad deemed southern culinary staples—foods associated with regional, racial, and cultural identities of black Southerners and not prohibited by orthodox Islamic law—unfit for consumption by black Americans.68 Muhammad outlined many “great poison

66 Muhammad’s childhood also lends insight into his aversion to Southern cuisine. The seventh of thirteen children, Elijah Muhammad was born Elija Pool in 1897, the son of destitute Georgia sharecroppers born into slavery. Young Elija knew firsthand the devastation wrought by institutionally-sanctioned racism. While his father served as a Baptist minister, Muhammad’s mother Marie worked in the homes of white families to supplement the family’s meager income. Instead of cash wages to pay rent and other bills, employers regularly compensated her with foodstuffs. She often returned home with pig’s feet, chitterlings, hog maw, and other animal parts discarded from the white family’s dinner of pork chops or ham. Such a system of payment added the weight of experience to Muhammad’s likening of organ meat and other substandard foods to the unwanted scraps discarded by those who could afford better and accepted by those in no position to refuse. See Evanzz, 20; Clegg, 7.


68 Berg contends that like Noble Drew Ali and Fard, Elijah Muhammad seized “the unique opportunity to define and redefine Islam for many years without significant interference from
dishes” that his followers must not eat. He dismissed many varieties of beans (namely lima and butter beans, field peas, black-eyed peas, and soybeans) as “beans that cattle should eat.” Typical pork flavoring made them even more objectionable. Although Muhammad encouraged his followers to eat low on the food chain, he denounced some vegetables such as collard greens and cabbage sprouts as “horse and cattle food.”

Cornbread and sweet potatoes were likewise better suited for animals than humans. “No corn bread at all!” he commanded. “The white race, and some African people, used to live off corn bread, because it is cheaply made. It is not good for human consumption because of its potency, which only animal stomachs are able to digest. Positively do not eat corn bread.” He likewise warned, “Sweet potatoes were never good for any human to eat. They are good for hogs, but not for you…[P]otatoes and rice are too starchy for you and me. They laden us with too much starch and fat, which are friends of

Muslims with more traditional understandings of Islam. They seized this freedom to experiment with novel conceptions and formulations of Islam.” Berg, *Elijah Muhammad and Islam*, 127.
69 Muhammad, *How to Eat to Live: Book Two*, 65. Amiri Baraka, a staunch proponent of soul food, acknowledged that black cuisine centered on foods and ingredients that most white Americans typically would not eat. “Maws [hog stomachs] are things ofays [white people] seldom get to peck, nor are you likely ever to hear about Charlie eating a chitterling [intestines].” Beyond the various cuts of meat, Baraka acknowledged that, historically, blacks had fewer vegetables to choose from as well. “All those different kinds of greens (now quick frozen for anyone) once were all Sam got to eat. (Plus the potlikker [broth], into which one slipped some threwed away meat.) Collards and turnips and kale and mustards were not fit for anybody but the woogies. So they found a way to make them taste like something somebody would want to freeze and sell to a Negro going to Harvard as exotic European spinach…Did you ever hear of a black-eyed pea? (Whitey used it for forage, but some folks couldn’t.) And all those weird parts of the hog? (After the pig was stripped of its choicest parts, the feet, snout, tail, intestines, stomach, etc., were all left for the ‘members,’ who treated them mercilessly.)” Amiri Baraka, *Home: Social Essays* (William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1966; Akashic Books, 2009), 121, 122.

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69 *Book Two*, 65.
70 *Book Two*, 34.
72 *Book One*, 6.
diabetes.” These pronouncements rested not on religious law or tradition but on an experientially-informed attack on the dietary double standards of white Americans.

“Peas, collard greens, turnip greens and white potatoes are very cheaply raised foods,” Muhammad declared. “The Southern slave masters used them to feed the slaves and still advise the consumption of them. Most white people of the middle and upper class do not eat this lot of cheap food, which is unfit for human consumption.” Instead, he urged, “Eat butter, milk and fresh vegetables—but not your old favorite collard greens, cabbage sprouts, turnip salads, mustard salads, beet top salads, kale, etc…”

Gesturing toward the reality that many Americans ate such “cheap” foods so as not to go hungry, Muhammad explained, “…most people like us to eat the inexpensive food, because we do not have the finance to buy expensive foods that rich millionaires eat. So, He prescribed for us, dry navy beans, bread and milk.” Simple, unprocessed foods prolonged life. Muhammad furthermore denounced the manner in which many typical southern dishes were prepared—often fried or flavored with pork—which he characterized as anathema to physical wellbeing. In his mind, these foodways had evolved out of necessity and been sustained by a lack of knowledge and self-regard among black Americans conditioned by centuries of custom and limited options to hunger for and take pride in them.

Muhammad made plain that his guidelines applied specifically to African Americans. Commingling social and racial commentary with appeals to theology

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73 Book One, 4.
74 Book One, 5.
75 Book Two, 34-35.
76 Book Two, 34-35.
generally unsupported by sacred texts, Muhammad taught that the conditions, behaviors, and values of his followers distinguished them from the worldwide Muslim community, as they continued to be shaped and warped by centuries of enslavement and systematic oppression. Muhammad’s corollaries to the Islamic diet thus revealed contempt for black cultural practices influenced by ingrained acquiescence to political and cultural dispossession. Surely Muhammad recognized that many white Americans, particularly in the South, also consumed processed foods high in fat, salt, and sugar, but that, he believed, only heightened the need for black Americans to distance themselves from the behaviors, lifestyles, and cultural values of the damned white race. Allah had taught believers the right way, and those who knew better must do better. In radical tones and lively language, Muhammad demanded his followers enact their beliefs, their racial pride, and their subservience to him as Messenger of Allah by refusing to eat foods made by and for the white oppressor. As a result, in the realm of food and diet the NOI promoted an immediate solution or course of action in response to the problems it identified, articulating a race-based, food-centered social theology aiming not only to resist historically racist views of black personhood but to counteract the damage wrought by structures of white supremacy on black bodies and souls.

77 Islamist scholar Herbert Berg judges that Muhammad was likely not well-versed in the Qur’an and, for his purposes, did not need to be. “His use of quaranic language, his citation of isolated quaranic passages in the midst of other passages, and his proclivity to read quaranic passages…as prophecy suggest that his purpose was not so much to explain the Qur’an as to lend legitimacy through reference to it in his mythology of the origin of the races and the coming eschaton.” Berg, Elijah Muhammad and Islam, 67.

78 Bracey writes, “The Nation of Islam had created a movement of escapism—one that was premised upon moral uplift, economic empowerment, and social withdrawal….Nation of Islam teachings and community development provided blacks with a means of expressing their
Muhammad’s unyielding aversion to the politics and culture of Southern foodways ironically reinforced the authority of white cultural practices by heralding them as the standard against which black Americans must define themselves.\textsuperscript{79} Such a view naturally ignored or condemned the potential for black culinary heritage to express a shared history or collective identity. Nor did Muhammad appreciate the value of such foodways as evidence of black Americans’ cultural innovation and ability to maintain their humanity in often utterly inhuman conditions.\textsuperscript{80} Dismissing black foodways as remnants of the “slave diet,” Muhammad suggested that blacks in America had no culinary tradition. That which they honored as their dietary inheritance merely represented a perversion of white foodways. This argument, more than others expounded by Muhammad, sparked the ire of black cultural nationalists. Revolutionary poet Leroi Jones, for example, left his wife and children and moved to Harlem, devastated after the murder of Malcolm X in 1965. Increasingly critical of pacifism and integrationism, Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) adamantly defended soul food. In his 1965 essay collection \textit{Home}, he asserted that allegations that a people lack “their own…characteristic cuisine…to me is the deepest stroke, the unkindest cut, of oppression, especially as it has distorted Black Americans. America, where the suppliant, far from rebelling or even disagreeing with

\textsuperscript{79} Ogbar argues that the NOI was one of several “black organizations that were ostensibly pro-black [but] struggled with reconciling their own contradictions with black self-love.” Ogbar, \textit{Black Power}, 11.

\textsuperscript{80} In their study of African American foods and foodways in the context of slavery, Covey and Eisinach argue, “In fact, not only did they subsist, they created flavorful and nutritious dishes by supplementing rations of poor-quality food and leftover scraps with their own enterprise, drawing on the rich African and Caribbean traditions of peppers and spices.” \textit{What the Slaves Ate}, vii.
the forces that have caused him to suffer, readily backs them up and finally tries to become an honorary oppressor himself.”

Though Baraka’s indictment targeted white Americans, the Nation of Islam, too, could be found guilty of the crimes he alleged. In his view, the foundation of Muhammad’s attack on soul food was ludicrous. “No characteristic food? Oh, man, come on.”

**Fasting**

Beyond the divine prohibition of pork and an insistent condemnation of soul food, Muhammad’s dietary laws rendered restraint—the ability to control one’s bodily appetite—as the key to a long and healthy life. The Nation’s emphasis on thrift, hard work, and self-determination attracted a membership base through most of the 1950s of lower- and working-class males, primarily in Northern cities. As a result, Muhammad’s dual emphasis on rejecting unhealthful foods and advancing black economic empowerment through conscientious consumption encouraged a view of racial liberation firmly rooted in aspirations for social mobility and communal autonomy. Perhaps responding to or anticipating the practical objections of those who consumed inexpensive foods as a result of financial necessity, Muhammad urged his followers to eat no more than once a day (unless weak, ill, young, or old) and to fast for two or three days at least once a month. Muhammad called only tangentially on the spiritual merits of fasting as

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81 Baraka, *Home*, 121.
82 Stokely Carmichael remarked upon Malcolm X’s strict adherence to this rule. While visiting Howard University in 1962, Malcolm met with student organizers at an informal dinner gathering. As Carmichael remembered, the NOI minister “declined to eat with us, explaining that for religious reasons he ate only one meal each day. He sat a little apart taking cup after cup of black coffee and our endless questions.” Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell,
a ritual of discipline and devotion, promoting instead the physical benefits of the practice.

“Eat one meal a day or one meal every other day,” he urged, “and it will prolong your life. Do not think that you will starve. On the contrary, you will be treating yourself to life, and a life filled with sickless days.”

Muhammad argued that the human stomach could not withstand a constant barrage of food and that the American way of eating three meals per day with periods of snacking in between resulted in a human lifespan far shorter than the one thousand years humans were equipped to last.

“Eating three and four times a day is to your stomach as dripping water is to a stone or iron,” he warned. “The dripping water will eventually wear the stone and iron away.”

He urged healthy adult believers (with exceptions for pregnant or nursing women) to train their stomachs to require food only once per day with the ultimate goal of limiting food intake to once every third day. Eating too frequently, Muhammad taught, did not give “an enemy (germ) that may be in our food time to die,” a process that required at least twenty-four hours. He testified that after “a few months” of restraint, “I did not have the symptoms of illness at any time. My whole body felt light and my head was clear. I could almost hear insects crawling. (smile).”

While the Bible presented fasting primarily as a ritual of atonement and purification, Muhammad believed that “…fasting, as Allah proscribed for

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*Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (Scribner, 2003), 257. See also Samuels, “Two Ways: Black Muslims and the N.A.A.C.P.,” 39.

83 *Book One*, 22.

84 According to food historian Abigail Carroll, the American practice of eating three daily meals arose as a consequence of the Industrial Revolution. Carroll further contends that cultural eating habits shift with historical context and circumstances. Therefore, Muhammad’s decree that followers eat only one meal each day was not unprecedented, as it first appeared. Carroll, *Three Squares: The Invention of the American Meal* (Basic Books, 2013).

85 *Book Two*, 9.

86 *Book One*, 78-79.
us, is to prolong our lives with better health by eating the right food and not eating too frequently.”\textsuperscript{87} In addition to minimizing the costs and suffering of periods of acute or chronic illness, Muhammad taught that fasting contributed to cognitive clarity and intellectual acuity. He maintained that a legitimate fast of three or more days cleansed the blood, “leav[ing] the person happy and enjoying the results of a healthy body—which is the greatest enjoyment we can have.”\textsuperscript{88} An ailing body could heal itself only if given the opportunity.

Patience and regimentation, then, could save black Americans much in the way of medical bills, prescription costs, and lost work days, all while promoting true, holistic health and spiritual well-being. Long before heated public debates about racialized access to food and healthcare, Muhammad warned of the conflicting interests of healthcare professionals whose livelihood depended on the proliferation of diet-related illnesses. Preventive measures (health care) rather than treatment of symptoms (sick care) offered the best hope for individual longevity and prosperity, as well as the communal health and economic strength of black Americans as a race. In criticizing the nature of privatized healthcare, rather than demanding greater minority access to it, Muhammad anticipated many of the shortcomings and biases highlighted by twentieth-first century advocates of health justice. However, in advocating withdrawal rather than reform as the best means of surviving these interlocking systems of oppression, Muhammad’s analytical foresight allowed the inadequacies of the U.S. healthcare system to become further entrenched, rendering those most economically marginal increasingly

\textsuperscript{87} Book Two, 46
\textsuperscript{88} Book Two, 47.
vulnerable to poor health and social neglect. Of course, to his mind, those who did not follow him were damned to death and suffering regardless. His apocalyptic vision of the looming racial Armageddon thus thwarted the potential for his teachings to be of widespread or lasting benefit to black Americans.\(^{99}\)

In significant contrast to the global Islamic community, Muhammad dismissed the significance of Ramadan, a period of ritual austerity observed by Sunni Muslims during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar year.\(^{90}\) The Nation’s leader disputed the validity of orthodox beliefs that Muhammad (the Arabian founder of Islam, born in the sixth century and considered by Muslims outside the NOI to be the last prophet and Messenger of Allah) received the Holy Qur’an during the ninth month.\(^{91}\) Instead, Elijah Muhammad contended that the process of revelation occurred over a span of twenty-three years, thus rendering faulty the very premise of Ramadan. Moreover, he disagreed with the logic and purpose of fasting during what he felt should be a time of celebration in honor of “the great salvation (Holy Qur’an) that Allah (God) sent to us.”\(^{92}\) He rationalized, “it is not necessary to FAST to get something that you have already received.”\(^{93}\) Finally, given Muhammad’s insistence that his followers regularly eat only once per day, he deemed

\(^{99}\) “Fasting is one of the greatest ‘doctors’ we have. Fasting is prescribed for us in the Holy Qur-an and in the Bible. The Bible does not teach us as much of how good fasting is health-wise, as the Holy Qur-an does.” Book Two, 45. For an overview of the evolution of U.S. health care since the Great Depression, see Beatrix Hoffman, Health Care for Some: Rights and Rationing in the United States since 1930 (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

\(^{90}\) “Fasting,” Book Two, 45-54.

\(^{91}\) Berg, Elijah Muhammad and Islam, 3.

\(^{92}\) Book Two, 51.

\(^{93}\) “Fasting,” “Fasting is Prescribed,” and “One Meal a Day,” Book Two, 45-60. Muhammad continued, “If you can convince me it is necessary to Fast in the month of Ramadan because of Muhammad receiving the Holy Qur-an, or the first revelation of the Holy Qur-an, then I will go along with it. However, since the Qur-an was received over a period of year, I am very much baffled in trying to understand why we should FAST in the month of Ramadan” (51).
inadequate the orthodox ritual of abstaining from food and drink between sunrise and sunset. “...[W]e cannot call this a FAST,” he intoned, “for we are eating the same way that we have always been eating (one meal in that day).”

Muhammad thus disparaged Sunni observances of Ramadan as inadequate.

Respecting the principle, if not the rationale and timing of a period of abstinence and observance, Muhammad called upon his followers to fast in December, lecturing, “it was in this month that you used to worship a dead prophet by the name of Jesus.”

In much the same way that Muhammad called upon the history of American slavery to support his condemnation of soul food, he justified the December fast as a way “to try to drive out of us the old white slavemaster’s worship of a false birthday (December 25th) of Jesus” and thereby contest the Christian religious tradition he charged with encouraging blacks’ acquiescence to their own oppression. Moreover, Muhammad recognized that many behaviors he discouraged or prohibited—namely consuming alcohol and excessive amounts of food, playing games, wearing flashy or festive clothing, and, of course, eating pork—flourished during the holidays. He scorned, “Your everything but right is committed on the 25th day of December in celebrating the birth of a righteous man. But, you are not doing so for righteousness…and the white Christians will send you all the

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94 Book Two, 50.
95 Book Two, 48. In 1970, Muhammad announced a change in this policy, commanding followers to observe Ramadan in accordance with the Islamic calendar. Clegg suggests this was one of several gestures by Muhammad aiming to win the favor, and hopefully the investment dollars, of global Muslims leaders. Clegg, 255.
96 Opie suggests a more practical rationale for fasting in December. He explains, “December was hog-killing time, when slaves received a ‘tolerable supply of meat for a short time’ as they gorged themselves on the parts of the hog that the master’s family refused to eat: chitlins (entrails), ‘hog maw’ (the mouth, throat, or stomach lining), and crackling or pork rinds (deep-fried skin, a by-product of rendering lard)” (23). Thus, the Nation’s period of fasting aligned with the calendar month during which slaves were likely to eat the largest quantity of pork.
whiskey and beer and wine and swine that you want to eat and drink on that day." 97

Christmas, like almost every American tradition, served to prolong black docility by
promoting frivolity and vice.

Deriding the orthodox practice of eating once per day during Ramadan,
Muhammad defined a spiritual fast as a minimum of three days without food. Only then
might the believer be freed from impure impulses and “the desire to do evil against self
and our brothers and sisters.” 98 Nonetheless, he insisted that these ends were only vital
for those “not always in His [Allah’s] presence,” meaning Christian infidels. 99

Muhammad’s conscious decision to set aside the Christmas season as a time of fasting
reflected wider aims to fashion NOI practices relevant to the realities, customs, and
histories of black Americans, practices powerfully conspicuous among non-believers.
This mandate compelled Black Muslims who might otherwise join Christian relatives or
friends during holiday gatherings to abstain from communal meals, further cementing
their break from old customs and established relationships. 100 In pragmatic terms that
spoke to the Nation’s disdain for all things “Christian” (a metonym for “white”) and to its
value for thrift and conscientious consumption, Muhammad commanded his followers to
restrain their appetites during December to “to keep…from worshipp[ing] falsehood,

97 Book Two, 56.
98 Book Two, 49.
99 Book Two, 47.
100 Of course, most African Americans, regardless of their religious beliefs, enjoyed festivities
surrounding the Christmas holiday. Opie notes, “Religious traditions and eating on special
occasions became even more established in African American communities after emancipation.
There are many different churches within most African American communities, but the food
celebrations remained consistent. These events increased the association between soul and food
in black communities: religion nourished the soul while food nourished the body.” Hog and
Hominy, 52.
instead of truth, and to prevent them from spending their money in the falsehood…”

At certain points in the second volume of How to Eat to Live, however, Muhammad offered conflicting messages about the purpose and value of fasting. After reiterating that “FASTING is good for our health and FASTING is good for our spiritual advancement…” he continued, “WE ARE NOT FASTING (in December) we are just abstaining from taking a part with false worship. We abstain from eating meat throughout the month of Ramadan—the month of December.” Though earlier in the same chapter he disputed the very premise of Ramadan, he shortly thereafter urged his followers to fast during a month he likewise refers to as Ramadan before concluding that the act would be not an active ritual but a passive retreat from the “false worship” of Jesus and even Santa Claus. Yet in requiring his followers to alter their behaviors in keeping with the Christian calendar, Muhammad in reality demanded they observe one of the two holiest Christian celebrations, even if that observance must be characterized by reclusion or restraint. In this way, Muhammad’s regulations regarding Christmas reinforced the authority of the white Christian world to shape Black Muslims’ perceptions of time and to influence their conduct and practices. Regardless of Muhammad’s stated rationale for requiring believers to fast during December, the mandate ironically demanded considerable sacrifice and devotion on the part of Black Muslims, all in efforts to renounce the significance of the birth of Christ.

\[101\] In addition to Jesus, Muhammad also categorized “Santa Claus” as “the falsehood.” He made clear that Christianity and its practices were designed by and for whites, commanding, “The Black Man should not take any part in any white people’s holidays not even to Sunday. These are not our days. Please remember this.” Book Two, 52, 57.

\[102\] Book Two, 52.
Hunger Behind Bars

The power of diet to transform the body and liberate the mind was perhaps best received by the growing black U.S. prison population, whose desperation for a sense of self-worth and an explanation for the black man’s plight did not escape Muhammad’s discerning eye. While serving several years in a Michigan prison for draft evasion during World War II, Muhammad witnessed the enormous potential, both in numbers and

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103 Lomax, 18. Given the religious mission of the organization, NOI prison recruitment efforts were far more concerted—and effective—than those of other proponents of black liberation. Muhammad’s emphasis on redemption and white devilry, his patient and personal efforts to communicate with prisoners and demonstrate an interest in their daily wellbeing, and the effectiveness of NOI kin and social networks in promoting conversion won over many black prisoners to the Nation, even if only fleetingly. Moreover, conversion brought with it organizational and institutional support structures that promised to aid prisoners with reentry into society. Though Black Muslims suffered harassment and discrimination at the hands of some U.S. prison officials, Muhammad’s conscious attempts to avoid official surveillance by eschewing active political protest, coupled with his demand that followers abide by the law and reform their deviant behaviors, permitted his followers some leeway to organize. In 1961, Time reported, “in principal U.S. cities, lesser Muslim agents are at work in many a U.S. prison, spreading fanatical doctrines and recruiting new brethren among Negro prisoners.” The piece quoted sociologist C. Eric Lincoln, who commented, “The prisoners are made to order for Muhammad. Nine times out of ten, the potential convert was arrested by a white policeman, sentenced by a white judge, directed by a white prison guard under a white warden. The prison chaplain was white, and he knew when he got out that he could not go to a white church for help. The Negro church was not interested, but there was Elijah waiting.” Qtd. in “Races: Recruits Behind Bars,” Time (31 Mar 1961). Despite its message of black supremacy, the inherent social conservatism and religious trappings of the group also likely made it appear less threatening to prison officials than the overtly antagonistic posturing of the Black Panther Party during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The comparatively short span of the BPP’s existence, as well as its decentralized structure, also made systematic efforts to recruit in prisons less practical. Nonetheless, many BPP members had criminal records, and a good number served time as a result of Party activities. These factors brought many inmates, particularly in the San Francisco Bay area, in contact with the ideology of the Panthers. Some, like Eldridge Cleaver, who converted to Islam temporarily while incarcerated, cited the charisma and ideology of Malcolm X as the Nation’s driving appeal. Once outside prison, however, new recruits could easily fall back into old habits and lifestyles not permitted of Muhammad’s followers. For an in-depth discussion of the Nation of Islam’s recruitment work, and the appeal of Islam more broadly among prisoners, see Hamid Reza Kusha, Islam in America’s Prisons: Black Muslims’ Challenge to American Penology (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2009).
in latent passion and ability, of black prisoners. Familiar with the mindset and frustrations of the incarcerated, Muhammad encouraged his followers to recruit friends, family members, and strangers in America’s penal system. The Nation secured more than four hundred converts among black inmates in 1958 alone. Two years later, *Muhammad Speaks* boasted of this success. “People in prison benefit from Messenger Muhammad’s kindness. Prisoners all over the country are hearing the word of Messenger Muhammad from newspapers; confirmed criminals have changed their ways of life…”

In addition to corresponding with interested prisoners, Muhammad averred that he sent “thousands of dollars monthly” to those abused by the prison system and abandoned, forgotten, or otherwise unsupported by their families or communities. Variousy functioning as religious prophet, political teacher, father figure, and friend, Muhammad developed personal relationships with numerous inmates, many of whom felt inspired by his teachings but did not believe themselves capable of reform or worthy of redemption.

Transmitted through official publications, personal letters, and testimonials, Muhammad’s message about spiritual purification often framed dietary reform as the first step on the path to larger transformations. The Nation tied this quest to maintain

104 Malcolm X commented that convicts were well suited for conversion to the Nation of Islam and noted a fear among administrators of the American penal system regarding “the steadily increasing rate at which black convicts embrace Islam.” X with Haley, 297.
105 Essien-Udom, 192.
107 The magnetism and life experiences of Malcolm X, in particular, spoke to many inmates. As Cleaver explained, “Malcolm X had a special meaning for black convicts. A former prisoner himself, he had risen from the lowest depths to the greatest heights. For this reason he was a symbol of hope, a model for thousands of black convicts who found themselves trapped in the vicious PPP cycle: prison-parole-prison.” In Cleaver’s view, Malcolm represented the primary appeal of the NOI for prisoners. “The Black Muslim movement was destroyed the moment Elijah cracked the whip over Malcolm’s head,” Cleaver argued, “because it was not the Black Muslim
healthful black bodies to other social objectives, equating the ability to control one’s appetite for food with his ability to control appetites for other earthly vices, including liquor, cigarettes, drugs, gambling, and white women, all of which helped to perpetuate his state of material and spiritual poverty.

Like many early converts, Malcolm X first encountered the Nation of Islam while in prison. By his own account a hardened criminal—pimp, drug dealer, hustler, and burglar—Malcolm, known by other inmates as “Satan,” initially learned of the Nation through a letter from his brother Reginald. The missive, he later recalled, “…contained this instruction: ‘Malcolm, don’t eat any more pork, and don’t smoke any more cigarettes. I’ll show you how to get out of prison.’”108 Skeptical of Reginald’s promise but desperate for escape, Malcolm remembered his brother’s order a few days later and refused to eat the pork served in the prison cafeteria. “It was the funniest thing, the reaction, and the way that it spread,” Malcolm mused. “…It was being mentioned all over the cell block by night that Satan didn’t eat pork…It made me very proud, in some odd way.”109 Separating himself from other inmates by shunning the meat of a pig, Malcolm quickly realized the potential for self-definition inherent in one’s food choice. In Malcolm’s view, “One of the universal images of the Negro…was that he couldn’t do without pork. It made me feel good to see that my not eating it had especially startled the white convicts.” Imagining an otherwise fleeting moment of agency as bold defiance of movement itself that was so irresistibly appealing to the true believers. It was the awakening into self-consciousness of twenty million Negroes which was so compelling. Malcolm X articulated their aspirations better than any other man of our time.” Eldridge Cleaver, Soul on Ice (Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968), 58, 59.

108 X with Haley, 180.
109 Ibid.
the basest of racist expectations, Malcolm (telling the story with the hindsight of a Muslim minister) framed this incident as pivotal in the process of his conversion. “Later I would learn, when I had read and studied Islam a good deal, that, unconsciously, my first pre-Islamic submission had been manifested. I had experienced, for the first time, the Muslim teaching, ‘If you take one step toward Allah—Allah will take two steps toward you.’”\(^{110}\) This simple sacrifice, he believed, brought him nearer to the divine.

Muhammad’s deeper message about the superiority of the black man over the white devil appealed to black inmates for several reasons. First, the Nation’s worldview offered an explanation for the transgressions of criminals dismissed by others as lazy, immoral, or socially irredeemable. In espousing the innate evil of white Christians while highlighting the systematic structures responsible for producing a poor, uneducated, disenfranchised, and alienated black urban underclass, the Nation erected for black prisoners a framework through which they could see their own lives as the inevitable creation of a racist society bent on their destruction.\(^{111}\) Malcolm X, for one, often remarked, “Christianity took me to prison and Islam brought me out.”\(^{112}\)

\(^{110}\) Ibid.

\(^{111}\) Malcolm X received this message in a letter from Muhammad. “The black prisoner, he said, symbolized white society’s crime of keeping black men oppressed and deprived and ignorant, and unable to get decent jobs, turning them into criminals.” X with Haley, 195.

\(^{112}\) Qtd. in Samuels, “Two Ways: Black Muslims and the N.A.A.C.P.,” in Meier and Rudwick, *Black Protest in the Sixties*, 40. James Baldwin, an avowed atheist, averred the destructive role of Christianity in the history of American Americans. In his 1963 classic *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin offered an extended discussion of the Nation’s appeal to the downtrodden, explaining, “The struggle…that now begins in the world is extremely complex, involving the historical role of Christianity in the realm of power—that is, politics—and in the realm of morals. In the realm of power, Christianity has operated with an unmitigated arrogance and cruelty—necessarily, since a religion ordinarily imposes on those who have discovered the true faith the spiritual duty of liberating the infidels. This particular true faith, moreover, is more deeply concerned about the
Second, the Nation’s emphasis on resurrecting black manhood—and its corollary view of women as nurturers and child bearers in need of protection—worked to counteract the process of black emasculation many believed to be at the core of black social, political, and economic dislocation. United States prisons housed a constituency highly receptive to this message. Third, Muhammad’s message about black unity and his personal interactions with inmates created a profound sense of community for many who otherwise felt entirely alone, severed from the outside world. Believing from their own experiences that the white system offered them nothing but suffering and punishment, many black inmates were moved by the enigmatic stranger’s interest and soul than it is about the body, to which fact the flesh (and the corpses) of countless infidels bears witness” (45).

113 Muhammad himself experienced this demoralizing state during the Great Depression, as he was unable to find steady work to feed his growing family. Like many others, Muhammad turned to alcohol to cope with his frustrations, initiating a pattern that further hindered his ability to improve his prospects. Clegg, 17. In his study of manhood and the black freedom struggle, Steve Estes notes, “The Muslims ministered primarily to members of poor, urban households: men who often lacked the economic wherewithal to support their spouses as homemakers and women who worked outside of the home, sharing or sometimes shouldering the breadwinner burden. In other words, low wages, unemployment, and underemployment made it difficult for many men in these families to achieve the ideal of patriarchal manhood that typified middle-class American culture in the 1950s and early 1960s.” Estes, *I Am A Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 96. Historian Michael Gomez argues that Muhammad’s perception of the black female body “was primarily as a tool of procreation and reproduction, as farmland exists for the purpose of raising crops. The issue for him, therefore, [was] access—who will have the right to ‘sow seed.’…Women, like fields, are conceived of in terms relating to questions of ownership. Their reclamation was a prelude, a first step, a necessary exercise in preparation for the more elusive goal of establishing usufructuary in the actual land.” *Gomez, Black Crescent*, 324.

114 The NOI’s welcoming of prisoners and ex-convicts forged a sense of belonging for those who had been physically removed from society for real or perceived deviance and criminality, while also encouraging the rest of the Nation’s membership to understand the circumstances that led to the arrest and imprisonment of so many black Americans. One female member described her interactions with ex-convicts who had joined the Nation. “I was working and rubbing shoulders with brothers and sisters who had been incarcerated for murder—sisters who had been in jail for prostitution—but we rolled up our sleeves because we were working for a common cause, and there wasn’t any sense of one being better than the other, and I would never have experienced or learned that if I had not been in the NOI.” Qtd. in Gibson and Karim, *Women of the Nation*, 50.
sympathy for their plight. “People in prison benefit from Messenger Muhammad’s kindness,” *Muhammad Speaks* pronounced in May 1960. “Prisoners all over the country are hearing the word of Messenger Muhammad from newspapers; confirmed criminals have changed their ways of life and they write and seek to get with Messenger Muhammad…” Perhaps just as importantly in winning converts, Muhammad and the Nation strived to meet the earthly needs of prisoners, demonstrating how their lives would improve if they joined the Nation’s ranks.

Finally, and most effectively, the moral code promulgated by the Nation offered all members, even those with the most limited range of options in their daily lives, both the opportunity and the responsibility to act in adherence with their beliefs, and in doing so to defy white supremacy and white capitalist oppression. Again, rhetoric and imagery of appetite spoke to issues beyond diet, likening one’s ability to control the foods he consumed to his ability to restrain his desire for other earthly vices, both those deemed

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116 Baldwin understood how Muhammad’s message about self-respect and uplift spoke to the downtrodden and forgotten. “This is the message that has spread through streets and tenements and prisons,” Baldwin wrote, “through the narcotics wards, and past the filth and sadism of mental hospitals to a people from whom everything has been taken away, including, most crucially, their sense of their own worth. People cannot live without this sense; they will do anything whatever to regain it. This is why the most dangerous creation of any society is that man who has nothing to lose. You do not need ten such men—one will do” (6).
117 Opie suggests that inmates may have found it easier than others to give up pork because they did not pay for their food in the first place. He notes, “The economic reality for meat-eating African Americans living outside the controlled environment of prison walls was very different” (163). This view has merit, but unlike Black Muslims on the outside, prisoners did not have the capacity to make or eat foods not offered to the rest of the inmate population. Citing his own experiences in the penal system, Muhammad believed that prison officials often intentionally contaminated all foods with pork to spite the growing number of Muslim inmates. “While in prison,” he wrote, “the Christians made it hard for us to live as we had been. They deliberately put swine, or the essence of swine, in everything and the assistant warden made mock of it when I told him my followers lived on nothing but bread to avoid swine. He said that even the bread had swine in it.” *Book One*, 54-55.
immoral by Islam and other organized religions and those denounced by Elijah Muhammad and various social conservatives as communally destructive and responsible for the continued plight of African Americans—behaviors perhaps nowhere more prevalent than among black convicts. Certain facets of the Nation’s moral code—for example, strictures against fornication, adultery, alcohol, and other intoxicating substances (vices to which prisoners already had limited access, if any)—spoke more to prisoners’ previous lives than to their current realities.\footnote{118} Therefore, in the context of incarceration, the dietary proscriptions promulgated by Muhammad took on added significance.

Reporting on recent outbursts of violence at Folsom and San Quentin prisons in California during March 1961, \textit{Time} remarked, “In every case the troublemakers were Black Muslims…Behind the big house walls, the Muslims attempt to proselyt\[iz\]e in the mess halls, in the exercise areas, wherever they encounter other Negroes…”\footnote{119} The piece tellingly noted, “When pork appears on prison menus, Muslims disdain it. Mess-hall fighting has been touched off when they have attempted to impose their dietary laws on other prisoners.”\footnote{120} Given regular complaints about the quality and type of meals served and the magnitude of mealtime in the monotony of prison life, food presented a forum to resist the impositions of the most clearly authoritative of all white institutions.\footnote{121}

\footnote{118}{Of course, many prisoners acquired intoxicating agents or profited from the underground prison economy. Malcolm X, for example, used “nutmeg and…other semi-drugs” to achieve a high while serving time for burglary. X with Haley, 177.}
\footnote{119}{“Races: Recruits Behind Bars,” \textit{Time} (31 Mar 1961).}
\footnote{120}{Ibid.}
\footnote{121}{A 1969 story in \textit{Muhammad Speaks}, for example, assailed the inhumane living conditions of prisoners in a Detroit county jail, particularly with regard to meals. “Bowls, plates, spoons, and}
Conscious dietary decisions, namely abstaining from pork or from food entirely, forged new avenues for exercising personal agency, occasions to explain the NOI worldview to other inmates, and means of demonstrating faith and solidarity with other “lost-found members” both within and beyond prison walls.\textsuperscript{122} As a result, Malcolm X estimated that the prison environment actually produced the most ardent, disciplined believers and many of the most passionate ministers, for “convict-converts preconditioned themselves to meet our Nation’s moral laws…As it had happened with me, when they left prison, they entered a Temple fully qualified to become registered Muslims. In fact,” Malcolm claimed, “convict-converts usually were better prepared than were numerous prospective Muslims who never had been inside a prison.”\textsuperscript{123}

Sometimes changes of heart and habit proved temporary. Following the assassination of Malcolm X in February 1965, Eldridge Cleaver, one of Muhammad’s

\textsuperscript{122} In Eldridge Cleaver’s estimation, such little signs or “gesture[s] of unity, brotherly love, and solidarity [were] so meaningful in a situation where Muslims [were] persecuted and denied recognition and the right to function as a legitimate religion.” Cleaver, \textit{Soul on Ice}, 52.

\textsuperscript{123} X with Haley, 297. These efforts to impede the ability of Black Muslim inmates to follow Muhammad’s dietary guidelines surely aimed not merely to punish those who converted but to dissuade others from doing so as well. Certainly the Nation’s teachings about black supremacy, economic up-lift, and moral reform threatened institutions of white supremacy, a key component of which was, and remains, the prison system. X explained, “This is probably as big a single worry as the American prison system has today—the way the Muslim teachings, circulated among all Negroes in the country, are converting new Muslims among black men in prison, and black men are in prison in far greater numbers than their proportion in the population.” X with Haley, 211. Cleaver described the Nation’s success in rehabilitating a prisoner known as Butterfly, who “upon his release from San Quentin…joined the Los Angeles Mosque, advanced rapidly through the ranks, and [became] …a full-fledged minster of one of Elijah Muhammad’s mosques in another city. He successfully completed his parole, got married—to a very black girl—and is doing fine” (10).
most dynamic prison proselytes, left the Nation of Islam to explore other avenues for black liberation in keeping with the teachings of the slain leader and icon. Cleaver’s views of Muhammad’s foodways thus revealed the insight of a former believer disenchanted by the ideology and approach of the NOI, as well as the social perspective of a recidivist felon and the analysis of a keen radical intellectual. In a letter from Folsom prison, Cleaver characterized celebrations of soul food as firmly in keeping with “counter-revolutionary black bourgeois ideology.” No longer espousing what “…Malcolm denounced [as] the racist strait-jacket demonology of Elijah Muhammad,” Cleaver reframed Muhammad’s assertion that soul food represented remnants of the slave diet. Questioning Muhammad’s true agenda in prohibiting soul food, Cleaver called attention to the social benefits and privileges enjoyed by the black middle class that resulted from the inferior quality of foods available to the black masses forced to consume items like chitterlings “from necessity.” Cleaver contended that efforts to claim soul food as a product of black culture or ingenuity in truth merely enabled the black bourgeoisie to reassert their racial authenticity and to pacify the black poor and

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124 Maxwell Geismar, “Introduction,” in Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, xiii. While serving time in San Quentin on convictions of rape and assault, Cleaver led the San Quentin Mosque. He was, in his words, “instructed to impose an iron discipline upon” members of the group, “which had continued to exist despite the unending efforts of prison authorities to stamp it out.” Cleaver believed that the falling out between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad dampened prisoners’ enthusiasm for the Nation of Islam and vocally defended Malcolm X. “Soon I had the ear of the Muslims, and it was not long before Malcolm had other ardent defenders in Folsom [where Cleaver was transferred in 1963 for, in his words, “being an agitator”]. In a very short time Malcolm became the hero of the vast majority of Negro inmates. Elijah Muhammad was quickly becoming irrelevant, passé.” To Cleaver’s mind, Malcolm’s popularity as much as Muhammad’s message contributed to the Nation’s influence among inmates after the late 1950s. *Soul on Ice*, 57, 58.

125 Cleaver expressed these thoughts on soul food in a letter from Folsom Prison dated November 3, 1965, one of “Four Vignettes” published in his *Soul on Ice*. Ibid. 29-30.

126 Ibid., 60, 29.
working classes without addressing their economic oppression—an oppression upon
which their own class privilege rested.\textsuperscript{127} In Cleaver’s estimation, the black middle class
equated “[e]ating chitterlings” with “going slumming,” and only began to endorse the
“mocking slogan” of “Soul Food” once they themselves obtained the means to afford
choicer cuts of meats like steak.\textsuperscript{128}

After his departure from the Nation, Cleaver maintained that Muhammad’s
staunch prohibition of pork, in fact, “had nothing to do with dietary laws.” Rather, in
forbidding NOI members to eat the foods to which they were accustomed and which they
could most readily afford, Muhammad’s dietary laws compelled believers to confront the
forces impeding their ability to access foods favored by white Americans and the black

\textsuperscript{127} Literary scholar Doris Witt echoes Cleaver’s broader point, arguing that soul food “clearly
exemplifies the cultural logic of black middle-class expansion after World War II. Under attack
as assimilationist, many members of the black bourgeoisie were eager to assert their racial
authenticity.” In her complex study, which endeavors “to understand how and why discussions of
putatively private practices such as cooking and eating have been mobilized for political ends,”
Witt argues “that the debate over soul food was constituted by, and in turn helped constitute,
many of the contradictions inherent in post-World War II attempts to revalue or reconstruct black
manhood, especially Black Power efforts to control, contain, and abject the often fungible
category of the ‘feminine.’” Witt, \textit{Black Hunger}, 15, 81.

\textsuperscript{128} Cleaver’s claims, of course, disregarded the widespread popularity of soul food among many
black community leaders, including many leading figures of the civil rights movement. Martin
Luther King Jr. and his colleagues in the SCLC, for example, regularly held meetings at black-
owned Pascal’s restaurant in southwest Atlanta, close to Morehouse College. See Opie, 108-109.
King advisor Andrew Young described his friend’s taste for pigs’ feet in his memoir. Young
recalled that, while travelling through Mississippi during the summer of 1964, King and his
entourage “stopped for gas in the early afternoon at one of the little country stores with one gas
pump that sold everything from fishing licenses to bubble gum. We hadn’t eaten the entire day.
On the counter was a two-gallon jar of pickled pigs’ feet. Martin and Ralph [Abernathy] and
others in the caravan started buying pigs’ feet, one by one. Then Martin just shrugged and bought
the whole jar. They stood around this little country store in the middle of Mississippi eating pigs’
feet like they were going out of style. Martin tried unsuccessfully to get me to eat one.” Andrew
Young, \textit{An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America} (Waco,
against the life-styles and culture of most black people spilled over into the rhetoric against the
civil rights movement.” In many ways, Muhammad’s attacks were misdirected. Ogbar, \textit{Black
Power}, 23.
middle class. According to Cleaver, Muhammad wisely recognized “that when you get all those blacks cooped up in the ghetto with beef steaks on their minds—with the weight of religious fervor behind the desire to chuck—then something’s got to give.” Here Cleaver emphasized the politicizing function of hunger for a specific type or quality of food—in this case steak, with its connotations of class mobility, privilege, virility, and masculinity. He meanwhile called attention to the barriers of experience that prevented middle class black leaders from truly understanding the needs of the masses or willfully conceding some of their own advantages for the cause of racial solidarity. “The system” of white supremacy and black oppression, Cleaver asserted, “has made allowances for the ghettoites to obtain a little pig, but there are no provisions for the elite to give up any beef. The walls come tumbling down.”

To Cleaver’s mind, Muhammad’s prohibition of pork more directly furthered his political and economic agenda, rather than spiritual ends.

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130 Emphasis in original; Cleaver, 30. A few white writers shared the view that soul food had evolved from a history of racialized poverty. In his 1962 exposé, *The Other America*, journalist Michael Harrington wrote of the “chitterlings, ham knuckles, hog maw, pig’s feet, pig’s tail, [and] pig’s ear” so readily available on the streets of Harlem: “This food—and some of it can be fairly costly—is the diet of the poor South, brought North in the migrations. These are the things the white man did not want….So it is that the food becomes a problem to the educated Negro…On the surface, the food is an oddity, a quaintness, and the names might even charm some whites. But this food, like so many of the simple things in Harlem, has the smell of poverty to it…. Unlike Muhammad, Harrington suggested, “there is a curious advantage to having known poverty so deeply: one learns to survive…The Negroes, as members of the hereditary poor, have a much more balanced diet of cheap food, even if it is fat back and greens…” Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1962), 68.
Feeding the Family

The emphasis on black manhood and masculinity in the Nation of Islam—and in the black freedom struggle more broadly—has been widely documented by contemporary observers and historians alike. The Nation promoted a strict division of gender roles, commanding prudence, industry, and militancy of men and subservience, domestic aptitude, loyalty, and motherhood of women. These gendered expectations in some ways reflected the postwar middle-class values of white Americans, and successfully fostered a collective image of thrift, morality, and purity that garnered Black Muslims the respect of many Americans, white and black alike. Given the long and brutal history of black emasculation and its centrality to the project of white supremacy, Muhammad, the Nation’s patriarch, stressed the imperative function of the black family as both an operative economic unit and a stalwart against the corrupting influences of white evil. In addition to shielding against intoxication, fornication, adultery, and immodesty, a strong Muslim household must be supported and sheltered by an upstanding, domineering male head and guided morally by a nurturing, devout, docile female. In exchange for the respect of Muslim men and bodily protection against white male assault, the dutiful Muslim woman cooked and cleaned the home and blessed her family with many healthy black children of Allah. Muhammad’s faithful wife Clara, for example—who, as the

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131 See, for example, Gibson and Karim, Women of the Nation; Steve Estes, “God’s Angry Men,” I Am A Man, 87-106. Estes writes, “As radical as the Nation’s nationalist rhetoric could be, its vision of gender relations was cut from traditional family values advocated by many conservative, middle-class Americans, black and white” (92).
132 Muhammad Speaks included a regular column entitled “Women and Islam,” which addressed the role and responsibilities of female members. Estes argues, “The strict separatism of gender roles in the NOI formed the foundation of a racial uplift philosophy that linked the struggle for liberation directly to a quest for manhood….” (88). See also Curtis, 97.
mother of the movement, carried on its work during the period of her husband’s incarceration—modeled female fidelity and fecundity, bearing eight children worthy of prominent positions in the NOI hierarchy.\textsuperscript{133}

The Nation consciously taught its followers from a very young age to respect and embrace strict gender roles, which placed males in the public realm while relegating females to positions of service and subservience in the domestic sphere. Food work and dining etiquette, of course, constituted a vital part of female training.\textsuperscript{134} Black Muslims predictably acclaimed Muhammad’s own family as a paragon of Muslim virtue. In 1959, The Messenger, an ill-fated predecessor of Muhammad Speaks, featured a photo spread of the household of “Supreme Captain Raymond Sharrieff, son-in-law of Messenger Elijah Muhammad and most trusted aide.” The images of this “typical Moslem family” included an evening meal during which the six members, each appropriately dressed for the occasion, sat around a formal dining table adorned with an ornate cloth. Father, seated at head of the table, and son to his immediate right, each wore a suit and tie.\textsuperscript{135}

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\item By the early 1960s, it was well-known among the NOI inner circle that Muhammad did not reciprocate his wife’s faithfulness. Even amidst revelations of her husband’s adulterous relationships with several of his young secretaries—liaisons that produced numerous illegitimate children—Clara remained with her husband. For an in-depth examination of Clara Muhammad’s role in the evolution of the Nation of Islam, see Rosetta E. Ross, Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights (Fortress Press, 2003), 141-162.
\item Offering what she terms a “black-feminist-inspired approach to food,” Witt writes, “As a central component of both unpaid and paid domestic labor, food preparation is fundamental to the worldwide exploitation of women…We need to be attuned, in other words, to the historical/cultural contexts and individual idiosyncrasies which render a standard materialist framework insufficient for thinking about the experiential dimension of food, cooking, and eating.” Black Hunger, 10.
\item While attending a meal hosted by NOI members, Essien-Udom observed, “…the Muslim hosts, children, and guests paid special attention to formalities. The men dressed in business suits (and quite often some wore vests) for dinner….Table manners were rather formal, and
\end{itemize}
The mother, Muhammad’s eldest daughter Ethel, sat across from her husband in a dress and simple jewelry; their daughters appeared in similar fashion. Aside from a fruit centerpiece, the table held no food. The copy explained, “The Moslems emphasize the importance of the entire family dining together. Father always sits at the head of the table. The Moslem father is greatly loved, respected[,] and obeyed by his wife and children. The Messenger insists that the Moslem father must also fulfill his role as family provider and protector.”

The magazine celebrated the family’s “ultra modern kitchen,” emphasizing the pride of mother and daughter, posed in front of the stove, in preparing wholesome Muslim foods to nourish their family. Lest readers forget, the caption reminded, “Moslem Sisters must keep their homes”—and most importantly, their kitchens—“spotlessly clean at all times.”

The spread also included images of a dinner party, during which the family welcomed an NOI minister and his family from out of town, illustrating why “Moslems are famous for their genuine hospitality. They love to visit with each other and carry their Brotherhood into practice.”

Judging by the photos, the Sharrieff family clearly enjoyed the accoutrements of middle-class life. They entertained guests in a well-appointed living room with a cherry wood coffee table, serving tea and cookies from a

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136 The Messenger (1959), 31. As Essien-Udom explained, “This is what the Muslims mean when they say Islam teaches them not only what to eat but when to eat….They are supposed to eat one meal a day, the dinner meal, with the entire family present” (206).

137 The Messenger (1959), 32. Gibson and Karim write, “The ability to prepare meals that adhered to the NOI’s dietary laws was considered a fundamental requirement for all Nation women….Nation women responded creatively and positively to the dietary laws. They regularly published recipes for meals in the Muhammad Speaks newspaper and became renowned for their bean pie” (52).

silver tea set. The description noted, “Moslems shun the public places of entertainment, but do much entertaining in the quiet and more wholesome atmosphere of their home. Evenings such as this are spent discussing ways and means to help unite our people and enable them to make faster progress economically as well as spiritually.”

Thus, a good Muslim household provided simple, healthful foods and a morally nourishing social environment, a sanctuary from the filth and vice of the Christian world. The Messenger himself often welcomed dinner at his home. He certainly used these occasions to woo potential converts and conduct business with NOI leaders and celebrities such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, but he also extended the honor to notable blacks figures including author James Baldwin and SNCC organizers Cleveland Sellers and Stokely Carmichael. In doing so, Muhammad permitted influential infidels a taste of the opulence and refinement of the Black Muslim world.

The Nation portrayed its leaders and prominent members as exemplary of its broader following, simultaneously esteemed and accessible. Muhammad Ali, the handsome and audacious heavyweight boxing champion, epitomized the strength and

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139 Ibid., 32.
140 Baldwin recalled, “In the dining room, there were two long tables; the men sat at one and the women at the other. Elijah was at the head of our table, and I was seated at his left. I can scarcely remember what we ate, except that it was plentiful, sane, and simple—so sane and simple that it made me feel extremely decadent, and I think that I drank, therefore, two glasses of milk” (65); see also 57-82. Carmichael remarked of his experience dining with Muhammad, “Two more different cultures could hardly be imagined. SNCC was into freedom of individual conscience and democratic participation. The Nation, best we could tell, was authoritarian, dogmatic, and fundamentalist. There was also serious disagreement over what Cleveland Sellers] and I called their narrow nationalism, the blanket condemnation of all white people, the so-called blue-eyed devils. Clearly antithetical to SNCC’s composition, experience, culture, and associations.” Carmichael with Thelwell, Ready for Revolution, 522.
vitality of Black Muslim body politics. His young wife consequently bore great responsibility for nurturing him. In a piece detailing Ali’s diet, *Muhammad Speaks* encouraged Black Muslim housewives to “…make your man happy to be at home by feeding meals with real gusto. A man has to go out and earn that living and women should try to keep him with enough energy to do a superior job.” The article offered Ali’s new bride Sonji, a former model and waitress with a “healthy ‘outdoorsy’ look,” as an expert on healthy eating, a vital position given her new “career…that demands the know how to care for the diet of her athlete husband.” She commented, “It takes planning to look and feel vibrant[,] you must eat the right type of food and prepare it in the proper way.” The author reminded readers, “Not just the budget should be considered, but quality and vitamin content should also play an important part in the buying and preparing of all food.” The couple’s celebrity and financial success proved it worthy of emulation. Women such as Sonji, who converted to the Nation in adulthood, learned recipes for Muslim staples like bean soup and whole wheat bread, as well as new cooking techniques. Other temple sisters frequently shared this knowledge, often visiting the homes of newer members.

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141 According to Clegg’s analysis, “The emphasis on Ali’s strong and dignified physicality points to yet another major theme of NOI discourse on the black body—namely, the idea that blacks had been poisoned by foods, liquor, and tobacco given to them long ago by white American Christian slaveholders.” Clegg, 171.

142 “Recipe to Remember: Wife Tells Secret of Champion’s Energy,” *MS* (11 Sep 1964), 21. Interestingly, Sonji’s opposition to many Muslim customs regarding the role of women contributed to the brevity of her marriage to the champ, which lasted less than a year and a half. Thomas Hauser, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (Simon and Schuster, 1992), 129.

Muhammad often directly addressed black mothers, reiterating their responsibility to provide nutrition for their children, thus fulfilling their feminine duty to promote the physical endurance and spiritual survival of the race. The Messenger repeatedly fused these two objectives, arguing, for example, that bottle-fed infants often later became delinquents because “the baby cannot have too much love for its mother. It loves the bottle that its food is in—food that his mother robbed from the cow’s baby to feed her own baby.”\footnote{Book One, 80.} In Muhammad’s view, the intimate act of nursing and the symbolic significance of a mother’s milk resonated beyond the realm of physical health. Long before debates about the predisposition of black children to lactose intolerance, Muhammad reasoned that humans needed the nourishment of human milk.\footnote{For a contemporary discussion of breastfeeding, see Harold H. Williams (Council on Foods and Nutrition), “Differences Between Cow’s and Human Milk,” \textit{Journal of the American Medical Association}, Vol. 175, No. 2 (14 Jan 1961), 104-107. Though breastfeeding remains a point of heated social contention, the medical benefits of breast milk over formula, and certainly cow’s milk, validate Muhammad’s teachings about the healthfulness of the practice. For a recent iteration of debates about the merits of breastfeeding, see Penny Van Esterik, “The Politics of Breastfeeding: An Advocacy Update” (1995, 2008, 2013) in Counihan and Esterik, \textit{Food and Culture}, 510-530.} To deprive one’s progeny of this most basic need constituted a dereliction of a woman’s duty as a mother and a Muslim.

As the industrial food system produced more and more highly processed foods, Muhammad insisted that his followers not try every item on the market, nor eat everything placed in front of them. “Do not feed your children all sorts of processed foods (such as cereals), if you can give them fresh foods. And do not give your child
ready-prepared food. Prepare it yourself as mother used to do a long time ago.”

Expanding on this historically non-specific nostalgia, he assured, “You were more healthy in those days than you are now. Prepare your child’s food and give it to him…”

Muhammad reasoned that humans need only to eat a few pure, beneficial foods to live a long, robust life. Too much variety, and certainly too great a quantity, placed hazardous stresses on the human stomach. Cows and pigs graze, eating constantly, even past the point of satiation. Humans must not, Muhammad ordered. “Never say that you will eat anything,” he chided. “Say that you will eat the best of things.”

Muhammad implored black Americans to eat a diet heavy in fresh fruits and permitted vegetables, “pure milk,” butter, whole grain bread, and small navy beans. Fruits must not be cooked. “Do not try eating all the different types of foods, lest you will be found dead one morning in your bed. And, try to eat fresh foods and not stale foods. Cook it done, and not half done. Just done and that is all…”

To learn these skills and techniques, adults expected girls as young as seven to join their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers in the kitchen. Beyond the home, individual temples often required Muslim sisters, especially elder women, to perform official kitchen duty for the congregation, preparing dinners such as baked fish and whole wheat rolls for sale to the community. Those who failed to appear when scheduled for kitchen duty could, at the

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146 Elijah Muhammad, “The Benefits of Eating Once a Day,” MS (3 Sep 1965), 11.
147 Ibid.
148 Book Two, 65.
149 Ibid., 67.
150 Tate, 21.
151 Ibid., 58.
discretion of the “Sister Captains” who supervised, face expulsion from the Temple for up to four months.\textsuperscript{152}

The Muslim Girls Training and General Civilization Class (MGT-GCC), established by Wallace Fard Muhammad shortly before his disappearance in 1934, instructed Muslim girls and older female recruits in proper methods of homemaking, childrearing, and food preparation. As a girl during the early 1970s, Sonsyrea Tate attended these meetings at nine o’clock on Saturday mornings at Washington’s Temple No. 4.\textsuperscript{153} Sometimes classes focused on specific lessons, such as one Tate recalled dedicated to an hour-long discussion of “the nutrients of the navy bean.”\textsuperscript{154} In addition to cultivating domestic aptitude, the MGT-GCC also policed the bodies and appetites of Muslim females, weighing them from the age of thirteen two times each month and issuing a fine of one cent for every pound they carried beyond what Nation officials deemed acceptable.\textsuperscript{155} Though for Sonsyrea “M.G.T. class was like a tea party with real people and real talking instead of stuffed animals and toy dishes,” she recognized that the older women treated the classes “more like a meeting, an opportunity for them to talk

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 49.
\textsuperscript{153} As suggested by the title of Sonsyrea Tate’s memoir, the author was known in childhood as Sonsyrea X. Her family left the Nation of Islam in the late-1970s in favor of Sunni orthodoxy. Sonsyrea Tate, \textit{Little X: Growing Up in the Nation of Islam} (San Francisco: Harper, 1997).
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 90.
\textsuperscript{155} Essien-Udom, 158; Ogbar, 31. In their study of NOI women, Gibson and Karim offer anecdotal evidence suggesting that these strictures and regulation were not always followed or enforced. They contend, “It is probable, and indeed likely, that women did eat more than one meal per day. Images of Nation women in the \textit{MS} newspaper confirm…comments about the diversity of Nation’s women’s bodies. More important, they contest the notion that dietary laws were rigorously enforced and that women were punished for overeating. Nonetheless, women were expected to be able to cook and prepare meals that adhered to the dietary guidelines published by Elijah Muhammad. This was considered particularly important for women seeking marriage” (53).
about things that bothered them,” including financial troubles at home.\textsuperscript{156} Sonsyrea
attended one meeting where an older sister complained that her husband had placed his
obligation to reach his weekly sales quota of \textit{Muhammad Speaks} above the well-being of
his family, squandering the month’s rent to purchase the papers he had been unable to
sell.\textsuperscript{157} The young girl recounted the distressed wife’s admission that though “she could
go along with budgeting their money to allow only five dollars a week for groceries like
Elijah Muhammad suggested,” she resented the stringent and often impractical
expectations of Nation leaders clearly out of touch with members’ lived realities.\textsuperscript{158}

Indeed, despite the Nation’s efforts, the sexual revolution and emerging movements
for feminism and gay liberation repeatedly called into question cultural assumptions
about sex and gender. Seminal works such as biologist Paul Ehrlich’s \textit{The Population
Bomb} (1968) and Frances Moore Lappe’s \textit{Diet for a Small Planet} (1971) heightened
public awareness about the potentially disastrous prospects of feeding the earth’s
mushrooming human population, as the United States was only one of many nations to
have experienced a postwar baby boom.\textsuperscript{159} Certainly aware of these global developments,
Muhammad and the Nation quickly mobilized to counteract the findings of scientific
research, particularly in the realm of demography. The 1960 approval of the birth control
pill by the Food and Drug Administration reinforced the Nation’s perception of technical

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\textsuperscript{156} Tate, 92.
\textsuperscript{157} Clegg suggests that Muhammad similarly placed his loyalty to his teacher Fard above the
material needs of his family, as he gave his “‘last dime’ while family members were ‘sitting at
home hungry’” (26).
\textsuperscript{158} Tate, 93.
\textsuperscript{159} Paul R. Ehrlich, \textit{The Population Bomb} (Ballantine Books, 1968); Frances Moore Lappe, \textit{Diet
for a Small Planet} (Ballantine Books, 1971).
\end{small}
innovation, haphazard regulation, and government-funded research as clear and pressing threats to the survival of the black race.\textsuperscript{160} Food access and family planning were intimately linked in Muhammad’s view, a fact evidenced by the lengthy condemnation of contraception contained in \textit{How to Eat to Live}.\textsuperscript{161} Officially, the Nation viewed scientific predictions and emerging medical innovations as sinister ploys to expedite black annihilation. One \textit{Muhammad Speaks} article contended that “[e]xperts in this area…point out that if anything, there is a world food surplus. It is distribution of food that is needed. And this can only be made manifest by the maturation and fruition of peoples [sic] liberation fronts, through-out the world—fronts Washington essays to cripple, or exterminate or sterilize.”\textsuperscript{162} Having long maintained that American foodways and food systems worked to control African Americans politically and economically by starving or crippling them physically, the NOI viewed issues of food access and population control as two fronts of the same attack.\textsuperscript{163}

In August 1969 \textit{Muhammad Speaks} printed a cartoon calling attention to the relationship between poverty, diet, and what the artist portrayed as a federally-sanctioned

\textsuperscript{160} Curtis points out, “much of the NOI’s discourse…anticipated the presentation of birth control as black genocide by black power and black consciousness advocates in the late 1960s and early 1970s” (122).

\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Book One}, 83-87.

\textsuperscript{162} “In light of these developments,” the article continued, “Black people in America might well become prepared for what has to a great extent already begun in Africa and Asia. Anti-population legislation for instance…has been rigidly enacted in Ghana and India in line with U.S. demands.” Leon R. Forrest, “They Burn and Bury Food, Waste Land, but Want: THE PILL for the Hungry,” \textit{MS} (17 Oct 1969), 8.

\textsuperscript{163} Likewise, \textit{Muhammad Speaks} reported that as “[t]errifying as it may seem, plans are now on the drawing board, and more are daily being concocted, whereby so-called ‘temporary’ sterilants’ will be secretly added to food and water supplies.” See “Bare Diabolical Plot to Curb Black Births by: Planting Sterilizing Chemicals in Water Supplies?” \textit{MS} (17 Oct 1969), 8.
project of black genocide. The image portrayed five thin black women and a hairless black child, all barefoot and in tattered rags, waiting in line for a bowl of soup. A heavy-set white male, whose disgusted face looks away from the needy group, dishes out the soup from a large cauldron. He confers with another domineering white man whose top hat, adorned with a star and stripes, marks him as Uncle Sam. A single line of text explains the scene: “It’s called ‘the Poor People’s Special’—tomato [sic] sauce, beans, and ground up birth control pills.” The sketch conveyed this complex of racist forces as overtly gendered, picturing only black women and children queued for government handouts and only white men tasked with distributing the suspect aid. Tellingly, the paltry offering of tomato sauce and beans attracts the needy but does not promote their health. The concealed birth control pills reflected a dominant white view of black female sexual promiscuity and maternal irresponsibility, while also depicting official manipulation of black desperation. More pointedly, the drawing illustrated the Nation’s broader contention that hunger and malnutrition operated in tandem with more active, targeted efforts to eliminate black Americans.

In the same issue, *Muhammad Speaks* reflected on the purpose and consequences of poor neonatal nutrition in African American communities, charging that the federal government’s failure to intervene in the growing epidemic of childhood malnutrition was a scheme to eliminate the progeny of America’s poor, specifically its black poor. The article quoted one physician in California’s Contra Costa county, who surmised, “Genocide is not a thing of the past, nor is it of foreign origin… Failure or refusal to tell

women and girls of the life and death importance of food nutrition is directly responsible for the infant mortality rate among the poor….Black people—exactly what U.S. rulers want. They don’t want healthy poor babies.”

While many organized religions, including Sunni Islam, prohibited the use of contraceptives, Muhammad and his followers believed that the federal government and medical professionals actively encouraged and enabled poor black women to use birth control with the goal of reducing, and ultimately eliminating, the black population. They believed not only in the sanctity of motherhood and traditional gender roles, but also in the superiority of the black race and the vile intentions of white devils, who produced, sold, and profited from the pill while perpetrating the suffering and death of Allah’s chosen black people. Rather than fund or revise much-needed welfare programs like food stamps, Muslims believed that white government officials preferred to encourage black women to trust the pill to reduce their plight, thereby situating the very existence of black children as a societal ill that added to the burdens of the black poor. President Richard Nixon’s decision in 1969 to name Republican Representative Donald Rumsfeld of Illinois, an adamant opponent of

166 Many black women, including organizer Fannie Lou Hamer of SNCC, had very valid cause to fear the motives of whites in positions of medical authority. Hamer had been forcibly sterilized during a procedure to remove a small stomach cyst, and was thus victim of a so-called “Mississippi appendectomy.” See Danielle L. McGuire, At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power (Random House, 2010), 156-173.
167 K. Malin, “Scientist proves overpopulation outcry is screen for genocide: How the Earth can feed billions more people,” MS (21 Nov 1969), 6. Malin reported, “Recent developments in the United States exemplify the genocidal effect of combining the racist and Malthusian theories for application to a country’s domestic but ethnically diverse population. The poor in this country, which ethnically are largely a Black group, are being urged to use birth control…Food, education, housing and health needs of the poor are simultaneously ignored or left unsatisfied by the government.”
federal poverty programs, to head the Office of Economic Opportunity sparked outrage among NOI leadership. *Muhammad Speaks* predicted that Rumsfeld would spend funds “which could be better used to feed the millions of straving [sic] Black people…to hire the poor to be trained in methods for their own destruction.” Muhammad’s Muslims believed that contraception was not only against Allah’s will, but that it also cooperated with white aims to destroy the black race by divorcing sexual intercourse from its divine purpose of procreation, thereby acerbating sexual immodesty with injurious effects for the sanctity of the black family.

**Feeding the Nation**

Muhammad’s dietary gospel, and his black body politics in general, neatly complemented the Nation’s broader mantra of black self-help, industry, and thrift. Though Muhammad never directly worked to advance his rhetorical demands for a separate black state in the Deep South, he maintained throughout his life that realization of his vision of black independence mandated black ownership of land and the ability to produce. Like many twentieth-century black leaders, Muhammad traced this need to the period of Reconstruction and the unfulfilled promise of the federal government to provide freedmen with “forty acres and a mule.” Land, Muhammad declared, must be the foundation of freedom, for the landless remained beholden to landowners for work,

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169 For related *Muhammad Speaks* reports on white efforts to destroy black families, see Ogun Kakanfo, “Free-Divorce-for-Poor Program Same as Free-Birth-Control-for-Poor Folks” (3 Oct 1969); Lonnie Kashif, “Steps Up ‘Pill’ Timetable To Wipe Out Black Race” (21 Oct 1969), 9; “Administration Demands More Birth Control Funds” (31 Oct 1969), 14.
170 Other NOI business ventures included, for example, clothing and shoe factories and outlets.
171
shelter, and, most importantly, food. In Muhammad’s eyes, a man who could not feed his family was no man at all.

The Messenger’s personal history of sharecropping and physical deprivation surely amplified his belief in the urgent need to own land. Muhammad struggled with alcoholism and depression amidst long periods of unemployment after leaving Georgia for Detroit in 1923. These experiences frustrated his hopes of providing for his growing family during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Forced to turn to public assistance like millions of other Americans during the Great Depression, Muhammad realized that his family’s physical survival faced immediate peril. In addition to offering an explanation for his plight as a poor black male abused and exploited by white society, the Nation of Islam offered Muhammad distant hopes of establishing financial stability and securing autonomy, not only for himself and his family, but for black Americans in a broader sense. Convicted of draft resistance in 1942, Muhammad began serving his sentence at

Stokely Carmichael arrived at this conclusion while organizing in Mississippi: “…[W]e should not lightly dismiss that forty acres and a mule either….Of the many, many betrayals and disappointments Africans had suffered at the hands of this republic, I began to see how Congress’s failure to make good on its promise of those forty acres to the freedmen was arguably the most far-reaching and injurious. No doubt about it.” Carmichael with Thelwell, Ready for Revolution, 288. Baldwin, too, “could not deny the truth” of Muhammad’s contention that “no people in history had ever been respected who had not owned their own land….For everyone else has, is, a nation, with a specific location and a flag….It is only ‘the so-called American Negro’ who remains trapped, disinherited, and despised, in a nation that has kept him in bondage for nearly four hundred years and is still unable to recognize him as a human being. And the Black Muslims, along with many people who are not Muslims, no longer wish for recognition so grudging and (should it ever be achieved) so tardy. Again, it cannot be denied that this point of view is abundantly justified by American Negro history.” The Fire Next Time, 73.

Patricia Sullivan, Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era (University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Clegg argues, “Muhammad’s agrarian background and experiences in depressed Detroit during the 1920s and 1930s were directly tied to his later attraction to the Nation of Islam as a vehicle of financial uplift as well as spiritual and racial empowerment. In fact, thousands of African Americans were attracted to the movement because of its willingness to address both eschatological and earthly concerns.” Clegg, xii, 17.
the Federal Correctional Institution in Milan, about forty miles southwest of Detroit. Outraged by prison personnel’s refusal to accommodate the dietary needs of Muslim inmates, Muhammad nevertheless marveled at the facility’s 300-acre farm, manned by prisoners who tended livestock such as cows, pigs, and chickens.\textsuperscript{174} The farm enabled the prison to be self-sufficient, encouraged prisoners to work to feed themselves, and reminded black inmates, in particular, of their racial roots in the soil of the Deep South.

In 1947, one year after his release, Muhammad purchased a farm in White Cloud, Michigan, about 180 miles northwest of Milan. Assisted by weekend volunteers from Chicago, two Muslims families operated the farm, growing wheat, beans, and vegetables; raising chickens; and producing milk and butter.\textsuperscript{175} By 1956, the NOI operated several large farms comprising one thousand acres in Michigan, which supplied milk, eggs, and other dairy products to the Nation’s many food enterprises.

Muhammad’s teachings inspired the admiration and pride of his followers, attracting outside attention as well. While the Nation’s militant rhetoric and visible race pride sparked white fear and hostility, the economic manifestations of its separatist, black supremacist ideology occasionally evoked resentment, even retaliation by white leaders and communities cognizant of the threat posed by black-owned businesses to institutions and ideologies of white supremacy. This proved especially true in the Deep South. An April 1961 letter addressed to the “Black Devil” Muhammad by J.B. Stoner of the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, for example, vowed to drive members of the

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 94.
\textsuperscript{175} Essien-Udom, 167. Clegg disputes this date, claiming that the Muslims purchased the farm in 1945, before Muhammad’s release. See Clegg, 99.
Nation out of Atlanta by orchestrating a boycott of the NOI grocery store in operation there. “You Black Muslims claim that you will take America away from us Whites by 1970, but you are dead wrong,” Stoner insisted. “Instead, I am going to put you Congo jungle bunnies out of business…by the end of 1962 at the latest…[M]y secret agents are mobilizing Christian darkies against your infidelic niggers.”176 In addition to pressuring non-Muslim blacks to boycott NOI businesses, Stoner stated that the Christian Knights would contact white housewives and merchants in Atlanta, urging them to instruct their black employees to avoid the NOI mosque and to refrain from patronizing its store. The missive threatened to use media, particularly the black press, “to expose [Muhammad] and scare Christian darkies away…” Charging black businesses with mismanagement and poor sanitation, Stoner insisted, “Niggers couldn’t get along without the White stores, so they must smarten up and BOYCOTT the Muslim nigger store….” This bigoted tirade suggested that, to the minds of some white Southerners, religious differences could be manipulated to serve as a more significant cleavage than class or even race. While Muhammad promised that Islam could unify blacks in America around their “original” religion, opponents like Stoner anticipated that “the good Christian darkies will stand with the Klan against you White-hating Mohammedan infidels.”177 Fortunately, for the sake of the Nation’s economic viability, Stoner’s predictions proved wrong.

Because he initially brought little capital or connections to his business undertakings, Muhammad relied heavily on black patronage and investment, particularly

the financial support of his disciples, to propel his projects to fruition. In soliciting contributions, Muhammad and other Nation ministers harped on themes of historical black oppression, race pride, and self-help to inspire believers (most of whom were working class) to give money they truly did not have to spare. A December 1961 issue of *Muhammad Speaks*, for example, implored readers to donate to Muhammad’s program to “GIVE THE POOR SO-CALLED NEGROES A CHANCE TO DO FOR SELF!”

Muhammad called for the Nation’s many followers and supporters to “Help Us To Buy Farm Land To Raise Food To Feed The Poor Of Our People.” This ad, in particular, situated a program of emergency food assistance to “FEED HIS HUNGER” as the first of three “Steps toward helping the so-called Negro.” After months of student-led sit-ins across the South to integrate public accommodations and just weeks before James Meredith integrated the University of Mississippi, Muhammad asked, “Do we not look ignorant begging white America to accept us as equal members of their society without having one square foot of earth that we call our own?” Maligning the tactics and aims

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178 “Give the Poor So-Called Negro a Chance to Do For Self!” *MS* (Dec 1961), 9. Muhammad often used the term “so-called Negro.” During a speech in Atlanta in 1961, Muhammad explained, “I say so-called Negro because you are not a Negro. You are members of the Asiatic Nation, from the Tribe of Shabazz. There is no such thing as a race of Negroes. This is a false name given you during slavery by your slave master, who, after robbing you completely of your knowledge of your homeland, your parents, and your culture, called you ‘Negro’ or Nigger because that word means something that is ‘NEUTER’ or ‘NEUTRAL.’ Therefore you are now a little group of people on this earth who stand out because you have become naturalized by ignorance of yourself and your own kind, and of your enemy. You are ‘neutral’…not united with yourselves, among yourselves, nor are you united with your own people of your own world.” Qtd. in Lomax, *When the Word is Given*, 115.

179 Elijah Muhammad, “Mr. Muhammad Speaks: Some of This Earth That We Can Call Our Own!” *MS* (15 Sep 1962), 11. Clegg contends, “…historical timing was a factor in the appeal of Elijah Muhammad. The Southern ‘massive resistance’ campaign against integration along with de facto segregation in Northern and Midwestern cities fed the flames of black discontent and made millenarianism and black separatism, even in their most extreme forms, an almost natural
of liberal integrationists and their repeated demands for inclusion in American society, Muhammad insisted, “Without some of this earth for a home that we can call our own, rest assured we will forever be 20,000,000 begging slaves at the door of some nation. We the black people of America should be ashamed of ourselves to go sit in the white businesses to force them to serve us.” Until they acquired some land, Muhammad reasoned, black Americans would remain captive to the whims of white society, relegated to the status of servants or peons rather than self-respecting, self-possessed men and women. In the meantime, Muhammad admonished, “We are like hunter dogs whom the hunter is tired of and wishes that his dog would go and hunt food for himself.” Rather than appreciate and reward “the poor, foolish dog” for its loyalty, the hunter resented his dependence, as “every time his master sits down to eat, there he is—standing in the door begging with his tongue hanging out and wagging his tail.” Had the dog instead “gone into the woods looking for a meal,” Muhammad promised, “he would not have had to suffer the hatred, kicks and curses of his master.” This metaphor underscored the demeaning, dehumanizing relationship between one who is hungry and the person on whom he depends for food.

In light of his mantra that Black Muslims must eat the right foods to live a pure and productive life, Muhammad considered it imperative that his followers not only have access to these foods, but also have the capacity to produce them independently so as to

response for many African-Americans living under some of the worst conditions in the industrialized world.” An Original Man, 135.
180 Muhammad, “Mr. Muhammad Speaks: Some of This Earth That We Can Call Our Own!” MS (15 Sep 1962), 11.
181 Ibid.
free their bodies from reliance upon Christian food producers who sought ceaselessly to poison them. Black Muslim food enterprises and NOI food politics enabled and encouraged Muhammad’s followers to work for racial separation and personal and communal empowerment simultaneously. Armed with a enduring vision of black grandeur, Muhammad erected a vertically-integrated food system that enabled followers to do as he instructed in farming, processing, selling, cooking, and serving the rations upon which their bodies and their souls relied. In 1968, the NOI purchased 4,500 acres of farmland in Bronwood, Georgia, about 150 miles southwest of Muhammad’s hometown of Sandersville. In addition to a dairy plant, aptly-named Temple Farms even included a rudimentary canning operation. A potent symbol of black economic power in the Old South, the venture proved financially disastrous, as it was too large to manage effectively, especially given the dry Georgia soil. The combined losses for the Bronwood venture and the Nation’s two other farms reached $682,000 during their peak operation in 1972. Muhammad nonetheless indicated the desire to expand these holdings in the Southwest, perhaps near his winter retreat in Phoenix, Arizona, and by 1975 Muhammad’s organization owned an estimated 15,000 acres of farmland.

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182 The Bronwood farm, now known as Muhammad Farms, is still in operation. David Jackson, “On Georgia Farm, Nation Of Islam Happily Seeks To Replow Old Ground,” Chicago Tribune (12 Mar 1995).

183 Former NOI minister Ibrahim Pasha of Atlanta explained in the mid-1990s, “We called it a canning factory, but it was just a bunch of people lined up passing cans.” Qtd. in Ibid.

184 Ibid.

Building Community

The need for access to the healthy, unprocessed foods advocated by Muhammad shaped a captive clientele for businesses run by and for Black Muslims. In response to this created need—and to utilize the produce from the Nation’s farm holdings—the organization and many individual followers founded and operated an array of food-related businesses, including restaurants, bakeries, butcher shops, processing plants, and even a tractor-trailer company to transport foods produced by NOI farms and factories to dispersed points of distribution. Muslim food businesses constituted a significant part, and arguably the most visible front, of the Nation’s business empire by the late 1960s. Quite purposively, these enterprises advanced Muhammad’s objectives in crucial ways, exhibiting the possibilities of black self-help while situating Muhammad as a leader and the Nation as an organization that created concrete opportunities and visible improvements in black communities. Black Muslim food industries encouraged followers to construct and patronize independent food operations to create income and employment in black communities; generated funds and spread the Nation’s message about racial separation and black uplift; and furthered black independence through land ownership and control of food production, necessary to sustain black Americans until the demise of

186 Lomax observed, “Muslim men are watched…and must engage in some kind of gainful employment. They are encouraged to go into small business whenever possible; they are assured of patronage from their fellow Muslims. A number of Negro businessmen have been attracted to the Nation of Islam because it provides them with a ready source of customers…The temple restaurants employ scores of Muslim men and women, thus decreasing the ranks of their unemployed.” Lomax, When the Word is Given, 80.
Creating businesses, Muhammad reasoned, would not only produce income for Black Muslims—and by extension, the Nation’s leadership—but would also create jobs to stem the rising tide of black unemployment. In July 1947, the Nation established the Shabazz Restaurant at 31st Street and Wentworth Avenue in Chicago, an intersection that would later house Eat Ethel’s Pastries, a bakery managed by Muhammad’s eldest daughter during her early adulthood. Chicago’s Temple No. 2 also operated a grocery and meat market. According to his son Warith Deen Muhammad, the Messenger realized early on that believers and non-believers alike must see that the NOI platform could produce tangible improvements for their families and neighborhoods. In many cases, individual temples constructed and controlled these businesses, unions that directly associated the NOI’s religious values with its business acumen. Years later, Warith fondly recalled the work his family performed at the grocery store, where, given the Nations’ financial constraints and despite his own lack of experience, the Messenger himself butchered the meat. He learned on the job, referencing charts and diagrams, asking suppliers for cutting demonstrations, and soliciting feedback from customers. “He, himself, with his own apron, had his children in the business with him,” Warith reminisced. “I used to do everything from slaughtering the chicken to cleaning and picking it, and even to cooking and serving it and then ring up the money in the cash

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188 Ibid.
register. We did all those things.”

Building upon this early ideological and practical foundation of industry and entrepreneurship, Muhammad directly oversaw the establishment of many of the Nation’s more successful enterprises following his release from prison, particularly during a period of rapid expansion after 1952. In these settings, Black Muslims could be confident that the food they purchased would be permissible by Allah and that their money would help to support and employ black Americans in respectable work advancing the collective interests of the black community. An ad published in *Muhammad Speaks* in January 1962 promised “the **Best** Meals Begin Here At Temple No. 2 Grocery & Meat Mkt….Your Table Deserves The Best!” In addition to touting the quality and variety of goods sold, which included prime cuts of kosher beef and lamb, liver, Grade A chickens, and “Farm Fresh” vegetable and fruits, the store urged readers to “shop in comfort among friends” and to “make jobs for your own by patronizing your own!” Moreover, all black customers could be sure that they would not be barred by law or custom from enjoying the same quality of goods or services afforded to white customers, a point especially significant as the Nation’s following and business enterprises spread to the South.

As the Nation’s business holdings grew, Muhammad retained a heavy, active hand in daily affairs. Muhammad’s most dedicated pupil, Malcolm X, recalled,

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190 W.D. Muhammad, *As the Light Shineth From the East*, 20.
191 Essien-Udom, 72, 167.
192 *MS* (Jan 1962), 7.
“[Sometimes] I would ride with him as he drove on his daily rounds between the few grocery stores that the Muslims then owned in Chicago. The stores were examples to help black people see what they could do for themselves by hiring their own kind and trading with their own kind and thus quit being exploited by the white man.” Despite his prominence and personal wealth, Muhammad insisted on demonstrating his leadership and working-class sympathies by performing menial tasks while managing NOI enterprises. Malcolm thus saw Muhammad “as an example to his followers whom he taught that idleness and laziness were among the black man’s greatest sins against himself.” From the beginning, Muhammad believed that the manner in which his followers presented and carried themselves and the orderliness and precision with which they ran their affairs could compel non-believers to consider the merits of his divine wisdom. Malcolm, who spent countless hours talking with and learning from Muhammad, recalled one particularly effective pedagogical moment: “One day, I remember, a dirty glass of water was on a counter and Mr. Muhammad put a clean glass of water beside it. ‘You want to know how to spread my teachings?’ he said, and he pointed to the glasses of water. ‘Don’t condemn if you see a person has a dirty glass of water,’ he said, ‘just show them the clean glass of water that you have. When they

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194 X with Haley, 236.
195 As late as 1969, Muhammad’s personal secretary reported that the Messenger, 72 years of age and in declining health, still made day-to-day decisions about the operations of the Nation’s farms, bakeries, supermarkets, and restaurants. Anne Ali (Secretary to Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Messenger of Allah), “What Manner of Man is Mr. Muhammad?” MS (31 Oct 1969), 19.
196 X with Haley, 236.
inspect it, you won’t have to say that yours is better.”

Black journalists such as Louis Lomax and Alex Haley commented on the social function of Muslim eateries, particularly official temple restaurants. In Lomax’s view, the restaurant and the temple, “usually located close together, in the heart of the Negro ghetto,” functioned as “the nerve centers of work and worship.”

Malcolm X worked from Harlem’s Temple No. 7 Restaurant, a half block from the temple itself. Lomax reported in 1963, “he [Malcolm] can be seen there almost any time conducting the financial affairs of the movement and holding press conferences.” NOI leaders typically secured convenient locations for temple restaurants, thus allowing ministers to move easily between the two settings while encouraging believers, as well as outside customers, to associate the good food and service of the restaurant with the principles and morals taught at the temple.

In a foodscape described by Amiri Baraka as “hundreds of tiny restaurants, food shops, rib joints, shrimp shacks, chicken shacks, [and] ‘rotisseries’ throughout Harlem that serve[d] ‘soul food,’” the Temple No. 7 Restaurant constituted a haven for believers and other health-conscious diners.

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197 Ibid.
198 Two decades later, the *Chicago Tribune* estimated, “At its height in the 1970s, court records show, Elijah Muhammad’s Nation owned farms in three states, a newspaper that earned annual profits of $3 million, a Chicago supermarket that cleared $325,000 on sales of $1.7 million, a string of small bakeries and cleaners, some 40-odd Chicago-area rental properties and the controlling interest in the Guaranty Bank and Trust Co. on the South Side.” David Jackson and William Gaines, “The Power And The Money: Farrakhan Prospers As Ventures Flounder,” *Chicago Tribune* (12 Mar 1995).
199 Lomax, 19.
200 Ibid., 20.
201 Baraka described the abundant soul food landscape of Harlem in the mid-1960s. “There are probably more restaurants in Harlem whose staple is fried chicken, or chicken in the basket, than
Whereas most ministers vowed to live in poverty (and, in fact, many followers lived at or below the poverty line), the restaurants offered fine appointments like linen tablecloths and chandeliers that required no added expense or personal indulgence, all while drumming up business. One ad billed the Temple No. 7 Restaurant “the dining place of African students, diplomats, and even royalty…[t]he only spot in New York where you can enjoy your dinner in an African atmosphere…with a Nile River setting…beneath the Pyramids and the Sphinx.”

British photojournalist and *New York Times* editor Gertrude Samuels concurred: “Even the juke box seems toned down. It is like a stage set.” Described by one contemporary scholar as “a deviant organization…subject to public scorn and ridicule,” the Nation of Islam worked to “consolidat[e] the recruit’s allegiance” by creating alternative social “environment[s]” outside those “where substantial pressures operate to erode this allegiance.”

Community and clientele served as points of distinction as much as the food itself.

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any other place in the world. Ditto, barbecued ribs—also straight out of the South with the West Indies, *i.e.*, Africans from farther south in the West, having developed the best sauce for roasting whole oxen and hogs, spicy and extremely hot.” Other offerings included “a breakfast of grits, eggs and sausage, pancakes and Alaga syrup—and even tiny booths where it’s at least possible to get a good piece of barbecue, hot enough to make you whistle, or a chicken wing on a piece of greasy bread. You can *always* find a fish sandwich: a fish sandwich is something you walk with, or ‘Two of those small sweet potato pies to go.’…It is never necessary to go to some big expensive place to get a good filling grease...” Though Baraka acknowledged the presence of Muhammad’s followers in Harlem, he described their “bean pies” as “really separate” from the foods he named. Baraka, *Home*, 122-123.

202 *MS* (Jan 1962), 16.


Muslim families often dined at temple restaurants before or after religious services. Muhammad always required his followers to dress modestly and neatly, but coming from or heading to the temple, restaurant patrons dressed in their best, heightening views of Muslims as pillars of black respectability and conservative morality, “the men dressed in black, the women in flowing white, and the children wearing pins or buttons to let the world know of their commitment to The Honorable Elijah Muhammad.” In these settings believers could be easily identified, not only by their attire and demeanor, but also by their language and conversation. Haley wrote of his time at the Temple No. 7 Restaurant, where he often convened with Malcolm X, “…I met some of the converts, all of them neatly dressed and almost embarrassingly polite. Their manners and miens reflected the Spartan personal discipline the organization demanded, and none of them would utter anything but Nation of Islam clichés.”

As a Muslim girl growing up in Washington, D.C. in the late-1960s, Sonsyrea X relished the sense of community, belonging, and pride she felt during visits to the NOI-owned Shabazz Restaurant, which included a health food store and fish market and employed three of her uncles. She delighted in the service and ambiance, as well as the sense of family fostered by “Muslim brothers in white chef jackets and hats [who] served our plates from behind a cafeteria counter.” Moreover, she knew upon entering that she could order anything on the menu with the confidence of Muhammad’s approval and

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205 Lomax, *When the Word is Given*, 19.
206 Haley, “Epilogue,” in *X with Haley*, *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 441. In an oblique reference to Muslim businesses, another contemporary observer noted, “The fact that the organization can provide a full social life furthers isolation from non-Muslims.” Howard, 36.
207 Tate, 67.
without having to justify her food choices to non-Muslims as she did at school. Sonsyrea regularly recalled the lessons taught by her family, her teachers, and the older Sisters at the MGT-GCC when dining at the restaurant. “Since we had so many restrictions on what we could eat, [the restaurant] served fish loaf instead of meat loaf, brown rice instead of white rice, and brown rolls made from 100 percent whole wheat flour instead of white rolls made from bleached flour, which we were taught had been stripped of all its nutrients.”

The restaurants naturally adhered to Muslim dietary laws and Muhammad’s nutritional guidelines, serving items such as beef and lamb sausages, a variety of cakes, and the “famous bean pie,” which Lomax characterized as “something of a gourmet’s delight in the Negro community.”

Muslim establishments never sold pork, alcohol, or cigarettes, but they also urged diners to replace seemingly benign foods—particularly

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208 Ibid. As Tate’s vivid recollections illustrate, Muhammad’s dietary guidelines and food economy (unlike other of his pronouncements) spoke directly to Muslim children as well, charging them with personal responsibility for embodying his teachings and performing their beliefs. Fourteen year-old Anne 3X, for example, wrote to Muhammad Speaks in December 1963 to express how Islam had improved her life. Tellingly, the central changes she noted involved her diet. She reported that since accepting “the teachings of the Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad,” she endeavored to eat “the right foods instead of just eating anything to satisfy [her] hunger,” examined labels to determine what she was putting into her body, limited herself to a single meal per day, and engaged in “a three day fast once a month to clean up [her] mind and clean out [her] stomach.” Lamenting “I cannot express myself as fully and as plainly as I would like to about Islam,” the teenager pointed to her behavioral and attitudinal changes—including bathing more frequently and refraining from profanity—as evidence of Islam’s profound influence on her life, the inspiration for her newfound desire to purify her mind and body. Food choice, in her view, was the most drastic change required by Muhammad as well as the most meaningful and demanding. Anne did not indicate when, how, or why she “accepted the teachings of the Most Honorable Elijah Muhammad.” See “Girl Counts Her Blessings Since Joining With Islam,” MS (20 Dec 1963), 7.

209 Lomax, 20.
starches like white bread, white rice, and white potatoes—with preferable alternatives.\(^\text{210}\)

Though the NOI’s demographic composition began to transition in the 1950s from older Southern migrants to young adults born and raised in urban ghettos, many members nonetheless maintained a taste for the culinary heritage of the South.\(^\text{211}\) The Nation’s food enterprises, particularly its restaurants and bakeries, demonstrated great creativity and innovation in producing foods, particularly sweets, which satisfied these tastes without violating Muhammad’s decrees. In addition to the omnipresent bean pie, which evoked the flavor of the forbidden sweet potato pie (which, of course, Muslims couldn’t eat “because Elijah Muhammad said they had too much starch and gas for our bodies”), Tate fondly recalled enjoying “carrot fluff, a sweet blend of soft carrots, brown sugar,

\[^{210}\text{Tate, 44. Muhammad did not categorize starches as sinful but taught that they would bring illness upon those who ate them. In this way, Muhammad’s dietary directives framed poor health as evidence of moral shortcoming or spiritual disobedience. Sonsyre Tate recalled of her girlhood, “I knew that when we did little bad things, little bad things would happen to us, so I tried to stay good.” When she, her brother, and her young uncles “caught the chicken pox a few months earlier, I knew it was because we had sneaked to eat potato chips and chewing gum, which were prohibited from our diet. I made up my mind that if Allah forgave me and let me get over those awful, itchy, ugly bumps that popped up all over my body, I wouldn’t sneak and eat potato chips anymore.” In this case at least, Sonsyre traced her physical ailment, one in fact not related to diet, to her “bad” decision to eat “junk” foods of poor nutritional value. Tate, 99. Muhammad encouraged the view that all physical ailments and health conditions revealed disobedience on the part of the afflicted. He argued that those who followed his directives precisely but still fell ill suffered “due to wrong mental food that they are eating, which has an effect on their digestive system. To get good results from eating the proper foods, we must have good thoughts.” Book Two, 11. In this way, Muhammad insulated his dietary laws against charges of ineffectiveness. In cases where good food had not staved off ill health, Muhammad argued that negative spiritual or mental energies (not flaws or holes in his nutritional wisdom) were to blame.\]

\[^{211}\text{A typical convert in 1950 was thirty to sixty years of age and had not progressed beyond the eighth grade. Clegg judges that Chicago converts “generally lived a life at the bottom rungs of the city’s socioeconomic ladder, working at unskilled labor and indulging in such activities as gambling, petty crime, and premarital and extramarital sex.” By 1956, “increasing numbers of professionals and educated individuals began to join the movement.” By the 1960s, NOI membership consisted primarily of males between seventeen and thirty-five years of age. Clegg, 100, 111, 115, 251.}\]
nutmeg, cinnamon, and enough eggs to make it fluffy like mashed sweet potatoes.\textsuperscript{212}

The Nation’s food enterprises thus encouraged diners “to eat to live” while demonstrating the manner in which businesses could strive to improve the health of individuals and communities while still remaining profitable. More importantly, it revealed that many who tried to follow the letter of Muhammad’s dietary laws nonetheless maintained a sense of connection to and longing for the flavors and textures of Southern “soul,” while also revealing to non-Muslims who patronized these businesses because they sold quality, tasty foods at cheap prices, that Southern-inspired dishes could be adapted to new needs and contexts. Certainly the gustatory pleasures of familiar-tasting dishes enticed diners, but, as Baraka noted, the emotions and feelings they evoked held great significance as well. Words could not adequately convey the flavor of sweet potato pie to one who had never partaken of it, for to Baraka’s palate, the Southern staple “taste[d] more like memory” than the pumpkin pie to which it was often compared.\textsuperscript{213} Desserts like carrot fluff and bean pie offered, in Muhammad’s view, more healthful alternatives, but the efforts of Muslim cooks to recreate the flavors of the South demonstrated a subtle resistance of Muhammad’s efforts to eradicate Southern culture from black life.

Muhammad generally permitted local ministers a good deal of entrepreneurial liberty in supervising these businesses and encouraged their profitability by allowing managers to keep a portion of the proceeds for use at their temples. Even so, Lomax

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 67. Curtis writes, “Different communities used different ingredients…[indicating] that the practice of Elijah Muhammad’s system of ethics among his followers was not monolithic in nature. Bean pies could be made with white sugar in one city and with brown sugar in another. One could follow certain ethical guidelines while ignoring others, depending on one’s own sense of values and the culture of control and enforcement in one’s local Muslim community” (107).
\item \textsuperscript{213} Baraka, 121.
\end{itemize}
estimated, “the bulk of the funds raised in the temple itself flow on to the movement headquarters in Chicago.”\textsuperscript{214} Muhammad retained the role of general manager and treasurer of the Chicago holdings, whose operators remained directly accountable to him or his proxy. In the early 1960s, the daily minutiae of NOI business dealings were subject to the final discretion of Malcolm X, “Elijah’s roving ambassador.”\textsuperscript{215} Muhammad’s family likewise maintained a strong, visible presence in the Nation’s financial enterprises, and by 1962 four of Muhammad’s sons managed one or more of the almost fifteen enterprises owned and run by Chicago’s Temple No. 2.\textsuperscript{216}

Beyond contributing to or patronizing official NOI enterprises, Muhammad implored followers to do for themselves by owning and operating businesses that improved black residential and commercial areas.\textsuperscript{217} Malcolm X reported that by 1961 such businesses had sharply increased in number, “demonstrat[ing]…what black people could do for themselves—if they would only unify, trade with each other—exclusively where possible—and hire each other, and in so doing, keep black money within the black communities, just as other minorities did.”\textsuperscript{218} Muhammad’s followers demonstrated shrewd salesmanship and recognized that customers sought excellence and value, especially important as Muslim shoppers could choose from among an increasing range of businesses catering to their needs and principles. NOI literature regularly featured and advertised Black Muslim ventures, simultaneously espousing the merits of Muhammad’s

\textsuperscript{214} Lomax, 79.  
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{216} Essien-Udom, 72, 167.  
\textsuperscript{217} Lomax, 79-80.  
\textsuperscript{218} X with Haley, 303.
lessons about discipline, thrift, cleanliness, and uplift and drumming up more business for his organization and its followers. The Shabazz Restaurant, which by 1964 had locations in Chicago, Harlem, and Long Island, boasted of its excellent customer service, cleanliness, and congenial atmosphere. A *Muhammad Speaks* feature story also touted the satisfaction of NOI restaurant employees, who found dignity in their work. After twelve years as a waitress, Eva June Morgan took a job at the Shabazz Restaurant, which she characterized as “the most pleasant and ideal atmosphere I’ve yet worked in.”

Such an endorsement encouraged readers to frequent businesses that not only hired black workers but that treated them well, subtly implying that such an environment produced superior service and a better overall experience for customers. The nearby Shabazz Market meanwhile attracted shoppers following its expansion and remodeling in September 1964 with a Saturday grocery giveaway. Touting the store’s “modernistic new front” and redesigned layout, *Muhammad Speaks* assured readers that the improvements extended beyond the superficial, for “Muslim management has also devised ways to bring to patrons a broad assortment of fresh foodstuffs of the highest quality and at the lowest cost of any markets in the community.”

The renovation of the Shabazz Market, the largest and most modern of the NOI’s stores, was but one stage in what the Nation promoted as “a steady development and improvement of retail outlets under the direction of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad with even more far-reaching

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219 Qtd. in James E. Mason, “Portrait of a Cateress: Waitress Worked 12 Years, Then Discovered Shabazz,” *MS* (29 Dec 1963), 22.

plans under consideration.”

**Investing in the Future**

In 1964, Muhammad introduced his Three-Year Savings Plan. Insisting that black poverty stemmed, in part, from wasteful spending on immoral vices and unnecessary material goods, the Messenger urged all Black Muslims to contribute $10 each month toward a fund to purchase additional farmland and establish industries to feed and clothe the black nation. In September, the first month of the plan, Muhammad reminded readers of the possibilities of pooling community resources by minimizing frivolous expenses. An ad for donations to the Economic Department of Temple No. 2 framed agricultural production as a prerequisite of black independence. “Buy farm land to grow food for self and children; timber, and clay land to build homes. We should, even now, buy up some of the surplus food from the government to help feed our own hungry…Your nickels, dimes, and dollars will do all this under the economic program of Muhammad. Without the farmer, there is no civilization.”

A week later, Muhammad instructed, “Put these millions of dollars to work buying farm land, since this is the basis of independence. Raise cotton, corn, wheat, rye, rice, chicken, cattle, and sheep.” Urging blacks to follow the example of entrepreneurial whites and to borrow from and mirror their technological advances, he reiterated that economic independence necessitated that a people be equipped to own and work the land. “[Y]ou must first go to the farms, till the earth, and produce your own food. Build stores and warehouse to preserve your food throughout...

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221 Ibid.
222 “PREPARE FOR THE NEW WORLD of the Black Nation,” *MS* (3 Sep 1965), 14.
the seasons. We just are not trying to do anything for self.” To this end, Muhammad pushed for the establishment of small-scale farms, collectives, canneries, and even poultry processing plants as tools for economic self-determination, cultivation of healthy food sources, and refutation of stereotypes and stigmas of black poverty, indigence, and reliance on public assistance. As the Messenger and his chief apostle Malcolm X each well knew, financial reliance on white employers or the government foretold devastation for black families. In his 1965 *Message to the Blackman in America*, Muhammad reminded followers, “The economical way to use the money you save is first to buy farm land and produce your own food. You can raise enough cattle, sheep, cows, and chickens by the thousands if you try following our program” “to fight against poverty and want!” He admonished, “It is a disgrace for us to have all this present trouble—standing around begging, quarreling and fighting with slave-masters over something that we can do for ourselves if only given a chance. This chance can be had if you go about it in the right way.”

Though Chicago and New York housed the bulk of Black Muslim establishments, Muslim restaurants, bakeries, and other businesses sprouted up in cities across the

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224 Curtis, 97.
225 Malcolm X believed that the emotional stress and social stigma of his childhood destitution following the suspicious death of his father directly led to the disintegration of his family during the Great Depression. “Some kind of psychological deterioration hit our family circle and began to eat away our pride,” he remembered. “Perhaps it was the constant tangible evidence that we were destitute. We had known other families who had gone on relief. We had known without anyone in our home ever expressing it that we had felt prouder not to be at the depot where the free food was passed out. And, now, we were among them.” His mother was subsequently institutionalized and Malcolm and his six siblings dispersed to foster homes. X with Haley, 18.
227 Ibid., 197.
country. Black Muslims in Los Angeles, for example, ran the Oasis Restaurant and Shabazz Restaurant (the latter of which boasted “delicious kosher dinners” and homemade pies), as well as the Shabazz Market. Proclaiming that “everyday is bargain day,” the Shabazz Market urged shoppers to “put the ‘BEST’ under your ‘VEST’ and ‘INVEST’ YOUR DOLLARS with YOUR OWN KIND,” promising, “we treat every customer like royalty!” Newark and Cleveland, too, each offered a Shabazz Restaurant & Bakery, promising the “the best in Muslim cuisine,” including “the original bean pie,” as well as “a variety of Danish pastries.” Muslims in Detroit ran the Shabazz East Restaurant, which offered live jazz and catering services and the O&C Super Market, which sold “eggs from our own chicken farm (Muslim).” It assured patrons that “watermelons from our Georgia farms” would be “coming soon,” perhaps supplied by United Brothers Produce Inc., a local distributor of crops harvested from Muslim farms. J&R Bakery and the Quon-Tiki Delicatessen likewise targeted Muslim clientele, asserting a “dedicat[ion] to serving only those foods designed to help keep you healthy.” Meanwhile, other businesses catered to Black Muslims, promising kosher meats and organic produce. Establishments such as the Oasis Food Market and Brothers Fish & Chips, though not openly Muslim by association or ownership, targeted Muhammad’s followers by regularly advertising in *Muhammad Speaks*. Other Muslim-owned businesses in Chicago included the Shabazz Bakery and Coffee Shop, the Shabazz Supermarket (which sold pastries and breads from the Shabazz Bakery and fruits and vegetables from NOI farms), as well as the aptly named “Your Supermarket,” which opened in December 1967 specializing in “delicious bean pies,” carrot pies, cookies,
bread rolls, and other sweets. Many of these businesses purchased goods and ingredients from other Muslim-owned entities, including Alamin Produce Company.

Many of these businesses regularly advertised in *Muhammad Speaks*, which often printed news stories that directly furthered their interests. For example, in January 1966 the paper reported charges by Walter E. Fauntroy, director of the Washington Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), that chain stores in Chicago, New York, and Detroit served inferior quality foods, especially produce, while charging an average of 22 percent more at stores located in black neighborhoods than those in predominantly white ones. Of course, Muslim food businesses occupied the ad space surrounding such stories, as well as Muhammad’s popular “How to Eat To Live” column. These tactics aimed to entice non-believers to patronize Muslim businesses, widely lauded for their cleanliness, pleasant service, quality ingredients, and fair prices.

The Washington Shabazz Restaurant, “located in one of the dingy sections of town” that housed “small black-owned businesses,” earned the respect not only of average residents but also of the neighborhood “pimps, prostitutes, and dope dealers.” Despite its blighted surroundings, Sonsyrea X remembered that during the early 1970s “[t]here was always a long line, Muslim and non-Muslim, waiting to get inside the restaurant.”

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228 According to Lomax, many official NOI businesses were “called ‘Shabazz’ restaurants after Malcolm X whose ‘restored’ Arab name is Shabazz…” (79). Your Supermarket was established in Chicago in December 1967. See “Something for Black People to Be Thankful For,” MS (28 Dec 1973), 17.
231 Tate, 67.
232 Ibid.
Beyond her youthful delight in dining out and having the opportunity to choose her meal, Sonsyrea credited the restaurant’s success with providing a sense of self-worth to its employees and to Muhammad’s followers more broadly. She took pride in the fact that the Nation’s brothers “had done a great job of carving out a nice, spanking clean place for us to dine.” On a personal level, Sonsyrea felt that this public esteem, coupled with the NOI’s financial success, counteracted the feelings of separateness, alienation, and insecurity she experienced while living and moving among non-Muslim blacks. As the restaurant grew in popularity and success, she explained, “It seemed like people were beginning to respect our Nation because black people were beginning to respect themselves….I didn’t feel insecure about being special now because a lot more people in the black community were supporting our efforts through buying our newspapers and fish products and visiting our stores and restaurants.” These material gains, she believed, helped improve perceptions of the NOI in the black community more broadly, as outsiders “respected our independence and industry even if they disagreed with some of the other, finer points of our program.” In Tate’s mind, as people came to admire the Nation’s ingenuity, they would begin to take seriously Muhammad’s teachings in a deeper sense. “People who used to laugh at us were eating at our restaurant, sucking in the aroma of our special recipes for bean soup and Whiting fish, browsing through our newspapers they bought on their way in.” Because the Nation’s business enterprises exemplified its spiritual beliefs and racial worldview, they introduced unassuming

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233 Ibid.
234 Ibid., 45.
235 Ibid.
patrons to Muhammad’s teachings. Tate, for one, “thought people were beginning to realize that the Muslim way was the right way and that life could be this good for all black people if they only listened to the Messenger.” In this way, performing Islamic values could, in Sonsyrea’s view, serve a proselytizing function as well.

Fare readily identified with the Nation, particularly bean pie, attracted non-Muslim patrons to Muslim-owned businesses, thereby creating vital occasions for propagation and proselytizing. One young woman named Amidah recalled joining the Nation after an encounter with staff at an NOI bakery. An NAACP youth leader and Harlem native, the woman was already somewhat familiar with the Nation of Islam. “I was on 125th Street [in Harlem], and I stopped by one of the stores owned by the Muslim brothers. I didn’t know that when I went in,” she said, “but I was interested in buying the bean pie because that was pretty popular in Harlem; everybody knew about the bean pie, and even if they didn’t care about the [Nation’s] philosophy, everybody wanted the bean pie.” After a challenging conversation with “one of the brothers in the store,” she realized that the Nation demanded the kind of discipline the NAACP lacked. Drawn in by the Nation’s sweet concoction, an invention inspired by Muhammad’s prohibition of sweet potatoes and its strong endorsement of navy beans, Amidah met and had the occasion to interact with Black Muslims on their turf. The bean pie in this instance served not merely as a commodity produced and sold by a Black Muslim business, but also as a tasty incentive that attracted an outsider into the social and religious realm of the organization. There the pie symbolized members’ dedication to Muhammad’s teachings.

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236 Ibid., 68-69.
237 Qtd. in Gibson and Karim, 56. The authors use a pseudonym for this source.
and exemplified the innovation spurred by his vision of black economic self-sufficiency and cultural autonomy.238

Young Sonsyrea likewise recalled the sense of belonging, community, and morality inculcated in the Nation’s progeny by rituals of food preparation and consumption. Born in Washington, D.C. in 1966, she explained, “Most of the families in our Nation were poor, but we learned that killing and stealing from one another were not options. We were taught that if you had one green pea, you split that pea and shared it with your brother. If a mother had only five dollars, she should put hers with a sister’s dollars to buy groceries together.” Most easily understood in the language of food sharing, this community ethos reflected not simply a pragmatic approach to group survival but a politicized stance in opposition to the oppressive tactics of the white power structure. “In the Nation I had learned that one of the white man’s tricks would be to starve us and deprive us and turn us against one another.”239 Like the children portrayed in Muhammad Speaks cartoons, young Sonsyrea recognized the divisive, corrupting power of hunger and learned as a student at the University of Islam and in the Muslims Girls’ Training and General Civilization Classes to appreciate the Nation’s capacity to resist systemic subjugation by promoting economic autonomy and provisioning nourishment for the black masses.

The Nation’s approach to food and food security acknowledged the degenerative influences of hunger to drive people to criminal acts and the capacity of community food security and communal bread-breaking to build a sense of togetherness by soothing

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238 Ibid.
239 Ibid., 4.
hostilities and bridging social divides. As suggested by a cartoon published in October 1969, the salience and simplicity of this message could be easily understood and transmitted by all of Muhammad’s followers, even young children.\(^{240}\) The first frame shows a Muslim boy in a black tee shirt as he leaves the NOI-owned “Your Super Market” with a bag of apples. Two other black boys, with dirty faces, clenched fists, and patched clothing, lie in wait behind a fence. When the Muslim approaches, one of the deviants hollers, “Hey, boy! Give us some of those apples…we’re hungry!” Nonplussed, the Muslim youth graciously hands two apples to each of the bullies, referring to them as his “brothers.” The hungry boys’ dumbfounded reactions imply that their coercive tactics have not previously elicited such a willfully generous response. Their aggression quickly turns to baffled gratitude. One stammers, “Gee—uh—thanks, but we’re not your brother[.] You’re no kin to [us].” This comment explains the boys’ belligerent approach to securing food and their bewilderment at the Muslim boy’s sympathetic response to their hostility. Divorced from any sense of black consciousness, the poor boys failed to see the potential of cooperation and community to address shared needs rather than turning against each other in solitary pursuit of singular survival. The Muslim boy explains, “You’re black and I’m black! That makes us brothers! So, instead of planning to do evil to each other, we do good and show brotherhood!” The two hungry boys quickly recognize these as the words and actions of a member of the Nation. “Right!” the benevolent youth confirms. “Mr. Muhammad teaches that a brother is not a brother unless he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.” The last frame shows

\(^{240}\) Cartoon, \textit{MS} (24 Oct 1969).
the would-be thieves carrying the entire bag of apples, apparently accepting the invitation “to [c]ome to Muhammad’s mosque and learn all about it!” In addition to portraying the need for young believers to follow and enforce Muhammad’s dietary decrees, this parable positions Muslim youth (specifically males) as capable proselytizers and food as an accessible and revealing forum for spreading Muhammad’s message not merely about diet and health, but about racial pride and black consciousness in a broader context.

Muhammad encouraged his followers to adhere to the law, earn a living, and resist earthly temptations not only to prolong their lives and promote their spiritual redemption but, more practically, to assert their collective purchasing power as a marginalized minority of Muslims within the context of a politically and socially marginal black urban underclass. Muhammad asked his followers, “Did you not know that if you would stop eating pig and the food that you should not eat; stop eating three and four times a day and stop drinking whiskey, beer and wine, you would save much in the way of money? …[Y]ou, also, will be adding money to your savings of hundreds and thousands of dollars,” he insisted. “You will be depriving those pig raisers and tobacco growers and alcoholic distilleries of millions of dollars that they rob you of which hasten you to your grave.”

Muhammad thus asserted the prerogative of poor and working-class African Americans in cities like Chicago and New York to influence the type and quality of their food as well as the conditions under which they lived and ate. Said Muhammad, “There are a lot of people who think their appetite is their God; but we, by

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241 *Book Two*, 43.
nature, have been made to control ourselves if we want to.”\textsuperscript{242}

**Plentiful Paradoxes and Paradoxes of Plenty**

Though in keeping with his deep-seated suspicion of the U.S. government and of white industry, science, and medicine, Muhammad’s insistent critiques of white food producers and regulators expanded upon growing public concerns about the dangers of the postwar food system’s “paradox of plenty.”\textsuperscript{243} During the 1950s, U.S. food industries rode the wave of national prosperity. Experimentation with the chemical properties of food yielded an unprecedented variety of highly processed, relatively inexpensive consumables.\textsuperscript{244} Muhammad contended that the money saved at the checkout paled in comparison to the added costs of refined sugars, starches, and farmed meats in terms of human health and environmental degradation, especially for the poor.\textsuperscript{245} In demanding that his followers transform their personal lives and intimate relationships, Muhammad’s dietary guidelines also spoke directly to white food industries that profited from the exploitation and weakening of black bodies and black communities. He denounced the motives of American food producers and distributors, as well as medical professionals and pharmaceutical companies that profited from those who fell ill from poor diet, for

\textsuperscript{242} *Book Two*, 39.
\textsuperscript{244} Levenstein, 109.
\textsuperscript{245} Years before its academic articulation, Muhammad alluded to the framework of “environmental justice,” the premise that a society’s most politically, socially, and economically vulnerable populations are also most likely to be exposed to the hazards of environmental degradation. For a useful reading of the theory’s application to a twenty-first century natural disaster, see Alexa Weik von Mossner, “Reframing Katrina: The Color of Disaster in Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke,*” *Environmental Communication* Vol. 5, No. 2 (June 2011), 146-165.
engaging in what he deemed a lucrative, thinly veiled project of black genocide.²⁴⁶

Scorning white flour and other processed grains “robbed of all…natural vitamins and proteins sold separately as cereals,” Muhammad proclaimed, “…the white race is a commercializing people and they do not worry about the lives they jeopardize so long as the dollar is safe. You might find yourself eating death, if you follow them.”²⁴⁷

Asserting that “…the poison that is now in our food and in our drink…[was] placed there deliberately by the enemy [white society],”²⁴⁸ Muhammad likewise warned against the consumption of chickens raised in “filth” or milk contaminated with tuberculosis; the questionable nutritional value of canned meats and vegetables; the dangers of fertilizers and preservatives; the use of fluoride, chloride, and sodium “which may have a bad effect on our brains and our human reproductive organs”; and the pesticide DDT, widely sprayed in the postwar period, which “can, over the long years, help shorten the span of our lives.”²⁴⁹ Muhammad marveled, “Allah has blessed America with the best of foods

²⁴⁶ As previously noted, Muhammad’s dietary manifesto included multiple diatribes against birth control pills, highlighting his view of the interplay between food, reproduction, food and drug industries, federal agencies, and the future of the black race. In Book Two, Muhammad dismissed the utility of medications in ameliorating diet-related health problems. “Now they want drugs to give you life. Drugs cannot prolong our lives if we are going to eat and drink the wrong food and drink; and drink polluted water. The very water we drink is polluted from filth…. [The government] deliberately causes this drink and food to be impure” (21). In lieu of medical or pharmaceutical remedies, Muhammad urged the ill to fast. “Fasting is a greater cure of our ills—both mentally and physically—than all of the drugs of the earth combined into one bottle or into a billion bottles… [Allah (God) in the Person of Master Fard Muhammad] has told me there is no cure in drugs and medicine. And this, the world is now learning. We can take medicine all of our lives until it kills us, but we are still ailing with the same old diseases.” Book One, 19.

²⁴⁷ Book One, 6.

²⁴⁸ Book Two, 59.

²⁴⁹ Book Two, 73, 107, 108; Book One, 11, 50, 107, 108, 114-117. Muhammad taught that chemicals like DDT “may not take instant affect [sic] on us, as it does the insects, but it can, over the long years, help shorten the span of our lives. We live in a world commercializing on
and with good water that is plentiful. America has been blessed with everything she could desire, but after all of these blessings, she is ungrateful and turns good things into bad…”

Muhammad assigned blame to the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for enabling large corporations and organized interests to overrun federal responsibilities to protect the welfare of consumers. Muhammad Speaks often commented on the enormous profit potential of modern agriculture, the role of government subsidies in enriching white landowners while forsaking black farmers, and the physical and economic exploitation of black farm workers. In January 1962, for instance, the paper reported comments by Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman indicating that “farmers may realize about a billion dollars MORE in NET INCOME this year,” noting that 95,000 farm workers had lost their jobs in the past year to the mechanization of cotton harvesting in the South. The USDA’s part in enriching powerful whites at the expense of the black poor reinforced the Nation’s perception of the government as essentially corrupt, a characterization that deemed futile any efforts to

everything where money is involved, and this has speeded production of everything but human lives, in order to fill the demands of the people.” Book One, 108. 
250 Ibid., 93.
251 Political scientist Don F. Hadwiger’s contemporary analysis of the relationship between federal agriculture policy and federal poverty programs remains remarkably salient. In 1971, he explained, “In addition to class and occupational discrimination” in the programs and policies of the USDA, “…there existed explicit, pervasive, and unremitting race discrimination, both in employment and in services provided…. [Civil rights] leaders felt the hunger problem was most urgent and most salient. They believed [USDA Secretary Orville] Freeman had the power to provide immediate substantial relief and that, since he was a liberal, he could be persuaded to do so. They were wrong.” See Hadwiger, “The Freeman Administration and the Poor,” Agricultural History 45 (1971), 21-22.
253 “Farmers Profit at Expense of Farm Workers,” MS (Jan 1962), 17.
work within the system to change a society wedded to racism.\textsuperscript{254} In his autobiography, released a few short years later, Malcolm X remarked on the magnitude of interest group politics in the scramble for favors and resources in the nation’s capitol. “The farmer, through his lobby, is the most government-subsidized special-interest group in America today,” Malcolm reasoned, “because a million farmers vote, not as Democrats, or Republicans, liberals, conservatives, but as farmers.”\textsuperscript{255} Implicitly recognizing the correlation between voting strength and economic fortitude, he continued, “Why, there’s a Beet Growers’ Lobby! A Wheat Lobby! A Cattle Lobby! …The government has departments to deal with the special-interest groups that make themselves heard and felt…”\textsuperscript{256} Alluding to his growing discontentment with Muhammad’s political inaction, Malcolm concluded, “There ought to be a Pentagon-sized Washington department dealing with every segment of the black man’s problems.”\textsuperscript{257} Though explicitly insular and officially uninvolved in national politics, the Nation continuously castigated the wastefulness of federal policies, in 1969 disparaging the “idleness” encouraged by $3.75 billion worth of USDA measures intended to curb production and support market prices of commodities such as wheat, cotton, and feed grains.\textsuperscript{258} Unsupported by government

\textsuperscript{254} Jack Temple Kirby, \textit{Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960} (Louisiana State University Press, 1986); Pete Daniel, \textit{Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures since 1880} (University of Illinois Press, 1986). The implications of these changes and SNCC’s efforts to counteract the role of hunger in the disfranchisement of black farmers is the subject of Chapter Two.

\textsuperscript{255} X with Haley, 362.

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 363.

subsidies, the Nation deemed USDA measures to curtail production amidst a growing yet underexposed epidemic of American hunger an ugly expression of lawmakers’ and administrators’ misplaced priorities. *Muhammad Speaks* pronounced in one headline, “They Burn and Bury Food, Waste Land, but Want.” Of course, without active political protest or negotiation to demand reform, Muhammad’s insightful observations and valid criticisms affected no change in federal policies.

Removed from formal channels of power, Muhammad’s food programs and politics encouraged his followers to work for racial separation and personal and communal empowerment simultaneously. Because all living beings must eat, his dietary decrees directly applied to all black Americans, young and old; wealthy, comfortable, working class, or poor; incarcerated or free; Muslim or not. Dismissing specific foods as physically unhealthy, socially destructive, or spiritually damning, Muhammad set forth a mechanism by which he demanded adherence to his social platform and theology, which could be tested on a daily, public basis. Furthermore, a separatist food politics promised to benefit the black community by keeping money in the hands of Muslim and other black-owned businesses and limiting the amount of harmful agents entering the bodies of black Americans.

**Black Capitalism**

Beyond these practical economic functions, the many Black Muslim food operations and industries, particularly restaurants and eateries, played a vital role in building the Nation community and in spreading its message about black unity—and, of

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course, “how to eat to live”—to black Americans outside its ranks.\textsuperscript{260} Jesse Jackson of the SCLC, for example, regularly patronized the Salaam restaurant on South Cottage Grove Avenue in Chicago, where he often led strategy sessions for the SCLC’s Operation Breadbasket, a campaign that targeted racially discriminatory hiring and management practices in food industries.\textsuperscript{261} Jackson’s regular appearances at the Salaam reflected Operation Breadbasket’s aims to promote gainful black employment by urging African Americans to “buy black.”\textsuperscript{262} Moreover, in gathering leaders and organizers outside the Nation to dine on Muslim victuals, Jackson exposed influential members of the larger black community to the Nation’s dietary lessons and broader black body politics while proving that “healthy” food could be tasty as well. If Jackson, a native of South Carolina, enjoyed the flavor and feel of Muslim fare, so might other Southerners partial to soul food.

Jackson’s association with the restaurant and the Nation was not simply personal or

\textsuperscript{260} Essien-Udom observed, “The economic organization of the Nation of Islam is the most effective point of contact and interaction between Muslims and other Negroes. It seems likely that they are gaining status in the Negro community in proportion to their improved economic position” (171).

\textsuperscript{261} Priscilla McCutcheon has surmised, “by doing this Jackson was making a regular statement that his organization’s goal of feeding people was consistent with the NOI’s focus on developing self-reliance and community building through food.” Priscilla McCutcheon, “Community Food Security ‘For Us, By Us’: The Nation of Islam and the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church,” in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (eds.), \textit{Food and Culture: A Reader, Third Edition} (New York: Routledge, 2013), 580. See also Curtis, 103.

\textsuperscript{262} See David Garrow (ed.), \textit{Chicago 1966: Open Housing Marches, Summit Negotiations, and Operation Breadbasket} (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishers, 1989). Garrow writes, “Jackson’s most significant work blossomed in the form of Chicago’s Operation Breadbasket chapter. Breadbasket had for six years been an SCLC program modeled on the Philadelphia efforts of ministers such as Leon Sullivan, but only when Jackson, in conjunction with local Chicago ministers such as Clay Evans, began applying this strategy—firms whose products were purchased by black consumers were asked by black ministers to provide significant job opportunities to black workers, or face a consumer boycott—on the Chicago scene did Breadbasket begin to approach its true potential” (xii).
practical but political as well, and in August 1970 he spoke at a benefit at the Salaam to raise funds for a new NOI educational center and hospital. He espoused the capacity of selective buying to create jobs and revenue in underserved urban communities. However, in doing so, he sparked the ire of Muhammad himself who accused the Christian minister of misrepresenting scripture and, seemingly more blasphemously, failing to give the Nation its due for having already implemented the types of structures Jackson advocated. In an official rebuke, Muhammad denounced Jackson for being “very careful…not [to] give the Muslims…full credit for what we are doing in the Name of Allah and for our Black People.” Even as Muhammad and NOI leadership grew increasingly willing to work with white businesses and suppliers to further the organization’s economic interests, Muhammad demanded that the Nation be credited for its pioneering endeavors and approaches to black self-help. “There is nothing that the Black Man can say against the start toward self that I am making,” Muhammad insisted “…Rev. Jesse Jackson was very shrewd in trying to keep honor of the work that I am doing among the Black Man here on the South side and throughout America and the world, from coming from his mouth…because he longs for this honor himself…This goes for all the preachers here in America. That is why they do not follow me.” In Muhammad’s view, it was not enough for nonbelievers to advance the interests of black Americans and to support the projects of the Nation financially and morally. In failing to give Allah and his Messenger proper credit for their ingenuity, Jackson and other Christian leaders undermined the cause of

black liberation while dooming themselves to inevitable “disgrace and shame.”

By the end of the Sixties, Muhammad’s offered a more patently aggressive message about intra-racial unity and more pointed allegations about the divisive influence of black Christian ministers. More than five-and-a-half years after the assassination of Malcolm X, *Muhammad Speaks* continued to label him a “hypocrite,” suggesting that he and others who turned away from Muhammad’s program posed a greater threat to the black race than even those who were openly anti-black, including the “whiteman.” As black cultural nationalism and “soul,” neatly encapsulated by the mantra “black is beautiful,” become popularly salient, the Nation worked to claim adulation for its long endorsement of racial separation, black pride, and economic nationalism. In October 1969, the paper charged “that the division of Blacks is perpetuated by church leaders who are trying to cover their false spiritual teachings in a variety of do-for-self plans taken from the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.” Christians espousing black pride, the Nation contended, focused too narrowly on the NOI’s behavioral and moral strictures, using religious differences as a rationale for refusing to patronize black businesses owned by Muslims. “If Black is loved so well, why don’t these leaders and their followers patronize the Salaam Restaurant where they know, and the world knows, the best of food is prepared at prices adjusted to the Black community and not with the excuse or reason that smoking is not allowed and no drinks are served and indecency is not permitted. / If Black is loved so well, why don’t they and their followers patronize Your Supermarket,

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264 Ibid. Five years later, Jackson paid his respects to Muhammad by appearing onstage during a televised memorial service for the recently deceased leader. Tate, 117.
which sets an outstanding example of superior products being offered for sale in meats, dairy, produce and staples…” No longer content with serving only Nation members and a small number of others attracted by the NOI’s assurances of quality foods and service at reasonable prices, Nation leaders intimated that blacks who patronized non-Muslim establishments demonstrated a lack of solidarity with the cause of black uplift and pride, presumably embodied by the “original black capitalists,” Black Muslims. Muhammad thus positioned selective buying not merely as a pointed economic strategy and a valid political act, but as an expression of race pride and brotherhood.

Despite real and perceived slights by Jackson and others, Muhammad’s work was in fact widely acknowledged and respected by non-Muslim blacks and increasingly noticed by white interests and institutions. Nearly a decade after labeling the Nation of Islam “the Black Supremacists,” Time designated them the “Original Black Capitalists.” Characterizing Black Muslims as “the bourgeoisie of the black militant movement” (again, despite the largely modest means of most members) the magazine reported in March 1969 that the Nation’s “dogged adherence to the notion of build black, buy black is paying dividends.” The magazine described the growing “Muslim-owned financial empire,” focusing particularly on operations in “Chicago’s South Side ghetto,” which by then included two bakeries, two restaurants, and two supermarkets, as well as a warehouse, clothing store, and residential apartments. Six years later, Time eulogized Muhammad as “[a]s much captain of industry as Messenger of Allah,” noting that, by his

268 Ibid.
269 Ibid.
death in February 1975, the NOI owned businesses and properties with an estimated combined worth of $75 million.\textsuperscript{270} Even Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley could not deny Muhammad’s influence, remarking, “Under his leadership, the Nation of Islam has been a consistent contributor to the social well-being of our city for more than 40 years.”\textsuperscript{271} Just before Muhammad’s death, journalist Barbara Reynolds observed, “Chicago had the largest and strongest financial base of any black community in the nation.”\textsuperscript{272} Muhammad’s example, investments, and encouragement undoubtedly shaped its course.

Certainly Muhammad did much to improve the self-image and galvanize the aspirations of countless black Americans during the postwar years. The Nation of Islam created an identity around its opposition to pork, as well as traditional southern foods like catfish, sweet potatoes, and cornbread, and its embrace of novel foods like baked fish, whole-wheat rolls, bean soup, and bean pie. Much like the conspicuously modest attire donned by members, Black Muslims foodways distinguished believers from non-believers, as Muhammad required his followers to exhibit their faith on a daily basis.

\textsuperscript{270} “Religion: The Messenger Passes,” \textit{Time} (10 Mar 1975). Less than four months later, \textit{Time} revised this estimate, writing, “While maintaining traditional Muslim secrecy about overall membership (estimated at between 50,000 and 100,000, though higher figures are often used), [Muhammad’s son] Wallace revealed the dollar dimensions of Elijah’s legacy: the Muslims have investments of $14.5 million in Chicago property and $6.2 million in farm land, while their stores, restaurants and other ventures pay $1.5 million annually in taxes. These are substantial amounts, but below previous guesses.” See “Religion: White Muslims?” \textit{Time} (30 Jun 1975).

\textsuperscript{271} “Religion: The Messenger Passes.” In her unauthorized 1975 report on Jesse Jackson, journalist Barbara A. Reynolds wrote, “By 1974, Chicago was beating its own drum as the Black Business Mecca of the World. In numbers, versatility of businesses, volume produced, Chicago is number one through the efforts of the Chicago Economic Development Corporation, the Chicago Cosmopolitan Chamber of Commerce, the Woodlawn Organization and many other groups and individuals, including Jackson. ‘It’s Nation Time,’ a slogan Jackson articulates from the pulpit, has been shaped from rhetoric into reality by the honorable Elijah Muhammad, leader of the Nation of Islam, whose estimated $100 million empire has its base in Chicago.” Reynolds, \textit{Jesse Jackson: The Man, the Movement, the Myth} (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1975), 176.

\textsuperscript{272} Reynolds, 177.
Prohibitions against particular foods and regulations about manners and ways of eating influenced where, when, and with whom Black Muslims could eat and interact. Moreover, Muhammad’s recommendations presaged future trends in nutritional “science,” including warnings to avoid carbohydrates and starches and to reduce meat consumption. The Messenger’s occasional inconsistencies in dietary logic and lessons might have reflected the volatile nature of nutrition as a field of study—or perhaps stemmed from his own conflicting interests as a dietician, capitalist, and demagogue.  

There again, Muhammad’s food laws and Black Muslim foodways surely revealed tensions springing from considerations of identity, convenience, and responsibility—constant concerns that determine how and what people do eat, rather than how they think they should.

Astutely observing the relationship between health and diet—and identifying the United States’ obesity epidemic decades before its emergence in public health discourse in the late 1970s—Muhammad’s followers likely did enjoy improved health and lower healthcare costs, benefits that permitted them to separate further from white-dominated pharmaceutical, medical, and weight-loss industries. Given that the majority of Muhammad’s converts were poor or working class black males, this foresight offered many a chance at a better, longer earthly life. His teachings also influenced a variety of

273 For example, at times Muhammad advocated moderate consumption of chicken and beef while at other points he urged a vegetarian diet. Likewise he sometimes endorsed heavy consumption of cow’s milk, while at other points he characterized it as unnatural, even detrimental to childhood development. Nutritionist Marion Nestle offers a useful discussion of the economic, political, and cultural forces that influence formulations of dietary guidelines and nutritional wisdom. See Nestle, Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), esp. 358-374.

274 Belasco, Food, 7.
other health-conscious African Americans who echoed his misgivings about soul food. Comedian Dick Gregory, an activist who became vegetarian in the mid-1960s to align his lifestyle with his philosophical belief in nonviolence, ultimately came to appreciate the health benefits of a natural plant-based diet. In terms noticeably similar to Muhammad’s, Gregory offered soul food as evidence of the disconnect between the political ideology and lifestyles of many advocates of racial equality. In Gregory’s experience, “the very folks in the black community who are most sophisticated in terms of the political realities in this country are nonetheless advocates of ‘soul food.’ They will lay down a heavy rap on genocide in America with regard to black folks, then walk into a soul food restaurant and help the genocide along.”

Unaffiliated with the Nation, Gregory, who remains a vocal proponent of raw and natural foods, carried Muhammad’s belief in the relationship between black physical and political health to more liberal arms of the black freedom struggle, most prominently in the Mississippi Delta.

Truth be told, Muhammad’s adamant insistence, and Daley’s affirmation, that the Nation of Islam had taken great strides for black Americans and for urban communities in a broader sense belies a less progressive reality, one readily if uneasily apparent to many of his followers. Remembering her family’s dissatisfaction with Islam and NOI leadership in particular during the mid-1970s, Sonsyrea X recalled that her mother felt increasingly alienated by the organization’s internal politics. “Ma thought the Nation was supposed to be different from mainstream society where white people were separated

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276 Opie offers the term “food rebels” to characterize Muhammad, Gregory, and other critics of soul food. *Hog and Hominy*, 155-174.
from black people and people who had money to afford certain things were separated from those who didn’t,” Sonsyrea explained. “The ‘Royal Family,’ the Honorable Elijah Muhammad’s wife, children, and grandkids, was treated with special favor, and the rest of us were just the poor masses. Ma was poor and without rank, so she had about as much a chance in this Nation as she did out in the world.”

While the racial and religious rhetoric of the Nation promised social mobility, the profitability of its financial empire relied almost entirely on the voluntarism and contributions of believers. “Working” for the Nation did not necessarily entail gainful employment, as NOI-owned businesses and restaurants expected unpaid labor from many who “believed they were working for the good of our Nation.”

In addition to their sweat, upstanding members contributed one-tenth of their annual income as a “Duty” to support the Nation’s work and businesses. Monetary donations to Muhammad’s empire did not entitle donors to any share of the revenue, but instead were accepted as “alms” given not to a particular business or to the Nation as an organization but to Islam as a system of beliefs and a way of life. This economic arrangement, which Muhammad referred to as “communalism,” ensured that while some Black Muslims, particularly among leadership, enjoyed the trappings of middle-class life, the majority often subsisted on black pride, self-respect, and hope for personal redemption, reaping little in the way of material gain.

Some discontents resented the manner in which Muhammad wielded his prophetic authority as a shield against questions or criticism of his mandates, practices, or personal

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277 Tate, 105.  
278 Ibid., 106.  
279 Essien-Udom, 165.
behaviors. Eldridge Cleaver, for example, followed in the footsteps of his martyred mentor Malcolm X, whose concerns about political strategy and Muhammad’s ethical lapses led him to leave the flock in favor of orthodox Islam. Calling attention to the sometimes outlandish teachings Muhammad expected his followers to accept, Cleaver remarked, “If Elijah wrote, as he had done, that the swine is a poison creature composed of 1/3 rat, 1/3 cat, and 1/3 dog and you attempted to cite scientific facts to challenge this, you had sinned against the light, [and] that was all there was to it.” By requiring followers’ unquestioning adherence to the earthly demands of his platform without regard for countervailing scientific, medical, cultural, or common knowledge, Muhammad successfully minimized internal dissent against his more radical teachings about white devilry, black superiority, and his own role in the salvation of the black race. Though Muhammad’s lessons about food and nutrition had some merit, he refused to account for the material realities that influenced not only food choice and decorum, but black politics, values, and culture in a deeper sense. Sharing Cleaver’s observations, Sonsyrea noted, “Elijah Muhammad told us to dress a certain way and we did. Told us to chew our food a hundred times before swallowing, brush our hair a hundred strokes, and think five times about what we’re going to say before we spoke. He gave us a long list of forbidden foods and required all of us, kids and grown-ups alike, to digest the historical and religious lessons.” Muhammad’s preferred pedagogical tactic of force-feeding was, in hindsight, metaphorically revealing. In speaking to the needs of hungry, weak, poor, and sick segments of black America, Muhammad won their trust and loyalty. In teaching “how to

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280 Cleaver, 55.
eat to live,” he positioned himself as responsible for the very lives of his followers. Though Muhammad asserted himself in the role of earthly redeemer to save the black race from the evil influences of white power, his authority by definition demanded subservience of a different form. Sonsyrea was likely not alone in her ultimate, troubling realization: “Elijah Muhammad had our minds completely.” Rather than work to empower the black masses, Muhammad channeled their moral and financial support to solidify his own influence, always in the name of Allah. Though he insistently spoke of the greater good of the black race, his efforts to improve bodily health and material conditions of the NOI faithful aimed, at best, to reposition them as the beneficiaries of the same racist capitalist system that had proven detrimental to human health and agency.

Unlike subsequent food-centered efforts to advance black freedom, which sought to reform or resist state programs and policies by highlighting the abusive forms of capitalist democracy, the food programs and politics of the NOI sought to critique existing structures but not to reform them. Instead, Muhammad and his followers established parallel institutions catered to the needs and interests of black Americans as Muhammad defined them, challenging only the racist implications, not the capitalist foundations, of the American diet and the industrial food system that supplied it. The Nation of Islam won converts with the lure of economic advancement, but Muhammad’s concrete programs in truth mirrored and reinforced the stratifying structures of capitalism. Though he attacked “white capitalism” for exacerbating the struggles of the black poor, Muhammad’s food economy failed to correct the reality that most of the

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Tate, 60.
Nation’s followers—whether dispossessed migrants or underserved and underemployed ghetto dwellers—grappled with the interlocking oppressions of racism and capitalism. Rather than address both, *Time* reported, “The Muslims have become the nation’s leading exponents of black capitalism — a Nixonian term that they despise.” Ultimately then, despite it radical and polarizing racial rhetoric, the Nation of Islam advanced an essentially conservative approach to black liberation, one that relied upon middle-class values and private enterprise to uplift the black race through greater physical health and economic opportunity. The issue of wide-scale access—to nutritious foods, employment, and entrepreneurial pursuits—remained problematic, driving some from the Nation’s fold while forging space for other black organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party to continue to experiment with tactics and strategies for ensuring that black Americans could acquire not only the knowledge but the means “to eat to live.”

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CHAPTER TWO

“One Man—Three Squares”:
SNCC, Hunger, and the Vote in Mississippi

In Mississippi, the setting of many of the most celebrated and traumatic episodes of the civil rights era, activists quickly realized that the tactics that brought the modern struggle’s earliest and most publicized triumphs could not meaningfully address the problems of the rural South. The sit-ins that won significant concessions in Southern cities after 1960, inspiring the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), promised little reward to poor blacks who, even if seated at a restaurant or lunch counter previously reserved for whites, could rarely afford anything on the menu. Consequently, activists with SNCC and other civil rights organizations, coordinated by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), realized that the most pressing need and most promising movement strategy for black Mississippians was protection of the right to vote.\(^{283}\) Only the franchise could harness latent black political

\(^{283}\) Initially formed during the 1961 Freedom Rides, COFO reestablished itself in February 1962 to coordinate work among the NAACP, CORE, and SNCC. SNCC provided most of the ground troops and spearheaded civil rights work across most of the state. Aaron Henry, a black pharmacist from the Delta town of Clarksdale who led the state NAACP, officially directed COFO, but historian John Dittmer, among others, contends that SNCC project director Bob Moses and assistant director Dave Dennis more significantly influenced COFO’s work. John Dittmer, \textit{Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi} (University of Illinois Press, 1995), 118-119; Charles M. Payne, \textit{I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle} (University of California Press, 1995; 2007), 62, 130-131. Moses credited Amzie Moore, a resident of Cleveland, Mississippi then in his fifties, with appreciating early on the centrality of voter registration to civil rights. Said Moses of Moore, “He wasn’t distracted by school integration. He was for it, but it didn’t distract him from the centrality of the right to vote. He wasn’t distracted at all about integration of public facilities. It was a good thing, but it was not going straight to the heart of what was the trouble in Mississippi. Somehow, in following his guidance there, we stumbled on the key—the right to vote and the political action that ensued.” Qtd. in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer (eds.), \textit{Voices of Freedom:}
power to force tangible improvements in the daily lives of Mississippi’s hungry poor.

Ruthlessly policing the racial status quo, Mississippi officials and vigilantes worked to thwart voter registration drives and other black advances with threats and acts of brutal violence—shootings, lynchings, arsons, and mysterious disappearances that left an uncounted number of black corpses floating in local waterways. More subtle than such flagrant criminal attacks, threats of economic retribution—termination by white employers, eviction by white landlords, loss of credit from white institutions—loomed ominously in the minds of the black poor who could most benefit from the vote but who could least afford the very real costs of working to secure it.

The physical deprivation and suffering endured by African Americans in the plantation South has been told in numerous important scholarly works. In addition to documenting the natural trials of life in agriculture, historians have detailed the manner in which white landowners—from the antebellum period through the 1960s—manipulated federal agricultural policies to their own financial benefit and their workers’ economic, political, and bodily peril. Less acknowledged or understood have been the responses of organizers and the hungry poor to the challenges posed by state-permitted food scarcity, insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating

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Committee (SNCC), the guiding force of COFO, lived and died with grassroots organizing. From its initial Mississippi campaign in McComb in 1961, SNCC organizers endeavored to dwell among the people, surviving on subsistence wages, staying with local families, and exposing themselves to the hazards of life in the rural South. In moving among the people, SNCC field staff quickly realized that those at the Mississippi grassroots were “dirt poor.” As early as 1962, when the town of Greenwood in Leflore County cut off federal food aid in retribution for voter registration work, SNCC recognized the importance of food to their struggle to bring meaningful change to African Americans “existing” in Mississippi.

SNCC’s approach to food aid, what many activists termed its “welfare programs,” evolved drastically between 1962 and 1965. Beginning with the so-called Greenwood food blockade and the subsequent “Food for Freedom” campaign—a nationwide effort to gather food and funds for distribution to destitute Mississippi sharecroppers—SNCC

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286 Sharecropper Unita Blackwell, who lost her job after attempting to register in June 1964, recalled her first encounter with organizers in Issaquena County: “That’s the first time in my life that I ever come in contact with anybody that tells me that I had the right to register to vote...People remember them people. SNCC went where nobody went. They was about the nuttiest ones they was. Ended up in some of the most isolated places and drug people out of there to vote.” Qtd. in Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 180.

287 SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman, who spent much of his childhood living with his grandmother in Mississippi poverty, recalled that for want of food he had often eaten dirt. He used the term “dirt poor” to emphasize both the squalor of his surroundings and the utter desperation of his family and community, who ate the earth when they had nothing else. This term also points to the irony of hunger among farmers, people who worked the soil but rarely benefited from its harvest. James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (University of Washington, 1972), 12.

288 In telling her life story, Fannie Lou Hamer regularly utilized the verb “exist” rather than “live” to convey the sense of suspended movement, of waiting, rather than thriving or acting.

staff, many drawing on their own experiences of hunger, saw the potential of food programs as “social work,” a means of holding people over until the food crisis subsided or could be addressed through official, democratic channels. The surprising voter registration upsurge in Leflore County in response to SNCC’s efforts to bring food relief to the agricultural region in the Mississippi River delta encouraged SNCC, for a time, to view food as a political incentive, emboldening black Mississippians to risk their lives and livelihoods by registering to vote. In doing so, organizers sought to reverse the generations-old white practice of manipulating food access to maintain an abundant, docile black workforce, the foundation of white economic domination. If a lack of food stifled movement, SNCC reasoned, then the promise of food could incite it.

The strategic link between food and the franchise operated on two levels during this time. First, the immediate need for food encouraged people to interact and work with SNCC, as those who attempted to register to vote had priority in receiving SNCC food assistance. It took only a short leap of vision and foresight, then, to connect food security—a state of reliable access to healthy, affordable, culturally appropriate foods—to the *exercise* of the franchise. SNCC organizers believed, and often asserted, that the “white power structure” (a term used by many local activists) could control the hungry poor because they had no influence as constituents with a say in the decisions and policies that governed them. Reflecting on this period, many activists spoke in humanitarian terms, highlighting the cruel and abusive nature of the inhumane Southern caste system. They drew upon their own experiences of physical deprivation, which persisted for many staff and volunteers reliant upon the generosity of sympathetic locals.
for meals and shelter. These memories and experiences demonstrated the role of material want in both signifying and maintaining white privilege and black oppression.\textsuperscript{290}

Demands for food in Mississippi served as more than an expedient rhetorical device or organizing tool. SNCC activists, many born and raised in the rural South, understood the problem of hunger and food insecurity on a personal level. Mississippi natives Anne Moody of Centreville in the southwestern part of the state and Fannie Lou Hamer from Ruleville in the Delta, characterized their own struggles with hunger as elemental to the evolution of their understandings of race, class, and social injustice. Moreover, given SNCC’s barebones budget, much of which went toward bail and legal fees, staff could not always count on their meager $10 weekly stipend. Therefore, activists themselves, even those from relatively privileged backgrounds, lived and worked among the people in a literal sense, and therefore, often endured the hunger and inadequate diets that plagued poor communities. Not coincidentally, many memoirs and interviews with organizers, especially those concerning the summer of 1964, speak almost nostalgically of communal meals where community was in far greater abundance and better quality than food.\textsuperscript{291} Volunteers and staff repeatedly remarked in awe and

\textsuperscript{290} As Stokely Carmichael explained, “...the single, central organizing principle, the major civic concern upon which the social, economic, and political arrangements of the entire state were predicated, was white advantage and black subjugation.” Carmichael, \textit{Ready for Revolution}, 285.

\textsuperscript{291} Blackwell fondly recalled the sense of community that developed during Freedom Summer, “I remember cooking some pinto beans—that’s all we had—and everybody just got around the pot, you know, and that was an experience just to see white people coming around the pot and getting a bowl and putting some stuff in and then sitting around talking, sitting on the floor, sitting anywhere, ’cause you know, wasn’t any great dining room tables and stuff that we had been used to working in the white people houses, where everybody would be sitting and they’d ring a bell and tap and you’d come in and bring the stuff and put it around. We was sitting on the floor and they was talking and we was sitting there laughing, and I guess they became very real and very
gratitude that people who had almost nothing willfully shared with those who worked on their side, the side of right and rights. Bob Moses, who directed SNCC’s Mississippi voter registration project, fondly remarked, “Everywhere we went, I and other civil rights workers were adopted and nurtured, even protected as though we were family…Our movement family saw to it that we had something to eat or a place to sleep. Inside this ‘family’ was the true place where the movement’s moral authority was anchored.”

Given this communal bond, SNCC workers took attacks on the local population personally, sentiments prompting fiery responses that endeared them even more.

Following the short-term successes of the initial food campaign in Greenwood, which proved to the local community SNCC’s commitment to addressing local struggles, some voices within the organization began questioning the efficacy of this work. If organizers intended for food aid to enable people to hold on, to remain present in the struggle in body if not always in mind and spirit, some wondered whether it did not also hinder prospects for a true restructuring of the social order. Certainly people needed to eat—and most SNCC staff and volunteers voiced genuine empathy and compassion for the hungry poor—but some feared that satiated people might become complacent. While many organizers viewed food as fundamental to the freedom fight, more radical voices began to argue by the end of 1963 that SNCC’s social work counteracted its ultimate objective of social transformation.

human, we each to one another. It was an experience that will last a lifetime.” Qtd. in Hampton and Fayer, Voices of Freedom, 193.


293 Despite his clear love and empathy for the local people, Carmichael was one of several staff
Civil Rights and Economic Reorganization after Emancipation

Much of the strife endured by black Mississippians in the twentieth century can be traced to the years after emancipation and the emergence of sharecropping, a race-based economic system that, in the wake of slavery, became the bedrock of white economic power in the Cotton Belt. In sharecropping arrangements, farmers or “croppers” (most often black, but sometimes white) contracted with white landowners to live on and farm their land, in return splitting the harvest in “shares.” Under this system, the farming year was divided into two phases. During the “furnish,” croppers relied on white landowners’ credit for shelter, food (typically cornmeal, fat pork, and molasses), clothing, farm equipment, tools, mules, seed, fertilizer, and most other necessities to work and survive until the second phase, the “harvest.” In contrast to tenant farmers who paid cash to rent farmland and thus enjoyed some degree of autonomy, sharecropping agreements required croppers to make all purchases through the plantation commissary, which generally charged prices ten to twenty-five percent higher than market value. At harvest time, landlords deducted items credited to croppers’ accounts from their share of the yield, which typically came to half the value of their annual cotton production. Like who voiced such concerns. SNCC, “Minutes of the Meeting of the SNCC Executive Committee (27-31 Dec 1963)” <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6312_sncc_excom_min.pdf>.

294 The generations-old interplay between black economic oppression and political marginalization has been well-documented by historians of agriculture, economics, and race relations. See, for example, Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost; Daniel, Breaking the Land and Dispossession.


many social institutions of the Deep South, the sharecropping system held immense potential for abuse.²⁹⁷ Rarely could croppers clear enough money at the end of the harvest to emerge with any profit. More often they finished the season in debt. Though they possessed the legal freedom to move to other plantations, sharecroppers regularly lacked the economic means to do so. At the turn of the twentieth century, the majority of southern black farmers—75 percent—were sharecroppers or renters.²⁹⁸

Beyond the economic function of maintaining a low-paid, docile workforce, enriching white planters at the economic and physical expense of black laborers, sharecropping and other forms of tenancy served vital political and social functions as well. Given the financial dependence of most blacks on white employers and the totalizing demands of the chopping and harvesting seasons, the children of black farmers often worked beside their parents. As a result, they seldom completed grade school.²⁹⁹ Coupled with the damning uncertainties and demands of manual labor, the shameful quality of black education in the Jim Crow South bred widespread intergenerational

²⁹⁷ Kirby, 145; Cobb and McLaurin, “The Economy of Ruleville, Mississippi” (Nov 1962).
²⁹⁸ In contrast, only one third of white southern farmers were tenants or sharecroppers. Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 6.
²⁹⁹ Hamer recalled the rhythmic demands of sharecropping in 1971. “Now sharecroppers is really something; it’s out of sight. Number one, what I found since I been old enough, it always had too many ‘its’ in it. Number one, you had to plow it. Number two, you had to break it up. Number three, you had to chop it. Number four, you had to pick it. And the last, number five, the landowner took it. So, this left us with nowhere to go; it left us hungry. Because my family would make sixty and seventy bales of cotton and we would pick all of the cotton and then, after we was finished picking the cotton, we would sometimes come out in debt. We never had so many days in my life that we had cornbread and we had milk and sometimes bread and onions. So, I know what the pain of hunger is about.” See “Until I Am Free, You Are Not Free Either,” Speech Delivered at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (January 1971) in Megan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (eds.), To Tell It Like It Is: The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer (University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 123. Hurt writes of cotton farming, “The crop left [farmers] little time, energy, or money for anything else.” Hurt, Problems of Plenty, 7.
poverty, as children seldom gained the knowledge or skills necessary to forge a life beyond the cotton fields. In relegating black farm workers to the fringes of economic viability, the neo-plantation system made it virtually impossible for local blacks to take economic risks or to assert themselves politically, as the subtest indication of defiance often threatened devastating consequences.

At about the time the sharecropping system began to take hold, re-solidifying the socioeconomic oppression of African Americans following the brief promise of the Reconstruction years (1865-1877), white Mississippi politicians swiftly maneuvered to thwart the black political agency portended by passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, which guaranteed all male citizens the right to vote. An 1890 state convention amended the Mississippi constitution, implementing two key provisions that would serve to disenfranchise generations of black Mississippians. First, delegates implemented a $2 poll tax to be paid annually for two years before an individual could vote in local or state

300 Black children typically attended schools far inferior to those of their white counterparts, their educational prospects handicapped by unqualified or underpaid teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of basic supplies and facilities like libraries. Dittmer describes one Delta school where seventy-seven students were assigned to a single teacher. Instructors were, of course, not permitted to engage in activist activities, particularly those related to civil rights, and rarely challenged the cotton season’s power to dictate their students’ progress. SNCC’s newspaper, The Student Voice, charged, “Whites who control Mississippi have little respect for education, but use it unscrupulously to prevent Negroes from obtaining the basic democratic right, the right to vote.” To address precisely these conditions, SNCC established Freedom Schools during the summer of 1964 as part of “a war against this academic poverty [sic]. It is not just the courses provided, but the fact that the schools are a focal point for personal expression against the oppression on the one hand, and for personal growth and creativity, on the other. The regular Mississippi schools are fundamentally opposed to this approach.” See Dittmer, Local People, 125; “FREEDOM SCHOOLS MISSISSIPPI,” Student Voice (5 Aug 1964).

elections. The second prerequisite, a literacy test, represented an especially despicable means of stifling black political impulses given the deplorable quality of black public education across the South. Because the power of white political authorities and legislators depended on black oppression, policymakers had no practical incentive to improve black schools. This cycle of miseducation, illiteracy, and political paralysis proved exceedingly effective in inhibiting latent black political action. As a final failsafe, local registrars (always white) wielded ultimate authority to pass or fail applicants. For the next seventy-five years black electoral participation, for all intents and purposes, did not exist in Mississippi.

**The Most Southern Place on Earth**

While black disfranchisement was the de facto policy across the state, the unique social and economic conditions of the Delta region amplified the oppressive influence of

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302 Though this provision applied to all voters, regardless of race, at least one convention delegate articulated its racist intent, stating, “The very idea of a poll qualification is tantamount to the State of Mississippi, saying to the Negro, ‘We will give you two dollars not to vote.’” Heightening this hurdle, the tax was to be collected by the local sheriff, who often refused to accept payment or to furnish the required receipt. Beginning in 1934, the state required payment of the tax to vote in both primary and general elections. Since the Democratic Party dominated the South until the 1960s, voters effectively selected officeholders during primary elections, which until 1944 were open to whites only. Therefore, it made little financial sense for black voters to pay $2 to weigh in on a campaign decided by white voters months earlier. Qtd. in United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Voting in Mississippi: A Report* (1965), 4.

303 As the report of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights noted in 1965, this remained true even years after the 1954 *Brown* decision deemed segregated public school facilities unconstitutional. At the time the new state constitution went into effect, sixty percent of Mississippi blacks were illiterate as compared to only ten percent of whites. Bob Moses, for one, lambasted the insult and injustice of imposing a literacy test under such conditions, noting, “In the Delta, especially, education took a backseat to servitude…You can’t deny people an educational opportunity and then say the reason people can’t vote is because they can’t read…” Moses and Cobb, *Radical Equations*, 69.

304 *Voting in Mississippi*, 10.
political marginalization on the daily welfare of African Americans.\textsuperscript{305} The storied Yazoo-Mississippi Delta sits between the Mississippi River to the west and the Yazoo River to the east, though in colloquial use “the Delta” often refers to Mississippi’s entire northwest quadrant. This region houses some of the most fertile soil on earth and for years produced greater quantities of high quality cotton than anywhere else in the world. The advent of the cotton gin in 1790 greatly reduced the time and labor required to separate the plant’s valuable fibers from its meddlesome seeds, thus making cotton farming—and race slavery—exponentially more profitable.\textsuperscript{306} The subsequent emergence of a cotton aristocracy reliant on forced black labor shaped the trajectory of the Delta’s racialized socioeconomic order. Because cotton farming depended on plentiful unskilled labor, white planters actively discouraged outmigration, and most blacks in the Delta continued to earn their living in cotton agriculture into the 1950s.\textsuperscript{307} Though Mississippi’s black population, like that of the South in general, thinned during two periods of mass exodus spurred by the World Wars, the Delta in the mid- to late-1950s

\footnote{\textsuperscript{305} For the foundational study of the Delta as place, see James C. Cobb, \textit{The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity} (Oxford University Press, 1994). See also Kim Lacy Rogers, \textit{Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change} (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).} \\
\footnote{\textsuperscript{306} Asch, \textit{The Senator and the Sharecropper}, 12.} \\
\footnote{\textsuperscript{307} The social, political, and economic circumstances of life in the South served as “push” factors during the Great Migration, the implications of which have been widely studied. See, for example, Nicholas Lemann, \textit{The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America} (Vintage Books, 1992); Isabel Wilkerson, \textit{The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration} (Vintage Reprint, 2011). Lemann’s journalistic account focuses on the lives of migrants between Clarksdale in the Mississippi Delta and the south and west sides of Chicago.}
maintained a strong African American majority, including some of the most densely concentrated black populations in the state.308

The Delta coincided roughly with Mississippi’s second congressional district, represented since 1941 by Democratic Congressman Jamie Whitten, chair of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies.309 The region likewise produced the Citizens’ Council, a network of white supremacists that actively, and at times violently, resisted integration in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown decision.310 Various celebrated and denounced as “the most Southern place on earth,” the Mississippi Delta at mid-century was a field of extremes, one that cultivated lavish wealth and crushing poverty, racist terrorism and nonviolent protest, federal largesse and utter abandonment.311 Organizer Stokely Carmichael, who spent the summers of 1962 and 1963 canvassing prospective voters in Greenwood, refuted the perception that poverty alone defined the region.312 “The Delta was in fact very, very rich. It produced great wealth,” he observed. “It was agribusiness on a gigantic scale, highly productive, heavily government subsidized, and based almost totally on the equivalent of slave labor…. [I]t was only the people who were poor. Dirt poor.”313 Sunflower County, for example, was

309 For a detailed rendering of the interplay between politics and economics in Mississippi agriculture, see Kotz, Let Them Eat Promises.
311 Cobb, The Most Southern Place on Earth, passim.
312 For more on Carmichael’s organizing efforts in Greenwood, see Peniel E. Joseph, Stokely: A Life (New York: Basic Civitas, 2014), 47-50, 55-58.
313 Carmichael and Thelwell, Ready for Revolution, 281.
home to both legendary sharecropper-turned-freedom fighter Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville and commanding U.S. Senator James Eastland, a wealthy cotton planter from nearby Doddsville and a fervent enemy of communism and civil rights. The remarkable polarities of the Delta spurned the ire of activists and inspired their efforts to mobilize. “There in the Mississippi Delta’s vast, almost eerie flatness of cotton lands,” Carmichael eloquently reminisced, “in its small hamlets and rural churches, on its dark, dusty plantation back roads; from its fetid jails and the cattle prods and blackjacks of brutal ‘po-lices’; in the drive-by shootings and midnight bombings of night-riding Klansmen—I saw the best and worse [sic] of which human beings were capable.” SNCC organizers faced a daunting task upon arrival in the Delta in 1962. Executive Secretary James Forman expressed great admiration for the courage of “Bob Moses and his band of guerilla fighters,” who put themselves on the line to try to bring change to the Delta. “They were resisting a tyranny imposed over hundreds of years,” Forman affirmed. “They were writing history with their lives.”

County officials made most decisions affecting the lives of African Americans, particularly those mired in poverty, and did so generally with the tacit approval of those holding statewide elected offices. Unsurprisingly, officials responsible for administering federal relief programs exhibited little concern for the needs of the black

314 Asch, passim.
315 Carmichael and Thelwell, 278.
316 Forman, The Making of Black Revolutionaries, 278.
317 The reality became quickly apparent to organizers. Bob Moses later remarked, “Like any Black person living in America I knew racism. What I hadn’t encountered before Mississippi was the use of law as an instrument of outright oppression. Mississippi stood out as the state most completely organized in terms of its state apparatus to foster apartheid.” Moses and Cobb, Radical Equations, 58.
poor. Diminishing their sense of self-worth and dignity by forcing the hungry to accept
the status quo, beg for food, or face starvation (and sometimes all three at once), the
white supremacist system in general and the biased, degrading welfare system in
particular, circumscribed the political and economic agency of the black poor. By
mandating that people focus their energy and resources on brute physical survival, white
leaders and their systems of proxy diminished black capacities to concentrate on higher
pursuits or long-term aims. And that, it seemed, was their intent.

**Farm Policies and Food Aid**

Focusing the attention of civil rights supporters on the alliances between Southern
lawmakers, white planters, and the Department of Agriculture (USDA), movement
organizers used Mississippi as a lightning rod, a tragic illustration of federal abuses and
excesses at their most extreme.\(^{318}\) Despite the avowed (if not always active) position of
the White House in support of civil rights, the agricultural policies of the Kennedy and
Johnson administrations in fact reinforced the entrenched power of Mississippi’s white
supremacist planting class. As a result, the “New Frontier” and the “Great Society”
remained distant promises. Quite simply, hunger and malnourishment left the
unemployed and working poor in Mississippi too weak and fractured to rally behind any
cause, even one as crucial to their lives as a War on Poverty.\(^{319}\)

\(^{318}\) Hurt states simply, “…American agriculture in the twentieth century is the story of farmers’
dependency on the federal government” (ix).

\(^{319}\) President Kennedy’s domestic program, dubbed the “New Frontier,” sought to advance and
protect “the civil and economic rights essential to the human dignity of all men.” Building on
the legacy and drawing on the popularity of his assassinated predecessor, President Johnson’s
domestic platform, the “Great Society,” rested on “abundance and liberty for all…demand[ing] an
end to poverty and racial injustice.” A former rural Texas schoolteacher, Johnson centered this
Scholars of Southern history, and of American race relations and food politics more broadly, have widely acknowledged the use and manipulation of food as a device to control black labor since the time of slavery. Perhaps even more so after emancipation, manipulation and monopoly of the food supply enabled those with land to maintain authority over labor. Beginning with the New Deal, the nation’s farmers benefited from federal subsidies, price supports, loans, and acreage-reduction plans, all of which aimed to ensure that, regardless of market forces, farmers could earn a living from the land. The advent of a federal surplus commodity distribution program during the 1930s likewise protected these interests, as distribution of surpluses to the poor offered a politically popular way to relieve the troublesome glut. If federal food programs

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vision on quality public education for all Americans. The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), established in 1964, managed the War on Poverty, the centerpiece of Johnson’s Great Society. Escalating U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War ultimately derailed this agenda. In his study of black farmers during the civil rights era, Pete Daniel writes, “New Frontier liberals such as [Agriculture Secretary Orville] Freeman, while offering support for civil rights, lacked grounding in southern history and culture, especially concerning how segregation and discrimination distorted relations between blacks and whites. By the time he came to the USDA, southern whites had demonstrated how viciously they would fight to preserve segregation, and as civil rights activity increased in the southern countryside, USDA officials manipulated government programs to punish activist farmers.” Daniel, Dispossession: Discrimination Against African American Farmers in the Age of Civil Rights (Chapel Hill: University of NC Press, 2013), 4. See also Hadwiger, “The Freeman Administration and the Poor,” Agricultural History 45 (1971), 21-22.


321 Kirby, Rural Worlds Lost, 56; Daniel, Dispossession, 9. Hurt explains, “Thus the AAA began the great enclosure movement in Southern agriculture whereby landowners released their sharecroppers and tenants, combined small farms into large fields, removed houses and fences, and used tractors, cultivators, and mechanical planters to plow, seed, and weed the cotton crop. Then, at harvest time, the landowners hired back many of their old sharecroppers and tenants as day laborers to pick the cotton. When they were not needed, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration offered these workers emergency assistance, essentially providing the ‘furnish’ previously obtained from planters and country merchants” (73). See also Hurt, 67-96.
improved social welfare, they did so incidentally, a byproduct of policies to safeguard the prosperity of American farmers.\textsuperscript{322}

This reality inevitably shaped the character of federal food aid, as most monthly commodity allotments therefore relied heavily on starches with little in the way of proteins, vitamins, and minerals. Program participants usually received flour, cornmeal, rice, dried milk and other dairy products, and occasionally some canned meat, but never fresh fruits or vegetables, which were difficult to store and transport.\textsuperscript{323} County authorities distributed food items in large quantities without regard for the needs, tastes, or foodways of local populations. Government commodities arrived in nondescript packaging with no instructions for storage or preparation. Of course, products that the poor did not have the facilities or knowledge to store or prepare offered little bulwark against hunger and malnutrition. Even more problematically, supplies often ran out midway through the month, leaving families to scavenge or go without during the long days before they retrieved the next month’s supply. Barriers to access exacerbated the program’s nutritional deficiencies, as local governments first had to request federal food aid for their jurisdiction and then were responsible for the costs and administration of distribution. In many cases, officials simply chose not to participate in federal food programs rather than deal with the expense and hassle. In some localities that technically did participate, people had to walk up to twenty-five miles to retrieve their allotments, as

\textsuperscript{322} In 1968, the Citizens’ Board of Inquiry produced a landmark study of food poverty. It stated, “We feel fairly confident that most Americans must believe—if they think of it at all—that the federal food programs (including the school lunch program) are designed to serve the interests and needs of beneficiaries. This is not true.” \textit{Hunger USA}, 5.

\textsuperscript{323} Cobb and McLaurin, “The Economy of Ruleville, Mississippi” (Nov 1962).
few areas offered decentralized distribution points. The cost and time of transportation thus often rendered the program impractical for those most in need.

Official insensitivity, hostility, and outright bias compounded the practical obstacles to obtaining commodity food aid. Though funded by federal dollars, commodity distribution, like other welfare programs, fell under the jurisdiction of state welfare offices and the direct administration of county officials generally unsympathetic to the plight of the hungry. In addition to setting standards for eligibility, county agents held authority to certify participants. This system allowed planters to continue to pay starvation wages throughout the year while the federal government, in effect, fed their workforce, especially during winter. Some county governments only supplied federal commodities during the winter months, insuring that once the cotton season began, farm workers had no choice but to return to the employ of opportunistic landlords, lest they and their families go hungry. Despite the many painful shortcomings of federal

325 Testifying in April 1967 before the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty about the efficacy of the Economic Opportunity Act and the overall progress of the War on Poverty, Marian Wright, a twenty-seven year-old African American lawyer with the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, denounced the daily administration of Mississippi state welfare offices. “Welfare practices…in Mississippi are terrible…People are not treated with dignity when they go into the welfare office, and they are not allowed to be people, and they are threatened, and this is a terrible kind of thing that has to be stopped.” As common practice, such attitudes and behaviors might be deemed merely insensitive; however, Wright and others charged that these patterns of treatment were intentional and targeted. “People who have participated in civil rights have been cut off from welfare, and we have been able to document this in many counties,” she testified. “The whole welfare department is simply not functioning to serve the needs of the poor and particularly in the Negro community.” The state’s refusal to appropriate matching funds required for participation in several federal welfare programs, for example, indicated anti-philanthropic inclinations rather than budgetary shortfalls, and in fact actually cost poor Mississippians millions of federal dollars in matching funds to which they were entitled. See Hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, First Session on Examining the War on Poverty, Part 2 (Jackson, Miss.: 10 Apr 1967), 654.
aid, the physical and economic survival of many poor Mississippians relied upon it. Recognizing this, landowners and local officials responsible for registering voters and administering federal food aid colluded to deploy provisions so as to perpetuate black economic dependence. Black residents avoided rankling local authorities so as not to risk being cut from the program without any means of redress. Of course, white leaders deemed voter registration a particularly egregious offense.

In one notable demonstration of courage and defiance, Mary Oliver Welsh and Daisy Griffin, elderly black women from Humphreys County at the lower edge of the Delta, testified before the U.S. Civil Rights Commission in February 1965 that the country registrar, G.H. Hood, had verbally abused and threatened them when they attempted to register as voters. Both women relied on federal surplus commodities and “[b]efore going to the courthouse,” the Commission report noted, “…had expressed concern to civil rights workers in Belzoni [the county seat] that an attempt to register would cost them their commodities.” Welsh reported that the county registrar “told me I was going to get in trouble, and he wasn’t going to give me no commodities. That’s what he said….After I went there and he scared me so bad, I didn’t go back to see was I passed or no…” Though difficult to ascertain the number of individuals dropped from the program for attempting to register, fear and threat of hunger very likely kept

326 Commission on Civil Rights, Voting in Mississippi, 21.
327 Mary Oliver Welsh qtd. in Ibid., 22. The report does not specify when this incident occurred. G.H. Hood took office in 1960. One local activist recalled in 1974 that his reputation had become so fearsome that “many people would not register if he came knocking on their door.” Lawrence Tardy qtd. in Timothy J. Minchin and John A. Salmond, After the Dream: Black and White Southerners since 1965 (University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 165.
thousands of local people from rocking the boat.\textsuperscript{328} Griffin and others likewise testified that the registrar had mentioned their reliance on commodities when they went to register. Official manipulation of residents’ fears of hunger served not only as retaliation, but as intimidation as well. In such cases, local officials wielded the much-needed commodities to bully those otherwise undeterred from pursuing their right to vote. Local authorities wedded to a Southern tradition based on the oppression and subjugation of black Americans therefore continued to hold the lives of poor blacks in their hands. The white economic noose around the necks (and stomachs) of thousands of blacks in the Delta minimized the likelihood that they would accept the economic and physical risks entailed in supporting any efforts to upset the status quo.\textsuperscript{329}

\textsuperscript{328} At the National Lawyers Guild convention in February 1967, Don Jelinek of SNCC and the American Civil Liberties Union described the power wielded by white county agents, which he decried as “human obstacles” to “federal programs in the South.” “Would you believe me if I told you that Negroes in any rural Southern county would rather have a sympathetic county agent than a sympathetic governor?” he asked. “[T]hese agents can exercise the power of life or death over the day-to-day economic life of the Negro farmer.”

\textsuperscript{329} Established in July 1967, the Citizens’ Board of Inquiry on Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States set out to study “within the nexus of the problems of poverty…those absolutely elemental ones of food.” Though its subsequent publication, \textit{Hunger USA} (1968), offered a survey of the nationwide hunger crisis, it tellingly dedicated an entire chapter to a “case history of bureaucratic non-response” in Mississippi. The Board identified 280 “hunger counties requiring immediate and emergency attention.” Careful not to overstate the extent of hunger and aware of the importance of recognizing degrees of need, the Board erred on the side of prudence in its calculations. To ensure that it spotlighted only those areas where need had reached a critical point, the Board designated as a “hunger county” one characterized by at least three of the following: mortality rates of children ages one month to one year twice the national average of 7.5 per 1,000; poverty rates twice the national average of 20 percent; state welfare programs reaching less than a quarter of those in need; and food aid reaching less than a quarter of those in need. Thirty-eight of Mississippi’s eighty-two counties met the Board’s criteria, a rate of 46 percent. The report also bore out what many had long suspected—and what others had long denied—as it found that sixteen of the eighteen counties existing partially or completely in the Delta were grappling with hunger emergencies. By way of explanation, the Board subsequently detailed the shortcomings and biases of federal food aid, including the commodity distribution program and food stamps. \textit{Hunger USA}, 4, 11-15, 38, 94-96, 49-76. See also Kotz, \textit{Let Them Eat Promises}, 1-18.
For decades, this arrangement worked to the economic advantage and racial privilege of white planters who maintained their political clout in areas where blacks vastly outnumbered them. By the early 1960s, conditions for black Mississippi farmers were worse than they had been in generations. Despite costly and complex federal efforts to constrict agricultural productivity, technological advances continued to produce unprecedented bounties. With the mechanization of cotton production nearly complete by the end of the 1950s, landowners less often leased their land, instead preferring to hire day laborers during the harvest. Unprotected by federal labor regulations until 1966, farm laborers who managed to find work averaged just $3 per day during the cotton season from April to December, putting their annual income at about $600. Many landowners also stipulated that all arable soil be dedicated to cotton cultivation, leaving none for food plots or subsistence gardens. These conditions ensured that the cotton labor force, especially sharecroppers, teetered on the edge of calamity, leading a hand-to-mouth existence that made accumulating savings impossible. Mired in a trap of hunger and desperation, poor families had limited mobility in every sense—physically, socially, and politically.

While the stringent voting regulations set in place in 1890 had largely shut down black political participation in the state, the open and imminent threat of economic  

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331 The *Greenwood Commonwealth* reported that the number of tractors in Mississippi increased from 5,542 in 1930 to 86,859 in 1959. “Mississippi Shares Large Part In Century Of Agricultural Growth,” *Commonwealth* (3 Aug 1962), 4. For more on the rise of the mechanical cotton picker, see Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 246-248.
reprisal served to reaffirm the white chokehold on the black community in the event that local blacks entertained ideas of organizing. Most local people soon knew, for example, the story of Fannie Lou Hamer’s ill-fated attempt to register to vote on August 31, 1962.\textsuperscript{332} When she defied the orders of her landlord, B.D. Marlowe, that she return to the courthouse to rescind her application, he promptly evicted her from the plantation where she and her husband had lived and worked for eighteen years.\textsuperscript{333} Word spread about cases like hers, eliciting indignation but often dampening enthusiasm for political action. Not only did evictions and firings thwart the potential for individuals, now homeless and hungry, to assert their voices in defense of their rights, but they also served as a warning to others on neighboring farms and in surrounding communities that any intimation of political resistance would evoke immediate repercussions. For years, this system was utterly effective in neutralizing threats of black political power.

Several developments converged in the early 1960s to disrupt this state of affairs. As the mechanization of cotton agriculture in the late 1950s fueled widespread unemployment in the Delta, civil rights groups began to move into the state. After SNCC’s first wide-scale voter registration drive, held in the southwestern city of

\textsuperscript{332} James Forman wrote that Hamer’s story “would in the next two years be told from one end of the United States to another,” expressing amazement that “this woman, who had picked cotton and fought to survive for so many years[,] didn’t turn back. Instead she went on to become a worldwide symbol of black heroism, or revolutionary black womanhood, a warm and always human symbol of the power of people to struggle against hardship, adversity, terror—the living realities of the Mississippi Delta.” *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 290-291. Ash concurs, “As a sharecropper-turned-voter, she became a vivid symbol of what SNCC believed Mississippi blacks could achieve; as a candid and forceful speaker, she articulated the moral imperative of the movement often more effectively than SNCC’s organizers could.” *The Senator and the Sharecropper*, 181.

McComb in 1961 and 1962, organizers honed in on the Delta for new and more vigorous efforts to secure the franchise in an area not greatly changed since emancipation.\textsuperscript{334} Bob Moses, director of SNCC’s Mississippi voter registration project, saw that the town of Greenwood held great strategic significance “as the center for around five different counties—LeFlore, Holmes, Carroll, Tallahatchie, Sunflower, and part of Humphrey.”

At a SNCC conference in April 1963, Moses explained SNCC’s early thinking: “[W]hat we hope will happen is that we will get a drive in all these counties with Greenwood as a focus. And if you do that, then that will crack the heart of the Delta.”\textsuperscript{335} Now viewing the black masses as not only economically obsolete but also politically menacing, white planters and officials re-stratégized, aiming to drive unemployed blacks out of the state by openly encouraging them to pursue better opportunities in Northern cities like Detroit and Chicago or out West in the fertile lands of California. Many Mississippi blacks, of course, could not realistically entertain this possibility, as they had no savings, suffered poor health, headed large families, and possessed no marketable skills beyond the cotton fields.

**The Greenwood Food Blockade**

In response to relatively isolated voting rights demonstrations and voter education and registration work in Greenwood during the summer of 1962, Leflore County officials made a bold move. After the usual tactics of intimidation and violence failed to

\textsuperscript{334} In comparing the two locations, Moses explained, “McComb was isolated where Greenwood essentially is not. People from Clarksdale, Ruleville, Tallahatchie, Cleveland have been continually moving in and out of Greenwood in leadership capacity…You didn’t have that in McComb, [as] there were no other cities around there.” Moses qtd. in Forman, 306.

\textsuperscript{335} Ibid.
discourage organizers, local administrators swiped the bottom out from under the poor in Greenwood. The Leflore County Board of Supervisors voted in July to eliminate from the budget the funds required to operate the surplus commodities program. Three months later, it formally shut down the winter commodities program, effectively cutting off thousands of poor Mississippians, black and white, from federal food relief. Recalling the implications of this decision four years later, Delta organizers Lawrence Guyot and Mike Thelwell contended, “the State began a program which can best be characterized as one of gradual genocide, the goal of which was to effect the dispersal or extinction of the Negro population.” In response to some initial opposition, the Board held a public meeting on November 9 to hear testimony and reconsider the measure. Seventy people attended. Board Supervisor Lewis Poindexter stated that the winter commodity program cost the county $4,150 per month for six months each year, in addition to distribution costs of labor and transportation. Poindexter insisted that the program would still serve those on welfare (families with dependent children, as well as the elderly, handicapped, and blind), but acknowledged that 22,000 would no longer receive benefits as a result of the decision. J.H. Peebles, president of the Bank of Commerce,

336 Dittmer writes, “Given the reality of life in the Delta, SNCC’s mission appeared foolhardy, if not suicidal.” Moreover, “Greenwood seemed an unlikely spot for SNCC’s first major Delta campaign. The SNCC activists had two immediate goals in Greenwood: to show they were not there simply to stir up trouble and then leave, and to help local blacks overcome the paralyzing fear that had stopped the registration drive.” Local People, 125, 129, 134.
337 “Leflore Won’t Have Commodity Program,” Greenwood Commonwealth (Nov 9 1962), 1. See also Dittmer, 143,144.
340 The United Press International later cited the estimate of political scientist Charles Hamilton, who calculated the combined annual costs of the commodity program for Leflore and Sunflower counties to be about $5,000. UPI, “Negroes Say Thousands ‘Starving,’” Clarksdale Press Register (1 Feb 1963), 1.
motioned to support the Board’s decision. Forty of the sixty-nine people who voted agreed with the move.\textsuperscript{341} The Board’s original decision would stand.

Many in town appeared content with the official explanation that the program had become too bloated and costly to maintain. Aubrey Bell, attorney for the Board of Supervisors, insisted the “commodities were cut off purely for a financial reason and no other.”\textsuperscript{342} By way of evidence, Bell pointed out that 26,000 of the country’s 46,000 people had previously been receiving commodities. Rather than an indication of widespread need, Bell and other opponents of the program framed these statistics as evidence of extensive abuse of the system.\textsuperscript{343} The Mississippi Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights backed the county’s decision, reporting it found “no concrete evidence” of civil rights violations as a result of the move.\textsuperscript{344} Thus, it appeared, business would continue as usual in Leflore.

Certain that the decision had been made in reprisal for its work in Greenwood, SNCC organizers quickly recognized that their campaign—and their target constituency—faced immediate peril.\textsuperscript{345} SNCC understood that the daily need to feed

\textsuperscript{341} “Leflore Won’t Have Commodity Program.”
\textsuperscript{343} Ibid. Four years later, USDA Secretary Orville Freedom assured the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty, “[T]here are 470,000 persons receiving food stamps and total distribution in Mississippi—nearly 10 percent of the national total. Every county in the state has one of the two distribution programs…The Mississippi distribution is the largest in the nation.” Qtd. in “The Mississippi Story—A case history in bureaucratic non-response,” Hunger USA, 11.
\textsuperscript{344} Qtd. in “More Turned Away—Food Distribution Here Ends As Groceries Trickle Out” (13 Feb 1963), 1, 2.
\textsuperscript{345} James Forman, for one, refused to believe the Board’s decision was unrelated to civil rights activity. He insisted, “This was clearly an intimidation tactic, a reprisal against voter registration, for there were few whites in the county getting surplus food. That winter many blacks had gone
one’s family took precedence over seemingly distant if no less pressing concerns about politics and elections. The organization thus immediately commenced a campaign to solicit food donations from movement supporters and concerned citizens in the North, hoping this tactic would enable the project and its people to keep going. In addition to coordinating the enormous logistical task of gathering and distributing donated foodstuffs from such cities as Chicago, New York, and Boston, SNCC and COFO worked to politicize hunger, framing it as a result of institutional biases, systemic deprivation, racial cruelty, and political abuse rather than individual misfortune. By connecting hunger to politics in the minds of hungry Mississippians and other concerned Americans, SNCC aimed to convert a looming catastrophe into a coup. Ensuing food drives aimed to harness desperation wrought by hunger into widespread agitation in the Delta, bringing national attention to the daily injustices of Mississippi life. The tactical miscalculation of Greenwood officials exemplified the life and death consequences of political

hungry. The situation for the poorest families was grim. To combat the whites’ inhuman tactic, SNCC organized the collection and shipment of food from all over the United States for distribution in Greenwood. People received food with the understanding that they would go down and register to vote, although adherence to this principle was not absolute. Registration lines at the County Courthouse grew longer every day.” The Making of Black Revolutionaries, 296.

Fundraising was an incessant concern for SNCC. As executive secretary, Forman described himself as “too busy with action, with organizing, with administration—and, above all, with the sheer survival of SNCC. This meant in a very nitty-gritty way, fundraising. By the end of 1964 the proper maintenance of SNCC called for raising forty thousand dollars a month. The ultimate responsibility for doing so had been laid on me alone.” The Making of Black Revolutionaries, 430. Asch writes, “Any organization, even one as thrifty as SNCC, depended on a steady flow of funds to perpetuate itself and continue its mission. Because SNCC was dedicated to working with the most impoverished blacks, it faced an inherent problem: the people whom it served almost by definition could not afford to finance its operation. Delta blacks simply did not have the financial power to challenge the injustice of their living conditions.” The Senator and the Sharecropper, 180-181.
dispossession across the rural South.\textsuperscript{347}

The poor immediately felt the stinging loss of federal food aid. Project director Bob Moses, a Harlem native widely remembered for his soft voice and understated yet unparalleled leadership style, wrote to a colleague in Ann Arbor, Michigan in December 1962, relaying dismal conditions in the Delta. “I was sitting resting, having finished a bowl of stew,” he explained, “and a silent hand reached over from behind, mumbling some words of apology and permission, and stumbled up with a neckbone from the plate under the bowl, which I had discarded, which had consequently some meat on it.”

Though the hungry stranger remained faceless to Moses, who did not want to embarrass him by looking, “[t]he hand was back again, five seconds later, groping for the potatoes I had left in the bowl.” In Moses’ mind, the disembodied hand alone told a whole life’s story, for it “was dark, dry and wind cracked, from cotton chopping and cotton picking.”

The broader ramifications of this scene for the prospects of the movement disheartened Moses. “What the hell are you going to do,” he wondered, “when a man has to pick up a leftover potatoe [sic] from a bowl of stew?”\textsuperscript{348}

To make matters worse, the winter of 1962-63 was an especially difficult one. That year the picking season had ended around Thanksgiving, about a month sooner than

\textsuperscript{347} Historian Charles Payne notes, “It was an awkward reprisal in several ways. It was non-selective, punishing the innocent as well as the guilty. It put some people in a position where they no longer had anything to lose by trying to register. It made plain a point COFO workers always wanted to put across, that there was a connection between exclusion from the political process and poverty. It also gave COFO a chance to show that they were more than the bunch of rag-tail kids they might appear to be.” Payne, \textit{I’ve Got the Light of Freedom}, 158.

usual. Meanwhile, the price of cotton had fallen, squeezing the community’s poorest during an unusually cold offseason. The vast majority of the black population would not likely find steady employment before cotton chopping began near the end of May. Moses’ letter conveyed these dire straits to movement allies in the North. Several days earlier Moses and others had met to organize a food and clothing drive, headquartered in Clarksdale, to assist the hungry poor during the long months ahead. He assured his colleagues in the North, “We Do need the actual food, I just hope you and others can gather it, and we can distribute it, so the people who need it can receive it.” He concluded the letter with a single sentence about the ongoing voter registration drive and the need for a typewriter and mimeograph machine “if we are to get out the volume of material we need to contact people across the Delta.” Though the letter addressed the voter registration campaign in Greenwood, Moses’ message served on a more basic level to link the material deprivation of SNCC’s target constituency to the project of political mobilization in a broader sense. About a week later SNCC’s newsletter, The Student Voice, first published news of the emergency in Greenwood and emerging problems in the Sunflower County town of Ruleville, where local official had begun aggressively to


350 Clarksdale, home to many legendary blues musicians, was an agricultural depot. Its large rail station served as the point of departure for many blacks leaving the South during the Great Migrations. See Francoise Hamlin, Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after World War II (University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
impede would-be voters from obtaining their monthly commodity allotment.\footnote{Rather than discontinue the commodity program completely, officials in Sunflower County erected formidable new obstacles to access. In its first story about the commodity crisis, SNCC’s paper, \textit{The Student Voice}, explained, “Many sharecroppers now have to fill out new registration papers showing how much they earned from each employer, many of whom keep no records….Due to the voter registration drive…in Ruleville, the ‘responsible people’ are not particularly inclined to favors for the Negro.” See “In Ruleville, Miss.: Surplus Food Denied to Registrants,” \textit{Student Voice} (19 Dec 1962), 2.}

Though only Leflore officials actually ceased participation in the federal commodity program, Sunflower residents were also in desperate need.\footnote{Ibid.} In response to movement activity, officials instituted new policies and procedures regarding eligibility for benefits, which had previously been accessible to nearly all who applied. By the end of 1962, officials began to require applicants to obtain proof of income from white employers, who were not often willing to help, let alone acknowledge that their workers earned too little to feed themselves. In other cases, longtime commodity recipients encountered unannounced procedural changes regarding where and how to apply or retrieve foodstuffs, most of which required great additional expenditures in time and cost of transportation. Field secretaries Charles Cobb of Springfield, Massachusetts, and Charles McLaurin, a Jackson native who established SNCC’s Ruleville base, told of one woman who attempted to follow the new rules. When she went to apply for aid, the county official handed her a card. She soon heard the mayor of Ruleville, C.M. Dorrough, quip, “most of them with cards ain’t going to get any food,” as he vowed to “mess up all of them’” involved in voter activity.\footnote{Qtd. in Cobb and McLaurin, “The Economy of Ruleville, Mississippi” (Nov 1962). Italics removed from original text.} In light of these new forms of harassment, COFO officials determined that food distribution efforts would focus on...
Greenwood in Leflore and Ruleville in Sunflower. Cobb and McLaurin explained, “The success of our voter registration program depends on the protection we can offer the individual while he is waiting for his one small vote [to] mean something. It doesn’t take much to tide over [sic] the rural Mississippi Negro, but the commodities are vital.”

Sam Block, a skilled and fearless organizer from the Delta city of Cleveland who attended historically-black Tougaloo College in Jackson, corroborated his colleagues’ observations in early January 1963. Having just purchased a car to ease the enormous burden of traveling from plantation to plantation and town to town while canvassing potential voters, Block noted that in addition to expediting registration efforts, motor transportation enabled organizers to familiarize themselves more intimately with the conditions and struggles of the people. Block wrote to Forman, “[W]e are now able to get around to these people who have been cut off[?] from this surplus food deal, and man[,] some of them will make you cry to see the way they have been trying to live.”

Enduring chilling temperatures in ramshackle housing “in little nasty alleys,” mothers

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354 “Comic to Make Deliveries: Food For Delta’s ‘Starving’ Expected to Arrive Today,” Clarksdale Press Register (11 Feb 1963), 1, 8.
356 Forman described Block as “tall, lean, dark-skinned, with a deep voice and a dry sense of humor” and “a kind of courage that defies imagination.” The Making of Black Revolutionaries, 283. The students of Tougaloo College included many movement activists, including Anne Moody, Dorie Ladner, and other Mississippi natives. Rev. Ed King of the MFDP was Tougaloo’s chaplain. SNCC reported in May 1964 that because “[s]tudents and faculty members at the school have been involved in anti-segregation activity…[they] have provoked the ire of local law enforcement officials.” According to The Student Voice, efforts to dissuade the involvement of Tougaloo students included a “bill aimed ‘at disaccrediting’” the school, which “passed the Mississippi Senate on May 14.” See “Legislature Attacks Tougaloo Rating,” Student Voice (26 May 1964), 3.
who had relied on commodity milk to feed their babies now had nothing to quiet their hungry cries, as they “had not received any food in a long time.” Organizers scrambled to deliver relief, spending days at a time “running back and forth to Memphis, Clarksdale and Jackson picking up food and clothing for the people”—and, Block believed, “seeing some results.”

Certainly some of the same humanitarian and religious impulses that drew activists into the movement compelled them to act on behalf of the hungry. Many had experienced hunger and food insecurity as children, recognized the need and its psychological and physical ramifications, and did what they could to help.

The conditions of the Delta alone warranted shock and outrage, but the conscious and concerted efforts of local authorities to hold federal food aid hostage elevated the tragedies of hunger, starvation, and malnutrition in a country with unprecedented and costly agricultural harvests to the level of national scandal. Seizing the catastrophe, organizers highlighted the depths to which the white power structure would go to protect itself. Cobb, for one, had no doubt that the decision to end participation in the commodity program “was in clear reprisal for the voter registration—never mind that most of the people in the county had not tried to register to vote. All the Black people were made to pay the price for this.”

Surely local officials expected the typical response to their tactics: cowering, maybe some muted grumbling, but fear, resignation, and ultimate acquiescence. Rather than paralyze them with panic, however, the Board of Supervisors’ decision incensed local blacks, particularly in Greenwood, inciting them to

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358 Ibid.
action. They began flocking to the courthouse to register in greater numbers. Local officials’ tactical blunder illustrated, in Cobb’s estimation, the connection between political power and economic and physical well-being, a relationship understood, if not readily articulated, by the hungry poor. Cobb later approximated the sentiments of poor blacks emboldened to register by the food blockade: “If you’re depending on this food, and it’s not there…then you better do something about that.”\footnote{Ibid.} As local people continued to react against the county’s maneuver, SNCC attempted to keep up with their needs, initiating a complex campaign among its northern allies—the official offices of which were dubbed “Friends of SNCC”—to collect and distribute food to those struggling for their rights in the South. Infuriated by this policy of collective accountability and inspired by the determination of poor sharecroppers to stand their ground, SNCC and COFO launched what would become known as the “Food for Freedom” campaign.\footnote{An official campaign by this name began in New York in March 1963.} The simplicity of its message and the immediacy of its action plan compelled passionate responses far and wide.

**North to South**

While many Mississippians scraped and scraped to keep their neighbors from starving, the viability of SNCC’s efforts in the Delta depended upon its capacity to inspire outsiders to take up the charge. On December 16, Aaron “Doc” Henry, a pharmacist from Clarksdale, made a national appeal as the titular head of COFO, and

\footnote{Ibid.}
donations began arriving soon thereafter. Located in Coahoma County, just north of Sunflower County and about 65 miles from the Tennessee border, Clarksdale served as a convenient dropping point. Among the earliest to rally in support of the campaign, movement supporters in Michigan worked with Henry and others to facilitate a massive food drive in time for the holidays. Spearheading these efforts, Michigan State University students Ivanhoe Donaldson of SNCC and his roommate Ben Taylor canvassed communities in East Lansing and Ann Arbor for food and clothing donations, then trucked the vital foodstuffs to the distribution headquarters in Clarksdale, some eight hundred miles away.

Local authorities, of course, knew of Henry’s movement work and affiliations and of COFO’s very public efforts to bring change to the Delta. Police therefore monitored Henry’s drugstore and did what they could to obstruct relief efforts. Donaldson and Taylor arrived at Henry’s store two days after Christmas with a truck containing one thousand pounds of food and medicine from Louisville, Kentucky. Unable to enter the building or get in touch with Henry upon their arrival in the early morning hours, they parked in front of the store and dozed off in the truck. Not long after, local police roused the exhausted men. Donaldson recalled, “We were harassed and juggled around and thrown in jail. The charges were that we were taking narcotics across state lines, but what we had were aspirins and bandages as parts of first aid kits for people who might

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362 “Comic to Make Deliveries: Food For Delta’s ‘Starving’ Expected to Arrive Today” (11 Feb 1963), 1, 8.
364 This was Donaldson and Taylor’s second trip in three days. Ibid.
need medical help.\textsuperscript{365} Despite Donaldson’s explanation (or possibly as a result of it), local authorities arrested them. Donaldson and Taylor spent five days in jail before getting word to Henry about what had happened. They remained there until the NAACP Legal Defense Fund successfully secured their release.\textsuperscript{366} Perhaps emboldened to defy such tactics of intimidation, Donaldson later estimated that he “made about thirty-odd round trips to Louisville, to Detroit, round trips from Clarksville and Greenwood, back and forth, and also to Chicago during that period. In fact, one of the interesting points about the food drive,” he noted, “was that a prominent young black comedian named Dick Gregory got involved in the movement and it totally changed his life.”\textsuperscript{367}

Indeed, Gregory, who struggled with hunger and food insecurity from his childhood days in St. Louis into his early adulthood, famously and visibly responded to the crisis.\textsuperscript{368} He wrote soon after, “There was a battle going on [in the South], there was a war shaping up, and somehow writing checks and giving speeches didn’t seem enough….I wanted a piece of the action now, I wanted to get in this thing. I got my chance sooner than I expected.”\textsuperscript{369} His call to become an active participant rather than a distant sponsor came from Greenwood. Informed of the situation by a SNCC ally in Chicago seeking to secure the public support of a wealthy black celebrity, Gregory

\textsuperscript{365} Donaldson qtd. in Hampton and Fayer, \textit{Voices of Freedom}, 150.
\textsuperscript{366} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{367} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{368} Gregory wrote in 1964: “Richard Claxton Gregory...A welfare case. You’ve seen him on every street corner in America. You knew he had rhythm by the way he snapped his cloth while he shined your shoes. Happy little black boy, the way he grinned and picked your quarter out of the air. Then he ran off and bought himself a Twinkie Cupcake, a bottle of Pepsi-Cola, and a pocketful of caramels. / You didn’t know that was his dinner. And you never followed him home.” Dick Gregory with Robert Lipsyte, \textit{Nigger: An Autobiography} (Washington Square Press, 1964), n.p.
\textsuperscript{369} Ibid., 160.
immediately reacted to reports from Leflore County. He resolved, “If the government would not feed the people, then I would.”370 He spearheaded additional relief efforts, appealing for donations from residents of his adopted hometown of Chicago. One letter signed by Gregory and Rev. Douglas M. Still of the National Council of Churches pronounced, “These people need food! They look to us in the North for help… To secure the widest support possible we are asking prominent Chicago citizens in simple humanitarian, non-political terms, to endorse and support this effort.”371

Chicagoans responded, and Gregory and a local disc jockey combined forces to collect 14,000 pounds of canned food, mostly fruits and vegetables.372 In February, Gregory chartered a plane to transport the goods to Memphis, then drove 134 miles to Clarksdale. From there, SNCC transported the supplies to Greenwood and Ruleville. “I was still afraid of the South,” Gregory recalled, “and I wanted to leave that night….” Reticent to venture beyond enemy lines but compelled to use his fame and fortune to support those at the front, Gregory felt prompted to act by the urgency of hunger, a condition he knew often begat shame, alienation, immobility, and numbness. Gregory and SNCC staff, including Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, distributed the donations and planned a voting rights demonstration to dramatize the connection between

372 The *Clarksdale Press Register* reported the amount to be equal to “three truck loads and a U-Haul trailer load.” B.J. Skelton, “Negro Comic Visits City: Brings Food For ‘Starving,’” *Clarksdale Press Register* (12 Feb 1963), 1, 8.
food and politics. Feeling inspired, and perhaps somewhat cornered, Gregory wrote, “I promised the voter registration workers from SNCC…that I’d come back when the demonstrations began.”

The swarm of publicity and agitation stemming from Gregory’s appearance and colorful comments succeeded in putting local white officials and residents on the defensive. Rather than assert that hungry people deserved to starve—a politically untenable message in almost any context—authorities struggled to reframe their actions by downplaying the extent of local need and calling into question the motives of those opposing the commodity rollback. Shortly after Gregory’s arrival, the local newspaper, The Greenwood Commonwealth, ran a front-page story based on the anonymous statements of a “concerned Negro citizen of Leflore County [who] said that local Negro citizens ‘deplore[d] the adverse publicity the county is getting’ around free food distribution.” The unnamed source asserted “that food ‘isn’t really need[ed], nobody is destitute that we know of, but we will accept it if it come with thanks.’” Far from a blatant bid to silence political dissent, the article suggested that the “story” had been concocted by outsiders aiming to generate “bad publicity [for] Leflore County.” The unnamed informant pointed to growing tensions in the North, suggesting that Gregory’s energies would be better spent cleaning up his own backyard. “You won’t find anybody being evicted from their homes here as you will in Chicago,” the source falsely reported.

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373 Carmichael and Brown, as well as James Forman and Ralph Featherstone, all later worked closely with the Black Panther Party, the subject of Chapter Three.
374 Gregory, Nigger, 160-161.
“…You won’t find anybody’s gas or lights being cut off.” Suggesting that Greenwood authorities and community groups like the Negro Elk’s Club met the needs of which they were aware, the anonymous man concluded, “If anybody is destitute it is only because they haven’t let their need be known.” The Commonwealth expressed “satisf[action] that [the anonymous source] speaks for a substantial group of Leflore County Negroes,” pointing out that he “made the statement in the presence of several leading white citizens.” Rather than call into question the authenticity of the unattributed comments, the reporter implied that this fact actually bolstered the credibility of the account. The witness concluded, “If they’ve got free food, certainly let’s take it with thanks…Let’s help them distribute it. Then let them be on their way.” If hunger existed, the article implied, it would be remedied from within. Though local blacks might accept charity, the Commonwealth insisted that they nonetheless resented efforts to challenge or question those entrusted with protecting the public’s interests, including their own.

On the contrary, Moses believed that beneficiaries of food aid would be more likely to stand up in support of those who delivered them from hunger. The population in Greenwood was by far the most receptive to the political implications of their food insecurity, as the food and clothing drives mobilized people there in new, sometimes astounding, ways. As a result, violence, tension, and repression gripped Greenwood throughout February and March. “Cars were wrecked, a Negro registration worker was shot in the back of the neck, the SNCC headquarters was set on fire,” Gregory learned. “Bullets were fired into Negro homes. SNCC workers were beaten up. When Negroes

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376 Cobb, Oral History.
marched in protest, the police put the dogs on them. They arrested the eleven top registration workers. In the midst of the chaos, the food work continued. Given the scale of the anticipated need, SNCC required residents to apply for food aid, stipulating that “a person must be unemployed, have earned less than $500 last year (1962) and have two children of school age who are not attending school.” Block insisted that SNCC trusted applicants, “taking their word” about their circumstances. A day before one scheduled distribution, Block reported receipt of nine hundred applications for food and clothing. Though 22,000 people had been ousted from the commodity rolls in recent months, the Commonwealth reported that less than one thousand had signed up to receive SNCC food aid and that “Block and some of his co-workers had been going about the city and county seeking people to make application for the food.” Rather than interpret this as evidence of the need to publicize the availability of free food or of widespread fear among local blacks that applying for and accepting aid might make them targets of retribution, the Commonwealth cited initial hesitance as proof that people who had been receiving federal aid had not actually needed it.

Willie Peacock, a native of Charleston, Mississippi, who came to Greenwood to provide support for Block’s efforts, emerged as chairman of the “emergency relief committee.” On February 13, he oversaw distribution of food at Greenwood’s Wesley

377 Gregory, Nigger, 161.
378 “Negroes Sign For Free Food at Church” Greenwood Commonwealth (12 Feb 1963), 1.
379 Ibid.
380 Ibid.
381 In Moses’ view, the trials of Greenwood fortified “SNCC organizers like Willie Peacock from neighboring Tallahatchie County [who] had come through the fires of Greenwood annealed like steel.” Moses and Cobb, 66.
Methodist Church. The Commonwealth observed that between two and three hundred black residents received boxes marked “SNCC,” which contained non-perishable foodstuffs like rice, flour, cereal, and canned goods, but “only about enough food for one or two meals.” One woman with two children and a disabled husband at home acknowledged, “It’s not much what they are giving, but it helps.”

When the food ran out after four hours, an even greater number of people had to be turned away; still seventy-five more waited to apply for help. Despite their disappointment at leaving empty-handed, Peacock believed that “when I explained it to them they understood.”

While the local paper and leading white citizens highlighted SNCC’s inability to provide food for all who requested it, they curiously continued to downplay that a need actually existed. The paper emphasized, for example, that many of those seeking aid had arrived in cars. The implication, of course, was that people who had private transportation could afford to buy their own food. This assumption infuriated organizers, who recognized that food expenses were more flexible than fixed costs like rent and car notes. “A car has nothing to do with it,” Block insisted.

The following week, SNCC delivered more food, provisioning those previously turned away.

Having returned home to Chicago, Gregory nonetheless felt that his intervention had made him a target of white politicians and reporters in Mississippi. “I knew they were laying for me down there,” he remembered. State Welfare Commissioner Fred

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382 Qtd. in “More Turned Away—Food Distribution Here Ends As Groceries Trickle Out,” Greenwood Commonwealth (13 Feb 1963), 1, 2.
383 Ibid.
384 Ibid.
Ross tellingly characterized the “cheap publicity generated by Gregory and the gullibility of national news media who apparently relish the opportunity to disseminate half truths and outright lies” as “a distinct disservice to the Negro population of Mississippi.”

Claiming that blacks comprised eighty percent of the state’s commodity recipients, Ross defended the extent of state relief efforts. “The white people of Mississippi are leaning over backwards and taxing themselves to the hilt to help the Negro race,” he declared, warning that the “national ridicule and abuse” the state suffered as a result of the controversy “may well result in the surplus food commodity program in Mississippi being seriously curtailed or entirely wiped out.” First suggesting that Gregory and civil rights organizers had exaggerated the amount of food donated, white Mississippi leaders then implied, in Gregory’s words, “if Dick Gregory was going to take care of their poor Negroes, let’s send them all up to Chicago.”

An editorial from the Clarksdale Press Register echoed these sentiments in dramatic terms, dismissing Gregory and the “grocery situation” as “downright ridiculous.” Playing on Gregory’s profession, the author stated that the “whole absurd spectacle” of his appeal “to the bleeding hearts of Chicago for food to bring down to the Southern hinterlands would be downright sidesplitting if it were not taken seriously by Mississippi’s less knowledgeable Americans in the social wastelands of South Chicago,

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388 Ibid.
389 Gregory, Nigger, 161. According to the Commonwealth, Ross “said it was possible counties might decide to let Gregory and his Chicago friends handle food distribution rather than tax themselves to do so.” Qtd. in AP, “State Welfare Boss Blasts Food Hoopla.”
Gary, Harlem, and Hyannis Port.” This generalization of donors as bleeding-heart liberals overlooked the contributions of conservative organizations, including the Nation of Islam. The suggestion that those sending food should focus on their own affairs in the North similarly ignored the likelihood that many donors maintained family ties in the South. Instead, the commentator attacked the “widespread and flagrant abuses by the [commodity program] participants, which have nothing whatsoever to do with voting, school integration, or what have you.” The distribution of free food, the author seemed to contend, was a privilege, not a right of citizenship.

In attempting to belittle the need by characterizing “Gregory’s Jet-Propelled Grocery Store” as ill-informed and self-interested, opponents missed the point. The huge public response to the food drive stemmed less from the identity of the donor than from the extraordinary lengths to which he traveled to bring food to hungry people. By attacking Gregory’s motives, white officials aimed to distract from the circumstances that

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391 Ibid.
392 *Muhammad Speaks* covered the Greenwood crisis in March, noting, “Their need remains despite the fact that a food-caravan organized by comedian Dick Gregory and a number of mid-western organizations have flown tons of food and clothing into the area to prevent the mass starvation.” A year later, a feature story on the Shabazz Supermarket thanked community patrons for enabling the store to “maintain its performance of charitable work in the Negro community,” including “mail[ing] a truckload of canned foods and clothes to hard-pressed Negro families in Mississippi during the 1963 economic boycott of Negroes by white officials who had dropped them from relief rolls because of their attempts to register and vote.” See “A Time of Terror and Torment: Chill Wind of Horror, Hunger, Rakes Negroes in Mississippi,” *MS* (18 Mar 1963), 18; “Fallacy of the Free World: Grim History of Greenwood, Miss.,” *MS* (29 Apr 1963), 10; “Shabazz: Market of the Midwest,” *MS* (11 Sep 1964), 19.
393 In addition to “the so-called Negro leaders of the Mississippi NAACP and other multiple-titled racist organizations, led by a certain Clarksdale pharmacist [Aaron Henry],” the editorial alleged that “one real culprit is the occupant of the White House [JFK]… whose New England provincialism toward agriculture and whose Harvard horror of the difficulties of social adjustment, are responsible for the very conditions which idle thousands of our farm workers.” “Gregory’s Groceries,” 4.
necessitated outside intervention. Though locals and insiders understood Mississippi’s customs and modus operandi, the peculiarities and injustices of Mississippi social relations represented a source of embarrassment when illuminated by national media, evidence of the extreme measures deployed by the white power structure to keep black Mississippians on the margins of life. The food blockade thus created a crucial opportunity for people beyond state lines to feel a human connection to the struggles of the rural poor, black and white. If the collective conscience of Americans outside the South might find solace, even comfort, in the knowledge that they as individuals could not do much to expedite desegregation, secure black voting rights, or overturn the plantation economy, they might—and apparently did—nonetheless feel compelled to contribute food for the cause of freedom. Certainly widespread hunger stemmed from broader structures of political repression and economic exploitation, but it also offered a condition to which others might relate and a cause to which they could directly, and relatively easily, respond. In helping to meet the material needs of the poor, donors and movement friends demonstrated that everyone interested in justice had a role to play. As the days dragged on, local people finally began to move en masse.

The spark ignited on February 23, when police arrested Sam Block for “issuing a false statement designed to cause a breach of the peace.” The night before, four

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394 Several weeks later, The Student Voice summarized the sequence of events: “On February 20, four Negro businesses were burned to the ground in Greenwood, just one block away from the SNCC office. Block stated publicly that he thought arsonists had meant to destroy it. Three days later Block was arrested on a charge of ‘circulating breach of the peace,’ which was later changed to ‘making statements calculated to breach the peace.’...What differentiated this from the usual harassment against SNCC staff members was the reaction of Greenwood Negroes, who
buildings near the SNCC office had burned. Block hypothesized to the United Press International that arsonists targeting SNCC had mistakenly set ablaze the buildings in its vicinity in reprisal for recent food distribution efforts.\footnote{395} Though Block had been jailed numerous times in Greenwood by that point, on this occasion local residents responded in a decidedly different fashion. Cobb, who spent most of his time working in Ruleville, remarked, “…people came from all over for Sam’s trial. And they were doing stuff we had never seen in Ruleville or any other place…like deliberately drinking from the ‘white’ water fountains and talking back to white people. It was kind of a protest as well as an observation of Sam.”\footnote{396} Such flagrant violation of one of the signposts of Jim Crow etiquette—segregated drinking fountains—indicated a striking refutation of social customs and political arrangements that marked black bodies as inferior and their physical needs and comfort mutable and unimportant. “With little to lose now,” Bob Moses recalled, local residents “protested that Sam Block had done nothing wrong. Even we [SNCC staff] were surprised by their militancy…”\footnote{397} This show of support represented as a welcome change for Block, who had slept in his car for four months upon arriving in Greenwood because no one in the local community dared to risk associating with him.\footnote{398} When City Judge O.L. Kimbrough implied that things would

\footnotesize{conquered generations of fear to protest.” See “SNCC Staff Jailed as Greenwood Negroes Register in ‘First Breakthrough’ in Mississippi,” \textit{Student Voice} (Apr 1963), 1.}\footnote{395}{"No Evidence at Scene’—Negro Arrested For Charging Arson Was Committed Here,” \textit{Greenwood Commonwealth} (23 Feb 1963), 1.}\footnote{396}{Cobb, Oral History.}\footnote{397}{Moses and Cobb, 63.}\footnote{398}{Block later explained, “When people found out what I was there for, they said it was best for no one to have anything to do with me because of what I was doing, and I was only going to stir}
improve for local blacks if Block left town, Block’s defiant response further galvanized the crowd. “Well, judge, I ain’t gonna do none of that,” he reportedly retorted.\footnote{399} Mississippi-born and -educated, Block had literally been schooled in the system of white supremacy and black exploitation upon which it rested. He became a local hero that day not only for refusing to back down to a white man, but for openly defying an agent of the same local government that denied black voting rights and perpetuated black hunger.

Cobb and Moses viewed this sequence of events as a psychological turning point for the embattled community, as “for the first time people were making a connection between food on their table and political participation…They recognized that the people who did this [withheld the commodities] were people who were elected to office.”\footnote{400} Local blacks appeared to comprehend the implications of the judge’s proposition—that is, that local power elites saw them, and the food they needed to survive, as pawns in a political battle. Judge Kimbrough showed his hand too soon, in effect acknowledging that officials squeezed locals to squelch resistance. In Cobb’s eyes, this episode cemented in the minds of both Greenwood blacks and SNCC organizers the vital connection between eating and voting. He recalled the new approach and mentality: “you’re not only here to get food, but you’re also here to fill out this registration form.”\footnote{401} Moses meanwhile celebrated the manner in which the food giveaways facilitated communal autonomy, signified hopes for self-determination, and fostered self-respect.

\footnotesize{\begin{itemize}
\item \footnotesize{up trouble and be there for a short length of time, and then leave.” Qtd. in Forman, 283. See Douglas Martin, “Samuel Block, 60, Civil Rights Battler, Dies,” \textit{New York Times} (22 Apr 2000).}
\item \footnotesize{399 “Block Convicted,” \textit{Greenwood Commonwealth} (25 Feb 1963), 1.}
\item \footnotesize{400 Cobb, Oral History.}
\item \footnotesize{401 Ibid.}
\end{itemize}}
“The food is identified in the minds of everyone as food for those who want to be free,” he believed, “and the minimum requirement for freedom is identified as registration to vote.” Amidst justified fears of violence against those who joined or cooperated with the movement, local people might be moved to participate in the political process if they could see how their involvement might immediately improve their circumstances. Distribution of food provided both an example of the daily need for compassionate community leaders and the occasion for organizers to highlight the link between political disfranchisement and destitution. “When a thousand people stand in line for a few cans of food,” Moses contended, “then it is possible to tell a thousand people that they are poor, that they are trapped in poverty, that they must move if they are to escape.”

Several days after Block’s arrest, Moses wrote to Northern supporters, thanking them for their assistance and conveying the value of their efforts. In doing so, he directly reinforced the connection between food and the franchise. “The food drive you organized and publicized….has resulted in and served as the immediate catalyst for opening new dimensions in the voter registration movement in Mississippi,” he assured them. The logistics of direct aid distribution necessitated personal contact with community leaders, as well as individuals and families in need, and, just as importantly, encouraged rural blacks to come to SNCC for help. Indeed, many had nowhere else to turn. Moreover, though liberal students and local volunteers might be afraid of the violence and harassment that often accompanied registration drives, a campaign to feed

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403 Ibid.
the hungry held an altruistic appeal that seemed, at the surface, apolitical in nature. Moses confidently informed supporters that the food drive had fueled the “[d]evelopment of a core of workers who come to help process the applications [for aid], packing and distribution of the food, and [then] stay to help on the voter registration drive.” Thus, SNCC food work seemingly politicized staff and volunteers as well. Finally, and most critically to SNCC’s broader political aims, the food drive fostered for the organization, philosophically and tactically dedicated to encouraging indigenous leadership, an “image in the Negro community of providing direct aid, not just ‘agitation.’” This was no small matter in the Delta, where the threat of official or vigilante justice, firing, or eviction paralyzed the aspirations of many who otherwise might have been inclined to vote.404

Leading white citizens in Greenwood meanwhile endeavored to defuse the situation by denying that a situation existed. The mayor and city commissioners preached calm, blaming the upsurge in demonstrations on the work of outsiders “activated by motives other than the welfare of our people...[and] dedicated to creating disunity and discord among us.”405 Appealing to an imagined past of racial unity in which “the white and colored races of Greenwood and Leflore County have lived together in an atmosphere of harmony, understanding, and cooperation,” the official statement, issued at the beginning of March, assured local residents that, if they refused

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to “permit [them]selves to become victimized by those whose sole purpose in being here is to bring about upheaval and unrest…they will move on; and we will continue, in the future as in the past, to manage our own affairs for the mutual benefit of all.”

Couching objections to SNCC’s work in terms of local autonomy rather than race and class conflict, Greenwood leaders hinted at the external pressures exerted by the USDA to ameliorate the situation, and on March 19, the Board of Supervisors voted to reinstitute the commodity program. In a scathing editorial, a writer for the Commonwealth identified as “T.W.” characterized the decision as a “surrender” to a USDA ultimatum that Leflore “furnish commodities to the masses of Welfare Cheats or ‘we will do it for you.’” T.W. warned that, in allowing the federal government to intervene in “local” affairs, the Board’s compliance signified the first step on a slippery slope. Considering the role of State Welfare Commissioner Fred Ross in the decision, T.W. ironically echoed Ross’ threat that Mississippi should get “out of the welfare business altogether, because nowhere do the strings attached to federal money show up clearer than in that particular area which has become strictly an activity of the government, divorced entirely from the control of the people.”

In light of the Board’s decision, SNCC leadership decided to continue to collect and distribute food to dramatize its assertion that, even for those who received it, federal food assistance did not stave off hunger.

SNCC’s decision reflected the utility of food as an organizing tool. In an organization dedicated to building indigenous leadership, food aid provided something

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406 Qtd. in Ibid.
concrete and meaningful to the needy—the very people whose trust SNCC had to gain in order to make inroads in the “closed society.” Food provided a relatively easy but absolutely vital entry point. People who at first shied from organizers they feared would try to convince them to register to vote might be more inclined to listen if they saw something to be gained in the here and now, not only for themselves but for their families. Long-term political organizing was hard and often dispiriting work. The country registrar often turned away blacks that attempted to register, and even unsuccessful attempts often brought violence, harassment, or economic reprisals. Food, however, helped not only to entice the poor to trust SNCC, but also created an incentive for them to take greater risks with and for an organization that met their daily needs. More practically, SNCC’s food aid made local people less reliant on often manipulative and unreliable government food aid, and worked to reassure potential voters that, even if they lost their homes and jobs in retribution, at least they would not be left to starve. Reflecting upon the lessons of Greenwood, Moses explained, “We knew more about organizing now. A small dedicated band—even one person—could dig in, establish a beachhead, survive and perhaps get some kind of breakthrough, punch a small hole in the wall of white supremacy by linking everyday issues to political participation.”

Charles McLaurin, who at Moses’ behest had recruited Fannie Lou Hamer to work with SNCC, underscored this connection, but described a more practical function of the food giveaways in February 1964. A day after a truck delivered 24,000 pounds of food and clothing to the center in Ruleville, seventy-five people signed up for aid, and a

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third of those then went to the county courthouse in Indianola to register.\textsuperscript{409} On this occasion SNCC directly reinforced the continued imperative of voter registration by stating that those who attempted to register would be first to receive the free food distributed the following night. Of the three hundred people who came to the food giveaway the next day, more than half had attempted to register, some walking up to ten miles to do so. The following Monday morning, people began arriving at the SNCC freedom house before six o’clock, and by 7:30 there were about one thousand people standing in line and a queue of cars ten blocks long. Within five days, the entire shipment of food had been distributed, and still many more needy people had been unable to collect provisions.\textsuperscript{410} Over the course of the week more than three hundred black Americans—about thirty percent of those who had come requesting food—tried to register to vote in Sunflower County. Most were illiterate and therefore certain to fail the test, but that, McLaurin noted, was not the point. “Now they could say that they had been to the courthouse to register to vote. The people who could not write or read may never become voters, but they had done what we asked—to register or to make an attempt to do so.”\textsuperscript{411} Forman agreed that the effort meant as much as the outcome. “We were interested in more than registering people. Going to the courthouse”—the seat of white

\textsuperscript{409} Charles McLaurin, “Report from Sunflower County” (19 Feb 1964) \textless http://www.crmvet.org/lets/6402_sncc_sunflower.pdf\textgreater. In an interesting aside, McLaurin remarked that women accounted for eight of the twelve “community people” who unloaded the truck. “Well this sounds bad for us [men],” he commented, “but the men up here are nothing. The saying around Ruleville is that if you want a job done right, get a woman.”

\textsuperscript{410} Though jarring, these events did not incite action among all blacks in Sunflower County. As courage spread, those living and working on Senator Eastland’s plantation, for example, still could not budge. McLaurin reported that though they were clearly “in bad shape…they were afraid to come and get the food and clothing.” Fear of economic reprisal permeated the air in Sunflower County. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{411} Ibid.
power—“was a symbol of defiance. And the whites had recognized it as such.”

Friends of SNCC

From a fundraising standpoint, food aid held great promise. As a widespread condition that affected people of all races, hunger evoked a universal bodily sensation that rallied humanitarian impulses. SNCC field secretary Fannie Lou Hamer, for one, often drew on her personal experiences and credibility as a poor, middle-aged black woman from Mississippi to appeal to outsiders for aid and support. Though best known for her spellbinding speaking skills and her ability to move large groups of people with soulful renditions of freedom songs, Hamer’s message demanded attention in written form as well.\(^{413}\) In a moving 1963 letter requesting donations of food, clothing, and money, she recalled a lifetime of hunger pains. “Here in the Delta part of Mississippi, I…have just barely existed,” she declared, “not really lived[,] because coming from a farming family, I can tell you what it is like to suffer for things that are essential in order for one to survive throughout these economical and social changes.” She testified that the deprivation she experienced and witnessed stemmed from intergenerational poverty and want, not isolated emergencies. “So many times as a child, I have gone hungry and now as an adult, I’m still hungry.” She then expanded her message to politics in a

\(^{412}\) Forman, 296. Moses concurred, explaining, “Mississippi whites were counting on us never being able to involve large numbers of people in our efforts. This pragmatic need was behind much of the violence and economic reprisal in the state….This local argument conformed to the national stereotype of southern Black people in particular. It was only when hundreds of people began showing up at the Leflore County courthouse after food aid was shut down that this argument began to erode. They could say people were hungry, but they couldn’t say they were apathetic if for a little bit of food they were willing to risk everything and go down and stand at the registrar’s office trying to register for rights.” Moses and Cobb, 62.

\(^{413}\) Hamer was most closely associated with the songs “Go Tell It On the Mountain” and “This Little Light of Mine.”
traditional sense, as she proclaimed, “It’s one of the greatest things that ever happened in the state of Mississippi when the Voter Registration Crusade began.” Directly connecting the struggle for food to the struggle for the franchise, Hamer continued, “…[W]e need a change in Mississippi[.] I’m sick of being hungry, naked and looking at my children and so many other children crying for bread. I have so many times been in jail and beaten by so called law enforcement officers just because I tried to exercise my rights.”

As Hamer’s letter recognized, SNCC food work mandated broader movement dialogue and action to address black hunger and oppression in the South. It called upon concerned Americans across the nation to contribute foodstuffs for the cause of freedom, thus demonstrating a concern outside the South for the struggles of the Southern rural poor. Moreover, it seized upon a problem that—unlike political disfranchisement, segregation, or racial violence—affected members of all races. It encouraged allies in the North and around the country to contribute directly to the movement by pointing out tangible needs that regular supporters could easily help meet.

SNCC’s pursuit of Northern support dated at least as far back as June 1962, when Forman and the Executive Committee resolved to open offices in Northern cities, hoping large black populations might generate financial support for efforts in the Deep South. SNCC eyed New York, Washington, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Cleveland, hoping not only to raise money but also to break into the national news media to bring


Southern struggles into national discourse and consciousness. Forman later wrote, “I saw the Northern offices as providing an information network and bases of political support. In those Northern cities with large black populations it should be possible to build an awareness of what was happening in the South together with pressure for government action.” In the best case scenario, “[t]his awareness would also sensitize black people around the country to SNCC’s activities, thereby generating an impulse in them to do something active and frontal in their own cities.”

The “Food for Freedom” campaign officially launched in March 1963, a week before Leflore County reinstituted the commodity program. James Monsonis spearheaded fundraising and food drives in New York, and orchestrated a meeting on March 16 to coordinate these efforts. Hosted in the auditorium of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters on West 125th Street, the purpose of the meeting, as Charles McDew and Bill Mahoney conveyed to invitees, was to establish a “Sharecroppers’ Relief Committee” “to organize a citywide Food for Freedom drive to aid the hungry Negro families of Mississippi. Through our united efforts,” they hoped, “we can not only call attention to the plight of the Mississippi sharecroppers but we can also take specific actions toward correcting the situation.” Preliminary sponsors included the New York

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415 Forman, 271.
416 Ibid. Forman recalled a benefit concert organized by Ella Baker, Joanne Grant, and William Mahoney at Carnegie Hall in February 1963 as “the beginning of a support base among many black artists and writers together with liberal and progressive whites. Lorraine Hansberry, Harry and Julie Belafonte, Diahann Carroll, and Sidney Poitier were among those who consistently supported SNCC from 1963 to 1966” (293).
417 Bill Mahoney of Howard University’s Nonviolent Action Group served on SNCC’s Executive Committee. At a September 1963 meeting, he urged SNCC to focus on developing its economic programs to work toward tangible goals like full employment. Carson, *In Struggle*, 104.
Branch of the NAACP; District 65 of the Retail, Wholesale, and Department Store Union; the Metropolitan Community Methodist Church; the Grace Methodist Church; the Friendship Baptist League; and longtime activist Bayard Rustin and the War Resisters League.\textsuperscript{418} U.S. Congressman William F. Ryan endorsed the cause but could not attend the meeting, at which Sam Block was slated to discuss his experiences being “shot at, jailed, and almost lynched as he worked in Leflore County.”\textsuperscript{419}

In soliciting support and appealing for attendance, organizers like McDew acknowledged that a food drive delivered only fleeting relief to those afflicted by shifts in agricultural technology and economy, but might “also bring to the forefront the need for a deeper, more meaningful solution.” SNCC emphasized that the value of donations went far beyond their monetary worth. “To the people of the Delta,” one fundraising letter explained, “aid in the form of a can of food or a pair of shoes not only satisfies physical needs but also means that someone in the North cares whether they live or die.” The moral and material backing of outsiders helped to “free the sharecroppers from economic dependence upon local whites. This means that they are free to fight for freedom to vote, freedom to speak, and freedom from want and fear.”\textsuperscript{420} Bob Moses sketched the situation in Greenwood in similar terms at a SNCC conference in Atlanta, held over Easter weekend. “What is going on essentially is that you are fighting psychologically for the minds of the Negro people. They are being bombarded on the one hand by the local

\textsuperscript{418} Rustin is perhaps best known for his dedication to nonviolent civil disobedience and for organizing the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963.  
\textsuperscript{419} Charles McDew and William Mahoney, Letter to New York City supporters (12 Mar 1963); William Mahoney to Rev. William James, Metropolitan Methodist Church (8 Mar 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49.  
\textsuperscript{420} SNCC Form Letter (26 Mar 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49.
white community and the state political machinery, and on the other hand by the civil rights organizations and by the work of the Justice Department and the local F.B.I.”

To win the favor of the masses, he suggested, SNCC needed to offer incentives that outweighed the costs. By way of evidence, he noted that most of the five or six hundred blacks who had tried to register in Leflore in recent months “have been primarily people who are very black and very poor. The people come off the plantation areas, who have not this year had enough food for their families...[They] came to the church where Sam and Willie began distributing food and were encouraged to go down and register. They went down in the face of their fears because they were starving. That’s the basic motivation of hunger.” The essential need to secure food, and the outrage sparked by knowledge that their hunger was being used to intensify their weakness, emboldened people tired of being abused. By April, The Student Voice announced, “Friends of SNCC in Chicago, the Southern Educational Fund and CORE in Louisville, students in Ann Arbor, Detroit, Los Angeles, and several other cities” were operating food drives and would “continue until cotton-picking begins again for the thousands of seasonal sharecroppers.”

Wide-scale participation in mid-western cities like Chicago and Ann Arbor stemmed from the deep Mississippi roots of many black residents, the liberal student bases of several large public universities, and the relatively close proximity and ease with
which donations could be transported.\textsuperscript{423} Though almost twice as far from Clarksdale as was Chicago, New York nonetheless housed an array of resources and communities that quickly mobilized to meet the need. Movement celebrities like Harry Belafonte, Sidney Poitier, and other heavy hitters sponsored fundraising dinners and other events, flexing their networking muscle to secure the help of the influential and famous, in additional to larger philanthropic organizations.\textsuperscript{424} New York City residents, too, swiftly signed on to help with the explicit approval of leading city politicians. The office of the Borough President of Manhattan, Democrat Edward R. Dudley, endorsed “the effort of organizations in New York to take part in a national effort to collect food to send to Mississippi,” proclaiming April 6 the start of “Food for Freedom Week.”\textsuperscript{425} In an official proclamation, Dudley “called upon all citizens of Manhattan to give maximum support to

\textsuperscript{423} The train route from Clarksdale to Chicago was a major thoroughfare during the Great Migration. As a result, many blacks in Chicago and Detroit, for example, had familial links to the Deep South. Such a connection brought fourteen year-old Emmett Till from Chicago to the Delta, where he was murdered in August 1955. The New Left got its start with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), founded in Port Huron Michigan in 1962.

\textsuperscript{424} Harry Belafonte Enterprises, for example, attempted to secure donations from Meals for Millions, a non-profit food agency headquartered in Santa Monica, California. Meals for Millions expressed enthusiasm to assist SNCC and proposed an initial grant of one ton of “Multi-Purpose Food,” specially engineered to provide maximum nutritional value at minimal costs. Executive director Florence Rose wrote to Belafonte Enterprises: “Be sure that we are eager to be as helpful as we can—in whatever way we can.” Letter from Florence Rose [Exec Dir of Meals for Millions, Los Angeles] to Clarence B. Jones [Harry Belafonte Enterprises] (2 Oct 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49. ‘On a dangerous mission in August 1964, Belafonte and Poitier travelled to Greenwood to deliver cash to SNCC. Belafonte opened in his 2011 memoir by recounting this incident. See Harry Belafonte and Michael Shnayerson, My Song: A Memoir (Knopf, 2011), 3-11.

\textsuperscript{425} Block appealed directly to Dudley for his endorsement. Voicing solidarity with “all of the thousands of hungry Negroes in Mississippi,” Block explained SNCC’s focus on Leflore, where the poor “had been denied this federal assistance because the county officials refused to handle these commodities. We believe this was done to try to halt the interest that Negroes of the county are showing in registration.” Samuel Block to Honorable Edward Dudley (President of the Borough of Manhattan), n.d., SNCC Papers, Reel 49.
the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and co-operating groups so that the fight by a minority for their Constitutional rights will not be hindered or stopped by near starvation….”  

The Community Church of New York, a Unitarian Universalist congregation located on East 35th Street, was one of many religious organizations that got on board. While Rev. King and the SCLC assisted local leaders in the Birmingham movement, a May 1963 newsletter tied the need to feed the Mississippi hungry in light of “horrifying” economic reprisals to these broader movement efforts. “Though unable to be a front-line worker in this struggle,” the Church insisted, “we can all extend a helping hand to both families and student workers.” It urged the congregation to bring food to the May 12 service and to participate in food drives at local grocery stores the following week. The Community Church raised more than thirteen hundred pounds of food and more than $400 to cover shipping costs. Edith Dodson of the Church’s Social Action Committee assured SNCC’s Bill Mahoney, “This was an all-Church program… overwhelmingly supported by the congregation…” Humanitarianism, rather than

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426 William Mahoney to Hon. Robert F. Wagner, Mayor of New York City (5 April 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49.
427 Religious organizations, regardless of their political leanings, have long rallied around the philanthropic task of feeding the hungry. Though many shied away from openly allying with movement activists, they felt compelled to donate food aid. In this way, food represented a seemingly apolitical rhetorical device and organizing focus. Whereas sit-ins and demonstrations fostered an image of confrontation and often led to violence, the notion of “food for freedom” connoted a simple demand, nonthreatening in a nation where a growing middle-class wasted large quantities of food and where obesity and overweight increasingly threatened the health of well-fed Americans. One person’s ability to eat did not diminish or threaten that of another, but one’s refusal to help a hungry person eat compromised one’s own morality and salvation.
429 The sources conflict on the actual amount. William Mahoney to Edith Dodson, Community Church of New York (5 July 1963); Edith Dodson, Social Action Committee to William Mahoney (20 June 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49.
religious faith, provided the primary motivation for donors. “The drive was so universal in appeal,” she explained, “that shoppers joined our committee in handing out flyers and explaining the project at the stores.” Meanwhile, a few miles north in Harlem, citizens organized a metropolitan-wide food and clothing drive, which collected enough donations to fill a boxcar.

At times, the outpouring of generosity outpaced SNCC’s capacity to facilitate or assist in the arduous process of transporting heavy boxes of foodstuffs and clothing to those needing assistance. In August 1963, Mahoney assured the Teamsters of New York that SNCC’s “inexcusable failure to supply you with help…does not erase the crying need in the south for the food that persons so gracious as yourself have been kind enough to donate.” Mahoney implored, “If you could help in any way to expedite the collection of food and its transportation to the south, it would bring solace to many of our less fortunate brothers.” The Teamsters responded to the plea, supplying manpower and a truck to transport the collected items to a vehicle secured by SNCC to carry them on to Mississippi. Julie Prettyman, the administrative secretary of the New York SNCC office thanked the Teamsters one month later, explaining, “It is always a source of encouragement to be made aware of the concern and interest of people like yourselves, who are taking an interest in the work we are doing.” Prettyman, like others, acknowledged that the food drives reassured both recipients and organizers that their

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430 Edith Dodson, Social Action Committee to William Mahoney (20 June 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49.
431 Letter from William Mahoney to Bob [Moses] (9 May 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49.
struggles meant something outside the local context in which they occurred.\footnote{Letter from William Mahoney to William Nuchow, International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Local 210, NYC (9 Aug 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49.} By late 1963, organizations including Brooklyn CORE, Fort Washington Manhattenville Reform Democrats, Village Independent Democrats, Riverside Democratic Inc., Harlem Education Project, and the East Harlem Reform Democrats sponsored food drives, as did nine individual supporters, more than half of which were female.\footnote{Memo, “Food Drive Collectors—memo on Northern support sent” n.d. (late 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49.} In addition, local Friends of SNCC chapters at Stuyvesant High School and the Entre Male Club hosted drives.

The cause likewise sparked spirited responses from liberal college students. In early 1964, Dorothy Zellner, a Mississippi veteran in charge of SNCC communications and fundraising, coordinated a month-long donation drive at Harvard and Brandeis Universities near Boston.\footnote{Perhaps in part because of these efforts, Harvard University would send the largest group of Freedom Summer volunteers of any institution after University of California, Berkeley. “Friends of SNCC Sending Supplies to Help Mississippi Sharecroppers,” Harvard Crimson (6 Feb 1964) \<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1964/2/6/friends-of-sncc-sending-supplies-to/>.\} With the help of about thirty Harvard students and donations from thirty-one communities in the surrounding area, the Boston Area Friends of SNCC collected five tons of food, clothing, and books.\footnote{“Friends Send Food, Clothes,” Student Voice (11 Feb 1964), 2. Strategically positioned on the page opposite from this story, an ad requesting donations displayed a photograph of two young black boys perched on the wooden steps of a cabin. One wears no shirt. The other frowns. Large bold print above the image urged “Give Them A Future[,] Help Support SNCC.” Though not directly referencing the food drive described on the previous page, the image’s juxtaposition appealed to readers’ sense that, for children of three or four years, the future depended most immediately on SNCC ability to deliver them food.} Zellner remarked, “The response has been extraordinary, especially from the suburban women.” After a four-day packing operation, a van left Cambridge, embarking on a journey of some fourteen hundred miles.
to deliver the provisions to Ruleville. Three months later, *The Harvard Crimson* covered a fundraising effort at neighboring Radcliffe College, where on May 14, six hundred twenty-one female students participated in a “Fast for Freedom,” voluntarily abstaining from the evening meal served in the dormitories to donate the money saved on food costs (approximately $0.50 per student) to SNCC. The form of the fundraising drive heightened its significance, for a minor inconvenience or sacrifice for young adults of privilege translated into tangible aid for families literally starving for the right to vote several hundred miles away. *The Student Voice* credited the idea to Brandeis students and reported that co-eds from a total of forty Northern universities participated. The fast netted $15,000 to purchase emergency food supplies.

Initially SNCC had intended to continue the food campaign only through the start of cotton-picking season in mid-August, the lone phase of the cotton year not yet wholly automated. Undoubtedly aware that hunger existed in depressed areas across the South (and, indeed, around the nation), SNCC kept its focus on providing relief to the Mississippi Delta. In September 1963, as SNCC prepared a study of hunger conditions in Mississippi and South Carolina, James Forman explained to one perspective donor, “If

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438 In a letter to the SNCC Chicago office, Block minced no words. “[T]hings are going bad here,” he admitted. His thoughts centered on malnourished children in need of medical attention, too hungry to concentrate at school. His personal inability to help them deepened his anxiety and melancholy. Block described having watched a ten-year-old boy shoo away a dog digging in a trashcan so that he himself could scavenge some “potato peelings and some hard white bread.” When the boy asked “Mr. Freedom man” for “a nickel to buy me something to eat,” Block started to cry because he “didn’t have not one penny to give the little boy and he had to go on to school hungry.” Samuel Block to Ralph Rapoport (25 Sep 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 29.
there is a question of choosing states, we prefer to concentrate on Mississippi where we
know of the needs, for the people are at our doors with their hungry children. This
condition is not right and therefore we welcome whatever you might be able to do.”

To Forman’s mind, SNCC organizers felt more enmeshed in Mississippi, and therefore
more personally responsible for the worsening plight of many poor blacks since the
organization’s arrival. That day he also composed a revealing letter to Clarence B. Jones,
advisor to Martin Luther King Jr., expressing frustration with the continued need for
SNCC to feed hungry Mississippians. With winter looming, Forman conveyed the
“terrific need for food for the people with whom we are working,” admitting,
“[s]ometimes we need it for ourselves. But that is incidental to the fact that thousands of
Negroes in this country just do not have enough food.” Focusing on the political
dimensions and functions of hunger, Forman and SNCC sought to use the situation in
Greenwood as an occasion “to wage a campaign that would force the issue of the
government feeding people.” By calling upon the conscience and resources of
“volunteers to supply a governmental function,” Forman hoped the Food for Freedom
campaign would highlight the inadequacy of federal food aid, forcing donors and
volunteers to question why the government did not provide for its needy citizens.

Nevertheless, Forman did not feign enthusiasm for the project. He expressed
instead a reluctant acknowledgement that the food program was necessary to “meet the
needs of the people insofar as we are capable of doing this.” Eager to find another
organization or agency willing to take on the task, Forman declared, “We are not at all

439 James Forman to Eddie Albert, Delmonico’s Hotel (23 Sep 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49.
happy with the fact that we must raise food for people in the South. It takes our attention from other work that we should be doing.... From his vantage as administrator of an organization incessantly in search of funds, a nationwide food aid program was simply impractical, exacting immense costs in time, money, favors, and resources. Others shared Forman’s sentiments. Despite their importance to SNCC’s efforts to mobilize the poor, seemingly unending donation drives in truth aggravated many staff, particularly younger men who at times resented the tedium and monotony or disliked being responsible for meting out relief to people they occasionally felt took things they did not really need. Reporting on a largely successful distribution effort in Ruleville, McLaurin nonetheless lamented, “Yet there is always someone who did not as they say get a thing. You know how they act, [‘]someone got more meat than I did or two pairs of shoes and I only got one[,] things like that.”441 In their darker moments, staff and volunteers expressed frustration with poor people who came for “hand outs” but still refused to participate in the voter registration drive. Thus, when the work did not yield immediate results, some questioned its efficacy as an organizing tool.

This survival mentality did, at times, thwart the politicizing potential of food, as some destitute recipients conceptualized aid as an end in itself, a way to keep keeping on,

440 James Forman to Clarence B. Jones (23 Sep 1963), SNCC Papers, Reel 49. Forman had experience organizing food relief as part of the Emergency Relief Committee, a subcommittee of Chicago CORE established in 1961 to support destitute blacks evicted for voter activity in Fayette County, Tennessee. Working to build a “support movement,” the committee solicited food and cash donations in front of Chicago grocery stores before moving on to organize local churches. Los Angeles CORE assisted by sending support to neighboring Hayward County. In Forman’s view, “A movement developed in Chicago around the plight of people in Fayette County.” The United Packinghouse Workers and, later, the AFL-CIO Industrial Union Council of Cook County supported the committee’s efforts. The Making of Black Revolutionaries, 131-136.

rather than a spur for greater action. From the perspective of the hungry poor, this was not an irrational approach. They relied on and appreciated movement food aid, but its arrival did not immediately alter the reality of their dependency. In fact, handouts from SNCC provided only meager sustenance. Despite the outpouring of support from around the country, thousands upon thousands of pounds of free food could not begin to address the area’s dire conditions. Those fortunate enough to obtain foodstuffs procured by SNCC had a few days’ reprieve from hunger, but when the food ran out, as it always did, beneficiaries found themselves scarcely better off than they were before.

It seemed that where the movement had already been flailing—typically in areas paralyzed by the most repressive white violence—efforts to address the material needs of poor residents seldom sparked mass participation in larger campaigns. However, in areas characterized by more limited or subtle intimidation tactics or where organizers had moved in months or years earlier, feeding the hungry served to some extent to mobilize the local population. In many such cases, organizers had become part of the community, and therefore understood the obstacles facing local people. Officials and plantation owners in these areas more often used economic reprisals than violence to discourage people from registering or otherwise aiding the movement; as a result, food and clothing

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442 The Citizen’s Board acknowledged the pervasiveness of “…people whose lives are virtually consumed in seeking the food they lack the money to buy.” Hunger USA, 16.
443 Anne Moody of CORE described her disheartening experiences distributing food and clothing in the Madison County town of Canton, near Jackson, in September 1963. Needy people barraged the Freedom House seeking clothes, but showed a strong aversion to voting, as well as open suspicion of rights workers. Moody recalled, “I began to have the feeling that either we came up with an idea or project better than voter registration or we would have to get out of Canton.” Anne Moody, Coming of Age in Mississippi: An Autobiography (New York: Random House, 1968), 344, 356.
drives elicited positive responses. Seeing the direct connection between their own misery and the unchecked power of white leaders seemingly inspired many who might otherwise have been too afraid to join the movement or unconvinced that resistance could actually change anything. In contexts where political action did not guarantee vigilante violence, localized issues of food access arguably offered a more compelling incentive for political participation than distant national concerns like a civil rights bill, as a single black vote in a county or state election held much more weight than one of millions in a presidential contest between candidates not likely to be seriously concerned with the hardships of rural Southern life. In addition to wielding greater influence, black voters had more to gain by taking control in a local context.

The experience was somewhat different for SNCC staff working outside the South, primarily in fundraising capacities with Friends of SNCC. Removed from the front lines of voter registration and desegregation drives, and forced to tackle the tedious and often thankless job of pleading for contributions, organizers who left the South to work generating Northern support expressed aggravation with the slow response. Casey Hayden, a white woman involved in the founding of both SNCC and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), lent her labors and expertise to the Chicago Area Friends of SNCC (CAF-SNCC) during 1964. Hayden, a veteran of direct action in the South, had led student sit-ins at the University of Texas in Austin during 1960, participated in the Freedom Rides in 1961, and worked fulltime with SNCC thereafter. In April 1964 she wrote to her friend Dinky Romilly at SNCC headquarters to explain the “Chicago problems.” Whereas she felt that northern SNCC affiliates should be focused on aiding
the struggle in the South, she found that most of the people she dealt with believed fundraising for Southern programs to be of secondary importance to increasing movement work in Chicago. Hayden confessed, “I am distressed by lack of concern with the South here and with the effect of trying to get people going on a fund raising program and on Southern action.” She complained that at a recent meeting of CAF-SNCC she “had to press to get Greenwood”—the heart of SNCC’s Mississippi work—“on the agenda.” Not surprisingly, no one there volunteered to take the lead on a mass mailing that aimed to keep supplies flowing to the Southern trenches. 444 Two weeks later, Hayden reported that the division in focus and priorities had worsened. Cordell Reagon, a founder of the SNCC Freedom Singers, had, Hayden indicated, “encountered so much hostility in raising funds that he had real difficulties.” Citing the alienation of others like Charles McDew and Curtis Hayes, who had ventured northward to continue supply operations for the South, Hayden remarked, “I must say I agree with them, as I wouldn’t have thought I was in a SNCC meeting for the most part up here.” 445

The politics of food highlighted the relationship between the belly and the ballot. Hunger in the Delta made the importance of political action tangible and real rather than idealized and diffuse. It created material political aims and targeted specific individuals and actions responsible for the afflictions of the masses. SNCC’s food activism continued for the duration of its work in the Delta, and in early 1964, the geographic

444 Casey Hayden to Dinky Romilly, “Re: Chicago Fund Raising” (4 Apr 1964), SNCC Papers, Reel 29.  
center of the organization moved from Atlanta to Greenwood. Though vastly overshadowed by the dramatic implications of the 1963 Freedom Vote and 1964 Summer Project, food aid and “welfare work” remained crucial to the movement’s survival. Local schemes to drive or starve African Americans out of Mississippi threatened SNCC and COFO’s strategy to bring change through electoral politics, a strategy pragmatic only as long as blacks maintained a clear numerical advantage. The project of feeding the hungry not only spread SNCC’s message and image of its “beloved community,” but also helped to keep its voter registration drive viable. However, food welfare did not fundamentally challenge the shortcomings and biases of the existing system of food distribution, or of resource allocation and property ownership in a broader sense. Though this fact did not escape the attention of leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer, who spearheaded the organization of a largely successful farm cooperative in 1969, SNCC continued to utilize food as a means to spawn local moral and political support, as well as vital national attention.

Despite the notable outcome in Greenwood and SNCC’s success in reframing hunger in explicitly political terms, in most cases food aid provided crucial

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446 The national headquarters of SNCC moved from Atlanta to Greenwood in preparation for the 1964 Freedom Summer project. Moses had lobbied for this move since late 1963. In Forman’s mind, this “[w]as a way of putting maximum pressure on that state, of coordinating forces outside the state, and of insuring that national attention be given to the work of the project…SNCC’s move to Mississippi was an important decision, for COFO folded after the summer of 1964, and many of the problems that were actually created by the independence of COFO became the problems of SNCC. The move to Greenwood had made SNCC stronger in Mississippi and, without that strength, we would not have been able to deal with many of those problems.” The Making of Black Revolutionaries, 378.

447 Hamer outlined this venture during a 1971 speech. See “Until I Am Free, You Are Not Free Either,” Speech Delivered at the University of Wisconsin, Madison (Jan 1971) in Brooks and Houck, To Tell It Like It Is, 121-130. See also Lee, “Poverty Politics and Freedom Farm,” For Freedom’s Sake, 136-162; Kay Mills, This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer (Penguin Group, 1993), 258-260.
assistance, but little inspiration. SNCC, for the most part, conceptualized food as a means to the end of voting, a spark to get people interested in what politics could do for them, and a way of dramatizing the inhumanity of the Southern system of white rule. By August 1964, it became clear to many black Mississippians, as well as many of the movement’s most idealistic leaders, that while politics—movements to obtain and exercise power—might inspire and energize the oppressed, politicians and the Democratic Party that dominated the South until 1968, would in fact not do much for them. This quest for political responsiveness propelled the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party challenge, which cruelly demonstrated the system’s inability, if not outright refusal, to engage rights crusaders on equal terms.

In light of the Food for Freedom campaign, SNCC inability to address widespread hunger in a lasting way reflected several realities. First, systems of emergency food relief work only to help the hungry endure brief periods of crisis. Because food programs and projects relied on human generosity rather than systemic reform, they did not—and could not—forestall future emergencies. Moreover, efforts to transport massive amounts of food to aid a regional catastrophe required intricate coordination and great expense. Food sent from distant places like California, for example, reflected deeply meaningful sentiments, but served only temporarily to address the need, as people required food every day. Moreover, in addition to collecting food, organizers had to raise funds to cover the costs of delivery. Thus the actual value of donated assistance diminished in

448 Much has been written about the 1964 Democratic National Convention and the challenge posed by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. See, for example, John C. Skipper, Showdown at the 1964 Democratic Convention: Lyndon Johnson, Mississippi and Civil Rights (McFarland, 2012); Dittmer, 272-302.
transit. Nationwide food drives helped to feed people in limited ways, but they did not address the source of their problems.

Though an important tactic for organizing, SNCC’s food programs and its emphasis on food security and nutrition were always secondary to its chief ideological and strategic concern of political enfranchisement during the early years of the Mississippi movement. Moreover, the daily work of food distribution exhausted the time, energy, and occasionally the patience of staff and volunteers concerned with supposedly loftier aims. The promise of the 1963 Freedom Vote, the frustrations and ambiguous reverberations of the 1964 summer project, and the unceremonious, heartbreaking defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention that August, monopolized the focus and energies of SNCC and COFO. Many key leaders, Bob Moses, John Lewis, and Stokely Carmichael among them, were disillusioned by the year’s setbacks, and though the passage of the Voting Rights Act the following summer represented a landmark triumph for the movement, those remaining on the ground in Mississippi increasingly realized that political power in theory without economic power in reality could not advance the goals of racial equality or social transformation in an enduring manner.

**Fighting Federal Food Programs**

Responding to widespread criticism of the surplus commodity program—and likely hoping to ameliorate some of the damage done at the recently concluded Atlantic City convention, which brought the dispossession and oppression of Mississippi sharecroppers to the national political stage—President Johnson signed the Food Stamp
Act in August 1964. The measure institutionalized on a national scale a program piloted by President Kennedy as one of his first acts in office, which aimed to bring more dignity and freedom of choice to recipients of federal food aid.\textsuperscript{449} Critics of the commodity program characterized it as calorically and nutritionally inadequate and cumbersome in practice. They also often objected that the very premise of the program denied participants dietary choice.\textsuperscript{450} The Food Stamp Act aimed to make food aid more accessible and nutritionally balanced, as people could purchase food from local stores rather than travel to the county distribution point to retrieve items allocated by the USDA. Despite these intentions, the revamping of federal food aid, by most accounts, at first actually worsened the hunger pains of many poor Americans, especially the poorest of the poor.\textsuperscript{451} While the commodity program handed out free food, the Food Stamp Act instituted a system whereby those who qualified could purchase paper stamps they could


\textsuperscript{450} Primary sources include \textit{Hunger USA}, 50-56; Robert Coles and Al Clayton, \textit{Still Hungry in America} (World Publishing Company, 1969), 76, 88, 113; Kotz, 47-49. See also Poppendeick, \textit{Sweet Charity}, 10-12.

\textsuperscript{451} A 1967 USDA study of food aid programs in two Mississippi counties made a striking discovery. \textit{Hunger USA} explained, “all families studied—those participating in the food stamp program, those participating in the food distribution program and those participating in neither program—were found to have diets of approximately equal nutritional value.” Those receiving federal food aid were no better off than those who did not. The USDA’s own report found that conditions had actually worsened since 1955. “ Compared with households in the country with incomes under $2,000 surveyed in the spring of 1955, the food stamp participants in Washington County [Mississippi] had diets that were lower in all respects. They contained only about 80 percent as many calories, only about 60 to 70 percent as much calcium, riboflavin and ascorbic acid and roughly 90 percent in other nutrients. The diets of the food donation participants in Sunflower County appeared even worse in comparison with the 1955 diets.” \textit{Hunger USA}, 14, 15; Cobb, \textit{The Most Southern Place on Earth}, 257-258.
then use to buy food. Many families could not afford the expense, especially since stamps could only be procured in a month’s or half-month’s supply. Because the monthly welfare cycle did not align with the availability of stamps at the start of the month, many poor Mississippians borrowed cash from their landlords at a fixed interest rate, a cycle that effectively rendered them more dependent than before. In other cases, landlords agreed to drive their tenants into town to pick up their stamps, but charged them a hefty fee for the service. On top of these abuses, local poverty boards (composed almost exclusively of white men) maintained authority to determine eligibility thresholds and exchange rates. In order to be certified as “poor,” a household head had to obtain the signature of white employers, who could refuse to cooperate without penalty. For example, a landowner might claim that his tenant earned an amount that would either require he pay a higher rate or render him ineligible for the program entirely. Doing so ensured that laborers would remain reliant on wages, if they were fortunate enough to be employed. Local authorities had to choose which of the two programs they would administer, and retained the option to participate in neither.

SNCC and other movement organizations thus persevered in their efforts to mobilize poor rural blacks by highlighting the relationship between federal politics and

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452 Those in greatest need of food stamps paid the lowest amount and received the greatest bonus in purchasing power. For example, a family of four might be eligible to buy $22 a month in stamps good for $74 worth of food. The minimum monthly cost for each participant was $2. See Hunger USA, 57-66; Kotz, 49-54, 63-67.
453 Coles, Still Hungry in America, 2-4; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Cycle to Nowhere (Clearinghouse Publication, No. 14, 1968), 6-7, 39. Hunger USA stated, “The principal recommendation of this Board is, therefore, a free food stamp program keyed to need and to the objective of a completely adequate diet, and one which would be administered with minimum controls” (5).
454 Cobb, The Most Southern Place on Earth, 257-258.
455 Kotz, 49-53; Hunger USA, 66.
policies, local white power structures, and black destitution. In late 1964 and early 1965, the Freedom Information Service, a communications network designed to share resources and ideas among civil rights groups in Mississippi, produced several fliers to inform the hungry poor about the politics undergirding their plight. These organizing materials explained the two primary federal food aid programs and connected their failures—and the bodily hunger of the poor—to local power structures and federal policies benefiting wealthy landowners at the expense of the masses. One pamphlet featured a drawing of a large middle-aged black woman, bent over picking cotton, dragging the familiar long white sack behind her. Her facial expression conveyed worried concentration, as she gazed downward with wide eyes at the task before her. The woman appeared to be an experienced picker, as she used both of her large hands to pluck the fluffy fibers from the cotton blossoms. Large, hand-written letters beneath the image declared, “THERE IS ENOUGH FOOD,” indicating that food insecurity, not the woman’s work, caused her troubles. The following page assured the target audience, most of whom likely could identify with the woman’s work and her plight, “in this country…poor people do not have to be hungry.” The flier served a vital function by comparing the commodity and food stamp programs. Acknowledging that the federal food programs provided insufficient means to feed program participants, the pamphlet declared, “BUT THE WHITE PEOPLE OF MISSISSIPPI TRY TO KEEP US FROM GETTING EVEN THAT.” The brief explanation of the commodity program, by then likely familiar to most poor black Mississippians, stated, “The federal government says that poor people

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may get food all year round but if the white people who run your county say so, the food will go only to people who get welfare checks. And maybe to other poor people in winter.”

The pamphlet offered a more elaborate, if imprecise, description of the newly reinstated food stamp program. “If you have money to buy food,” it explained, “you may get stamps with that food [money] to buy more food….A good thing about food stamps is that if the county has them at all THEY MUST GIVE THEM TO ALL POOR PEOPLE IN THE COUNTY…BUT THIS PLAN IS NO GOOD FOR PEOPLE WHO DO NOT HAVE ANY MONEY AT ALL.” Below the text, an image of an older black male in overalls, clenching his fist, underscored the relationship between federal food programs and political engagement. A dozen or so black community members, mostly in or nearing middle age, encircled the male speaker, who gained his authority from his willingness to stand up, literally and figuratively, against the structures oppressing him. The text above his head suggested the thoughts he might be conveying: “The trouble with both the COMMODITIES AND FOOD STAMP plans is that if white people say that you are not poor, you can not get the food.” Thus, this instructional image depicted hunger and food scarcity as avoidable, deliberately inflicted conditions, situating food aid as an entitlement denied by white people to black people unwilling to fight for it. The document also expounded upon the insufficiencies of the federal programs by offering a brief nutrition lesson framed around the government’s recommended daily intake of milk, protein, fruits and vegetables, and grains. “But do they give you those foods? And do they give you enough? They promised FOOD and money to give poor people JOBS
giving out that food,” the flier asserted. “Then they do not keep that promise. THE
PEOPLES WANTS [sic] FREEDOM.”

Other materials took a similar approach to persuade people to see the significance
of federal programs in personal terms. Construing agricultural policies as products of
greed and political expedience, another flier rhetorically questioned, “What happens to all
the surplus food? Big farmers in this country produce so much food that they cannot get
the prices they want for it.”457 Aiming to cement the connection between large planters’
wealth and the poverty of the masses, organizers highlighted the implications of USDA
efforts to remove market surpluses. “This makes the rich farmers even richer. They can
buy more farm machines and hire fewer day laborers. They can do away with their
tenants and sharecroppers. The surplus food is then supposed to be given to poor people
through the commodity programs.” The flier asserted that even if the commodity
program delivered adequate, federal food aid, by definition, would never be sufficient. A
drawing of a dark, unfriendly Lyndon Johnson illustrated the president’s role in
perpetuating hunger, dismissing the very premise of his Great Society programs. “Poor
people ask ‘is this the way a Great Society works?’ Without jobs poor people get poorer.
Food only helps them stay alive and poorer longer.”458

457 Freedom Information Service and Delta Ministry, “What Happens to All the Surplus Food?”
458 In 1969, Fannie Lou Hamer voiced the sentiments of many disillusioned by the grand failures
of Johnson’s vision. In a speech at UC Berkeley, she recalled a conversation during which she
told the president, “If this society of yours is a Great Society, God knows I would hate to live in a
bad one.” See “To Make Democracy a Reality,” Speech Delivered at the Vietnam War
Moratorium Rally, Berkeley, California (15 Oct 1969) in Brooks and Houck, To Tell It Like It Is, 99.
“One Man—Three Squares”

In April 1965, debate about the role and purpose of SNCC’s food work resurfaced as the executive committee gathered to discuss strategies for the coming summer. The problem of staff discipline, of people in the field “floating” without projects, emerged as a point of contention. Muriel Tillinghast, who had worked in Greenwood the previous summer before becoming head of SNCC personnel, posed an important question: “What do you do after you finish demonstrating. You stand in front of a hamburger stand for 3 weeks, but when you get in, you don’t have fifteen cents to buy the hamburger.” In her mind, and the minds of many increasingly disillusioned with the slow pace of integration and the unresponsiveness of liberal politicians and the Democratic Party, securing colorblind access to the capitalist system meant nothing without the means to participate in and benefit from that system. Tillinghast insisted that the fight had not ended with the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as poor and working class blacks no longer excluded from the rights and privileges of American citizenship by race were still barred by class from the comforts of middle-class life. “Negroes are going to have to fight for everything they get,” she surmised. “We’ll just have to find a way to keep people producing. Federal

459 For an overview of the meeting, see Carson, In Struggle, 169-170. According to Carson, James Forman “suggested that the new phase of the southern struggle would require different skills but that SNCC workers had not yet begun to discuss emerging issues such as the Johnson administration’s recently launched ‘War on Poverty’ or proposed voting rights legislation.” The remarks of SNCC’s leaders demonstrated that ‘[t]hey recognized the seriousness of SNCC’s problems, but…reflected their uncertainty about the extent to which SNCC would have to change to remain in the vanguard of the black struggle.”

460 All dialogue from this meeting is derived from SNCC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes (12-14 Apr 1965) <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/6504_sncc_excom_min.pdf>.

Programs aren’t going to do anything and you know this before you start out. The staff of Mississippi is tired. They just don’t have the energy to start over knocking on doors.”

Talk quickly turned toward larger questions about SNCC’s priorities moving forward. The demoralizing failure of the Freedom Democratic Party’s challenge to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention the previous August burned fresh in their minds. SNCC leaders believed more and more that the electoral system would not respond to any force seeking to challenge entrenched power from within, no matter the method or motive. The political process had proven itself not merely unresponsive, but seemingly rigged, as the interests, voices, and votes of thousands of disfranchised Mississippians had been overshadowed and shut out by the concerns of wealthy white male politicians. Organizer Jimmy Garrett chastised the similar stances of the Democratic and Republican parties, concluding, “Voting shouldn’t be the end.” Marion Barry concurred, “People must be educated politically.” Ralph Featherstone, a schoolteacher who had been quiet for much of the meeting to this point,

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462 As Bob Moses saw it, “The sharecroppers and others who made up the constituency of the MFDP were the voice of the real ‘underclass’ of this country and to this day I don’t think the Democratic Party, which has primarily organized around the middle class, has confronted the issue of bringing poor people actively into its ranks. We were challenging them not only on racial grounds…[but] were challenging them to recognize the existence of a whole group of people—white and Black and disenfranchised—who form the underclass of this country.” Moses and Cobb, 83. John Lewis, SNCC chairman from 1963 to 1966, voiced the frustrations and disappointment of many who had believed in the system and in the Democratic Party. He later wrote, “As far as I’m concerned, this [the defeat of the MFDP challenge] was the turning point of the civil rights movement. I’m absolutely convinced of that. Until then, despite every setback and disappointment and obstacle we had faced over the years, the belief still prevailed that the system would work, the system would listen, the system would respond. Now, for the first time, we had made our way to the very center of the system. We had played by the rules, done everything we were supposed to do, had played the game exactly as required, had arrived at the doorstep and found the door slammed in our face.” John Lewis with Michael D’Orso. *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999), 291.
countered motions to confine SNCC’s work to the political realm, however broadly defined. “Let’s get deeper,” he urged. To that end, he proposed that SNCC replace its widely circulated motto, “One Man—One Vote,” conceived on the battlefields of Mississippi, with a new, more extremist goal: “One Man—Three Squares.” When several of those present laughed, Featherstone defended his proposal, declaring, “We are not as radical as we can be. I think we should talk about economics [but]…people have diverted us to politics. Food is more important than politics.”

The subtext of this exchange concerned whether food should be conceptualized as a civil right guaranteed to all citizens or as a human right that must be seized and protected outside the conventional political systems controlling its production and distribution. Just as the “One Man—One Vote” mantra conveyed the simple logic that the franchise held the key to political power, the foundational right of citizenship upon which all others turned, “One Man—Three Squares” situated food security (reliable access to three daily meals) as a precondition of political citizenship. Food, as sustenance and symbol, as means and motivation, fused the imperatives of economic justice with political engagement. More demanding than “Food for Freedom,” which associated sustenance with political liberation, “One man—Three Squares” demanded reliable food access for all Americans. In replacing the fundamental practice of democratic citizenship—the vote—with the “deeper” goal of three daily meals, Featherstone positioned freedom from hunger as a birthright of citizenship.

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463 Forman characterized Featherstone, along with Carmichael’s political comrade and friend Cleve Sellers, as two members “who would later become outspoken critics within SNCC.” That summer, Featherstone joined the project in Lowndes County, Alabama, under Carmichael’s direction. *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 434, 443.
In response to a comment that the purpose of “political power is to change things economically,” Featherstone retorted, “That’s Bullshit. Economics controls [sic] politics.” By that point, it was nearing midnight and the meeting adjourned. The following day, however, Stokely Carmichael returned to Featherstone’s idea. By that point, Carmichael and others had shifted focus from Mississippi to political organizing in Lowndes County, Alabama.464 “I’m afraid that after I’ve organized [there], what will I do after this,” he wondered. Carmichael recognized that securing access to the vote in the Black Belt did not actually change the conditions of black life when the people could only cast ballots for racists. He chastised those who had ignored or trivialized Featherstone’s idea the day before. “…[I]t really made me angry,” he announced. “Ralph really had a good issue but no one listened to that. It was too abstract to work on within the framework in which we’re now existing.” Certainly by this point in its history, SNCC grappled with a host of pressing, fundamental questions about its mission and direction, let alone its vision for what “freedom” would truly look like. The Voting Rights Act, signed by President Johnson four months later, ostensibly removed the last formal obstacles to the black franchise in the South, presumably rendering moot the chicken-or-egg dilemma reflected in the executive committee’s discussion about the relationship between food and the franchise. After the movement’s greatest victory guaranteed legal protections for black voters, however, local authorities became more determined than ever to maintain their political hold by either driving blacks off the land and out of the state or by starving them out.

Hunger in the National Spotlight

Federal legislative triumphs for the cause of racial equality and economic justice sparked renewed attack on black bodies, as white Mississippi authorities moved beyond efforts to control black labor to new tactics to expedite black migration out of the Magnolia state. Movement activists, backed by a number of anti-poverty interests, religious groups, and other concerned Americans, thus set out to highlight the extent not only of hunger, but of “nutritional blight” more broadly, forcing Mississippi to the center of national discourse about hunger, education, and human rights in the richest and most powerful nation on earth. In fact, the scourges of hunger and malnutrition tellingly worsened after 1965, soon after SNCC and COFO began their strategic retreat from Mississippi. Those that stayed behind—local people like Amzie Moore, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Unita Blackwell—continued to call attention to the daily suffering of the hungry poor, as it became increasingly apparent that “civil rights” alone would bring little progress for those mired in racialized destitution. With the emergence in 1967 and 1968 of a national hunger lobby and the publication of numerous studies documenting the physical, social, mental, and psychological toll of chronic malnourishment, many movement veterans, particularly those who had been “Mississippi bred and Mississippi fed,” demanded federal intervention to ameliorate widespread suffering in the Delta.

While rights workers had endeavored to address the conditions, if not the causes, of hunger since at least 1962, the situation had gone from incredibly bad to unbelievably

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worse. The Twenty-fourth Amendment rendered the poll tax unconstitutional in 1964 and the Voting Rights Act eliminated the literacy test and permitted federal oversight of elections, but even these landmark achievements did not—and could not—address the debilitating power of economic reprisals. In March 1967, NAACP lawyer Marian Wright, the first black woman admitted to the Mississippi Bar, brought these concerns to Washington. Testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty, she attacked the prevalence of racial discrimination in the services and demographic composition of state welfare agencies and the Department of Agriculture, and demanded federal action. Wright’s testimony revealed the stakes in Mississippi’s vicious web of racial discrimination, economic dependence, and political oppression, as she repeatedly linked food insecurity to continued disfranchisement, more than a year and a half after the Voting Rights Act. Despite advances in areas with strong, rooted black leaders such as Coahoma County—where, Wright reported, still fewer than half of eligible black voters were registered—the situation remained largely unchanged “in those Delta counties which were once poor, where there is less organization, there is still a huge amount of fear…. [and] a huge amount of economic dependence on the white power structure, the plantation owners.” In such places, black residents continued to “mak[e] very little inroad on the right to vote.”

Though poor blacks might be able to weather short-term unemployment for the sake of the vote, Wright insisted that local activists could not realistically expect them to wager their lives and their families if they had nothing to eat. “[T]he key,” she pronounced, “…is some kind of hope in terms of Federal programs which are going to
feed people if they take the risk.” Moreover, Wright insisted that any feasible solution must be community-led; food relief must not be viewed as charity or held as ransom. People needed to be made aware of the programs that existed to assist them and the benefits to which they were entitled, and, perhaps most importantly, they had to believe that relief would be administered without agenda or ulterior motive. Poverty programs run by those already in power, in Wright’s estimation, amounted to “just that much more money being given to the power structure to buy off that many more [poor] people, and it strengthens those forces which we are trying to get rid of…the very same traditional people who kept Negroes down.”

Though the economic shifts that accompanied the transition to mechanized agriculture had been underway for several years, a new $1 minimum wage for agricultural workers instituted in February 1967 expedited the process, as landowners

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467. Moreover, Wright contended that the Community Action Programs (CAP)—the bedrock ideal and structure of the War on Poverty, geared to foster the “maximum feasible participation” of the poor in the process of changing their own lives—operated “through the very same power structures that created or helped create the poverty problem in the first place.” Wright pulled no punches, denouncing the role of “middle-class Negroes picked by white boards of supervisors…for their effectiveness in parroting the white community.” Instead of fostering interracial camaraderie, the problems of the poor, black and white, incited heightened prejudice and hostility borne out of economic competition and the simple drive of the indigent to survive. Wright’s eloquence and ability to support emotional anecdotes with statistics and legal precedents moved many of the politicians present, chief among them Senators Robert Kennedy (D-NY), Joe Clark (D-PA), and George Murphy (R-CA). At Wright’s behest, the subcommittee held hearings in Jackson the following month, where they heard from other organizers and community members about the issues raised in Washington. Wright described the dilemma of hungry blacks in Sunflower County, where the sheriff was also acting chairman of the CAP board, noting, “This is a sheriff that we have been able to document and that the Civil Rights Commission reports deemed was traditionally hostile to Negro citizens.” In this case, community control was not simply a moral ideal, but a matter of community empowerment, of survival itself. Hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower, and Poverty of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, First Session on Examining the War on Poverty (Washington, DC: 15 Mar 1967), 162.

468. Ibid., 163.
preferred to invest in new equipment rather than pay higher labor costs. According to Wright’s sources, more than 8,000 families—at least 58,000 people—had already been displaced by Mississippi’s agricultural “modernization.” Distressing for the prospects of black economic self-sufficiency, large-scale dispossession virtually halted movement momentum, as the masses grappled with more immediate concerns. Wright bluntly remarked: “The single largest problem facing all of us in Mississippi right now is how can people eat during the winter.” She informed the subcommittee that the switch in many counties from the USDA commodity program to the new food stamp system had worsened the already precarious plight of countless blacks in the Delta. “This is causing a major crisis just in meeting the hunger problem.” Despite the countless injustices faced by black Mississippians in 1967, the prospect of mass starvation, tacitly condoned by the federal government and actively administered by Mississippi officials, was, Wright declared, “absolutely untenable.”

Wright’s eloquence brought to light a paradox that remains unresolved in public debates about welfare: whether, in fact, government-run poverty programs might actually solidify the oppression and marginalization of the poor.

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469 Reflecting on these hearings years later, Wright explained, “I thought I was going to testify on Head Start but I don’t know what moved me to talk about hunger. I guess I stayed out in the field a lot and was often visiting poor parents and they began to transfer over from food commodities which was the federal food program that were free to food stamps which cost two dollars a person. And people who had no income couldn’t afford food stamps and hunger and even starvation was increasing and that’s what came out of my mouth that day.”

<http://www.makers.com/moments/getting-rfk-take-poverty>
by prolonging their dependence. Visibly moved, subcommittee member Robert F. Kennedy later offered Wright a simple suggestion: “bring the people to Washington.”

The culmination of the Mississippi movement, which ended with a whimper rather than a bang, occurred in the dismal mud of Resurrection City during the Poor People’s Campaign of May 1968. Conceptualized by Martin Luther King, Jr. and spearheaded by his Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the Poor People’s Campaign sparked the imagination and channeled the energies of the hungry, who accepted Senator Kennedy’s invitation to carry their grievances to the seat of federal power. A fleeting but symbolically poignant protest in front of the Department of Agriculture punctuated the movement’s final massive effort to engage with the state on behalf of the hungry poor, demanding not only an economic bill of rights, but more humane federal food policies as well. Demonstrators left with neither.

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471 Wright, who soon married Senator Kennedy’s advisor Peter Edelman, recalled this exchange in Hampton and Fayer, Voices of Freedom, 453.
472 For more on SCLC’s Poor People’s Campaign see, for example, Robert T. Chase, “Class Resurrection: The Poor People’s Campaign of 1968 and Resurrection City,” Essays in History, Vol. 40 (University of Virginia, 1998); Gerald D. McKnight, The Last Crusade: Martin Luther King Jr., the FBI, and the Poor People’s Campaign (Westview Press, 1998); Adam Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).
473 Journalist Daniel Schorr described an innovative demonstration led in late May by Rev. Jesse Jackson, then working on SCLC’s Operation Breadbasket in Chicago. “…Jackson, of whom I had not been aware before this date, took three hundred of them [demonstrators, and]…marched up to the Department of Agriculture. He took them down to the cafeteria. They picked up trays. I saw Jackson tell them to go through the line and to give all the checks to him. And so, one by one, they took food, they went through the checkout counter, and they pointed to Jackson, who was standing there, tall, six footer, nodding, smiling, and they said, He’s got the check for us. And when they’d all gone through the line, Jackson took a megaphone and he announced to everybody, ‘Okay,’ he said, ‘this government owes us a lot. And they’ve just begun to pay a little bit of it with this lunch.’” Qtd. in Hampton and Fayer, 479.
The passage of the Voting Rights Act in ways signaled a decline of national interest in the affairs of Mississippi and the Deep South, as media attention, and the efforts and actions of many leading organizers, turned to conditions in Northern cities like Chicago and Los Angeles. Poor blacks in Mississippi emerged from the 1960s with federal protection of voting rights, but little else. Years later, Stokley Carmichael reflected on the impact of SNCC’s work in the Delta. “In black Mississippi certainly, some oppressive—carefully constructed and brutally enforced—psychological barriers had been breached forever,” he concluded. “But in hard political and economic terms, conditions were, of course, still as grim as they ever were. That work remained (and much unfortunately still does) to be done.”

James Forman offered a similar assessment, suggesting, “…the work SNCC had done was, in its time and place, revolutionary. We were not struggling for the vote as an end in itself, but to attain human dignity. And any struggle for dignity is revolutionary. SNCC was a pacesetter, a vanguard, in the early 1960s, and would continue to be one.” Despite this, Forman admitted, “it is possible to do revolutionary work in certain situations without being a revolutionary. This was what SNCC as a whole had done until then, and we had reached the point where it was necessary to become a revolutionary organization in every sense.”

From a strategic standpoint, the persistence of hunger and malnutrition in Mississippi after SNCC’s departure suggested the impossibility of utilizing liberal means to achieve radical ends—that is, to work through the electoral system to redress biases and injustices built into the system itself. Quite simply, the U.S. government had not

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474 Carmichael with Thelwell, 425.
475 Forman, 412.
been designed to protect the interests of the poor or powerless, as the people making decisions were neither. Though food aid did encourage many in Mississippi to register to vote—or to at least entertain the idea of doing so—the system that counted their ballots continued to exclude the black and the poor from the ranks of decision-making.

Indeed, after James Meredith’s 1966 March Against Fear, Forman, Featherstone, and other key SNCC leaders followed newly-elected SNCC chairman Carmichael’s increasingly radical approach to black liberation, encapsulated by his famous call for “black power,” first publically articulated during that trek at a rally in Greenwood. In doing so, many of SNCC’s most radical voices began entertaining the need for and possibility of revolutionizing not only race relations, but class relations as well. Their vision would be tested in the San Francisco Bay region of California, where the Black Panther Party, named after the political mechanism guided by Carmichael in Alabama the previous year, strived to mobilize the urban poor, transforming urban hunger into a rallying cry “to feed the revolution.”

476 Years later Carmichael recalled the rationale for introducing the terminology of Black Power in Greenwood: “Now, I myself had been in Greenwood. I had worked in the [SNCC] project there. I had spent time in the jail in Greenwood so many times the police knew me. The police chief knew me. Everyone in town knew me. So we decided we couldn’t go wrong in Greenwood, SNCC’s strongest base in the Delta. This is where we will launch Black Power.” Carmichael qtd. in Hampton and Fayer, 289.
CHAPTER THREE

To Feed the Revolution:
The Black Panthers, Free Food, and Community Survival

On a drizzling morning in April 1969, just over a year after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. sparked violent uprisings across the United States, photographer Ed Buryn documented a military operation in the Hunter’s Point neighborhood of San Francisco. Eight months earlier, director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation J. Edgar Hoover had characterized a charismatic organization of black militants, founded across the bay in Oakland, as “the greatest threat to the internal security of the nation.” The efforts of that organization, the Black Panther Party, would for the next several years occupy Hoover’s focus and make his blood boil. Buryn described the mutiny he witnessed: “On the sidewalk in front of the Black Panther office…a small group of Panthers are loading the trunk of a beat-up Cadillac with weapons of all kinds—milk, bacon, eggs, bread[—]for distribution to the new army: the black kids from Hunter’s Point, Bayview, and Fillmore battlefronts. This,” he declared, “is the Free Breakfast Program of the Black Panther Party….” Facetiously playing upon media and political rhetoric characterizing the Panthers as ruthless soldiers in a war against America, Buryn

478 This frequently referenced quote is excerpted in Hampton and Fayer, Voices of Freedom, 512.
encapsulated the insurrectionary nature of the project in San Francisco and elsewhere around the Bay Area.

A month before Buryn’s report, Bobby Seale, Chairman of the Black Panthers, mandated that all Party chapters institute a Free Breakfast for Children Program.\textsuperscript{480} Since its founding in October 1966, the Party had become infamous for its confrontational methods of “policing the police” via community patrols of young black men in leather jackets and berets openly bearing loaded weapons.\textsuperscript{481} Seale’s directive instituted the first of the Party’s much-celebrated “service to the people” programs delivering free goods and services to the urban poor.\textsuperscript{482} Of myriad initiatives subsequently launched, Panther free breakfasts, and subsequent free food programs, spoke to an organizational commitment to undermine local and state officials, federal programs, and businesses in


\textsuperscript{481} California law permitted this practice as long as patrols did not conceal their weapons and maintained a certain distance from police conducting an arrest. In May 1967, twenty-five to thirty members of the BPP staged an armed march to the state capital of Sacramento to protest a bill proposed by conservative Republican Don Mulford aiming to curtail this tactic by prohibiting civilians from carrying loaded weapons in California cities. Several Panthers, including chairman Bobby Seale, were arrested. Recently-elected Republican governor Ronald Reagan subsequently signed the bill into law, effectively forcing the Panthers to re-strategize. The protest drew national media attention to the Black Panther Party, resulting in a large increase in membership. Barbara Lee, who worked with the Panthers as a community ally before starting a career in local politics in the mid-1970s, estimated that, with passage of the Mulford Act, “Huey realized that in the eyes of the federal government and law enforcement, if the Party changed direction and moved toward reform programs, they would be perceived as an even more dangerous revolutionary organization.” Barbara Lee, \textit{Renegade for Peace and Justice: A Memoir of Political and Personal Courage} (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 53. For background on the confrontation in Sacramento, see Adam Winkler, “The Secret History of Guns,” \textit{Atlantic Monthly} (24 Jul 2011) \url{http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/09/the-secret-history-of-guns/308608/?single_page=true}.

\textsuperscript{482} In 1971, the Party began referring to its service work as “Survival Programs.” Panther Elaine Brown describes Newton’s explanation for this change. Elaine Brown, \textit{A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story} (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 248.
predominantly black neighborhoods that played upon the politics of poverty and hunger to maintain an ailing, fractured underclass in order to solidify their own political and economic bases.\textsuperscript{483} This work converted efforts to address a vital community concern—that of rampant childhood hunger and malnutrition—into a platform to mobilize and politicize the urban poor.

Believing class oppression, not racial discrimination, to be at root of the people’s suffering, Panther co-founders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale situated the Party’s food programs and later community service work as necessary measures to ensure the physical survival of poor communities, particularly in black urban neighborhoods. Such efforts permitted the Party a vital means of heightening the consciousness of the hungry poor and working classes to the various forms of their oppression, while demonstrating that the poor had the power to affect the conditions in which they lived. As Seattle chapter captain Aaron Dixon recalled, “That’s what the Survival Programs were about, as was just about everything we did—transforming a problem into a solution that we [the

\textsuperscript{483} I use the term “food programs” to include the Free Breakfast for Children Program (by far the most organized and regimented of these), Free Food Programs (which operated more or less like food pantries), staged community food distribution at events often called Survival Conferences or Survival Rallies, and lesser known and less successful or enduring nutrition initiatives. In addition to food programs, the BPP instituted a host of other innovative initiatives for the urban poor, including clothing and shoe giveaways, ambulance services, busing to prisons, community schools, health clinics, plumbing and maintenance services, pest control, and an escort service for senior citizens. Drawing on the insights of German economist and revolutionary socialist Karl Marx and French Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre, geographer Nik Heynen argues of the Panthers’ “radical antihunger politics,” “The power relations that manifest under the tyranny of hunger relate explicitly to how capitalist societies, and the proliferation of free market forces, rely on access to food as a negotiating chip to maintain domination and coercion.” Nik Heynen, “Bending the Bars of Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival: The Black Panther Party’s Radical Antihunger Politics of Social Reproduction and Scale,” \textit{Annals of the Association of American Geographers} (99:2), 408.
people] created and controlled.”

In this way, Panther food programs created physical and discursive sites in which the practical needs of the people fused with the political imperatives of the Party. As BPP ally Angela Davis and many others noted, revolution may be mandated and justified by the starving masses, but it certainly could not be waged by them. Panther food programs thus empowered the people both physically and politically. Panther leaders insisted that, rather than a break with tactics of armed self-defense, the Party’s emerging emphasis on social service represented a return to its original vision and ultimate objective—the forceful overthrow of the racist, capitalist American “empire” and the establishment of a new social order by and for the people.

In the context of the Party’s work in the San Francisco Bay area, particularly in the East Bay communities of Oakland and Berkeley, the food programs revealed a nuanced, bold

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485 When questioned by a Swedish journalist in 1972 about the tactics of the Black Panther Party, Davis, one of the most eloquent radical intellectuals of her generation, obliquely explained the rationale behind the Panthers’ survival programs. “[I]f you’re gonna talk about a revolutionary situation you have to have people who are physically able to wage revolution, who are physically able to organize, and physically able to do all that is done.” Quite simply, before revolutionary changes in resource distribution and race relations could be possible, the oppressed masses must work to strengthen themselves physically and psychologically. Davis’ statement implicitly recognized the function of bodily weakness and vulnerability in preventing the oppressed from organizing. *The Black Power Mixtape, 1967-1975*, directed by Goran Olsson (Louverture Films; MPI Home Video, 2011).

486 In defense of the Party’s reputation for confrontation, Communications Secretary Kathleen Cleaver, one of the first female Panthers to rise to a national leadership position, asserted, “It’s good to be confrontational against evil and violence [with] the kind of problems that the black community suffer—unequal levels of imprisonment, unequal levels of access to resources, poor health. And so the Black Panther Party tried to model for the community some of the possible solutions that were not capitalistic-oriented, like free clinics…or send your children to us and we will feed them for free…The Black Panther Party was not the only organization that did it, but it was the only organization based in ghetto communities that did it.” *The Black Power Mixtape*. 
vision of the relationship between systematic deprivation, social welfare, community building, and revolutionary politics.\textsuperscript{487}

Locating food and concerns of hunger and survival at the center of Panther programs for social justice illuminates their practical function in winning the confidence and trust of the urban poor and, more immediately, in ensuring their “survival pending revolution.”\textsuperscript{488} Beyond the Free Breakfast for School Children and People’s Free Food Programs, the food politics of the organization—namely the forceful means by which they solicited donations for their programs—represented both an extension of and a prerequisite for its aim to overturn the capitalist system that perpetuated the physical vulnerability of America’s racial underclasses. In contrast to the Nation of Islam, the structure and ideology of which influenced many Panthers, the Party contended that in racist white America, the inhumane forces of capitalism profited from the suffering of the poor and working classes of all races, though capitalism disproportionately harmed and

\textsuperscript{487} The Party highlighted the connection between efforts to resist police oppression and grassroots struggles for food by naming several food programs after Party members martyred or imprisoned by law enforcement officials. The Chicago breakfast program was dedicated to Chairman Fred Hampton, murdered by police during an early morning raid of his apartment in December 1969. The Angela Davis People’s Free Food Program was named in honor of the former UCLA professor, fired for her affiliations with the Communist Party, then tried and ultimately acquitted on capital murder charges in 1971 and 1972. The John Savage Memorial Breakfast in San Diego honored a “local Party member who was recently assassinated.” The New Haven John Huggins Memorial Breakfast Program was dedicated to a Panther whose murder by members of the rival black nationalist US Organization was incited by FBI misinformation. In late February 1970, a Los Angeles program, held in a private home, was likewise named in his honor. “John Huggins Memorial Breakfast Program,” \textit{BP} (1 Nov 1969), 21; “Another Breakfast Opens in L.A.,” \textit{BP} (28 Feb 1970), 18; “San Diego Breakfast Moves Ahead Despite Continued Harassment,” \textit{BP} (26 Jul 1969), 15. Seattle BPP Captain Aaron Dixon explained, “It was common practice in the party to name community centers and programs after fallen comrades. It was our way of keeping their memory alive.” Dixon, \textit{My People Are Rising}, 178.

handicapped African Americans and other racial minorities.\textsuperscript{489} The Party’s food and other survival programs thus linked capitalism and capitalist enterprises with racist economic oppression in concrete ways. Food producers and distributors—white or black—were, the Panthers declared, key agents and beneficiaries of the people’s suffering. The Marxist politics of Newton and his followers lay at the root of this worldview, which declared that freedom and capitalism could not coexist, for as Seale and others repeatedly asserted, a people could not be free unless they had access to basic provisions for survival at no cost.\textsuperscript{490} Otherwise, the nation’s oppressed remained beholden to, even enslaved by, those in control of the goods and services they needed to live, the most pressing of these needs being food.

Originally organized for the immediate goal of self-defense against abusive agents of local law enforcement, the Black Panther Party soon broadened its conceptualization of institutional violence to include all state-sanctioned or–permitted systems that worked to weaken or destroy black bodies. In the Party’s estimation, the federal government—namely, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the Department of Agriculture (USDA)—colluded with American food industries to carry on the tradition of American capitalism and its complicity in racial oppression.

\textsuperscript{489} For more on the influence of the Nation of Islam on black radicalism in the Bay Area, see Donna Jean Murch, \textit{Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California} (University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 81-84.

\textsuperscript{490} This ideological position distinguished the Panthers from other proponents of Black Power and self-determination. Former SNCC Chairman Stokely Carmichael, for example, dismissed socialism in its many iterations as “ideolog[i]es] not suited for black people,” while the Nation of Islam firmly embraced capitalism as a means of economic empowerment and black uplift. By the late-1960s, SNCC shared the Nation’s opposition to interracial approaches to black freedom, which the BPP increasingly advocated. Carmichael, qtd. in Murch, \textit{Living for the City}, 157. Panther Elaine Brown affirmed this view, stating, “…if there is a price tag to eating, then there is a price on your head.” Qtd in Nik Heynen, “Bending the Bars of Empire from Every Ghetto for Survival: The Black Panther Party’s Radical Antihunger Politics of Social Reproduction and Scale,” \textit{Annals of the Association of American Geographers} (99:2), 411.
genocide against peoples of color. Even more hazardous than racism, capitalism wielded unchecked influence over matters of life and death. The ideological thrust of the Panther food programs held that the system could not stand. If the essentials of life were not free, then those at the margins of society could not afford to organize or mobilize in struggle. The BPP thus came to see its food programs as defensive measures designed to counteract centuries of abuse and neglect, in preparation for (not in lieu of) armed revolution.

This new-fangled approach to black empowerment did much to rally the support of the Oakland community, but also simultaneously to incite ever more violent tactics of repression on the part of local police and federal investigators. Thus, while Panther rhetoric threatened revolutionary overthrow of racist capitalism, crackdown on Panther programs and the jailing and murder of key Panther leaders ultimately necessitated that the Party consider the merits of the electoral system for addressing the immediate material needs of the people. Beginning in 1972, Panther food giveaways, often billed as Black Community Survival Conferences, deployed the promise of free groceries to encourage poor city dwellers to register to vote. Much like SNCC worked to dramatize links between food security and political empowerment, Panther food giveaways encouraged attendees to “vote for survival,” suggesting that the power of the vote be used to demand that elected officials respond to the needs addressed by Panther survival programs.\(^\text{491}\) Though the political revolution the Black Panther Party sought did not come

\(^{491}\) James Forman, whose role in SNCC during the late-1960s put him in close contact with many Panther leaders, explained, “The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was able to grow where we did not for many reasons. Central to its development was its formulation of a clearly defined
to pass, Panther food programs demonstrated the possibilities of socialism in action and the need to subvert racial divisions in the interest of working class unity. In the minds of Panthers and their allies, as well as Party apologists in more recent years, the most significant tangible legacy of the Party—the establishment of a National School Breakfast Program in 1975—forced a tacit recognition on the part of the federal government that hungry bodies are often ripe for agitation and disruption.

**Bodies Behind Bars**

Unlike liberal civil rights organizations such as the National Urban League (NUL), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Black Panther Party was founded and led by black men and women from poor or working-class backgrounds. Many Panthers had grown up hungry, had witnessed the degrading and sometimes illegal lengths to which their parents or neighbors went to feed their families, and had come to recognize how systems of power used food to control their bodies and their lives. Like Black Muslims, many Black Panthers served extended time in prison, either prior to

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set of goals in its ten-point program and statement of beliefs.” In addition to the “courage and tenacity of its founders and early members, the Party’s “emphasis on recruiting street bothers, young people from the ‘ghettos,’ rather than college students, gave it a large base and eliminated some of the class tensions we [SNCC] had experienced. Finally, the Black Panther Party had begun to articulate the need for armed self-defense and revolution just at the time of growing militancy in the black liberation struggle.” Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 527. 

492 Panther Elaine Brown explained the significance of the BPP’s recruitment focus: “The party reached out mostly to men, to young, black urban men who were on the streets, who knew that there were no options somewhere in their lives, who were gang members because that was all you could be in order to find some sense of dignity about yourself. We reached out to these people because we had something for them to do with the rest of their lives. In most cases, they were used to violence, they were used to struggle, they were used to fighting just to keep alive. We offered them the opportunity to make their lives meaningful.” Qtd. in Hampton, *Voices of Freedom*, 359.
joining the Party or as a result of BPP activities. The official and philosophical leader of
the Party and a chief proponent of its community programs, Huey Newton, in particular
began in the early 1950s and 1960s to intellectualize the relationship between physical
confinement, historical enslavement, political disenfranchisement, and the systematic
destruction of black bodies. 493 Sentenced to a long term in solitary confinement, Newton
began to see that self-control and self-denial, even in the most isolated, brutal
circumstances, could be liberating. Given the restricted physical mobility of prisoners
and their subjection to constant surveillance, agency and autonomy could often best be
exercised by controlling one’s body so as to assert and redefine his intellectual and
psychological self in the context of captivity. More so than physical exercise, a common
release, food choice offered prisoners a means of seizing control of their bodies despite
the legal suspension of their corporal freedom. 494

493 Angela Davis observed in 1971 that black Americans’ “survival has frequently been a direct
function of our skill in forging effective channels of existence….But even containing our
resistance within the orbit of legality, we have been labeled criminals and have been methodically
persecuted by a racist legal apparatus…The occurrence of crime is inevitable in a society in
which wealth is unequally distributed, as one of the constant reminders that society’s productive
forces are being channeled in the wrong direction. The majority of criminal offenses bear a direct
relationship to property.” Davis, “Political Prisoners, Prisons, and Black Liberation” (May 1971),
in Joy James (ed.), Imprisoned Intellectuals: America’s Political Prisoners Write on Life,
Liberation, and Rebellion (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 64-65, 69. For more on
racism and the carceral state, see Angela Y. Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete? (Open Media, 2003);
Michelle Alexander, The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness (The

494 Seale likewise conducted a hunger strike while imprisoned in 1969 on charges of conspiracy.
He explained his fast to other prisoners as “protest of the fact that the administration of this jail,
from the commissioner on down to the captain and others are violating the Constitution by
subjecting prisoners to cruel and unusual punishment…” Others joined the two-day strike in
solidarity with Seale and four others on lockdown. Seale, A Lonely Rage: The Autobiography of
Bobby Seale (New York: Times Books, 1978), 210, 213. Several years later, The Panther
reported a hunger strike by prisoners at Soledad Prison “to demand humane treatment and to
show support for the Soledad Brothers, 3 Black inmates accused of killing a prison guard.”
Inmates regularly complained about the quality of food served in prison cafeterias. Whereas members of the Nation of Islam objected primarily to the regular use of pork as a key ingredient, many others abhorred the poor quality and monotony of the food served, which caused malnutrition and sickliness. Newton recalled of his time in Oakland’s Alameda County Jail in 1964, “Conditions were not good; in fact, the place blew up...when the inmates refused to go on eating starches and split-pea soup at almost every meal, and went on a food strike. I joined them.” Here, in a setting that deprived individuals of physical autonomy and mobility, they still insisted on their human right to decent food, imbuing food with heightened significance for two reasons. First, mealtime was one of the few potentially humanizing moments of a prisoner’s day when he could interact with other inmates, satiate his body, and optimally, enjoy some taste of his previous life. Prison meals were a shared experience for inmates, and food, of course, a shared need and simple pleasure of those with few other ways to address the wants and needs of their bodies. In a life regimented by monotony, mealtime held the possibility of variety and spice. Second, food was a rare arena in which prisoners could exercise choice, even if only to eat or not to eat. The drama of prison food strikes stemmed from the strikers’ refutation of assumptions of their inferiority. In refusing to ingest the food served by the state, one could elevate himself morally while marking the care provided by the state as inhuman, offensive, and in need of reform. The decision to endure hunger

Among the inmates’ specific demands were an end to “all restricted diets” and “[b]etter grade and non-repetitious foods.” See “Hunger Strike at Soledad Prison, Max. Row Inmates Demand Better Conditions[,] Prisoners Burn Mattresses,” BP (25 July 1970), 6, 13.

495 Qtd. in David Hilliard and Donald Weise (eds.), The Huey P. Newton Reader (New York and London: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 39.
rather than accept unpalatable scraps illustrated prisoners’ self-respect and determination to subvert their bodily needs for a higher purpose. This became especially apparent to Newton during his time in the “soul breaker,” one of the jail’s infamous “deprivation cells.” Sent there as punishment for his role in a food strike, Newton later explained, “I did not want to beg. Certainly my resistance was not connected to any kind of ideology or program. That came later…I learned the secrets of survival…Control. I learned to control my food, my body, and my mind through a deliberate act of will.”

Just as Newton came to conceptualize his own ability to control his hunger as a form of psychological liberation, he also understood the provisioning of food as a tool of control, and therefore a useful forum for resisting institutional oppression. He scorned for example, “a fat Black inmate named Bojack, who served in the mess hall” as “a diligent enforcer of small helpings.” Newton sought and seized small opportunities for defiance and resistance. He recalled, “Whenever Bojack turned away, I would dip for more with my spoon. One day he tried to prevent me from dipping, and I called him [out] for protecting the oppressor’s interests and smashed him with a steel tray.” This incident illustrated Newton’s early belief that one’s relationship to systems of domination and coercion—not his race—determined his social and moral position. In this case, the “fat” inmate Bojack, both a captive and servant of the state, clearly got more than his share of food while denying others the opportunity to have their fill. “Because of my experience in the hold [of solitary confinement],” Newton wrote, “I could survive. Still, I did not submit willingly…. [T]he way I was treated told me a lot about those who devised

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such punishment. I know them well." In order to survive, Newton discovered, he must resist succumbing to a state of total submission, for a prisoner who did not or could not struggle became blind or numb to his own lack of freedom. Though worsening his immediate circumstances and endangering his physical well-being, fighting to assert his humanity and autonomy kept Newton intellectually and spiritually alive.

Situating his own toils in the context of epic moments of historical struggle, Newton likened his childhood poverty to conditions in nineteenth-century France. As a young adult, Newton “read and reread Les Miserables by Victor Hugo, the story of Jean Valjean, a Frenchman who spent thirty years in prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his hungry family…I identified with Valjean,” Newton remarked, “and I often thought of my father being in a kind of social prison because he wanted to feed his family….”

Complicating the “life-and-death issue” of survival, hunger and food insecurity served, in Newton’s mind, to fracture poor families by emasculating black men, a group he

497 Hilliard and Weise, 42, 43. Black Panther George Jackson, killed by prison guards during an escape attempt in 1971, brought widespread attention to the conditions of black life in America’s penal system with his book Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson (Bantam, 1970). Such experiences surely contributed to the Party’s focus on the rights of prisoners, evidenced by Party legal aid initiatives and a program designed to keep inmates connected to their families and communities by bussing loved ones to penal facilities often far removed from urban centers. Aaron Dixon, who was assigned to the Legal Aid Program, worked “coordinating and revitalizing the Busing to Prisons Program, and corresponding with inmates in the Panther cadres scattered throughout the California prison system.” In his view, the Party saw “the prison population as a potential force in assisting us with the revolution. We saw promise in the inmate who was a victim of circumstances and American racism.” Later, while in jail for driving with a suspended license, Dixon “began to do what all Panthers must do while incarcerated: politically educate the inmates.” He served several days in solitary confinement for doing so. Dixon, My People Are Rising, 224, 193, 241.


499 Hilliard and Weise, 28. African American men, in particular, were often unemployed. Moreover, their mere presence in a household could render a family ineligible for welfare assistance, a fact that further emasculated poor or working class men.
lamented as “ineffectual both in and out of the home.” Newton explained, “He cannot provide for, or protect his family. He is invisible, a nonentity. Society will not acknowledge him as a man. He is a consumer and not a producer. He is dependent upon the White man (“THE MAN”) to feed his family, to give him a job, educate his children, serve as the model that he tries to emulate.” But the problem ran deeper than daily dependence to a damaging state of self-loathing. Newton continued, “He is dependent and he hates ‘THE MAN’ and he hates himself. Who is he? Is he an adolescent or is he the slave he used to be?”

Like the revolutionary heroes of Hugo’s tale, Newton believed an uprising of the oppressed classes to be the only viable means of securing personal and social liberation. The tale of Valjean, who served nineteen years on a chain gang for his crime, ends not only with his economic and social uplift but also his spiritual redemption. Such stories, said Newton, “made me feel even more justified in my pattern of liberating [stealing] property from the oppressor as an antidote to social suicide.”

Thus, in Newton’s estimation, hunger in its many forms operated as both a symptom of

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500 Hilliard and Weise, 133. Elaine Brown cited the absence of a father figure during her childhood as a factor that drew her toward the machismo of the Panthers. “I was a child who had no father at home, so that had a certain subjective appeal to my psyche and to my emotional need, to say, ‘Yes, there are men in this world who cared, black men, who cared about the community and wanted to do something and were willing to take it to the last degree.’” Qtd. in Hampton, 360. Ron Dellums, a licensed psychiatric social worker and future politician, likewise recognized the manner in which unemployment emasculated black men, forcing them to “linger on the margins of our society and intrude upon the system as they seek to reassert their humanity.” Ronald V. Dellums and H. Lee Halterman, Lying Down with the Lions: A Public Life from the Streets of Oakland to the Halls of Power (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 29.

501 Hilliard and Wiese, 28. In a 1968 interview with Playboy, Eldridge Cleaver asserted that the very nature of the American capitalist system forced black people “to rebel and turn to forms of behavior that are called criminal, in order to get the things they need to survive. Consider the basic contradiction here. You subject people to conditions that make rebellion inevitable and then you punish them for rebelling” (95). Nat Hentoff, “Interview: Eldridge Cleaver: A Candid Conversation With A Revolutionary Leader Of The Black Panthers,” Playboy, 1968.
social inequality and neglect and a cause of the continued alienation and fracturing of marginal communities and the families they housed. Just as the quest for bread propelled the overthrow of the French social order in Hugo’s novel, so too, in Newton’s mind, could the black urban poor be organized around the cause of food and the need to ameliorate hunger. Newton believed such a struggle could and must result in the overthrow of the racist capitalist American empire.502 For him, that struggle would take shape on the streets of Oakland, California.

Hitting the Streets

The San Francisco Bay area nurtured myriad forms of political agitation and social and cultural experimentation during the 1960s. Berkeley stood as a bastion of student activism and San Francisco the locus of a blossoming counterculture.503 In contrast, neighboring Oakland languished as a “dull, shabby city suffering from commercial and cultural blight.”504 Sol Stern, writing for *New York Times Magazine* in July 1966, characterized Oakland as a city on the brink of eruption.505 Referencing the

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505 Ibid., 21, 22, 24, 26, 29. A graduate student at the University of California Berkeley during the 1964 Free Speech Movement, Stern later wrote for *Ramparts*, the liberal literary political magazine that also employed future Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver. Stern, “The Unfree Speech
explosion of racial violence in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles less than a year prior, Stern commented that Oakland “[r]esidents joke bitterly among themselves: ‘If Watts gets any worse, it might become another Oakland.’” Like many postwar American cities, Oakland floundered in a state of crisis fueled by deindustrialization, white flight, strict residential segregation, and a declining tax base—problems that overwhelmed residents and elected officials alike. New freeways and regional transportation networks increasingly bypassed Oakland neighborhoods, bringing white suburbanites and commuters from the Oakland Hills to work and shop in other parts of the Bay Area, expediting economic divestment from the city proper. Stern observed, “There are no theaters, coffee shops or cultural attractions to speak of….It is impossible to find a decent restaurant in downtown Oakland.”

Marking the city’s decline with the onset of World War II and the ensuing arrival of tens of thousands of African Americans from Louisiana, Texas, and other states of the Deep South, Stern cautioned, “Oakland has been transformed from a white city into one in which the racial question has become the crux of all its social problems.”


508 The Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system set the new standard. See Self, 153-159.


510 Stern, 22. Historian Donna Murch offers a compelling portrait of the cultural, political, social, and economic effects of mass black migration from the South to the San Francisco Bay area. She argues that, in addition to hopes for economic mobility characteristic of the Second Great
painted a bleak picture. Twenty-five percent of the city’s 360,000 residents were African American and about twenty percent of those were unemployed.511 “Among Negro youth in the ghetto,” wrote Stern, “the most likely source of [unemployment] trouble, the estimates run up to an astronomical 75 per cent in some areas.” Stern concluded, “in Oakland the only long-range solution is a political mobilization of the poor…. [T]o talk only of averting a Watts[-like outburst of violence] misses the point, as if the only time one acknowledges the misery of the ghetto is when it is about to start burning. Without riots and without fires, the damage has already been done.…”512

Though political alienation and economic desperation fueled underlying tensions, police brutality provided the immediate spark that ignited the violence in Watts in 1965. Likewise in Oakland, the exceedingly hostile relationship between local law enforcement and black residents provided the pressing impetus for rapid neighborhood mobilization.513

In response to these patterns, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, students at Merritt College who worked together at the North Oakland Neighborhood Anti-Poverty Center,

Migration in general, migrants destined for California in particular sought the benefits of the state’s strong public education system. The realities they encountered often belied their optimism. That many new migrants were ineligible for welfare benefits like the NSLP often heightened their frustrations with often dilapidated schools in “slum” areas like Oakland. Murch, *Living for the City*, passim. Congressman Ron Dellums’ memoir offers a personal account of growing up in West Oakland during these transitions. Dellums and Halterman, *Lying Down with the Lions*, 9-12.

511 Stern, 22.
512 Ibid., 29.
513 Dellums writes of the 1940s, “As West Oakland became less integrated, it increasingly took on the characteristics of a small Southern black community, with the white, urban police becoming more and more alienated from the people they were supposed to serve. This pattern of racial harassment and police alienation from the community would continue for decades, leading ultimately to the birth of the Black Panther Party in the 1960s.” *Lying Down With the Lions*, 11.
formed the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense in October 1966. Though listed as the seventh of ten points outlined in the Party’s founding platform, “What We Want, What We Believe” (a document modeled on the black nationalist program of the Nation of Islam), armed self-defense against Oakland police served as the primary objective and function of the Party in its early months. Sensational images of black men arming themselves against the police defined the public perception of the Party from the start and would prove impossible to shake. While the media ran with visions of young black

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514 Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1970; Black Classic Press, 1991), 13, 35. Seale recalled, “I was working at a ‘poverty job,’ working for the community…[O]ur situation in Oakland was people were starving, going day-to-day without a job…My feeling was to put dudes to work, teach them carpentering, plastering, plumbing—give them a way to get some skills…I was going on the thought that the more people have, the more they’ll fight for.” Seale, *A Lonely Rage*, 139. Ron Dellums noted the radicalizing potential of federal anti-poverty programs. “People’s involvement in governance through the new antipoverty programs gave them an opportunity to gain a better sense of the factors that inhibited, harmed, or affected their lives on a daily basis. From this, they could better determine where to put pressure and what levers to pull. Growing from these experiences, they rapidly saw that the ultimate act of controlling their lives would be to engage in the political process—fulfilling in practice Dr. King’s injunction. ‘Max feas’ imbued the community with the hope that comes when the possibility exists to control the dynamics of one’s own life. A new political force was born.” *Lying Down With the Lions*, 32.

515 In the late 1970s, Eldridge Cleaver wrote, “The Panther program was essentially an attempt to redress the injustices of the black community, suffered for more than two hundred years. Much of the input may be traced to the Black Muslims, some to the Communists, but all of it rang a bell in the minds of deprived ghetto citizens: we wanted control of our lives.” Cleaver, *Soul on Fire* (Word Books, 1978), 114. In his autobiography, Bobby Seale described the appeal of Malcolm X and his own devastated response to news of his assassination. “Malcolm was my personal friend. My leader. My unknown partner. Malcolm’s rebellion was mine…I was wishing I could talk like Malcolm, think like him…” In the early months of the Party, members would gather on Wednesday nights to read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* aloud. *A Lonely Rage*, 134; see also 129-130, 133-136, 158.

516 Seale described his typical conversations with Newton as they worked to get the Party off the ground, “pouring out our understanding to each other; me listening to Huey’s articulate philosophical-political-socioeconomic point of view, me answering with my own practical everyday words, with specific understanding of what we both had begun to realize about each other and our unity of goals. We were feeling that serious need to know, expounding on the urgency of organizing something. We were developing black revolutionaries who had become insightfully critical of our environment….Huey and I racked our brains as to how to get some
militants taking over the city streets, Newton in particular contended that the task of combating police brutality and racial violence was but one dimension of the Party’s broader vision of black community empowerment, which centered on its demand for “freedom” and the “power to determine the destiny of our Black Community.”

Reflecting on the Party’s initial goals, Newton explained, “Interested primarily in educating and revolutionizing the community, we needed to get their attention and give them [the poor] something to identify with.” The tenth point of the Party platform encapsulated the tangible gains it sought for America’s “black colonial subjects,” declaring, “We want land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace.” Indeed, several years into President Johnson’s War on Poverty, the conditions of ghetto life continued to deteriorate. Struggles for land and housing required long-term legal community-based organization going, and especially how to properly deal directly with the police. We decided we would need to watch the police, patrol the police; black brothers were being brutalized and arrested. Huey and I knew we could do it, but we’d have to do it armed.”

Seale, A Lonely Rage, 153. In 1967, the Party dropped “for Self-Defense” from its name, thereafter calling itself simply the Black Panther Party. Barbara Lee, a Bay Area activist who worked for black politicians Shirley Chisholm and Ron Dellums, lamented this “old collective memory of the Black Panthers as gun-wielding men who wore black berets and dressed in military style clothing and advocated violence. What’s wrong with this image is that the good work they did and their efforts to help the poor and other disenfranchised minorities gets lost in the fray and has been forgotten with time. Carrying guns was a way for the Panthers and other blacks to protect themselves and members of the community from the racist tactics police used at that time. The Panthers were earnest about addressing community issues, and they offered people reasonable, immediate aid and gave them practical options for their day-to-day survival. They also provided black people with an opportunity to become empowered in their own right.” Lee, Renegade for Peace and Justice, 53. For a detailed exploration of media portrayals of the BPP, especially the emphasis on violent imagery, see Rhodes, Framing the Black Panther, passim.

517 “Ten Point Program” (1966), Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation <http://www.blackpanther.org/TenPoint.htm>. 518 Hilliard and Weise, 58. 519 In Dellums’ view, “One of the most radical things to emerge from the War on Poverty was the mandate embedded in the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, which required the program to be operated with the ‘maximum feasible participation of the poor’…This provided the legislative imprimatur for a King-like vision of fully engaged citizens, empowering previously
and economic strategizing, while major reforms of the urban education system would require skillful reorganization and enormous financial investment, all with no immediate payout. Certainly fair housing and quality education were crucial goals, but the human toll of the structural shifts wrought by the urban crisis manifested most palpably, and unforgivably, in the daily suffering of the hungry poor. Moreover, widespread hunger impeded efforts to secure many of the Party’s other objectives, particularly that of education. Therefore, while other black community leaders and organizations worked toward long-range goals of “freedom,” “justice,” and “peace,” the Party began organizing around the basics of bread, for the city’s poor could identify with nothing more readily than hunger and perpetual uncertainty about when and how their next meal would come.

**The Basics of Bread**

While many refused to believe hunger existed in a country with the world’s most abundant food supply and newly revamped federal assistance programs like food stamps and the National School Lunch Program, academic research confirmed what many disempowered communities to assert their voices in the distribution of program resources and in the planning of program requirements. Life in the ‘poverty business’ would never be the same.” Dellums and Halterman, 31.


521 In recent years, the term “food insecurity” has become official parlance to include in calculations of need those who may have food to eat most days (and may consume an adequate number of calories as well) but who may not always know where or how their next meal will come. In 2006, the USDA removed the term “hunger” from its assessments of food security, replacing it with the term “very low food security.” Many anti-hunger activists quickly denounced this change as a “political maneuver to deflect attention from the persistence of hunger in the face of plenty” in efforts to depoliticize hunger as a social issue in national discourse. See Patricia Allen, “The Disappearance of Hunger in America,” *Gastronomica*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Summer 2007), 19-23.
Oaklanders knew painfully well. According to a 1967 University of California study, sixteen percent of the poor in East Oakland had lately been forced to do without meat or vegetables for several days at a time, while one in ten had recently gone hungry (without food of any kind) for several days. At the national level, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) Research Committee reported in 1970 that “…approximately 1/3 to 1/2 of the nation’s very poor experience hunger, with resulting psychological damage,” noting that “malnutrition is probably much more prevalent than hunger…” The SCLC committee opined, “A child who is hungry because his family cannot afford to buy food is living proof that this society treasures financial capital over human life.” In fact, the SCLC calculated that the federal government expended the annual budget for the Food Stamp and National School Lunch Programs each week on the war in Vietnam. Even if poor residents of the East Bay did not understand or were unconcerned with domestic policies or foreign affairs—or if they did not believe their

522 For background on the Food Stamp Act of 1964, see Chapter Two. An outline of the Child Nutrition Act of 1966, a key effort to make federal food programs more responsive, follows below. In 1967, the U.S. government determined that nearly 30 million Americans (representing fifteen percent of the total population) were poor. A Citizens’ Board of Inquiry found that fewer than one in five poor Americans were able to participate in federal food programs, which included the Commodity Distribution Program, Food Stamp Program, National School Lunch Program, School Milk Program, and Child Nutrition Program. Hunger USA (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 50.
523 “Socioeconomic Description Of East Oakland” (n.d.), HPN Papers, Series 2, Box 52, Folder 9.
524 The SCLC research committee formed in May 1964 with the purpose of keeping Martin Luther King Jr., president of the SCLC, informed about current events and developments pertaining to politics and economics, particularly in the North. For more about the origins and membership of the research committee, see Adam Fairclough, To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr. (University of Georgia Press, 2001), 170-172.
525 “Socioeconomic Description Of East Oakland” (n.d.), HPN Papers, Series 2, Box 52, Folder 9.
actions could affect much—the hungry poor could not afford to ignore the consequences of food politics. Nor could they refuse free food, regardless of its source.

During the nearly two decades during which hunger disappeared from the national agenda, many American citizens and lawmakers might likely have responded to charges of hunger in America by citing the variety of federal food aid programs available to assist the hungry poor, all administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The longest running and most popular of these, the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) had been established by Congress in 1946 as a way to feed burdensome agricultural surpluses to public school children, simultaneously addressing increasingly vocal concerns of home economists and nutritionists about childhood nutrition while creating a politically defensible way to maintain agricultural price supports.\(^{526}\) Though at first seemingly immune to public controversy, the NSLP in fact evolved into a politically charged, bureaucratically inefficient, and nutritionally marginal endeavor.\(^{527}\) Following the reinstitution of a federal food stamp program in 1964, the Child Nutrition Act of 1966

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\(^{526}\) In her detailed exploration of the National School Lunch Program, historian Susan Levine contends, “[T]he health and welfare of farmers and of children were not so obviously linked, nor were children’s welfare activists and farmers such natural allies.” In broader terms, she argues, “The history of school lunch politics encompasses a combination of ideals and frustrations, reflecting, at base, America’s deep ambivalence about social welfare and racial equality” and “suggests the central role food policy plays in shaping American health, welfare, and equality.” See *School Lunch Politics*, 70, 1, 2.

\(^{527}\) In the program’s early years, proponents argued that public school food furthered the interests of national defense by promoting the health and strength of Americans in a climate of global war. Local school boards administered the program by distributing surplus foodstuffs to participating schools. Consequently, the foods served to school children were those that farmers had overproduced—not necessarily those supported by contemporary nutritional science, cultural utility, or even common sense. Levine notes that as the program came under increased scrutiny in the early 1960s for often excluding the very children who needed it most, supporters of the 1946 act “insisted that feeding poor children had never been the original bill’s central intent.” *School Lunch Politics*, 112.
aimed to reform the NSLP by devising more efficient standards and procedures, particularly for ensuring that needy children received free or reduced price lunches as mandated by law.\textsuperscript{528} Indeed, though the program was “national,” the federal government offered minimal oversight or even guidance regarding implementation. All interested schools were eligible to participate, but local considerations and politics determined which schools could participate in practical terms and which students could actually afford to eat at school.\textsuperscript{529}

Participating institutions were responsible for determining how to distribute or utilize federal funds, a fact that resulted in what one citizen group described as “a crazy-quilt pattern for determining need” that fostered inconsistencies and inequalities, even within school districts and individual schools.\textsuperscript{530} Exacerbating low participation rates,

\textsuperscript{528} The Child Nutrition Act, as Levine explains, “proved to be a milestone in the transformation of school lunches from farm subsidy to welfare,” as it included the first direct congressional appropriation of funds for free lunches. While mandating an expansion of the lunch program, however, the USDA “offered no help to local schools, which now had to finance large numbers of free lunches. Because very few states contributed any local taxes or other state resources to school lunchrooms, urban districts in particular, were caught in a dilemma. Built under the assumption that students would live close enough to return home for lunch, city (or ‘neighborhood’) schools were generally unequipped with food service facilities. By the 1960s many school districts were ‘plagued with decaying buildings’ and had little money to pay for repairs, let alone new cafeterias.” Ibid., 113, 115.

\textsuperscript{529} Even administrators who acknowledged the benefits of the NSLP often felt, as budgets tightened, that school food service should be cut before programs of more pressing “educational” merit. Still others felt that the responsibility for feeding children rested with their families, beyond the purview or mission of public education.

\textsuperscript{530} Committee on School Lunch Participation (CSLP), \textit{Their Daily Bread: A Report on the National School Lunch Program} (McNelley-Rudd Print Service, 1968), 22. As with most welfare programs, NSLP criteria for determining need were subjective and slippery. The USDA set no uniform standard of eligibility, leaving school officials and social workers not only to identify needy children but then also to decide which of those children most deserved a free or reduced price meal. In some cases, eligibility extended only to children of welfare recipients, a requirement that excluded children from households with two parents, as well as recent newcomers to the area who had not yet established residency and were therefore ineligible for welfare benefits. In other areas, welfare recipients were categorically excluded with the rationale
schools needed to request aid from the federal program, and then parents of needy children had to apply proactively for the benefit. Poor families therefore had not only to overcome a bureaucratic hurdle but also to endure an often-invasive investigation of their finances and circumstances so officials could render subjective judgments about which children were truly “needy.” Even then, the number of free lunches provided by local schools often fell far short of the number of hungry children. Ideological and political opposition to federal intervention in the realm of public education, traditionally the jurisdiction of state and local governments, hindered the effectiveness of this national program, often permitting regional customs and biases to prevent poor African American children and other racial minorities, particularly in the South, from participating in a program ostensibly able to quell their hunger.

The inevitable failures of the NSLP to feed the nation’s hungry children came to public attention with the 1968 publication of *Their Daily Bread*, a report by the Committee on School Lunch Participation, a coalition of women’s groups concerned with

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531 The CSLP noted, “In many cases, it is not the school, but the parents and the children themselves who make the decision not to apply for free lunches. Over and over again, we heard parents say that although their need is great, they would not subject their children to the humiliation of being pointed out by their classmates as being too poor to afford lunch; or they would not go through the embarrassment of a searching investigation—with no guarantee of confidentiality—that applying for free lunches might involve.” *Their Daily Bread*, 24.

532 According to Levine, after passage of the Child Nutrition Act, USDA “officials initially issued a weak and confusing set of guidelines that basically just reminded local school lunch administrators that they were obligated to provide free meals to all poor children in their districts[, but]…refused to send specific directions to local administrators telling them how to accomplish this task.” *School Lunch Politics*, 117.
issues of poverty and child nutrition in the U.S. The Committee introduced its report with a hard fact: “Of 50 million school children, fewer than two million, just under four per cent, are able to get a free or reduced price school lunch….And generally speaking, the greater the need of children from a poor neighborhood, the less the community [school] is able to meet it.” Key findings included an unwillingness on the part of many local and state governments to allocate tax revenue to make the NSLP accessible to needy children; wide variations in district participation and pricing, with urban school districts particularly underserved; a lack of federal oversight; and, most damningly, widespread racial and class bias in determining not only which children received free or reduced price lunches but also the conditions under which they could eat. The Committee asserted that, in general, “the poorer the school, the needier the child must be to get a free lunch.” In real terms, “This means that the slum child, who needs good nutrition most, has the least chance of getting a school lunch.”

Operating in one of the largest public school systems in the nation, the California NSLP faced an especially arduous and complex task. Twenty years after the program’s

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533 The CSLP included members of Church Women United, the National Board of the YWCA, the National Council of Catholic Women, the National Council of Jewish Women, and the National Council of Negro Women. The Committee was chaired by Jean Fairfax, director of the Division of Legal Information and Community Service of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and a delegate to the World Council of Churches. See CSLP, Their Daily Bread, 133-135.
534 Ibid., 1, 2. Italics removed from original.
535 According to the report, some schools required children receiving free or reduced price lunches to pay with tokens or colored tickets, to wait at the end of the line until all the paying children had been served, or to work in the cafeteria to “earn” their lunch. CSLP, 5, 34.
536 The CSLP reported, “In some school districts, the children of families with incomes over a certain amount—$2,000 is the usual amount—are not eligible for free lunches, although no distinction is made between the family with one child and the family with seven or eight children” (23).
537 Ibid., 4.
founding, only ten percent of the nearly four hundred thousand California children from families living below the poverty level or receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) received a free or reduced price lunch. According to data collected by the USDA Consumer and Marketing Service in December 1966, only 17.9 percent of the 4.8 million children enrolled in California’s 41,555 elementary and secondary schools participated in the NSLP on a typical school day, well below the national average of 36.5 percent. Tellingly included in these calculations were students who paid the “full” price, which from 1962 to 1967 increased annually in California by five cents, making the state’s school lunch one of the most expensive in the nation. The California NSLP director noted of this trend, “We have had a 25 per cent drop-off. It knocks off the kids who need it most.”

Though participating schools were subject to administrative review by the USDA, rarely did the agency issue citations to states that failed to comply. Even still, California was one of five states at the time of the report to have been found in violation of regulations by “not providing sufficient free or reduced price lunches.” It suffered no major penalty for this failure. Thus, the CSLP concluded, “the administrative review, as far as feeding needy children is concerned, has little meaning.”

The need was particularly great, and most often unmet, in “slum” areas like West Oakland. In the Oakland Unified School District, only students whose parents were “on welfare or earn[ed] less than welfare scale” were eligible for free lunches. Even with
such stringent criteria, 21.5 percent of students in the district qualified for free or reduced price lunches.\textsuperscript{543} But as the CSLP noted, “It is when a large number of needy students attend a school that the system of providing free lunches for them collapses.”\textsuperscript{544} The local school lunch director indicated that only 23 percent of the city’s 59,041 enrolled students ate the school lunch on a standard day.\textsuperscript{545} Because need far surpassed available resources in Oakland, certified children were “entitled to a maximum of ten free lunch tickets a month, except in June and December” when they received only five.\textsuperscript{546} Thus those students identified by school officials as needy were fed through the NSLP only about every other school day. Said one Oakland parent, who received welfare but whose children were not regularly fed at school, “If the school runs out [of lunches], that’s it. There ain’t no more allowed.”\textsuperscript{547} The principal of one Oakland elementary school reported that 150 of its 445 enrolled students ate the school lunch, which at a full price of 40 cents tied with Tallahassee, Florida, for the most expensive lunch in the sample. An additional 120 students reportedly brought lunch from home, leaving a total of 175 children at the school—nearly forty percent—who did not eat during the day.\textsuperscript{548} This was the state of affairs \textit{after} a two-year community effort to revive the NSLP in Oakland, which, \textit{Their Daily Bread} reported, had been “discontinued...in slum schools because not enough children could afford to pay and the program was losing money.”\textsuperscript{549} Though the

\textsuperscript{543} Ibid., 41.  
\textsuperscript{544} Ibid., 21.  
\textsuperscript{545} Ibid., 70.  
\textsuperscript{546} Ibid., 25.  
\textsuperscript{547} Qtd. in Ibid., 16.  
\textsuperscript{548} Ibid., 60.  
\textsuperscript{549} Ibid., 41.
NSLP returned to city schools, “the reopening of the program and the granting of a minimum number of free lunches,” the CSLP explained, “satisfied neither the parents nor the school board.”\(^550\) Situating the failure of the NSLP in the broader context of welfare, food politics, and education, Their Daily Bread astutely warned, “The plight of the slum child at lunchtime is just one symptom of the sickness of education in the slums of our cities. Organized protest, with parents demanding a more adequate lunch program, has already taken place in several cities. We predict more.”\(^551\) Released a few months prior to the CSLP’s findings, Hunger USA, the report of the Citizens’ Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States, offered a similarly dire assessment of school food programs and childhood nutrition on a larger scale. “School lunch programs come too late in life to eliminate deaths from [early childhood] malnutrition…[or] to avoid the permanent brain damage which…results from severe and prolonged protein deficiency,” warned the Board. “And they come too late in the day for children who have had no breakfast and no dinner the night before.”\(^552\)

The problem of childhood hunger was certainly not limited to lunchtime, a reality broached by the Child Nutrition Act’s provision for a two-year pilot School Breakfast Program (SBP) for poor children. Though the law authorized up to $7.5 million to fund the experiment, Congress ultimately appropriated only $2 million to make the breakfast program happen during the 1966-67 academic year.\(^553\) The slow pace of federal

\(^{550}\) Ibid.
\(^{551}\) Ibid., 51.
\(^{552}\) See also Citizens’ Board of Inquiry, Hunger USA, 69.
appropriations ultimately allowed most states only four months to operate the program, utilizing less than half of the funding set aside for that purpose. Given the short time frame of the trial project and the uncertainty surrounding federal funding, school administrators were often less than enthusiastic about committing local resources and personnel to the experiment. Moreover, though the SBP was expressly designed to serve free breakfast to children in need, the selection of trial sites was determined more by the availability of kitchen facilities and other practical matters than by which schools and children would benefit most from a breakfast program, offering federal reimbursement of up to 15 cents per child. The state of California used its $66,162 in federal appropriations to fund pilot breakfast programs in only three schools, all in Los Angeles. At full price, the breakfast cost students about ten cents. No students ate for free.

While “no one disputed the value of breakfasts for needy children,” the CSLP enumerated the limitations of the experimental program: “In addition to the funds being late, which made planning difficult, other reasons for resistance during the first year were (1) cost (although the reimbursement rate is high, labor is not covered); (2) requirements for record keeping; (3) disruptions to morning schedules; [and] (4) community feelings that breakfast is a family responsibility.”

The Black Panther Party’s Free Breakfast for School Children brought this concept to Oakland, bypassing many of the issues that limited the federal pilot program.

1967-68 school year. Between 1969 and 1973, actual funding levels rose from $3.5 million to $18 million. Levine, 141.

554 CSLP, 99.
555 Ibid., 118, 100.
556 Ibid., 101.
by using volunteer labor to prepare and serve donated foods to every child who came to eat. The Panthers did not ask participants to demonstrate need, sparing them the scrutiny and shame often endured by participants of federal food programs. Volunteers did not waste time or manpower managing the books because the program did not rely on local or federal monies.\footnote{Deborah Johnson, fiancé of Panther martyr Fred Hampton, explained: “We started feeding the children in the community without asking how many children you got and how many different daddies of children you got or if you’re getting an aid check. Those things were not important to us and we did not say we had to wait for federal funds. As a matter of fact we could not accept any federal funds at all because we felt that an enemy that was trying to destroy us would not give federal funds to a group that had no vested interest in that enemy’s survival.” Shoddy record-keeping left the Party open to charges of misuse of goods and funds, as in at least one instance when critics alleged that Party members consumed the food that had been donated to feed school children. Johnson qtd. in Murch, 175-176.} Operating before school hours, typically between 7am and 9am, the free breakfasts structured rather than disrupted the morning routines of both the child participants and the young adult volunteers.\footnote{Some Panthers later suggested that the idea for a breakfast program initially stemmed from a desire to foster daily structure, discipline, and a sense of purpose among the rank and file.} Ultimately, the language and mentality of the Party and its survival programs conceptualized childrearing, and physical survival more broadly, as a communal project, encouraging local residents to take ownership of the endeavor as a cooperative effort. The earliest and arguably most successful and controversial of the Panthers’ community projects centered on food because such programs met a pressing, practical need to feed hungry people, demonstrating the potential of programs and systems run by and for the people, outside the channels and jurisdiction of school boards, local governments, and federal agencies.\footnote{Critics, particularly residents of poor or underserved communities, charged that federal community action programs (CAPs) were often administered or supervised by local officials who had much to lose if impoverished minority communities actually participated in and benefited from programs for the poor. This fundamental programmatic flaw, and the conflicts it fostered, came to national attention during the fight over funding for the Office of Economic Opportunity’s}
Starting with Breakfast

The Free Breakfast for School Children program stemmed from a simple agenda: feed hungry children before school. Though by some accounts the Panthers were involved in free community breakfasts as early as 1967, the first official Panther Free Breakfast Program began in January 1969 in the basement of St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church in West Oakland.\(^{560}\) It was a runaway success, with participation mushrooming from eleven children on the first day to 135 by the end of the first week.\(^{561}\) Its enormous popularity immediately made clear the persistence of urban hunger, despite the lofty

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Project Head Start in Mississippi. The Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), an organization that openly supported civil rights and employed many movement activists and sympathizers, operated eighty-three of the two hundred Head Start preschools in Mississippi. As historian John Dittmer has persuasively demonstrated, “CDGM was unique in that it was led by people who did not apologize for their civil rights involvement and who saw CDGM as an opportunity to provide education and services for poor children while at the same time advancing the movement agenda.” Perhaps inevitably, Head Start and CDGM became a flashpoint in local struggles over race relations and civil rights, as white officials rightly perceived community-wide involvement of the poor through the CAP system as a threat to the status quo. The prospect of allocating U.S. tax dollars to organizations often headed by or advocating for the black poor incited a visceral reaction from some white Americans and many politicians and professionals who believed CAP structures were rife with potential for fiscal abuse, mismanagement, and politicization of participants at taxpayers’ expense. Mississippi’s white elite and others fearful of black gains saw the War on Poverty in general and Head Start in particular as subterfuge, a means of using federal funds to promote black equality. They therefore swiftly aimed to discredit CDGM and its administrators. Critics charged misuse and misappropriation of funds, citing poor or incomplete bookkeeping. Funded in 1965 and 1966 by OEO grants, CDGM applied in August 1966 for a third year of federal funding, but was denied. Dittmer, 370. For in-depth analysis, see Dittmer, “CDGM and the Politics of Poverty,” *Local People*, 363-388. For a poverty warrior’s first-hand account, see Polly Greenberg, *The Devil Has Slippery Shoes: A Biased Biography of the Child Development Group of Mississippi: A Story of Maximum Feasible Poor Parent Participation* (Youth Policy Institute, 1969, 1990).

\(^{560}\) Elaine Brown disputes this, stating that the first free breakfast was held at Sacred Heart Church in the Fillmore district of San Francisco. Abu-Jamal asserts that the Seattle Program operated a free breakfast program beginning in late 1968 and inspired Seale to mandate that each chapter operate a program. Most sources point to the program at St. Augustine’s as the official launch of the project. Brown, *A Taste of Power*, 157; Mumia Abu-Jamal, *We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2004), 69.

\(^{561}\) Bloom and Martin, *Black against Empire*, 182.
rhetoric of President Johnson’s War on Poverty. As the Panthers worked to meet this need in the community and expanded their efforts with spectacular free food giveaways, they recognized that in delivering food to the people, they could also use food to deliver the people to the Party. Many black Oakland residents and white liberals who had been skeptical, if not fearful, of the Party’s early tactics of armed resistance, quickly began softening to the Panther program. *The Black Panther* newspaper published calls for donations in cash and in kind, as well as for volunteers to operate the programs on a daily basis. The male-dominated organization reinforced the stereotypical role of women as nurturers, appealing to “Mothers, Welfare Recipients, Grandmothers, Guardians[,] and others who are trying to raise children in the Black Community where racists oppress us…to come forth to work and support this needed program.”

People responded. In addition to multiple sites in Oakland, Berkeley, Richmond, San Francisco, and Vallejo in the Bay area, within the year, the Panthers launched free breakfasts in Sacramento, Los Angeles, Seattle, Denver, Indianapolis, Milwaukee, Kansa City, Chicago, Boston, New Haven, Albany, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Jersey City; Harlem, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island, White Plains, and Peekskill in New York; and such seemingly unlikely places as Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Des Moines, Iowa; and Eugene, Oregon.

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562 This language appears in multiple issues of the newspaper. For one example, see “Breakfast for School Children,” *BP* (27 Apr 1969), 3.

563 The following year, new programs opened in Atlantic City, New Jersey and Rockford, Illinois, among other locations. The Party’s shift in emphasis to these Survival Programs served not only to challenge public and media perceptions of the Panthers’ membership and motivations, but to reconfigure the demographic makeup of the Party itself. By the end of 1969, Seale estimated that 60 percent of Panther members were women. Murch, 169; Seale, *A Lonely Rage*, 177.
A typical morning at a Panther breakfast program began between 6am and 6:30, as Party members arrived at BPP headquarters to load and deliver food while volunteers (primarily sisters and mothers from the community) gathered at the program site to begin preparing the day’s meal. Some of those who staffed the breakfasts limited their involvement with the BPP to that program. Others worked more intricately with the Party as “community workers,” steady allies who assisted on a regular basis by raising funds and performing other daily tasks but never formally joining the Party. Both daily volunteers and community workers proved vital in helping to legitimize the Black Panther Party in the eyes of ordinary citizens and community leaders. Community alliances established an essential visibility and aura of credibility as program coordinators worked to secure the resources required for daily operation. Local churches housed the majority of Panther free breakfasts, but underused schools, community centers, and even public housing projects provided spaces, while a few residents voluntarily hosted breakfast programs in their own homes.

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564 Barbara Lee explained, “A formal process for becoming a Black Panther Party member was developed but the organization also had a cadre of people called ‘community workers,’ and I was one of those during the early to mid-1970s. As a community worker, I had access to ‘mainstream’ people and places Party members didn’t because they were oftentimes seen as too radical. I could help raise money for the Party’s various programs from private foundations and other resources while some of the more outspoken Party members simply never could have gotten access. I also used my organizational and fund-raising skills to help implement The Ten-Point Platform, and by maximizing my credibility I was able to facilitate a lot of dialogue. This helped diffuse some of the middle-class folks’ suspicions about the Party.” Lee, Renegade for Justice and Peace, 46-47.

565 Several Panther breakfasts in Los Angeles and Seattle were located inside housing projects. Flores A. Forbes explained of his work in Watts, “We held the program in the homes of junkies, drug dealers, regular public assistance recipients, gamblers, and gangbangers…” See Forbes, Will You Die With Me?: My Life and the Black Panther Party (Atria Books, 2006), 50-51; Aaron Dixon, My People Are Rising, 178.
At busier locations (some of which boasted attendance of up to twelve hundred students each week), volunteers picked up children and drove them to the program or served as crossing guards to ensure their safe arrival.\textsuperscript{566} A typical morning’s menu might include bacon, eggs, grits, and toast or hotcakes and sausage, usually served with juice, milk, or hot chocolate.\textsuperscript{567} Most breakfasts operated from 7:00 to 8:30, during which time two volunteers cooked while four or so served food, socializing with the children, and cleared their plates. In addition to the labors of Panthers, community workers, and parents, some locations benefited from the help of high school and college students who rose extra early to help with the project. Children signed in upon arrival, creating an attendance record and a useful list of community contacts. Once the kids were off to school and the tables, dishes, and facilities cleaned, the crew resumed the arduous daily task of procuring food and supplies for future meals, soliciting donations and monetary contributions from members of the community, focusing particularly on local businesses. The breakfast programs generally opened every school day, and in the event that they closed for another BPP function, the Party often sent groceries home with the students to make up for the meal.\textsuperscript{568}

The objective of feeding hungry children before school, in truth, veiled far more radical aims, a fact the Panthers acknowledged and their opponents denounced. A breakfast program was a shrewd place to initiate the Party’s community efforts for several reasons. Its practical aim—to feed hungry children—was morally, if not

\textsuperscript{566} David Hilliard (ed.), \textit{The Black Panther Party Service to the People Programs} (Dr. Huey P. Newton Foundation, 2008), 32.
\textsuperscript{567} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{568} Committee Meeting Minutes (1 Apr 1972), HPN Papers, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 8.
politically, unobjectionable. Black, white, liberal, or conservative, few could speak out against the premise of the program. As Seale pronounced, “there’s not even a preacher in any church….who can deny a breakfast for children program. There’s not a businessman nor a demagogic politician around who can deny a breakfast for children program and get away with it…”569 Free breakfasts worked to meet the most basic need of the most vulnerable Americans, the truly deserving poor, and in doing so, they provided an immediate, vital service to the Party’s target constituency. The programs could benefit every poor and working class family in the area, as even those who regularly had enough to eat often scraped to meet other costs like rent, utilities, clothing, transportation, and medical expenses. By allowing household heads to focus on obtaining and provisioning only one or two meals per day, free breakfasts enabled families to conserve their resources to prevent, for example, having to spend rent money to ensure their children had enough to eat—or sending their children to school hungry as the cost of keeping a roof over their heads.570

Just as important to the program’s success, the Panthers could realistically access or mobilize resources to meet the pressing need for community food programs. Quite simply, a nationwide breakfast program was feasible. The free breakfasts and later free food programs permitted the BPP a ongoing opportunity to demonstrate concern for the needs of the people and a commitment to meeting those needs. Moreover, food programs required that the Party and its communities deliver regularly and consistently. This

570 Poverty activists sometimes refer to this as the “heat-or-eat” dilemma.
served three functions in organizing the hungry poor in the Bay Area. First, it created an opportunity for the Panthers to interact with members of the community, including mothers, businessmen, and church leaders, in a context outside their infamous police patrols. Father Boyle of Sacred Heart Parish in San Francisco was one of several religious leaders who praised the work ethic and attitude of Party members, observing that “the serving of breakfast to seventy-five to a hundred children here…each day…really gave a sense of self-worth, of self-esteem, of dignity, to the young people…who came at six o’clock in order to prepare this breakfast.” Moreover, press photos of African American men donning aprons while serving grade school students softened the group’s militant image, which had alienated or frightened some members of the black community, particularly women and elderly. In the spaces thus created—the breakfast rooms and food giveaways—Party leaders could spread the underlying ideology of the group that tied revolutionary struggle to bread and butter issues of daily survival. In addition to learning about black history, schoolchildren could interact every school morning with young adults in a positive, safe space and come to associate the work of individual Panthers with service, sacrifice, and dedication to help communities unite and grow strong to wage the struggle ahead. “Perhaps more than the plentiful eggs, bacon, bread and jam, etc., and more than the songs and laughter of the Liberation School,” The Black Panther reported, “the children thrived on the presence of revolutionary black men

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572 Though alternative news sources like The Movement and other student publications reproduced these photos, historian Steve Estes points out that mainstream media rarely published images of Panthers performing community work. Estes, 171.
and women whose spirit and love represented a better future.” Finally, the Panther food programs demanded that area businesses get in line with the program or suffer the consequences.

The functional benefits of the program were great. As The Black Panther regularly emphasized, the free breakfasts worked to quell the hunger pains that so often incapacitated black youth during school hours—a cycle of hunger and poor education generations in the making. Comedian Dick Gregory vividly recounted his struggles as a hungry boy in Depression-era St. Louis, expressing frustration with the apparent detachment of teachers from the hurdles hindering their students. “The teacher thought I was stupid,” Gregory remembered. “Couldn’t spell, couldn’t read, couldn’t do arithmetic. Just stupid. Teachers were never interested in finding out that you couldn’t concentrate because you were so hungry, because you hadn’t had any breakfast. All you could think about was noontime, would it ever come?” For Gregory, hunger meant desperation, a body paralyzed by physical want of nourishment and a mind consumed by thoughts of food. He remembered thinking to himself, “Maybe you could sneak into the cloakroom and steal a bite of something…. [S]ometimes I’d scoop a few spoonfuls out of the paste jar in the back of the room. Pregnant people get strange tastes. I was pregnant with poverty…and pregnant with hunger. Paste don’t taste too bad when you’re

574 The Citizens’ Board of Inquiry likewise noted that hunger resulted in such educational impediments as “listlessness, fights over food, inattentiveness, acute hunger pangs, withdrawal, a sense of failure.” Hunger USA, 31. For more on hunger in the classroom, see Janet Poppendieck, Free for All: Fixing School Food in America (University of California Press, 2010), 9, 161-189.
hungry.”575 Such dire circumstances persisted in poor urban neighborhoods three decades later, with the United States supposedly far removed from the anguish of the Great Depression and basking in the promise of the Great Society.

Many Panthers knew first-hand how hunger and economic oppression operated in a vicious cycle. Two months after the first breakfast program began, *The Panther* explained the dizzying array of social impediments facing the poor, refuting the illogical objections of those who believed the poor had created their own plight and therefore must accept responsibility for their own suffering. “They TELL US, you’re hungry because you’re poor…You’re poor because you haven’t got the best jobs…You can’t get the best jobs because you’re uneducated, and you’re uneducated because you didn’t learn while you were in school, and you didn’t learn while you were in school because you weren’t interested…” In terms strikingly similar to Gregory’s, the author asserted that distraction, not disinterest, impeded the performance of most hungry school children, questioning, “How can a person be expected to pay attention and learn about history, math, science and other subjects that are abstract to his reality when his mind is concentrating on a very real and concrete problem? Where is the next meal coming from?” For those who might miss the point, *The Panther* asserted, “The root cause of this problem”—of educational disparity and social inequality—“is not mental incapabilities or cultural deprivation, but HUNGER.”576 The connection between undernourished bodies and underdeveloped minds was plain: Children’s bellies must be

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575 Gregory, Nigger, 30. *Hunger USA* framed the dilemma in similar terms, noting, “Hunger for food overrides hunger for knowledge” (31).
fed each morning if they were to feed their minds at school during the day, to establish fundamental skills in math and reading necessary not only for socio-economic mobility but for political mobilization as well. Free breakfasts worked to interrupt intergenerational patterns of hunger that had for so long kept poor communities physically and intellectually stunted and, therefore, economically and politically marginal. More significantly in the long term, healthy brain development and function demanded adequate childhood nutrition. The developmental scars of malnourishment during one’s early years persisted for a lifetime.577

The progression of poverty, the Party maintained, both began with and resulted in the physical want for food, the driving cause and most urgent and obvious symptom of social inequality. Free breakfast programs worked to stop this cycle. One Panther, recalling his own struggles with childhood hunger, remarked, “It is a beautiful sight to see our children eat in the morning after remembering the times when our stomachs were not full.”578 Three months into the program, the Party cited the improved physical health of the children. “At one time there were children that passed out in class from hunger, or had to be sent home for something to eat,” the Panther explained. In sharp contrast, it reported, “[T]he teachers in the schools say that there is a great improvement in the

577 In 1968, Hunger USA documented expert medical testimony regarding long-term health complications caused by early childhood hunger and malnutrition. The authors reported, “We have learned that if poor nutrition goes unchecked in early childhood and growth is consequently retarded, the effects may include irreversible brain damage” (21). In her work on the Panthers’ health politics and medical programs, historian Alondra Nelson notes, “Health was a powerful and elastic political lexicon that could signify many ideals simultaneously… [H]ealth was a site where the stakes of injustice could be exposed and a prism through which struggles for equality could be refracted.” Alondra Nelson, Body and Soul: The Black Panther Party and the Fight Against Medical Discrimination (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2011), 5.
578 “Reform or Revolution?” BP (3 Mar 1969).
academic skills of the children that do get the breakfast.”

The Panther proclaimed, “and the Black Panther Party will not let the malady of hunger keep our children down any longer.”

Many newspaper articles applauded the sustenance provided by the breakfast programs, not only in the form of bodily nutrients, but also in terms of community-building and commensality. In addition to giving kids a leg up at school each morning, the breakfast programs served as classrooms in their own right. While school children waited for their meals or lingered before departing for school, Party members led them in political songs or engaged them in revisionist history lessons that situated the plight of impoverished minorities as a defining element of the American socio-economic system and of the black experience in America. Moreover, children learned the names and faces of Newton, Seale, and others, and came to understand the Party’s efforts to counteract the oppression of the poor by the “pigs,” a term the Panthers used to refer to police, white political leaders, uncooperative businessmen, and members of the black community.

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579 Ibid.
580 Ibid.
582 Heynen describes the importance of scalar innovation to the Panthers’ free breakfasts: “Moving from the mundane space of the fork, mouth, and table (read as bodily spaces) to the church or school (read as black community spaces) where BP members helped feed hungry children helps to elucidate the power of everyday political struggle dialectically in subtle yet powerful ways.” Heynen, “Bending the Bars of Empire,” 411.
583 In an article denouncing surveillance of BPP breakfast programs by Chicago police, The Panther defiantly pronounced, “Not only do the Breakfast Centers provide free breakfasts but they also serve as a place where children receive revolutionary culture, education and also immediate first aid treatment.” “Chicago: We Still Serve Free Breakfast for Children,” BP (11 Oct 1969), 5.
middle class that opposed the BPP. Just as important as structured lessons were the interactions between schoolchildren and Party members and other motivated volunteers. One outsider, a photojournalist, celebrated the “atmosphere of brotherliness and communion,” attesting that the “‘little brothers’ are treated like part of the family, and the service includes both food and soul.”

Describing what critics maligned as propagandizing to children, trading food for loyalty, The Panther noted, “As some kids wait for the meal, they get an impromptu lecture about where it’s at for black people today—watch out for the pigs, dig the injustice of capitalist society, see the strength of the Panthers in combatting [sic] it…The kids are noisy with questions…” Satiated and energized by hot food, the children’s minds, the Panthers claimed, began working to understand why their families needed food assistance and why the Panthers felt impelled to provide it. “And they eat, and feel there is a place for them. The rap they get, by the way, isn’t laid on very heavily, and there is no hate in it. What they hear is true, and they get to think about it over breakfast. Can’t knock it.”

Perhaps in response to charges that the Panthers used the children selfishly to serve their own political ends, the BPP in Mount Vernon, New York declared, “…we fight not so much for ourselves but because we want our children and their children to live to see a society free from exploitation and oppression. It is our young

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584 Ed Buryn, “Suffer Not, Little Children,” BP (27 Apr 1969), 5. For footage of Panther free breakfasts and mealtime at its Liberation Schools, see Black Power Mixtape.
585 Buryn, “Suffer Not, Little Children.”
586 Ibid.
Black children that will nurture the seeds of the new world we are planting, it is they who will fertilize the ground we plow.”

In June 1969, SNCC’s newspaper, *The Movement*, recounted a scene at a Bay Area breakfast program: “At a lively meeting of children and some mothers, the Panthers explained…how the power of the people makes merchants donate food to the Program. They suggested a boycott against Safeway, until that giant chainstore decided to give some free food. One little boy, about seven, shouted out: ‘I’ll tell my mama, don’t buy. Right on.’ This anecdote highlighted the ability of nourished, lively children to think in terms of their relation to the problems that crippled their communities, as well as the solutions that might liberate them. Thus energized, children could recruit their parents to the cause. This boy’s response, in particular, spoke to the imperative of winning the support of women, who often held heavy influence over a family’s purchasing habits. One report from the Rockford, Illinois chapter conveyed a similar response among the children. “Whenever we ask them questions such as, ‘Why are you at the breakfasts?’ They reply, ‘so I can grow and be strong and take the Panthers[’] place.’ Right on youth.”

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589 Willie T. Kent (Rockford, Ill. BPP), “Businessmen Attempt to Block Breakfast,” *BP* (29 Nov 1969), 15. The Rockford Chapter later reported a troubling incident in which the owner of a small store humiliated a nine year-old black girl sent by her mother to purchase a few items using food stamps. The owner refused to sell her pepper, claiming it was not “food” and therefore could not be purchased with food stamps. Local Panthers claimed, “The store has been accused (the manager) of selling little girls apples and candy with razor blades in them, and catering to the little boys with favors of money…[I]t appears that this sick demented racist is using the store as a place to manifest his deranged perversion, which can be noted in the acts of most capitalist
Without question, physical confrontation, intellectual development, and political movement required sound nutrition. At the individual and communal level, this process elevated the masses to a heightened awareness of the forces perpetuating their suffering. Newton explained the underlying relationship between the survival programs and the revolutionary project of consciousness-raising. “Black people already know they’re poor and powerless,” he declared. “They just don’t understand the nature of their oppression. They haven’t drawn the line from their condition to the system of capitalism. The Survival Programs do that. The people will undoubtedly start asking themselves why the party can do so much with so little, and the capitalists so little with so much.” An awareness of this paradox or contradiction, Newton insisted, would “motivate them to start making some demands—not begging… In other words, the programs are another tactic for revolution.”

Party language alluded to a persistent commitment to and belief in the necessity of armed insurrection, though Newton and others increasingly acknowledged that such a scenario was not imminent. “Our children must have strong, healthy bodies, and minds that are alert. Alert and ready to think…about changing this society, not to passively accept the conditions we live in as inevitable.”\(^{590}\) One provocative image by BPP Minister of Culture Emory Douglas illustrated the potential—and the threat—of strong aspiring pigs.” Roy Kent (Rockford Branch BPP), “Rockford Store Owner Intimidates Small Children,” \(BP\) (25 July 1970), 12.

\(^{590}\) Qtd. in Brown, \textit{A Taste of Power}, 249. Stokely Carmichael, who temporarily joined forces with the Panthers before leaving the country, agreed with this premise. “All real education is political. Politics is not necessary [sic] educational, but good politics always is. You can have no serious organizing without serious education. And always, the people will teach you as much as you teach them.” \textit{Ready for Revolution}, 391.

black youth nourished by plentiful food and the ideology of revolutionary violence. First printed on the back cover of *The Black Panther* in November 1970, the drawing shows a young black boy wearing an oversized wide-brimmed hat. The boy carries a Molotov cocktail in his pocket and a rifle slung over his shoulder. “Just wait until I get a little bigger,” the boy thinks, “so that I can wear my daddy’s hat and shoot my daddy’s gun.”

The child looks off in the distance, likely toward the looming class war. Speaking obliquely to the necessity of creating strong black men, Douglas positioned children as the future of the struggle, affirming the need to nourish them “body and soul.” Even more ominous than the message itself was the simplicity of the image, which a child or illiterate adult could readily understand.

In addition to cultivating favor among local residents, the breakfast programs brought the Party into close regular contact with another logical if unlikely ally, local churches, which hosted the vast majority of the new programs. Of course, at the height of the civil rights era, most churches and religious leaders had largely embraced the tactics and strategies of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, led by dynamic ministers like Martin Luther King Jr. guided by philosophical nonviolence and wedded to Christian ethics of peace and brotherly love. Though the Panthers as a group had been

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592 This image is reprinted in Murch, 138.
593 Murch, 173; Abu-Jamal, 69.
closely associated with images and acts of violence, their new approach won the cooperation of a number of religious organizations and institutions in urban centers. Episcopalian, Catholic, and Seventh-Day Adventist congregations, for example, hosted early programs in Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, respectively. Methodist and Baptist churches also participated.

Father Earl Neil, pastor of St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church in West Oakland and host of the first official Panther free breakfast program, exhibited unsurpassed dedication and passion for the Panther’s platform, and for its survival programs in particular. In addition to hosting a daily breakfast, Father Neil served as advisor, community advocate, fundraiser, and organizer for the BPP. A seasoned community activist and veteran of civil rights campaigns in McComb, Mississippi, and Selma, Alabama, Neil had moved from the trenches of the Southern movement to work with the SCLC opening housing campaign in Chicago. Upon his arrival in the Bay Area, he became an active ally of the Panthers, providing Newton with spiritual guidance during his murder trial. Like many longtime rights organizers, Neil grew more radical as the decade progressed. His approach to social change ultimately aligned closely with the Panthers’ emphasis on community empowerment and self-determination. Neil allowed the Party to hold regular

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595 Southern California BPP, “L.A. Panthers Bring Free Breakfast Program,” BP (14 Jun 1969), 3. Elaine Brown recalled that the black pastor of the University Seventh-Day Adventist Church “welcomed us with one admonition: that we serve no meat.” One breakfast organizer “found something called ‘vegeburgers.’ With the donations we were beginning to receive from some Hollywood whites, we purchased the burgers, passed them off as sausages, and started our program.” A Taste of Power, 181.

meetings and political education sessions at St. Augustine’s, and continued to permit the
Panthers access to his congregation’s facilities and resources, despite police harassment
as early as April 1968. The family of George Jackson, a Panther killed by guards while
attempting to escape from Soleded prison, held his funeral at St. Augustine’s in August
1971. Rather than cower from the violence of the streets, Father Neil offered his church
as a refuge for community work and proactive problem solving. Moreover, he chastised
black religious leaders who evaded the trying issues facing their communities by muting
what Neil believed to be the inherent radicalism of Christianity.

At the first United Front Against Fascism conference, coordinated by the Panthers
in July 1969, Neil situated fascism as the key oppressive force in the United States. He
argued that in demonizing the BPP as a gang of thugs and criminals, the “fascist power
structure” defanged Christianity by positioning Jesus as a passive reformer. In fact, Neil
asserted, “Jesus was a bad dude, and…if understood correctly, was really a very
profound…and very dedicated revolutionary…I saw his own work, his own
ministry as dealing with the human condition, of dealing with oppressed people.”
Rather than espouse and uphold essentialist principles and rigid codes of conduct, Neil
proclaimed, “clergymen and other concerned laymen have…to redefine what is moral
and what is ethical….” From his vantage, “What is necessary to survive America is
moral and ethical.” Father Neil’s emphasis on ameliorating present conditions
contrasted sharply with what he saw as the patience and restraint advocated by many

597 Murch, 163.
599 Ibid.
black preachers who reminded followers of the promise of “a kingdom in the hereafter which is a ‘land flowing with milk and honey.’” Neil refused to accept such passivity, admonishing, “[W]e must deal with concrete conditions and survival in this life! The Black Panther Party…has merely put into operation the survival program that the Church should have been doing anyway. The efforts of the Black Panther Party are consistent with what God wants…”

Despite Father Neil’s unwavering support, in truth, many churches refused to host Panther programs. Some cited cost or space considerations or the opposition of members of their congregation as reasons for nonparticipation. Others openly wished to avoid the hassle and publicity or feared that internecine feuds between Panthers and other rival organizations or street criminals might bring violence upon their congregants. In typical fashion, Party leaders did not take rejection lightly—or quietly. Elmer Dixon, Seattle BPP breakfast coordinator, for example, asserted that the widespread success of the chapter’s first free breakfast, attended by black and white children alike, indicated a need

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600 Fr. Earl Neil, “The Role of the Church and the Survival Program” (15 May 1971), 10-12, qtd. in Mumia Abu-Jamal, We Want Freedom: A Life in the Black Panther Party (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2004), 69. Speaking before a crowd of thousands at the first BPP Community Survival Conference in March 1972, Neil made the point even more dramatically. “What the Party is about is the same thing that Jesus was about. The only difference between Jesus and the Black Panther Party is that Jesus fed 5,000 and the Black Panther Party is feeding 10,000.” See “This Will Tide Us Over To Liberation,” BP (8 Apr 1972). Fannie Lou Hamer echoed these sentiments during a speech in Lexington, Mississippi, in 1969. “I’m sick and tired of hearing these ministers, these chicken-eating ministers…telling me that I should expect milk and honey—I can’t drink sweet milk, and I don’t eat honey—when I get to the other side, and him riding in a good car. This ain’t going to work no more, honey.” Hamer, “To Tell It Like It Is,” Speech Delivered at the Holmes County Freedom Democratic Party Municipal Elections Rally in Lexington, Mississippi (9 May 1969) in Brooks and Houck, To Tell It Like It Is, 91.

for more sites to serve other “kids [who] come by the office and ask when are we going to start serving breakfast.” When five “so-called Black churches” with “petty bourgeoisie congregation[s]” denied Panther requests to use their facilities to expand the program to other areas, Dixon called them out by name. He assailed the motives of religious leaders, claiming they protected the material opulence of the black middle class at the expense of local youth. “The pimping and the raping of the people by the ministers through God must end,” Dixon declared. “We call on the petty bourgeoisie to miss a Cadillac payment and delay the remodeling of their churches so that [the] hungry oppressed may eat.”

In similar fashion, the Party characterized the “eviction” of a Los Angeles breakfast program from Emmanuel A.M.E Church in early 1970 as “a vicious blow from a bootlicking, head scratching unreverend [sic] preacher” worried that affiliating with the Panthers might “jeopardiz[e] his career.”

In other cases, church leaders and individuals or organizations asked to host the programs cited fears of police harassment or official violence, fears warranted by the persistent, even paranoid efforts of

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602 Dixon charged, “The petty bourgeoisie [sic] don’t see the ever growing need, and they influence the churches to refuse to let us use their facilities. What it breaks down to is that the petty bourgeoisie are influencing the church to rape the people and the ministers to pimp the people by metaphysical idealism (God’s holy scripture). The very popular, social church committees are squawking about remodeling their church or about some other insane b---s--t while kids ask the PARTY when are they going to be able to eat.” Elmer James Dixon (Seattle BPP), “Seattle Breakfast Serves Youth” (15 Nov 1969), 17. According to Elmer’s brother Aaron, Captain of the Seattle BPP, the chapter expanded its breakfast programs to five locations, typically inside housing projects. “Eventually, we were able to get mothers in the community to take over the duties of cooking breakfast and feeding the kids,” he wrote, “leaving us to make sure the food supplies were there.” Dixon, My People Are Rising, 178.

local and federal law enforcement to check the programs’ expansion so as to quash the Party’s influence.\textsuperscript{604}

**External Pressures**

For better and for worse, Panther community efforts and food programs quickly caught attention—and generated controversy. A May 1969 issue of *Newsweek* quoted a California police officer’s response to the recently instituted and highly publicized Panther breakfasts. “How can anyone be against feeding kids?” he asked.\textsuperscript{605} The stealth criticism, resistance, and outright opposition the programs soon encountered, however, made clear that many—especially those in positions of legal, political, and economic authority—did oppose Panther efforts to feed poor kids, and adamantly so. Those most

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\textsuperscript{604} Documented FBI pressure in San Diego included anonymous phone calls protesting one priest’s involvement in a Panther breakfast program, which resulted in his transfer to another church. A memo to FBI director Hoover stated that complaints to “an ‘auxiliary bishop’ to protest the Black Panthers’ breakfast program…appeared to be favorably received, and [the bishop] seemed to be quite concerned over the fact that one of his priests was deeply involved in utilization of church facilities for this purpose.” The pastor of the church admitted that the Panther program “gave the kids vitamins, a terrific breakfast, [and] then they [Panthers and volunteers] would clean the hall better than the women ever did after a dinner.” He therefore stated that the priest was dismissed from the diocese because of his underlying political affiliation and alliance with the Panthers, not simply his support of the breakfast program. As the FBI planned, the free breakfast ended with the priest’s tenure at the church. An FBI memo dated August 20, 1969, boasted “TANGIBLE RESULTS,” reporting, “The BPP Breakfast Program appears to be floundering in San Diego due to lack of public support and unfavorable publicity concerning it. It…has presently been temporarily suspended. Therefore, it was felt that placing the above mentioned anonymous call to the Bishop at this particular time might be a significant factor in precluding the resumption of the program. The information to the Bishop appeared favorably received and he seemed to be quite concerned over the fact that one of his Priests was deeply involved in utilization of church facilities for this purpose. This matter, of course, will be closely followed for further anticipated developments concerning the Breakfast Program.” Qtd. in Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers: Documents from the FBI’s Secret Wars Against Domestic Dissent* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1990), 133. See also, Ronald J. Ostrow and Narda Zacchino, “FBI Claimed Credit in 1969 for San Diego Ghetto War,” *Los Angeles Times* (1 Jan 1976), 1, 8, 10.

vocal in their reactions questioned the Panthers’ motives and methods. Many believed BPP leadership had devised the survival programs to create a veneer of respectability and legitimacy to distract from illegal or otherwise illicit activity. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover believed this to be the case. He claimed that programs like the free breakfasts represented a tactical calculation to divert from the rhetoric of armed revolution for which the Party had become infamous and, in doing so, to win the support and cooperation of black residents in their lawless and bloody war against established authority. According to Bureau records, one FBI head instructed agents at a San Francisco lecture in May 1969, “…The BPP is not engaged in the ‘Breakfast for Children’ program for humanitarian reasons, [but for others,] including their efforts to create an image of civility, assume community control of Negroes, and to fill adolescent children with their insidious poison.”

The extent of police harassment of the Party’s breakfast programs across the nation and the intricate work of the FBI’s Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) beginning in 1967 to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities” of the Panthers demonstrated that local and federal officials identified the food programs as a multivalent threat to the established order, just as the Panthers intended.

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607 An August 1967 FBI memo included this infamous phrasing of COINTELPRO’s objectives. Qtd. in Churchill and Vander Wall, Agents of Repression, 58.
Indeed, despite reasonable expectations that animosity between the Panthers and local law enforcement might die down as a result of fewer armed patrols and an increase in active, regimented service work to occupy the ranks, *The Black Panther* reported heightened police presence around Party activities after these projects began. In addition to monitoring morning routines at facilities hosting the breakfasts (and often intimidating children and their parents in the process), in some cases police reportedly worked to dissuade participation by going door-to-door, encouraging parents to keep their children home. The Richmond chapter, north of Berkeley, reported, “One of the brothers that we feed at the Breakfast…distinctly told us that the pigs came to his house and told his parents that the Black Panther Party was teaching racism and endorsing riots.” Though in this case the child’s parents “simply told the pigs that their son wasn’t getting into any trouble, and for them (the pigs) to leave,” these tactics often proved effective in the short run. When attendance at the Richmond program suddenly plummeted by forty to sixty percent, breakfast organizers attributed the decline to the work of “the pigs…to spread racist and fascist propaganda.”

True or not, this explanation for low turnout bolstered the Party’s stance that the police used fear and intimidation as weapons against the most basic interests of the poor. The Panthers claimed that police visibility and hostility in fact worked against aims to delegitimize the Party by making “even the children…aware of the pigs’ madness. They learn at a very young age how difficult it is

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608 Panther Chief of Staff David Hilliard witnessed, “Police raided the Breakfast for Children Program, ransacked food storage facilities, destroyed kitchen equipment, and attempted to disrupt relations between the Black Panthers and local business owners and community advocates, whose contributions made the programs possible.” Hilliard and Weise, *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, 15.
to come to a free breakfast without the constant reminder of pig occupation in their community and constant police harassment.\(^{610}\) In more blatant cases, police attempted to impede operations by arresting Party members working at the programs, raiding facilities and sometimes destroying food, or pressuring breakfast hosts and local businesses to cease cooperation.\(^{611}\)

While some church leaders acquiesced to this external pressure, others staunchly defended the BPP’s efforts and continued to work with them. Father Eugene Boyle, the Irish Catholic pastor of Sacred Heart Church in San Francisco, met media and police attacks on his partnership with the Panthers head on.\(^{612}\) One of the earliest community leaders to join with the Panthers’ fledgling breakfast program, Father Boyle adamantly espoused the merits of the Party’s community programs more broadly, often to his own detriment.\(^{613}\) Amidst allegations in June 1969 that students attending the BPP-sponsored

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\(^{611}\) On at least one occasion, a driver picking up other Panthers was arrested on an alleged traffic warrant en route to the morning program. \textit{The Panther} concluded, “These fascist pigs thought that by busting Melvin [the driver] they would stop our Breakfast. What foolish thinking. There are a lot of Melvins in Richmond, and as long as there are people like him, and this country remains under this fascist government, we will always have a Free Breakfast Program.” Joe Cuba, “More Breakfast Sabotage,” \textit{BP} (29 Nov 1969), 15. The Brownsville chapter in Brooklyn, New York, reported that in early February 1970, “some low rated person” attempted “to sabotage the Breakfast Program” by unplugging the refrigerator, forcing the breakfast coordinators to discard rotten meat and sour milk. To add insult to injury, the vandals also tore down posters of Newton and Seale hanging on the walls. “Attack on Brownsville Breakfast Program,” \textit{BP} (28 Feb 1970), 18.


free breakfast in his church had received coloring books advocating black violence
against white police officers, Boyle offered reporters gathered in his office an
unwavering endorsement of the Party and its work. Father Boyle testified that, as
opposed to inciting violence, he had witnessed at least one incident where BPP members
squelched what he termed “a potential riotous situation” on a nearby street, pointing out
that the incident had “got into the press another way.” Moreover, he charged on a local
television news program that Senate investigators, local police, and even public health
inspectors had targeted his church for harassment “because of our…involvement with the
black community and our urgent plea addressed to the police department that the police-
community relations be revitalized….614 He went so far as to accuse the Police Officers’
Association of delivering false reports to the archbishop of San Francisco,
“misinterpreting… what we’re doing in this area.” Father Boyle stated that he believed
the Panthers’ claims that they had not produced or distributed the coloring books in
question, and vowed that his church would continue to work with the Panthers until city
or state governments instituted comparable programs.615 In this case, police tactics
actually strengthened the alliance between the Panthers and their community supporters,

614 In an open letter published in The Panther in October 1969, Boyle noted that the public health
officials had not felt the need to inspect the church kitchen in the many years it had served Italian
and Irish Catholics. “Untold gallons of spaghetti and pounds of corned beef have passed through
that kitchen,” he wrote, “…and never before had the Public Health Department poked into the
refrigerator, checked the stove, or tested the heat of the dishwasher. Suddenly, Panther breakfasts
were a threat to health. And one might wonder,” he continued provocatively, “whose health was
endangered by scrambled eggs, sausage, toast, honey, grits, and hot chocolate—the small children
streaming in and out from 7 to 8:30 am each morning, or the public official lost behind his desk
somewhere, who knows that San Francisco city schools can and should be feeding youngsters in
need of food. Public health laws somehow get stronger enforcement than federal and state laws
empowering city schools systems [sic] to offer breakfast and lunch to children.” Rev. Eugene J.
as officials’ haphazard ploys to the discredit the group forced Sacred Heart to assume a defensive posture. Father Boyle’s belief in the Panthers’ innocence proved warranted, as FBI records ultimately revealed that a Panther infiltrator had carried out a Bureau plot to plant the inflammatory books as a means of discrediting the Party in the eyes of the community.\(^6\)\(^1\) Father Boyle’s spirited defense of the Panthers reflected his understanding that police hostility to the breakfast program represented a new expression of entrenched opposition on the part of local law enforcement toward the safety and interests of the black communities they patrolled. Several months later, Father Boyle refuted continued accusations of Panther criminality. He reminded the public “that without funds or any of the support available to public agencies, the Panthers are obeying an older law, one as ancient as Christianity, which urges compassionate man to fed the hungry and to open his ears, his resources, his heart, to the needy around him.” Rather than inflame racial animosity, he insisted, “It is time to point out that it is the Panthers who have small children, Black and White, sitting down to eat a meal together, in peace…It’s good to find so much Christianity in a Church.”\(^6\)\(^1\)

Though especially intense in the Bay area, police suspicion and hostility penetrated Panther projects around the nation. Two and a half months after Chicago police killed charismatic chapter leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in an early

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morning raid, the Chicago Panthers could not shake the presence of local law
enforcement. In an article attacking a recent story published by the \textit{Chicago Tribune}
implying that the breakfast programs fed “so few children until the program hardly
exists…while still collect[ing] donations for the Program,” local Party leaders reported
that “Chicago police and the Gang Intelligence unity [sic] have…the habit of attending
our Breakfast Programs,” accosting and frisking Panther breakfast volunteers on phony
charges in front of the center where the breakfast program operated. Chicago Panthers
charged that police, “[i]llegally enter[ing] through back doors,” had “often destroyed
breakfast foods” stored for later use. They additionally alleged that police had sabotaged
the facility’s heating system, temporarily forcing the program to shut down. Regardless
of the veracity of these purported acts, Panthers’ colorful, urgent language framed
interactions with police as symptomatic of the broader oppression endured not merely by
the poor, but specifically by poor children forced to learn at an early age their unfortunate
place in the social order. “You see, ameriKKing capitalists, who own and control the
means of production, distribution, and instruments such as the press and the police, have
told the pigs to shoot us. And they do…with their guns. They have also told the press to
shoot us. And they do…with their print.” Thus \textit{The Panther}’s telling of events
positioned law enforcement, corporate news media, and capitalists more broadly as a

\footnote{\textsuperscript{618} Fred Hampton and Panther Mark Clark were killed in an early morning police raid of their
Chicago apartment in December 1969. Official documents and forensics indicate that Hampton
was likely asleep in bed beside his pregnant fiancé when the Chicago Police Department opened
fire. See Roy Wilkins and Ramsey Clark, Commission of Inquiry into the Black Panthers and the
Police, \textit{Search and Destroy} (New York: Metropolitan Applied Research Center, Inc., 1973);
Jeffrey Haas, \textit{The Assassination of Fred Hampton: How the FBI and the Chicago Police
Murdered a Black Panther} (Chicago Review Press, 2011).}
triumvirate of evil against which the poor must unite. The intense reaction of the police, and the efforts of the Tribune to “reinforce...the gagging voice of conservatism, racism, and capitalism” proved, in the Panthers’ view, the worthiness of these programs, illustrating that authorities deemed them a very real threat to established relations and systems of power. 619 The FBI’s role in the assassinations of Hampton and Clark, the former of whom had recently negotiated a truce between two feuding gangs and driven efforts to implement Party community programs in Chicago, demonstrated that the ideas and possibilities represented by the Panthers, rather than specific violent or criminal acts, elicited the fear of the highest investigative authority in the nation. 620

FBI harassment of the Winston-Salem Panthers was particularly imaginative and vile, slandering the designs of those operating the breakfast program. Larry Little, head of the local chapter, alleged that the Bureau authored several anonymous public letters charging that his nephew, who assisted with the breakfast program, “was a homosexual and before he would give the children their [food] they had to commit homosexual acts.” 621 Little also attributed a January 1971 shootout between Panthers and police to an FBI set-up. The incident began when some Party members went to retrieve a donation of meat from a Chatham Meat Company truck. When they arrived at the predetermined meeting point and began unloading the food, the truck’s white driver accused them of

620 O’Reilly, Racial Matters, 310-316, 303-305.
robbery, and violence ensued. Of course, these tactics, like most of the FBI’s counterintelligence measures, were effective because they were secret, and the exposure of COINTELPRO in 1971 slowed FBI activity. Subsequent investigations and findings of the Senate Church Committee beginning in 1975 revealed the shocking extent and ruthlessness of FBI efforts to stifle dissent by framing, infiltrating, and sabotaging radical organizations, particularly those advocating revolutionary or nationalist aims. The vast majority of these specific efforts targeted the Black Panther Party. The extent to which government operatives worked to undermine Panther food programs, in particular, revealed that they, too, understood what was at stake in permitting communities to see the direct connection between strong bodies and strong minds, between healthy children and healthy communities, between free food and free people. The consequences of official repression inevitably extended beyond Party members, affecting the lives and endangering the safety of those who volunteered for, contributed to, and benefited from the programs. Barbara Lee, who described herself as a BPP community worker, believed that “due to the conflict between COINTELPRO and the Black Panthers, I was placed right in the middle of a movement that, despite its obvious social benefit, was often treacherous and dangerous…” Like many others, Lee “gave the Black Panthers the

622 Jack Betts, “FBI Files Point To Harassment Of Winston Group.”
623 For information about public revelations of COINTELPRO, see Betty Medsger, The Burglary: The Discovery of J. Edgar Hoover’s Secret FBI (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014).
624 In her memoir Elaine Brown, who spearheaded the establishment of the Los Angeles chapter’s first free breakfast program, surmised that “[t]he success of the Panther free breakfast programs for the poor…as much as Panther guns triggered J. Edgar Hoover’s targeting of the party for the most massive and violent FBI assault ever committed.” Brown, 10. In the Bay area alone, the Bureau employed eight full-time agents working with thirty-eight informants on college campuses, including twenty-two at Berkeley, seven at San Francisco State, and three each at Merritt College and Stanford University. John Fogarty, “How FBI Harassed Bay Area Leftists,” San Francisco Chronicle (2 Dec 1977), 1, 4.
benefit of the doubt because I believed the good the Party did outweighed the bad reputation it sometimes had.”

**Internal Tensions**

Despite their clear appeal and effectiveness in exposing large numbers of people to the Party’s message, local breakfast programs sparked vociferous contention inside the Party as well. Speaking in Moscow in late 1969, Eldridge Cleaver, who had recently fled the U.S. to escape charges stemming from an April 1968 shootout with Oakland police, condemned Panther community work as reformist, even counter-revolutionary. “The right wing has seized the reins of leadership and put a muzzle on the Panther,” he informed a contingent of white European reporters. “The vanguard party has become a breakfast-for-children club…Babylon is quiet. Pigs [police] are comfortable. Why? Because the vanguard is cooking fucking breakfasts instead of drawing guns!” Though Cleaver’s gender politics were among the most extreme in an organization beset by charges of misogyny, here he articulated a common assumption that the work of feeding

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625 Lee, *Renegade*, 60.
626 For more on this incident, in which the Panther’s first recruit, seventeen year-old Bobby Hutton, was killed, see Bloom and Martin, 118-120; Murch, 164-167.
627 These are Cleaver’s words as Brown recalled them. Qtd. in Brown, 220. In her memoir, Brown expressed shock at Cleaver’s sudden denouncement of Party leadership, particularly David Hilliard, who had gained much influence while Newton and Seale were in jail awaiting trial. She recalled a private diatribe later that evening during which Cleaver declared, “Revolution has to be won, not coddled like eggs. The Hilliards are so punked-out and gun-shy, they’re making the vanguard look like a reformist bitch…I don’t give a fuck about some serve-the-people programs. Anybody who doesn’t want to deal with the struggle has to have his ass dragged down the revolutionary road, kicking and screaming if necessary. I’m talking about the same thing I’ve always talked about, ‘revolution in our life’ and I mean it….” After Cleaver threatened Brown’s life when she voiced her disagreement, she concluded he, who had fled the country to avoid imprisonment, was weak and terrified, hiding far away behind words of violence and revolution. “Eldridge was…a rapist, a man who lashed out at women—in fear.” Brown, 223, 225.
and nurturing was incompatible with, if not antithetical to, the project of revolution.\footnote{Cleaver’s prison manifesto \textit{Soul on Ice} (1968) described the process by which he became a rapist, viewing sexual violence against white women as “an insurrectionary act. It delighted me,\textquotedblright he acknowledged, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft that I was defying and trampling upon the white man’s law, upon his system of values, and that I was defiling his…I felt I was getting revenge.\textquoteright\textquoteright Cleaver, \textit{Soul on Ice}, XX; Bloom and Martin, 78-79. Rumors also abounded that Cleaver physically and verbally abused his wife, Kathleen. See Brown, 225, 227-228.}

Cleaver’s relentless attacks on the free breakfasts and other “sissy” programs ironically echoed those of local police and the FBI, which contended that Panther service programs (gendered female) aimed not to help the people but to distract official and public attention from Panther violence and criminality (gendered male).

Though a number of members sided with Cleaver and followed him out of the Party following his very public expulsion by Newton in February 1971, many others, including Aaron Dixon from Seattle and Flores Forbes of Los Angeles, believed the course laid by Newton to be more prudent.\footnote{This incident occurred after about seven months after Newton’s release from prison, when Cleaver challenged him during a phone conversation aired on live television. Cleaver later wrote that the split with Newton \textquoteleft\textquoteleft would finally shatter that Panther loyalty and cause me to doubt completely the efficacy of social, political movements as the agent of true liberation or lasting salvation. Everything that I had trusted, supported, and believed had a propensity for melting down under the heat and light of testing.\textquoteright\textquoteright He subsequently became a born-again Christian and, later, a Republican. Cleaver, \textit{Soul on Fire}, 77; John Kifner, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft Eldridge Cleaver, Black Panther Who Became G.O.P. Conservative, Is Dead at 62,\textquoteright\textquoteright \textit{New York Times} (2 May 1998). For more on Cleaver’s expulsion and the factional split of the BPP, see Bloom and Martin, 362-371; Murch, 186-189.}

\footnote{Dixon, 212.}
made the point more emphatically, mocking Cleaver’s reckless zeal to “get it on with the ‘Pig Power Structure’ and start offing pigs via urban guerilla warfare in the streets right now…Shit, were we ready to do that? Hell, fucking no,” he insisted. Foolhardy violence, they knew, would result in massive bloodshed and the slaughter, not the liberation, of the people. As Dixon and Flores averred, Panther food programs, more so than subsequent survival programs, furthered the dual goals of community survival and political education, illustrating the revolutionary potential of food work and other traditionally feminine labors.

In her controversial memoir, *A Taste of Power*, Panther Elaine Brown asserted, “As women, our role was not very different from that of the men, except in certain particulars.” While perhaps true, those particulars revealed deeply ingrained assumptions about food work as the domain of women. Brown, for example, described an interaction with a woman at a meeting of the US Organization, a rival black nationalist group. When Brown moved to help herself to the communal meal, the woman chastised, “you will have to wait until our Brothers are served…our Brothers are our warriors. Our warriors must be fed first.” Though part of a group dedicated to revolutionary social change, the woman here defended the gender status quo, reaffirming the expectation that struggles for social change required violence, and that violent revolution was the exclusive purview of men. Seale described witnessing a similar incident while dining

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632 Brown, 136.
633 Ibid., 109.
634 This view is not uncommon to black nationalist ideology, which, political scientist Michael C. Dawson explains, “represents the most racialized of African-American ideologies…One
at the Party’s Chicago headquarters in 1969. Seale had insisted that the women join the men at the table rather than wait until they had finished. When a male Party member objected, Seale launched into a diatribe, linking sexism to the broader systems of exploitation against which the Party struggled. “You eat up all the choice pieces [of meat], and they [the women] get what you leave? Listen, brother—the worker deserves enjoying the product of the worker’s labor. How you going to sit up here and talk about a person producing and not getting exploited?”

Though Seale and Newton both, at times, espoused the need for gender equality given the vital role of women in the liberation struggle, the rank-and-file did not wholly embrace that message. As a result, Panther women worked in service roles, preparing meals and cleaning dishes, far more often than their male counterparts.

While some argued that gender discrimination in organizations of the New Left turned many female organizers on to an emerging feminist agenda, a number of Panther women maintain that, though sexism existed within the organization, it did not deter their ability to contribute to the cause of black liberation.

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cornerstone of this racialized world view is that virtually all other ideological perspectives are considered to be the tools of white oppressors….More recently, challenges to what black feminist have characterized as nationalists’ blatantly patriarchal and often misogynist views of women have also fueled conflict between activists in the black feminist and black nationalist camps.”


Seale, A Lonely Rage, 178.

Newton and Seale. Despite these pronouncements in defense of women’s and gay liberation, Newton’s personal misogyny is well documented. For references to Newton’s abuse of women, see Hugh Pearson, Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America (DeCapo Press, 1995), 227, 265-266, 290-291.

incidents, Brown insisted that Panther women remained focused on black freedom; all other causes, including that of women’s liberation, came second. Panther food programs help explain why. Brown claimed, “Our gender was but another weapon, another tool of the revolution.” She noted that, in addition to using their bodies and their sexuality to advance the cause (rewarding Panther men with sexual favors and wielding “pussy power” to exert influence over Party rivals), Panther women “also had the task of producing children, progeny of revolution who would carry the flame when we fell, knowing that generations after us would prevail.”

Panther food programs, particularly the breakfasts, created a space where feeding and nurturing garnered esteem, thus calling attention to the importance of black women to revolutionary struggle even as prominent individual critics, Cleaver chief among them, denounced those efforts as antithetical to the cause of armed insurrection.

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*Party: A New Look at the Black Panthers and Their Legacy* (Routledge, 2014), 123-127. More recently, historian Tracey A. Matthews has shared Evans’ general assessment, arguing, “The gender ideology of the BPP, both as formally stated and as exemplified by organizational practice, was as critical to its daily functioning as was the Party’s analysis of race and class dynamics in class communities. Rather than the Party’s gender politics being secondary to the ‘larger’ struggle against racism and capitalism, I instead posit that the politics of gender were played out in most aspects of party activity and affected its ability to function as an effective political organization.” Tracey A. Matthews, “‘No One Ever Asks What a Man’s Role in the Revolution Is’: Gender Politics and Leadership in the Black Panther Party, 1966-71,” in Betty Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (eds.), *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights & Black Power Movements* (New York University Press, 2001), 231.

638 Brown, 136-137. Brown recalled the words of a fifteen year-old female Panther who, at Seale’s behest, explained to Brown, who had recently arrived from Los Angeles, the role of women in the Bay Area BPP. “‘A Sister has to learn to shoot as well as to cook, and be ready to back up the Brothers. A Sister’s got to know the ten-point platform and program by heart…A Sister has to give up the pussy when the Brother is on his job and hold it back when he’s not. ‘Cause Sisters got pussy power.’ / I was filled with fury,” Brown explained. “The word ‘Sister’ was sounding like ‘bitch’ to me” (189).

639 Flores Forbes, originally of the Los Angeles chapter, recalled a confrontation between Huey Newton and Ericka Huggins after Elaine Brown left the Party in 1977 during which Huggins
Raised by a single mother who seldom had the time or resources to prepare food at home, Brown admitted that she, too, rarely considered or appreciated those who cooked the food she ate until others expected her to cook for them. She disdained the obvious gendered division of labor (heightened by the spatial segregation of the sexes) during one Panther meeting in April 1969, recalling, “There were about ten women in the kitchen…I realized I had not seen them during the whole time. I had smelled the bacon and biscuits they had cooked but had given no thought to who was doing the cooking.” She reflected on this as she “angrily slopped eggs and bacon and biscuits and potatoes onto plates, poured orange juice into plastic cups, and served the Brothers in the living room.”

Other Panther women, too, openly disparaged the drudgeries of food work, dismissing it as servile and monotonous, and especially repugnant when expected of intelligent, capable women seeking to advance the higher cause of black liberation. The gendered dynamics of food preparation, service, and consumption in many ways reflected the broader dynamics of the Party, which, despite various pronouncements by Newton and others about the value of women to the revolution, situated the restoration of black masculinity as central to the process of racial liberation.

Though their participation and cooperation was vital to this project, many Panther women scorned their sexual

asserted that Panther women’s vital functions, especially in the survival programs, warranted them more respect, including the right to date men outside the BPP. Newton did not respond favorably. Will You Die With Me, 157-162.

Brown, 190-191.

In his study of masculinity and the civil rights era, historian Steve Estes writes, “While their evolving ideology heightened race and class consciousness in America’s inner cities, the most strident message from the Panther leaders in the early years of the party was their clarion call for black males to stand up and ‘be men,’ to stand up and be revolutionaries.” Estes, “The Baddest Motherfuckers Ever to Set Foot Inside of History,” I Am A Man!: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 155.
objectification and typical relegation to tasks associated with traditional female responsibilities of nurturing, especially childrearing and food work. Brown fumed, “Of course, the women were to clean up the kitchen in which they had eaten, standing. When the meal was over, the men remained in the living room discussing guns and politics—and ‘pussy power,’ I presumed.”

Myriad memoirs, interviews, and contemporary sources affirm that women bore a disproportionate burden for the food work that kept these programs running. However, these sources also indicate that Panther men often worked beside women, if not in the kitchens, then in the dining rooms, serving food, clearing plates, and witnessing the socializing and organizing power of food. The centrality of the Panther food programs to their organizing strategy not only illustrated a pressing need to assist families in the communal task of child-rearing, but also an acknowledgement that the realm of food work—traditionally a politically invisible task forced upon women—was essential to the health and survival of communities, and thus, indispensable in mobilizing economically and politically disenfranchised groups. Kathleen Cleaver, in addressing widespread

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642 Brown, 190-191. Brown’s own disdain for cooking and her initial failure to view food preparation as valuable work may explain how and why she advanced so quickly up the Party hierarchy, becoming Chairman in 1974. She later reflected, “We knew Brothers dragged their old habits into the party. We all did. The party’s role, however, was not limited to external revolution but incorporated the revolutionizing of its ranks. If, however, the very leadership of a male-dominated organization was bent on clinging to old habits about women, we had a problem. We would have to fight for the right to fight for freedom” (191). See also Tracey A. Matthews, “‘No One Ever Asks What a Man’s Role in the Revolution Is’: Gender Politics and Leadership in the Black Panther Party, 1966–71,” in Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (eds.), Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement (New York University Press, 2001), 230-256.

643 Brown and Seale offer the two most prominent examples.

644 Nelson persuasively argues, “Health politics…must be understood as an important feature of a broader conceptualization of the civil rights movement…For the Party, the reality of urban
criticism of the Party’s gender dynamics, attested “that the reality of what was actually going on day to day in the Black Panther Party was far less newsworthy” than the violence the media and officials chose to focus on. Kathleen, who endured a rocky twenty-year marriage to Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, has contended that, though sexism proved irksome and at times physically dangerous for Panther women, most believed gender equality to be secondary to issues of community survival and class mobilization. She recalled, “Racism and poverty, imposed by bloody terrorists backed by state power, seemed so overwhelming then…[F]rom the early to mid-1960s, the first order of business was not how to advance our cause as women but how to empower the community of which we were a part, and how to protect our lives in the process.”

Indeed, fundamental conditions of economic injustice, exacerbated by racial discrimination, created a valuable opening for the Panthers, men and women alike, to perform their vision of social change by articulating anti-capitalist critiques and by modeling socialist solutions. In the process, Party food programs, at root of this socialist vision, aroused a vital interest in the Party among the poor of the Bay area and around the nation. The drudgeries of day-to-day organizing—of reaching people and connecting with them—sparked a series of food-centered campaigns aiming not only to improve the daily lives of the hungry, but to accentuate the structural inequalities that served to keep

poverty and structural racism showed recent civil rights strides at their limits” (8, 9; emphasis hers).


African Americans and other economically and politically marginalized groups divided and weak.

Black Capitalism and the Boyette Boycott

The need to provision community goods in a capitalist society created a paradox at the heart of Panther service programs, for the Party relied on the goodwill of individuals, groups, organizations, and foundations—beneficiaries of capitalism—for contributions to keep their socialistic program going. The guiding premise of the Survival Programs—to provide goods and services free of cost—necessitated incessant fundraising efforts. Hollywood celebrities like Jane Fonda and Donald Sutherland and musical acts including Archie Bell and the Drell, Hugh Masekela, and James Brown donated money, while others, including producer Bert Schneider, hosted fundraising events in support of the BPP. Large contributions provided much-needed relief, a great deal of which, however, went toward paying bail for arrested Party members. Therefore, as one among the ranks remembered, “our everyday bread and butter was the field operation. Scores of comrades would go into the streets collecting donations for our myriad programs.” Indeed, Party members, parents, and sometimes the children themselves, solicited local grocery stores and businesses for contributions, either in cash or in kind.

648 Aaron Dixon noted, “Securing the donations of food and funds for the Survival Programs was a full-time job.” My People Are Rising, 195.
649 Brown, 209, Dixon, 195
650 Forbes, 133.
651 In Southern California, for example, the children took matters into their own hands during the fall of 1970 when El Segundo Dairy Farms offered five gallons of milk as their donation for the entire year. Thirty-five of the reported 1300 children who regularly attended local BPP breakfast programs “went to the dairy and began marching and demanding milk for their breakfast. The children told the manager that they needed at least 12 gallons of milk a day and that he makes 100
The Party welcomed donations of any amount, but insisted that “black businesses” in particular commit to a regular ongoing contribution. Initially, the Party used the term “black businesses” to refer to those owned by African Americans, but soon broadened its definition to include all establishments that relied on the patronage and support of black customers, urging “all businesses throughout the Black Community to donate all necessary food and utensils to prepare the foods, for school children.”

Some times the cost of those 12 gallons a day from the Stockwell Community alone.” When the children and the breakfast coordinators returned later that day to speak with the owner as instructed, “they were greeted by seven carloads of pigs [police]. . . The owner refused to give any more milk or make additional comment.” In the children’s presence, the Party decided not to press the issue further, but ominously commented, “[W]e know that not for too many times will the revolutionary youth stand silently by and let the avaricious businessmen deprive them of their basic needs.” Southern California BPP, “Revolutionary Youth Demand Their Basic Needs,” BP (7 Nov 1970), 12.

652 Robert Kroll, “Free Food, Clothing for Ghettos: Black Panthers Reveal New Image,” Berkeley Daily Gazette (31 Mar 1971), 1-2; “Breakfast for Black Children,” BP (Sep 1968). The city of Oakland did not house a single black-owned supermarket (an absence the Panthers openly denounced) prior to the opening of the Acorn Supermarket in May 1970. Established at 12th and Peralta streets under the ownership of CAL-LA Soul Foods, Inc., the Acorn was billed in local media as “the first of a chain of supermarkets across the country, providing employment for minorities and training many to compete in the field of economics of this country.” CAL-LA Soul Foods, organized in 1969, initially focused on importing fish from Louisiana for wholesale to retail stores, and within a year of operation estimated it had brought more than six tons of “buffalo fish, catfish, gasper goo fish, gar fish and even coons” to serve black customers on the West Coast. The Oakland Post reported that, in addition to promising “their prices will be comparable with those of any supermarket in the City of Oakland and cheaper than most,” the Acorn would be a boon to the neighborhood by “providing employment for minorities and training many to compete in the field of economics of this country.” Despite the fanfare surrounding the store’s opening and the support of Berkeley City Councilman Ron Dellums, store owners faced bankruptcy within six months, accused by the Opportunity to Ownership lending agency of owing $10,000. Harry Avington, part-owner of Acorn, spoke to the San Francisco Sun-Reporter, charging that the lenders “made us put up our homes for the loan, with the hope that they’d keep up their promise to assist us when we needed the help. But instead of helping us, they are asking us to go into voluntary bankruptcy…. [T]his is a way to suppress a form of Black power. We are now forming a corporation.” Within a year, Newton and other Panther leaders were in talks to acquire the store to operate as a cooperative, selling groceries at cost to members of the community. Those plans did not come to fruition, and by October 1972, the Consumers Cooperative of Berkeley, another potential buyer, withdrew from the project. There remained, at that point, no other supermarkets in the area. See “Supermarket Plans Opening,” Oakland Post
businesses, like General Meats, Kupferberger, Ace Packing, and Pollack Bologna willingly agreed to participate, but others, like Luchetti’s Meat Company in San Francisco, major regional chains such as Safeway and Mayfair, and independent operations like black-owned and -operated Bill’s Liquors, refused to do so.⁶⁵³

Undeterred, the Party appealed not to the goodwill of potential donors, but to their fear of economic retribution, as The Black Panther regularly listed stores and businesses that refused to cooperate.⁶⁵⁴ In this way, the imperatives of the Party’s food programs identified specific targets of ire and sites for resistance. In April 1969, the Panther stated that the breakfast “program is run through donations of concerned people and the avaricious businessmen that pinch selfishly a little to the program. We say that this is not enough, especially from those that thrive off of the Black Community like leeches.” The Black Panther Party not only blamed capitalist enterprises for creating the problem of hunger by overcharging for food commodities but also demanded that they be part of the solution or suffer economically for their refusal. As a result, the Party fostered a view of

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urban hunger predicated on the belief that capitalism caused the people’s suffering, while also relying on profit incentives to get businesses in line with their agenda. In this way, Newton and Seale hoped, the breakfast programs had the potential to awaken the revolutionary consciousness of the people to see the connections between capitalist enterprises, material deprivation, state-sanctioned violence and their own physical vulnerability and political marginalization. Black entrepreneur Bill Boyette, for one, endured a long and costly lesson about the Panthers’ ability to organize and their unwillingness to negotiate or compromise the interests of the people as defined by the Party.

In August 1971, the Panthers announced a boycott of Bill’s Liquors #2 located at 54th and Grove streets, the second of two local liquor stores owned by Bill Boyette businessman. Only three months earlier, Boyette had led the Cal State Package Store and Tavern Owners Association, Incorporated (Cal-Pac), an organization of more than twenty independent business owners, in a statewide boycott of several major liquor producers, including Johnny Walker, Jim Bean, and Tangueray, to force negotiations for increased hiring of African Americans. Boyette characterized those companies as “flagrant violators of hiring of minorities, even though a large percentage of their income is from the black and other minority communities.” Having secured minority employment gains in the beer and soft drink industries, as well as among bread truck drivers and representatives of distilleries and distributors, Cal-Pac demanded the liquor companies

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655 The boycott also targeted wholesalers, including Alta Distributors, Baruch, Haas Brothers, H. Berman Company, Juliard-Alpha, McKesson’s, Rathjen Brothers, Max Sobel, and Vick’s Distributors. Tom Nash, “Association Is In Support of Liquor Brands Boycott,” *Oakland Post* (5 May 1971), 15.
guarantee that no less than fourteen percent of those working in warehouse, office, delivery, and sales supervision positions be hired from primarily black communities. At the time of the boycott, African Americans held only two percent of such jobs.

Centered in Oakland, the boycott soon spread across the bay to San Francisco and around the state to areas including San Diego, Fresno, Sacramento, and Monterey. Cal-Pac estimated that about forty percent of the income of the eight wholesalers targeted came from the black community, which saw a return of less than three percent in the form of wages for black workers. Alluding to the success of a similar boycott organized by Cal-Pac in Los Angeles in May 1971, which Cal-Pac claimed brought 150 to 170 new jobs to African Americans (accounting for a large part of “some $3.5 million in benefits to the Black community of Los Angeles”) Boyette implored the public to observe the boycott. “You may assist us by asking your local retailer if he is supporting the boycott….Your selective buying habits can mean the difference between a success and a failure….“ He promised, “All legal means necessary will be used to bring this boycott to a successful conclusion.”

The campaign triumphed two and half months later, leading to a settlement between Cal-Pac and the liquor manufacturers that would, Boyette announced, create forty-eight new jobs for African Americans totaling more than half a million dollars in additional income for local black communities. At a San Francisco press conference, Boyette attributed the victory to “the combined efforts of Black and white merchants,

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656 “Liquor Boycott Expanded By Blacks of Bay Area,” *Oakland Post* (10 June 1971), 1.  
657 Qtd. in Ibid.
with overwhelming community support.” In addition to Cal-Pac’s attorney, the Oakland Black Caucus, and the SCLC, Boyette specifically thanked the Black Panther Party for its support, voicing hope that “the unity expressed in this successful boycott should not die.” The Panthers had been particularly instrumental in demonstrations against Mayfair stores, which had refused to negotiate with Cal-Pac’s demands.

Though the spirit of the boycott did not die, the unity between the Panthers and Cal-Pac was short-lived. In August, Boyette filed suit in the Alameda County Superior Court charging the Black Panther Party, specifically Newton and Seale, with harassment. The court awarded him a temporary restraining order. The discord arose from Panther demands that Boyette make good on a prior agreement to contribute around $10 per week to the Party’s community programs. Boyette asserted via official documents that Newton had come to him at the end of May requesting that all twenty-two members of Cal-Pac pledge to donate $5 weekly to the program. When Cal-Pac declined, proposing instead a one-time donation of goods, Newton countered by raising the demand to $10. Upon Boyette’s refusal, the Panthers called for a boycott and, on July 31, initiated protests, assembling more than forty picketers in front of Bill’s Liquors to block the parking lot and store entrances.

Speaking to a crowd during the demonstrations, Seale likened Boyette’s counteroffer to a “payoff” for the Panthers’ support of the Cal-Pac boycott of Mayfair. The Party newspaper claimed that Cal-Pac’s offering “would only be enough food for

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660 Barbara Lee confirms this sequence of events. *Renegade*, 57-58.
one day’s serving for the Breakfast Program” and insisted the “Breakfast for School Children Program, and all the other Survival Programs, must be supported and donated to by Black Businesses, every week, for greater unity in the Black Community.” To maintain the community’s moral and political support and its adherence to the boycott, the Party unloaded a truckload of free groceries in front of its Peralta Street office, illustrating the clear need and immediate benefit of Party-run survival programs supported by local businesses. Seale promised, “you are going to remember why we’re talking about they should donate to the survival programs.” Beneficiaries of the giveaway articulated their gratitude for the food, emphasizing the constant threat of hunger stemming from widespread unemployment. One African American father of four explained, “They’re helping Black people by giving out this food….We have so much unemployment in the Black community that people need food before they can deal with other problems of educating themselves.” Another recipient said simply, “I ain’t working, I need a job, I’ve got no money and I have a one-year-old baby to feed.” Two Chicano girls voiced similar frustrations, lamenting, “Our father’s job ain’t good enough. He was recently on strike and our groceries have been awful thin.” The twelve year-old boy received the last box said simply, “I need food for my little sisters at home. I stay with my grandmother and she don’t shop that much no more. We’re hungry.”

Collectively remarking on the scarcity of decent jobs, the costs of collective bargaining

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661 “Chairman Bobby Speaks at Boycott Site,” BP (9 Aug 1971), A. The Panther reported, “The Community-Panther boycott was highly successful, and in fact, Mayfair Stores were shut down within 4 days. Mayfair Stores agreed and negotiated with Cal-Pack. Bill Boyette...has now outrageously and openly come out against the very welfare of the people in the Black Community.” “Why Boycott Boyette?” BP (9 Aug 1971), A.
and unionization, and the perils of hunger and low food security, the crowd demonstrated
that, as activists and organized interests debated tactics and principles, people needed to
eat in the interim, and they would stand behind those that enabled them to do so.662

While maintaining that all black businesses had a responsibility to support
community programs, Seale called attention to the nature of Boyette’s business, in
particular, which he claimed compounded the economic and social poverty of the
community by flooding it with alcohol. “Black people drink sixty percent to seventy
percent of all the liquor in this country,” Seale pronounced with much hyperbole. “All
those funds going down the drain.”663 Champions of the boycott revisited this theme
throughout the campaign, contending that Boyette’s business caused more misery and
destruction than most. Seale professed that, practically speaking, a weekly contribution
doubled as a good investment, cultivating for Boyette “a new relationship with his own
Black community, with the very people that’s been buying from him for the length of
time that he’s been there.”664 Seale stressed the bottom line: “[I]f we’re not going in
there buying… he’s losing and he’s going to learn a lesson. Now you know what kind of
fool he is. The five thousand [dollars] he lost [as a result of the boycott], if he had

662 All qtd. in Charles Aikens, “Seale Denies Charges of Extortion, Explains How Survival
663 “Chairman Bobby Speaks at Boycott Site,” BP (9 Aug 1971), A. Seale later acknowledged
that, when “bums” or “hope-to-die winos would cross through twenty or thirty people picketing
the store” the Panthers encouraged them “to cooperate [by] organizing their selfish need with ours
by giving them free bottles of wine. Then they united and drunkenly spouted our boycott
rhetoric.” Seale referred to such an approach of offering people “[s]omething that gives them
individually a selfish satisfaction” as “cooperative selfishness….Everybody around the world will
fight for something, down to the bum who will fight for his wine.” Thus, Seale’s exaggerated
claims about astronomical levels of alcohol consumption among poor blacks served to bolster his
point about collective purchasing power. However, if bribes of liquor could help maintain
observance of the boycott, the Panthers did not hesitate to offer them. Seale, A Lonely Rage, 231.
664 “Chairman Bobby Speaks at Boycott Site,” BP (9 Aug 1971), A.
decided to only donate two dollars or fifteen dollars, he wouldn’t have lost five thousand dollars for the whole year.”

The situation stalled until mid-August, when Seale reiterated Newton’s demands at a Cal-Pac meeting. According to the *Oakland Post*, Boyette alleged that Seale threatened “if these payments were not made, the Panthers would close down the business of each of the members.” Newton repeated the warning the following day. Boyette claimed that a week later the owners’ association offered to make in-kind donations of “bread, milk, eggs, cereal, and meat to the Black Panther breakfast-program for children,” an offer Newton quickly shot down. In covering the story, the *Post* sided with the owners, reminding readers that “the Cal-State Package and Tavern Owners Association has long been involved in worthwhile community projects.”

Boyette appealed to the public. Whereas the Panthers framed the conflict as one of responsibility and accountability to the community, Boyette asserted his right to individual liberty and free choice. During a television interview with local CBS affiliate KPIX Eyewitness News, Boyette explained, “I feel that I’ve worked for my money and I think it’s left up to me to donate to who I see fit. I realize—now don’t take this out of context—I realize the needs of the black community probably more than Mr. Seale does because I have been gainfully employed all my life trying to make a living. No one has

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665 Ibid.
667 Ibid.
given me anything.” Recognizing mid-sentence the implications of his remarks—which suggested that those who are gainfully employed earn the right to spend their money as they see fit, while those unable to find work and forced to rely on welfare did not have similar rights—Boyette inadvertently trivialized those “given” assistance through public or community programs. The Panthers insisted, on the other hand, that Boyette had made a good living profiting from the black community and highlighted remarks in which Boyette seemed to malign the work ethic or lifestyles of the poor. A community member shared these sentiments in a letter proclaiming, “There is an underlying obligation upon those who can, to see that others do not starve, do not walk unshod, nor unclothed. More so, those whose very livelihood is eeked out from welfare checks, unemployment compensation and strike pay should be highly responsive to the fact that Blacks are ‘their thing’ and, without the system per se their businesses are passé.” Footage of picketers with signs imploring shoppers to “Support the Store that Supports the Survival Programs” and “Don’t Support the Greedy,” quietly attested to the sentiments of many boycott adherents.

Boyette defended his stance by citing his charitable contributions to the March of Dimes, United Crusade, and other nonprofit groups. Unmoved, the Panthers responded by dismissing those organizations as “at best, racist [and] very costly, in terms of administrative expense” and “having really no real thrust toward the Black poor

669 “But Bill, Why Do We Even Have to Ask?” BP (25 Sep 1971), 16.
community.” Boyette, in turn, asserted that the Panther Survival Programs evolved as a tactical move on the part of the Party to reframe its public image and win popular support, not as a genuine effort to advance the interests of the poor. Boyette said of one September demonstration, “This is a grand-stand play to play on the sympathy of the people…[T]his is a method, [a] tactic they have used…[W] hen something is going wrong in the community against them…they come up and say, ‘okay, we’re gonna drive up in a truck and give away some free food to show you we’re some nice guys.'” Referring to the infamous militancy of the Party’s early years, Boyette continued, “Before they were carrying rifles and pistols and bayonets. All at once they’ve turned out to be nice fellas…[A] leopard doesn’t change its spots.” Here Boyette vocalized his view of defensive violence and community service as antithetical aims, the latter distracting from or disguising continued pursuit of the former, rather than as two prongs of the same attack.

In a showdown between businessmen and community groups, the subject of welfare proved particularly volatile. An October 1971 article in the Panther newspaper titled “Boyette Talks About Your Momma” accused Boyette of referring to black children as “blackbirds” and making “nasty remarks about mothers receiving State Welfare aid,” denying there were hungry children in Oakland because “Welfare was taking good care of them…if mothers don’t give all their money to ‘pimps.’” Clearly, the Panthers contended, Boyette had no sympathy for those “who struggle to survive this

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670 Ibid.
society without employment,” demonstrating a lack of compassion “only exceeded by [Boyette’s] vicious statement about our men who suffer unjustly in the prisons and jails across the U.S.” Such comments, however, merely added insult to injury, as customers complained that Boyette’s “prices went up on the first and the fifteenth (welfare check days) of every month” when welfare recipients were more likely to be able to afford them. At least one woman had “reported Boyette to the Better Business Bureau for this and other exploitative practices.” Thus, the witnesses seemed to testify, Boyette had proven himself not merely insensitive to the plight of the poor, but also a profiteer who gouged prices, exacerbating the community’s poverty by selling alcohol to those whose relied upon it to numb themselves to the reality of their deprivation. The article reassured readers, however, that Boyette would “lose his business, because he is unmoved by our efforts to survive. He is unmoved by our people’s oppression. Bill Boyette will lose his business because he does not wish to understand what it means to be moved.” The Party warned, “[B]y stabbing the people of the Black community in the back his own business bleeds to death.”

This graphic language transferred powerfully to visual images, bringing the Panthers’ disgust for Boyette to a wider audience, including the young and the illiterate. Indeed, Panther efforts went beyond mere picketing and selective buying, as they deployed vivid racial imagery to smear Boyette’s reputation as a community leader and as an advocate of black progress in a broader sense. After a tentative agreement soured

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673 Ibid.
674 Ibid.
in mid-October, the BPP Minister of Culture, Emory Douglas, produced two particularly incendiary images. The first focused on a large bottle of wine. Tear-shaped drops of red blood spilling from the top smear the faces of a dozen or so black children. Boyette smiles from behind the bottle, as blood flows directly into his mouth. The price tag reads, “Bill Boyette’s Bloodbank, Where Particular People Congregate.” The bloodbank, of course, referred to Boyette’s store, while the children represented the donors, whose lives were bought and sold by black adults who continued to patronize the smiling, bloodthirsty entrepreneur. To Boyette’s right, William Knowland—owner of the pro-Republican *Oakland Tribune* newspaper and figurehead of the California Republican Party until Ronald Reagan’s ascendance in 1967—stared blankly ahead, blood dripping from his mouth.675 A powerful force of conservatism in local politics and the regional economy, Knowland, along with the Oakland Chamber of Commerce, actively opposed the boycott, providing financial support to prevent Boyette’s business from going under.676 Douglas used photographs, not drawings, for the likenesses, giving the image a powerful realism, a pastiche of human faces splashed with cartoonish drops of human blood. The photos of children, likely attendees of Panther free breakfasts, directly connected the barbarism of Boyette and Knowland to the suffering of black youth. With

675 For more on the “Knowland machine” and its stifling effect on the political participation of blacks and poor whites, see Murch, 197-198.
676 Sam Durant (ed.), *Black Panther: The Revolutionary Art of Emory Douglas* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 142. This image is dated October 16, 1971. In 1966, Sol Stern of *Ramparts* surmised, “Oakland’s political establishment is no longer as ignorant as it once seemed to be of the social dynamite that is building up within the city….Even former Senator William Knowland’s *Oakland Tribune*, the only daily newspaper in the city, and still considered a key element in the power structure, is concerned….He knows that Oakland is in trouble. Yet the approach of The Tribune is to play down the rumblings of racial discontent.” Stern, “Trouble in an ‘All America City,’” *New York Times Magazine* (10 Jul 1966), 24.
the exception of Knowland’s peach-tinted complexion, the bright red bottle offered the only color in the otherwise black and white image. The red evoked life and death, indicating the stakes of the conflict, while also highlighting the connection between alcohol consumption and child welfare. The absent referent—and the intended viewer—is, of course, the adult consumer with the power to change the situation by supporting the boycott.

While this image characterized Boyette as a bloodthirsty monster, preying on young children, an image in the next issue of the BPP Intercommunal News Service, published two weeks later, blatantly portrayed Boyette as a racist. Endeavoring to thwart objections of cultural nationalists who embraced black businesses as a boon for the black community, Douglas colored Boyette as an “honorary Klansman” for his refusal to “treat the people to a piece of bread” by pledging a regular donation to the breakfast program.677

In a nod to Halloween, the Boyette caricature, dressed in full Klan regalia, smiled menacingly, his eyes suspiciously shielded by large sunglasses. Similar to the first image, here Boyette’s extended left arm offered a bottle of alcohol labeled “PROOF: 100% BLOOD. BOTTLED BY KNOWLAND; SOLD BY BOYETTE.” His hands were monstrous, with claw-like fingernails and bestially hairy knuckles. The unsmiling faces of four black children beneath the label represented the human casualties. This image positioned Knowland as the force behind Boyette’s treachery, endorsing,

677 Reflecting on the importance of the Party’s graphic imagery, Emory Douglas commented in August 2007, “When the Black Panthers started the paper the whole idea was to have lots of pictures and art because a segment of the African-American community wasn’t a reading community. But they could see the pictures, or they might understand the captions and get the gist of what was going on. That stayed in my mind. People used to say that my artwork kind of cut to the chase, so they would get the message right there.” <http://moca.org/emorydouglas/>.
bankrolling, and profiting from the exploitation of black children. Boyette stood exposed, front and center, as the face of that exploitation, “tricked by Knowland” and the political and economic systems he embodied into turning against the community, becoming, in effect, a traitor to his race. If there had been any doubt, Douglass made clear that both Boyette’s refusal to participate in the community’s survival and the Panther-led efforts to put him out of business were not merely tactical; they were personal.

Some segments of the community did come to Boyette’s defense. The Ad Hoc Committee for the Preservation of Black Businesses convened hearings and media events castigating the boycott and the Panther approach. During one meeting in late September, Frances Albrier, a middle-aged black female committee member and longtime area resident, commented, “Although we agree that…some of [the Panther] programs are excellent and good, we feel that in their attitude toward the black businesses it’s wrong, and quite wrong.” Reverend Charles Belcher of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance went further, stating, “While we do feel that any organization that contributed to the welfare of the community is vital, we abhor methods of coercion or intimidation such as using a boycott with the determination of eliminating a business unless such

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678 Only a few weeks earlier, the Tribune had carried a cover story declaring that, despite the high level of media attention garnered by the Panther boycott of Boyette, most local black residents opposed the tactics and strategies of the protest. “Blacks Unite to Oppose Boycott Plan,” Oakland Tribune (24 Sep 1971). The Panthers held deep-rooted animosity for the Tribune, which supported California grape growers in opposition to the labor demands of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers. See, for example, Bigman, “Fascist Calif. Grape Growers Use Mass Media to Combat a Living Wage” (27 Jul 1969), 16.
businesses capitulate to various demands as made by the Black Panther Party.\textsuperscript{679} Two weeks later, the California-based Christian Anti-Communist Crusade similarly commented, “Despite their effort to transform their image, they have retained one of their basic financial techniques: Extortion from businessmen in the black community. Apparently they see nothing wrong with this so they do not attempt to hide it…Their sincerity compounds their menace.”\textsuperscript{680}

Amidst this counterattack, the Party vocally denied accusations of extortion. Seale asserted, “We’re engaged in lawful demonstrations….We haven’t threatened anybody and we don’t intend to, but the way we see it, Black businesses are institutions in the community that can aid the community.”\textsuperscript{681} Indeed, at root the boycott manifested the Party’s ideological and political critiques of capitalism in general, and black capitalism in particular.\textsuperscript{682} In Marxist fashion, Newton and Seale had long characterized racism as a mere distraction from capitalism, the true source of human division and affliction. While admonishing Boyette and other black businesses belonging to Cal-Pac, Seale also worked to situate them, like all African Americans, as dupes of white supremacy and white capitalism. “The Black Panther Party realizes the Black brothers are victims too, just like the Black people in the Black community.” He continued,


\textsuperscript{682} Espousing the BPP community platform during a 1969 interview in Stokholm, Seale said, “We look at this program as a very international-type program. It’s for any human beings who want to survive…Socialism is the order of the day and not Nixon’s black capitalism. That’s out.” \textit{Black Power Mixtape}. 
“...the people’s power, is culminated in the ability...to see what we can do to try to teach those who exploit, those who rob without giving back... that they have to learn how to be human beings...” Seale curiously concluded, “Bill Boyette is really a victim...of the big white capitalists and he doesn’t have sense enough to see it. He’s a victim just like us. He’s Black and he’s really oppressed...So we have to teach him, just like you teach a little child, you have to spank him a little bit.” While reaffirming that black businesses profited from the exploitation of black consumers, Seale also acknowledged that racism aggravated the disparities perpetuated by capitalism, rendering black capitalists themselves dupes of white capitalist oppression, which divided them against their own while denying them opportunities to advance and grow their businesses. Here again Seale invoked the role of the community in Cal-Pac’s successful boycott of Mayfair, which had refused to concede to Cal-Pac’s demands.

Despite Boyette’s public assurances that his aim in taking the matter to court was not “to discourage or discredit any of the projects begun by the Black Panthers or any other organization for the benefit of the black community,” the Panther-led boycott continued for more than five months, ultimately bringing Boyette’s business to its knees.683 In January 1972, black Congressman Ronald Dellums joined Newton and Boyette in announcing a negotiated settlement. Boyette and other members of Cal-Pac agreed to make weekly contributions to the United Black Fund, Incorporated, a non-profit recently established to accept and administer community donations to the Survival

Programs and community programs run by other organizations. In exchange, the Panthers agreed to call off the boycott. Dellums remarked, “In an important sense this has been a creative conflict, for out of it has come not only a new recognition of responsibility and respect on both sides but a whole new organization created to respond to the desperate and special needs of the black community, which needs have often been dramatized by the Black Panther Party.” While Boyette simply expressed his satisfaction that the situation had been resolved since the boycott had, he claimed, left him “broke,” Newton seized the occasion to reassert the centrality of both the Boyette boycott and the Panther Survival Programs to the broader project of community organization, particularly around the needs of the poor. “The community[,]… now going in its first stages[,] has organized itself in order to attend to the ills we’ve been suffering so long,” he claimed. “It was a very hard fact and it was a fact among class brothers and friends but most of the times when we enter into these kind of contradictions, even among our friends, we come out with something in the interest of everyone.”

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685 “Dellums Settles Panthers Dispute,” KPIX Eyewitness News (CBS, 15 Jan 1972) <https://diva.sfsu.edu/bundles/208079>. During her second campaign for city council, Elaine Brown sought and secured Cal-Pac’s endorsement. Brown, 374; Dixon, 251. As Newton implied, the Party consciously worked to meld its food campaigns and food politics with broader aims for political education and civic engagement. In similar fashion, the Party, which followed up its free breakfast programs with a spate of free health clinics, implicitly recognized the health dangers that accompanied poor diet. Nelson, *Body and Soul*, passim. Thus, Party health initiatives aimed to prevent and ameliorate the long-term effects of malnutrition and hunger. In addition to the food programs themselves, several of the Party’s health initiatives recognized and targeted diet-related ailments common in poor communities. The Bobby Seale People’s Free Health Clinic, which opened in the largely black community of South Berkeley in April 1971, devised programs for “door to door testing” and screenings in churches, clubs, and schools for diabetes and hypertension, particularly among residents thirty-five years and older, with the intention of encouraging changes in dietary habits “planned to meet the economic and cultural needs of the black community.” Party members also planned education programs to correct vitamin
A few weeks later, Newton attempted to clarify the seemingly seismic shift in the emphasis of the Party’s tactics from armed self-defense to selective buying initiatives linked to community-run social programs. Acknowledging that the Panthers “don’t support the system,” Newton nonetheless insisted, “The gun itself does not symbolize a revolutionary. In order to win the revolution you must participate.” Though the system could not be permitted to continue functioning indefinitely, Newton recognized, “we can’t deal with it before it is time to deal with it.” Panther food programs aimed to prepare the poor for the revolution by strengthening, educating, organizing, and radicalizing them to see the role of social and political institutions in perpetuating their suffering and marginalization. Participation had begun with breakfast and evolved with the boycott. In lieu of the bullet—which had landed countless Panthers in jail, in exile, or in coffins—Newton reasoned, the people must now turn to the ballot.

**The Electoral Turn**

Initially conceptualized as emergency measures, the Free Breakfast for School Children and other food giveaways and nutrition initiatives in fact reflected a long-term investment in nourishing the bodies and minds of the poor, those the Party saw as potential revolutionaries. Years of police repression and violence had resulted in

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688 In describing prospects for black liberation, Malcolm X offered white America the famous ultimatum of “the ballot or the bullet.” See “The Ballot or the Bullet” (4 Apr 1964), in George Breitman (ed.), *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 23-44.
devastating losses for Party membership. As it became increasingly clear that violent revolution was not an imminent possibility, the Panthers began planning for the long haul. Newton and Seale began seriously to consider the possibilities of electoral politics as a means of advancing its agenda following the expulsion of Eldridge Cleaver and the subsequent purging of Cleaver loyalists. In 1972 several Panthers, including Erika Huggins, won election to the Berkeley poverty board and Bobby Seale and Elaine Brown began considering bids for local office the following year.

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689 “While currently supporting the electoral political system,” the Sun Reporter noted, “Newton still believes a revolution will occur, possibly a violent one[,] and emphasized the Black Panther Party opposes the U.S. political system. He thinks the system will have to change completely but now is not the right time.” See “Huey Re-emphasizes Change In Policy,” Sun Reporter (5 Feb 1972), 3.

690 According to Brown, Newton conceived the idea of having Panthers run for elected office while on a diplomatic trip to China. She explained, “China’s recent entrance into the U.N. was neither contradictory to China’s goal of toppling U.S. imperialism nor an abnegation of revolutionary principles. It is a tactic of socialist revolution. It was a tactic, Huey concluded, that offered us a great example.” Brown, 313. Murch writes, “In less than a decade after its founding, the revolutionary nationalist party travelled full circle from its youthful, migrant roots to become a power broker in local politics.” Living for the City, 10.

691 Nelson, 57. Seale described his platform in campaigning for the mayoralty: “We were trying to expound on and build the concept of community control! Community control of the police department and all the city agencies and functions—to transform them so that they would serve the people. Also to make the Port of Oakland the economic base of the city, yielding more in annual funds; for construction of decent cooperative housing; to build up further all the Party’s programs of free health clinics, mobile units taking medicine and aid to the people in a cheaper way than building clinics for every one hundred square blocks of residence. And ultimately increase the aid programs of free food and clothing to the point of balancing the degree of unemployment affecting families with the need to create more jobs.” Seale, A Lonely Rage, 223-224.

Flores A. Forbes, who started out with the Party in Southern California, first learned of Seale’s plan to run for mayor during a political education class at St. Augustine’s in March 1972. He remembered Seale’s monologue as follows: “‘Comrades, we are going to create the goddamnedest, sho ’nuff, highfalutin, best political organization this city and country have ever seen. We will register people to vote….When we register people to vote, we will get them down to the Oakland Auditorium and give every person who signs up to vote for our program a free bag of groceries, a free pair of shoes, and a free sickle-cell anemia examination. That’s right, we will organize the people with our survival programs, and at the same time we will bring them to the polls to get rid of [Oakland] Mayor John Reading and those other right-wing fascist motherfuckers that have been oppresssing us here in Oakland for the last fifty years.’ / The room
In contrast to the Deep South, where the vast majority of African Americans remained disenfranchised until at least the 1965 Voting Rights Act, black residents of California had not historically experienced great practical difficulty in registering to vote or casting ballots. As a result, black Californians had succeeded in electing a few notable African Americans to local offices. Nonetheless, feelings of social and political alienation, coupled with pressing daily concerns to get by, deterred many African Americans from participating in electoral politics. Most likely felt that few candidates truly understood, represented, or even cared about their interests. The telling exception, Panther ally and Berkeley City Councilman Ron Dellums, elected to office in 1967, recalled being “constantly called upon to represent the voice of protest within officialdom.” One black face in the white halls of power could not, however, overturn a system ensnaring a multitude of black faces and other poor faces of many races. Of course, as the Panthers’ dispute with the Ad Hoc Committee had demonstrated, cleavages in class, ideology, and strategies and definitions of “progress” divided black Americans

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erupted. Panthers were on their feet, clapping and pumping their fists, stomping and grinning like they had all been delivered unto the promised land. I know I had.” Forbes, 68.

692 Murch attributes this to the relatively shorter history of black communities on the west coast. “Segregation functioned like a palimpsest whose layers grew denser with the passage of time. The relative youth of the East Bay’s black population meant that formal systems of racial control had not yet been consolidated.” Living for the City, 24.

693 Dellums and Halterman, 50, 51. “During my three years on the council, I had gone from being the soft-spoken social worker to being the person with an open door to the Left, to militants, and to community activists. As a result of my belief in the validity of the analyses to which I was exposed in countless conversations and meetings, I had become an increasingly vocal and public advocate for all these ‘outsiders.’ Our relationships grew constantly stronger as I increasingly displayed my convictions about the integrity of the ideals advanced by the people on the streets: equality, peace, justice, and environmental preservation.”
as they did any group of people. Thus, public officeholders must, the Party insisted, reflect the diversity, interests, and desires of the electorate. Though Dellums and two members of the Berkeley City Council won the Party’s endorsement, the Panthers maintained their distance from the defining apparatuses of the system by refusing to endorse either major political party. To do so, Newton insisted, would be to cooperate with the existing power structure rather than challenge it.

Merging the Panthers’ anti-hunger politics with its emerging electoral aspirations, a series of Community Survival Conferences during the spring of 1972 sought to use the need for food to bring people of like circumstances together, both to reveal their strength in numbers and to highlight the other commonalities that united them. The main attraction of these events, at least in the estimation of organizers, was the thousands of bags of free groceries “with a chicken in every bag” given away at the end of each day’s program. Panther language emphasized that community people would not be motivated

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694 In the midst of the Boyette boycott, the Oakland Post reflected on this reality. It characterized the action as “an instance where a Black organization is openly working against a Black business,” claiming, “many Blacks question the purposes, goals[,] and justifications of this activity.” The paper warned, “…as 1972 approaches, battle lines are being drawn by opposing camps of Black people who intend to challenge Black incumbents on almost every front….To say it another way, Negroes can be expected to rally around any specific idea or person that is important to their desires at any point in time, but to suggest or expect Negroes to be constantly banded together is to deal with an erroneous idea. The broad-based myth of Black unity must perish under the broad rules of human nature.” “The Myth of Black Unity,” Oakland Post (9 Sep 1971), 12.


696 This image, of course, intentionally evoked Republican Herbert Hoover’s 1928 presidential campaign promise of prosperity for all Americans, signified by “a chicken in every pot.” Seale remarked, “Politicians used to promise momma a chicken in every pot…but we’re producing it. If necessary, we’ll open a free pot program to cook the chicken in.” Qtd. in “People,” Time (10 Apr 1972). By 1972, the Party had, at Newton’s command, largely centralized itself in Oakland, resulting in the closure of most its local chapters, and with them, BPP food programs. Those who
to action by agendas with delayed gratification. Seale later reflected that actually winning office “was not the major point,” which was in fact “an educational campaign, getting the issues stated and known…[to] put pressure on whoever ended up mayor to do things right, to do what the people needed and wanted and felt.” The immediate purpose of the Black Community Survival Conference, then, was to register voters.

Anticipating that a barebones voter registration drive would not likely draw a crowd, the Panthers’ promotional strategy emphasized the distribution of free food. Father Neil, in a letter appealing for donations, explained the logic of the food giveaways: “To register people to vote and to administer 10,000 free Sickle Cell Anemia tests, ten thousand (10,000) bags of groceries will be given away FREE to the poor oppressed Black

Stayed behind recreated similar “survival rallies,” spreading the Party’s message about the connection between political empowerment and grassroots movements for community survival. Chicago’s Ida B. Wells housing project hosted a BPP Free Food Give-Away on April 1 where 2,000 bags bolstered Panther Bob Rush’s appeal for those in attendance to register to vote. By that point, during less than four months of operation, Chicago’s Fred Hampton and Mark Clark Free Food Program had distributed 10,000 bags of groceries. On May 20, 1,500 residents of a Detroit housing project attended a BPP-sponsored Survival Day, which launched a local Free Food Program by handing out over 1,000 bags of groceries. See “The Chickens Come Home to Roost: 2,000 Black Chicagoleans Get A Chicken in Every Bag,” \textit{BP} (15 Apr 1972), 3; “Free Food All Over Motown: 1,500 Come Out for Detroit’s First Survival Day,” \textit{BP} (10 June 1972), 7. In July, Panthers in Philadelphia, Houston, Toledo, and Winston-Salem held similar events, distributing 200, 2,000, 1,000, and 1,200 bags of groceries respectively. “Everywhere It’s Raining Bags of Groceries: Black Panther Party Survival Programs Building All Over the Country,” \textit{BP} (12 Aug 1972), 6, 13,14.

Seale, 224. Despite their conflicting personalities, Elaine Brown acknowledged Seale’s talent for mobilizing people. Once put in charge of the Party’s Survival Programs, she noted, “Bobby blossomed, turning his true talent for rallying massive numbers of people into a tangible boon for the party and our people. He created the most magnificent food giveaways. The big ones became major community events, reported often in media. Previously, there had been only the breakfast and other free-meal programs but Bobby organized a campaign to give away bags of groceries to whole families, with a stalking panther printed on each bag. The community and the press went wild.” More importantly, “Bobby’s giant food giveaways begat tremendous support for all our other Survival Programs. Even middle-class blacks, theretofore reluctant to support or be identified with the party, began endorsing it and making contributions. As Bobby’s spirit and leadership reached the other chapters, support for the party’s free-food programs grew by leaps and bounds everywhere.” \textit{Taste of Power}, 276.
This way, the Panthers and their community partners would “show concern for the people’s right to all basic human necessities by demonstrating the possibility of and need for adequate medical care and healthful food.” The Party and its allies appealed to more than one thousand “Black Businesses” in the San Francisco Bay area for cash or in-kind donations. Four days before the first conference (March 29-31), the Panthers had amassed an impressive inventory of donated goods, including approximately 900 cases of taco mix, 23,000 cans of creamed corn, 18,000 cans of lemon juice, 2400 packs of Chicken Bake, 700 cans of potato flakes, 5600 small cans of tomato juice, 4,200 packs of rice, 240 cans of goulash beef, and 720 cans of Noodles-N-Beef.

The bagging process was tedious, requiring significant planning and manual labor. More than two hundred volunteers were assigned six- to eight-hour shifts to complete the five-day operation. Panther Aaron Dixon later recalled, “It took a tremendous collective effort to pull this off. There were many nights of no sleep, and long hours of work, but this is what we lived for: meeting, planning, organizing, fighting, and serving the people.”

Conference organizers anticipated that the groceries would be the main attraction, and planned the event accordingly, allocating sixty-four percent of the conference budget for the food giveaways. (News reports estimated that the food bill actually accounted for

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698 Fr. Neil to Prospective Donors, Letter, HPN Papers, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 8.
699 Ibid.
700 “Food Inventory List,” (25 Mar 1972), HPN Papers, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 8.
701 “Statistical Data: Count Of Available Workers To Help Bag Food,” HPN Papers, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 8.
702 Dixon, 232.
90 percent of conference costs.) The bags of groceries, with a retail value of $10 to $13, were to be distributed at the end of the event after clothing and shoe giveaways, in hopes of retaining the crowd and exposing it to the Party’s message about political engagement and health education. In a planning memo to Newton, Seale reported that he, as the last speaker on the program, would discuss “survival” for ten minutes before “giv[ing] 5 minutes worth of instructions as to how people will pick up their groceries,” thereafter returning to the theme of community “unity etc.” Once the frozen chickens were placed in the bags, Seale explained, “the curtain will raise and show 2,000 bags of groceries around and on the stage.” Upon exiting, groceries in hand, “[e]veryone will be asked again to register to vote” and the “Party paper will be sold to people leaving.” Thus Seale and the conference planners consciously sought to heighten the spectacle of the food giveaway by dramatically revealing the coveted free food amidst a lecture about the need for unity in the quest for survival. The importance of political power and education would be reinforced after the Party delivered the groceries, and with them, their promise to the community. The slogan of the day, “Vote for Survival,” referenced the importance of participating in the electoral process as well as the Party’s community programs, suggesting that the needs met by those programs could and should be the responsibility of elected officials.

704 Bobby Seale to Huey Newton, Central Committee Report Re: “Black Community Survival Conference, March 29th at the Oakland Auditorium,” HPN Papers, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 8.
705 Ibid.
706 Murch, 200.
The Panthers expounded their vision of grassroots organizing around concrete needs in a supplement to the April 1 edition of the Party newspaper, fifteen thousand copies of which were to be handed out at the conference. An article titled, “IN UNITY, THERE IS SURVIVAL,” asserted that the Panthers’ shift toward service programs represented, not a break from its revolutionary aims, but a practical return to its founding agenda of community empowerment and consciousness-raising.707 “The Black Panther Party…” it explained, “was founded to organize a united effort on the part of Black people to eliminate the ills Black and other oppressed people suffer, to combat Black genocide and bring about Black liberation…This original dream was designed to provide the people with a ‘lifeline’, serving their basic needs and desires. This aim,” according to Newton, “…was structured by the practical needs of the people, and its dreamers were armed with an ideology which provided a systematic method of analysis of how best to meet those needs.” The article acknowledged the problematic reputation of the Party, noting, “[i]n those years since [its founding], many lessons have been learned, most the hard way….We left behind our goal, which had been, from the beginning, to put together a practical program for our survival and to guarantee our right to life, manifested in the right to eat, have decent clothing and housing, etc…. The People and our Party have grown to this point, to unite for our survival and complete liberation.”708 In order for community unity to coalesce, people needed to be willing to admit their need.

707 In Nelson’s analysis, “…Bobby Seale and Huey Newton founded the Party to address abiding barriers to equality despite recent legislative strides. Social welfare concerns were therefore intrinsic to the organization’s very formation.” Body and Soul, 50.
708 “In Unity, There is Survival,” BP [Supplement] (April 1, 1972), D.
Judy Allen of the Laney College Black Student Union, who served as master of ceremonies on Wednesday, spoke about the connection between food, politics, and survival. “Politics, that’s the word that means survival to us,” she pronounced. “…The black vote has been exploited just like everything else in the black community…[but] if all blacks unified around a single platform, we could win elections in every major city in this country.”

Seale reinforced the centrality of the people to the task of securing their own liberation. He commended those gathered for cooperating with Panther-led boycotts of businesses that refused to donate, insisting, “it was you-all who boycotted who got this food this evening.” According to the San Francisco Journal, Seale “added that if necessary the Panthers would start a free pot project so people would have pots to cook their food in.”

In addition to cash and in-kind donations, conference funding came from royalties from Panther publications, including Seale’s Seize the Time and recently slain prisoner George Jackson’s Blood in My Eye, as well as advances for two projects written by Newton.

The Panthers understood that hunger and desperation would be the primary motivation of many attending the conference. They hoped to harness that motivation into a movement to create a more sensible and humane system of resource distribution. On the first day of the conference, Seale cautioned BPP staffs and volunteers “not to say

710 Ibid.
712 Ibid.
713 Murch characterized this as an effort to create “an alternative to the disciplinary and restrictive nature of state welfare.” Living for the City, 175.
anything and not to react in any manner towards those people in the community who might obtain or pick up two, three, four or more bags of groceries.” He ordered “that even if people go out and put groceries in their cars and come back through the doors[,] monitors and people doing groceries will not stop them or harass or do or say anything to them…” This policy, which wisely aimed to avoid antagonizing the crowds the Party hoped to rally, implicitly recognized the daily struggles of the hungry poor to maintain dignity while accepting the charity or assistance of others. No doubt such a stance evolved from the personal experiences of many Panther leaders, including Elaine Brown, who recalled her own childhood hunger pains when “[i]n between paydays, we were often hungry behind our steel doors and concrete walls.” This sense of isolation, she surmised, stemmed in part from her mother’s proud refusal to accept handouts. The San Francisco Chronicle described the scene on day two of the Survival Conference, characterizing its timing “three days before the Welfare Check comes” as “a very

714 Bobby Seale to Huey Newton, Central Committee Report Re: “Black Community Survival Conference, March 29th at the Oakland Auditorium,” HPN Papers, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 8. Panther security forces and monitors coordinated by walkie-talkie. According to Panther Aaron Dixon, assigned to monitor the event, “With few exceptions, the food giveaway at the auditorium went smoothly. I spotted one brother loading up the trunk of his Cadillac with groceries, and saw a few people clutching three or four bags, running down the street. But at the giveaway later in the week in East Oakland, the monitors were almost completely overrun by overzealous crowds.” My People Are Rising, 231-232.

715 In To Die for the People, Newton explained the Party’s delicate approach in rendering services to the community: “We will not get caught up in a lot of embarrassing questions or paper work which alienate the people. If they have a need we will serve their needs and attempt to get them to understand the true reasons why they are in need in such an incredibly rich land. Survival programs will always be operated without charge to those who need them and benefit by them.” Huey P. Newton, “Black Capitalism Reanalyzed I: June 5, 1971” in Toni Morrison (ed.), To Die for the People: The Writings of Huey P. Newton (Random House, 1972; City Lights Publishers, 2009), 103.

716 Brown remembered, “The government’s ‘relief’ program for the poor was beneath my mother’s dignity. She did not believe in asking anybody for anything, telling me it was better to steal or starve than beg.” Taste of Power, 36.
welcome time to receive groceries.” *The Chronicle* reported, “The hungry and the needy attended the meeting in droves and they went away—entire families, down to tiny toddlers—carrying away bags of groceries. And looking much happier.” Validating the Party’s bread-and-butter organizing strategy, the paper noted that “[o]ne middle-aged woman who looked as if she were about to cry with gratitude, said, ‘I wouldn’t be here if I hadn’t been so hungry.’”

Logistics were quite complex, a fact lamented during a debriefing meeting held on April 1. Various attendees reported that the free food had not been properly distributed, meaning some volunteers working at various posts “did not get enough food.” Organizers did not keep records like inventory or invoices. And most importantly, and problematically, “[C]ommunity workers especially should have been treated a lot better…” In particular, community volunteers, those working most closely with the Party and therefore most loyal to its agenda, were overlooked and as a result “community people were working hungery” [sic]. The planning committee realized simply that “this turns off community people.” Preparations began immediately for a second conference to be held in April. Rather than a chicken in every bag, the main attraction of this conference was to be a dozen eggs and a pound of bacon.

Questioning the immediate payout for the time and expense the Party invested in the intricate convention, the *Berkeley Barb* characterized the series of events as a “jamborree,” and “a gamble for their political future.” In the end, the *Barb* concluded

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718 Committee Meeting Minutes (1 Apr 1972), HPN Papers, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 8.
719 Ibid.
that the Panthers had gained “nothing tangible…[e]xcept,” that is, “exposing a lot of people—including a lot of people the government doesn’t even know exists, people who hide out from the census takers, people who have no phones, people who have never registered for social security—to politics.”

Suggesting that politics could do something for people in a real way represented a start, for as Seale told an audience of black college students at Stanford University earlier that month, “We can pass out all the leaflets to organize our people—but the best leaflet I know is free groceries, free medical help[,] and free clothes.” The minutes from the following day’s meeting noted, “We proved at the conference that the people relate to concrete functional programs rather than personalities.”

According to this logic, once people realized that the Party understood their needs and interests, they would be more willing to work with it and begin to identify with its larger goals. Likewise, those immediately responsible for quelling that hunger—namely the Party members and community workers—could be viewed as leaders concerned about and capable of addressing the very real needs of those on the margins of society. Considering official efforts to thwart the food and other survival programs, Seale remarked that the police “[a]re going to have to come down and arrest the bags of free food...At some point or another, the people can actually choose to defend that food...that

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722 Notes, Santa Rosa Meeting (1 Apr 1972), HPN Papers, Series 2, Box 18, Folder 8.
they know they have a right to as decent human beings.”

In this way, Black Panther food programs socialized participants to understand their own physical hunger within a larger socio-political context as they linked capitalism and capitalist enterprises with racial injustice and economic oppression.

A third conference, held in June, at the Oakland Auditorium “was packed to the brim,” Seale recalled, “and outside the six thousand seats, black people were sitting everywhere in the aisles.” Famous black performers like bluesman John Lee Hooker, Sister’s Love, and The Tower of Power “seemingly took the whole audience on a fantastic, exuberant trip, from youths eight years old and up to older poor sisters still in their everyday clothing.” The event won official legitimacy with the presence of the Urban League’s Percy Steele and Congressman Ron Dellums, who spoke before Seale took the stage. Both men, Seale recalled, expressed astonishment at the “double level of full grocery bags on the forty-foot deep and eighty-foot-wide stage—groceries on the floor under the tables and crammed on top of the tables and the entire length and breadth of the stage behind the curtains.” Seale rallied the crowd, vowing that, unlike other politicians, the Party “fulfill[s] promises and [does] what we say….That’s why I want to let you see—I mean know that there exist without a doubt ten thousand bags of

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723 Seale qtd. in Art Goldberg, “Conversations: The Panthers After the Trial,” Ramparts (March 1972), 26, HPN Papers, Series 8, Box 3, Folder 3.
724 Seale, A Lonely Rage, 224. In contrast to Seale’s recollection, the Examiner estimated that only half of the ten thousand people expected actually attended the one-day event. “Panthers’ Day-Long Conference,” San Francisco Sunday Examiner (25 June 1972), 3.
725 Seale, 224.
726 Seale described his outfit as a “black, conservative-cut suit” matched with a “black, wide-brim, flat-top, smooth-felt hat…. [T]he Party had me decked down, looking clean and sharp like a righteous people’s political candidate…merged [with] revolutionary-political-cultural style. Mixing the extreme lumpen-style dress with the conservative cut and color—a special sharpness!” Seale, 225. See also Dixon, 231-33.
groceries!”

Seale thus conceptualized the food not merely as an incentive to get people in the door or to register to vote, but just as importantly, as proof that the Party kept its promises. He urged attendees to demand that their elected officials do the same. After one such event, Brown recalled, “we shed the last of our combat boots and berets, ignored the sound of ultraleft teeth-gnashing, and launched our new campaign…I could see on the faces of our constituents…a resurgence of hope. Whatever the outcome of the campaign, that alone gave it worth.”

Republican incumbent John Reading won reelection in 1973, but Seale stunned skeptics, finishing in second place with the support of more than 43,000 voters.

Recognizing the influence evidenced by the new Panther political machine, Reading vowed to consult with Seale “very soon to see if we can find common ground on which to work together in solving community problems.”

Panther Aaron Dixon believed there was victory in the defeat, concluding, “The party and its members had run a magnificent, well-organized campaign. We had brought the Black Community to the brink of victory. Black people who had never voted before cast a ballot for the first time. We had proven that the white control of city hall was coming to an end.”

Some interpreted this turn of events as a sign of new liberal impulse within the Party or, more

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727 Seale, 226, 227.
728 Brown, 321, 322.
729 Flores Forbes recalled assisting one such voter, a blind black woman in her eighties or nineties who had no family. Female Party members had begun to visit her, bringing free food, reading aloud the Party paper, and registering her to vote. When Flores drove her to the polls on election day, she turned to him and said, “Son, you have to help me do this, so vote for that boy [Seale] that works with those boys and girls that feeds them kids and stopped them police from messin’ with us in West Oakland.” Will You Die With Me, 249.
730 Washington Post (17 May 1973) qtd. in Seale, A Lonely Rage, 228.
731 Dixon, 238.
drastically, a cooptation or evisceration of black radicalism. Brown admitted, “the voting process had never changed the disposition of real power in America” as even “[blacks] who actually made it to the ballot box found their votes decimated by the might of white political machines.” She insisted, however, “Voting for Black Panthers was another matter. / Our agenda was to overthrow the United States government. It was to defend the humanity of our people with armed force. It was to institute socialist revolution….It was still the program of the Black Panther Party.”

Food for Revolution

Certainly Panther food programs operated as vital emergency measures to get food to the hungry and nutrients to the malnourished. But that was only the beginning. Chief of staff David Hilliard acknowledged that food “serves a double purpose, providing sustenance but also functioning as an organizing tool.” The Party’s social programs were lastingly influential because they worked not simply to address the immediate needs of the urban poor, but to highlight the shortcomings and inadequacies of the welfare state by pointing out what the Party called “the basic contradictions” of a society boasting unparalleled wealth and power while generating millions upon millions of poor, ineffectual people.

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732 Brown continued, “That was not the program of the Republican Party. It was not the program of the Democratic Party. It was not the program of the traditional white-endorsed, black-faced candidates. It was not the program of the NAACP or the Urban League. It was not even the program of the black nationalists or SNCC or the radical Peace and Freedom Party. It was still the program of the Black Panther Party” (323).


734 In Brown’s view, “The more the party sharpened the contradictions between haves and the have-nots, between the powerful and the powerless, the oppressor and the oppressed, the more the
platform for educating the masses about the relationship between capitalism, politics, and daily struggles against hunger, malnourishment, ill health, poor housing, illiteracy, and a host of other social barriers. “We called them survival programs pending revolution,” Newton explained. “They were designed to help the people survive until their consciousness is raised, which is only the first step in the revolution to produce a new America…During a flood the raft is a life-saving device, but it is only a means of getting to higher ground. So, too, with survival programs, which are emergency services. In themselves they do not change social conditions, but they are life-saving vehicles until conditions change.”

The work of social change is messy and difficult. Sometimes the fact that a struggle is waged, that resistance coalesces, may itself be the only triumph of action, for “[w]hat was won must be judged by what was possible.” The community efforts of the Panthers would have been noteworthy had they stopped at emergency food relief, and their service work would have been subversive if their chief aim had been simply to provide needed goods and services to the urban poor. But in effect, doing for the hungry poor of the nation’s urban ghettos what the federal government claimed to be doing but was not, and moreover encouraging the members of the community to do for themselves,

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people would seek to resolve them. That, and the desire to temporarily alleviate the pain of poverty, was precisely the purpose of the party’s Free Breakfast for Children program.” A Taste of Power, 156. Nelson’s study of BPP health programs offers the term “citizenship contradiction” to refer to the “gap between civil rights and social benefits…” which “has been especially acute for women and African Americans.” Nelson, 10. Murch likewise contends that the community programs played a vital role in “politiciz[ing] welfare rights by showing a coordinated national effort that highlighted the Party’s successes and the government’s failures.” Living for the City, 175.

735 Newton, qtd. in Abu-Jamal, We Want Freedom, 70.
constituted political work, meaningful organizing, and class mobilization for grander, if ultimately unachieved, ends. The revolution the Panthers sought was not to be, but the means by which they prepared for that revolution made clear the relevance of politics to the everyday lives of the hungry poor. This itself must been seen as a victory, as the Panthers framed hunger as an issue of power and inequitable resource distribution rather than a fleeting personal condition that beset the lazy or the unfortunate. Launched in the early years of the Nixon administration in the shadow of Johnson’s lofty, unrealized Great Society, Panther anti-hunger programs called attention to the bipartisan failure to establish or maintain a defensible, humane hunger safety net. Neither Democrats nor Republicans were solely responsible but neither had the wherewithal to actually, finally tackle the problem.

The most lasting, visible legacy of the Panther survival programs stemmed from the earliest and most pressing of its community objectives. The permanent authorization of a National School Breakfast Program in 1975 represented in some ways an official acknowledgement of the need the Panthers had insisted be recognized, but that critics claimed the Party manufactured or exploited. Even if, as detractors often suggested, the good done by the Party was a byproduct of ulterior aims or motives, the children nurtured and educated by them did not seem to notice—or else they did not care. In teaching children to demand their food, to participate in political protest, and to vocally and actively resist the socio-economic status quo, Panther breakfasts not only enabled

Heynen writes, “Like the very notion of impossibility in which utopian politics are based, the dismantling of the BPP amidst a world still dealing with hunger, inequality, and oppression shows that ultimately their conception of ‘the’ revolution did not occur.” “Bending the Bars of Empire,” 419.
children to perform in school but also encouraged them to be active participants in the struggle for their lives.\textsuperscript{737}

\textsuperscript{737} Levine, 153. In Heynen’s estimation, the BPP “succeeded in reshaping antihunger politics both in the short term through their Breakfast Program and in the long term through essentially forcing the United States to do a better job of feeding hungry children because it saw the revolutionary potential of radical antihunger and antipoverty politics and sought to protect empire” (419). Lee notes that the Panther Free Breakfast Program, though initially “castigated by both local and federal government…eventually…was adopted by the national government and became a vital source of food and nutrition to poor children around the country.” \textit{Renegade}, 56.
CONCLUSION

“What we eat is politics.”

Proponents of black freedom attacked issues of hunger and food access from a variety of vantage points. These different approaches reflected not only the diverse ideological moorings of organized activists, but also their evolving understandings of the relationship between physical sustenance and politics, and human freedom in its most basic sense. Divergent organizational priorities, leadership structures, and visions of black liberation—as well as disparate historical and geographic contexts—shaped the forms and outcomes of these efforts, programs, and food ideologies. While the Nation of Islam made food an object of contention by advocating dietary reform as an end in itself, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Black Panther Party

738 During a speech at Berkeley in 1969, Hamer acknowledged that many people disillusioned with the system were ready to give up on politics. “But, baby,” she reminded her audience, “what we eat is politics.” Hamer, “To Make Democracy a Reality,” Speech Delivered at the Vietnam War Moratorium Rally, Berkeley, California, (15 Oct 1969) in Megan Parker Brooks and Davis W. Houck (eds.), *To Tell It Like It Is: The Speeches of Fannie Lou Hamer* (University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 101.

739 Reflecting on specific class-based social movements during the twentieth century, Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward’s classic work, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (1977), published at the tail end of the events described here, theorized the interplay between state power, historical circumstances, leadership personalities, organizational structures, and the demands and outcomes of social movements on behalf of the poor. Piven and Cloward affirmed the need to approach historical moments with objectivity and respect for the decisions of movement leaders. They contended, “so long as lower-class groups abided by the norms governing the electoral-representative system, they would have little influence…. [P]rotest tactics which defied political norms were not simply the recourse of troublemakers and fools. For the poor, they were the only recourse.” From this vantage, the criticism and backlash elicited by food relief work by SNCC and the BPP seemed inevitable, for as Piven and Cloward ask, “how could it have been otherwise? Important interests were at stake, and had those interests not been a profound source of contention, there would have been no need for [class] insurgency…” in the first place. “[T]he relevant question to ask,” insist Piven and Cloward, “is whether, on balance, the movement made gains or lost ground; whether it advanced the interests of working people or set back those interests.” Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 3, xiii.
expanded the parameters of debates about food and freedom, each viewing food work as a means of mobilizing the dispossessed and politicizing the disenfranchised for immediate or imminent strategic ends.

Despite their often distinctive theoretical and practical approaches to questions of health and resource distribution, the NOI, SNCC, and the BPP nonetheless demonstrated adaptive creativity in responding to the changing foodscapes of the communities, cities, and nation in which they worked. Organizational and ideological cross-fertilization, propelled especially by ex-convicts who had considered Muhammad’s teachings before moving on to organizations prepared to act on the issues he brought to light, put these groups in conversation with each other, propelling a crucial dynamism in activists’ endeavors to respond to the practical needs of the poor and working classes. Stokely Carmichael of SNCC, for example, distributed free food to starving sharecroppers in Mississippi, shared dinner and ideas at Elijah Muhammad’s home, and, after introducing the notion of “Black Power” into the mainstream American lexicon, collaborated with the BPP in its quest for racial revolution. Eldridge Cleaver, meanwhile, served as an influential NOI minister while in jail, married Kathleen Neal of SNCC after his release, and ultimately became a guiding voice within the Black Panther Party and, as such, a vocal opponent of the Panthers’ community food initiatives. The NOI provided practical support and press coverage of SNCC’s food work in the South, and SNCC later celebrated and in places participated in Panther food programs. Despite practical, personal, and cultural impediments to a wide embrace of Muhammad’s dietary dogma, proponents of black liberation across the ideological spectrum recognized and often
applauded the Messenger’s efforts to encourage black people to challenge the oppressive conditions shaping their daily realities, starting with food—an essential building block of life, community, and culture.⁷⁴⁰

Stories and images of once-broken prisoners proudly refusing to eat pork, of sharecroppers starving for the right to vote, or of malnourished children too hungry to learn prompted the consideration, response, and action of a range of groups in ways that demands for integrated public schools and lunch counters, fair housing and employment, and legal protections did not. In a nation that grappled with agricultural surpluses, that gave taxpayers’ money to large farmers to encourage them not to produce, that paid large sums of money to store excess foodstuffs, and that deployed international food aid programs as a tool of Cold War diplomacy, food represented a public good. Feeding the hungry did not threaten the full stomachs of the white middle-class or the livelihoods of food producers; American agriculture produced more than enough to go around. Moreover, unlike the vagaries of “economic justice” or even “civil rights” more broadly—terms increasingly contested by the end of the 1960s—food as a demand and a promise seemed concrete, actionable, and unassailable.

Following Senator Robert F. Kennedy’s well-documented encounter with conditions of near-starvation in Mississippi slums in April 1967, federal officials had no

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⁷⁴⁰ In a 1959 article in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, conservative black commentator George Schuyler, who refuted Muhammad’s charges that the white capitalist system excluded black participation, nonetheless admitted, “Mr. Muhammad may be a rogue and a charlatan, but when anybody can get tens of thousands of Negroes to practice economic solidarity, respect their women, alter their atrocious diet, give up liquor, stop crime, juvenile delinquency and adultery, he is doing more for the Negroes’ welfare than any current Negro leader I know.” Qtd. in Christopher Alan Bracey, *Saviors or Sellouts: The Promise and Peril of Black Conservatism, from Booker T. Washington to Condoleezza Rice* (Beacon Press, 2008), 78.
choice but to respond, if not to the needs of the hungry poor, then at least to allegations of official abuse or neglect. Testifying in July before the Senate Subcommittee on Manpower, Employment, and Poverty, Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman insisted that no American had to go hungry. “[T]he United States today possess all the physical resources necessary to insure that every person has the opportunity for a full and nutritious diet,” he boasted. “We have the food, and we have the most efficient system in the world to distribute it. All that is necessary is to use the resources efficiently and humanely.”

The continued and worsening predicament of the hungry poor by decade’s end revealed, according to Freeman’s own logic, that federal food programs were neither efficient nor humane. Less than two years after Freeman’s pronouncement and less than four months after the first official Panther free breakfast program, President Nixon declared before Congress, “That hunger and malnutrition should persist in a land such as ours is embarrassing and intolerable...More is at stake here than the health and well-being of 16 million American citizens….Something very like the honor of American democracy is at issue.” Having vowed to cut domestic spending and distracted by efforts to obtain “peace with honor” in Southeast Asia, Nixon nonetheless recognized the political need to acknowledge a reality that a growing number of activists and concerned citizens had fought for years to make visible: that in a land of wealth and surplus, millions of Americans were starving or sick with hunger. More revealing than Nixon’s

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public comments, of course, were his private sentiments and directives. He reportedly instructed one cabinet member, “Use all the rhetoric, so long as it doesn’t cost any money.”743 Journalist Nick Kotz reflected upon these contradictions and conflicts, noting, that if Nixon’s pledge to “put an end to hunger in America for all time” “did not enhance the bellies of millions of malnourished Americans, it may have fattened their dreams; at least it was food for thought to legions who often have only thought for food.”744

The American Medical Association Council on Foods and Nutrition chimed in during July 1970, several months after a largely ineffectual White House Conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health.745 “Hunger and malnutrition is only one of the reasons for the fierce resentments of the U.S. poor,” the council asserted. “But it is one that can be removed in very large degree. The cost of [a] massive attack upon hunger and malnutrition will be great in money; the cost of doing nothing will be immeasurable in terms of lost human potential and social unrest.”746 Hoping to stifle dissent and to quell public outrage at the suffering of Americans on American soil, the federal government instituted two key reforms in the next several years designed to fortify the domestic hunger safety net. Congress permanently authorized a National School Breakfast

743 Ibid.
744 Ibid.
745 Among those in attendance, Fannie Lou Hamer recalled her reaction to the White House conference during a speech in 1976. “I will never forget the time that I went to a conference on nutrition and Nixon spoke to us that night and after that I told him, when the conference was over, I said, ‘Well, you don’t worry about me coming back to a conference on hunger to Washington because they don’t even know what they’re talking about.’” Hamer, “We Haven’t Arrived Yet,” University of Wisconsin (29 Jan 1976) in Brooks and Houck, To Tell It Like It Is, 181.
Program in 1975 and removed purchase requirements for the food stamp program two years later. These important revisions constituted a belated reaction to the clamoring hunger lobby of the late-1960s, but did little to challenge the socioeconomic and educational disparities that both perpetuated and resulted from food insecurity in the United States. Interlocking structures of economic injustice and racial discrimination remained fundamentally unchallenged, even as the media spotlight dimmed.

Of the notable food activists of the long civil rights era, comedian Dick Gregory stood out for his active participation and vocal engagement in raging debates about intersections of food, race, and power. After collecting and delivering thousands of pounds of foodstuffs to assist hunger relief efforts in Mississippi, Gregory soon came to appreciate Elijah Muhammad’s warnings about the health perils of soul food and the American diet more generally, reiterating the need for dietary reform in terms removed from Muhammad’s religious dogma. Gregory was certainly no radical militant, and explained his conversion to vegetarianism in 1963 as the natural, logical outgrowth of his philosophical dedication to nonviolence. In 1971, Gregory offered an eloquent account of the plight of those afflicted by hunger in its myriad forms. “There are two kinds of hunger: the hungry stomach and the hungry mind,” he wrote. “…A hungry man, dependent upon the system for his meager food allowance, can be expected to behave just as the system wants him to behave. He reacts to the smell of food and his reactions are geared toward getting some of that food for his hungry stomach. But,” he noted, “when a child is fed a proper diet, he grows strong in body, and when his stomach is full, he

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develops a hungry mind. His mind reacts to sound, and the lessons the system teaches him just don’t sound right to him anymore. The child develops strong mental determination to be free.” Here directly defending the Panthers’ community food programs while attacking local law enforcement and FBI tactics to quash them, Gregory called attention to a reality that the NOI and SNCC had likewise acknowledged. With varying degrees and durations of success, all three groups recognized the imperative to strengthen and protect black bodies before turning to higher spiritual, democratic, or revolutionary pursuits. “That,” Gregory insisted, “is what the system in America is really afraid of….748

The historical moments recounted in this study offer revealing precursors and parallels to concerns about race, health, and food justice in the twenty-first century. The underlying concern—and, at times, the prevailing focus—of the Nation of Islam, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Black Panther Party with the interplay between food and black liberation spoke to increasingly worrisome connections between community, capitalism, and political empowerment. The continuing deprivation of African Americans in New York, Illinois, Mississippi, and California, as well as poor and working class Americans of all races across the nation, speaks to the capacity and willingness of the federal government, local leaders, capitalist entrepreneurs, and citizens to permit, even encourage, the endurance of social, economic, and institutional structures of hunger. Almost fifty years after Senator Kennedy, kneeling on the dirt floor of a

Mississippi shack, fought back tears while attempting to engage a black child numb with hunger, nearly half of black Mississippians still live in poverty. Meanwhile, poor residents of Oakland, like many U.S. cities, continue to confront food deserts, food spaces offering poor residents limited geographic and economic access to healthy, nutritious, culturally appropriate foods. It remains the case that, as CBS News ominously noted in 1968, “The poor are alive because they eat. They are malnourished because of what they eat. Fat people can be hungry people.”

Drawn-out Congressional debate in recent years about a new farm bill and the persistent relationship between agricultural policies and food aid illustrate the perils of a system in which special interests dominate the agendas of those responsible for safeguarding the public interest. Signed by President Barack Obama in February, the trillion-dollar Agricultural Act of 2014 authorized $7 billion in additional crop insurance subsidies for farmers while cutting $8 billion from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program over the next decade. For about 850,000 families reliant upon federal food aid, this will mean a reduction in their monthly food budget of about $90. As CBS implored nearly five

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749 Marian Wright Edelman described having witnessed this incident in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer (eds.), *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (Blackside, Inc., 1990), 452-453. These statistics are derived from the 2010 U.S. Census.


751 *Hunger In America* (CBS, 1968).

decades ago, this “most basic human need”—the need for food security—“must become a human right.”\textsuperscript{753} That need persists.

\textsuperscript{753} Hunger In America (CBS, 1968).
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