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Asking Essential Questions: Recentering the Past, Unraveling Assumptions, and Envisioning a
More Holistic & Realistic Food System

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ABSTRACT

Addressing food insecurity is one of the most prominent tasks our present-day society faces. Previous attempts at remedying food deserts have failed to provide meaningful results in alleviating food insecurity. One of the essential questions this thesis aims to answer is *why*? Why have none of the past solutions worked, and why do we keep trying these same solutions even though they clearly are not working? To do so, I will outline the context that current solutions were created in, focusing specifically on the U.S.'s history of redlining, discourse around the "obesity epidemic," and racial disparities in society's prevailing idea of health. Then, I will explore the failure of current interventions and discuss why they were pushed despite little evidence of success. By using my own research project, "Understanding the Underserved: Why Farmers' Market Access is not Equitable," I will explicitly address commonly overlooked issues with utilizing farmers' markets to address food insecurity. Finally, I will then provide recommendations that can cultivate more well-rounded solutions, including recognizing and contending with lesser minds bias, ascribing complex personhood to those who food insecurity solutions wish to serve, and creating small-scale, realistic interventions on a community level that focus on the experience and voice of the communities meant to be served. Underlying this entire thesis is the notion that space for our humanness, for fluidity of thought and action, and for the continued striving for better is central to a pursuit of equity and social justice.

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Chapter 1

Background

According to the most recent data from Feeding America (2022), approximately 10.4% of Americans are food insecure and 6.1% live in a food desert. Of those Americans experiencing food insecurity, a disproportionate number are from a marginalized identity group. “Of the 38 million people experiencing food insecurity in the U.S., 15.2 million are white, 11.1 million are Latino, 9.5 million are Black, and 2.4 million are Native Americans, Asian American and Pacific Islanders or multiple races. While nearly 40% of the food insecure population in the U.S. is white, Black, Native American, and Latino individuals are 2 to over 3 times more likely to live in food insecure households” (Feeding America 2022).

The vastness of those data points is practically unfathomable to me, but they represent the staggering number of individuals who experience food insecurity, which according to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (USDA ERS 2023).

Remedying food insecurity has proven to be a complex problem, and although decades of legislation, funding, and time have been put towards creating a more equitable food system, very little progress has been made.

One of the essential questions this thesis aims to answer is why? Why have none of the past solutions worked, and why do we keep trying these same solutions even though they clearly are not working? In answering these questions, I argue that the current framing of food deserts in

the U.S. has overly simplified the experiences of marginalized groups, and in doing so, encourages solutions that do not account for the ever-changing, complicated nature of human life, especially as it pertains to the diets and food choices of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), immigrant, and refugee communities.

To make this argument, I will draw on primary sources, sociological and psychological principles, and various scholarly studies to trace how the modern-day food insecurity framework was created, paying special attention to flaws in the framework and how they came to be.

First, we will explore the history of redlining in the U.S. as it pertains to the structural inequalities that remain in the modern food system. I will draw on primary sources outlining the criteria for redlining that discriminated on the bases of race and ethnicity which provided substantial barriers to erecting businesses, grocery stores, malls, and opportunities for housing in underserved communities. I will then compare these primary sources to current data of neighborhoods in Erie, Pennsylvania, correlating redlining to modern inequalities in economic success and the food system. I will also discuss how neglecting this history in the current food desert framework has laid the groundwork for disjointed and constrained solutions to address food insecurity.

Next, I will analyze the societal discourse around health, food, and the so-called “obesity epidemic” that the modern-day food desert concept was born into. I will explore how a rigid understanding of health and an overwhelming anxiety about rising BMI and weight played a key role in shaping the kinds of food insecurity solutions that became popular in the early aughts, particularly the establishing of farmers’ markets and grocery stores that provide fresh, local fruits and vegetables to underserved communities, and how those solutions fail to meet the needs of the

communities they wish to serve. I will also discuss how and why these solutions fail in the long term, citing several examples where this failure has already been documented.

Drawing on this data, I will then outline my own research study, “Understanding the Underserved: Why Farmers’ Market Access is not Equitable,” which takes a sociological approach at understanding why marginalized communities in Erie, Pennsylvania may avoid shopping at farmers’ markets for reasons beyond economic constraints.

Finally, exploring the answers to the essential question of why existing solutions are failing, I will provide the key concepts I see missing from current food desert discourse and begin to envision a more successful and realistic food system based on the information provided.

A Necessary Introduction

Some literary critics have long believed that an author's identity is not pertinent to understanding a work of literature and that focusing on the author distracts from understanding a work's true meaning. These “text and text alone critics,” conventionally known as Formalists, insist that everything you need to know about a work of literature exists in the words an author wrote in the pages you read, and anything outside of the text is inessential. I think they are wrong.

I think they are wrong for a myriad of reasons, but I think they are especially wrong because of the thesis you are reading right now. Who I am is quite central to what you are about to read. The journey I intend to embark on with you requires that you know more about me. You must know who I am, and perhaps more importantly, who I am not.

The task this thesis intends to accomplish is vast, and because I am only one person, my voice is incapable of encompassing all the voices that have a stake in creating a more equitable

food system. One person cannot fully understand and account for every complexity and nuance in the food desert debate. At the end of the day, it is important to ask a Black person, a poor person, a fat person, a queer person, etc., when having conversations that are especially pertinent to their experience, and this thesis has attempted to do just that.

But I will make mistakes. What is written here serves as a grounding point for answering the essential questions, but as the world continues to change, so will the questions we need to ask. Underlying this entire thesis is the notion that space for our humanness, for fluidity of thought and action, and for the continued striving for better is central to a pursuit of equity and social justice

Chapter 2

How We Got Here (Surprise, it's Racism!)

As with much U.S. history, the backlog of events leading to the present-day food system is directly correlated to the legacy of racism. Although this thesis will focus primarily on the food system, overall community structures and resource allocation play a huge role in creating those urban neighborhoods where more than 19 million people live over a mile from a grocery store, making them residents of a food desert (USDA ERS “Documentation” 2022).

With that thought in mind, I want to take a brief detour to talk about language.

Recently, scholars, critics, and policy makers have noted how the term “food desert” may suggest that a lack of food access is naturally occurring. When we think of a “desert” on its own—perhaps the Sahara, Mojave, or Sonoran—images of sandstorms, cacti, and oases spring to mind. Unlike deserts, though, these locations where food access is scarce are not naturally occurring; they are, as this section will explore, human made.

Accordingly, many suggest using the alternative phrase “food apartheid” to highlight this distinction. Karen Washington, the often-cited originator of the term, defines food apartheid as such:

Food apartheid looks at the whole food system, along with race, geography, faith, and economics. You say ‘food apartheid’ and you get to the root cause of some of the problems around the food system. It brings in hunger and poverty. It brings us to the more important question: What are some of the social inequalities that you see, and what are you doing to erase some of the injustices? (Brones 2018)

For the purpose of this thesis, I will use the term food apartheid to refer to the overarching system that creates food scarcity and unequal food access. The term food desert will be used to describe an urban area where residents live over a mile from a grocery store.

Another language caveat worth noting here is the troubling choice of words to describe the diverse groups of people who have been affected most by food deserts. Modern food deserts touch an ever-growing array of people with complex backgrounds and identities. There is no acronym, no shorthand, no all-encompassing term that can include every person who has a stake in these issues.

I will be using the term BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Person of Color) as a shorthand throughout this thesis to describe this group, but it is very important to understand that BIPOC does not accurately encompass all the people who are affected by this issue.

For example, in Erie, which will be used often in this thesis as a grounding point for examining food apartheid, the population includes high numbers of immigrants and refugees. While the acronym of BIPOC may not directly include these populations, it is my intention that when used, BIPOC will encompass this more expansive group.

Redlining in Erie & Beyond

Erie County, PA faces particular challenges in terms of food access and security. The USDA also defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life (USDA ERS “ERS Charts” 2022). According to Feeding America (2022), the food insecurity rate is 13.9% in Erie County, which is above the national average of 12.8%. Here, approximately 54,000 people are enrolled in the Supplemental

Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), over 16% of people live below the poverty line, and a disproportionate number of those people are African American or Hispanic (Feeding America 2021).

The current snapshot of Erie's poverty and food security rates is best explained by examining the history of redlining in the U.S., which begins with the riveting topics of banks, mortgages, and loans! Historically speaking, short-term loans were the tried-and-true way to buy houses before the Great Depression in the 1930s. The collapse of the housing market during Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency inspired the New Deal, which made 30-year mortgages the new standard for buying a home. This was especially prevalent for the flood of soldiers returning from WWII in 1945.

However, approval for these longer-term loans was not universal. Enter redlining, which, according to Cornell Law School, is defined as “a discriminatory practice that consists of the systematic denial of services such as mortgages, insurance loans, and other financial services to residents of certain areas, based on their race or ethnicity” (Legal 2022). As noted by Cornell Law, redlining in our case is most notably associated with restrictions on mortgages and insurance loans in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s to BIPOC, resulting in legal segregation of communities into white people who were able to obtain mortgages and loans and BIPOC who were not.

According to Jonathan Burdick (2019) in the *Erie Reader*, residential Security Maps were created by the Federal Housing Administration to denote which neighborhoods were suitable to receive loans and which were not. The Federal Housing Administration surveyed cities, labeling areas where BIPOC settled as “hazardous” and “undesirable,” often causing loan requests in these areas to be denied (Burdick 2019). This ranking system also signaled to realtors and urban

developers that these areas were not places where economic growth was likely and pointed them to develop in more affluent, white neighborhoods instead.

In practice, areas with lower rankings were not only denied loans but were often also overlooked as locations where the necessities of a city should be built. Grocery stores were constructed closer to more affluent neighborhoods, creating present-day food deserts.

In addition to affecting food access, redlining bleeds into other facets of life for poorly ranked neighborhoods, primarily inhabited by those who are BIPOC. Predominately white and highly ranked neighborhoods now have better hospitals, more shopping complexes, and most notably for our purposes here, more grocery stores and food options than their BIPOC neighborhood counterparts.

Because these rankings used race-neutral language to dictate where businesses, houses, and landmarks would be placed, it is easy to overlook how current economic disparities for BIPOC are the result of intentional shaping of community structures. However, a closer look at these maps and notes reveals the true nature and result of redlining.

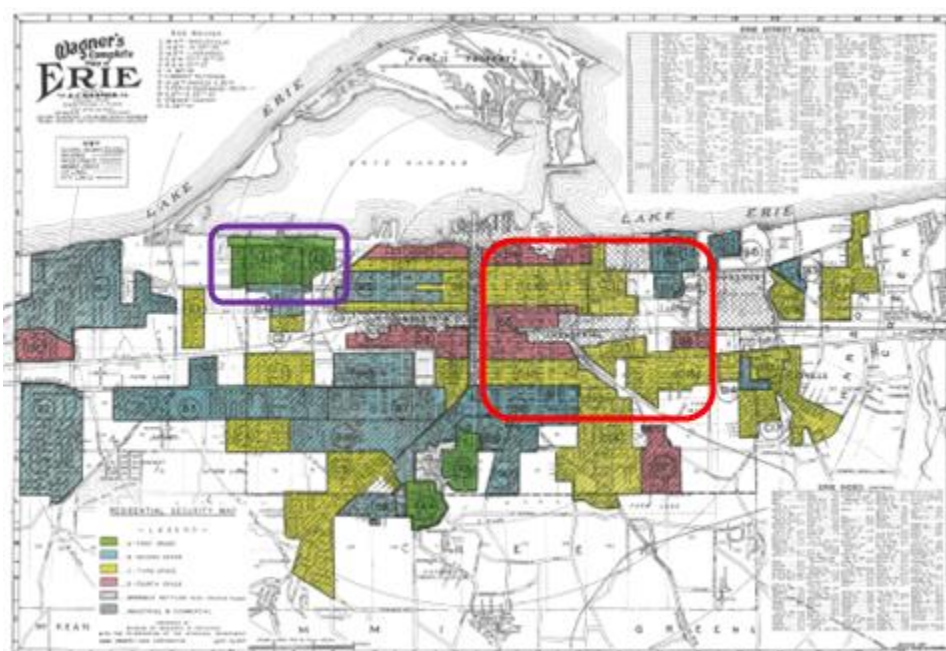


Figure 1: Residential Security Map of Erie, PA (Burdick 2019)

Take, for example, the above “Residential Security Map” of Erie, PA created in 1934 as part of the Federal Housing Administration’s mission to hand out those aforementioned loans. Burdick (2019) explains how this mapping system works:

These “Residential Security Maps” were designed “to graphically reflect the trend of desirability in neighborhoods from a residential viewpoint” and to identify neighborhoods with an “infiltration” of “undesirables.” Areas were designated by a number along with a security grade and color, which described the “quality” of the neighborhood. These security grades consisted of A (“Best” and green), B (“Still Desirable” and blue), C (“Definitely Declining” and yellow), and D (“Hazardous” and red). Neighborhoods outlined in red (“redlined”) or yellow were consistently denied loans in favor of almost exclusively white suburbs or affluent city neighborhoods.

Alongside these map evaluations, descriptions of who lived in these neighborhoods were also collected. Special interest was paid to neighborhoods whose tenants were “foreign-born,” “negros,” and other “undesirables” (Burdick 2019).

Although this racial and immigrant data did not directly accompany the maps given to bankers and loan managers, the collected data helped inform the labeling of neighborhoods in the first place. Neighborhoods of color were often denied loans. Investors did not put money into these areas, and economic growth was stymied.

For the most part, white people received loans and settled into more desirable land while people of color and immigrants who were denied loans created their communities where no one else had settled. The result is visible in many cities today: one block is booming with business, luxury apartment buildings, and restaurants and the next is covered with foreclosure notices, run-down buildings, and an influx of houseless people. Erie just so happens to be one of those cities.

Frontier and East Side, Erie PA

Ask anyone from Erie to tell you the best and worst neighborhoods to live in, and I would be willing to bet every cent in my bank account (25 dollars and 15 cents) that they will tell you Frontier and the East Side, respectively. While not the official name of a neighborhood, East Side is an established colloquial name for a conglomeration of neighborhoods located on the east side of Erie that share diverse demographics and socioeconomic status. For this thesis, East Side will be used to refer to this collection of neighborhoods.

If you return to the Residential Security Map, these are the two neighborhoods squared in red (East Side) and purple (Frontier). Here is what Burdick (2019) has to say about how the Residential Security Map ranked Frontier:

In Erie, the Frontier neighborhood was labeled as one of the city's best. In the accompanying documents, it is described as a “desirable restricted residential area of high-class homes” with “good transportation and schools.” Residents were described as “executives” and “professional men.” There were no foreign-born or black households. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, around 130 homes were built in Frontier, the construction of which would have been approved for almost exclusively white families.

So, Frontier was labeled A (Green) in the Residential Security Map in the 1930s and has been reaping the benefits ever since. The East Side, a part of D-5 on the Residential Security Map, housed many more folks of color and was ranked much lower. Burdick (2019) explains:

Another neighborhood, labeled D-5, notes that there is an “infiltration of negro” and identifies their specific concentration “along railroad tracks and on 13th to 16th Streets.” It also notes a high [number] of Polish immigrants and some “low class Jewish on 17th and 18th Streets from French to Parade.” Little Italy, with 60 percent Italian immigrant families along with a small [number] of black households, was also considered “hazardous” and one of the least desirable neighborhoods.

The East Side received rankings of C (Yellow) and D (Red), and people living there rarely received approval for the loans that skyrocketed economic growth. These decisions of the past haunt the ground of Erie still today. Just look at the difference in images that appear when you search Frontier versus East Side Erie PA on Google:

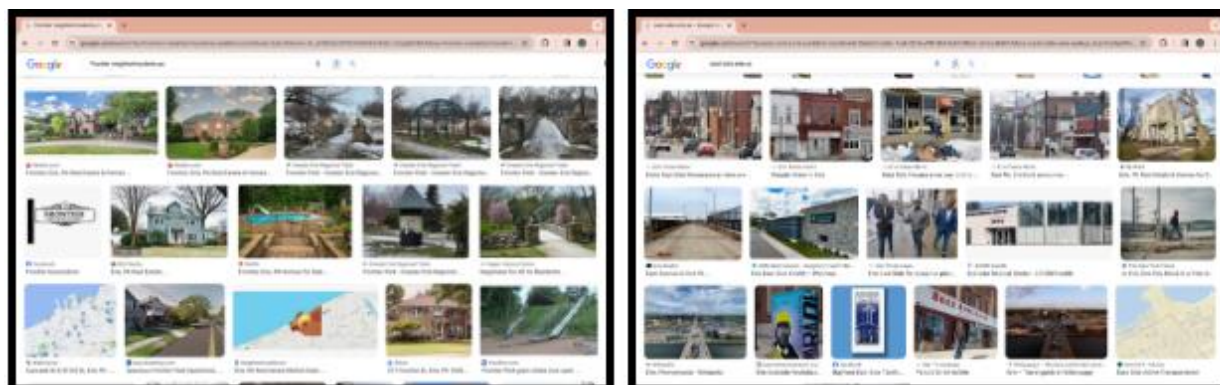


Figure 2: Side by side comparison of Google search for Frontier (left) and East Side (right)

The stark contrast between million-dollar houses, pools, and parks, and the bleak, worn-down buildings, old roads, and few businesses is quite clear. A drive through the neighborhoods reveals the same: Frontier is filled with extravagant houses, perfectly intact sidewalks, and in the blistering Erie snow, the roads are plowed. The East Side appears much more rundown: buildings and houses are squished together and often falling apart, unhoused people persist on the streets, and there is limited access to green space.

However, it is important to acknowledge that these depictions are generalizations. People in the East Side have good lives just as people in Frontier struggle. Regardless of where you are, people have traditions, passions, and are fully rounded human beings. I in no way want to suggest that one neighborhood is better than the other. In the East Side, countless taskforce exists to increase safety, beautify the neighborhood, and build quality housing, all of which serve to foster and strengthen the community. What is clear to me as I consider qualitative views of both neighborhoods is that one has been historically given fewer resources and opportunities to become an economically successful place to live than the other.

Granted, qualitative analysis is not considered a very scientific measure, so let us look at something grounded in more data.

Data compiled from the U.S. Census (2023) states that the median income for residents living in the Frontier neighborhood ranges from \$92,000-\$96,000 per year, whereas the median income for residents living in the East Side neighborhood hovers around \$16,000-\$20,000 per year (City Data 2022). The median income for Erie overall is about \$43,000, placing Frontier and the East Side at two extremes.

According to the USDA Economic Research Department's Food Access Atlas, residents living in and around the East Side neighborhood are experiencing high levels of poverty and are also over one mile from the nearest grocery store, making them inhabitants of a food desert (USDA ERS "Food" 2019).

Inhabitants of Frontier do not experience high levels of poverty, but they are considered a food desert. This fact alone seems like it should negate the argument that I am presenting here, but the distance to the nearest grocery store has vastly different effects on those who rely on public transportation versus those who reliably own their own means of transportation (USDA ERS "Food" 2019).

For those who live in Frontier where the median income comfortably exceeds the national average by about \$20,000, owning a car is plausible, making the over-a-mile trek to the nearest grocery store a 15-minute drive (Guzman & Collar 2023). For those living in the East Side, most must either walk or rely on public transportation to get to the nearest grocery stores, and in several cases, it takes about as long to walk as it does to use Erie's public transportation bus service (Erie Metropolitan Transit Authority 2024).

Obviously, this example draws on data from only two neighborhoods but displays in the micro how redlining has played a role in creating food deserts. Areas where BIPOC settled in the mid-1900s were labeled undesirable, those living there were denied loans for housing, and their communities were neglected in terms of development. These disparities continue to exist and compound after nearly 90 years, resulting in unequal community structures and access to grocery stores, medical care, and retail options. There are countless large-scale scholarly studies that support and affirm these findings on the macro level (Raja et al. 2008; Zhang & Ghosh 2016; Shaker 2023).

Where Are We Now?

In the grand scheme of systemic racism, redlining is one of the practices that set up community structures to make it more difficult for BIPOC to succeed in American society, restricting them from quality health care, access to food, and well-funded community organizations. Additionally, current studies identify that hiring discrimination, unequal pay, and day-to-day microaggressions are common occurrences for BIPOC living in the U.S.

The term microaggression is defined as an indirect, subtle, or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group. Microaggressions can look like touching a BIPOC's hair without permission, being impressed by a BIPOC's ability to speak English, or color blindness through phrases such as "all lives matter" (UCLA 2023). Several recent studies have found a positive correlation between the frequencies of microaggressions a person faces and negative mental health outcomes (Nadal et al. 2014). Oftentimes because these social consequences are more difficult to see and quantify, they are overlooked, but increasing scholarly attention has

revealed how America's history of slavery and racism continues to inform the lives, opportunities, and social expectations of BIPOC.

Although redlining and subsequent laws that made racism legal have (almost) been completely wiped from legislation, their effects still result in racial disparities today. Dr. Kenneth H. Kolb of Furman University in his groundbreaking book *Retail Inequality: Reframing the Food Desert Debate* explains:

Even though explicit and overt racism is now illegal and, to varying degrees, politically untenable, the public and private sectors still manage to produce unequal outcomes by race. Unlike Jim Crow-era edicts, the policies that ultimately created food deserts were written in race neutral language. The business decisions to abandon these neighborhoods were explained away as being decisions about profit, not race. (2021:8)

Although redlining is now recognized as a practice that discriminates according to race, it was described during its time as decisions about profit and economic development. In the present day, solutions for rectifying disparities caused by redlining must overcome the urge to avoid interventions based on that same framework.

The most obvious answer to removing disparities caused by redlining seems to be to put funding into these neglected neighborhoods by building grocery stores, hospitals, recreational facilities, etc., where they were previously denied. But the solution is not that simple for a myriad of reasons, and the most blatant reason goes back to profits, echoing the initial justification for redlining in a haunting way.

If we are simply talking about removing food deserts, adding grocery stores in neighborhoods that have none should (in theory) solve the problem, but recent data shows that the solution to food deserts may be far more complicated than that.

However, even if simply adding grocery stores fixes the problem entirely, economics stand in the way of successfully doing so. Areas where food deserts persist in general have more people living around or below the poverty line, higher levels of unemployment, and overall worse economic conditions. This means there is less money spent on food in these areas and usually a higher reliance on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) funds to purchase food items.

Anyone with a simple understanding of business and economics can tell you that these compounding factors probably won't add up to a successful business whose profits can cover the costs of operation. It is easy to argue that these neighborhoods deserve equal access to food, but any economist could easily prove that from a profit standpoint, it does not make any sense to place new stores there.

However, arguing against supplying resources to these neighborhoods based on a capitalistic framework does not negate the racist origins of these disparities.

Just because redlining is no longer legal, and the Civil Rights Act essentially outlawed racism, it does not mean that systemic racism disappeared with the signing of a document. Using economics as a justification for not placing resources into these neighborhoods is still rooted in racism. It is just disguised as something else, something entirely permissible by our society: capitalistic self-interest.

Organizations such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) explore how racism in the 1970s and capitalistic self-interest of today both translate to poorer economic outcomes for BIPOC in America. A 2023 ACLU article outlines the racial wealth gap: the racial disparity in wealth and income caused by systemic inequalities and barriers (Duarte & Mimbela 2023).

What did they find? Today, people of color, depending on their race, are anywhere from 1.5-1.8% more likely to be denied a mortgage compared to white applicants. In 1976, 69% of white families owned a home compared to only 46% of Black families, a 25% gap between the two (Duarte & Mimbela 2023). In 2022, the gap was 30%. In 1970, the median income for Black households was \$30,400 compared to \$54,100 in white households, a \$23,700 gap (Duarte & Mimbela 2023). In 2018, the gap increased to \$33,000 (Duarte & Mimbela 2023).

BIPOC and white people did not begin at the same starting line in America, and although both white people and people of color are increasing their overall wealth, the initial gap between the two groups has persisted and widened as time goes by (Fry 2021; Martinez & Kirchner 2021; Duarte & Mimbela 2023). A vastly unequal start has resulted in a largely unequal present and future, and denying reparations for the initial gap simply reinforces the legacy of racism in America.

As Kolb (2021) so strikingly points out in *Retail Inequality*, it is high time we begin asking: “*Who keeps getting the short end of the stick?*” and seek out solutions that right these historic wrongs (p. 8).

If you have not experienced racial oppression, it can be difficult to wrap your head around, especially if you are not used to seeing the world from an intersectional, systemic point of view. But, as activist and author Sonya Renee Taylor (2021) says, “Understanding is not a prerequisite for honor, love, or respect” (p. 19). Just because you cannot comprehend someone else’s experience does not mean that their experience is not valid. Data and scholarly research continue to identify worse outcomes for BIPOC Americans than their white counterparts, and food apartheid is merely one piece of that injustice. Rather than ignoring this history when considering modern-day disparities, it is important to consider how this past has led us to the present.

It took careful deliberation and intentional actions to create the unjust food system that we live in today, and it is going to take all that and more to undo it. With that in mind, let us turn to modern-day solutions to the food desert debate and consider how neglecting this history and other context may contribute to their failed attempts to address food insecurity.

Chapter 3

Ideological Flaws in the Food Apartheid Framework

There is a plethora of factors that need to be taken into consideration when thinking about food apartheid. What I love most about Karen Washington's assertion that the term "food desert" does not fully encompass the problem at hand is that it forces a change of framework. By using food apartheid, no longer is the focus of food access blind to the myriad of other factors that affect people who live in food deserts.

The term food desert was created in the 1990s and immediately swept through popular media, making headlines and falling on the desks of prominent political leaders and activists. People in poor, primarily BIPOC communities were calling attention to the lack of "healthy" food options in their neighborhoods, citing high numbers of fast-food options with little to no grocery stores (Kolb 2021).

We needed to do something about this! And by "we," I mean primarily white, middle- to upper-class people who ostensibly did not live in food deserts.

But the framework of food deserts set us up for failure. As Kolb (2021) points out in *Retail Inequality*: "We were wrong because people in food deserts were not really complaining about their diets. They weren't asking for help to improve *what they ate*; they were asking for help to improve *where they live*" (p. 1).

Remember all that discussion in the last chapter about how redlining affected more than just access to grocery stores? That is really important here, and it is what Kolb is referring to as "retail inequality."

BIPOC in neglected neighborhoods had been calling attention to the disparities that their communities faced for decades, but framing what was happening in these communities about health and wellbeing captivated popular culture in a particularly compelling way.

Health, Wellbeing, and the BMI

Let us talk about the obsession with health that heightened in the 1990s. It is key to understanding why, as Kolb so strikingly points out, we got so much wrong in the first place.

In 1997, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared obesity a major public health issue and global epidemic (World Health Organization 2021). The National Institute of Health (NIH) reports that a slow increase in obesity occurred in the 70s and 80s but began a “rapid rise” in the following two decades (Nuttall 2015).

What they do not mention is that in 1998, the categories for the Body Mass Index, or BMI, changed (Temple 2022). Overnight in 1998, the cutoff point between the normal and overweight categories for the BMI was reduced, converting millions of Americans from being considered a normal weight to being overweight (Temple 2022).

Those people’s bodies did not change, but the way that they were treated by medical professionals and in society did. Concerns about obesity were at an all-time high in the 1990s because millions of Americans, who up to that point were considered at a healthy weight, were now in a weight category that suggested that they had an elevated risk for diabetes, heart attacks, and other cardiovascular disease.

This increasing concern with American health and diet that skyrocketed due to the “obesity epidemic” in the late 90s and early aughts had significant influence on how food apartheid was framed in popular discourse. When people in underserved communities asked for more food options, due in part to rising anxiety about health, weight, and wellness, providing more food options became not just about providing food generally, but about providing “fresh, healthy, local” food.

But before we dive into that, a moment to get more specific about the history of the BMI.

The BMI was invented by a Belgian mathematician – not a physician or doctor – named Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quetelet in the early 19th century (Devlin 2009). When Quetelet unveiled the BMI, he specifically noted that it would not be a useful tool to use on an individual level (Devlin 2009). The BMI was to measure the “degree of obesity” of the average man on a national scale, providing an overview of an entire country, but it would prove useless to give any measure of an individual’s health (Devlin 2009).

Despite the original intent of the BMI, because it is calculated based on metrics already being measured at the doctor’s office, it proved to be an extremely cheap and efficient way to put individuals into categories and make suggestions about their diet and exercise habits (Devlin 2009). But instead of using the BMI as a tool to measure obesity on a nationwide scale, it became the center of the universe at many doctors' offices.

Now, it is the primary way that the NIH and WHO measure obesity rates around the world.

But criticism of the medical community's reliance on the BMI is rising.

Most notably, the BMI does not account for the difference between body fat, muscle, and bone density (Harvard Public Health 2022). It merely divides your weight by the square of your height and gives an arbitrary number. This is why renowned athletes like Simon Biles or Serena Williams would land in the overweight or obese categories of the BMI even though they are considered superhumans in the sports world.

Additionally, interpretations of the BMI equate bodyweight with health (Humphreys 2010). In practice, this means when fat people go to the doctors' office and have their BMI calculated, the doctor often does not ask them about their eating habits, exercise, mental health, or any other factors that directly affect their health. Many doctors assume these patients are unhealthy and need to lose weight. Tools like the BMI have compromised the need to recognize health as the sum of a person's many parts.

I fall into the "obese" category of the BMI – and have since I was about 12 years old – and never once has a doctor asked me about my eating, exercise, or mental health before launching into a speech about the need to be healthy (i.e. skinny), suggest I see a dietitian, and provide an array of apps I can use to track my calorie intake and exercise minutes.

Paradigms like Health at Every Size (HAES) assert that people of all sizes can be healthy. Grounded in scientific evidence about the effect of weight stigma and anti-fat bias on overall health, HAES aims to move our framework of health away from weight loss to focus on more overarching (and proven) ways to improve health (Association for Size Diversity and Health 2022).

I am saying all of this to point out that the way that everyday Americans understand health and diet is through concepts like the "obesity epidemic," BMI, and the medical establishment,

which are scientifically proven to be flawed. This flawed reasoning is key to understanding why food apartheid solutions have ultimate concern with providing what is deemed “healthy” food options, not just expanding food access generally.

When BIPOC Americans asked for better food options, it caught public attention in a way that asking for better urban development and resources for their communities never could. And with the focus on food and diets being central to food apartheid, much of this flawed thinking about health bled into the discourse.

Because food apartheid most notably affects BIPOC, it is also necessary to analyze how standards for health and wellness differ between racial categories. Historically, people of color have had worse health outcomes than white people, and that very phenomenon was made clear during the COVID-19 Pandemic (Ford et al. 2022). Once again, it is important to ask why this is the case and take a closer look at the specific standards for health that contribute to these unequal outcomes.

Fatphobia & Racism in Food Apartheid Discourse

Have you ever heard that in ancient and even not-so-ancient times, being fat was considered a sign of wealth and prosperity? In Sabrina Strings’ *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia*, an historical analysis of primary sources outlines how society went from revering bigger bodies to shaming them, providing a framework that intertwines fatphobia and racism.

Fatphobia or anti-fat bias is defined as “an aversion or hostility to, disdain for, or fear of fatness and fat people,” and also refers to discrimination on the grounds of weight (Dictionary.com 2021). Anti-fat bias both in the medical field and society at large has been correlated with worse

health outcomes for fat individuals (Vogel 2019). BIPOC, particularly Black Americans, face higher levels and more severe anti-fat bias than their white counterparts, resulting in worse health outcomes (Strings 2019).

Fearing the Black Body begins by describing prominent newspaper media in the 1860s that stirred anxiety among Americans about the size of the population; both men and women were reported to be dying from being malnourished. Popular culture and the medical community presented a deep concern for the skinniest of Americans, particularly its women. This leads Strings (2019) to the foundational questions her book sets out to answer:

What led some well-to-do Americans to believe that slenderness, especially among women, was both aesthetically preferable and a sign of national identity? How did fatness become a sign of immorality? How did fatness become linked to ‘Africanity’ or blackness? If the medical establishment just over a century ago feared the meagerness of the physiques of (elite white) women, when and how did they come to view fatness, especially among black women, as the greater threat to public health, as they would in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries with the ‘obesity epidemic?’ (p. 4)

Even Strings’ initial questions point to the significance of seeing our present-day society as a product of the past. While many of the complexities and nuances of Strings’ book are outside of the scope of this thesis, her explanation of the connection between slavery, the thin ideal, and Blackness connects to why framing retail inequality primarily as a concern about BIPOC health and diet was so arousing to the food apartheid debate.

In the most simplified way of putting it, the practice of slavery and the hierarchy of races that has thrived throughout history created a need to define Blackness in terms of the Other.

Specifically, the Black body was defined as “simultaneously excessive and inferior,” creating an image of what it meant to be Black that centered overindulgence, laziness, and a villanization of larger bodies (Carlan 2020).

In a review of *Fearing the Black Body* in the Center for the Study of Women, Hannah Carlan (2020) outlines the importance of understanding how Black bodies are treated differently in society:

Without understanding how fatphobia emerged in response to slavery and in order to solidify whiteness as an embodied phenomenon, we cannot grasp how our contemporary obsession with thinness is rooted in anti-Blackness. The most current manifestation of institutionalized fatphobia around “obesity” as a public health crisis is deeply reliant on the same ideologies that European race scientists drew on to construct fat as indicative of the laziness of body, mind, and spirit.

Targeting language about the “obesity epidemic” towards BIPOC communities echoes standards of white beauty and health that have been shaped from hundreds of years of racial hierarchies. When we talk about obesity as a public health issue, we often neglect to recognize the ways in which standards for what obesity is have been created with a white body in mind.

This translates to Black bodies being shamed, ignored, and left out of mainstream conversations about solutions for food apartheid. It is this very history that fosters solutions that are only beneficial for a very rigid (predominately white) group of people.

Chapter 4

Faulty Food Apartheid Interventions

I know some of this may seem superfluous, but this is the environment that the term food desert was born into. The context makes Kolb's words from *Retail Inequality* make a lot more sense: "We were wrong because people in food deserts weren't really complaining about their diets. They weren't asking for help to improve *what they ate*; they were asking for help to improve *where they live*" (2021:1).

The obsession with health, weight, and wellbeing made the issue of food apartheid about health. When BIPOC people living in underserved communities asked for help, all that we heard was that they did not have any grocery stores. What we did not hear is they had fewer hospitals, public transportation options, job opportunities, and chances at economic stability. We did not consider how expectations and assumptions about health, weight, and diet would affect the solutions that would be generated.

The start of the movement to address food apartheid focused on lack of healthy food options correlated to a lack of grocery stores or supermarkets. Most food deserts identified had a high number of fast-food restaurants but no chain or local grocery stores where people could buy fresh produce. The logical solution seemed to be to put grocery stores in these areas, giving communities access to the fresh, local food they previously had to travel long distances for.

Media outlets latched onto the framing of food apartheid as a health and wellbeing issue rather than exploring how practices like redlining and other historical injustices created an overarching landscape of retail inequality – hence the name of Kolb's book.

Kolb (2021) asserts that the framing that “living in a food desert is bad for your health” has blinded many food justice activists from seeing that the issue of food apartheid is not only about food, but also about the entire retail landscape of these underserved communities.

Although popular media does not necessarily control all popular discourse, it does hold the capacity to shift focus, and the framing of retail inequality and food apartheid as a health issue tunnel-visioned our approach to finding solutions. Political momentum, compounded by media coverage, garnered massive support for what would be the Healthy Food Financing Initiative (HFFI) (America’s Healthy 2024).

According to their website, “HFFI provides grants, loans, and technical assistance to improve access to healthy food in underserved areas, create and preserve quality jobs, and revitalize low-income communities. HFFI supports the capacity of local and regional Healthy Food Financing Partnerships and provides financial and technical assistance to eligible healthy food retailers and food enterprises to overcome the higher costs and initial barriers to entry in areas with inequitable access” (America’s Healthy 2024).

This federal program began in 2010 under the Obama administration and dispersed millions of dollars to subsidize grocery stores and food markets in communities facing high levels of food insecurity (America’s Healthy 2024). Only a year later, the USDA launched an online map, the “Food Desert Locator,” to the public, reinforcing the idea that proximity to grocery stores was the key variable creating food insecurity (Kolb 2021; America’s Healthy 2024). These media pushes also associated this lack of food access with bad health outcomes in these communities.

In *Retail Inequality*, Kolb (2021) outlines several popular culture food critics who arose during this time. Among them is Michel Pollan and his famed *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, a book

outlining the “numerous traps our food system sets for us.” Pollan asserts that America’s reliance on a national food system is harmful to Americans’ health and animal wellbeing. Pollan’s early writings claim that refocusing on a more local food system that is primarily vegan/vegetarian will create a more sustainable food system, and while he never explicitly commented on food apartheid, his thinking has highly influenced those in the alternative food movement who are working on these issues. Writing like Pollan’s reinforce the idea that local food should be the primary solution for food insecurity and for America’s health crisis but overlook the reality of food apartheid.

Another popular culture moment that is not included directly in *Retail Inequality* but is prevalent to formulating food insecurity solutions is the idea of the “nudge.” Written originally in 2009 by Richard H. Thaler, and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* is a book about how simple shifts in choice architecture can create a big impact, specifically in food choices. Since its original publication in 2009, subsequent editions of the book have been published updating the nudge principle to present-day issues. Thaler and Sunstein use the layout of a grocery store to describe the power of the nudge, suggesting that the placement of food in a grocery store has a significant impact on what consumers buy (Readinggraphics 2024).

It is a simple enough concept. Food at eye level is more likely to be purchased. More frequently bought items like milk and eggs are placed in the back of the store, forcing consumers to walk through the aisles of other food, potentially spending more on processed foods.

This framework flourished during the late aughts and early 2010s and was applied to food placement in grocery stores and the distance from homes to grocery stores. Using nudge logic, the

solution to food apartheid is simple: place grocery stores in food deserts and immediately draw in consumers from those areas who have been lacking access to fresh food.

However, recent critics have found that this framework is not adequate to address the complexity of food apartheid. In an episode of the podcast *If Books Could Kill*, hosts Hobbes and Shamshiri (2023) criticize the one-track-mindedness of the nudge framework. Rather than acknowledging the wholeness and complexity of the human brain, nudge frameworks suggest that simple, seemingly meaningless changes in choice architecture can significantly alter outcomes (Hobbes & Shamshiri 2023). Thinking like this contributed to the simplification of food insecurity framework, resulting in solutions that rely on easy, straightforward answers that do not account for the complexities of human behaviors.

Along the same thread, Kolb cites Michael Ruhlman, another prolific author of over 20 books on food and restaurants of this time, who adheres to this one-track-mind nudge ideology on a grander scale. Kolb (2021) explains:

[Ruhlman] draws a straight line from the lack of grocery stores to poor health outcomes. From his perspective, the food desert debate is over, and now is the time for action – if we wait, it will be impossible for people to resist the convenient and cheap items under their noses. As for the solution, his answer is clear: healthier options. Put them in place, reduce the travel and purchase costs, and we will see the dietary changes for the better. Build them and they will come. (p. 33)

Much like the framework for the BMI, this idea of “give them healthy options and they will buy them” seems great on a large scale but falls apart on the individual level.

Let us take a scenario. Say you have just worked eight hours, and you have not eaten anything all day. On your way home, you pass a grocery store and a fast-food place. You calculate quickly how long you will sit in the drive-thru line as opposed to how long it would take you to go into the grocery store and pick out the food you need.

If you have access to a kitchen, utensils, pots and pans, stove, microwave, etc., you might also consider how long it will take you to properly prepare the food you bought. And then to wash all the dishes – my least favorite part. But these considerations only matter if you have access to a working kitchen. In American, 8.2 out of every 1,000 do not have access to an adequate kitchen, making buying food from the grocery store that needs prepared or cooked useless (Lucas & Ungar 2020).

You think about how many mouths you will have to feed. If you have hungry kids coming home from school, getting them something to eat is a top priority. Although dinner is usually an ordeal in many households, there are plenty of other things that happen when people come home from work and school: rehashing the day's events, homework, playing, and getting ready for bed being just a few among the infinite possibilities. Humans do much more than just eat.

You also may think about how you are feeling. If you have had a particularly good, particularly bad, or particularly normal day, you might just want to get yourself a little treat!

You may also think about what the food means to you. I personally have a fond love for a vanilla frosty from Wendy's because it reminds me of warm summer days with my grandma, taking a trip in town – in our car – to pick up the sweet treat. On days when I miss my grandma the most, you will find me parked in the Wendy's parking lot, frosty in hand, Elvis on the radio, reliving my childhood vicariously through a cup of ice cream.

All of that to say that proximity is not the only factor in our decisions about anything, let alone food. And this list of considerations is not exhaustive – we have not even considered price, routine, and cultural significance yet.

An additional critical assumption that Ruhlman makes is that providing fresh, “healthy” food options to underserved communities would increase their overall health. He decides that people already have the desire to be “healthy” but lack the means necessary to become healthy.

I place “healthy” in quotation marks because in many cases, I find the term arbitrary. Most often, when we are talking about “health,” we picture someone thin, white, and fit but not too muscular. And the reality is, very few individuals possess the right genes, or the infinite money and time needed to look like this ideal of health.

And, as we will explore later, when we think about a “healthy” diet, we are thinking about a very culturally specific type of diet. Our idea of “healthy” often cages us in, keeping out other, more diverse ways of thinking about health and wellbeing that defy our usual definition like HAES.

But anyways, back to the point. Food justice advocates in the early years of implementing food desert solutions mostly agreed with Ruhlman and the nudge principle: combatting food insecurity and removing food deserts could also be a way to address the obesity epidemic. Two birds, one stone! Unfortunately, this simple explanation was not equipped to handle the complex problem of food apartheid.

Grocery Stores

The beginning of addressing food apartheid was filled with many an assumption about the potential impact of grocery stores in food deserts. As mentioned earlier, these seemed to be the most simple and logical solutions to alleviating food deserts. Anxieties about the diets of BIPOC communities who lacked access to fresh, local food and whose diets subsisted (supposedly) on fast food also fueled the fire for supporting grocery store initiatives in food deserts.

Under HFFI, new grocery stores, food markets, and food stands began popping up in food deserts across the country. Their initial openings received abundant news coverage, and the excitement at the change in food landscape buzzed through media outlets, community leaders, and political figures (Kolb 2021).

However, when most stores closed a year later, media coverage sounded the alarm ... with crickets.

Failing stores received far less media coverage in their deaths than they did in their beginnings, and the media coverage that did cover the failures explained the loss in a way that kept the prevailing food desert solution framework intact (Kolb 2021).

“Food deserts need grocery stores,” activist insisted, “This one just did not work for some quirky reason! And the same thing in those other 10 cities! It is just so quirky! We are still right!”

Kolb cites five specific instances where markets and grocery stores opened and closed within a year and analyzes the language used to describe this phenomenon in media coverage.

In an example describing the Maywood Market in Illinois, Kolb (2021) describes how initial interventions “assume unmet demand in food deserts, with some predicting that newfound

supply will increase consumers' appetite for fresh produce and wholesome foods." Essentially, this market was founded under the influence of Ruhlman's theory about invigorating existing desires to be healthy.

Maywood Market was also opened with the framing that it would be part of the revitalization of the otherwise bare urban neighborhood, drawing in consumers from outside of the community to shop, providing ample profit to keep the store open for decades.

It would close in only six months.

One of my favorite lines of *Retail Inequality* comes while unpacking this failure and media framing: "Here we see hints of the core complaint about retail inequality: the symbolic value of healthier options is greater than the sum of their nutritional benefits. Still, though, it's wrapped in the flawed assumptions that grandmothers would readily change their shopping and cooking habits" (Kolb 2021:39).

I have to laugh because it's true! Solutions suggesting that food apartheid can be fixed with grocery stores are grounded in assumptions that leave out any sense of our complex *humanness*. The people living in food deserts have been doing so for decades, and they have already established a routine that works for them despite the lack of grocery stores in their proximity. People are not going to just uproot their entire routine to shop somewhere new, especially not for vegetables.

Farmers' Markets

Even as previous interventions failed, food justice advocates continued to search for alternative means of addressing food apartheid.

Throughout history, there have been several so-called alternative food movements. From the first sweeps of vegetarianism and veganism to our present-day obsession with organic, cage free, and natural foods, people have always opposed food norms and sought alternatives that they found better for their body and for the earth. If society was looking for a food alternative that may be able to salvage the system of food apartheid, who better to ask than the people who have been searching for an alternative themselves for almost a century?

One of the main tenets of the current alternative food movement is that local food sits at the top of the food chain. If you can have access to food that is grown right in your neighborhood, you are cutting down on carbon emissions and using your money to support your community, not some big-brand multi-billion-dollar corporation.

So, when people in the alternative food movement started getting involved in creating a solution for food apartheid, farmers' markets and community gardens began popping up in food deserts. Because they require less money to operate, support local entities, and provide some fresh fruits and vegetables to communities, they seemed like the perfect way to supplement existing food markets in communities who lacked access to healthier options.

Media coverage surrounding farmers' markets' capabilities to alleviate food insecurity ring similar bells to those touting support for new grocery stores in food deserts:

Local farmers' markets, however, can serve as community-level interventions, bringing healthy food options to food deserts, and they are viewed as just one way to begin addressing the nation's chronic health problems. Farmers' markets can be purposefully developed in communities with high rates of poverty, communities of color, and/or

communities with limited access to healthy foods. (The Institute for Functional Medicine 2022)

Even the NIH has begun studying the effects of farmers' markets on food insecure communities, hoping that "farmers' markets could be established in food deserts to increase availability of healthy food, thereby reducing the population's risk of developing obesity and diet-related chronic diseases" (Brace et al. 2020). Some farmers' markets are also able to accept SNAP and EBT credit and offer special promotions and lower prices for those who spend them on fresh fruits and vegetables (Brace et al. 2020).

Now do not get me wrong, I am an absolute sucker for gardening and a good farmers' market. The fresh produce, socialization, being outdoors and away from the blinding lights, blaring music, and never-ending labyrinth of chain grocery stores are all green flags in my book. I am even one of those people who rides my bike to the market on sunny days and feels great about cutting down on carbon emissions.

But I also recognize the ways in which farmers' markets are untenable to solve food apartheid, and the belief that they can is permeated with underlying assumptions about people, food, and race. As fat activist and writer Aubrey Gordon once said, "wellness culture is just diet culture repackaged with classism and racism built in," and placing farmers' markets at the top of the food chain is exactly that (Gordon & Hobbes 2024).

Answering the "Why?"

When grocery stores, farmers' markets, and community gardens were placed in food deserts to provide a healthier diet, although it would not be clear to most, there was a specific type

of diet in mind. Most notably, one perpetuated by white, middle-to-upper-class food justice activists.

It is practically subconscious to those of us who grew up without any other cultural attachment to food, and it is why we do not blink an eye when we must venture into the cultural food aisle at Walmart when we have a taco night. There is an “otherness” to the cultural food aisle, as in, this is food “we” eat when we want to spice things up but is not necessarily a staple in our diet.

We seem to forget that there are people whose diet and cuisine is primarily found in that singular aisle.

Authors like Dr. Psyche Williams-Forsen (2022) assert that food is not merely something that we require for nutritional value; food is a conveyor of power. In her book, *Eating While Black: Food Shaming and Race in America*, Williams-Forsen explores how Black food culture has been erased, stereotyped, and demonized throughout history, creating the environment for food apartheid solutions that continually miss the mark at serving primarily BIPOC communities.

One of the main ideas that Williams-Forsen discusses in her book is that the current alternative food movement pays little attention to how food is culturally significant to diverse communities, especially when it comes to implementing fresh fruits and vegetables through farmers’ markets.

Increasingly, grant programs have become available to farmers and community members looking to alleviate food apartheid specifically in BIPOC communities. This usually looks like outside entities applying, curating, and advertising farmers' markets in neighborhoods that are not their hometown.

Williams-Forson (2022) has visited many markets where startup costs come from such a funding source, and she outlines the bleak experience of shopping at and talking to the owners of these markets:

Before I knew it, I had spent upwards of fifty dollars for only a couple of items that would last my daughter and me maybe a few days. I had gotten most of the way around the loop when I thought, “I have to stop or I will be broke when I leave here.” I also knew I would definitely be stopping by Food Lion on the way home to get all of the “real” things I needed from the store. (p. 171)

Her experience of financial worry while shopping is not restricted to only people of color. One of the primary reasons that people do not shop at farmers’ markets is because of the price of local products (Hewawitharana et al. 2022).

And if Williams-Forson, a professor and department chair in the Department of American Studies at the University of Maryland College Park, is worried about how much money she is spending at the farmers’ market, what can that possibly mean for the rest of us less educated, less financially successful individuals?

But it is not just money that keeps Black people away from these markets according to Williams-Forson. Even while in a market created to serve the surrounding Black community, she observes that only a few customers and one vendor who looked like her (Williams-Forson 2022).

This was one of the issues that market managers brought to Williams-Forson’s attention when she attended their market. Despite being centrally located in BIPOC communities, primary shoppers were still white and affluent, often traveling into town for the market. In one such interaction with a manager, Williams-Forson (2022) was asked if she had any suggestions for

diversifying the market: “I responded by asking her if she had gone into the community to let them know she is there. She replied that she had not. I then suggested that she might want to contact some of the local houses of worship where primarily African American people attended service” (p. 153).

I wish that I could report that this interaction is an exception to the norm, but unfortunately, this is the case with most markets set up with intention to provide produce to BIPOC communities. Little input from communities of color is going into these markets’ creation, and as a result, very small numbers of BIPOC residents feel welcome in these spaces.

Let us return to earlier in the chapter where I highlighted the distinction between the rest of Walmart and the multicultural aisle. A primary difference between a farmers’ market and a Walmart, at least in this regard, is that Walmarts *have* a multicultural aisle. Williams-Forson asserts that in terms of produce, okra, cabbage, collard greens, sweet potatoes, squash, cabbages, leeks, purple peas, and peppers are Black food staples. Journey to a farmers’ market, and you will most likely be hard-pressed to find one, let alone all, of those items available for sale. There is a myriad of reasons why this is the case, but perhaps the most dominating one is that no one thought to include them.

Underneath this “no one thought to include them” are two interconnected issues. One is that, as previously mentioned, most farmers’ markets made to address food insecurity neglect to get the input of those communities as they are created. The second is that most of these markets do not have farmers of color selling produce.

Several studies estimate that on average, vendors at farmers’ markets are usually around 73% white and 18% people of color (Cambell 2014; Taylor 2022).

There are not many Black farmers in general – only about 2% in the U.S. identify as Black – so the pool of farmers itself is small (Legal Defense Fund 2023). But this is also a result of systemic racial oppression in the farming industry that has kept Black farmers from buying land, receiving loans, and finding support from federal programs (Legal Defense Fund 2023). While the specifics of this issue are outside of the scope of this thesis, national acceptance and proclamation of the effects of racism in the farming industry exist, and several programs are attempting to alleviate past disparities (Congressional Research Service 2021; Yale Law School 2021; Legal Defense Fund 2023).

So, few farmers are Black, especially in urban areas where farmers' markets are created to alleviate food apartheid. But even if farmers in these areas *are* Black, they probably weren't sought out as potential vendors where managers are outsiders in the neighborhoods they wish to serve.

This is a clear issue considering the stated purpose of these markets is to serve communities of color, especially when it has been outlined in literature for years that "farmers' markets operated by people of color attract more customers and vendors of color than those administered by white market managers" (Legal Defense Fund 2023). This does not just go for farmers' markets, though. People are more comfortable dealing with people who look like, act like, talk like, and are like them. So, it seems obvious that one of the best ways to attract BIPOC to farmers' markets is to have BIPOC running those farmers' markets.

Unfortunately, that obviousness has been lost on most farmers' market managers. So, white patrons and farmers dominate the farmers' market space. And because white farmers have a primarily "white" diet, much of what they grow excludes those foods that Williams-Forson cites as Black produce.

Beyond thinking to include these foods, growing culturally diverse produce is also a challenge for American farmers. Williams-Forson (2022) explains:

I had never considered the problems that American soil and temperatures would pose for someone from outside the country who wanted to plant the foods they were accustomed to. Many of these nuances are lost on people because we just do not go deep enough in our conversations about food. We tend to stop with our own experiences, which are important and valid but represent only one perspective. (p. 183)

In places like Erie that have high numbers of immigrants and refugees, considering climate in local food solutions to food insecurity is huge. The temperature, sunlight, and soil conditions vary vastly across the globe, so growing food that is culturally appropriate across climate lines, while not impossible, can be a huge challenge.

With the proper resources, farming diverse produce can be possible. Structures like high tunnels, greenhouses, and soil amendments can provide more heat, sunlight, and nutrients for plants that have different climate needs, but these are only possible if there is money, space, and time allocated towards the effort.

And even then, plants are finicky. Produce grown in a new area can take several years of practice to perfect. Bugs and other pests may also become an issue. And sometimes, plants just die. It is a complicated process that does not have an easy answer.

And as Williams-Forson points out, most people are not having these complicated conversations in the first place. At least, they were not during the initial conversations about alleviating food apartheid. Work like hers attempts to bring these issues to the forefront of the conversation in hopes that future solutions can be more nuanced.

Farmers' markets and grocery stores can be solutions to food apartheid, but when aiming to alleviate food insecurity in BIPOC communities, considering the specifics of BIPOC diets is crucial to understanding how solutions can be tailored to actually help those communities. Making assumptions about diets and food choices has set the stage for the failures of markets and stores across the country, and recognizing and embracing human complexity might make it easier to find solutions that work.

A Caveat

It's important to draw attention to the fact that I can hold both realities at once, meaning that I can be a bike-riding, farmers' market loving sustainable food system advocate and criticize the system at the same exact time, because asking for things to be better doesn't mean you have to fully remove yourself from participating in things that aren't directly causing anyone harm, especially if they bring you joy.

I feel the same way about the fact that I rely on my car for transportation: just because I drive does not mean I cannot insist that large companies reduce carbon emissions. That does not make me a hypocrite, it makes me human.

This grey area is a difficult space to inhabit. I feel increasingly aware of how racism permeates all systems of society and how I am complicit in these systems. However, overly focusing on my complicit-ness paralyzes me from making any meaningful change.

I am not perfect, and neither is this thesis. But I think embracing the grey area makes it better (hopefully?) than the past discourse. Further exploration of the importance of embracing this grey area can be found in the final chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 5

Understanding the Underserved: A Research Project

After diving into this world of food apartheid and reading as much discourse as I could get my hands on, I still had some questions. As an undergraduate student living in Erie, I recognized that I was living in an area affected by food apartheid. Many of the solutions discussed in *Retail Inequality* were taking place in my community, and I wanted to get a sense of how things were working out here.

So, in the summer of 2023, I applied for and received funding from Penn State University's Erickson Discovery Grant to pursue research that I titled "Understanding the Underserved: Why Farmers' Market Access is not Equitable."

Rather than focusing on quantitative measures, I was more interested in understanding the qualitative, sociological measures that may have created barriers for BIPOC from accessing food spaces specifically created for alleviating food insecurity in their neighborhoods. After all, it seemed clear to me that these interventions were not working on a national scale, but specific reasons for the failure had not been conclusively measured. Compiling all the research I had encountered, I decided to focus on farmers' markets as they were a prominent and interesting means of addressing food insecurity in Erie.

According to the USDA Economic Research Service, surveys conducted in 2019 show there were around 9,000 farmers' markets in the U.S. (USDA ERS "Charts" 2022). As of 2019, more than half of U.S. counties had at least one farmers' market that accepted credit cards, and

one-third of U.S. counties had one or more farmers' markets that accepted SNAP and EBT (USDA ERS "Charts" 2022). Because of this push, farmers' markets have seen a 162% increase in SNAP redemption (Farmers' Market Coalition 2022).

Because of these rapid changes made to purchasing options, demographic shifts in who shops at farmers' markets were expected. The inclusion of credit cards, SNAP, and EBT at farmers' markets aimed to bring in shoppers of poorer demographics and BIPOC in hopes of alleviating the high levels of food insecurity present in these communities. However, studies dating from the 1990s to the present have consistently shown that the primary shoppers at farmers' markets are white and middle-to-upper-class despite these updates (Dorceta et al. 2022).

An initial review of the literature on these topics revealed several gaps in the research (Dodds & Holmes 2016; Crowe et al. 2018; Mino et al. 2018; Singleton et al. 2020). Although it is clear that BIPOC are less likely to shop at farmers' markets, reasons beyond economic constraints have not conclusively been determined (Singleton et al. 2020). The new additions of SNAP and EBT benefits without a notable change in farmers' market shopper demographics suggest underlying social explanations for this pattern that are yet to be uncovered (Crowe et al. 2018).

Simply put, "Understanding the Underserved" attempted to answer three main research questions:

- Though SNAP and EBT have been integrated into many farmers' markets, what keeps people of lower socioeconomic status from shopping there?
- What are some of the barriers preventing people of color from shopping at farmers' markets?

- What can be done to make farmers' markets more equitable and inclusive?

Books like *Eating While Black* and *Retail Inequality* suggest several explanations for the failure of food apartheid solutions, and I wanted to see how well these hypotheses held up in Erie. Additionally, I hoped that acquiring data from Erie residents would allow for more conclusive results to be drawn about what can be done to make these farmers' markets more accessible and successful.

Farmers' Market Background

Farmers' markets have been identified as racialized spaces, meaning that they are predominantly dominated by a specific racial category and affirm certain ideas and beliefs specific to that particular race (Singleton et al. 2020). Most notably, farmers' markets are white spaces and adhere most closely to the tenets of liberal middle-to-upper-class norms (Singleton et al. 2020).

In non-scholarly terms, this means that there is an essence to farmers' markets that makes white people more comfortable there. It reminds me of the stereotypical concept of lunch tables in high school and how certain groups of people are drawn to one another. The jocks, the theater kids, the art kids, and other made-up roles and groups stick together at their own tables, and crossing the threshold from one table to another can cause discomfort, anxiety, and even a feeling of being unwelcomed. Think of farmers' markets as the lunch table for white, middle-to-upper-class people who really care about where their food comes from. Entering this space when you do not "fit in" can feel unwelcoming.

The alternative food movement as made popular by activists like Eric Schlosser and Michael Pollan created the groundwork for these racialized spaces by mainstreaming the idea that

eating and spending money on “the right food” is a political action. As concerns about ethical handling of animals, the environmental impact of where food comes from, and meat versus plant-based or vegan diets rose, the alternative food movement grew. Eating local food alleviates almost all these concerns about food, and farmers’ markets act (in theory) as the perfect space to do so.

Most people think that eating food from farmers’ markets means eating “good food that is good for your body and for the earth”: a thought often perpetuated by predominantly white people. Which is great, except historically the only people that could afford to go to farmers’ markets were white, middle-to-upper-class people. If we take the sentiment that “good food that is good for your body and for the earth” comes from a farmers’ market to its logical conclusion, then food that *does* *not* come from a farmers’ market is not good for the earth or good for you.

Obviously, a person cannot get all their food from the farmers’ market to have a full, well-rounded diet, but even buying a few vegetables from a farmers’ market can give the sense that you are doing something good.

There is a clear moral hierarchy not only in what we eat but where it comes from. A head of lettuce from the store isn’t as much to brag about as a head of lettuce the neighborhood farmer grew in their backyard in the same way that the keto cookies you could buy at the gas station aren’t as brag-worthy as the homemade keto cookies my dad makes (but they both taste terrible, by the way).

I suspected that there may be a great deal of guilt and shame associated with not shopping at a farmers’ market because I feel guilty for not shopping at farmers’ markets. Here I am, a strong advocate for sustainability and sustainable food systems, yet I still shop at Walmart on occasion out of mere convenience and affordability. Once you become aware of how harmful “non-

sustainable” shopping can be via guilt-inducing ads that place the fate of our world on an individual shopper’s shoulders, it becomes hard to wipe your mind of their haunting messages. Every single-use plastic, every hamburger, every non-local, non-organic vegetable sends a tinge of guilt up my spine.

What good is this guilt doing me, you, and our planet?

The short answer: nothing. The reality is, I do not have the financial means to always shop locally at farmers’ markets or continually buy organic produce, and neither does the vast majority of the population.

What does this mean for marginalized groups who most likely feel left out of the accepted circle of farmers’ market patrons?

Beyond exploring tangible barriers for BIPOC shopping at farmers’ markets such as prices, locations of markets, and hours, I wondered if there were social and invisible barriers that kept BIPOC shoppers away from farmers’ markets because they did not feel welcome.

Williams-Forsen's book provided some very interesting insights on the experiences of walking through a farmers’ market meant to provide food for nearby Black neighborhoods that confirmed some of my suspicions:

So it was not just the fact that there were no purple-hulled peas, jams, pickles, melons, peaches, loaves, over-sweetened cakes and pies, and few vendors of color, but the space did not have *the feel* of markets meant to welcome African Americans. There were no soaps, hair products, jewelry, or clothing, all items frequently found at Black-run markets. Rather,

the environment of the farmers' market was sterile – meaning there was no sense of what I call *Black food energy* to signal “You are welcome here.” (Williams-Forson 2022:156)

Recent research has increasingly focused on tangible aspects of farmers' markets, continuing to assert that if fresh, local produce is provided to BIPOC communities, then they will buy the food. Yet, Williams-Forson's observations strike through the fallacy of this idea, pointing to more social, invisible norms that affect consumers' shopping choices.

I wondered if this was true for farmers' markets in Erie as well. By combining all these considerations that scholars were pointing to about the inability of farmers' markets to alleviate food insecurity in BIPOC communities, “Understanding the Underserved” was created.

Methods

This project utilized a questionnaire modeled after past sociological research and was approved by the IRB as valid human subject research. No identifying information was collected but demographics were included. Data collection incorporated a variety of question types (open-ended, multiple-choice) and scales such as the Likert Scale.

Questionnaires were distributed in person at local farmers' markets, promoted via social media, and sent out via listservs throughout Penn State University, and via local groups such as Erie's Food Policy Advisory Council (FPAC), Bayfront Eastside Task Force (BEST), the Sisters of Saint Joseph Neighborhood Network (SSJNN), Our West Bayfront, and U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) Agricultural Partnership Program.

Results

Questions were aimed at understanding the barriers that create farmers' market avoidance. The focus of the research was determining consumers' motivations for choosing where to shop, and how marketing, advertising, and physical and logistical limitations influence these choices. Approximately 200 people were surveyed for qualitative data about their knowledge of and attitudes towards farmers' markets.

My initial hypothesis after reviewing the relevant literature predicted that white, middle- and upper-class people would feel comfortable shopping at farmers' markets because they are primarily white spaces.

Data showed the contrary. When white respondents were asked: *Whether you have been to a farmers' market or not, can you list three words that describe how you would feel being there? (Examples: happy, nervous, unsure)*, their response ranged from "healthy, good, virtuous, supportive, and charitable," to "nervous, skeptical, unsure, let down, wasteful, anxious, overwhelmed, and out-of-place."

Responses with positive connotations such as "virtuous, supportive, and charitable" may suggest that being at a farmers' market made shoppers feel good because they were *doing* good and following social norms. Scholars have noted this phenomenon as being present throughout the alternative food movement, as pressure to conform to acceptable standards reinforces positive emotions from society and within us.

This pressure often overlooks the abilities that a person has and assumes they have the means to, in this case, shop at a farmers' market. This begs the question then, if one *does not* shop at a farmers' market are they sinful, obstructive, and selfish? Clearly society would not usually

directly label a person as such, but the feelings of guilt and sadness can nevertheless result from this lack of privilege.

Although determining the precise cause of people's discomfort with shopping at farmers' markets was beyond the scope of this project, responses such as "nervous and out-of-place" suggest a feeling of noncompliance with the social norms at farmers' markets—norms that, as scholars note, were created primarily by white people in the first place. If this is the case, it is important then to recognize how this feeling of not belonging is likely exacerbated in BIPOC communities.

More practical complaints about farmers' markets also surfaced such as "time consuming and too much walking." Considering that a great deal of farmers' markets consumers are older (survey data had 29% of respondents as age 55+) and those who live under the poverty line, making the markets as accessible both physically (time, location, ADA accessible) and socially (welcoming, inclusive) are key to creating successful models to address food insecurity.

The brevity of this project did not allow me time to establish an ideal level of trust among underserved communities, which would be needed to comprehensively explore their relationship to farmers' markets. After all, I was a stranger in their neighborhood.

Future research needs to focus on establishing embedded, reciprocal relationships in these communities. Only a small percentage of respondents identified as BIPOC and most of these responses were recorded at the Sisters of Saint Joseph's Little Italy Farmers' Market, a market created intentionally to provide fresh, local produce to the surrounding historically underserved community.

When looking back to the Residential Security Map, Little Italy was one community that did not receive support from investors: “Little Italy, with 60 percent Italian immigrant families along with a small [number] of black households, was also considered ‘hazardous’ and one of the least desirable neighborhoods” (Burdick 2019). As such, the neighborhood is still a food desert and houses a substantial population of individuals who live under the poverty line and rely on SNAP and EBT to purchase food.

Recent literature emphasizes the inclusion of farmers of color, the selling of culturally appropriate food, and listening to the community's needs as key to creating an equitable market. In its 10th year of operation, Little Italy has successfully gained the trust of their patrons and looks to them for feedback to ensure their voices are heard. These ideas are reflected in the survey, as BIPOC respondents at Little Italy described feeling “happy,” “blessed,” and “excited” while shopping at the market. In the overall scheme of the data, BIPOC respondents at Little Italy were far more comfortable with shopping at farmers’ markets than their white counterparts who completed the survey elsewhere.

The data suggests that farmers’ markets created for underserved communities with their voices at the forefront of formation can provide access to fresh, local food in a welcoming setting. Further research in food justice can also be used to increase food security and dismantle systematic oppression in food spaces and beyond.

Chapter 6

Considerations: A Tangible Path Forward

So, what does this all mean? I started this food system analysis journey almost two years ago, and I am still not fully certain I have an answer. However, there are several key facts I have learned along the way that seem especially poignant to a necessary framework shift that could cultivate more equity in our modern-day food system solutions.

Several organizations have created guides for starting anti-racist farmers' markets meant to serve BIPOC communities and food deserts. After perusing a few of these guides, and even having someone tell me that the answers to all the questions I had about how to create an equitable farmers' market were located in their guide, I mostly found dense, liberal-minded, well-meaning literature that boiled down to one or two main points.

In a sweeping generalization, the gist of these guides is to make the input of the stakeholders (i.e. the BIPOC community) central to every decision made about creating the farmers' market without overburdening them with the work of creating it. Easier said than done, which is why all those packets are almost 100 pages and hardly any markets are successful.

I love the fact that people are actively trying to create frameworks of reference to lessen racism in the farmers' market and alternative food space. Their work is great and important, and I want to emphasize that *thinking about these issues is extremely necessary work*.

But Williams-Forsen poses a question from Julie Guthman in her text that strikes through all those guidebooks' spines, questioning *why we need these solutions in the first place*. Up to this point in history, the alternative food movement has not been successful in addressing food

apartheid. BIPOC residents do not change their shopping routines even when there is fresh and local produce available. Thus, BIPOC diets have not changed, and neither has the so-called obesity epidemic. Williams-Forson (2022) explains:

Rather than focusing on why African American neighborhoods reject or accept such traditional alternative food projects, she suggests that we reframe the questions: rather than ask why Black people won't participate, we should question "white desire to enroll Black people in a particular set of food practices." Here, Guthman is referring to the constant discourse pushing local food eating and, more importantly, buying local food from farmers' markets. (p. 162)

What Guthman and Williams-Forson are pointing to here is the desire for nation-wide frameworks as the solution to food apartheid. We often seem stuck on the idea that if something works for one community then it must work for another. In all honesty, there seems to be a serious lack of critical and complex thinking for those leading the charge. Why must every community rely on local food pathways when this approach is not working for most people?

What I have learned from all the sources I have read and conversations that I have had is that we have created very narrow, very unhuman ways of thinking about food apartheid, retail inequality, and systemic discrimination. This narrow thinking creates solutions, as Guthman points out, that force individuals to adhere to a certain way of life that is not true to themselves, their routines, their heritage, and their realities.

Lesser Minds Bias & Complex Personhood

The concept that encompasses this tendency to create frameworks that only work for a particular group of people is called lesser minds bias.

Psychologists have identified that because humans can only experience their own consciousness, we have trouble comprehending the minds of people outside of us. However, in adolescence, humans tend to overcome this paradox and learn to see others as having their own minds and consciousness. But, as psychologists Waytz, Epley, & Schroder (2014) point out in their paper “The Lesser Minds Problem,” “even though it may be quite easy to think about others’ thoughts, feelings, or other mental states, the mind attributed to others may be systematically lacking in complexity, depth, and intensity.”

Even though we can recognize the complexity of our own mind and lives, we often cannot afford to consider this same complexity in other people, especially those who are not present constantly in our lives. Indeed, studies show that the more we know a person, the more complexity we see them having (Waytz et. al 2014). However, when it comes to people we do not know, and especially large groups of people that we are not fully acquainted with, we often mold them into simple, single-minded individuals.

Think back to the previous example given about what type of food choices you would make after a long day of work. Would you go to the grocery store or purchase fast food if you did not have a kitchen, had many mouths to feed, or did not have the time to prepare a full meal?

Lesser minds bias means that when we ask, *if we put grocery stores in neighborhoods where there are none, will people go to them?*, we do not consider if the people we are talking about have kitchens, the time to prepare a meal, or many mouths to feed. In the past, we have

drawn a straight line between providing grocery stores and people shopping there, but the human experience is anything but a straight line.

This is true across many identity lines but can be particularly significant when considering how majority groups view minority groups, and in the food apartheid debate, lesser minds bias clearly made an impact in terms of white folks creating solutions for BIPOC, immigrant, and refugee populations without fully comprehending the complexity of their lives.

Being aware of the ways in which lesser minds bias affects how we perceive people outside of ourselves is key to understanding why when we are creating policies meant to serve other groups—and I cannot stress this enough—*we need to involve those groups*. No one person can 100% accurately speak to the experiences of any other singular person, let alone a whole group of people speaking for another whole group of people. For the most part, the food desert discourse thus far has been just that: far more speaking than listening.

In coalition with lesser minds bias is the idea that solutions regarding equity for marginalized groups often neglect recognizing complex personhood. In a book titled *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* by Avery F. Gordon (2011), she outlines so beautifully the concept of complex personhood:

Complex personhood means that all people remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that those called “Other” are never that. Complex personhood means that the stories people tell about themselves, about their troubles, about their social worlds, and about their

society's problems are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching toward...Complex personhood means that even those who haunt our dominant institutions and their systems of value are haunted too by things they sometimes have names for and sometimes do not.

Truthfully, her prose takes my breath away with how gorgeously it summarizes the human experience, and it moves me to identify that every person that I have loved, hated, and never met has a never-ending list of complexities, quirks, and nuances that I will never fully know.

The fact that we need to be reminded that our parents, friends, and partners have complex personhood should signal to us that we make assumptions about other people constantly in our daily lives. The assumption that BIPOC, immigrant, and refugee populations would spend more time, effort, and money to eat popular American foods if only they had access to them robs those individuals of their complex personhood.

Fear Not, Move Forward

Lesser minds bias also explains that this tendency to rob individuals of their complex personhood is a side effect of being human. We categorize, make assumptions, and put each other in boxes because our brains cannot handle the vast amount of information it is required to take in daily. I intend to impart no shame upon anyone who has minimized the experiences of someone else in their mind because I have certainly done it, too. In *The Body is not an Apology*, Taylor (2021) summarizes beautifully how what we do not know should be considered a starting point for expanding ourselves: "Being uncertain, lacking information or simply not knowing something ought not be an indictment against our intelligence or value. Lots of exceptionally smart people

can't work a copy machine. This is not about smarts. Nor am I proposing we eschew information. Quite the contrary, this is an invitation to curiosity" (p. 19).

What we do not know is an invitation to ask new questions. How did we establish the view we have of Black people, trans people, queer people, or any other marginalized group? Have we talked to multiple people in that identity category, or did we learn our viewpoints from friends, family, church, social media, etc.? If we have not had these conversations, we should consider asking what assumptions we have made about these groups of people and why we made them. What stories have we been telling ourselves about the rest of the world, and how have these stories comforted us?

Recognizing if and why these questions may make us uncomfortable is a great place to start. And keep in mind, as Taylor points out, what we do not know and have assumed is not a reflection of our intelligence, but of the society we live in.

I have had to spend so much time throughout this project reflecting on assumptions I had made, and I quickly realized that guilt and shame that can come from this reflecting are mechanisms of the same oppression that creates injustice. Guilt and shame are meant to hinder social progress and keep individuals stagnant in a society where hierarchies persist, and divisiveness thrives.

On the micro level, exploring how lesser minds bias has affected the way you interact with others can cultivate more equitable and human connection in relationships. On the macro level, when policy makers, political leaders, and food justice activists make decisions about food security with their specific community in mind (and with input from that community), government assistance, federal funding, and systemic resources can be used in a more impactful way.

Stacked into the discussion about food apartheid is not just the tendency toward having one-track-minded views of groups of people, but also of food.

After spending two years engulfed in the alternative food and food justice movement, I realized that I was having conversations about food in a very disjointed way. Just as we have a hard time comprehending an entire person, we also tend to have a hard time comprehending all that food encompasses. Here are some categories that I have noticed people tend to stick to when they are having a conversation about food:

- Food for taste or pleasure.
- Food as comfort.
- Food as a reminder of the past, usually childhood.
- Food as a tool for weight loss/health.
- Diets such as veganism, vegetarianism, low carb, Mediterranean, etc.
- Food in specific cultures, cuisines, or locations around the world.
- Food as an environmental tool used to mitigate climate change, food waste, etc.
- Food as agriculture.
- Food in low-income neighborhoods including discussion about SNAP and EBT.
- Disordered eating, eating disorders, and other food related illnesses.

That is a lot of categories, and the list is not exhaustive. But collecting this list has allowed me to recognize that, in conversations about food, we are often missing a great deal of other considerations. Specifically, in a discussion about food apartheid, we almost exclusively rely on conversations focused on food in low-income neighborhoods, food as a tool for weight loss/health,

food as agriculture, and food as an environmental tool. What you may notice about those four categories is that none of them incorporate people, their lives, preferences, and experiences.

I blame this mostly on the initial food desert discourse and framing that was discussed in previous chapters. By neglecting to recognize how redlining and the legacy of racism played a part in the creation of our modern food system, past activists removed the context that centered the marginalized groups that food apartheid solutions aimed to serve. This became a debate about food deserts and food insecurity rather than one about American's history of allowing inequality and inequity to persist in both public and private spaces.

Refocusing the debate around food apartheid on people and resisting the urge to create nationwide frameworks for solving complex problems seems to me a great place to start in creating a more equitable food system.

Large scale-frameworks can be helpful to an extent, but they often come with assumptions about marginalized groups that, when taken as fact, negate much of the positive intention brought along with them. Keeping these biases and tendencies at the forefront of our minds is, for me, the first step in creating a more just and equitable food system.

Chapter 7

A “Conclusion”

Setting out to answer the essential question this thesis outlined is a complex task. Trying to identify why past solutions for food apartheid persist despite evidence of their continued failure led to digging deep into our human nature in a way that one discipline cannot account for. The research and discussion presented here are not an exhaustive list of considerations required to fully form a tangible, realistic path forward to completely solving food apartheid, but it is a start.

Further research is required in many aspects of this thesis, including but not limited to, how interventions in food deserts can be economically viable, how solutions can better account for diverse diets and experiences, continuing effects of systemic racism in social and political context, and the effects of persistent moralizing messaging in the alternative food movement.

This project has touched me in a myriad of way, and I am continually amazed at how these issues permeate our daily lives.

At a local business recently, I was speaking to the proprietor who asked me about school and what I studied. I told them my major, and they asked what I was interested in writing about. Hesitantly, I gave them the abridged abstract of this very thesis, and they smiled at me knowingly.

On the wall next to where we chatted were several newspaper articles, one titled “Immigrant from Japan Finding Success in Erie, PA.” I read the article as we talked, recognizing that I was speaking to that very person—and someone experiencing the very phenomenon that this thesis set out to explore.

They asked me what I thought about the recent closing of the food co-op downtown. Based on what I had considered in this thesis, I suggested that the co-op needed people with a higher income than the surrounding area to shop there to be economically viable, and although it was attempting to alleviate a food desert, it didn't necessarily provide the right food at a reasonable price point to help those living downtown.

They agreed, noting that they never shopped there – it was too expensive. Besides, they did not like much of the food that was sold there, anyways. When the conversation lulled, they met my eyes once more.

“Why are you passionate about this?”

An essential question to ask; a question I had been asking myself since beginning this work over two years ago. This reminded me, as many things do, of the amazing work of Anjali Prasertong, a dietitian and writer whose work in nutrition, racial equity, and food systems centers on recognizing the beautiful grey area of constantly asking *why*?

With Prasertong in mind, I responded that I was interested in finding the connecting points between social justice, theory, and tangible solutions. I wanted to make meaningful differences in people's lives and do so in a way that would be sustainable in the long term. Following that idea led me to this thesis.

The framework built here does not just apply to food apartheid but to a multitude of issues that divide our country. Goodness knows we need every ounce of understanding, flexibility, and kindness possible, and if thesis is the macro version of looking at these issues, having one-on-one conversations with friends, family, neighbors, and strangers is the micro version.

Because this thesis is to me a living document, finding a place to fully conclude feels strange. To reiterate what was said in the introduction, what is written here serves as a grounding point for answering the essential questions, but as the world continues to change, so will the questions we need to ask. Underlying this entire thesis is the notion that space for our humanness, for fluidity of thought and action, and for the continued striving for better is central to a pursuit of equity and social justice.

With that thought in mind, I leave you with a quote from Prasertong (2023): “There is no One Right Way to live a life seeking justice and equity for all, and I wanted to create a space that allows me to talk about my own missteps, trade-offs, and tough decisions. A space to be a human being.” Reflecting on our mistakes with kindness, expanding our understanding, and moving forward has been and continues to be the central premise of this thesis and my work. It is this process that I deem necessary, because as Prasertong (2023) notes, “The world is imperfect and there are no blueprints for building a better one, no instructions to follow. There is only trial and error, working and learning alongside each other.”

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