

Weapon of White Supremacy

Hunger, in the postwar American South, was an instrument of ethnic cleansing. In December 1962 field secretaries of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) warned that local Mississippi authorities were starving out sharecroppers who tried to register to vote. “A new economic squeeze is being put on Negro citizens here. . . . Hunger and violence are apparently being used to curtail voter-registration efforts” (SNCC 1963). SNCC began a Voter Education Project in the Mississippi Delta in 1961. In response, county welfare offices began to restrict access to welfare and food aid. SNCC and its affiliates in the Council of Confederated Organizations (COFO) estimated in 1963 that twenty-two thousand people in the Delta had been left “destitute . . . as a result of being denied work or state welfare aid because of increasing economic pressure against Negro voting efforts” (Stilt 1963, 1).

Hunger was a weapon of white supremacy. “White elites used hunger as a weapon,” writes Monica M. White (2017, 21), “starving anyone who sought the right to participate in the political process into compliance.” Following a site visit to Huntsville-Madison County, Alabama, in 1968, Professor Theodore James Pinnock concluded: “It is obvious that the unwritten plan of the white power structure in the rural counties of AL is to make things so economically difficult for the Negro and poor Caucasian that they have no alternative but to leave” (in De Jong 2016, 49). Bobby Smith II (2019, 2) has described how “local, state, and national actors in Mississippi used ‘food power’—the use of food as a weapon or an element of power—to maintain white supremacy and undermine the civil rights movement.” Southern elites chose to starve out African Americans who pursued political and economic autonomy.

Food and agriculture were central to the strategies of both white supremacists and civil rights activists in the 1960s South (De Jong 2016, 26; Smith 2023, 9).

Southern landowners altered their crops and tools to reduce their dependency on Black labor. Cotton acreage declined massively in Alabama and Mississippi, in favor of livestock and other crops. As a result, SNCC field secretary Robert Moses (2001, 7) observed that “economic necessity no longer acted as a constraint on the virulence of white racism” on the plantations along the Mississippi Delta. White landowners received price supports to reduce production and keep fields fallow. On the cotton fields remaining, the mechanical cotton picker shifted social and economic leverage toward landowners and away from workers. New Deal farm policies prevented Black workers and landowners from accessing federal support. Farm laborers, like domestic workers, were not covered by Social Security. Displaced white farmworkers found work in industry; Black farmworkers were shut out. Those who did not migrate North became underemployed seasonal laborers. White southern political leaders imposed policies designed to push Black residents out of the South (De Jong 2016, 34–36).

Moses, a leader of SNCC’s voter drive in the Delta, wrote in December 1962 to Martha Prescod at the University of Michigan SNCC chapter:

Just this afternoon, I was sitting resting, having finished a bowl of stew, and a silent hand reached over from behind, mumbling some words of apology and permission, and stumbled up with a neckbone from the plate under the bowl, which I had discarded, which had consequently some meat on it. The hand was back again, five seconds later, groping for the potatoes I had left in the bowl. I never saw the face, I didn’t look. The hand was dark, dry and wind cracked, from cotton chopping and cotton picking. Lafayette and I got up and walked out. What the hell are you going to do when a man has to pick up a leftover potatoe [*sic*] from a bowl of stew? . . . We met last Sunday to initiate a drive for food and clothing for Negroes in the Delta. (Moses 1962)

Again in US history, starvation served as an instrument of violence to displace nonwhite people whose presence and labor were extraneous to the accumulation of white wealth. White supremacists reorganized land, labor, and welfare to block Black residents’ access to sources of food. These gestures were most obvious in the American South but also played out in the organization of housing and labor in the urban North.

As Laurie B. Green has pointed out, media reports and politicians from the 1960s to this day refer to hunger in the United States as if it were a natural outcome of personal misfortune. What many Black Americans suffered in this period is more accurately described as programmatic starvation (Green 2017). Doctors with the Medical Committee for Human Rights (MCHR), who volunteered in support of civil rights actions, bore witness. “Most people [here] are malnourished,” Dr. Herbert Krohn told a Freedom Summer volunteer in Alabama. “I saw a child with a classical case of malnutrition such as you would read about in concentration camps” (quoted in Hartford 1965). “To starve” is a transitive verb. To defend themselves against programmatic starvation, African Americans in the 1960s

rural South and urban North undertook “survival experiments,” informed by their own experience and by medical knowledge. Survival experiments were forms of organization, technology, and communication that imagined and built alternative, nourishing futures. Black people recognized that food and hunger were wielded against them as a weapon and reconfigured their food networks to build “emancipatory food power” (Smith 2023, 2).

Cooperative farms in the Mississippi Delta and free breakfast programs in the urban North experimented with new ways of producing and distributing food. Community organizations built networks of mutual aid. Drawing upon strategies of “collective agency and community resilience,” these groups practiced cooperative survival economies (White 2018, 5–11). Participants in the 1968 Poor People’s Campaign and the National Welfare Rights Organization testified to Congress and pushed for changes to welfare policy. Collective actions, protests and boycotts, challenged low wages at work and high prices at the grocery store. These survival programs sought nutritive, economic, and political autonomy from a system of labor, food production, and distribution, which was designed to dispossess people.

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The biography of Mrs. L. C. Dorsey, Mississippi sharecropper, civil rights activist, and public health leader, illuminates how Black people in the American South organized in response to their programmatic starvation. Dorsey drew from her life experience to articulate a political theory of hunger and power. She grew up in the 1940s on a plantation in the Mississippi Delta. She described how families hustled to survive, planting vegetables, catching rabbits, picking berries and pecans from common lands on the levy to sell for cash. Those who were unable to take care of themselves were “included in the network of support on the plantation. Everybody always planted some extra vegetables, saved the extra rabbits that they caught, for those families” (Dorsey 1992). Mutual aid, planting, and foraging compensated for a lack of money. Despite long hours of work in the cotton fields, Dorsey’s family—like the others on plantations—never cleared a profit from the plantation landowner. “You get all these advances, and at the end of the year you settle up, and you’re supposed to have money, and we never had any” (Dorsey 1992). At the yearly reckoning, the landowner always claimed that cash advances, purchases at the plantation store, and “overhead” expenses ate up the value of the sharecropper’s cotton. As she later recalled:

I figured out, I had excellent teachers in these little one-room school houses who taught us incredible stuff, like how to keep books, basic bookkeeping, in math classes and stuff. I decided, and I’m not sure how I arrived at this conclusion, and I’m sure Miss Higgins, who was my teacher, influenced that by impressing us with the importance of knowing how to do these things, so that we would be more responsible in managing our money and stuff. So somehow I made the quantum leap from learning all that stuff, and decided that the reason black folks never cleared any money from this operation was because we didn’t keep any records. (Dorsey 1992)

Reckoning value on the plantation served as a mechanism for labor control. As Caitlin Rosenthal (2018, 3) has written in her business history of slavery and scientific management, “control has always been at the heart of modern accounting practice.” Slaveowners in the nineteenth century, as Rosenthal shows, were among the most sophisticated bookkeepers anywhere. Later, in the Jim Crow years, plantation owners used accounting practices and, relatedly, debt peonage, as leverage over their workers. Loading some workers with debt and forgiving others’ debts, owners were able to encourage some workers to stay and force others to seek work elsewhere (Rosenthal 2018, 180).

Mathematics and bookkeeping were technologies of labor management. As an eighth-grader, Dorsey understood this and decided to keep her own score.

I got a Blue Horse notebook. . . . The paper was sewn in and then it was covered with a piece of stuff. Not like the frivolous stuff you have now that falls apart. But we set it up, and I set it up the way I had learned in school with expense columns and income columns, and every day I would come home and listen to the market on the radio, where they broadcast how much cotton was selling for. Helena, Arkansas, had that every day between eleven and twelve. I forget the name of the radio station. And every thing we got, I listed in that expense column. (Dorsey 1992)

When the time for reckoning came, Dorsey proudly gave her father the notebook and explained its entries (he could not read or write). She expected a payment of over two thousand dollars and was “positively ill” with disappointment when her father returned with a few hundred. This was the first year her parents had cleared any money at all, and they were more than satisfied, but the amount did not square with her careful accounting. Later she came to suspect that her father had not showed the notebook to anyone, because he understood the challenge that it posed to the landowner’s authority.

Dorsey identified math as a technology of labor control in the American South: “I mean, I had latched on to what was wrong with the whole plantation system.” Sums in the ledger determined a family’s access to food. Plantation owners disbursed credit, sold survival goods, and set the rate of repayment at harvest. Dorsey came to realize, when her father returned with far less money than she had reckoned, that math alone was not enough to reverse the structural oppression, which it supported. “At that point, I decided that there was no fairness in the system,” she recalled, “and that somehow people had to escape the system. Because it was not ever going to be a situation where you could do anything to make it work for you. I mean, that was the end of me assuming responsibility for an unfair and unjust world” (Dorsey 1992).

Dorsey married and began a family; three years later, her young family was asked to leave the small plantation where they lived. Their landowner had purchased a mechanical cotton picker and no longer needed them. “I experienced deprivation in a different form than I had ever had at home, because there was hunger.” She learned to work the local rules for surplus commodities distribution

and barely kept her children fed. She applied her bookkeeping skills to balancing rent payments, electricity bills, and weekly food purchases. She chopped cotton when she was able. Dorsey described her experience of hunger:

I had one horrible, nightmarish night [in 1965] where we cooked the last food at noon. It was enough food at noon for everybody to get enough to eat, and we went to bed that night hungry. . . . you can't appreciate how horrible that is unless you've lived through it. It's one thing to be hungry yourself. It is an entirely different thing to know that your children are hungry, and to put them to bed knowing they're hungry, and listen to them cry themselves to sleep. It is even more devastating, and it hurts even to talk about it now, to have the older children, who are only ten or so, be just as hungry but try not to let you hear them cry. That is something that helps you understand why women become prostitutes, why people rob and break in stores, and why they take what they want to deal with this. (Dorsey 1992)

Dorsey understood her family's hunger as a consequence of marital relations, agricultural transformation, legal power, and anti-Black racism. Her husband drank, failed to bring his paycheck home, and did not gather food supplements as her father had done. Neighborly mutual aid networks served as a last resort. Her family had no access to land for growing survival crops. In her gendered role as mother, Dorsey was responsible for keeping her children fed and was deeply responsive to their suffering.

Dorsey understood her family's hunger in relation to law, power, and racism. Hunger led her to "understand why women become prostitutes, why people rob." Hunger resulted from law, and to escape hunger meant to break beyond law. This was why "[people] take what they want to deal with this." Her experience with hunger was part and motive for her activism for civil and economic rights. Antihunger action required a challenge to legal power over Black people. Civil rights work gave Dorsey tools to analyze and intervene in her community's history. In the Freedom Summer of 1964, SNCC and COFO organized volunteers to converge upon the South and mount a large-scale voter registration drive. Freedom summer volunteers set up schools, to counter the historical underinvestment in Black education. These schools were meant to be antihierarchical, imbued with the "awareness that students brought with them valuable knowledge and experiences" (Dittmer 2009, 53). The Freedom Schools taught math, reading, health, and Black history in relation to the civil rights movement.

Later, Dorsey was selected to enter employee training for the Head Start child-care program, funded by the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, which offered her further access to politically-grounded education. Civil rights education opened new and other worlds. "We were learning, and it was a whole new world," Dorsey (1992) said. "I read all the stuff they brought as voraciously as I had read the Freedom School material, because it opened up another whole world, that being in the plantation, and the limitations of the educational experiences that the plantation had offered, had denied us. And I realized that there was a hunger there that

I hadn't recognized that was akin to this whole business of keeping records in that Blueback notebook when I was thirteen." Dorsey's synthesis of hunger for change, hunger for learning, and bodily hunger echoes across African American cultural history. Hunger, literacy, and empowerment are powerfully interconnected in the African American literary tradition (Warnes 2004).

Frederick Douglass's autobiography evokes the pain of bodily and intellectual starvation, seeking wheat bread and the "bread of knowledge." Richard Wright (2005 [1944], 16), in his autobiographical novel *American Hunger*, wrote of feeling hunger as a "deep biological bitterness." Wright (2005 [1944], 282, 382) described a hunger that extended beyond food: a "hunger for insight," "a hunger for life." In 1964 and 1965, Dorsey volunteered with COFO, recruited by Fannie Lou Hamer, and began to mobilize sharecroppers to register to vote. She felt an echo of the earlier "magic" of math. "I felt an excitement that somehow what we were doing, and the magic of the vote, was going to eradicate all of the inequities that we were experiencing. . . . The only other time I had that kind of high, for lack of a better term, was that year that I was keeping books to show Mr. Carl that we knew what he was doing, and we were going to break up this nonsense of taking all our money" (Dorsey 1992).

In response to Black residents' mobilization, white landowners tightened control over access to communal food resources. In other words, they sought to starve Black workers out. Local authorities in Dorsey's town closed off access to the levy, where pecan trees grew on public federal land. Landowners refused to allow sharecroppers to plant gardens of turnips and other survival crops. Enclosing common food resources in this way had two effects: it criminalized poverty survival tactics like gleaning pecans; and it controlled poor Black people's labor and access to land (Williams and Freshour 2022, 43). As described in chapter 3, plantation owners used food advances to maintain tight labor control. Sharecroppers relied entirely on loans from landowners to bridge the months between the November harvesting season and March, when landowners took the cotton to market and distributed the shares; loans were contingent on remaining in the employ and good graces of the plantation owner. If a worker attempted to escape this cycle of debt, they would be met by violence and criminalization. Food advances were tools of power. Welfare agencies collaborated with this structure of political and labor control by making access to benefits contingent on obedience.

County welfare officials responded to civil rights mobilization by enacting a requirement that an employer or "responsible person" sign a complicated form before any applicant could receive food. However, "due to the voter registration drive . . . , the 'responsible people' are not particularly inclined to favors for the Negro" ("Ruleville Miss." 1962). Several counties like Leflore County, the site where Emmett Till was murdered, chose to replace their federal commodity surplus program with food stamps. Unlike surplus commodities, stamps required money deposits that were too expensive for most laborers. The number of residents

receiving aid plummeted.¹ Dorsey (1992) explained that “Black people were totally dependent on white people for everything that had to do with their survival.” If one plantation owner decided to eject a Black family from the plantation, they were blacklisted and would not find work or food anywhere else. Federal surplus commodities, the only other source of food, might delay starvation, but they also served as mechanisms for white authorities to further tighten control. Collective mobilization and voting held a status analogous to education and bookkeeping in Dorsey’s fight against exploitation. In her struggle they were tools of liberation from subjection and starvation. The fight over the value of labor, the fight to vote, and the fight against hunger were one and the same.

Like many other activists in the region, Dorsey saw that white landowners responded to the civil rights movement by starving Black residents out. Plantation owners warned her not to bother bringing sharecroppers back home once she led them to the voter registration desk. Sharecroppers who tried to register risked losing their homes, work, and subsistence. “When people started mumbling about civil rights and human rights and political rights . . .” Dorsey (1992) noted, “there was a conscious move by white landowners to clamp down. One of the things that they did was actually put in place those things that would result in people being starved to death.” In 1967 she was recruited to bring her local organizing skills to the newly opened Tufts-Delta Health Center. The Delta Health Center, funded by Lyndon Johnson’s Office of Economic Opportunity, was established by physicians and social workers connected to the Medical Committee for Human Rights and is widely recognized as one of the first community health centers in the United States. The Delta Health Center was organized around principles of community accountability. Dorsey (1992) was hired to teach residents “how to go to the Welfare Department with records and demand your rights, how to go to elected officials and get things done in your community.”

Delta Health Center founder Jack Geiger turned the Center’s pharmacy into a food pantry. Center leaders called neighborhood meetings, where they asked residents about their needs and goals. They found that “food is always the number one priority. When we first came to the Delta the people said, over and over again, health services are wonderful, . . . we’re happy to have it here—but for the love of God, could you spare some food?” (Geiger 1969, 2438). At the Center, Dorsey founded and managed the North Bolivar County Farm Cooperative, a cooperative of area residents who pooled their labor to grow food for their families and to sell at local markets (Hatch 1992). Neither state officials nor the federal Office of Economic Opportunity were enthusiastic about these experiments in subsistence undertaken by a health center. Geiger told the story of when the Office of Economic Opportunity “sent someone down to scream at me when I was giving away food and charging it to the pharmacy. I said, ‘What’s wrong with that?’ He said, ‘The pharmacy is for drugs and the treatment of disease.’ And I said, ‘The last time I looked in my medical textbook, the most effective therapy for malnutrition

is food.' And he went away" (Geiger and Cohen 2017). Geiger's "therapy for malnutrition" was a political intervention. The diagnosis of malnutrition created possibilities for community-based mutual aid, cooperative production, and education. By framing poverty relief as medicine, rather than welfare, the Delta Health Center shifted the locus of power away from local welfare boards, run by White Citizens' Council members, to federal agencies.

Years later, having earned a PhD in social work, Dorsey became the Delta Health Center's director. She continued to serve her community for many years. Her life-long survival experiments mobilized math and accounting, political organizing, historical education, health services, and cooperative agriculture. All of these skills were necessary to resist labor control and ethnic cleansing by starvation.

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A group of displaced sharecroppers, mobilized by SNCC and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, met on January 29, 1966, at the Mount Beulah Center in Edwards, Mississippi, "to talk about their problem: being hungry and poor." Many of the people at the Mount Beulah meeting were homeless and without a means of subsistence. Many were fleeing violence. The hundreds of attendees included a group of sharecroppers who had been evicted from the Andrews plantation near Dorsey's home, when they had tried to strike for better working hours and higher wages. In the backlash to that strike Dorsey (1992) "saw the horror that could happen to you when you didn't belong to a white man. That was what we saw with the Andrews' people. Everybody got kicked off that plantation, and every plantation was alerted not to hire them." They all lived in "a system that really controlled you through the threat of starvation."

SNCC field secretary Charlie Cobb was present at Mount Beulah and described the desperate circumstances behind this mobilization. In response to civil rights advances, plantation owners and local authorities stripped Black citizens of the means to survive in Mississippi. Cotton-picking machines, which had begun to appear in the mid-twentieth century, appeared everywhere and displaced tens of thousands of workers. White Citizens Councils, white supremacist organizations formed in response to the Supreme Court ruling on school desegregation, controlled local welfare boards. Employers sealed off access to jobs. County officials cut access to welfare. Black residents were left with two choices: "leaving the state in search of opportunity elsewhere, or starving" (Cobb 1966, 1).

Cobb (1966, 2) recorded testimony from one resident to the effect that local welfare officials "gonna keep us hungry as we been all our days. We still ain't gonna have no food. I'm thinkin bout gettin them [nonpoor] folks off that [county welfare] board and putting some of these folks on who know what it means if you go in the kitchen to cook an you ain't got but half a package of beans an 8 kids to feed—you got to put enough water in that pot to have some likker, so when the beans run out, the likker go roun into gravy an you have somethin to sop."

Participants testified to their experience of living hungry, with extending gravies and prolonged, worried sleep. Another resident testified: “We heard Mr. Johnson speak about poverty. He’s gonna restrict poverty. Everybody’s gonna get well treated. When it [welfare] be issued out through that Sunflower [County] KKK, you just ain’t gonna get it. While they’re figuring an all like that, you have these peoples on the plantation who are starving” (Cobb 1966, 2). “If the food that’s somewhere down for us poor peoples in Mississippi doesn’t be given to us,” several people warned, “I guess somebody’ll have to go try and take it. An that’s not gonna be long” (Cobb 1992, 6).

A group of fifty people, led by COFO volunteer and Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegate Unita Blackwell, decided to occupy the nearby abandoned Greenville Air Force Base. Instead of waiting to receive welfare from local or federal authorities, they wanted to establish conditions for their own survival. “We are here because we are hungry and cold,” they announced. “We demand food. We are here because we are hungry. Our children can’t be taught in school because they are hungry. . . . We demand jobs. . . . We demand income. . . . We want to decide what foods we eat” (MFDP 1966, 1). They claimed the buildings for homes and training centers, and the land for farming. Within weeks, US military police came to clear them from the base and their experiment in survival came to an end. But the national publicity that they generated opened a new chapter in the political history of hunger in the United States.

Senator Robert Kennedy and the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty heard about the Greenville Air Base incident and traveled to Jackson, Mississippi, in April 1967 to gather testimonies. Kennedy’s visit, covered widely in national media, is commonly characterized as the moment when Americans “discovered” hunger in their own country (Green 2017). Of course, the only people doing the “discovering” were the senators and television viewers. People on the ground did not need to discover anything. The senators heard from Unita Blackwell, MFDP leader Fannie Lou Hamer, and Marian Wright, who was then a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) lawyer representing welfare clients in the Delta. Blackwell made clear that hunger and starvation were weapons of white supremacy. She described poverty relief as a direct result of her community’s mobilization and resistance: “Senators, I want you all to know that in Mississippi if it had not been for civil rights it wouldn’t have been no poverty program, because this is what people started out to get enough initiative to stand up to try to say could they do something for themselves, and that’s what started the whole thing” (*Hearings before the Special Subcommittee* 1967, 594).

Blackwell, Hamer, and Wright explained to Kennedy and the other senators how local welfare boards denied civil rights activists their legitimate benefits. They told the senators of pervasive hunger and how “poverty programs are being discouraged in the way of saying, you can’t participate in civil rights” (*Hearings*

before the Special Subcommittee 1967, 548). They demanded that federal authorities take authority for food and welfare programs away from states and counties that used hunger as a tool of violence. “[Local control], along with the purchase price requirement, meant that many of the poor would not benefit from the food stamp program. In fact, it could almost be said that in some part of the South these features of the program created, rather than solved, the social problem of hunger” (DeVault and Pitts 1984, 548). Kennedy asked Blackwell: “What happens when people don’t get the commodities [denied to them by local administrators of federal welfare programs]?” She answered: “They starve” (*Hearings before the Special Subcommittee* 1967).

As poor people and civil rights workers made clear, the white power structure across the cotton-growing region undertook a near-genocidal campaign of deprivation. In an echo of the withholding of food rations from Native peoples at the turn of the twentieth century, plantation owners and county welfare boards coluded to starve Black residents out of the South. Fannie Lou Hamer told a journalist: “Down in Mississippi they are killing Negroes of all ages, on the installment plan, through starvation. If you are a Negro and vote, if you persist in dreams of black power to win some measure of freedom in white-controlled communities, you go hungry” (“Going Hungry” 1968, 9). In the wake of the 1967 Senate hearings that gathered testimony in Jackson, conditions in the Mississippi Delta became a reference point for speaking about hunger in the United States. Poverty, malnutrition, and hunger elsewhere in the United States were compared to conditions in the Delta, which in turn were compared to conditions in Africa or Latin America. This led to debates about the specificity of hunger, malnutrition, and starvation. If hunger in Mississippi was the result of a coordinated campaign of starvation, what did hunger represent in the urban North? Doctors and activists began to profile a space extending all the way across “the wealthiest nation in the history of the world,” in which “millions of men, women and children are starving” (Citizens’ Board 1968, 7, 9).

“Frequently throughout the Mississippi Delta,” wrote physician Raymond F. Wheeler, “we heard charges of an unwritten but generally accepted policy on the part of those who control the state to eliminate the Negro Mississippian either by driving him out of the state or starving him to death. At first, the charge seems to me beyond belief” (Wheeler 1967, 26). Wheeler led a group of Ivy League physicians, mobilized by the Southern Regional Council, on a tour of Mississippi’s Humphreys and Leflore counties immediately following the 1967 Senate subcommittee hearings in Jackson. Doctors visited the homes of families enrolled in a federally funded early childhood education program. Wheeler noted the “common practice” of white plantation landlords forbidding their tenants from planting a subsistence garden, even when ample space for one existed. He and his colleagues spoke with families who were declared ineligible for surplus commodities or food stamps, “even though they have literally nothing” (Wheeler 1967, 5). One

mother with whom Wheeler spoke “summed up the question of diet in a single, poignant sentence: “These children go to bed hungry and get up hungry and don’t ever know nothing else in between” (Wheeler 1967, 13–14).

Doctors with Wheeler on the Southern Regional Council’s tour of Mississippi “saw children whose nutritional and medical condition we can only describe as shocking—even to a group of physicians whose work involves daily confrontation with disease and suffering.” They reported:

In child after child we saw: evidence of vitamin and mineral deficiencies; serious, untreated skin infections and ulcerations; eye and ear diseases, also unattended bone diseases secondary to poor food intake; the prevalence of bacterial and parasitic disease, as well as severe anemia, with resulting loss of energy and ability to live a normally active life; diseases of the heart and the lungs—requiring surgery—which have gone undiagnosed and untreated; epileptic and other neurological disorders; severe kidney ailments, that in other children would warrant immediate hospitalization; and finally, in boys and girls in every county we visited, obvious evidence of severe malnutrition, with injury to the body’s tissues—its muscles, bones, and skin, as well as an associated psychological state of fatigue, listlessness, and exhaustion. (Brenner et al. 1967, 4–5)

If charges of deliberate, programmatic starvation at first had seemed “beyond belief” to Wheeler and his companions, by the end of their tour he was convinced. Wheeler came to see Mississippi as “a kind of prison” for “semi-starving people” (Wheeler 1967, 27).

The Senate subcommittee hearings and the Southern Regional Council report inspired further and broader reporting. In July 1967 the Field Foundation recruited Wheeler to join an ambitious national survey, the Citizens’ Board of Inquiry into Hunger and Malnutrition in the United States. Board members included doctors and public health experts, law professors, a Brookings Institution economist, religious and charitable leaders, union representatives, the presidents of Morehouse and Clark colleges, Dolores Huerta of the United Farm Workers Union, and Vine Deloria Jr. of the National Congress of American Indians. The Citizens’ Board assembled data and carried out hearings and field trips in Kentucky, San Antonio, Alabama, Mississippi, on a Navajo Reservation, in South Dakota Indian country, Florida migrant labor camps, and poor neighborhoods of Boston, New York, and Washington, DC. The reporters of the Citizens’ Board (1968, 9) wrote that “we find ourselves somewhat startled by our own findings, for we too had been lulled into the comforting belief that at least the extremes of privation had been eliminated.”

The Citizens’ Board mapped a geography of displacement and violence—a zone of American settler colonization—through the spread of hunger. Board members “found concrete evidence of hunger and malnutrition in every part of the United States where we have held hearings or conducted field trips” (Citizens’ Board 1968,

9). Many of these sites were situated at the borderlands of US settler-colonialism, near the Mexican frontier, on Native American reservations, on plantations, and in mining communities. In northern cities the Citizens' Board visited immigrant neighborhoods and areas settled by displaced plantation workers. Notably, the Citizens' Board tied starvation in the rural South to hunger and malnutrition in the urban North. They emphasized that "these conditions are not confined to Mississippi." Their report identified a "great group of people" in the northeastern United States "living just at or below a minimum level of subsistence." The report documented severe malnutrition in Baltimore, Boston, Cleveland, and New York. Doctors in the Bronx recounted cases of anemia and other forms of malnutrition prevalent in children, and widespread hunger in the days before welfare checks came in. Psychiatrist Robert Coles, who worked with impoverished children in Georgia and Boston, argued in the report that the starvation of Black Americans impacted both the North and the South: "When a sick, chronically malnourished child leaves a plantation or mountain hollow for Chicago or Detroit, rural poverty becomes urban poverty" (Citizens' Board 1968, 32). Wheeler compared what he saw in Boston's poor neighborhoods to his previous experiences in the South and concluded that "the problems [in Boston] are only different in degree from what we have seen elsewhere" (quoted in Citizens' Board 1968, 18).

Historian Greta de Jong has theorized that the hundreds of thousands of Black Americans exiled from the South in the 1960s "were the first to experience the transition from free labor to displaced persons that awaited millions of other workers in this new era of economic restructuring" (de Jong 2016, 17). These displaced people's condition of abandonment and deprivation, justified by ideologies of free market, limited government, and individual liberty, would be replicated across the United States in the late twentieth century. The Citizens' Board (1968, 4) report showed some awareness of this process, even as it cast hungry people as "useless mouths": "wherever we have gone we have seen the multitudinous cast-offs of an economic system which, bewilderingly, can build up ever greater national achievements without affecting the immense and economically useless pockets of the impoverished." The violence of ethnic cleansing through starvation could not and would not be contained geographically to the South.

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Readers of the *New York Times* on May 21, 1968, opened the newspaper to a three-column advertisement captioned, "This Baby Is Dying of Hunger." The ad urged readers to tune into a CBS special report that evening, which would reveal an "incredible, shocking truth" (Martin 1972, 186). CBS's broadcast on "Hunger in America" brought the Citizens' Board's narratives into the living rooms of millions of American households.² Guided by the resonant voice of reporter Charles Kuralt, viewers of "Hunger in America" followed the itinerary of the Citizens' Board

investigators, with some important deviations. Viewer reactions were strong: in the week after the show aired, CBS received more than five thousand letters, and constituents “deluged” the Senate Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 1968, 53) with phone calls and letters of concern.³

Viewers of the televised special report met local doctors and their patients in the borderlands of San Antonio, tenant farms in wealthy Loudoun County, Virginia, a Navajo reservation near Tuba, Arizona, and sharecroppers’ shacks in Hale County. But CBS completely excised Northern cities from its program. Despite the Citizens’ Board’s insistence that Northern urban poverty was connected to Southern starvation, CBS producers skipped over the Bronx, Boston, Detroit, and Cleveland. For a Northern urban audience, the broadcast created a geography of the hungry other. “Hunger in America” begins with Mexican Americans in San Antonio, where, we are told, “unemployment is high” and “100,000 people are hungry all the time” (Carr and Davies 1968, 3:30). A priest named Father Ruiz leads the camera into the homes of his parishioners and explains what it means for them to be hungry. When hunger becomes visible, “when you begin to see hunger in the faces of people,” by then they have already lost sensation and “they no longer feel hunger” (7:00). Viewers learn that poor residents of San Antonio survive on surplus commodities, which lack fruit and vegetables. Commodities keep them alive, but it is a poor life. “The poor are alive because they eat. They are malnourished because of what they eat. Fat people can be hungry people” (14:20). Vera Burke, director of social services at a local charity hospital, complains that patients cannot afford to follow the diets prescribed to cure their nutritional illnesses, especially adequate protein intake. She leads the camera through three wards for malnourished infants. When the babies leave the hospital, she says, they go home “where there is no milk” (16:50).

Medical authorities are the main protagonists in this documentary; they validate the veracity of hunger. In Loudoun County, Dr. Steven Graninger explains that seven thousand families have severe nutrition problems; in his eyes the problem is that tenant farmers have too many children and not enough food. Graninger blames these white farmers’ condition on a cycle of “constant misery”: “these people with no past to be proud of and no hope for the future, seek immediate forms of enjoyment” (37:35). In Tuba, Dr. Jean Van Duesen accompanies the camera into the homes of Navajo families, patients who “continually face the medical problems caused by lack of food.” Like Burke, Van Duesen denounces the starchiness of federal surplus commodities, “what I would call a white diet, . . . actually a very poor diet.” Van Duesen shows viewers an infant at the public hospital, whom she has diagnosed with kwashiorkor, protein-calorie malnutrition. “The is a disease that was first seen in South America and Africa. It’s not supposed to exist in the United States but it does.” Van Duesen recounts that she sees infants with

marasmus, “total, total protein-calorie malnutrition” (46:50). A third of these cases died in the hospital.

Finally, Dr. Raymond Wheeler leads the camera into Miss Carlyle’s home in Hale County, Mississippi. Wheeler prefaces the visit by explaining that “slow starvation has become part of the Southern way of life.” The *CBS Reports* segment leaves it to Miss Carlyle, not Wheeler, to explain the social context for her family’s starvation: “White people don’t care how you live. . . . I imagine I feel like it’s because children going to school, doing a little voting, something they never have did.” When pressed to justify her statement that “white people don’t care,” Miss Carlyle refuses to take the bait: “I know they don’t care. I don’t have to think they don’t care. I know they don’t care” (48:03). Unlike in his written report, Wheeler does not validate Miss Carlyle’s statement on air. The “Hunger in America” segment pulled a theme from the Citizens’ Board report and repeated it at every location: hungry people, especially children, were irreversibly damaged. Malnourished babies at the Tuba Public Hospital “may have permanent damage to the brain and inability to read and write” (33:50). In their first year undernourished children in the South “fall behind . . . and they never catch up” (42:55). The poor diet of tenant farmers’ children in Virginia “affects brain tissue, . . . the ability to think and to learn. The worst damage is done during infancy. The brain damage is not reversible. It can’t be changed, one year from now or five years from now” (20:56).

Mikal Raz (2013) has shown how poverty discourse in the 1960s figured poor people, especially poor Black people, as deficient. Poor people were thought to lack sensitivity, culture, and maternal care. The “deprivation hypothesis” focused attention on “what is missing rather than what is there, on deprivation rather than on differences or strengths and coping mechanisms,” and left a long legacy in social services and education (Raz 2013, 24). The “Hunger in America” broadcast thus transmitted and amplified this view of the poor as damaged and lacking. Government officials reacted strongly. US Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman gave an angry press conference days after the broadcast to denounce its “shoddy journalism, . . . distorted, oversimplified and misleading picture of domestic hunger” (Martin 1972, 189). A congressman from San Antonio tasked the Federal Communications Commission with investigating whether CBS producers lied when they portrayed babies in his city dying of hunger. The FCC expressed concern about the evidence for CBS’s reporting but refused to censor the network over the content of its claims. Mississippi congressman Jamie Whitten, chair of the powerful House Agricultural Appropriations Subcommittee, was said to have persuaded FBI agents to launch an investigation into the broadcast’s producers and contributors. Jean Mayer (1971), one of CBS’s scientific advisers, wrote that “almost anyone who was seen in the picture was interrogated, some repeatedly.” In its most explicit and pointed message, the “Hunger in America” broadcast indicted the US Department of Agriculture and its management of the food stamp and surplus

commodity programs. “In this country,” Charles Kuralt concluded, “the most basic human need must become a human right” (Carr and Davies 1968, 49:47).

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Starvation in the United States, for Robert Wheeler and for many medical experts, was “beyond belief.” Investigators for the Southern Regional Council “found it hard to believe we were examining American children of the Twentieth Century” (Brenner et al. 1967, 5). Medical practitioners and hunger researchers struggled to articulate and respond to these reports, which originated outside of their professional circles and societies. Some reacted with shock and a transformed sense of professional responsibility. “While we have been studying ‘hyperglycemia in tuco-tucos’ and ‘mouse liver nucleic acids,’” despaired one nutrition researcher, “we have not investigated the problem of pre-school malnutrition in our own back yards” (Latham 1968, 2). Other experts reacted defensively; if they had not noted or studied the problem previously, it must not exist. To diagnose hunger in the United States was to diagnose neglect, violence, and inequity. This, to many, was beyond belief.

As soon as American hunger and starvation appeared in the public consciousness, experts questioned the nature of this diagnosis. Perhaps there was hunger—but it couldn’t be a real, medically validated hunger. Some experts argued that hunger itself was an empty category that could not be diagnosed or measured and therefore should be eliminated from the medical vocabulary. Hunger’s scientific validity was challenged, at precisely the peak of its social and political power. How did experts not see or believe what was happening in their own backyard? John F. Mueller (1969, 1413), president of the American Society for Clinical Nutrition, lamented that “most of us were so concerned with the enormity of the problems in developing countries of the World, that we forgot our own problems.” Was this a question of “forgetfulness?”

Mueller blamed a sense of complacency in the aftermath of the “vitamin era” and successful treatment of specific deficiency diseases like beriberi and pellagra. During most of the twentieth century, nutritionists battled successfully against deficiency disease. They identified the vitamin or mineral associated with a particular set of symptoms and developed pharmaceutical or industrial palliatives. Thiamin and riboflavin entered into the standard bag of flour; iodine was added to table salt; vitamin D got mixed into milk bottles. Simple deficiencies were resolved with a single supplement, and nutritionists rightfully felt a sense of mastery and triumph at having cured them. With the important exception of the two world wars, concerns about hunger and starvation faded into the background of these exciting developments. Two conditions challenged the vitamania of twentieth-century nutritionists: obesity and hunger (Moran 2018, 112, 137). Both were generalized metabolic conditions that resisted attempts to contain them with a pill or supplement. Mueller (1969, 1413) offered another, more uncomfortable

explanation for nutritionists' neglect of the hunger around them: experts felt "some degree of indifference fostered by an unwillingness to become 'involved.'" In other words, they refused or avoided naming what they saw. Some scientists, particularly in nutrition, preferred to maintain discussion on a technical, apolitical level. To name hunger and starvation was to acknowledge the violence of American society (Biltekoff 2024, 14).

Many experts looked at these cases of malnourished children and thought of Africa and Latin America. Doctors and researchers who had worked with the Rockefeller Foundation and USAID to alleviate hunger in the global South, were shocked to discover the presence of severe malnutrition in the United States. One nutritionist wrote, in reaction to the CBS broadcast, that as "a physician who has dealt with a great deal of kwashiorkor and nutritional marasmus in Africa, it was eye-opening to sit in a comfortable U.S. home and to see cases of these serious nutritional diseases displayed in Texas and Arizona" (Latham 1968, 3). Citizens' Board member Alfred Haynes, a Johns Hopkins University professor of public health, expressed a similar sense of dissonance: "We associate [kwashiorkor] with Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, but one of our medical colleagues found cases in a field trip to the Indian reservations" (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 1968, 17). The National Nutrition Survey found in Texas and Louisiana "signs and indices of malnutrition of essentially the same incidences and severity as found in low-income Central American families" ("Malnutrition and Hunger" 1970, 273). Could medical terms that experts used to describe poor, hungry, underdeveloped peoples in the global South—malnutrition, undernutrition, starvation—apply equally within the borders of the United States? Hunger debates skirted the question of American empire and settler-colonialism.

Medical experts on the Citizens' Board struggled to reconcile the condition of poor Americans with their experiences as development experts in the informal American aid empire. Haynes found "children, while living in the United States, [who] seem to conform more to the pattern of developing countries. They are not what we would call sick but they have not been able to achieve their potential" (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 1968, 16). But Haynes and the Citizens' Board distinguished between their observations and "the extreme famine state with which some of us have had first hand familiarity abroad." More concerning, they argued, were "the far vaster numbers of Americans who never get enough to eat, who never get adequate nutrition, who waste away or suffer the corpulence and gross overweight of a diet comprised almost entirely of starches" (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 1968, 31).

Some nutritionists resisted *Hunger USA* as a challenge to their own authority and expertise. The Citizens' Board (1968) report centered and highlighted poor people's testimonies. To some experts, this was an error and an affront: a poor person's story about feeling hunger had no scientific validity, as their hunger represented no more than a subjective feeling. "Hunger is a physiological or

emotional state . . . very often [directed at] something having no direct relation to nutrition.” A well-fed person might get hungry for a “steak or a popsicle [*sic*]” (Youmans 1970, 1123). Obese people tend to feel hungry all the time. Truly malnourished, even starving, subjects may not feel any hunger at all. John B. Youmans, professor at the Vanderbilt University Medical School, spent his career surveying the nutritional status of large populations from Tennessee to Pakistan by massive data collection, dietary observations, physical exams, and laboratory analyses. Youmans (1970, 1123) accused reporters of using the term “hunger” “primarily for its emotional and political impact without reference to its actual physiologic meaning.” To this, Dr. Alfred Klinger retorted that physicians must heed the voices of the poor: “We [must] recognize that medicine is as much a social science as a biological one” (Klinger, Mendelsohn, and Alberts 1970, 682).

Dr. Herbert Pollack led the charge against *Hunger USA*. Pollack, a diabetes and nutrition expert at George Washington University and consultant to the US State Department, spoke out against the Citizens’ Board report. He may have been motivated by his ties to the conservative Institute for Defense Analyses, which sent typed copies of his critique to federal policy makers (Pollack 1968, 32). Or he may have felt personally affronted by the CBS broadcast. Pollack owned a cattle farm near Leesberg, Virginia, where he served as governor of the Middleburg Hunt and member of the Loudoun County Medical Society (Smith 1990). He and his associates may well have taken offense at the way that CBS depicted Loudoun County as a site of deprivation and malnutrition. Where the Citizens’ Board or CBS reporters saw “hunger,” Pollack argued, they had no idea what they were looking at. They lacked scientific grounding. In his view, *Hunger USA* was based on little more than “a series of anecdotal testimonial presentations” (Pollack 1969, 480). Reporters may have observed symptoms of what looked like malnutrition, but Pollack did not believe their claims about the nature of the problem.

In his critique Pollack employed a technique that had already been sharpened by the tobacco industry in its defense against public health activists (which is still employed today by climate change deniers and the sugar industry). Naomi Oreskes and Eric Conway (2010, 13) call it the “tobacco strategy”: invoking multiple possible causes and explanations, to foster a sense of uncertainty and paralyze policy action. What looks to an average observer like deprivation, Pollack argued, might well be something else. Inadequate access to food, or “primary malnutrition,” was only one possible explanation (he thought it the least likely explanation) for these apparent symptoms. Pollack (1969, 486), for one, “[had] yet to hear of such a case [of infantile malnutrition] that was the result of poverty.” He ran through *Hunger USA* and at almost every stop found alternative causes for what the reporters saw.

Low birth weights in San Antonio might be inherited rather than nutritional; Mexican babies, Pollack suggested, should not be measured to the same standards as Anglo babies. Swollen bellies might be caused by umbilical hernia, not

protein-calorie malnutrition. Elderly people might be too lonely and isolated to seek the food that they need, rather than too poor. Blackfoot Indians surveyed by the Public Health Service might not have accurately reported how little they ate. A prevalence of anemia in Harlan County, Kentucky, might be caused by parasites, bone marrow disease, excessive bleeding, or by drinking too much milk. Intestinal parasites or digestive diseases might prevent the body from absorbing nutrients, even when someone is eating plenty of food. Infectious diseases might “increase metabolic demands” by drawing excess energy away from the body, causing fevers or other symptoms. Many symptoms that appeared to be linked with malnutrition might be something else entirely (Pollack 1969, 480). Extra food, Pollack (1969, 488) warned, might even make some of those conditions worse. If there really was a serious malnutrition problem in the United States, Pollack (1969, 486) suggested, public health authorities would have noticed a change in overall rates of sickness and death. They had not.⁴

Above all, Pollack suggested that the real problems lay with poor people themselves, with their ignorance and incompetence. Inadequate welfare was not to blame. The proper diagnosis for this condition was not primary malnutrition, or lack of access to food, but secondary malnutrition caused by “lack of knowledge of nutritional value of foods and poor management of household budgets” (Pollack 1969, 480). “It becomes apparent that what the [Citizens’ Board] observers are really declaiming is the failure of people to participate in the food stamp and commodity programs,” rather than the insufficiencies of federal programs themselves (Pollack 1969, 481). Pollack (1969, 481) bemoaned “the lack of understanding or an inadequate education” in rural areas. Poor people’s food choices, not inadequate wages and welfare, led to dietary deficiency. Southern Democrats and their allies repeatedly blamed malnutrition on the purported ignorance of Black women (Moran 2018, 115).

Pollack’s arguments were echoed by Secretary of Agriculture Orowille Freeman in his defense against charges that federal food aid criminally neglected the poor. In testimony to Congress, Freeman cited Harvard Public Health professor Frederick Stare to the effect that “there are no hard facts” on how many people are hungry or malnourished in the United States. Like Pollack, Freeman criticized reports relying on anecdotal testimonies and ran through a list of alternate explanations for apparent symptoms of malnutrition. Above all, Freeman argued that government agents cannot be responsible for guaranteeing proper food choices in a poor and ignorant population: “it is not possible for them to spoon-feed every person in the country” (*Hunger and Malnutrition* 1968, 243–244).

Everyone saw the same images of poor children on their television screens. Doctors and nutritionists fought, in policy briefs and in the pages of medical journals, over what it was that they all saw. In a debate that still continues today, experts questioned the medical grounds for a diagnosis of hunger. Were these

children severely malnourished, merely undernourished, simply hungry, ignorant, or just plain poor? Was this condition an objective illness or a subjective feeling, a medical question or a political one, and who ought to determine the answers? Doctors with the Southern Regional Council, after traveling through Mississippi, were categorical. They diagnosed not malnutrition but starvation. The Council doctors rejected the malnutrition diagnosis, for a very different reason: “We do not want to quibble over words, but ‘malnutrition’ is not quite what we found; the boys and girls we saw were hungry—weak, in pain, sick; their lives are being shortened; they are, in fact, visibly and predictably losing their health, their energy, their spirits. They are suffering from hunger and disease and directly or indirectly they are dying from them—which is exactly what ‘starvation’ means” (Brenner et al. 1967, 6). Testimonies gathered by Wheeler and his colleagues insisted that we remember the violent relations underlying these conditions. To starve was, and is, a transitive verb.

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Poor people did not want to wait for experts to agree whether they were hungry, malnourished, deprived, deficient, undernourished, or starved. In October 1970 two dozen activists with the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), Radical Action for the People and the Welfare Coalition, disrupted a workshop at the Missouri Association for Social Welfare conference on “The Dimensions of Hunger.” Dr. Arnold Schaefer was scheduled to present the results of the National Nutrition Survey, which had launched in response to the publicity around the *Hunger USA* report. Welfare activists shouted Schaefer down, crying, “Let the people talk.” They called for welfare workers to disrupt their agencies’ complicity in suppressing clients’ access to support. The protesters demanded “that experts stop studying hunger and do something about it.” As Ms. Huella Scales said, “We can’t eat studies” (Canfield 1970).

Poor people’s activism spread across the United States in the late 1960s. As Annelise Orleck (2011, 2) has documented, “the poorest of the poor, despite daunting obstacles, transformed themselves into effective political actors who insisted on being heard.” The 1964 Economic Opportunity Act opened spaces and resources for community organization. Across the country, poor people built and maintained urban housing cooperatives, farming cooperatives, community health clinics, welfare rights organizations, renters’ rights groups, and community development corporations (Orleck 2011, 20). The Chicago Freedom Campaign and Union against Slums mobilized urban residents to fight against discriminatory city policies (Laurent 2018, 124–127). United Farm Workers fought for living wages and safe working conditions in the agricultural fields of the western United States. The NRWO united poor activists across the country who campaigned at local welfare boards demanding their legal right to welfare benefits, food, and housing (Piven and Cloward 1977, 272–353).

In cities as in rural areas, welfare activists challenged the structures of welfare administration, wage control, and the free market for food and rent, which produced scarcity and deprivation and upheld white supremacy. Restrictive welfare provisions were aimed at women of color across the United States. Activists in the urban North and West understood the parallels of their own situation with that of Southern workers. One of the most radical acts undertaken by NWRO was to mobilize poor women to demand welfare benefits, to which they were already legally entitled (Piven and Cloward 1977, 284). They challenged moralistic, punitive, and paternalistic “man in the house” rules, which monitored single women to ensure that no potential male breadwinners stayed overnight (Piven and Cloward 1977, 295). By 1969, NWRO grew to twenty-two thousand activists, mainly centered in the Midwestern and Northern cities; 85 percent of its membership was Black (Piven and Cloward 1977, 317).

In May 1968, in the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, the Poor People’s Campaign occupied a tent encampment called Resurrection City on the Capitol Mall. At the center of Resurrection City, organizers erected a massive ten-by-thirty-two-foot open mural titled “Hunger’s Wall.” Slogans for “Chicano Power,” “Sisters of Watts for Human Dignity,” “Uhuru or Revolution,” “Cosmic Brotherhood,” and “Love, not War” cover the wood panels. Above all of it stands an image of a Black man speaking out. “BROTHERS AND SISTERS,” the text behind him reads, “HUNGER IS REAL AND YOU BETTER BELIEVE IT!” (NMAAHC 2021).

Activists with the Poor People’s Campaign testified by invitation of senators on the Committee on Labor and Welfare, some of whom had visited Mississippi the year before. Mrs. Leona Hale of the Fort Berthold Reservation (in Newtown, North Dakota) testified: “We had a good life when the games [for hunting] were there. Now they are gone. I live on this [surplus] commodity and I have diabetes and I can’t live on this canned chopped meat in exchange for what they took away from me. My people are starving at home” (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 1968, 115). Myrtle Brown of Marks, Mississippi, asked why white children were able to eat in school and not Black children. “Nothing from nothing is nothing,” she said. “I have to go to Washington to see I get some rights. I am not only pleading for myself but I am speaking for the whole nation of poor people” (*Hunger and Malnutrition in US* 1968, 117). Benjamin Ortiz, high school student from Camden, New Jersey, linked hunger to settler-colonialism and white supremacy: “That is why I am starving, because you think, ‘Everything in this country is mine’” (*Hunger and Malnutrition in UW* 1968, 127).

In 1969 the Black Panther Party (BPP) required that each of its chapters across the country set up a breakfast program for children every school morning. Party leaders understood hunger as the root of a “vicious cycle” ensnaring Black people across the country: “They TELL US, you’re hungry because you’re poor. . . . You’re poor because you haven’t got the best jobs. . . . You can’t get the best jobs because you’re uneducated, and you’re uneducated because you didn’t learn

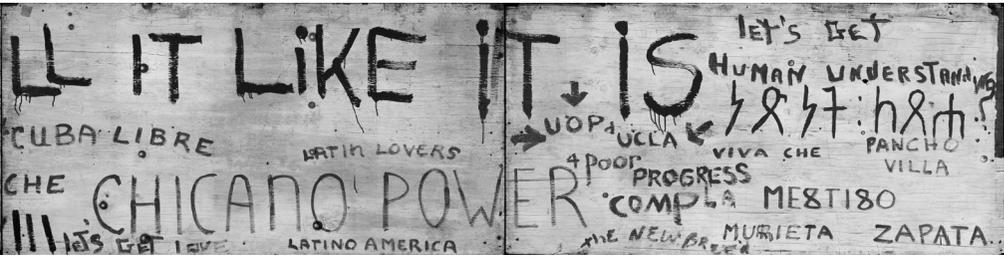


FIGURE 10. Plywood panel mural created and displayed in the Resurrection City encampment on the National Mall in Washington, DC, during the summer of 1968 (detail). Painted text at the top of the panel reads: “Hunger’s Wall: Tell It Like It Is.” Source: Collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Vincent DeForest.

while you were in school, and you didn’t learn while you were in school because you weren’t interested.” While acknowledging the link between access to food and school performance, the Panthers refused experts’ conclusion that poor people were irremediably damaged. “The root cause of this problem is not mental incapacities or cultural deprivation, but HUNGER” (Potorti 2017, 94). The Panthers targeted neighborhood businesses and employers who “thrive off of the Black Community like leeches” and perpetuate hunger in their communities. “Hunger is one of the means of oppression and it must be halted” (Black Panther Community News Service 1969, 3).

The Black Panther Party’s survival experiments were engaged with science, medicine, and history. They were political and technical. Black Panther Party member David Lemieux later recalled the reasons why the Party began to serve free breakfast to children in 1969. “Studies came out saying that children that didn’t have a good breakfast in the morning were less attentive at school, and less inclined to do well, and suffered from fatigue. I mean, there’s all sorts of scientific reasons to have a good breakfast in the morning. And we just simply took that information and a program was developed serving breakfast to children” (quoted in Nelson 2016). Survival programs like the Black Panthers’ combined local knowledge, federal antipoverty resources, and scientific and medical expertise. Medical knowledge, disseminated via television reports, popular press, and medical volunteers, informed political and economic actions in the South and urban North. Freedom Schools developed political theory and historical grounding, through students’ and teachers’ collaborative work. Impoverished people navigated and redirected welfare and public health programs, notably President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty and antihunger measures, toward broader political ends of life and liberation.

Survival programs countered racist assumptions that hunger, joblessness, and outmigration were the natural consequences of economic modernization. Cooperative farms and businesses, mutual aid networks, self-help education,



and training built alternatives to structures that exploited Black people (De Jong 2016, 29). Many of these programs failed not because they were unsustainable, but because they were actively suppressed by those in power (Smith 2019). Survival programs “show a contradiction in the system”: hunger is neither a natural state nor an inevitable side effect of economic change. “If the Black Panther Party can do all of this with no money,” asked BPP member Jamal Joseph, “how is the richest government in the world allowing people to live in poverty and hunger and on the street?” (Mukherjee 2017). Hunger was—and is—a programmatic policy, not a fact of nature.