

Conclusion

They Were Hungry

“They were hungry.” In an interview with sociologist Kelly Neilsen, former University of California–Riverside (UCR) chancellor Ray Orbach recalled the low-income students who entered UCR in the early 1990s. UCR is where I teach. Many of my students are hungry. This book is a response to the question why. One reason is historical: UCR lost a quarter of its enrolled students during the 1970s and 1980s due to environmental catastrophe. Air pollution in the local area got so bad by the late 1970s that the City of Riverside called for a state of emergency. Faced with a precipitous loss of tuition funding, university leaders decided to recruit an untapped pool of potential undergraduates: local high school students. They reached out to area schools and families, counseled students how to qualify for UC admissions requirements, and welcomed new cohorts of first-generation, low-income, underrepresented youth. In this process UCR experienced a triple financial, ecological, and demographic transition, which defines the university’s landscape today.

The smog has lightened since, and UCR is nationally recognized as a leader in promoting diversity, inclusive excellence, and student social mobility. At the same time, the university now depends on underrepresented students, their tuition and state funding, to finance its operations. Looking back, what struck Orbach most about the new wave of students was their drive and motivation. “We were able to bring students who not only had no one in the family who had gone to college,” Orbach said, “but they hadn’t even thought about it. These were first-generation students, and they were marvelous. They were hungry. They worked as hard as they could” (Hamilton and Nielsen 2021, 34). Orbach spoke metaphorically, but his words also described a material reality. Roughly half of UCR undergraduate

students, according to recent student surveys, are food-insecure (University of California 2024). They were, and they continue to be, hungry. Students at UCR, across the UC system, and across the United States are taking up hunger as a collective political identity. They are staging hunger strikes, taking labor action against starvation wages, and making collective demands to end all forms of food insecurity and carceral hunger. Students are pointing the way toward a future politics of hunger.

Orbach's figurative image of UCR students as hungry and motivated took a concrete turn around 2015. The University of California began an initiative to promote research on global food systems. As part of its launch, the university financed an internal survey of food insecurity among UC students (Martinez et al. 2018). This was one of the first large-scale surveys of college food security in the United States or anywhere, and the results stunned many of us. Of the UCR students who completed the survey, 62 percent qualified as food-insecure; half of that group were deemed very food-insecure. Almost two-thirds of students surveyed were eating poorly due to lack of resources. One-third skipped meals because they could not afford to buy more food. Many of us who work and study at UCR were deeply shaken by this news. I was teaching a seminar that year on "Hunger and Famine in the Modern World," about chronic hunger and famine events around the globe. I learned from students in that very class that some of them were skipping meals due to lack of funds, and some were sleeping during the daytime to deal with unsatisfied hunger pangs.

How could this be possible? How could thousands of students be hungry at a public university in a state with the sixth-largest economy in the world? At a campus founded on an agricultural research station, in a city that once called itself the citrus capital of the world? Focus groups of food-insecure students across the nation probed the underlying dynamics and consequences. A complex of entangled issues emerged: Students have scarce time to seek out and prepare healthy and affordable food, and they lack transportation to grocery stores. Universities contract food service out to private food suppliers, and set higher wages than at local food joints, leading to high food prices on campus. Students are hit by hidden costs of off-campus housing such as utilities and other bills. Financial aid packages tend to underestimate the actual cost of attending universities like UCR. Some students do not take the loans in their financial aid packages, because they don't want to fall into debt; then they find themselves unable to earn enough to live and study at the same time. Others take on heavy loans and live in a state of anxiety about paying them off. On top of that, many students face eligibility restrictions for federal welfare, SNAP (food stamp) benefits, and Pell grants. Many students are caring for and financially supporting family members, children, or elders. Food-insecure students encounter shame, stigma, and accusations of poor financial decision making (Henry 2017; Meza et al. 2019; Fortin, Harvey, and White 2021).

Students expressed fatigue, anxiety, anger, and frustration with themselves and their institutions. They spoke of their struggle to focus on lectures and schoolwork, to find sources of affordable food and time to eat between tightly packed work and school schedules. They described a feeling of alienation from their studies and their social world, unable to go out to restaurants or bring their own lunch to a study group session. Black, Latinx, and Native American students, former foster youth, LGBTQ+ students, and students caring for family members all respond to UCR surveys with much higher rates of food insecurity than other groups of students (University of California 2024). Students identified as food-insecure had lower grades, on average, than food-secure peers (Phillips, McDaniel, and Croft 2018). Meanwhile, a union-financed study, also released in 2016, found that more than two-thirds of staff members employed by the University of California (of those who responded to the study) qualified as food-insecure (Drier, Bomba, and Romero 2016).

Over the past few years, food security reports and surveys have proliferated. Tens of thousands of students have answered two or six or ten questions designed by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to track individual food security. Reports describe an acute crisis nationwide: the HOPE Lab found that two-thirds of community college students in the United States suffer from food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, and Hernandez 2017, 1). Social surveyors identified levels of food insecurity between 10 percent and 75 percent among different groups of college students; almost all surveys found that food insecurity among students far outmeasured food insecurity among US households (Nikolaus et al. 2020; Nazmi et al. 2019). At UCR and beyond, student hunger has become a matter of concern.

Some commentators, faculty and staff, expressed skepticism that students really were experiencing an actual food-security crisis. Skeptics noted that USDA household food-security surveys consistently identify between 12 percent and 15 percent food-insecure households in the United States. How could students experience food insecurity at rates three or five times higher than local families? Perhaps, one skeptical faculty member suggested to me, the food-security measuring instrument does not work properly with students. Perhaps the survey identified as “food-insecure” habits and events common to the college student experience. Which student hasn’t skipped a meal on occasion? Some commentators suggested that students just need to buck up; some recalled their own lean college days, living on beans or ramen noodles. But activists and scholars pushed back. No student today can afford college just by cutting corners and eating ramen. Over the past forty years, state governments have divested from higher education, just as underrepresented, low-income students began to enter college in large numbers. Universities in the United States now enroll more low-income students than middle-income students, and tuition dollars, not public

taxes, fund most university operations (Fortin, Harvey, and White 2021, 243). Students are on the hook for increasing fees even as the cost of living and housing soars. A public education today does not resemble the student experience of the 1970s or the 1990s.

Well before the University of California released its student food-insecurity survey, student activists fought to address the crisis of entitlements in their midst. Activists for undocumented student rights built the first food pantry on UCR's campus in 2013 as a collective response to student hunger. Mafalda Gueta, president of the UCR Chicano Student Center's PODER program, explained that "undocumented students constantly have to fill that [financial] gap, so some of them work two jobs or try to find scholarships that don't require residency or citizenship. A lot of students go hungry because they choose to pay their rent instead of eating" (Magat 2015). Undocumented students are excluded from federal programs like Pell grants and SNAP (food stamp) benefits. As students nationwide campaigned for legal status, financial aid, and educational access, UCR students with Undocumented Student Programs and Chicano Student Programs sought to care for each other's material needs. They relied on university seed funding, grocery and cash donations, and volunteer student labor to start a mobile food pantry on campus. Student pantry coordinators quickly realized that many documented students also suffered from food insecurity. A student parent association stepped in to help with food distribution, as part of its own mutual aid program. Student volunteers at the mobile pantry handed out grocery bags to fill with apples, lettuce, and canned goods. Gueta noted that food insecurity had grown to a campuswide student issue (Magat 2015).

After the UC food-insecurity survey came out, student activists pushed to raise awareness. Political science major and student government leader Melina Reyes went on a five-day hunger strike in 2016, supported by fellow students, to press the issue of food insecurity on campus (Avila 2016). Activists showed up at university leaders' town halls and public events, demanding an adequate response to this issue. They organized rallies at the Belltower, a central meeting point on the quad. Student organizations set up public showings of documentaries on food insecurity, solicited student-run solutions, and organized meal plan donations. A student in my class wrote a series of articles in the UCR student newspaper highlighting the food-insecurity survey and student responses to it (Ismail 2017a, 2017b, and 2017c). Student government leaders campaigned on the issues of food and housing insecurity, and succeeded in galvanizing state legislators to provide funding for emergency food and housing. The student food-insecurity survey became a rallying point. Student organizer Crystal Brachetti explained that "essentially, we are just trying to show administration that we're aware that there are 62 percent of us that are hungry and we're not OK with it" (Ismail 2017a).

Students and staff mobilized to serve students suffering from hunger. Students established and fought to preserve a university-sponsored community garden. Two students who conceived and built the first UCR food pantry, Ana Coria and Daniel Lopez Salas, later became university staff members coordinating (respectively) Undocumented Student Programs and the official, expanded campus food pantry. A student founder of the community garden, Fortino Morales, went on to direct universitywide sustainability efforts. Staff and students now grow and harvest fresh food from the garden to supply the pantry. In 2016 my students and I visited the student food pantry, which at that time was located in a small closet behind a student meeting room. Pantry director Grecia Marquez-Nieblas described the pressing needs on campus and invited all of us to get involved. I began to attend working group meetings of staff, students, and faculty around basic needs. Being a historian, I brought what skills I had to the table and set out to write this book. I hoped that I could contribute material to situate individual experiences with hunger in deeper, collective histories.

The writing of this book is indelibly marked by the historic UC graduate student and postdoc strike of fall 2022. I remember standing in a conversation with graduate student organizers and hearing a student call to fight against “starvation wages.” That exchange was the origin point of the chapter on starvation wages and hunger marches of the Great Depression. That conversation and others like it reoriented my research to pursue more closely the connections between hunger, learning, and labor exploitation. More generally, the strike of fall 2022 compelled me to be keenly aware of the conditions of my own work and my responsibility to those who have fought such battles over time. (Here I am writing a book about hunger, in the middle of a labor action against starvation wages!) I do not remember that student’s name, but I thank them for their insight and for making clear the historical connections between the student labor action of 2022 and the world-historical struggle against hunger and starvation wages.

One of the high points of the 2022 strike happened in early December, as classes were officially coming to a close (though many already had been cancelled). University dining halls across the UC system were “liberated.” Organizers surrounded the cash tills and declared the dining hall free and open for all. They invited students who had no more credit at the dining hall, those who could not afford a meal plan, and food-insecure community members to gather at the hall and eat what they needed. By imagining mutual aid as a weapon against the war on subsistence, and specifically by targeting an institution that is designed to promote social welfare and mobility, organizers brought back to life the historical tradition of the hunger marchers. “Today,” declared organizers at UCR, “we are reclaiming the resources that are ours; resources we shouldn’t have to pay to access in the first place. Food insecurity is violence” (AbolishUCR Collective 2022). This research comes out of a lived encounter, shared with colleagues, students, and staff at UCR,



FIGURE 13. "Food Insecurity Is Violence." Source: AbolishUCR Collective 2022.

who advocate for recognition and repair of hunger and food insecurity on campus. My research is responsible to them and to others who may feel shame or alienation due to hunger and food insecurity. Hunger is not your fault.

. . .

Hunger is not a natural, biological, or genetic destiny.¹ It is not just a matter of choices and habits. It is not a switch that you can turn off, or an addiction. Hunger is a technology. This book shows how hunger is produced, on purpose and to specific ends. Hunger is a tool, an instrument. Hunger focuses and narrows the horizon of desires and needs. Hunger drowns out other thoughts, feelings, plans, and concerns. Hunger cannot be ignored.

Hunger serves to advance a logic of elimination, a logic of debt and labor, a logic of behavior control, and a logic of commodification. By “logic” I mean a set of knowledges and ideologies, power relations, and forms of subjectivity. Knowledge, power, and subjectivity together constitute a discursive and material formation, an apparatus for shaping worlds (Escobar 2011, 46). A logic of elimination targets specific groups of people for dispossession and disappearance. A logic of debt and labor forces people to work in order to survive. A logic of behavior control employs regimes of motivation to punish or reward specific actions. A logic of commodification manipulates desire and longing toward commercial aims.

Throughout this book we have seen a logic of elimination play out through starvation, land seizures, and forced displacement, economic and cultural assimilation, and imprisonment. At several junctures in US history, state agents and their collaborators set out to eliminate people. Indian agents and army units systematically destroyed Native sources of food and replaced them with rations conditional on obedience (the “starving process.”) In Mississippi in 1967, Raymond Wheeler and the Southern Regional Council identified a “policy on the part of those who control the state to eliminate the Negro Mississippian . . . by starving him to death” (Brenner et al. 1967, 26). Stringent welfare rules close off access to common resources and criminalize survival (thus, by implication, foreclosing one’s continued existence). In American prisons hunger is a key component in broader regimes of containment and elimination. Targets of elimination, violence, and displacement were (and are) blamed for their own suffering. Poor and starving people were said to be lazy or criminal. Eugenacists and racists proposed that “inferior” peoples were doomed to disappear. This logic negates the existence and thriving of whole cultures and peoples. The subjective side of elimination is a sense of loss of self, and shame for one’s own feeling of diminishment.

People caught up in logics of elimination fought back, and continue to do so. Work by the Native Food Sovereignty Alliance, the NDN Collective Land Back campaign (Pieratos, Manning, and Tilsen 2021), water protectors at Standing Rock (Estes 2019), tribal entities such as the Karuk Department of Natural Resources

(Norgaard 2019), and land trusts like the Tongva Land Conservancy reveal and reverse the logic of elimination. Black food justice organizations such as the National Black Food Justice Alliance (Reese and Cooper 2021), Community Services Unlimited (Haasberg 2020; Garth 2020), North Bolivar County Good Food Revolution (Smith 2023), Black Farmers Market initiative, and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (White 2018) work toward emancipatory food power. The California Reparations Task Force, Restitution Study Group, the Equal Justice Initiative, and other reparations movements fight for repair of intergenerational state and corporate violence against Black people in America. Incarcerated people and their allies in organizations like Impact/Justice (Soble, Stroud, and Weinstein 2020), Maryland Food and Prison Abolition Project (MFPAP 2021), and the Youth Justice Coalition hold rallies and hunger strikes to protest continued confinement and deprivation.

When workers must follow orders if they want to survive, this is an example of the logic of debt and labor. Employers activate this logic when they leverage starvation wages, debt, scrip, and food advances to maintain control over workers. Hunger channels workers to serve specific ends, as when welfare agencies required work in exchange for relief. Scrip and furnish (food advances) exemplify the power of debt: plantation and coal mine owners purposefully kept their workers hungry as a tool of coercion. Food aid works in a parallel way at an international level, as when US president Lyndon Johnson pressured India to industrialize its agriculture in exchange for famine relief. Student debt functions according to this same logic, forcing students to channel their studies and ambitions toward jobs that will support their debt burden.

The logic of debt and labor, starvation wages, and punitive welfare policies is undergirded by ideology: hunger as a whip, driving people to work. Antiwelfare politicians argue that hunger is a necessary stimulus to labor and productivity. Conversely, they blame poor people for their own situation; if one is hungry, one must not be working hard enough. Starvation wages marked a worker as abject, subaltern, undeserving. Similarly, credit card debt, underwater mortgages, or unpaid car loans appear as personal failures, not as systemic forms of economic pressure. History shows us powerful stories of collective resistance to debt and labor coercion. The Hunger Marchers of 1930 and 1931 built a national coalition across race, ethnicity, gender, and rural/urban divides all around a common identity: of being made hungry. They turned hunger into a powerful common cause. Mutual aid networks such as the neighborhood aid described by L. C. Dorsey, the Freedom Farms Cooperative established by Fannie Lou Hamer, and the Black Panther Party breakfast programs made survival into a collective project. Since 2011, the Debt Collective has worked to disrupt the coercive power of personal debt. The Collective functions as a debtors union; it purchases packages of outstanding medical, student, and credit card debts (which are resold on financial markets), and forgives them. In the process the Debt Collective (2020) reveals that

the logic of debt and labor is collective and structural, not simply a question of individual blame and responsibility.

The logic of behavior control employs punishments and rewards to nudge, motivate, and coerce. Psychologists set up this structure of behavior control in animal laboratories, and from there it spread to schools, prisons, workplaces, drug treatment centers, and weight-loss programs. This logic reflects a utilitarian ideology that sums up human experience as pleasure and pain. Aversive feelings discourage certain preferences and behaviors; pleasurable feelings make one want to do more. As these feelings repeat, one automatically avoids certain behaviors, while other behaviors become habits. Edward Thorndike taught schoolteachers to impose such regimes of repetition, punishment, and reward on their students. Charles Ferster's behavioral weight-loss program had dieters recite their worst fears and shames ("ultimate aversive consequences") while staring at a piece of pie. Prisons enact the most violent and coercive expression of behavior control, imposing hunger (in the form of an inedible, indigestible diet) as punishment. In all of these examples the punishment is always stronger than the reward.

This logic assumes a pliable, influenceable subject—like the "starved personality"—whose feelings and actions may be undone, broken down, and recast. This subject's attention is focused on relieving hunger, pain, and aversion, and seeking relief and pleasure. They are hypersensitive, responsive, and suggestible. They follow external cues and directions. They must work to direct their "willpower" repeatedly toward specific ends. Hunger is a tool to create such a pliable subject. This is often in the service of a racial project, as when would-be saviors infantilize nonwhite people with scripts about how they need to change their diet, exercise more, and practice willpower (Moran 2018, 133; Williams-Forson 2022, 16). It is difficult to undo such pervasive ideologies of motivation, habits, and self-control. Antidiating activists challenge punitive weight-control programs. Unconditional parenting and antigrading approaches to teaching relieve behaviorist pressures on children. Removing moral rules around welfare, making welfare support unconditional, is another step in this direction. All of these approaches refuse the logic of behavior control, punishment, and reward.

Chapter 8 outlined a critique of commodified structures of desire and longing. Food companies manipulate taste preferences and the neurobiology of hunger, in order to make us hungry to consume. Government subsidies for wheat, corn, and soy encourage industrialized agriculture, massive livestock operations, and highly processed foods. But suppressing hunger is also commodified in the form of weight loss drugs and diet plans. Commercial interests like Weight Watchers and Novo Nordisk benefit from diet culture and fat shaming. Liking food, pleasurable eating, family food histories, rich Black and Indigenous food cultures are shamed. In the absence of real, intentional pleasure, all that remains is a battle between cravings, willpower, and drugs. A logic of commodification is expressed through feelings of wanting, longing, and craving.

Resistance to logics of commodification is possible, even at the most everyday level. Chefs and scholar-activists like Catriona Rueda Esquibel and Luz Calvo call upon us to decolonize our diets. By this, they mean to actively resist the lure of commercially processed foods, which keep people sick and weak. Ancestral knowledge, recipes, seeds, plants, and growing techniques offer protection, nourishment, and cultural healing. For scholar Psyche Williams-Forson (2022, 126–128), decolonizing diet requires a space free of racist food shaming, for Black people to “decide how we want to live our culinary lives.” Black food and eating call for “praise and celebration” rather than “shame and embarrassment.” Cooking, Esquibel and Calvo (2013, 3) say, can be a “revolutionary act.”

Hunger and eating, alongside personal indebtedness, are surely among the most moralized areas of American culture. Blame and shame run thick. This book shows that hunger and debt are historically intertwined. Cultural tropes around debt and eating sound very similar: critics accuse their targets of making bad choices, being weak in the face of temptation, unable to control themselves. My goal is to loosen the shame that knots around individuals, their wishes and choices. At the same time, I have no interest in replacing social blame (around debt, or body weight) with purely biological explanations about how hunger is a disease or an addiction. Instead I point to connections and movements that address hunger, debt, and their logics as regimes to be resisted collectively.