

Negotiating “Good Food” at an Elite Elementary School in New York City

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the discourses produced, circulated, and enregistered by administrators, teachers, and parents around and about “good food” at an elite elementary school in New York City. The larger research goal was to understand how privileged school children are socialized into elite foodways (how to identify, procure, and consume food) and elite forms of food talk (the codes and registers used around and about food) that contribute to the social field within which they develop the cultural capital needed to succeed as privileged worker-consumers in the neoliberal, late-capitalist world their parents are building. Here the analytic focus is on the intertextuality and indexical stance-taking of adults at the school and how these contribute to the sedimentation of elite signs and values and their imbrication into a moral economy of food and language in this privileged setting. The negotiation of contradictory messaging holds some hope for the roles these children may play as late capitalism unravels.

Like most products crafted for elite consumption in the neoliberal marketplace, education has become a super-high-end commodity for rich parent-consumers, who shop for an “independent” school with a distinctive social field capable of steeping and releasing their children’s potential for becoming

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exceptional power brokers and creative superstars. As a traditional part of the school day and major focus of twenty-first-century global discourse, school food is foregrounded in this tableau, and foodways discourses circulating at the school index a moral economy with global reach. This article analyzes how these discourses, especially the notion of "good food," were negotiated by administration, parents, and staff at an elite elementary school in New York City, where my research team conducted an ethnographic study of food-and-language socialization in 2010–12.

Our overarching aim was to understand how children of privilege were digesting this food menu and thus developing elite and individualistic strategies for using foodways and food talk to index and exchange a range of embodied goods and values (see Riley, forthcoming). Here I focus primarily on the socializing input: the structural contexts, intertextual discourses, and indexical stance-taking of school administrators, parents, and teachers seeking to mobilize a moral food regime to interpellate the future elite—unique leader-citizens and CEO-consumers—into the neoliberal state and global marketplaces that the students' parents have helped construct. However, the social field under construction at the school was cracked by contradictory messaging, and the resulting negotiations may offer some hope for the adult roles these children will play as late capitalist crises unfold.

What Linguistic Anthropology Brings to the Neoliberal Table

A critique of neoliberalism has arisen within the social sciences out of an attempt to understand how dominant discourses about the moral good of empowering individuals' freedom of choice can hegemonically obscure the fact that democratic and capitalist institutions and practices actually undermine and constrain individual and group efforts to effect constructive and equitable change (Harvey 2005; Brown 2019). Over the past half century, as print capitalism (Anderson 1983) has transformed into surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019), sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have developed tools and concepts—footing and stance (Goffman 1981; Jaffe 2009), registers (Agha 2005), and heteroglossia (Hill 1985); language ideologies and indexicality (Silverstein 1985; Irvine and Gal 2000); and language socialization (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984) within symbolic marketplaces (Bourdieu 1991)—for pursuing an anthropological linguistic approach (Zentella 1997) that synthesizes the apparent chasm between structure and agency.

This critical negotiation has been fruitfully pursued in at least three ways. First, the linguistic codes and their (re)production are frequently examined as

hegemonic indices of hierarchical social categories (e.g., Schieffelin et al. 1998; Morgan 2002; Silverstein 2003; Rosa 2019). Second, discursive registers through and about material substances such as food are studied as semiotic mediators of unjust social relations (Shankar and Cavanaugh 2012; Cavanaugh and Shankar 2017; Karrebæk et al. 2018). Third, the joint socialization of food and language is analyzed with the goal of understanding of how these intertwined registers are developed by individuals in indexical relationships that reflect and constitute a society's moral order (Riley and Paugh 2019).

The neoliberal approach to linguistic codes rests on a long history of elites using standard languages to interpellate citizen-laborers, idealized as “equal,” into nation-states (Anderson 1983; Silverstein 1996; Bauman and Briggs 2003; Heller and McElhinny 2017). But in the latest formulation of this imagined society, codes are treated as capital: inherited and deployed by the few to manage the trickle-down opportunities of the rest, whose codes are devalued (Bourdieu 1991; Duchêne and Heller 2012; Paugh and Riley 2019). The analogous neoliberal fantasy about food is crafted by the visible hand of neoliberal advertising and corporate social responsibility:¹ in the future, everyone will have access to plenty of tasty, healthy, fair, and sustainable food. In the actual Anthropocene (Chua and Fair 2019), the elite will marshal science and technology to cure the problems they create, and international capital and NGOs will oversee the unjust distribution of what is produced. Even activist food movements (e.g., Slow Food and Fair Trade)² take stances that rely on less visibly neoliberal discourses about the power of the individual to effect change through informed consumption practices, literally at the dinner table and figuratively in the ideological marketplace (Frye and Bruner 2012; Williams-Forson and Counihan 2012; Karrebæk et al. 2018; Riley and Paugh 2019).

These prestige codes and registers, whether linguistic or alimentary, and the ideological discourses about their (in)correctness are socialized and valorized through everyday interactions about and around food in a range of domestic, workplace, governmental, and recreational sites (Bourdieu 1984; Ochs et al. 1996; Coupland and Coupland 2009; Paugh and Izquierdo 2009; Riley and Cavanaugh 2017; Karrebæk et al. 2018; Riley and Paugh 2019). Much of this food talk is now mediatized; some foodways are invested with moral “goodness” while others are enregistered as low-class and lacking in taste through the circulation of media such as online recipes, televised barista and cooking shows,

1. See, e.g., the McDonald's page describing its “Values in Action,” <https://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en-us/about-us/values-in-action.html>.

2. See, e.g., www.slowfood.com and www.fairtradecertified.org.

and food films and advertising (e.g., Cotter and Valentinsson 2018; Mapes 2018). However, plenty of food talk still takes the form of face-to-face interactions, especially at school.

Although represented as the great “liberal” hope for engineering equal opportunity within a democratic society, meritocratic educational institutions operate as gatekeeping mechanisms that leave some people less free and equal than others. In school settings, the embodied codes and discursive modes of the already rich and powerful are socialized and mobilized to enrich and empower their offspring, leaving others marginalized (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Heath 1983; Morgan 2002; Urciuoli 2008, 2018; Wortham 2008; Khan 2011; Rosa 2019). As a big part of this transaction, food registers are consumed and digested through formal pedagogical lessons crafted to shape students’ taste for “good food” as well as through informal peer socialization through which students refuse, choose, or reformulate these “good food”-ways. For instance, Karrebæk (2012, 2013, 2014) studied how the national food registers of Denmark (including rye bread, pork, and milk) are presented to children from a range of ethnic backgrounds in a manner that contributes to the stigmatizing of those who bring pita from home, avoid pork as haram, and prefer juice when given the option.

The project analyzed in this article is a study of the food-and-language socialization of foodways and discourses at an elite elementary school in New York City where an expensive education is expected to leave none in the margins, a paradox that lies at the crossroads of these two avenues of neoliberal critique—the linguistic and the alimentary. First, children at this school are formed to perform elite linguistic codes while also learning to express compassion for those diverse others who fail to find a voice. Second, they are fed moral messages about what it means to eat “well” in this world and about the sad state of those who cannot. The underlying contradiction can be summarized as follows: learn to eat and speak well within the walls of one’s own elite existence while orating from the ramparts one’s empathy for the rest of humanity who may by hegemonic definition never eat or speak well. This article analyzes the performative texts, contextualized registers, and intertextual stances through which these mixed messages were articulated by adults at this school, who thus indexed a moral path forward despite the live mines buried in the social field.

In sum, neoliberalism is a moral problem for linguistic anthropologists in at least two ways: first, because neoliberal institutions and practices shape ideologies for assessing how people communicate and socialize members to abide by these assessments; and second, because neoliberal ideals permeate how we talk

about abstractions such as choice, change, and power in ways that efface their real-world impact. This research offers a glimpse at how elite discourses about and around food display neoliberal ideologies, circulate in elite school settings, and thereby have an impact on who may eat well, or at all, in the wider world.

Research in a Bucolic Food-and-Language Minefield

My research team spent two years (2010–12) conducting ethnographic and discursive research at the New York City independent school we refer to as Ridgecrest. We used various methods to collect a range of data: ethnographic observations and photographs taken in classrooms, dining areas, and outdoor spaces; noted and recorded situated discourses, interviews, and focus groups involving students, parents, school staff (teachers and kitchen workers), and administrators; and texts produced and circulated by all of these actors. My findings concerning the foodways discourses being socialized at this school emerged out of my analysis of these multimodal and intertextual forms of food talk produced and circulated at the school. Here, I provide preliminary information needed to navigate the discursive analysis to follow.

Natives and Activists in an Elite Social Field

My team studied Ridgecrest's lower school, which includes students in pre-kindergarten through fifth grade and at the time of our study had a population of about 350 students and 60 faculty and administrators. "Ethnic" diversity was visibly high, as the heads of the middle and lower school, many teachers, and a good percentage of students were of African, Hispanic, and/or Asian descent, but socioeconomic diversity was minimal, because the school had one of the highest tuitions in the US, and only about 20 percent of the students were receiving financial aid. Despite and because of this, the school was committed to engendering an ethic of care not only within the school community but also for the less privileged in the neighborhood and around the globe. Figure 1 exemplifies how a "caring community" begins in the dining room with chores that few of these children were being tasked with at home (cf. García-Sánchez 2014, 12).

Additionally, a handful of staff and parents at Ridgecrest had been tuning in to school food change discourses for over a decade: through, for example, farm-to-school programs for teaching children to grow and enjoy fresh food³ and Jamie Oliver-style programs for training school food staff to prepare nutritious foods.⁴ Inspired by these programs, a number of initiatives had been introduced

3. See, e.g., <http://www.farmtoschool.org/>.

4. See <https://abc.go.com/shows/jamie-olivers-food-revolution>.

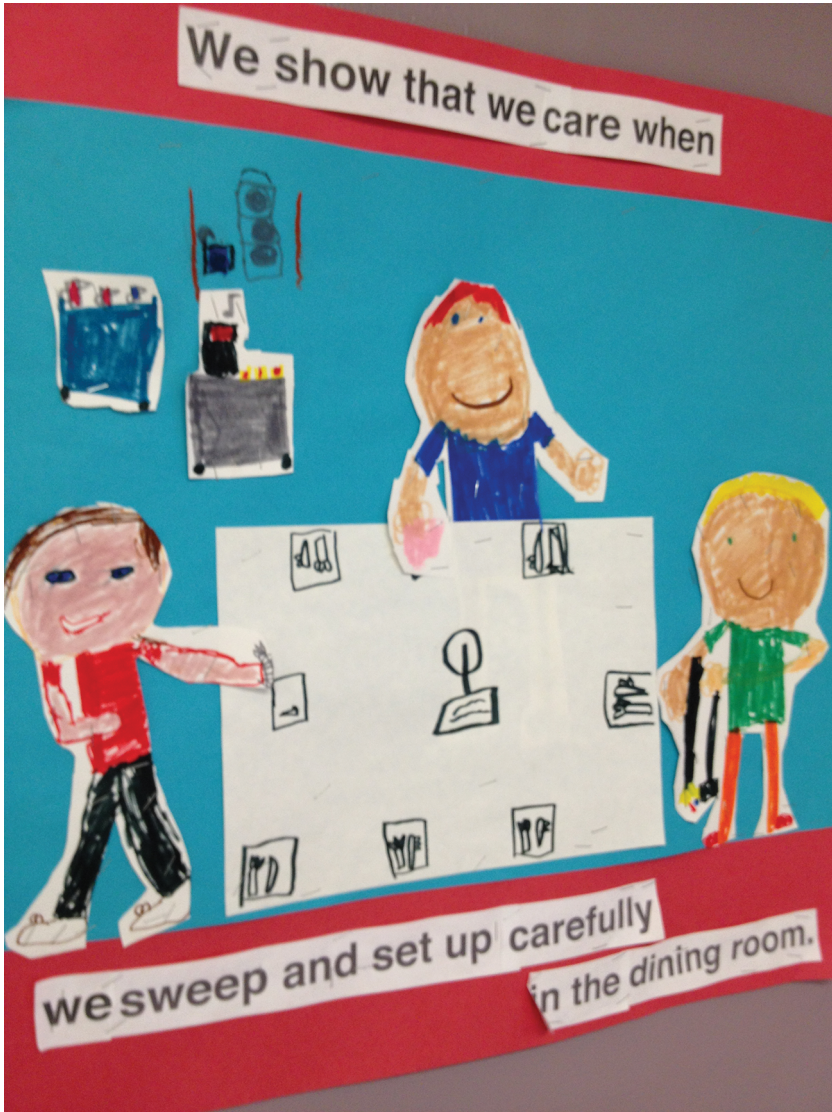


Figure 1. A caring community

at Ridgecrest to serve healthy and sustainable foods and to teach the benefits of growing and eating it. For instance, parts of the eight-acre campus had been developed into what Alice Waters (2008) dubbed an "edible schoolyard,"⁵ sporting fourteen raised garden beds (fig. 2), a greenhouse, and composters for food scraps.

5. See <https://edibleschoolyard.org/>.



Figure 2. Raised beds

Little of the produce from these gardens appeared in the dining hall because the school year does not intersect well with the growing season, and the volume of product was too little to feed a school. Instead, the actual school food was sourced from and partly determined by the new school food distributor, hired because of its claim to specialize in local, seasonal, and sustainable foods. However, close analysis of the panoply of foods offered on a regular basis—including an array of hot and cold options, meats, starches, fruits, and vegetables—revealed what the company director explained in an interview which he declined to allow me to record: the distributor uses a flexible definition of “local” (Blum 2017), closer to 1,000 miles than 100, for much of the school year.

Nonetheless, the chef attempted to serve and educate the students about the vegetables that could have been grown in the school gardens (fig. 3 shows a typical lunch menu) using a vegetable education program⁶ that the school bought into along with the new food regime. This involved taste testing one new vegetable per week (e.g., kale is “hailed” in fig. 3) along with posters of information about the vegetable—its name, plant part, seasonal availability, health benefits, and origins—that were hung up in the dining hall alongside a USDA My Plate

6. See <https://www.veggiecation.com/>.

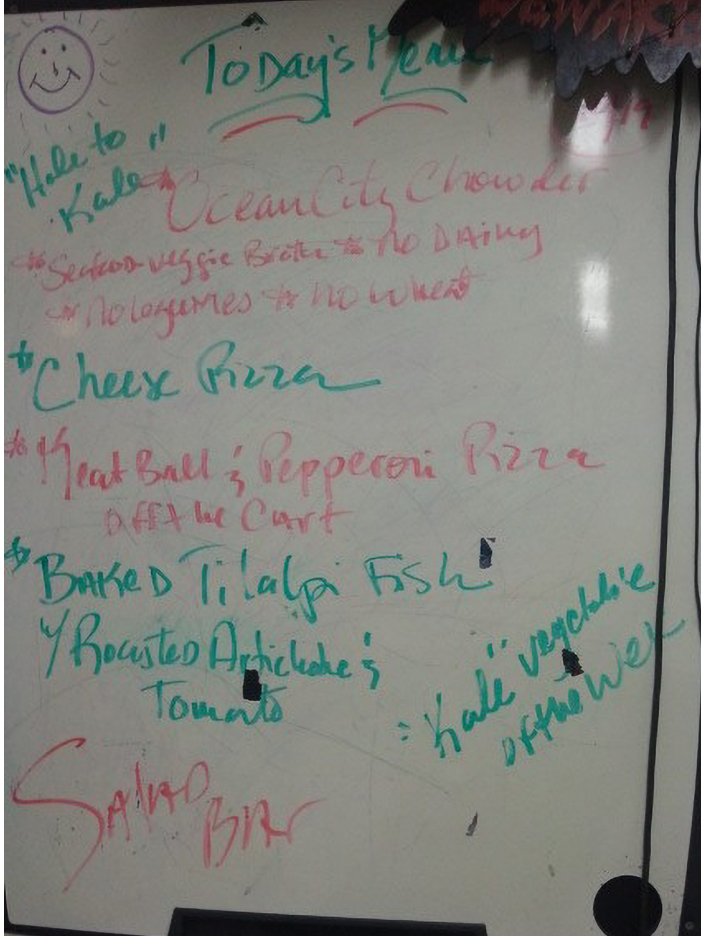


Figure 3. Hale to kale

poster⁷ and a state-mandated food allergies alert.⁸ While professional “veggie-ation” posters could be ordered for some of the vegetables, the art teachers were also recruited to transform other vegetables into an educational art project (see the hand-drawn leek poster in fig. 4).

Finally, a few teachers also consciously taught students about healthy, sustainable, and diverse foodways, as evidenced by the map (visible in fig. 2) painted by

7. See poster image at <https://www.fns.usda.gov/tn/myplate-posters>.

8. See image at <https://www.amazon.com/Food-Allergies-Aluminium-Commercial-14-25X15-75/dp/B07JW9N9X6?SubscriptionId=AKIAJ2F6RDUSIYCWQMFQ&tag=sa-b2c-new-20&linkCode=xm2&camp=2025&creative=165953&creativeASIN=B07JW9N9X6>.

children in the Environmental Sciences class which indicates the historical origins (Africa, Asia, and the Americas) of the produce being grown in those three garden beds. And in health class, children learned in various ways about what makes foods “healthy,” how to recognize them, and how to include them in one’s diet. Figure 5 illustrates a typical brainstorming session.

Texts from these school food change initiatives are examined at more length below. However, I pause here to make explicit my positionality as a native anthropologist in this study (Narayan 1993; Jacobs-Huey 2006). While rarely applied to WEIRD (white, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic) researchers,

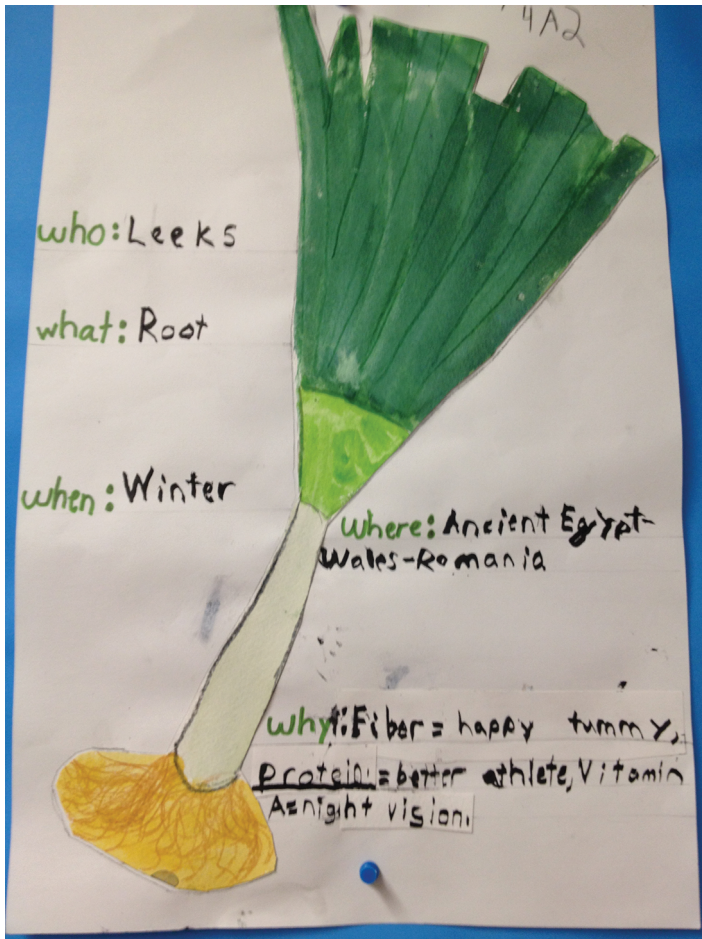


Figure 4. Leek

and sustainable food and food education at the school prior to beginning the study, and I developed the study in hopes of understanding why it seems so hard to achieve such goals. As with many native anthropologists, my identity as well as my activist intent may have provided an insider's intuitions but also clouded my perspective.

I was also joined in this project by thirteen undergraduate research assistants, all of whom were studying anthropology with me at the City University of New York.⁹ Their shock (cultural, social, economic, and political) never disappeared throughout the time we were collecting data, and their viewpoints and voices influenced and enriched my findings. I return to these points in the conclusion but turn my focus now to the infighting over foodways we found at the school when we arrived.

Food Fights at the School

Efforts to implement the various and shifting initiatives to serve “good food” at Ridgcrest and to teach children about it were stymied by several roadblocks, both ideological and material. Such obstructions operate in many school food change movements where late capitalism is organized around providing consumers with a proliferation of commodities and goading them to use choice as a form of agency (e.g., Poppendieck 2010). An independent primary school located in the neoliberal capital of the United States offers an illuminating look at how material options are complicated by moral ideals and elitist values.

First, there were practical constraints inhibiting the food staff's ability to procure and prepare fair, healthy, and sustainable food, constraints that may now be found around the globe (Robert and Weaver-Hightower 2011). That is, despite the best intentions of food (inter)activists, the production and distribution of school food is governed by a web of government policies, corporate entities, and NGO interventions—from farm bills and supply chains to safety regulations and farm-to-school programs (Riley and Paugh 2019). Any claims to the contrary—i.e., that their food is all sourced from organic farms where laborers are paid handsomely—are at present either purposeful greenwashing or an aspirational fantasy, even at well-heeled establishments such as Ridgcrest.

These practical problems paled in light of some of the ideological tensions triggered by food talk at this school. To begin with, the adult actors lacked any consensus as to what “good food” is. Low in fat, sugar, and sodium? Fresh,

9. Amber Brookmire, Carolina Carvajal, Seth Cipriano, Sesaley Graciani, Jackson Kuang, Esther Liu, Kristen Policastro, Keishla Santana, Brittany Schuler, Geraldine Then, Yexenia Vanegas, Brooke Vermillion, and Gabrielle Williams.

local, whole, or organic? Fair-trade? Is its goodness related to the health of the individual consumer, the environmental balance of the planet, the well-being of those producing these foods, or some other set of values associated with class, religion, or nationality? Given how our mediated world is saturated with conflicting discourses about the health, safety, moral rectitude, and symbolic capital of specific foodways, it is unsurprising that the staff and parents, who represented a wide range of ethnic, regional, and socioeconomic backgrounds, had not reached a shared definition of "good food," much less any agreement about how to improve it.

Moreover, many adults at the school questioned whether teaching "good food" practices in a school context is worthwhile and feasible. Just as a starter: can food that is good for children taste good to them? A number of adults assumed, like many Americans, that "kids' food"—sweet, salty, greasy, crispy, white, bland, and not touching on the plate—is a natural category that needs no cultural transmission, and that a taste for complex preparations using diverse and healthier ingredients is acquired as one matures. And yet a subset of these adults admitted, with a hint of guilt, to preferring these "bad" foods themselves.

Finally, some adults did think serving "good food" a worthy goal but doubted it could be achieved at school. These adults voiced the following objections: teachers should not be force-feeding peas, interfering with a child's comfort foods, or discussing unpleasant topics such as where meat comes from or what chemicals laborers are exposed to. These adults thought of school food as physical fuel for fulfilling this elite institution's primary function, that of filling children up with essential goods and skills. Only secondarily did some see food as a teaching tool for feeding children ideas about fair, healthy, and sustainable food.

Nonetheless, as mentioned above, a small group of parents had mobilized along with a few staff members to change not only the food but also the food education at the school. I discovered these adult actors when I checked out the Parents' Association's Sustainability Committee. After a couple of meetings, I realized that this committee was not, as its title suggested, focused on "greening" the school (i.e., making all eight acres energy-efficient and involving students in experiential and skill-building projects to do with environmental sciences). Instead, it had been convened in an administrative attempt to channel the energies of several high-powered mothers who wished to see their children eating "good food." Of course, I joined! The staff members and some, but not all, of the parents on the committee had bought into the same moral economy that I had as a farm-to-school activist in Vermont—that is, a market of values in which children can be socialized to believe, and can socialize each other to

believe, that healthy, sustainable, and just food is cool and fun to grow, prepare, and eat. Additionally, these staff members were willing to facilitate my study of this phenomenon and its contradictions on school grounds. Thus, I tuned into the general perception that the new food regime had spawned a backlash to change and thus a schoolwide food fight. With little difficulty I identified two factions that, although not actually homogenous, took aim at each other discursively as if they were.

One faction, the Sustainable Food camp, populated by members of the Sustainability Committee, called for the school to formulate a healthy and sustainable food vision and to implement a set of policies that would impose these foodways at the school and educate children about their goodness. In their view, lunch and snacks should consist of tasty, healthy, and sustainable foods, and knowledge about diverse foodways should be integrated in palatable ways into the school curriculum. By contrast, the opposing faction felt no need for a committee; these parents went straight to the staff to complain and found many sympathetic ears. I call them the Freedom Food camp (after the “freedom fries” of the Iraq War era),¹⁰ as they were diverse in background but coherent in their insistence that the teaching of foodways should be left in the hands of parents and that children should be left free to delight in the full range of child-pleasing foods, such as Dunkin’ Donuts brought in for birthday parties or chocolate bars provided by parents prior to sports practice.

One example of a skirmish in the battle over foodways and the moral goods symbolized thereby occurred during the first year of the new healthy food regime, in which white flour was replaced by whole-wheat breads, pizza, and pasta, and most desserts were eliminated. As a result, the Freedom Food parents complained that their children were coming home with headaches. Physicians’ notes arrived giving medical reasons why children must be allowed to bring white-bread sandwiches from home. A survey conducted by fifth graders found that most students reviled the new pizza crust and pronounced the pasta soggy. Finally, bake sales in support of “good causes” proliferated as a result of the missing desserts. All of this inspired endless grousing back at the Sustainable

10. “Freedom food” now displays a range of values online from anti-dieting (https://search.tb.ask.com/search/GGmain.jhtml?searchfor=food+freedom&enableSearch=true&rdrct=no&st=sb&tpr=omni&p2=%5EBYA%5Exdm126%5ETTAB02%5Eus&ptb=08ED8E09-1C1F-41F5-9E32-E61E4FEB62F6&n=783a396f&si=245051_PT-Purple-GBIN-US-Chrome) to food sovereignty (<https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/freedom-foods>). However, at the time of this study, the food camps seemed loosely associated with a Democratic Party-Republican Party divide that was also implicit in the “freedom fries” name-change (<https://www.cnn.com/2003/ALLPOLITICS/03/11/sprj.irq.fries/>). The Freedom Food camp’s message now seems eerily aligned with that of the fast-food consumer-in-chief presently occupying the Oval Office.

Food camp. Food fights such as these represent the public-facing version of a moral economy woven out of less visible and contradictory discourses and indexical stances by administrators, teachers, and staff. I probe these discourses and stances now in more detail.

Discursively Socialized Foodways and Registers

The first set of foodways discourses analyzed here are administrative texts, directed toward students, parents, staff, alumni, and beyond, which were designed to index the school's mission in a neoliberal world. The second set includes parental discourses about and around the food offerings at the school. The third consists of pedagogical discourses intended to socialize students into an understanding of food choice and constraint as part of the school's moral order. Each section also examines the reactions of other actors, including the students, who rarely consumed these discourses unquestioningly.

Administrative Discourses: Selling an Elite Toolkit

The school administration worked hard to enregister neoliberal discourses for designing the school's moral economy and a vision of the successful elite actors who would be formed within its social field, in which food was seen to play an active role. The school's mission statement, admissions materials, and annual reports were crafted to interpellate the body politic of board members, alumni, parents, students, and staff. Addresses by the head-of-school at opening and commencement ceremonies were intended to performatively galvanize the parent-student-staff body that had already been called, gathered, and made to pay. School rules and texts were condensed into keywords and posted around the school for student and staff consumption.

The keywords—*Mind*, *Character*, and *Community*—had been extracted from or expanded into the school's mission statement: "Committed to empowering lifelong learners by developing minds, building character, and creating community in order to change our world for the good." This and similar messages are echoed in annual reports written to enjoin parental and alumni philanthropy. For example, one article begins: "Giving to [Ridgecrest]: Different expressions with a singular purpose." It continues: "Engagement and participation are core values that drive our entire community—from the students and faculty who pursue their individual passion to the alumni, parents, family, and friends who generously support [Ridgecrest] year after year."

The salient keywords I culled from this article can be categorized in patterns that indexically highlight and promote the moral goods espoused by the school administration:

Developing Mind

Talents, interests, interest, passion, perspectives, pioneering, expanding, reach, creating, creativity, imaginatively, innovation, initiatives, inspired, revamped, renovated, improved, enhance, enhanced, enhancing, excellence, superb, visionary, significant, meaningful, meaningful, important, beneficial, development, change, future

Building Character

Leader, leadership, leaders, lead, capacity, passion, focused, direction, power, impact, impact, effective, effective, effectively, efficient, efficient, versatile, motivated, motivated, singular, singular, individual, specific, specific, particularly, character, character, enthusiastic, inclination, choose, chosen, decision, active, value, values

Creating Community

Community, committed, engagement, participation, participation, participate, participation, participate, connections, connections, supporting, support, support, support, support, serve, contribute, contribute, dedicated, fortunate, welcoming, open, convene, invest, opportunities, opportunity, different, many forms, difference, variety, diverse, difference

Out of these words, organized in this way, emerges an image of the moral goodness being proffered to students past and future at this elite establishment. First, it will develop creative minds capable of visionary innovations and meaningful change. Moreover, it will build character and, that is, the capacity to lead in effective, versatile, and singular ways. Finally, it will build commitment and engaged participation in diverse and welcoming communities. However, embedded in this alumni appeal to moral goodness lie intimations of the marketplace value of such an education—that is, students will benefit from connections and opportunities to invest their excellence and passion in the reproduction of well-meaning but elite institutions such as this one.

When organized syntactically into a single (but unspoken) statement, these keywords endorse and promote the neoliberal tenets and moral economy out of which this school has been forged along with the educational commodity it is selling to its students, parents, staff, and alumni: “Support a diverse community as a pool of opportunity to build value-filled individuals with unique skillsets

capable of leading meaningful change in the world." Or boiled down even more: "Develop good leaders with excellent minds capable of benefitting (from) a diverse and changing world."

Similar discourses are entextualized in the admissions team materials to recruit future parents and draft their children as students. Here, the precise qualities of the character being developed at Ridgecrest, enregistered as a moral good worth a lot in the neoliberal marketplace, are spelled out at more length: "At [Ridgecrest], we believe that character skills help students lead successful lives. . . . We look for students who will benefit from our approach, who will demonstrate curiosity, optimism, zest, and gratitude in their schoolwork, passions, and community activities."

These discourses about character and its qualities, such as grit, had been channeled by the charismatic head-of-school from the work of two psychologists, Peterson and Seligman (2004), on the character building, character assessment, and character skills needed to manage change. At the time of this study, the head-of-school was actively promoting these ideas in public venues, such as the Aspen Ideas Festival and the New York Times, as well as more privately, with actors like me, the alumna-parent-researcher-activist whose energies he sought to channel.

Additionally, the character skills—*curiosity, optimism, zest, gratitude self-control, imagination, grit, serenity, patience*—were sprinkled on post-it notes around the walls of the head-of-school's office and throughout the lower and upper schools' campuses. And in one commencement speech, he berated parents for not modeling these skills themselves:

Many people are finding out that they do not possess the skills and capacities they need to thrive in work and life, in the ever-changing world we live in. That is because they developed capacities, skills and knowledge that were not adaptive. We need to educate for change. We need to equip students with the abilities to think for themselves, reinvent themselves and to thrive in a world of change. . . . So, are you helping your sons and daughters collect their own tools for change? Do you have your own tools? Have you upgraded your toolkits for a more relevant version? Are you modeling the capacities such as optimism, self-control, imagination, grit, serenity under pressure and patience that allow us all to thrive under changing conditions?

This address about the skills needed for adaptation felt particularly relevant given the school's difficulties integrating food changes at this time. In principle, the school was offering students a dining experience that modeled how to make

wise consumer choices and politely enjoy them family style in a caring community (recall fig. 1). In reality, this was not happening: confronted with a plethora of good-food options, many students rejected the main dishes that were passed around the table in bowls and the proteins and veggies available on the salad bar, choosing dry cereal or a roll instead.

In response, the newly hired lower-school administrator (a Black man from the South) had a new set of rules posted in the dining hall. This discourse was visible to students and staff and was intended to manage teachers' regulation of the students' foodways choices. For instance, Rule 5 stated that students must take more than one food item on their plates while Rule 10 told teachers to remind students not to take more than they could eat. Additionally, the rules spelled out how students were to stand, sit, move around the dining room, eat, and interact: stand behind chairs quietly until all students have arrived (Rule 1); stay in chairs while eating (Rule 9); only leave one's chair when called by teachers to visit the salad bar (Rule 7) or when "hopping," bringing bowls of the main entrée to the table for others to pass around and serve themselves (Rule 4); consume food properly with utensils (Rule 6); only "converse" with those at one's own table rather than "shouting" between tables (Rule 8) and stop talking when the lights go out (Rule 2). Rule 3 specified that teachers need to communicate effectively to coordinate a five-minute silence during every lunch period.

The intention of these rules was to achieve better nutrient intake while instilling a more civil dining experience. However, the five-minute silence rule was perceived as punishment by both staff and students, so means were found to resist. The students invented ways to interact with full-body gestures that prevented food consumption more effectively than talk had. Teachers on lunch duty half-heartedly imposed the silence or tacked it on at the end after the children had finished eating. Alerted by their children, the Freedom Food parents were incensed at these new constraints on their children's foodways, while the Sustainable Food parents were quietly unconvinced that these rules, designed to socialize the skills required for tasteful, distinctive commensality, would in fact contribute to their children's acquisition of the habitus required for civilized dining.

Despite this uncomfortable present, in which more problems were being produced than resolved, one annual report instructed parents and alumni to look to the future: the physical campus was being renovated to make change happen. Food and food education would be integrated into the overall agenda for instilling creative skillsets into a diverse and forward-looking community: "The reconfiguration of the . . . building will include a more efficient and

welcoming cafeteria . . . , creating spaces that more effectively support creativity, community, and active learning." In other words, the head-of-school had decided that this capital investment would add value to the education-commodity he was selling. Indeed, he and I had had lengthy discussions about how to design this new, multifunctional food-space in ways that would engender creative pedagogical approaches to teaching diverse and morally sound foodways. He suggested I retool myself from an activist researcher into a paid consultant so he could sell my services to the board to assist in Ridgecrest's school food revolution. Perhaps because I was a product of the twentieth-century version of this school, I was not properly enskilled to create, nor did I desire, such a financially lucrative position, and so the consultancy never materialized.

Nonetheless, once an alumna, always an alumna, and this has left me unlimited opportunities to deconstruct the splashy appeals which still arrive at my address. These texts offering steeply priced shares in the educational marketplace enregister discourses of visionary schooling that forms individuals capable of making good choices (i.e., choices that are both ethically sound and personally strategic) and seduces the financial outlay of parents and alumni to grow the institution and perpetuate the resulting community. The food policies forged at the time of our study were part of the administration's investment in the ideology that learning to recognize and consume "good food" is one of the transferable skills students ought to learn at such a school on their way to becoming elitely segmented worker-consumers.

Parental Discourse: Negotiating Diversity across the Factions

The parents' uptake of the administration's attempts to fit school food change into its larger moral economy of education was mixed. The Sustainable Food parents' mission to spearhead food change at the school should have dovetailed nicely with the neoliberal messaging crafted by the administration. For them, as discussed above, foodways represent a set of values to be inculcated early: by learning to produce, share, and enjoy food now, their children would someday save the world. By contrast, parents within the Freedom Food camp felt that food is an essential pillar of personal liberty and that their children should be assured the right to eat in ways that suit their individual preferences. The situated interviews we conducted with eighteen parents, as well as the foodways journals that a couple of them kept, shed some interesting light on this food fight and the moral goods at stake.

As a member of the Sustainability Committee, I had easy access to the Sustainable Food parents and engaged in lots of informal discussion with them as

we organized for food change at the school. One of our initiatives was an evening food panel at the school that featured an array of speakers, from a locavore chef with a garden on his Greenwich Village roof to a community food activist with a CSA in Harlem. However, in the course of working together, I learned that despite the moral-pedagogical goals espoused by this panel, the primary focus of the Sustainable Food parents was on the health and taste (both gustatory and symbolic) of school food for the sake of their children's bodies, minds, and habitus. These parents were primarily concerned with ensuring that the actual food served at the school would be good for their children's growing bodies and minds by way of transmitting the proper nutrients and avoiding allergens and harmful chemicals. Only secondarily did they seem interested in influencing the pedagogical discourses served and consumed in the classroom alongside these foods. For instance, some parents on the Sustainability Committee would discuss how hormone-free chicken is good not only for their own children but also for environmental justice writ large. However, they seemed more interested using this food talk to index their liberal values (perhaps even branding the school through such foodways choices) and less committed to supporting the few teachers who were actively engaged in teaching the children about the systemic connections between planetary health, human health, and social justice via food.

The range of moral and aesthetic tastes expressed by the Sustainable Food parents were exemplified in an email exchange in response to a school newspaper article announcing the "New Breakfast" menu at the upper school. The Sustainability Committee had worked for two years to ameliorate the breakfast served at the upper school: the McMuffin look-alikes and humongous breakfast pastries were roundly critiqued as too heavy in carbs, fats, and sugar. The new menu replaced these with a "burrito made with eggs, meats, cheeses and ingredients of your choice," a "Cuban roll . . . that is flattened on the grill to sandwich eggs, meats, and cheeses," and with a "pancake of the week . . . cappuccinos, oreos, and carrot cake." A photo of this menu, published in the school newspaper, was attached to Parent 1's email and sent out to members of the Sustainability Committee, to which one other member replied:

Parent 1: Better. But Oreos?!?! For breakfast? [Chef] has never heard of a dark chocolate chip??? Ugh. What can we do?? That has to stop.

Parent 2: Also, has anyone ever heard of offering spinach or beans in a burrito not to mention offering one WITHOUT meat and/or cheese?

In this email exchange, the two parents were both frustrated that the more things change the more they stay the same, but their frustrations took distinctly different forms. Parent 1 expressed the viewpoint of what I call the gourmand-excellence wing of the Sustainable Food camp—that is, the stance that the food at Ridgecrest ought to replicate the excellence, diversity, and uniqueness to be found elsewhere in the educational program and the classy tastes their children ought to be educated to adopt. For this parent, what was better about this breakfast menu was that the sweets were muted and the egg McMuffins turned into identifiably ethnic, that is, diverse, offerings (burritos and Cuban sandwiches). However, she was still miffed by the low-class Oreo pancakes, as she believed that dark chocolate morsels would carry a lot more cultural capital. An interview with this parent revealed that she was a French-trained, TV-celebrity chef who kept an immense freezer stocked with ice-cube trays of homemade pulverized foods for her new baby and sent her pre-kindergarten child to school with homemade sushi at least once a week. She was well-situated to voice the perspective that this school ought to be capable of supporting both their children's physical health and their socialization into elite foodways.

By contrast, Parent 2 (who I confess was me) expressed the view of what I call the clean-just wing of the Sustainable Food camp: the desire for the food options at the school to educate children to consider not only their own health but also the health of the planet and those without food sovereignty, first by eating lower down on the food chain (more vegetables, fewer animal products), and second by considering the consequences of consumer choice on how food is produced and distributed. The lack of response from any other parent on this e-mail chain probably indicates that most of the parents in the Sustainable Food camp were only tangentially concerned with the fate of the planet or the well-being of others beyond their immediate elite community or concerned to immerse their children in dialogue over these matters. Thus, this brief exchange illustrates conflicting neoliberal positions even within the Sustainable Food camp at the school.

By contrast, Freedom Food fighters tended to view school food reform as a type of social engineering and evidence of the nanny state's attack on an individual's freedom of taste (note that this was the period of First Lady Michelle Obama's school food reform project and widespread resistance to it).¹¹ More generally, this faction agreed that the school, as an elite establishment noted for its abundance and excellence, should offer a similarly bountiful array of tasty

11. See https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/11/24/students-are-blaming-michelle-obama-for-their-gross-school-lunches/?noredirect=on&xutm_term=.179d09693806.

(not high-brow) options throughout the day. They were particularly aghast that their children were leaving school hungry.

I did not learn directly about this faction from its principal members because none of these consented to be interviewed by my team (we were clearly identified with the enemy camp). Instead, I heard about their vocal complaints from teachers and administrators as well as from parents who claimed to be unaffiliated with either camp but who, both in casual interaction and in interviews, willingly voiced the food freedom talk they had heard from other parents as well as their own children. The latter apparently complained vociferously that the new good food tasted bad and was too restrictive. When I mentioned some of the growing pains involved in switching to a new distributor or the difficulties of training old staff to cook in new ways, some of these officially unaffiliated parents expressed disbelief that the school could not manage to make healthy foods taste good, while others gave a collective shrug: why shouldn't their children like the foods found on kids' menus? For some of the wealthiest children, dinnertime meals consisted of pizza or sushitake-out or macaroni and cheese and chicken nuggets procured or prepared by nannies and eaten while engaging in other activities, such as video games. These parents assumed their children would grow into enjoying adult commensality without ever sitting down to such meals in any other setting. One interesting exception to this rule was a family which had regular "family meals" at a nearby gourmet restaurant, using it the way some Americans patronize fast-food joints.

Of those parents who consented to interviews, only two went on to keep a foodways journal for more than a couple of days, but these two journals shed light on the two ends of the socioeconomic spectrum and the diversity of ethnic types found at the school. One was a full-time mother from France who was socializing her two children into typical French foodways at home (see, e.g., Morgenstern et al. 2015): her produce was fresh and local (e.g., the beef in the freezer came from their upstate neighbor's cow); her Upper West Side brownstone kitchen was large and well-equipped; and her dining table was equally large and encompassing. This family spent a lot of money, time, and energy on cooking and eating together and considered this normal. By contrast, the other mother who kept her journal for a month lived in Yonkers, was African American, had quit working full-time when her third child was born, and was constrained by money and time in the foods she could buy, cook, and serve. Her two older children were attending the school on scholarship. Nonetheless, she consistently highlighted the kinds of foods she procured that food change advocates presumably consider healthy (e.g., organic baby carrots) as well as the methods she used

to get her oldest child to eat such foods (e.g., Seafood Sundays, veggies in the chicken soup or on taco night, watering down juices). She also mentioned the efforts she made to prepare dishes that her Jamaican husband would enjoy (e.g., curry goat), and she discussed how the family dined together. For example, dinner was at a set time in the family room with the TV on, while they went to restaurants for holidays such as Mother's Day.

Neither of these parents could be classified as members of the two food fight factions. That is, neither voiced objections to the food changes being made at the school, and neither attempted to fight for them. The French mother expressed in her interview that what was being done in the way of teaching children about sustainable, healthy, tasty food at least minimally mirrored what they were learning in her home, and she was happy that some of the school food choices seemed better than several years ago. She sometimes even asked the school chef for his recipes if her children said they enjoyed them. She was shocked to hear about the resistance to the new food regime, and she was critical of the foodways of some of her children's friends (no family meals, snacking from the fridge, and no interest in fruit). She intimated with some trepidation that these foodways were rubbing off on her children, who nonetheless, she insisted, appreciated fresh fruit at the farm and tried unusual foods when in France.

The Yonkers mother, when interviewed, expressed little knowledge of the new foods and ideas about food being served at the school and claimed her daughters seemed happy enough with what was served, especially the hot dogs, soups (this popular midmorning classroom snack was one of the early attempts by the head chefs to introduce fun ways of eating vegetables), and waffles with ice cream for lunch on Fridays (a compromise for the fact that desserts had been otherwise expunged from the menu). She noted that her eldest was sometimes hungry after school but did not blame the school for the sufficiency or health of their food offerings. Instead, she mentioned her children's excitement the day the head of the lower school came to the dining hall and demonstrated how he made his "yummo sandwich," putting cold cuts, pickles, lettuce, and tomatoes in a roll. We heard from several others that this demo day made an immense impact on the students: although the food was always out there, no one had ever shown them how to construct a sandwich before. The Yonkers mother considered it a great success because her older daughter began putting lettuce and tomatoes on her tacos.

Overall, it seemed that both parents assumed that their children would learn to eat as their family ate and that this would be more significant than anything

going on at the school. Perhaps the silent majority of parents agreed, but a noisy minority said otherwise.

Teacherly Discourse: Socializing Food Choice at School

The staff's discursive input was similarly complex, partly because they came from diverse backgrounds and partly because their jobs depended on wending their way through a minefield of administrative and parental demands. Most of the many I interviewed and observed at work seemed conscious of the vying foodways discourses at the school and were also carefully considering how to re-present these for the consumption and edification of the students. In this section, I look at two forms of pedagogical discourse: textual ways in which food was purposely integrated into educational lessons as well as less strategically designed ways in which teachers engaged students in various forms of food talk.

Many teachers carefully crafted "good-food" discourses and purposefully integrated these into teaching spaces in ways that more or less explicitly indexed the moral value of diverse and healthy foods while teaching content about where food comes from, what it signifies, and who gets to eat it. The educational gardening programs included pollinator gardens with literacy texts planted



Figure 6. *The Pollinator Times*



Figure 7. P for pomelo

among the flowers (see fig. 6), three-sister gardens planted by third graders learning Native American history, and projects testing seeds' needs for soil, water, and sunlight in done by fourth graders. Once the Sustainable Food parents got involved and provided funding, the program took a more ambitious turn, adding raised vegetable beds, compost drums, a portable greenhouse, and a new environmental lab constructed out of an old garage. One of the long-involved kindergarten teachers was hired as part-time environmental science teacher and worked with the children on creating garden plans.

The kindergarten teachers tended to be particularly committed to the idea that food is good to think with, just as writing and drawing pictures and graphs are good for codifying and channeling knowledge about food. Good-food manipulables were integrated into numeracy and literacy exercises in several classrooms: fruits beginning with *P* for *p*-week (fig. 7) and taste tests for tabulating and charting students' preferences (fig. 8). The foods used for these lessons were intended to index—both pointing out and constructing—the beneficial values of health and diversity. For instance, health was represented by familiar but unprocessed fruit such as pears, while diversity was embodied by foods the children may never have tasted or even seen before, such as pomelos, persimmons, and pigeon peas. These pedagogical lessons not only targeted

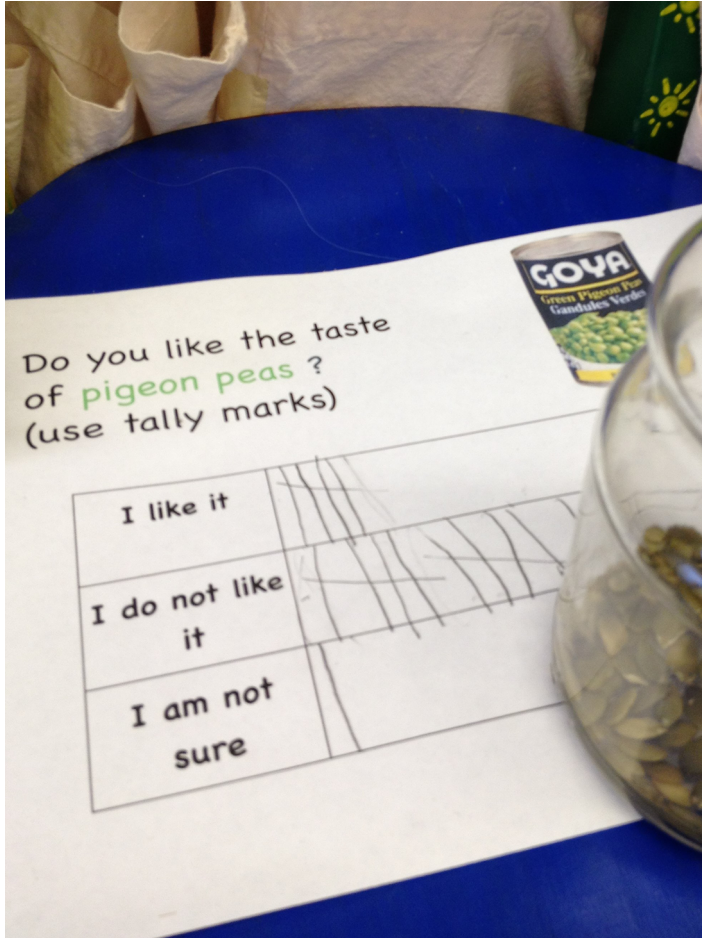


Figure 8. Pigeon pea taste test

literacy (the alphabet) but also socialized habits of conceptualizing food across space and time, form and function, through offhand discussions of the food's historical and geographical origins or seasonal production and nutrients, as well as individual assessments of its taste, color, or other qualia of goodness (such as health or intriguing unfamiliarity). But one element was missing: I never saw a food-imbued lesson take up issues of cost or convenience, even though for teachers and food staff, such criteria of choice played an obvious role in their moral economies of food, as their salaries were not commensurate to life in New York City. Nonetheless, teachers' personal commitments did sometimes contribute to messages that flew below the radar of metapragmatic consciousness.

My research assistants were embedded in separate classrooms and instructed to note the many ways in which food or food talk were apparent at the school: sampling tables on World Food Day, the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*, the kindergarten play-kitchen, or the Penny Harvest¹² at weekly assembly. Using this methodological lens, we realized not only the ubiquity of food and food talk but also how staff members were not always aware of the possibly incoherent impact of the messages being promulgated. For instance, pre-kindergarten teachers withheld the graham cracker snack from students until they had eaten a little more of their "real food," whereas sweet treats (e.g., brownies left over from a parent-teacher function) were routinely made available to teachers throughout lunchtime in plain sight of the students whose consumption of desserts was being limited.

But not all mixed messages seemed harmful. One fourth-grade teacher was especially masterful at the kind of complex signaling that can have excellent pedagogical effects. She had been teaching with and about food at Ridgcrest since the late 1970s: planting gardens, holding Spice Trade feasts, enlisting her students in the Heifer International Read to Feed project,¹³ and so on. Although she resisted pressure from the Sustainable Food camp to teach the moral imperatives of eating well according to the strictures of this historical moment, she did engage in many ironic and impromptu exchanges with her students that filled them with news about food far more effectively. Here are three examples:¹⁴

Example 1: Food staff as the enemy

(Fourth-grade lunch in dining room [YV, November 30, 2012])

Student: [*peeling back the cheese on a pizza slice to reveal a green speck*] They're hiding vegetables in the pizza now!

Researcher: It looks like oregano.

Student: Doubt it.

Teacher: [*wandering by*] Oh my god! You know, they're putting fruit in your pizza too. Tomatoes are a fruit.

12. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Penny_Harvest, a non-profit organization designed to "harvest" pennies from school children to help feed the homeless in New York City.

13. See <https://www.heifer.org/readtofeed/index.html?msource=FERFG120001>.

14. Due to the impossibility of gaining the consent of many parents, researchers noted these naturalistic discourses in the classroom, dining hall, and gardens by hand rather than recording and transcribing them using the methodological norms typically applied in linguistic anthropology. Thus, no transcription conventions are used to represent details that could not have been precisely noted; similarly, the analyses should be read as approximate and suggestive, rather than definitive.

Example 2: Teachers as pseudo-mothers

(Fourth-grade lunch in the classroom [YV, April 1, 2011])

Teacher: I'm going to demonstrate what's up here. Apple cider, five carrots per person. You can have more if there's leftovers, one bag of chips, an apple if you're interested. I'm being a mother, cookies at the end.

Student: In second grade Mrs. P would make us eat a vegetable before the cookie.

Teacher: If you're ten and don't know to put on a jacket when you go outside I can't help you.

Example 3: Children as picky eaters

(Fourth-grade discussion of *Journey to Jo'Burg*¹⁵ [AB, February 17, 2012])

Teacher: We need well-rounded diets. Here in the U.S., we can hound our kids when they eat crackers instead of fruits and veggies, but in some parts of the world, kids don't have the option to eat well-rounded meals. Sometimes all they have is rice . . . everyday! Here, we reject many foods, like 'oh no there's only 45 options in the cafeteria!'—some people don't have those options.

Student 1: Some people in this school, and in this class, just eat a piece of bread for lunch and reject the rest of the food.

Teacher: Well, yes, some people have medical . . . personal reasons for that, but it does happen. My son for example used to eat only bacon, lettuce, crackers and something else . . . I can't remember. This lasted for a long time, and I took him to the doctor who said it was ok—he was eating a little bit of each thing, but it was absurd to me that he only ate like 4 different things!

15. This teacher was using *Journey to Jo'Burg* (Naidoo and Velasquez 2002), a work of realistic fiction for young readers about apartheid-era South Africa, to discuss the real-world difficulties of children elsewhere in the world. The narrative ends happily despite the horrific obstacles faced by the two young protagonists, who travel 300 kilometers to bring their mother home from work in Johannesburg to care for their sick infant sister.

Student 2: Mm bacon's good!

Student 3: No it's not! It has nitrates!

Student 4: Yeah, like some people would kill to eat what we eat. I don't like olives, but I would eat them if I didn't have food and they would fill my stomach!

Teacher: Yes, it's not to say that we **MUST** change our behavior to match those who don't have what we do, but it's important to be aware of these things.

In each of these exchanges, the teacher establishes an epistemic stance in which the imparted knowledge is presumed to be already known by the student(s). That is, she treats her students as interlocutors with whom she can engage in sensible conversations over knowledge they already have and choices they already have the maturity to make. For instance, in example 1, she uses "you know" to indicate that the student does or ought to know that pizza sauce is made from tomato, which is a fruit. In example 2, the assumption is that the students by age ten know or ought to know without being told to take sensible precautions such as putting on a coat before going outside or eating their carrots and apple before their cookies. And in example 3, her use of the third person plural deixis "we" in the first and last line not only constructs a presumption of their shared understanding, but also specifically indexes their equal status as among those in the world who have plenty to eat and thus the luxury of choosing what not to eat. She frames this position of privilege as one that comes with responsibilities of moral citizenship: to be aware of those who are hungry and to be grateful for what one has. In this way, the teacher indexically projects the minds of the students into a new state of awareness without too obviously imposing her authority upon them.

She also does this through indirection, by mediating the voices of others. In example 1, she ironically aligns with (and so voices for) the student against the untrustworthy food staff agents who have been sneaking healthy, bad-tasting fruits and vegetables into the pizza, a food normally classified by children as good-tasting and unhealthy. In example 2, she sarcastically references her own performance as mother (identifying the "good-food" priorities) but then renounces this role as more worthy of a second-grade teacher, making explicit that the students are old enough to make good decisions on their own or beyond her

help if they cannot. In example 3, she mediates for others: hungry children elsewhere in the world, children with eating issues including her own child, and finally the doctor who told her not to worry. However, her most sardonic voice emerges for those students who reject the bounty offered at the school: “oh no there’s only 45 options in the cafeteria!” This voice is then clearly contrasted with her direct statement: “some people don’t have those options.”

Aided by her critically empowered students, this teacher has created a minefield that requires some fancy footwork to avoid psychic implosion or moral paralysis. This was because the classroom was filled with ten-year-olds possibly at risk of starving themselves for several reasons, including the orthorexic one indicated by Student 3’s concern about nitrates and the anorexic one implicit in Student 1’s finger-pointing, face-threatening act. Indeed, Student 1’s tattle that some only eat a slice of bread for lunch was observed by the researchers to be abundantly accurate; this elite population was statistically far more at risk of anorexia than obesity. In response, the teacher adopted two indexically contrastive stances from which to dance her way through and interpellate her students into their future moral roles as “well-balanced” elite citizens.

On the one hand, she used the distancing phrase “some people” to make two explicitly pedagogical points: some children in the world are structurally deprived of the option of having more than rice to eat every day while some others have medical or personal reasons for why they do not eat well-rounded meals. On the other hand, she uses the inclusive first-person plural to explain that “we” are lucky to have options and should use “our” privileged perch to be conscious of the complicated constraints on others: we must neither ignore them nor quit eating ourselves out of an excess of sympathy. In doing so, she has verged on othering the emergent anorexics in her classroom as well as the South African children in Naidoo and Velazquez’s (2002) narrative, while modeling her best attempt not to.

This is her way. Through eviscerating the position that no one has yet definitively occupied, she indexes the place from which to stand and get a commanding view: surely you realize that pizza is necessarily full of fruit; surely you know to eat the good food before the food that tastes good; surely you know not to mimic those who are actually starving. And she succeeds in calling some to this place of assurance as Student 4 manifests: distinguishing easily between what he likes and does not like while claiming to have the skills to survive if the world changes around him and has only olives to offer. Her skillful dance in this instance is typical of the heteroglossic style that made her an effective and beloved teacher, and a favorite for my research assistants who had the luck to observe her classes.

And while this classroom exchange covers many of the food issues at issue among the parental food-fighters (the bounty, the picky eaters, the medical conditions, and the nitrates), it also glances at the problem of food sovereignty that was otherwise largely missing from the food fight debate at the school. While a generalized and unified attention to caring for a diverse community and for changing the world for the good was written into the school's mission, the food talk among most parents and staff rarely reflected this moral good, or any constructive avenues for getting there. After much reflection, I think I see now how the contradictions are just too extreme for most to face without implosion. My final words will be spent attempting to confront and synthesize these contradictions.

Conclusion

A complex web of neoliberal values is interdiscursively woven into the moral economy of food at elite schools dedicated to developing minds, building character, and creating community to change the world for the good. How the students at Ridgecrest were digesting and helping to shape these values is examined in detail elsewhere (Riley, forthcoming). Here, by way of conclusion, I offer a little more critical probing of the discursive complications that affected their socialization as well as a few hopeful thoughts about its impact on them and on those who came to study them as well.

Education in the United States under late capitalism represents the latest step in a long history of schooling's use as a regimentation technique (Heller and McElhinny 2017; Urciuoli 2018). It rests on the neoliberal ideology that schooling is a consumer choice and that parents are free to assess the cost benefits of a range of schools like any other commodity. However, most school options are only available to the wealthy, and even these choices are just variations on a theme as education is now designed to form subjects into incorporated agents filled with bundles of skills that can be marketed and strategically deployed to engage in alliances with other incorporated agents. These acquired skills include linguistic, social, and cognitive competencies and other amorphous potentialities: that is, a flexible toolkit with which to respond to an ever-changing world. Foodways and food registers form an important but obscured part of this toolkit.

Production, circulation, and consumption of food and food values is implicit in the successful (re)production through schooling of elite leader-laborers capable of (re)creating an elite (if aspirationally inclusive) community: social

actors (teachers, staff, parents, and students) create frameworks for orienting perception and social alignment through multimodal messages and stances. That is, entextualized keywords and graphics as well as embodied enactments of evaluative phrases are dialogically imbricated into a roof line for the brave new world they are endlessly (re)designing. However, the imagined house is not so simply built—disjunctive discourses sometimes interrupt the capital flow. The three forms of discourse analyzed here—the administrators’, the parents’, and the teachers’—move from most regimented to least: the administrator monologically defines the mission, the parents buy into and then attempt to sway the school’s vision in various ways, while the teachers are heteroglossic in their pedagogies. It is because of this last phenomenon that I hold some hope that the children so affected are not being uniformly interpellated into a hopelessly contradictory moral economy. But let us review the food-infused aspects of these discourses before glancing at their possible effects beyond the school.

First, the administration’s multimodal forms of food talk—rules for correct dining and post-it notes about “grit” and “caring,” Penny Drive appeals and garden narratives about pollinators, My Plate posters and alumni publications about the capital-intensive food space under design—form food registers that index, both reflecting and performing, an aspirational moral economy for the elite participants in this edible schoolyard. A discourse of “good food” is foundational to this imagined community and its citizens under construction, who long to belong to a better world of their own making. My choice to send my own daughter into this reproductive system is proof of the seductive efficacy of these discourses. However, the reality is far more elusive.

Interwoven with these administrative texts were the debates among parents and staff over food and its exchange value in the moral economy constructed at the school: who is in charge of evaluating food’s goodness, and who controls who can or must eat it? The Sustainable Food parents’ focus on “good food” functions as an indexical icon of the school’s promise to feed these children the skills and knowledge that will entrench their elite status and facilitate their leadership roles in the world. That is, these parents were seeking to feed their children chemical-free protein, both materially and symbolically: “good food” reflected and recapitulated the elite value of orthorexically distinctive food. By contrast, the Freedom Food parents were intent on liberating their children’s minds and bodies from the school’s constraints imposed via food and food talk while nonetheless emerging from this institution with the goods—that is, the diploma and skillsets that would open further paths of choice and freedom for their children. These elite consumers’ debate over anointing certain foods

and foodways as "good" or "bad" was one way in which they attempted to retain some control over how their children would turn out.

Finally, most teachers and kitchen staff at Ridgecrest were fully committed to the stated mission of the school—that is, to create intelligent and sensitive world citizens—despite sometimes contradictory directives emitted by their employers (the administration, board, and parents) about how to accomplish this mission. Many of them incorporated a range of creative food-work to inspire their young charges to try new and diverse tastes and to dig into understanding where food comes from, who has access to it, and what impact their own foodways may have on the health of their bodies, the planet, and other beings living here. So, my critique of neoliberal education does not extend to individual members of the staff whose inspired teaching my team witnessed.

I end this critical probe by highlighting the neoliberal message about "care" to which these children were being exposed. This discourse has deep roots in the paternalistic ideologies of colonialism, development, and now neoliberalism. Simply put, the message—it is "our" burden to take care of peoples who cannot take care of "themselves"—is highly problematic because "their" problems were largely of "our" making (Wolf 1982; Harvey 2005). At the school, the steady diet of "care" messages accompanied the children's grooming to "serve" at the top ranks of the techniques of control that their parents were designing, techniques designed to perpetuate systems of profound inequality. Contributing to food sovereignty (or any type of sovereignty) for most of the world is not a part of this project. Instead, these children were being fed a moral discourse that tells them that agency for all needs to be contained by the hegemonic discourses that they (as elite children) were being trained to script and delegate.

So, what does this educational system breed? I begin with myself. As the product of an earlier instantiation of this elite institution, I consumed twentieth-century precursors of the neoliberal ideologies presently served there,¹⁶ and these affected my decision to conduct this study and my findings. On one level, this article is an analysis of the intertextual discourses pervading the socialization and sedimentation of moral signs and values in this particularly privileged

16. I first read Margaret Mead in eighth grade, and by tenth grade I was learning an early version of world systems theory, all of which contributed to my studying anthropology in college and to my choosing Ridgecrest for my daughter. In 2009, Ridgecrest's ninth-grade history curriculum had developed into an extensive critique of globalization, beginning with Walmart. By the time she graduated in 2013, I realized that the school was funneling these students' critical energies into social entrepreneurship and teaching them to combine moral concern with capital growth. Most recently, the teachers who created the Walmart curriculum were let go due to allegations of teaching pro-Palestinian perspectives. My daughter and her cohort protested, to no avail.

school. On another level, it is a personal critique of this institution's mixed messages and false promises of inclusivity and justice. It is also a quest for hope that such an education may lead a few of its student-products (me perhaps, or my daughter) to contribute to constructing just communities for more than our own kind.

Here's more of the hope: my research team. This group of intelligent, genuinely diverse undergraduates emerged from their weekly visits to the school with a critical awareness of how the world operates. Our weekly debriefings and professional presentations (e.g., Riley et al. 2014) helped me make sense of the data we collected and puzzled over. They pushed me past my doubts that this ethnographic story is worth telling. We must study the populations who are producing the discourses that construct the world that the typically less privileged subjects of anthropological investigation live in.

Then, there are the children we were observing. We were alternately bemused and disturbed to see how they were learning to harvest pennies to assuage their guilt about others having nothing to eat and to plant seeds in state-of-the-art greenhouses to soothe their anxiety about humans burning up the planet. We also concluded that though incredibly privileged, they are like all children the subjects of adult practices and structural constraints over which they themselves have little control. Their job, to use a neoliberal trope, is to make what they can of the skillsets they acquire and the discourses they are socialized into and through.

A few students might be incapacitated by rich-kid syndromes, that is, a lack of "grit." But the majority were taking away from this schooling the elite codes and food registers required of them to attain well-paid consultancies straight out of the elite universities they will attend (with or without their parents' illicit schemes to send them there).¹⁷ Most were acquiring the strategies needed to transform socially marked and marketable skills and knowledge into both social and financial capital. And many will continue to scaffold the uneven playing field onto which they were born at the top and will happily play well-segmented consumers at one end and leader-producers with highly transferable skills at the other.

Nonetheless, there is hope because the ways in which these students move through the world, projecting the moral universe they digested at Ridgcrest, will not be unified. Some children were already displaying characteristics my team agreed were "excellent": they were smart, creative, sensitive, and engaged.

17. This article was being completed at a time when the system by which celebrity parents buy their children's way into elite universities was being exposed in the news. See, e.g., <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/us/college-admissions-cheating-scandal.html>.

Some were taking strides toward understanding and envisioning a world in which food that is good, clean, and just could become a reality. Some may yet find ways to question and poke holes, using their comfort and capital to indexically question and re-order what they were born into and perhaps contribute to a brave new moral reality. Indeed, a couple may actually know how to grow food.

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