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This paper asks us to attempt to make sense of the social inequality in our world. Food is central to humanity, capitalism, and interpersonal relations — just as the planets circle around the sun, I think humanity, our stories and systems circle around food. Food highlights insecurities within the complex networks that frame our society, in that "the way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently" (Fischler, 1988, p. 275). To explain this phenomenon, I use the term *culinary subjectivity,* coined by Dr. Meredith Abarca (2021) to analyze how food influences our sense of self as a product and producer of relational networks and consider the continuing process of self definition related to "migratory movements, food availability, culinary knowledge, socio-economic realities, and… personal palate…" (Abarca, 2021, p. 666) within a "capitalist driven food industry" (Abarca, 2021, p. 668).

As culinary subjects the ways in which is we engage with food is multifaceted and "impacted by food made available by the food industry, values embedded within diverse food systems, food popularized by media outlets and popular culture which promote an idea of a lifestyle, as well as by food adaptations born out of peoaples' voluntary or forceful migratory journeys and socio-economic status" (Abarca, 2020, p. 20). We are situated within the harsh reality of a global industrial food system; "supermarket development has brought foreign foodstuffs into domestic urban markets [... and] have played their part in making sure branded products fly off the supermarket shelves" (Ehlert, 2021, p. 683). Continuously, "global corporations, 'supermarket culture' and media present a standardized and universalized picture of what is delicious, healthy, and trendy, establishing globally

recognized brand names (e.g. Coca Cola, McDonald's, etc.) as familiar and desirable, while pushing their availability" (Leach et. al., 2020, p. 11) This is what Leach et. al., (2020) cites as "a form of food cultural imperialism" (p. 11). This situation is only planning to expand, finding new technologies, methods, and markets.

My Junior year of high-school I became involved in the global climate strike movement and in that space I was introduced to the Newark Water Coalition through those spaces and was given the opportunity to learn from and support those organizers. The Newark Water Coalition is a grassroots organization in Newark NJ (the city that directly neighbors my hometown, South Orange) that focuses on providing clean water to Newark residents and works to expose and alleviate the effects of the systemic environmental racism Newark experiences through prioritizing direct community work. Since 2016, it has been documented that Newark experiences a lead water crisis, which has seriously harmed community members, especially children. "The Newark Water Coalition is one of the frontline organizations fighting for clean water in the city of Newark. The NWC has given out over 5,000 gallons of water and over 1,000 filters" (NWC).

Environmental injustice is a consequence of systemic environmental racism, a social inequality that communities in Newark face. Specifically the Ironbound neighborhood,

> "home to New Jersey's largest garbage incinerator, one of the country's most contaminated land sites… [and] has historically been both an industrial and a residential community, where factories operate right next to homes… As a result, our air, land, and water have been severely impacted[...]" Consequently, "for the people of Ironbound, environmental injustice – the overburdening amount of pollution and other environmental problems significantly impacting public health and quality of life in low income, communities of color – is a real matter" (Ironbound Community Corporation).

Core to the NWC message is that this is a human rights violation that has been purposefully ignored in order to maintain a systemically racist system that uplifts wealthy white communities while actively depleting low-income black and brown communities of already inadequate resources. Learning from the NWC is one of the biggest contributors to my understanding of my food and water privilege, my socieo-economic privilege that finds rooting within my whiteness, and has greatly influenced my theory of social inequality.

Fischler (2011) asserts that U.S. health-policies aiming to improve people's nutrition, does so based upon an implicit assumption "that information about nutrients, energy and exercise delivered to each and every individual should be able to optimize behaviour" (p. 543). But, what if consumers aren't given the tools or resources to make those health-forward choices? Moreso, what about when they are actively denied them?

Leach et. al., (2020) questions the likelihood that this approach will create systemic changes in regards to food; that national dietary recommendations codifying "assumptions that malnutrition will be best addressed by individuals learning to weigh every plate on its nutrient value, rather than addressing factors of social and environmental justice ranging from poor housing, to wage equality, to pollution and contamination of food supply" (Leach et. al., 2020, p. 12). Perhaps the food system isn't failing but doing exactly what it has always set out to do. It is here that I detect an inherent conflict within our current food system. Compelled by a corporate food regime framework[1], it undermines its supposed purpose of feeding a global population; "in other words, the current food regime stands in the way of human food security, democracy [... and] ecosystem restoration" (McMichael, 2014, p. 937). The consensus of food regime theory is that "both colonial legacies, and agro-industrial and or neo-liberal food regimes can work to narrow down, progressively, the food pathways available to certain groups of people" (Leach et. al., 2020, p. 12). As culinary subjects, our

[1] The concept of *food regimes* looks at power through world systems theory and a Marxist historical-materialist political economy analysis (Leach et. al., 2020) explaining concept as the "rule-governed structure of production and consumption of food on a world scale" (Friedmann, 1993, p. 30)

access to choice is only relative to what a corporatized food system will offer the places we're situated within. This belief is shared amongst food justice[2] scholars and activists; that there is nothing broken about the food system, "that the inequities it produces are functions of how it should work, as the push to maximize production and consumption while devaluing labor are integral to capitalist production" (Reese & Garth, 2020, p. 4). Reese & Garth (2020) explain how our current food system reflects and embodies the afterlife of slavery. Food inequalities and injustice are not accidental, but rather entrenched within the framework of a corporate food system[3] and result in areas characterized as *Food Aparthieds.*

Known as "urban farming's de facto grandmother"' (Vinella-Brusher, 2023, p. 6), trailblazing food justice activist Karen Washington, coined the term 'food apartheid' to explain systemic food injustice and insecurity in the United States. Her 2022 Bioneers conference talk entitled, *911 Our Food System Is Not Working*, describes how the food system is exploiting and failing the same people it's supposed to feed. She rejects the popularized term 'food desert'[4], which she asserts as an outsider term used to sugarcoat the gravity of food inequity and implicate these communities with an inherent desolation. This misappropriation of "ecological language to describe human-designed systems" suggests that "these unequal food systems are naturally occurring, while simultaneously narrowing the scope of food systems to market-based food solutions" (Forsyth, 2024). This language dilutes the severity of environmental racism and misleads the public from seeing the food system as

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[2] Definition of Food Justice: "At minimum, food justice highlights the problems of a contemporary food system that relies heavily on undervalued labor and the quick and efficient circulation of food products and is concerned with the unequal distribution of and access to healthy, affordable food" (Reese & Garth, 2020, p. 2).

[3] Eloquently put, "the fruit that is produced from a capitalist economic system for which the expendability of Black life is not tertiary but central" (Reese & Garth, 2020, p. 2).

[4] The term 'food desert' can be traced back to Scotland 1995, in a government publication document, using the term to refer to "a geographic area that lacks sufficient access to grocery stores, especially in low-income communities" (Karpyn et. al., 2019). The term became federally recognized under the Obama administration which classified food deserts as low-income areas "where a third of the population lives more than a mile (for urban areas) or 10 miles (for rural areas) from the nearest supermarket" (Vinella-Brusher, 2023, p. 6).

a *racist* food system, "understood as an inherently immoral economy[5], which proffers "junk" while denying access to consumption and "high quality" and "healthy" food. (Newman & Jung, 2020, p. 135). Washington (2022) clarifies that "in essence, we do have food. We've got that junk food, we've got that processed food, we've got that fast food. What we don't have is healthy food options. So I coined the term food apartheid" (*911 Our Food System Is Not Working*, 2022, 10:01).

In evaluating culinary subjectivities relation and access to agency, I stress that an analysis of language is vital; "it frames our understanding of the issue as well as how we interact with and respond to it" (Vinella-Brusher, 2023, p. 5). Our explicating terminology is capable of perpetuating, deconstructing, or neutralizing the very issue we seek to address. In seeing food inequity as a place-based, naturally occurring phenomenon, as food deserts, we maintain the very power dynamics central to the disparity. We prolong change and allow a corporatized food system to continue its capitalist agenda. Yet, this is not a hopeless case in which culinary subjects are stagnant individuals, easily manipulated by the whims of the food system. Embedded in Abarca's (2021) conception of culinary subjectivities, she argues that as culinary subjects we also maintain a level of agency in redefining what kind of subject we are; as food is infused with "culturally specific symbolism and socioeconomic realities" (Abarca, 2021, p. 667), how we apply our connection to food and the food system reflects and embodies our social values as acts of social/communal responsibility. Food apartheid not only recognizes this agency, but implores that culinary subjects leverage it for systemic food system transformation. From a food apartheid perspective, our culinary subjectivities are multifaceted. In being shaped and informed, they are an outcome of the systemically racist

[5] Newman & Jung (2020) utilize the concept of moral economies to "link social inequality and structural racism in the food system with lack of access to healthy and fresh foods" (p. 132), and "expose the inherent racism in the supposedly neutral economy" (p. 133). Their use of "the immoral racist economy is linked to a combination of exploitation by predatory corporations such as the fast food industry, including restaurants and convenience stores, as well as the strategic economic withdrawal of major chain (full-service) grocery stores, which can be both punitive and a strategy of underdevelopment, thus acting as instruments of power and exclusion" (p. 135).

and industrial food system. They circulate the food systems elements, alongside production, distribution, etc…, they are inextricably tied to the food systems preservation. Simultaneously, they are fundamentally connected to an individual's agency, flexible to the ever-changing wants and needs of people. Finally, as a proponent of the term food apartheid, I believe that it is through this degree of agency that I see culinary subjectivities as a tool for transforming the food system, the same system that intends to accumulate capital off of the inequities it produces.

It's important to make clear that in the case of Newark, this is not my story to tell. My lived experience comes only from learning from organizers of the NWC and reflecting upon growing up as Newark's neighbor but never experiencing the fear of lead in my water. The nuance of this issue comes from the multitude of consequences of systemic racism. How food insecurity and water insecurity intertwine each other. How inaccess to quality healthcare plays a role in the experience of exposure to lead. How funding of city infrastructures or educational resources, or lack thereof, impact the lead water crisis. How racist language, biases and stigma perpetuate environmental racism. And how climate change works to heighten the severity of these effects at a basically inescapable speed.

This paper asks us to attempt to make sense of the social inequality in our world. The tricky aspect of this paper is accepting that social inequality is nuanced and intertwines every social justice issue we face. Food and water injustice are not solvable issues, they are consequences of an almost impenetrable social, economic, and political system that is not going to finance a deteriorating water infrastructure for communities being poisoned that they already do not care to support.

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