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The "fat-hunger paradox" is a relatively recent phenomenon in the United States in which people of low socioeconomic status are disproportionately overweight or obese, and yet frequently lack access to adequate food and nutrition. Research indicates additional disparities in the prevalence of overweight and obesity amongst most racial and ethnic minorities, women, and female Food Stamp Program participants in the U.S. when compared to other low-income demographics. Although the body of literature investigating the fat-hunger paradox has increased over the past several years, efforts to offer insight into this problem remain hypothetical, nonetheless, and many questions are left unanswered. I argue that the Marxist concept of "estrangement" can help explain both the fat-hunger paradox and its disproportional effects on various low-income populations. Marx contends that the proletariat, analogous to the working poor today, experiences estrangement which leads one to seek temporary solace in base human functions, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, procreation, and passive forms of entertainment. I expand upon

Marx's theory using the work of critical social theorists, multicultural theorists, and Socialist Feminist theorists to demonstrate that, in addition to class, welfare, race/ethnicity, and gender are bases of estrangement in the United States. Among the means through which Marx proposes temporary solace may be sought and obtained, I argue that eating is the most readily available and socially acceptable source of such comfort for low-income people. Moreover, the types of foods that low-income people can afford and which are associated with comfort are typically the very sort that promote obesity but provide little in terms of nutritional value. My thesis about "Estranged Eating" is not intended to supplant other hypotheses or analyses. Rather, I contend that my theory adds significantly to our collective understanding of the fat-hunger paradox in general, and its disparate manifestations observed within low socioeconomic demographics in particular.

Estranged Eating

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ESTRANGED EATING

Obesity and poverty, once conceived as contradictory conditions, are dual realities experienced by many disadvantaged members of American society today. Numerous studies have shown that obesity rates are highest among low socioeconomic status and minority groups in the United States (Zhang and Wang 1623). In other words, the prevalence of obesity is greatest in populations with the lowest incomes and education levels (Drewnowski and Specter 6). The inverse relationship observed between obesity and socioeconomic status is particularly strong among women, but less consistent for men and children (Sobal and Strunkard 260). Research also indicates that households with incomes below the poverty line are at higher risk of experiencing food insecurity and hunger than more affluent households (Parker 54). While it makes intuitive sense that poverty and one's ability to obtain adequate food would be connected, another finding is quite paradoxical: within individuals and households, food insecurity and hunger can and do occur in conjunction with being overweight or obese (Center on Hunger and Poverty 1). The term "fat-hunger paradox," albeit rather imprecise, refers to the association of overweight and obesity with poverty in the United States. This relationship may, but does not necessarily, include experiences of food insecurity or hunger (Drewnowski and Specter 7).

Explaining the fat-hunger paradox presents something of a puzzle. The coexistent states of obesity and poverty involved in the fat-hunger paradox are historically and conceptually unprecedented, and the problem of obesity has not always been one that particularly afflicts the poor. Earlier in our nation's history, higher rates of obesity were observed in people of high socioeconomic status, especially men and children. In the later part of the 20th century, however, a complete reversal of this trend occurred with higher obesity rates existing in adults of low socioeconomic status, particularly women (Crawford 63). Conceptually, too, common sense dictates that poverty-induced hunger and obesity should be mutually exclusive conditions. Malnourishment and over-nourishment, the presumable correlates of hunger and obesity, appear at first glance to mark opposite extremes along a continuum of food intake. Presence of the first state, it seems, would logically preclude formation of the latter. Yet for many low-income individuals and families in the United States, the burden of poverty has – quite literally – grown heavier.

Although empirical studies focusing on the relationship between socioeconomic status and obesity date back to the 1960s, educational level, not income, has the been the criterion used most frequently as a proxy for socioeconomic status in such research (Olson 75). Measuring socioeconomic status solely in terms of educational level can be a shortcoming, especially when assessing trends from one period to the next, because "the social significance and monetary return for set educational categories (e.g., high school graduate) have changed quite markedly with time, limiting the utility of education relative to income…" (Chang and Lauderdale 2123). The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) III, conducted from 1988 to 1994, was the first to my knowledge to explicitly identify income-based disparities in the prevalence of overweight on a national scale. This government-funded survey, which involved nearly 40,000 participants over six years, identified low-income groups as disproportionately overweight (National Center for Health Statistics 156, 395). The association between being low-income and overweight or obese was strongest among women, while evidence for such a relationship among men was minimal (116). Within the lowest income categories for all races, NHANES III researchers found the percentage of overweight women to be significantly greater than the percentage of overweight men (117, 156).

NHANES III revealed additional disparities along the lines of race. Analysis of its results showed that within the "poor" income category, members of the largest racial and ethnic groups in the United States, Blacks and Mexican Americans, have higher incidences of overweight/obesity in comparison to whites of similar economic status (National Center for Health Statistics 117, 156). The sample size of other minority groups surveyed in NHANES III, such as American Indians, Alaskan Natives, and Pacific Islanders, was insufficient to reliably tabulate the prevalence of overweight/obesity in these populations according to socioeconomic status (139). Smaller population-specific studies, however, have found high rates of overweight and obesity in most racial-ethnic minority groups overall, with the exception of Asian Americans (National Institutes of Health 9). Current research indicates that the disparate prevalence of overweight and obesity among minority groups "persists at *broadly equivalent levels of income,* suggesting that race discrepancies are not reducible to income effects" (Chang and Lauderdale 2127, emphasis mine). In other words, comparative differences in overweight status between racial/ethnic minorities and whites continue to exist at the low socioeconomic level, as well as at higher socioeconomic levels (Zhang and Wang 1626-27).

Based on a recent article by Drewnowski and Specter published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* in 2004, it appears that the income- and weight-related disparities I have described thus far remain accurate today:

> There is no question that the rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes in the United States follow a socioeconomic gradient, such that the burden of disease falls disproportionately on people with limited resources, racial-ethnic minorities, and the poor. Among women, higher obesity rates tend to be associated with low incomes and low educational levels. The association of obesity with low socioeconomic status (SES) is less consistent among men. Minority populations (except for Asian Americans) have higher rates of obesity and overweight than do US whites (6).
>
> *Although obesity rates have increased steadily in both sexes, at all ages, in all races, and at all educational levels, the highest rates occur among the most disadvantaged groups* (7, emphasis mine).

As Drewnowski and Specter point out, American waistlines have grown substantially, indeed, within all demographic groups, at every income level, and in every state. The majority of these increases have occurred over the past two and a half decades (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 11). More than sixty-four percent of adults over the age of nineteen in this country are now overweight with Body Mass Indexes (BMIs) of 25 or more, and over thirty percent of overweight people have BMIs greater than or equal to 30 and are considered obese (Hill 1). The number of overweight children has increased nearly two-fold since 1980, and percentages of overweight adolescents have almost tripled during that time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services XIII).

No one denies that Americans in general have become significantly fatter since 1980. Recent discussions about how obesity trends have changed over time, however, seem to lack consensus. On the one hand, while fully acknowledging the dramatic increase overall in U.S. obesity rates in their 2004 article, Crawford et al, for example, describe the trend as one of increasing disparity in the prevalence of overweight and obesity among the poor:

> Although overweight is often considered a problem of overeating rather than hunger and scarcity, *low-income adults and children have gained the most weight in recent decades. Rates of obesity and overweight among the poor are increasing*, while the number of poor Americans experiencing food insecurity remains high, at an estimated 30 million (12, emphasis mine).

On the other hand, there is some evidence to suggest the association between socioeconomic status and obesity has weakened over time, at least in adults. Zhang and Wang, for instance, “have noticed a significant ‘catch-up’ in the prevalence of obesity in the high-socioeconomic status group,” whereby education level is used to represent socioeconomic status (1628). This change appears to have occurred after 1980, and is probably attributable to the coinciding overall increase in obesity rates across every demographic group in the United States, including those in both the middle and upper socioeconomic brackets, as well as more minority individuals attaining a higher educational level (1624, 1628). As to the effect an increase in overall obesity rates has had on obesity trends, Zhang and Wang explain:

> We suspect that some societal environmental changes affecting all socioeconomic status groups have contributed to a gradual positive energy balance and weight gain among American adults; thus, the association between obesity and an individual's socioeconomic status is weakened (1628).

Regarding the higher educational level attained by more minorities and its impact on obesity trends, they surmise:

> With more minority individuals moving into the high-education group, the association between socioeconomic status and obesity in the whole population was likely to be weakened because minority groups tended to have a higher prevalence of obesity than whites (1624).

Findings from a subsequent study by Chang and Lauderdale concur with the conclusion that recent weight gains in the U.S. population may not disproportionately disfavor the poor. Be that as it may, their analysis of female-specific data from NHANES surveys spanning 1971 to 2004 indicates that "those at higher income brackets maintain a distinct health advantage in terms of weight status in each time period" (Chang and Lauderdale 2127). "Hence," they state, "*even though women at the top income distribution today have higher obesity levels than low-income women in the 1970s, they continue to have lower levels of obesity than contemporaneous low-income women*" (2127, emphasis mine).

A study published in 2006 challenges the assertion that disparities in overweight among the poor have not increased in the United States during recent years (Miech et al. 2391). Examining NHANES data beginning in 1971, researchers analyzed the prevalence of overweight adolescents based on poverty status over the past three decades. Results show that, among adolescents aged 15 to 17 years, “trends of increasing overweight showed a greater impact in families living below the poverty line vs. not living below the poverty line” (2385). Specifically, the increase in disparities of overweight associated with socioeconomic status occurred during the last two NHANES surveys (1988-1994 and 1999-2004). Whereas in the first two NHANES surveys (1971-1974 and 1976-1980), “no differences in the prevalence of overweight between poor and non-poor families was apparent,” overweight rates increased disproportionately in 15 to 17 year-old adolescents from poor families between 1988 and 2004. This trend was observed in both genders and across racial/ethnic subgroups (2389). For younger adolescents, however, “no disparity in overweight by family poverty was apparent in any demographic group at any of the 4 survey years” (2391).

If the association between socioeconomic status and obesity is weakening, media attention to the issue is not. As far as I can tell, the alarming rates of overweight and obesity in the United States seemed irrespective of class differences to most casual observers until recently, despite earlier studies and government data from NHANES III which suggested otherwise. Americans as a whole were getting fatter and appeared, at least superficially, to be doing so at about the same rate, whether rich or poor. Public awareness of the fat-hunger paradox has come about rather slowly, perhaps because the media’s focus was on our larger, nationwide fat epidemic. Over the past several years, however, media coverage of the relationship between poverty and obesity, as well as a host of publicized studies by universities, academics, and non-profit organizations, have sparked national discussion of the issue.

Obesity, in whomever it occurs, can produce tragic and costly health consequences. Now the nation's fastest growing health issue, obesity rivals only smoking with respect to the serious health risks it imposes. Being overweight or obese is a leading risk factor for heart disease, type II diabetes, multiple forms of cancer, osteoarthritis, and many other chronic health problems. Currently, obesity claims the lives of approximately 300,000 Americans each year from diseases caused or exacerbated by its presence. Overweight children are also at increased risk for health problems. Conditions such as type II diabetes and hypertension, which are rarely present in children of normal body weight, are becoming common diagnoses for overweight children and teenagers today. Detrimental health outcomes experienced in childhood from excess body weight are often antecedent to serious, advanced disease in later years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1, 8).

Analysis of the fat-hunger paradox is a particularly pressing issue because the poor, who are disproportionately affected by obesity, already experience systematic disadvantages and discrimination in the areas of health care and other vital social services. Low-income households regularly lack access to adequate and affordable medical care for the treatment and management of disease and illness, including obesity-related conditions. It is often the case that the poor have no health insurance whatsoever, and therefore may be unable to pay for needed services and medication. Even those who qualify for state-financed medical coverage are vulnerable, due to budget cuts that reduce the types of covered services and the limited number of medical providers who will accept such patients.

The development of effective measures to treat a problem presupposes that the reasons for its existence are understood. Deciphering the connections between obesity and poverty in the United States is, therefore, an important step towards remedying the fat-hunger paradox. To adequately grasp the full picture, however, we must also explore what causes the uneven manifestation of obesity among various low-income demographics. Earlier, I cited notable differences that exist in the prevalence of obesity along gender and racial lines. To reiterate these main points, low-income women are particularly affected by the fat-hunger paradox in comparison to low-income men. Most minority populations in the United States also experience higher rates of obesity than whites of comparable socioeconomic status. It deserves mention here that the gender difference in obesity rates is not limited to the poor. Obesity is more prevalent among women than men at higher income levels, too (Crawford 57). Furthermore, two recent studies have revealed an additional variable in the fat-hunger paradox, namely, food stamp participation among women. At least with respect to food stamps, government assistance programs do not appear to alleviate the fat-hunger paradox. This seems particularly true among women, for whom participation in the food stamp program may actually have the opposite effect, i.e., an increased probability of obesity (Gibson 2225). Likewise, as I will discuss in Chapter Two, existing research on the subject indicates that women who receive food stamps are disproportionately overweight in comparison to other low-income subjects (2226).

Although the body of literature covering the fat-hunger paradox has increased considerably in recent years, efforts to offer insights into this problem remain hypothetical, nonetheless, and many questions are left unanswered. To be wholly adequate, a theory of the fat-hunger paradox should both explain the relationship between poverty, obesity, and food insecurity in the United States and account for the differences in rates of overweight or obesity among subgroups of low-income people. While the relationship between weight gain and food insecurity/hunger has been explored, less attention has been devoted to explaining the influence of class, gender, race, and welfare status in the prevalence of overweight or obesity. My work primarily focuses on this latter issue. On the one hand, I shall analyze and offer reasons for the paradoxical coexistence of fat and poverty in the United States. My second task is to elucidate why disparities are seen in the rates of obesity amongst low-income subgroups. I intend my thesis to not only shed light on ideological foundations of the fat-hunger paradox, but also to suggest a coherent explanation for the variations within this phenomenon involving race, gender, and welfare status.

I begin my arguments from the assumption that there are certain aspects of Marxism that still resonate in advanced, industrial, capitalist societies like the

United States. These relevant features include alienation, the increasing concentration of corporate ownership into fewer hands, and the tenet that people's economic conditions influence the way they perceive the world and themselves. Furthermore, my thesis proceeds on the premise that widespread obesity is a "disease of modernization," which has spread concomitantly with the transition of societies from subsistence to wage-labor economies (Counihan 301). It is reasonable to assume, then, that an eminent critique of capitalism like Marx's, which looks at the effects of wage-labor on human consciousness, could prove fruitful for understanding class-related phenomena such as the current relationship between poverty and obesity in America.

My thesis is based on a Marxist critique of capitalism, supplemented by insights from feminist, multicultural, and critical social theorists. Taken together, these theories help unveil the structural and ideological underpinnings that paved the way for the fat-hunger paradox's existence and the extensive, yet disparate, spread of obesity throughout the United States. I proceed from Marx's theory of estrangement and alienation as conditions consequential to wage-labor employment, especially the low-paying, "bottom-rung" sort of employment available to the working poor. Importantly, Marx argues that estrangement compels human beings to seek solace in base, animalistic functions such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and procreating. But, because the fat-hunger paradox does not equally affect all low-income populations in the United States, it is essential to consider other markers of status inequality in American society, such as race, gender, and welfare participation, which marginalize people as well.

I expand upon Marx's theory to argue that oppression based on race and gender adds to people's sense of estrangement. In other words, I contend that low-paying, wage-labor jobs are not the only source of alienation. Oppression by virtue of one's race or gender alienates human beings in ways that compound upon the estrangement resulting from class-based oppression. Moreover, as I shall explain in Chapter Three, participation in welfare programs is stigmatizing and adds to experience of estrangement, particularly for women receiving female-geared benefits such as food stamps. These theoretical steps can help clarify why obesity is not only more common amongst the poor, but why low-income women, female food stamp recipients, and low-income members of many minority groups are disproportionately overweight or obese when compared to white males of similarly-low socioeconomic status.

There are two relatively prevalent assumptions that the reader may expect to find, but that I will not use, in my argument. First and foremost, many people believe that obesity is an individual problem which should be investigated and treated as such. This view ignores the fact that many of our presumably "individual" beliefs, attitudes, perceptions, desires, and satisfactions are culturally constructed and are affected by one's position in society. Likewise, an individually-oriented focus cannot explicate why obesity is more common in certain groups of similarly-situated people. Hence, I reject the belief that America's obesity epidemic is merely a culmination of numerous, yet personally distinct, failures to control one's own body weight. Secondly, some suspect that there must be a biological explanation for Americans' excessive weight gains, for example, an "obesity gene." While genetic factors do indeed play a significant role in some cases of obesity, they cannot explain the rapid increase in overweight people over the past twenty-five years, nor can genetics or biological theories account for obesity's changing demographical proportions. In contrast to both the "individual" and "genetic" views, I assume instead that obesity, as experienced in the United States, is a social ailment.

To establish a common reference point for terms I will use throughout my thesis, I have devoted this section to their definitions. I intend the terms "alienation" and "estrangement" to be interpreted in the Marxist sense, as feelings of disconnect, fear, and displacement from the world in general, and from nature, other human beings, and oneself in particular. The terms "wage-labor" and "means of production" are Marxian, as well. Wage-labor is the type of work constitutive of a capitalist economy, where wages – a unit of value determined on the basis of what one's time and work are worth to society – are paid to the worker in exchange for his or her labor by those who own or control the means of production. The means of production include all of the components needed to produce saleable goods or services, such as land, raw materials, buildings, tools, machinery, capital, technological hardware, and owned ideas.

As mentioned earlier, I use the measurement of Body Mass Index, or BMI, to define “overweight” and “obesity.” Body Mass Index is widely used within the scientific and medical communities to categorize subjects as being of healthy body weight, overweight, or obese. A person’s BMI reflects their weight to height ratio in terms of kilograms per meters squared (kg/m^2). Body Mass Index as a sole measurement of whether one is overweight or obese can be misleading for certain individuals, however. Muscle tissue is denser and, hence, heavier than adipose tissue. As a result, some athletes or weight lifters have BMIs that classify them as “overweight,” although their percentage of body fat is actually low. Conversely, BMI is often an inappropriate measure of “fatness” for the elderly or infirm, whose muscle tissue may be significantly diminished. In this case, a person might have a healthy body weight for their height according to BMI standards, even though their percentage of body fat might be relatively high. Despite these limitations, BMI is nevertheless an inexpensive, simple calculation that allows for the weights of a large majority of the population to be reasonably categorized as falling within a healthy or unhealthy range.

“Poverty” indicates an annual household income at or below the Federal Poverty Guidelines, a measure issued yearly by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). For a family of four living in the contiguous United States in 2006, the HHS poverty level was $20,000 annually. For fewer or additional family members, $3400 is added or subtracted, respectively, to this figure (www.aspe.hhs.gov/poverty). The term “low income” refers to individuals and families whose annual household income is less than or equal to 150 percent of the appropriate Federal Poverty Guidelines' measure which corresponds to household size (U.S. Department of Education).

As criteria for poverty vary from country to country, so too do standards of "hunger" and "malnourishment." Because hunger in the United States is generally not observed as outright starvation, I will use a definition for hunger proposed by Randolph in 1989, which Patricia Allen quotes in her work on sustainable food systems. By this standard, a person is hungry or experiences hunger if he or she is "involuntarily going without food due to lack of resources." The term "fat-hunger paradox" may be something of a misnomer based on this definition. It seems unlikely that persons who lack enough food to eat would become obese, as Dr. Cluskey, Professor of Nutrition and Food Management at Oregon State University points out. Therefore, although I will continue to refer to the problem at hand as the "fat-hunger paradox," a modification of the term that Cluskey suggests, the "fat-poverty paradox," may be more accurate. "Food insecurity" is a broader condition than hunger and better characterizes the economic hardships that can lead to insufficient food resources in low-income families (Parker 48). I rely on the operational definition of "food insecurity" used by the Children's Defense Fund and many other advocacy groups: "Any lack of access by people at any time to normal channels to enough nutritionally adequate food for an active, healthy life," where "normal channels" denote retail markets where food is sold. A state of food security, then, can be described as having enough cash or food stamps to consistently buy adequate amounts of nutritious food from retail markets, in contrast to relying on emergency food systems such as food banks or soup kitchens in order to obtain enough to eat (Allen 256). Lastly, the terms “malnourishment” or “malnutrition” refer to a state of compromised health and physical well-being caused by an insufficient or poorly balanced diet over time.

In Chapter Two, I review extant literature on the fat-hunger paradox and provide exegeses of recent studies and theories on the subject. Consistently throughout my research, I found that many interpretations of the fat-hunger paradox fall short of connecting the symptoms of poverty and obesity with broader social issues that contribute to their manifestation. For example, Drewnowski and Specter offer an impressive economic model for explaining the fat-hunger paradox, which focuses primarily on the financial rationale of purchasing low-cost, highly energy-dense foods as one’s income decreases. After carefully considering Drewnowski and Specter’s analysis in my literature review, however, I conclude that their theory cannot adequately address racial and gender variations in the fat-hunger paradox.

An alternative, and perhaps more fruitful, approach to understanding the fat-hunger paradox probes deeper, beyond the visible symptoms of the problem or the costs of various food items, and poses more fundamental inquiries. I undertake this challenge of philosophical analysis in Chapter Three, where I explore the root causes of the fat-hunger paradox that other methods of examination may leave uncovered. Earlier, I introduced part of the theoretical basis for my own argument, Marx’s concept of alienation as a consequential state-of-being in capitalist societies.

Marx holds that all humans are estranged in a capitalist economic system, although in different ways. Those who benefit economically from the system find their lives affirmed by everything around them, while those who do not have their existence denied. It makes sense, therefore, that the most marginalized people in a capitalist society, i.e., those whose existence is construed as burdensome or mattering the least, would feel the need to find solace somewhere in life. According to Marx, such solace is obtained through the basic activities that humans and animals need in order to subsist, such as eating, as well as through passive forms of entertainment, like watching television for numerous hours every day as many people now do.

I argue, however, that society in the United States estranges people for reasons that are not explicitly class-based. Notably, some feminist critiques of Marx arise from his inattention to gender and race, which I discuss in more depth in Chapter Three. Race and gender, in addition to class, are social forces by which certain groups are marginalized and oppressed. Women and People of Color, like Marx's exploited proletariat, are devalued relative to others in positions of greater power or status and live in a world that does not affirm their lives. In the final section of Chapter Three, I consider consumer culture in the United States, specifically with regard to its effects on consumers' food attitudes, purchasing habits, and eating behaviors. This discussion includes a critique of our society's overwhelming emphasis on quantity over quality, which I contend has significantly altered the food landscape itself and people's perceptions about the "value," normality, and desirability associated with larger portions and package sizes. The association of larger portion sizes with better value, I assert, is particularly insidious for the poor.

Chapter Four is speculative. There, I examine conditions surrounding America's oft-called "obesity epidemic." Drawing from Marx's theory of estrangement, I develop the idea of being alienated from our food. I shall preview some key trends that I see as involved in our alienation from food here. To begin, modern forms of food production, distribution, and technology have separated us from the process of growing and cooking our own food or even knowing its source. Advertisements bombard us with messages to consume the most homogenized, heavily processed, and extravagantly packaged items. The ingredients in these products often require a full paragraph to list; many we cannot pronounce, let alone begin to understand how they may, or may not, nourish us. Furthermore, restaurant and fast food industries are booming. New market niches have been created, as well, by the diminishing occasions of home-cooked meals. For example, "family-size" ensembles are increasingly available in the expanded deli sections and freezer aisles of supermarkets. And yet, in spite of these burgeoning meal choices, families are sitting down to eat together less. In this section, finally, I discuss international cuisines, which were once rooted in a particular place and culture but have become mass-produced "Americanized" commodities in the Western world.

I speculate that changes in America's eating environment over the past two decades, when taken together, suggest an increasingly alienated relationship with our food. Such changes seem to correspond time-wise to obesity's rising rates and shifting demographic proportions in the United States. By the shifting demographic proportions of obesity, I am specifically referring to Zhang and Wang's notice of a "significant catch up" in weight gain by higher socioeconomic status groups, the research for which I discussed earlier in this chapter. According to Zhang and Wang's retrospective analysis of NHANES data, the association of obesity with socioeconomic status has been weakening in an obesity-promoting environment (1631). Changes in this relationship occurred during the 1980s and "coincided with the increase in the prevalence of obesity" (1628).

If alienation from our food has contributed to America's growing waistlines in general, there may be programs designed to restore our connection with food that could indirectly help address weight issues for those who participate, as well. In the latter half of Chapter Four, I discuss three alternative food-based movements that work to reconnect people with what they eat, where it grows, and one another. I have selected School Garden/Kitchen Classroom programs, Community Supported Agriculture, and the Slow Food Movement to examine in this discussion. My speculative analysis regarding alienation from our food raises the need for further research into what effect, *if any,* these movements could have on reducing rates of overweight/obesity among their participants.

CHAPTER TWO

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the problem of the fat-hunger paradox in greater detail and to review extant literature on this subject. My discussion begins with a more in-depth discussion about the meaning of hunger and food insecurity in the United States. From there, I move into the body of research that links the likelihood of carrying extra pounds to food insecurity in particular. The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to examining a wide array of studies and hypotheses relevant to the fat-hunger paradox. Taken together, the resultant insights offer much towards a better understanding of how it is that people who lack adequate resources for food can be overweight or obese. Ultimately, however, I conclude that none of these existing analyses, individually or collectively, will wholly suffice in explaining issues of class, gender, race, and welfare status in the fat-hunger paradox.

In 1984, the President's Task Force on Food Assistance published a report suggesting that the nature of hunger manifests in two forms. The first type refers to a severe, physical form of hunger, and it is this definition that most members of the medical community utilize, namely "the actual physiological effects of extended nutritional deprivation" (qtd. in Basiotis 262). Such incidences of hunger appear to be relatively rare in the United States compared to many other countries. This condition is distinct from the prevalent occurrence of "hunger" in the fat-hunger paradox. The second definition of hunger, however, directly pertains to the upcoming discussion in this chapter and my thesis. Hunger, by this standard, is “the inability, even occasionally, to obtain adequate food and nourishment” (qtd. in Basiotis 262). In the sense that I am using it and to which it applies to the fat-hunger paradox, hunger is best conceived as sporadic rather than persistent in duration, and as a complex social phenomena rather than a medical issue (Basiotis 262).

The Center on Hunger and Poverty at Brandeis University, an institution that works in collaboration with the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), relies on this widely-accepted definition of food insecurity: “Food insecurity occurs whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways, is limited or uncertain.” In comparison, “Hunger is defined as the uneasy or painful sensation caused by a recurrent or involuntary lack of food,” and may lead to malnutrition over time. Hunger and the broader condition of food insecurity are related, such that the former is a “potential, although not necessary, consequence” of the latter (Center on Hunger and Poverty 1).

Research indicates that repeated incidences of food restriction, followed by periods of abundance, can trigger people to overeat when food is readily accessible, perhaps as assurance against future scarcity. Such evidence is the basic premise underlying what I will refer to as the “feast-famine hypothesis.” The eating cycle of feast and famine is characterized by intermittent episodes of food insecurity coupled with spans of relative plentitude. A pattern of recurrent ups and downs in food availability that is compensated for by overeating can result in weight gain over time. And, because low-income households have fewer resources, they are far more likely to experience hunger or food insecurity than people in higher socioeconomic brackets (Center on Hunger and Poverty 1-2). As the reader shall see, this hypothesis is the foundation of one genre of proposals to explain the link between hunger, food insecurity, and obesity.

Several studies have found a positive association between food insecurity and overweight status specifically in women. In men and in very young children, however, this relationship is generally not observed (Crawford et al. 14). A study by Townsend et al. was the first to use a nationally representative sample of the U.S. population in investigating the food insecurity/overweight connection (Townsend et al. 1739). In 2001, they confirmed that food insecurity and overweight status are related among women, but not men (1738). After a gender difference was identified in the food insecurity/overweight relationship, the remainder of their analyses focused on women. Within their female-only data set, Townsend et al. divided the subjects into one of four categories based on their reported levels of food security: secure, mildly insecure, moderately insecure, and severely insecure. As one might predict, the level of food security reported by women was related to income, such that the food-secure women had higher incomes than those who were mildly food-insecure, and the mildly food-insecure had higher incomes than the moderately food-insecure (Townsend et al. 1742-3).

Townsend et al. used earlier criteria for classifying subjects as overweight that do not reflect current federal guidelines. *In this study, overweight was defined as having a BMI above 27.3 for women and 27.8 for men, rather than the standard BMI cutoff of 25 or greater used to define overweight for both sexes.* Choosing to follow the older guidelines significantly decreases the numbers and percentage rates of overweight subjects reported in their study, but it can safely be said that individuals identified by Townsend et al.'s criteria were "clearly overweight" (1740). By their standards, Townsend et al. found that 41 percent of mildly food-insecure women and 52 percent of moderately food-insecure women were overweight (BMIs above 27.3), compared to only 34 percent of the food-secure women. Excluding the severely food-insecure group, which is addressed later because very few women in the study met the criteria to be defined as such, the highest percentage of overweight subjects fell into the lowest income category and had an education level of 11th grade or lower. Overweight subjects were also more likely to consume a diet where greater than 38 percent of their total calories came from fat, to rarely or never exercise vigorously, and to spend more than four hours per day watching television. Furthermore, the proportion of African American and Native American women who were overweight by Townsend et al.'s criteria – 57.1 and 64.5 percent, respectively – was even higher than that for women in the moderately food-insecure category, at 52 percent (1743).

The severely food-insecure category, in contrast to the mild and moderate categories, represents the extreme of food insecurity. It is defined by people who, in response to a validated self-reported hunger measure, state that they "*often* did not have enough to eat" (Townsend et al. 1743, emphasis in original). Of the 4,509 women analyzed in the Townsend et al. study, only eleven subjects qualified as "severely food-insecure." Because so very few women were severely food-insecure, this category was excluded from their statistical analysis (1743). Likewise, severely food-insecure people clearly fall out of the scope of my thesis, as well, due to the relatively rare occurrence of this acute hunger level in the United States and, more importantly, because the fat-hunger paradox appears not to apply to this extremely deprived group. Townsend et al. found that women experiencing severe food-insecurity had lower incidences of being overweight than mildly or moderately food-insecure women, which is consistent with severely food-insecure individuals reporting that they do not have *enough* food to eat on a frequent and long-term basis (1743).

The irony of the fat-hunger paradox is that the lower-than-average body weights of the severely food-insecure group are seen in only one other group, the economically privileged food-secure. There is, however, a salient underlying distinction between the low percentages of overweight subjects observed at either end of the hunger spectrum, however, which Townsend et al. point out. The severely food-insecure and the food-secure are, indeed, both less likely to be overweight, but for fundamentally dissimilar reasons. While food-secure women may *voluntarily* restrict their dietary intake to control body weight, food consumption for the severely-insecure may be *involuntarily* decreased due to a lack of resources (Townsend et al. 1743, emphasis in original). When a person's long-term caloric intake is less than the amount of energy they expend, weight loss generally results. Thus, whether food restriction is voluntary and more prevalent in the food-secure demographic, or involuntary, as is true for the severely food-insecure, it is understandable why both groups have lower-than-average body masses.

After controlling for demographic and lifestyle factors, this study found that, for women, "food insecurity remained a significant predictor of overweight status" (Townsend et al. 1738). Mild food-insecurity, for instance, was shown to increase the likelihood of being overweight by 30 percent in a logistic regression analysis. And, the actual prevalence of overweight was even higher in the moderately food-insecure group than in the mildly food-insecure group. Townsend et al. conclude that

> food insecurity had an unexpected and paradoxical association with overweight status among women with a higher prevalence of overweight among the food insecure, and a resulting potential for increased incidence of obesity-related chronic diseases (1738).

One limitation of Townsend et al.'s analysis is that they provide no basis for insights into the high percentages of overweight African American and Native American women reported. A second weakness is their discussion of the gender disparity found in the food insecurity/overweight relationship. Townsend et al. simply offer two possible reasons to discount what is now a well-documented gender difference in the fat-hunger paradox. Both ideas they advance are so narrowly constructed as to be disappointing.

First, Townsend et al. note that women may be “more sensitive” than men to social pressures regarding thinness. Therefore, they state, women could have a “lower threshold for detecting an overweight/food insecurity relationship” (1744). I interpret their statement to mean that, in these authors’ opinion, the overweight/food insecurity connection may, in actuality, be just as prevalent in men as it is in women; women, however, because of their heightened “sensitivity” to social standards of thinness, notice and report being overweight more often or with higher accuracy than men. While I agree that women tend to be more conscious of body weight and food in general, I dispute Townsend et al.’s interpretation that this is due to women simply being “more sensitive” to society’s standard of thinness, as if this standard is gender neutral. Rather, I contend that much of Western society’s emphasis on being thin directly targets women, whereas men are more likely to receive messages about being muscular, physically fit, and active. Furthermore, it is important to add that if women do, indeed, have a “lower threshold for detecting an overweight/food insecurity relationship,” it could just as reasonably be argued that this is because women, who are primarily responsible for feeding families, are more aware of the food security situation in their households than are men. The basis for my claim is relevant and logical. Women are the *primary* grocery shoppers, food preparers, and caretakers of children for most U.S. households. Hence, a woman would most likely be the first to notice if her family could not afford enough nutritious food.

Second, Townsend et al. found that food-insecure women were often single parents, while food-insecure men often lived alone. This observation, it would seem, should make a gender-based comparison not only appropriate, but imperative. Nevertheless, in light of finding differences in the average household composition for women and men, Townsend and her colleagues default to “objective” scientific analysis and conclude this and nothing more: “Consequently, the gender comparison might be inappropriate” (1744). The limited explanation provided by Townsend et al. about how being female relates to the fat-hunger paradox leaves gender analysis wanting.

I contend that gender analysis of the fat-hunger paradox is critical. The relationship between food insecurity, poverty, and obesity observed in women does not appear to exist in men who live in the same households. Men of low socioeconomic status have about the same rates of obesity as men in the highest income groups. Women who live below the poverty line, however, are approximately 50 percent more likely to be obese than women at high incomes (Crawford et al. 13). Some researchers, at least, have offered ideas as to why low-income or food insecure women who are mothers are disparately overweight or obese. The theme of these ideas is “maternal deprivation,” whereby mothers forego their own nutritional needs during times of scarcity to allow their children more to eat (Basiotis and Lino 2). Crawford et al., who studied a large group of low-income Latina women and their young children, concur with the possibility of “maternal deprivation” and take its interpretation one step further. They suggest that a woman's caregiver role and her self-sacrifices apply not only to her children, but extend to protect the well-being of *all* family members—including, presumably, adult men in the household as well (Crawford et al. 14-15).

In situations of food insecurity, the following scenarios depict the difficult decisions that many economically-underprivileged women face. Mothers will skip meals or cut back their portions when food supplies run short so that others in the family may eat more, or simply eat. Another coping strategy of food-insecure women is to fill up on whatever non-perishable goods there may be in the cupboard, and save more expensive and nutritious items, like fresh produce and lean protein sources, for the children. Reflecting back on the "feast-famine hypothesis," food insecure people tend to overeat and/or binge-eat in response to periods of dietary restriction once food becomes readily available again. Taken together with the concept of "maternal deprivation," this comprises a prevailing theory of the fat-hunger paradox in low-income women, many of whom are mothers (University of California 9).

For some low-income households, the "feast-famine" cycle of consumption may be mediated by the fact that food stamp benefits are issued once a month, in amounts that are usually too limited to provide all household members with a consistently adequate diet over time. In its defense, the food stamp program is intended only as a supplement to one's total grocery budget; however, regardless of the program's intention, many recipients rely on food stamps as the primary or sole means to acquire groceries every month. In fact, nearly 90 percent of food stamp recipients have incomes below the poverty level, yet the amount of food stamp dollars received typically averages only 79 cents per meal for each family member (FRAC 3). Households often run out of both food stamps and money by the end of the month and so, for several days or weeks, they may be forced to reduce their food intake or subsist on a few inexpensive staples. When the next month rolls around, however, another seemingly large allotment of food stamp dollars is awarded. Feeling hungry and deprived from the budget restrictions of the prior month, the typical reaction is to splurge on food purchases and eat larger amounts of highly palatable foods. Cyclical consumption patterns, such as the one described, can add on extra pounds over time.

At least two studies have shown that food stamp program (FSP) participation is positively related to the overweight or obesity status of low-income women. A study by Gibson revealed over a nine percent increase in likelihood of current obesity among low-income female FSP participants in comparison to low-income women who were not currently receiving food stamp benefits, based on self-reported data. Gibson also calculated an approximate 20 percent increase in the predicted probability of current obesity among women for each of the previous five years they received food stamps when compared with low-income female subjects who did not participate in the FSP at all during that period (2225). Furthermore, as cited in Gibson's study, additional research by Townsend et al. found that women who received food stamp benefits had a 38 percent higher probability of being overweight than other subjects (2226). Townsend et al. also observed that the prevalence of food stamp recipients who were overweight increased as levels of food insecurity progressed. Food stamp recipients who reported mild and moderate levels of food insecurity were significantly more likely to be overweight than the recipients who were food-secure. Approximately 48 percent of the food-secure FSP participants were overweight, in comparison to the 53.7 percent and 68.3 percent of overweight food stamp recipients who reported mild and moderate levels of food insecurity, respectively (Townsend et al. 1743).

Townsend et al. hypothesized that the high prevalence of overweight women receiving food stamps may be a consequence of what is termed the “food stamp cycle” (1743). It seems plausible that, for some households, the “food stamp cycle” is closely related to the “feast-famine hypothesis” discussed previously. In any event, the reasoning behind both suppositions is similar. According to the “food stamp cycle” hypothesis, many FSP households have only a limited selection of foods left, or not enough to eat at all, during the last week each month when food stamps typically run out. That period of restriction creates feelings of deprivation, which can lead to overcompensation of highly palatable foods once the next month’s allotment of food stamp dollars is issued. For FSP participants, then, the “feast” and “famine” periods postulated in that so-named hypothesis may coincide with food stamp distribution. The “food stamp cycle,” Townsend et al. propose, could explain the high prevalence of overweight FSP participants in their study. As evidence for their hypothesis, Townsend et al. cite studies showing a tendency towards binge-eating behaviors following periods of food deprivation in adults, children, and animals. Because sensations of fullness are surpassed in overeating and binge-eating episodes, both behaviors, if recurrent, can cause weight gain (Townsend et al. 1743-4).

In 1992, Basiotis conceptualized and validated a model for the food purchasing behaviors of households under financial constraint. He hypothesized that

> households respond to decreases in economic resources by maintaining consumption of a reasonably constant amount of food energy (which is determined by physiological and other factors) while conserving monetary expenditures by purchasing cheaper sources of food…(Basiotis 264).

The term “food energy” is synonymous and interchangeable with “kilocalories,” or what are commonly called “calories.” Simply put, Basiotis suspected that when money is tight, people buy and consume less expensive types of food rather than reducing their overall food energy intake. Basiotis utilized household data from the USDA’s Nationwide Food Consumption Survey to test his model. The Nationwide Food Consumption Survey (NFCS) asked participants to answer a single question designed to measure food sufficiency, “Which of the following statements best describes the food eaten in your household?,” with one of four possible responses. The responses included: 1. “Enough and kind wanted to eat;” 2. “Enough but not always kind wanted to eat;” 3. “Sometimes not enough to eat;” 4. “Often not enough to eat” (Basiotis 262). Basiotis then compared the NCFS results to the respondents’ last month’s income (per person, per week), weekly food costs, weekly household energy (caloric) consumption, and price per 1,000 kilocalories (kcal) consumed.

His results indicated that, within households, a decline in food sufficiency was related to a decrease in mean income, total amount of money spent on food, and the price/quality of that food, but not food energy intake. Basiotis' analysis confirmed that individuals and families, when faced with diminishing food resources, will purchase less expensive or lower *quality* food before reducing their caloric consumption. Furthermore, he found that a cutback in the *quantity* of food eaten occurs only when the household's financial situation becomes so dire that "further reductions in the price or quality of food may not be possible while maintaining a palatable enough diet to be edible" (264). At that point, the condition of food-insecurity transitions into "food-insufficiency," a more severe state in which a "reduction in the *amount* of food energy consumed may be necessary in order to reduce food expenditures or costs" (264, emphasis in original).

In a study of 5,241 women, those reporting food-insufficiency (i.e., "Sometimes or often did not have enough to eat") had significantly poorer diet quality than the women who were food sufficient (Basiotis and Lino 1). Dietary quality is measured by the Healthy Eating Index (HEI), a 100-point scale that assesses the degree to which an individual's eating patterns meet the national recommendations for a healthful diet. Food-*insufficient* women, on average, consumed fewer servings of fruit, vegetables, and milk, and had less dietary variety than food-*sufficient* women. And, although average caloric intake by both groups was statistically similar, food-insufficient women had measurably lower HEI scores (Basiotis and Lino 2). As these findings imply, limited food resources have more of an adverse effect on diet quality than on total energy (calorie) intakes. Darmon et al.'s results of linear programming (LP) analysis concur that a limited food budget impacts healthy eating patterns. Darmon et al. show that by introducing progressively greater "cost constraints" on the LP model while keeping energy values fixed, nutritional quality in the foods selected was compromised. They conclude, "Our results suggest that…nutrition education alone may prove ineffective unless it is combined with economic measures aimed at improving the affordability of a healthy diet" (3769).

Sacrificing dietary quality may be a conscious or unconscious strategy used by low-income or food-insecure households in order to stretch their food budget and, hopefully, avoid altogether the physical hunger pangs of not having *enough* to eat. However, even with a full stomach or refrigerator, people whose diet lacks variety and adequate intake of healthful foods still have the problems that come with excessive weight, poor nourishment, or both. When food resources are limited, weight gain may be attributable to the high calorie and/or fat content of foods selected (i.e., excess energy intake) or, secondarily, to physiological adaptations made by the body that increase fat storage in the face of scarcity (i.e., decreased energy expenditure). A 1992 case analysis by Dietz illustrates and explores both possibilities.

Dietz's report is based on the clinical study of an obese seven year-old African American girl. In this case, the child's mother was a single parent who received governmental assistance through both the food stamp program and Aid for

Dependent Children to help meet her family's basic needs. The clinic where her daughter was seen for weight management had recommended including lower calorie foods, such as fresh fruits and vegetables, as part of the family's diet. During follow-up consultations, the mother indicated that it was difficult to follow the clinic's recommendations, especially before her second welfare check for each month arrived. The first welfare check, she explained, was used to pay rent, so prior to the receipt of her second check there was often not enough money for groceries. During that part of the month, the family depended on inexpensive, high-fat foods, like "pasta seasoned with extra oil, beans and hot dogs, and chicken wings" to avoid going hungry (Dietz 766). The clinicians involved in this case identified these times of food insecurity as possible contributors to the child's obesity. With this insight and, presumably, nutrition education and food preparation advice from the clinic's staff, the mother was able to reduce the amount of fat in her daughter's meals while keeping portion sizes constant. The child also cut back her own intake of sugary "fruit drinks" and, by her final appointment at the clinic, had lost 2.3 kilograms (766).

Dietz hypothesizes a causal relationship between hunger and obesity, giving two possible explanations for the coexistence of both conditions in the same individual. The first derives from the observation that, in times of financial constraint, members of the family in his case study consumed foods with higher fat content to prevent hunger. According to Dietz, the increased intake of fat during these periods of economic limitation "represents the most likely reason for the association of obesity and hunger" (766). Alternatively, Dietz proposes, obesity could be an "adaptive response" to episodic experiences of food deprivation. One plausible mechanism for this latter scenario is that the metabolism adjusts when food is scarce and the body, thus, becomes more efficient at conserving and storing fat.

If it is true that the human metabolic rate slows down in response to cycles of food deprivation followed by unrestrained eating, then over time a person would gain weight on fewer calories. Although supporting research for this idea is limited, the conclusions of some studies on animals, dieters, and binge-eaters seem to concur with Dietz's physiological interpretation of the case study above. For instance, research suggests that animals subjected to repeated patterns of food restriction and free-feeding will lose weight more slowly and regain weight faster in each progressive period. And in human studies, women who diet cyclically – in other words, repeatedly limit their food intake while "on" a diet, and then resume their usual eating patterns after the diet has ended – were found to have significantly higher percentages of total body fat and less fat-free mass than non-cyclical dieters. An association has also been made between self-imposed dietary restriction and binge-eating behaviors in some obese adults. Binge-eating, according to Dietz, "may represent another example of a physiologic adaptation to periods of food surfeit and insufficiency" (766). Although Dietz cautions us about interpreting studies on *voluntary* diet restriction in relation to the *involuntary* deprivation experienced as a consequence of hunger and/or food insufficiency, in his final analysis the possibility remains viable that physiological mechanisms are a key link between hunger and obesity.

Meanwhile, the search for physiological causes of obesity in all demographic groups continues. From the growing body of obesity-related science, two hypotheses have emerged as relevant in their application to the fat-hunger paradox. The first, a pioneering-theory on the physiological basis for the high rates of type II diabetes mellitus among certain populations is garnering renewed attention in light of the fat-hunger paradox. This so-called "thrifty-gene" hypothesis was first advanced by Neel in 1962. Neel postulated that some individuals are predisposed to diabetes due to a genetic trait which allowed their ancestors an evolutionary advantage during periods of starvation or seasonal food shortages. Those with the thrifty-genotype are, from birth onward, "exceptionally efficient" at storing calories from food as fat (Neel 354). The extra adipose reserves which once helped individuals survive famine are detrimental, however, in modernized environments where high-carbohydrate and high-fat foods are plentiful year-round and people lead more sedentary lives. Under these conditions, possession of the thrifty-gene predisposes one to development of serious risk factors for type II diabetes: rapid accumulation of excess fat, especially around the abdomen, and insulin-resistance (Khamaisi and Raz 720).

The thrifty-gene theory may relate to obesity in low socioeconomic status groups through the prior experiences and environments to which some members of this population have been exposed. In Fat Land, Greg Critser discusses the concept of “in-utero programming,” a hypothesis derived from examining children whose mothers were poor and inadequately nourished during pregnancy. According to this hypothesis, if a woman is nutritionally deprived while pregnant, the chances are somewhat greater that her child will have metabolic tendencies for becoming overweight (Critser 127-8). The potential alterations to the fetus in-utero arising from maternal malnutrition affect how the offspring metabolizes both fat and sugar. In-utero programming, then, could function with poverty to amplify the thrifty gene’s consequences, as well as increase the susceptibility of other low-income individuals to excessive weight gain.

Another physiological explanation for the fat-hunger paradox extends research on generalized stress and obesity-related endocrine abnormalities to the psychosocial stresses associated with poverty (Crawford et al. 14). A number of studies have shown that patients with central obesity, a condition where excess fat is disproportionately accumulated in the abdominal region, have increased levels of cortisol secretion. Alterations in the production of other hormones are associated with central obesity, as well. Components of the endocrine abnormality believed to increase abdominal fat deposition include increased rates of cortisol and insulin secretion and diminished production of growth hormone and testosterone. Cortisol and insulin promote fat storage and decrease lipid mobilization, whereas growth hormone and testosterone induce the metabolism of fats. When these hormones are out of balance, “[t]he combined effect…is therefore likely to be lipid accumulation” (Bjorntorp 21). Such hormone abnormalities may also lead to the development of insulin-resistance, particularly in individuals who are genetically predisposed. Over-activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis can cause hormonal changes in patterns similar to the endocrine abnormality associated with central obesity. When the activity of the HPA axis is boosted, cortisol secretions increase, growth hormone levels are reduced, and alterations in sex steroid production occur. University of Goteborg researcher Per Bjorntorp, MD, writes, "A well-known factor that activates the HPA axis is stress*, particularly stress producing feelings of helplessness or defeat*" (22, emphasis mine). Anxiety and depression, too, stimulate the HPA axis.

Research into the hormonal effects of stress on monkeys supports this idea. In the study, the social hierarchy of a clan of monkeys was intentionally disrupted and certain monkeys were always placed in the lowest stratum. The monkeys that were constantly put at the bottom of the hierarchy became exceedingly stressed and developed a helplessness response to their condition. Animals in this group also exhibited significant physiological effects, including heightened cortisol secretions, low levels of sex steroids, enlarged adrenal glands, and sympathetic nervous system activation (Bjorntorp 22). As this study implies, feelings of helplessness, defeat, depression, stress, and anxiety are likewise experienced by people who are placed at the bottom of human societies' hierarchies, such as the poor and People of Color. And the alterations in hormone levels that result from these psychosocial states might play a role in their development of obesity.

The psychosocial stress of being poor may contribute to fat-hunger paradox in other ways, too. As Fat Land author Greg Critser sees it, the "pain of poverty" is a factor in the low-income obesity equation (111). Critser's idea is based on an article by Stephanie Mencimer, a journalist who investigated the obesity epidemic in our nation's capital. There, over several months, Mencimer interviewed inner-city medical workers and talked to obese, impoverished residents of Washington, D.C. Most of Mencimer's insights are drawn from anectdotal evidence, but that, she says, is because no one wants to research health problems in the ghetto. One salient aspect of obesity, according to Mencimer, is commonly overlooked: that overeating has "psychological benefits" (*Washington City Paper Archives* 6). She discussed this idea in an interview with Dr. WilderBrathwaite, medical director at Georgetown University Hospital's mobile pediatric clinic. In her article, Mencimer observes that the cause of the obesity epidemic is "as complex as poverty itself" (*Archives* 5). Elaborating on the intricate web of issues involved in inner-city obesity, Mencimer reports:

> There are the obvious things—bad food, sedentary lives—mixed in with poor education, rampant depression, and working parents who are unavailable to keep their kids out of Wendy's after school. But there are also more subtle reasons, such as the collapse of inner-city neighborhoods.
>
> The adolescents who started appearing in D.C. hospitals with diabetes four years ago were born almost exactly at the beginning of the last big non-infectious inner-city epidemic. Crack cocaine changed the inner city and its residents in profound ways. Even those poor families that weren't succumbing to the ravages of drug addiction were touched by its side effects: unrelenting violence, the disappearance of vast numbers of men into the criminal justice

> system, and the emptying out of neighborhoods, of both commercial and residential elements.
>
> Food, in such an environment, joins drugs and alcohol as a ready painkiller (*Archives* 5).

As the above passage implies, environmental factors figure prominently into the fat-hunger paradox and can amplify the psychosocial stress associated with poverty. Hypotheses of the environmental genre implicate the infrastructure of low-income areas for promoting obesity among the poor. Infrastructure refers to the kinds of resources and facilities located in neighborhoods, housing districts, or other places of residential dwelling. It is these elements, some argue, that are most likely to determine people's physical activity level and weight (Critser 116). To be sufficient, a community's infrastructure should have adequate numbers and types of provisions which are safe, affordable, and reasonably accessible to most residents. Many low-income neighborhoods do not meet these criteria. Community features such as nearby supermarkets, parks, public transportation, bike paths, childcare facilities, and gyms are often lacking in the places where poor and working-class people can afford to live.

Among the various components of infrastructure that are causes for concern, the exit of countless supermarkets from inner-cities to suburbs puts the urban poor at a distinct nutritional disadvantage. The ongoing process of relocating major grocery chains and "supercenters" to more affluent areas is also criticized for promoting racial and class segregation and for exacerbating health inequalities (Cummins and Macintyre 545). Disparities in access to a nutritious, affordable diet that are attributable to the closing of grocery stores in poor neighborhoods and inner-cities have led to the concept of "food deserts." The term was coined in the mid-1990s by the Low Income Project Team of the Nutrition Task Force, which defined food deserts as "areas of relative exclusion where people experience physical and economic barriers to accessing healthy food" (qtd. in www.fooddeserts.org). Consequentially, residents of poor neighborhoods often rely on corner convenience stores for their groceries. The types of food items carried by corner stores are typically pre-packaged, extensively processed, and high in fat, sugar, and/or sodium. Fresh produce, if it is sold at all, tends to be overpriced and far past its prime.

Rural areas can likewise be food deserts in their own right, sometimes having only one small grocery store stocked with a limited selection of foods. Sociologists Blanchard and Lyson discovered, for instance, that food access "drops dramatically" in counties without towns of 2,500 residents and not adjacent to a large city. Furthermore, groceries in less-populated regions usually cost more, too (Mississippi State University). Not all poor people who suffer from obesity, however, live in areas – whether urban or rural – where resources like supermarkets, for example, are deficient or inaccessible. And, while the infrastructure in many low-income neighborhoods is a critical component in the fat-hunger paradox, environmental factors alone do not tell the whole story.

Perhaps the most comprehensive and methodical treatment of the fat-hunger paradox comes from Drewnowski and Specter. Drewnowski and Specter hypothesize that the relationship between poverty and obesity can be explained, at least to some extent, by the fact that high calorie, high fat and sugary foods are cheaper on a per-calorie basis than more nutritious food selections. Advancements in food production and technology, they explain, have made high calorie, i.e., “energy-dense,” foods low priced and ubiquitously available to American consumers. In their energy cost analysis, Drewnowski and Specter found that “fats and oils, sugar, refined grains, potatoes, and beans” are among the cheapest sources of energy (calories) in the United States, whereas the energy costs of fresh produce, fish, and lean cuts of meat are significantly higher (9).

An objective of Drewnowski and Specter’s research was to discern the relative costs of more and less energy-dense foods. Energy-dense foods are high in calories for their weight and volume. Such items tend to be dry and are usually laden with fat, sugar, and/or refined carbohydrates. Donuts and potato chips are good examples of energy-dense foods. Fresh fruits and vegetables, on the other hand, are considered “energy-dilute,” due primarily to their high water content. Energy density does not necessarily relate to nutritional value, however. For instance, many types of beverages have similar energy densities because they share in common a high water content. Soft drinks, one-percent milk, and orange juice are all of the same energy density, irrespective of their vastly different nutrient profiles (Drewnowski and Specter 8).

The investigations Drewnowski and Specter conducted indicate that highly energy-dense foods do indeed offer more calories for less money. Referring to their test samples of Seattle, Washington supermarkets in 2002, they note that potato chips or cookies provided consumers with approximately 1200 calories per dollar, while fresh carrots yielded only 250 calories per dollar. Furthermore, sugary beverages like soft drinks offered a lower-priced, albeit nutritionally-void, alternative to fruit juices or milk. The energy cost of soft drinks averaged 875 calories per dollar compared to orange juice from concentrate, which averaged 170 calories per dollar. Hence, when faced with a tight budget, "the selection of energy-dense foods by food-insecure or low-income consumers may represent a deliberate strategy to save money" (Drewnowski and Specter 9).

Furthermore, Drewnowski and Specter refer to studies which suggest that the energy density of foods consumed is the most significant factor influencing total caloric intake. According to the research they reviewed, test subjects generally consumed approximately the same volume of food at each meal. If these findings hold true for most people, then the energy density of foods eaten is the key determinant of whether a one's meal will be high or low in calories. Drewnowski and Specter cite additional experimental studies indicating that higher energy-dense foods are linked to decreased feelings of satiety and higher calorie consumption overall (8). A meal, then, that features mostly energy-dilute foods allows one to feel full on fewer calories, whereas a meal of mostly energy-dense foods does just the opposite. If low-income households consume more energy-dense foods as a strategy to cut costs and yet still feel full, it follows that their total caloric intake would likely increase, leading to weight gain.

The selection and consumption of energy-dense foods as a strategy to save money, Drewnowski and Specter add, may be reinforced by the high palatability of fat and sugar, the common components of energy-dense diets. They refer to numerous studies to support their point. Laboratory studies, for instance, have found fat and sugar to be potent sources of neurobiological reward for animals. Clinical research about humans indicates that food cravings are most likely triggered by foods that contain fat, sugar, or both. Other research, used to support Drewnowski and Specter's idea, shows that energy-dense foods provide more sensory pleasure than do energy-dilute foods. Perhaps this is due to the history of our species, as another study they reference suggests, when a human propensity for energy-dense foods offered a survival advantage during times of scarcity (8).

This last idea leads to an interesting question, one that Drewnowski and Specter did not pose. Could it be that experiencing a state of food insecurity awakens our ancestral instincts for survival, such that the desire for sugar and fat are heightened? As fascinating as this thought may be, I believe the practical answer is no. Throughout the history of the United States and other areas of the world, energy dense foods have been inexpensive and available at least to some extent, and people have experienced food insecurity and hunger. Yet, only in recent times has obesity become a particular problem for the poor. That the fat-hunger paradox is a contemporary phenomenon implies that there are other factors, besides a primeval urge towards energy-dense foods, which influence the food consumption and obesity rates among low socioeconomic status persons.

The economic expediency of energy-dense foods in the United States today, as Drewnowski and Specter hypothesized, is an important piece in unraveling the fat-hunger paradox. Overall, I agree with Drewnowski and Specter's economic hypothesis as a *partial* explanation for the fat-hunger paradox, which is, in fact, all they claim for it. Substantial evidence exists to support their central thesis, that "[T]he association between poverty and obesity may be mediated, *in part*, by the low cost of energy-dense foods and may be reinforced by the high palatability of sugar and fat" (6, emphasis mine). Furthermore, decisions based on economic expediency logically underlie the fat-hunger paradox, but other issues call for consideration as well. For example, even if healthy diets were made more affordable, there is no guarantee that people would choose them. Many households that can afford to eat healthfully, in fact, do not. Over sixty-four percent of Americans are now overweight, as I stated in Chapter One. To be sure, the increasingly overweight U.S. population contains class-based disparities, evidenced by the very existence of the fat-hunger paradox itself. However, the fattening of America cannot be explained by class alone because, while the incidences of being overweight are certainly stratified and unfair, they are also very widespread in society. Furthermore, although low-income sectors are disproportionately affected by obesity, if class is all that counts, how can we explain the disparate effects of obesity among economically disadvantaged groups?

The low cost and high palatability of energy dense foods may well be a partial explanation for the fat-hunger paradox, but what other conditions must we consider? Drewnoski and Specter's theory, for instance, cannot account for the higher prevalence of obesity among women and most minority groups in the United States in comparison to white men of similar socioeconomic status. The human psyche and the reasons people eat, I believe, are too complex to be understood only in terms of economic expediency and neurobiological reward. It appears that Drewnowki and Specter acknowledge the complexity of human behavior, as well, for their words "in part" limit the breadth and application of their hypothesis. Starting from Drewnoski and Specter's important work, then, it is crucial to analyze what effects socioeconomic status may have on one's consciousness. Next, we must ask what else influences people to eat, and to overeat, and what values and social forces drive our food purchases? Finally, it is critical to explore why certain groups of low-income people are impacted more by the fat-hunger paradox than others. Most research seems to skirt around or avoid this issue entirely, especially when it comes to the racial disparities in U.S. obesity rates.

To conclude, this chapter has provided the reader with a review of extant literature on the fat-hunger paradox. I have also given reasons why the theories proposed thus far cannot adequately account for the disproportionate rates of obesity existing among various low-income populations. In Chapter Three, I address the challenges outlined in the above paragraph and develop my own thesis about the fat-hunger paradox and *estranged eating*. By analyzing the foundations of estrangement, I submit we might better understand the fat-hunger paradox and why obesity manifests disparately among variously disadvantaged subcategories of low-income persons, such as women, People of Color, and female food stamp recipients. Finally, in Chapter Four, I speculate about how changes in the food landscape over the past two decades have increasingly alienated us from our food and suggest that these alterations may have contributed to the spike in U.S. obesity rates overall.

CHAPTER THREE

In Chapter Two, I reviewed existent theories that attempt to make sense of the fat-hunger paradox. While these theories offer a number of explanations for the high rates of obesity among low-income people in general, none are sufficient to explain the disparate manifestations of the fat-hunger paradox among specific low-income groups. I identify estrangement as a common factor experienced by members of the groups statistically most affected by the fat-hunger paradox: the poor in general and low-income women, People of Color, and female food stamp recipients in particular. My theory follows from Marx's insight that when people are estranged, their impulse is to seek solace in base human functions, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and sexual activity. In this chapter, I shall argue that estrangement and the temporary solace available through eating plays an important role in the fat-hunger paradox. It is my contention that my thesis about *estranged eating* significantly adds to our understanding of this phenomenon as it is observed in the United States.

In the development of my thesis, I incorporate insights from various traditions to support my claim that estrangement is a critical factor in the fat-hunger paradox. I begin this chapter with an overview of Marxism and proceed by explaining Marx's theory of estrangement in greater detail. I rely on Marx as I discuss the ways in which low-income people in the United States are estranged, and then utilize ideas of Jurgen Habermas to argue that the experience of welfare itself is a form of estrangement. Building on Habermas' reasoning, Nancy Fraser's analysis of a "gendered" welfare system helps to clarify why the food stamp program may be particularly estranging for women. Next, I address estrangement with respect to race/ethnicity, and draw from literature by W.E.B. Du Bois and multicultural theorists to support my claim that People of Color are marginalized and alienated in society in ways that whites, irrespective of class, are not. Finally, with respect to the demographic groups most affected by the fat-hunger paradox, I turn my attention to the issue of gender and examine additional types of estrangement that women experience by virtue of being female. For this task, the insights of Socialist Feminist theorists are invaluable. Chapter Three concludes with a discussion about *estranged eating*, i.e., how eating can function as a coping mechanism for those who are alienated on the bases of class, race, gender, and welfare status. In this section, as well, I explain how consumer culture exacerbates the tendency to overeat, especially for people with limited resources.

Marxism centers on the notion of economic class. In his theory of historical materialism, Marx postulates an account of human history based on the economic conditions and class struggles over control of the means of production at various epochs. The normative doctrine of thought, or ideology, of a given era, according to Marx, can be shown to have a historical pattern in relation to the ruling class of that time period, serving to legitimize and perpetuate the dominance of those in control of the means of production. Marx claims that human consciousness, the lens through which individuals view reality, is a product of one's economic reality.

However, since the economic forces that govern people's lives are shrouded in ideology, most people operate under a state of "false consciousness," unable to perceive what drives society or themselves.

Our participation in the various institutions of capitalist society conditions us to want certain things from life, such as a good job, marriage, family, a house, material possessions, and a line of credit. We also learn to expect certain things in our lives, like mortgages, car payments, student loans, and credit card debt. Although these desires and expectations are products of society, people believe nonetheless that their ideas are innate to themselves and derived from their own freethinking. This form of delusion is one example of false-consciousness.

Wholesale acceptance of the "popular" ideas in society, without critical analysis of the economic forces behind them, also constitutes false consciousness. In the United States today, for instance, political discourse is dominated by talk of freedom, equality, democracy, and justice. The populace subscribes to and espouses these ideas, convinced they are "natural" and "obvious." For example, if we unquestionably believe in equality and justice in America, we will most likely see poverty as an individual failing rather than the outcome of an economic system structured to concentrate wealth in the hands of fewer and fewer elite. It is in the economic interests of the rich if the masses cannot or do not see class disparities from a systems perspective and, instead, naively believe in "equal opportunity" and "liberty and justice for all."

In fact, the nature of capitalism is such that many jobs in society are, by design, monotonous, poorly-paid, and demeaning, with little to no opportunity for advancement and personal growth. Those with limited employment options work at jobs they hate, not by choice, but so they can merely earn a paycheck in order to live. For the working class, also called the proletariat, Marx observes that work is not about personal fulfillment; it is about survival. This sort of employment "is therefore not voluntary," Marx states, "but coerced; it is *forced labor*" (74, emphasis in original).

Marx astutely recognizes that the ability to imagine and create is what makes humans unique among other species. Additionally, he notes a further distinguishing feature between humans and animals, the fact that humans consciously engage in life activities for reasons beyond their needs of survival. Human beings, for instance, create art, music, and aesthetic objects. Furthermore, we modify our surroundings in the natural world not simply out of necessity or utility, but for the sake of beauty, as well. And, although animals undeniably build things too, only humankind has the ability to represent imagination, consciousness, and individuality in our work (Marx 76).

The vast majority of "unskilled" jobs in capitalist society, however, do not allow for the fundamental human traits of creativity and self-expression. Thus, the proletariat's life is spent doing work that deprives him or her of the very essence of what it means to be human. Consequently, Marx asserts, estrangement is fundamental to the proletariat's experience in capitalist society. By estrangement, Marx is referring to feelings of distance, disconnect, alienation, and perhaps even animosity towards oneself, other people, and the natural world. Moreover, estrangement erodes our human potential and limits our sensibilities as the world and our ways of relating to it are reduced to terms of appropriation, possession, and consumption.

Estrangement, in the Marxist sense, arises when the work we do for a living deprives us of personal fulfillment, satisfaction, individuality, and spontaneity. Marx describes four particular ways that the proletariat is estranged. First, workers are estranged from the product of their labor. Because much of the work we do in a capitalist society revolves around “getting things done” rather than expressing our imagination and creativity, the products of our labor have no personal connection to us. Our relationship to the things we make or do at our jobs is, therefore, one of distance and separation, i.e., estrangement (Marx 74). Secondly, people are alienated from the labor process by the way we work and make a living. Recall that in industrialized capitalist society, the bourgeoisie own the means of production and therefore have the power to employ the proletariat on a wage-labor basis. By requiring the vast majority of us to work not for ourselves but for someone else as a means of our survival, the capitalist wage-labor system makes the activity of work itself an alienating experience (75).

A third form of estrangement under capitalism is from what Marx calls our “Species-being.” Species-being encompasses both human nature and human potential; it speaks to the core of human existence, to the characteristics that distinguish humans from all other species, *to what being human means*. As I discussed earlier, our potential for creative work and our desire to produce even when we are free from physical need uniquely defines us as human. Capitalism, however, reduces life to merely a means for existence and, thus, estranges us from our own humanity (Marx 77). Estrangement from our Species-being also manifests as a separation from nature. Our language reflects this separation. We are accustomed to discuss and view nature as a conglomerate of natural resources, rather than a "sensuous" entity unto which humanity's "physical and spiritual life is linked" through our very flesh and blood (73, 75). Under capitalism, nature is treated instead as an object to be exploited and appropriated for the purpose of acquiring material wealth and power over other human beings.

Fourth and finally, capitalism estranges human beings from each other. The tendency in a wage-labor system is to start grouping people by power relations, into "owners" and "workers." Thinking of people in these terms is problematic because it often precludes the possibility of seeing one another in a deeper sense. Moreover, the fact that there is always unemployment under capitalism fosters a mentality of scarcity and a need to compete in people. The mentality of scarce resources and competition is so pervasive that it extends, subtlety or not so subtlety, beyond national borders and estranges us from people worldwide. For instance, loud government rhetoric that "Mexicans are taking away American jobs" adds to the collective sense of estrangement from one another for all involved. Likewise, foreign outsourcing by U.S. corporations, overseas conflicts pitting "us" against "them," the threat of terror (real or conjured), and extensive media coverage of America's slippery position in the global economy also feed into our fear of the "other."

As a result of our estrangement from other humans, most of us experience meaningful connections and maintain close relationships with only a select few people who usually are some combination of the following: family, a significant other, and/or a limited circle of friends. Moreover, when one works forty-plus hour a week for someone else, any drive to engage in creative activities that once were of interest slowly starts to diminish. Estrangement degrades human potential and limits our means of expression to such an extent that people only feel "at home" or free in their most base human functions, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and sexual activity, or perhaps, dressing up and going out for entertainment. A century and a half later it is interesting to note the prophetic quality of Marx's writings in the correlating booms of the restaurant/bar, sex, and media industries today. People seem to live for the times when they are off work and can relax, only to go back to their job again the next week and do the same thing all over. I do not mean to say that the animalistic functions of life are worthless or depraved. Partaking in them can certainly be fun; to do so is, in fact, *part* of being human. However, such base activities of human existence should not be the only option of expressing ourselves and our humanity.

So far I have described how workers, especially the working poor, are estranged under capitalism and the consequences of estrangement according to

Marxist theory. But can the unemployed in society also be estranged? I think if Marx were writing today he would answer with a resounding “yes.” Since the proletariat’s worth as a human being is reduced to the market value of his or her labor power, most people do indeed feel a loss of identity and self-esteem when they become unemployed. Adding insult to injury, after losing work a person is often required to seek some form of welfare, be it through unemployment, workers’ compensation, food stamps, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, or other programs. The entire experience of receiving a “helping hand” can be profoundly marginalizing, starting with the bureaucratic process of applying for benefits. Social welfare programs in America, such as the ones listed here, are designed to keep people at or above a certain level of poverty. In order to do so, an extensive system is set in place to ensure that applicants qualify for aid, follow program rules, and are treated legally and fairly. But, because procedures, regulations, and aid availability are subject to continuous modification, the benefit process changes frequently. Navigating the requirements of various programs is complicated and burdensome at best, and thoroughly dehumanizing at worst. This is especially true for the economically disadvantaged, usually the very people these programs are intended to help.

Jurgen Habermas’ examination of social welfare programs reveals a system that is heavily regulated by legal and administrative norms and other measures of bureaucratic control. Habermas insists that “the legal and administrative means through which welfare state programs are implemented are not a passive medium with no properties of its own," and he takes particular issue with welfare's practice of "normalization" and "surveillance" (291). Let me briefly unpack these terms. By normalization, Habermas means that welfare policies demand conformity and uniformity from potential and existing clients alike. In other words, rules about the continuation of benefits are non-negotiable, leaving little room for the individual to decide the right course of action for his or her life. Furthermore, once one begins to receive help, the government initiates surveillance. This means one is accountable to the both government and the caseworker for everything one does or does not do. Regarding the harm of normalization and surveillance to welfare's beneficiaries, Habermas states:

> Certainly the deformations of a lifeworld that is regimented, dissected, controlled, and watched over are more subtle than the obvious forms of material exploitation and impoverishment; but social conflicts that have been shifted over into the psychological and physical domains and internalized are no less destructive for all that (292).

The irony is that the programs meant to liberate some people from poverty ultimately control them. Despite many well-intentioned, dedicated caseworkers, welfare nevertheless degrades recipients' sense of autonomy and erodes their intuitive knowledge of how best to help themselves. It is for these reasons that being on welfare, at least welfare as we know it in the United States, is estranging.

In response to Habermas, Nancy Fraser contends that the welfare system itself is "gendered" (Tong 127). Welfare was created to alleviate the impact that fluctuations in the labor market have on both people and the economy. At the time of its origin, Fraser observes, men "ideally" occupied the roles of worker and breadwinner while women performed unpaid domestic duties. Although much has changed since then, both in terms of job markets and the construction of families, the structure of the welfare system today still centers on the "old, industrial gender order" and "the family-wage assumption" (Fraser 41-2).

According to Fraser, welfare programs fundamentally target and affect women differently than men. Fraser argues that assistance in the United States comes in two basic forms: "male" social insurance programs and "female" public assistance programs (Tong 127). Social insurance programs occupy the "first tier" of aid and were designed to replace the primary breadwinner's wage in the event of unemployment, illness, disability, or retirement (Fraser 42). Such aid is considered honorable because it is based on notions of entitlement and desert. Fraser explains:

> Here one receives benefits according to one's 'contributions,' usually tax payments, work, and service – where 'tax payments' means wage deductions paid into a special fund, 'work' means primary labor-force employment, and 'service' means the military, all interpretations of those terms that disadvantage women (50).

Public assistance programs, on the other hand, were patterned after "traditional poor relief" to serve the "residuum," that is to say, "needy people who had no claim to honorable support because they did not fit the family-wage scenario" (Fraser 42). Aid provided by public assistance programs is stigmatized, meager, and piecemeal. As the primary adult beneficiaries of food stamps and other forms of public assistance, female recipients of such aid are often subjected to demoralizing stereotypes about "welfare mothers" and treated by society accordingly (123). Based on Fraser's analysis, "female" public assistance programs arguably isolate and estrange recipients in ways that are different, and more pernicious, than "masculine" social insurance programs.

As we have seen, the welfare system in the United States is structured according to inequitable assumptions about gender roles, such that "female" public assistance programs exist as the "negatives" of an "ideal" *male* breadwinner, family-wage scenario (Fraser 42, 129). Analogously, but on an aggrandized scale, the vast majority of American institutions are built on inequitable assumptions about race and ethnicity, such that the experiences, traditions, and views of People of Color exist as the negatives of those belonging to the dominant white culture. Alas, although discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity is now illegal, our society is still systemically racist. The result of these inequities is that the lives and thoughts of "ethnic minorities" in the United States are marginalized, if not completely relegated to the status of second class citizens.

When economic power and societal institutions are controlled by a white majority, as is true of the United States, "whiteness" readily becomes a "*defined norm*, a standard of rightness and often righteousness wherein all others are judged in relation to it" (Pharr 10). For example, in a white dominated society, it is assumed that someone is white unless otherwise specified. This is especially relevant when the person being discussed holds a highly respected position. Hence, unless it is explicitly stated that a doctor, professor, author, or Nobel prize winner is of a *different* race, most people will *naturally* presume he or she is white (Johnson 103). In contrast, if the person being discussed is a janitor, housekeeper, or day laborer, it is increasingly probable that he or she will be imagined with darker skin. Worse, a rapist, drug-dealer, or the suspect of another crime (with the exception of white-collar crime) is even more likely assumed to be a Person of Color.

One corollary of whiteness as a defined norm, which also attaches to economic power and institutional control, is "white privilege." A reality well-articulated by Peggy McIntosh, white privilege provides extensive "*unearned advantages*" to people born with white skin-color while systematically disadvantaging members of other racial and ethnic groups (107, emphasis in original). Because whiteness is considered normal, neutral, and average in our society, white people can go about their lives while remaining generally unconscious of their own skin color and of the privileged conditions it affords them (104). From the mundane to the major, experiences that affirm whiteness, which are taken for granted by whites on a daily basis, leave People of Color feeling "isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared" (106). Such experiences are more than mere happenstance: having others that are undeservedly disadvantaged in society is logically required for one group to possess unearned advantages. McIntosh illustrates this dynamic from the perspective of her own white privilege:

> In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made inconfident, uncomfortable, and *alienated*. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit in turn upon people of color (106, emphasis mine).

As the previous discussion suggests, two key factors are involved in the systematic marginalization and alienation of People of Color: economic power and institutional control possessed by whites. Both of these factors fortify whiteness as a defined norm and reinforce white privilege, which I contend creates a collective sense of estrangement for racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. Economic power and institutional control also reinforce each other, making domination by a single group and the marginalization of various others possible throughout an entire nation. There are innumerable examples of the domination/marginalization dichotomy in our society; I shall offer just a few to illustrate. For instance, People of Color are underrepresented in institutions that create society's rules, such as Congress and the higher Courts, and are overrepresented in the U.S. penal system. Likewise, whites control the vast majority of corporations, businesses, and financial systems, while few People of Color are granted prominent leadership roles in the economic sector. Moreover, the educational system and the media in this country, both important institutions for determining whether one's identity is based on inclusion or exclusion, are controlled by whites and dominated by the images, history, accomplishments, and traditions of white people (Pharr 10-11).

The experiences of People of Color are diverse, to be sure, and in no way do I wish to reduce or simplify the multiplicity of issues that various ethnic and racial groups face in the United States today. Living in a white-dominated society, however, People of Color also share certain experiences in common and, arguably, endure estrangement as a result. One important insight into the estrangement generated by racism comes from W.E.B. Du Bois. In “The Souls of Black Folk,” Du Bois states that the “American world…yields him no true self-consciousness;” rather, he experiences his *self* as *selves,* a fragmenting “double-consciousness” (115, emphasis mine). By “double-consciousness,” Du Bois is referring to being both Black and an American in a racist society where the two terms are considered mutually exclusive.

Before I continue, it is true that exclusionary principles based on race are expressed today in ways far less overt than in Du Bois’ time. Nevertheless, there are sound reasons to believe his insights pertaining to a “double-consciousness” remain relevant to my discussion of estrangement and race. For instance, “mainstream” Americans are still presumed to be white, as are “American values,” and U.S. society is perceived not as a “plurality of cultural groups” but as consisting of a white majority and *other* minorities. There also are many in the United States who strongly hold the opinion that People of Color need to speak, act, look, think, and believe like (white) Americans in order to be American (Tong 214-15). Moreover, research indicates that although illegal, “significant” racial discrimination is an “ongoing fact,” and segregation, albeit also illegal, has been on the rise in many cities (Anderson and Collins 82). These are just a few of the reasons why Du Bois’ work, to which I shall now return, is meaningful today.

Du Bois describes an internal sense of contradiction, struggle, and even animosity between his *selves* that indicates estrangement: “One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from been torn asunder" (115). Fueling the internal strife Du Bois depicts, double-consciousness also involves seeing oneself through the eyes of others and measuring one's worth according to their negative views (115). Of the struggle for self-respect amidst the destructive forces of racism, Du Bois elegantly writes:

> He began to have a dim feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself, and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead-weight of social degradation partially masked behind a half-named Negro problem…
>
> But the facing of so vast a prejudice could not but bring the inevitable self-questioning, self-disparaging, and lowering of ideals which ever accompany repression and breed in an atmosphere of contempt and hate (117-118).

Contemporary theorists often refer to such experiences, whereby People of Color come to believe the negative messages and stereotypes about their group, as examples of "internalized oppression." Consistent with estrangement from oneself, internalized oppression may manifest as despair, depression, or self-abuse (Pharr 14).

Understandably, estrangement from oneself can also lead to estrangement from others. A loss of self-respect due to internalized oppression, for example, may be extended to members of one's own group or other oppressed groups. Sometimes, People of Color experiencing internalized oppression will turn their backs on their culture in order to try to align their identity with those in power, or they may feel disdain for minority groups in general, including, perhaps, their own. As Pharr explains,

> It is safer to express hostility toward other oppressed peoples than towards the oppressor. Hence, we see people destroying their own neighborhoods, displaying violence and crime toward their own people, or in groups showing distrust of their own kind while respecting the power of those who make up the norm (14).

It can be concluded, then, that oppression by virtue of one's race or ethnicity disadvantages and marginalizes People of Color in ways that lead to estrangement from oneself. At least in part characterized by internal conflict and a loss of self esteem, estrangement from oneself can lead to estrangement from others in the form of horizontal hostility, which deepens the rift between members of subordinated groups and undermines the potential for solidarity. The estrangement generated by racism is, thus, both enduring and far-reaching.

Up to this point, I have addressed estrangement with respect to class, welfare status, and race in the United States. Although I discussed gender inequities and women's estrangement in the context of "feminine" relief welfare programs, such as food stamps, gender also deserves consideration on its own as a major demographic variable in the fat-hunger paradox. The United States is, in fact, a patriarchal society as well as a capitalist one, and women *as women* experience estrangement in ways that men do not. Patriarchal societies are characterized by male domination and supremacy coupled with the subordination of women and devaluation of traditionally "female" roles. Socialist Feminists analyze and explain the ways in which women are dually oppressed under capitalism and patriarchy. Alison Jaggar, one such theorist, has contributed a great deal to our understanding of women's estrangement in patriarchal capitalist society. Much of what I discuss in this next section is based on her important work.

First, Jaggar contends, women are estranged from their sexuality and bodies. Female sexuality is defined in terms of male pleasure. In turn, the sexual objectification of women in society makes the female body into an object for men to either desire or reject. As preteens or even younger, girls learn to look at their own bodies like men do, as parts and pieces: face, hair, legs, thighs, buttocks, stomach, and so on. In doing so, their bodies become objects to themselves as well. Women are conditioned not only to view themselves through the "male gaze," but to attempt to alter their bodies accordingly. Jaggar points out that although women often say they diet, exercise, shave, wax, have their nails done, put on makeup, dress up in high heels and sexy clothes, and even get plastic surgery for themselves, these "beauty" practices are most likely done in order to gain or keep men's attention (Tong 125).

Socialist Feminists distinguish between the *productive* and *reproductive* spheres of women's lives under the constructs of patriarchal capitalism, and hold that women are estranged in both realms. Due to the continued existence of wage inequalities, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment in the workplace, women's *productive* lives are estranged. Work environments that are unsupportive of women who bear the dual responsibilities of wage-earning and care-giving add to female estrangement in society (Tong 123).

Jaggar argues that women are estranged from both the "process" and "products" of *reproduction.* The reproductive "process" for women giving birth in Western society has historically been controlled by male obstetricians (Tong 124). Due to the reinvigoration of midwifery, a growing number of female doctors, and recent emphasis on patient-centered medicine, this norm is changing; more options during pregnancy and childbirth are available to at least some women. For other women, however, the ongoing development and increased use of artificial reproductive technologies may amplify their estrangement from the process of reproduction (125). Motherhood can likewise be an estranging experience when women rely on the advice of child-rearing "experts," who are frequently male, or on their husbands to tell them how to parent. Furthermore, mothers are estranged from the "products" of female reproduction, their children, and vice versa. On the one hand, women in contemporary society often relate to their children as extensions of themselves and compete with other mothers in pursuit of raising the "perfect child." On the other hand, children have difficulty seeing their mothers as whole, autonomous beings with real lives of their own. Instead, mothers are primarily viewed as wait staff, housemaids, short-order chefs, and taxi drivers, "guilty of doing either too little or too much" for their children (126).

As mention of mothers' competition with one another suggests, the alienation of women from other women constitutes another form of estrangement, one which is not limited to motherhood. For instance, women are notoriously jealous, back-stabbing, and cruel to one another in their competition for men.

According to Socialist Feminist theory, this behavior stems from the dual reality of capitalism and patriarchy: that only through men can women gain access to power which is systematically not ours (Tong 117).

Within a system of patriarchal capitalism, finally, women are estranged from themselves in numerous respects. Jaggar, for instance, discusses how women are estranged from their intellectual capabilities. She explains that patriarchal society makes women feel insecure about themselves and their ideas. As a result, a woman is typically more reluctant than a man to speak her thoughts and engage in public discourse (Tong 127). Women are also taught to mistrust their intuitions, from fear of being called irrational or simply crazy. Moreover, women routinely determine their self-worth on the basis of their attractiveness to men, regardless of what they accomplish or the kind of person they are. It is difficult, in fact, for a woman to even imagine who she would be outside of the constructs of patriarchy.

Speaking from a female perspective, estrangement in its various forms unequivocally warps women's relationships with food in ways that are likewise alienating. On the one hand, most women are fearful of food and our bodies' need for it because we live in a society that equates thinness with attractiveness. And yet, on the other hand, many of us turn to food for comfort in times of distress. We may use food to numb our emotions and distract us when we feel lonely or bored. Eating can have a potent sedative effect, as well, causing sleep to take over one's consciousness more quickly. Let me insert two points of clarification here before I proceed. First, although these insights empirically pertain to more women than men, my intent is to affirm, not negate, the experiences of men for whom my words resonate. Second, it is true that for most people, food symbolizes more than mere nourishment to our bodies. Throughout the world, food is used to celebrate traditions and experience closeness with family and friends. Eating as a source of entertainment, a form of reward, or even to feel more comfortable in a crowd are also common practices and not necessarily the products of estrangement.

Estranged eating, however, involves the use of food as an emotional anesthetic and thus warrants further discussion as to its role in the fat-hunger paradox. Food is consumed as a response to estrangement in order to distract or suppress feelings associated with one's social and material conditions. Marx's observation that eating, like drinking, sleeping, and sex, provides temporary solace from estrangement has implications for our understanding of the fat-hunger paradox and its disparate effects on different low-income groups. Expanding upon Marx's theory of class-based estrangement, I have argued that race, gender, and welfare participation are additional sources of alienation in the United States. And, like the poor in general, people who are estranged on the bases of their race, gender, and welfare status also share in common the need to seek solace somewhere in life. Furthermore, I contend that being a Person of Color, female, and on welfare are factors that compound the experience of class-based estrangement. In other words, it is estranging to be poor, but to be poor, Black, female, and a food stamp recipient, for example, is even more estranging yet.

Among the various sources of solace that Marx described, eating is the most readily available and relatively accessible option for low-income people. Food is everywhere, and eating is not only necessary and socially acceptable, it is subsidized by the government in the form of supplemental programs such as food stamps. Other sources of solace, e.g., drinking, sex, and sleeping, are less socially accepted in many situations, such as while one is at home caring for her children, and more difficult to partake in on a frequent basis due to other demands in life.

Moreover, the temporary solace available through eating is associated particularly with the kinds of foods that promote obesity and yet provide little nutritional value. In Chapter Two, I discussed a prominent theory about the fat-hunger paradox which argues that low-income people choose and consume highly energy-dense foods because they are the cheapest on a per-calorie basis, and that this money-saving strategy may be reinforced by the sensory pleasure of fat and/or sugar content typical in energy-dense foods. What is not articulated by this theory is the observation that highly-palliative, energy-dense foods tend to be the ones explicitly sought after as “comfort foods.” Because the need for comfort or “just to get through the day” generally trumps short-term and long-term budgeting or health goals, it seems unlikely that the selection of energy-dense foods by the poor represents a deliberate strategy to save money, as Drewnowski and Specter hypothesized.

When people are estranged, nutritional advice such as “Consume more fresh fruits and vegetables” and “Choose whole grains more often” will generally fall by the wayside. Common experience should make this abundantly clear, even though it is something of which we almost never speak. To illustrate my point, I ask readers to imagine insatiably craving, seeking out, and subsequently overeating foods such as carrots, apples, or whole wheat bread. It seems almost nonsensical! But now think about chocolate, ice cream, fast food, potato chips, or donuts. These and other classic "comfort-foods" share three key characteristics: virtually without exception, all are highly-palliative, energy-dense, and consumed with the *immediate present* in mind. This insight is significant because it indicates that such diets may be selected by low-income people in response to estrangement and for reasons beyond those primarily suggested by existent theories, e.g., the economic expediency, availability, and convenience of certain types of foods, or a lack of education on the part of the person to make healthy food choices for themselves and their families.

Significantly, other theories about the fat-hunger paradox cannot explain why obesity rates are different among various low-income groups. In this chapter, I have argued that the low-income groups most affected by the fat-hunger paradox are estranged on multiple bases, compounding the feelings of alienation they experience and, hence, their need to seek solace as Marx described. Furthermore, I have explained how eating is a relatively accessible source of solace from estrangement, especially for low-income people whose financial-related constraints may limit their access to other options. Finally, because the kinds of foods that promote obesity are often inexpensive, associated with comfort, and energy-dense, it is my contention that *estranged eating* contributes to the fat-hunger paradox and its disparate manifestations among low-income women, People of Color, and female food stamp recipients.

Consumer culture in the United States only exacerbates the tendency to overeat, especially in households where money shortage is an issue. In addition to economic, racial, and gender inequities as sources of estrangement, this final point, which I shall elaborate upon now, considers at least one other ideological foundation that has contributed to the fat-hunger paradox's existence. Our society teaches us that quantity is paramount to quality. From every direction, we are inundated with the message that the more you buy, the better the value. The "bigger is better" mentality affects how Americans in general think, shop, but the emphasis on added value in larger quantities is a selling point of particular importance to the poor. For low-income households, buying "bigger" really does seem, in this case, to represent a deliberate decision-making process geared towards getting the most out of one's dollar. Buying "bigger" is absolutely not "better" from a public health standpoint, however. Studies have shown that the larger the package, portion-size, or serving dish, the more people eat (Rolls et al. 1212). And yet, we have been so thoroughly acculturated to consume that the urge is quite difficult to resist, even if one is aware of the evidence.

To illustrate some elements of what we are up against collectively, let me offer a couple of anecdotes from my own family. First, I should say that I have a degree in Nutrition and Food Management. I also am a fairly decent cook, although a lot of times I feel too tired to put in the effort. In my heart of hearts, I prefer natural, organic foods but often have trouble justifying the extra cost on our limited budget. And even though I know what we should eat and do to be healthy, we still get caught up in over-consumption. Here are just a few examples:

- Mega-stores like Costco and Sam's Club market industrial-sized packages to average-sized families like mine. After being lured in by a plethora of food samples and "warehouse pricing," we typically spend a couple hundred dollars and leave with our enormous shopping cart piled high. This happens more than I like to admit, especially since I waver about the price of organic foods.

- In my family, children and adults alike find it totally appropriate to drink 44-ounce sodas.

- Eating out is one of our favorite family pastimes. Sometimes it seems like it is the only thing we all enjoy doing together, so we eat out a lot – even when we really cannot afford it.

- Restaurants typically serve portions that are two to three times larger than most people should consume. After dining out, each person in my family usually takes home only a small container of leftovers, which we polish off later that evening while watching T.V.

In conclusion, that it is such a struggle for families in the United States to eat nutritiously and maintain a healthy body weight conveys something about our society as a whole. Despite the great deals of technological advances and material goods that have been generated by capitalist economies to date, Marx would argue that capitalism is nonetheless imbedded with contradictions and inefficiencies that will eventually undermine the entire system. In his era, Marx speaks of the cyclical periods of boom and bust caused by over-production as a key contradiction of capitalism. I submit we are now witnessing health-related indicators of other contradictions in American capitalism today. Moreover, perhaps the simultaneous obesity *and* malnutrition epidemic on this planet are symptoms of capitalism's inefficiencies—globalized. Whatever the case may be, it makes no rational sense whatsoever that, while Western science continues to advance its knowledge of nutritional requirements, metabolic pathways, and food behaviors, and while the amount of, and access to, health-related information has never been greater, Americans today are the fattest yet (WHO 22). Nor is it logical that, in the United States, a "nation of plenty" and model capitalist society, baffling contradictions like the "feast-famine" cycle and the fat-hunger paradox should emerge. I believe that my theory of *estranged eating* sheds new light on at least the latter of these phenomena.

CHAPTER FOUR

The problem of the fat-hunger paradox is like a puzzle which has, thus far, lacked a comprehensive solution. Let us briefly review the various parts of the problem as described in Chapter One. In the United States, low socioeconomic status populations have higher rates of being overweight or obese even though they may simultaneously experience food insecurity or hunger. Among low-income people, poor women tend to be more overweight than poor men. The same applies to most racial and ethnic minority groups in comparison to whites. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter Two, government assistance programs, at least in the case of food stamps, do not seem to alleviate the fat-hunger paradox, and some studies suggest they may even be part of the problem, especially for women, e.g., the "food stamp cycle." I have considered each of these constituent pieces from a philosophical perspective and developed a theory about *estranged eating* that not only adds to our understanding of the class-based inequities underlying the fat-hunger paradox, but helps to explain additional disparities in the prevalence of overweight or obesity that occur along the lines of race, gender, and welfare status.

Upon review of research surrounding the fat-hunger paradox, I found that the issue of food insecurity was examined quite thoroughly. Less attention, however, has been devoted to explaining the influence of class, gender, race, and welfare status in the prevalence of overweight or obesity. I focused primarily on this latter issue in my thesis, analyzing class, gender, race, and welfare status as distinct, yet interrelated, factors in the fat-hunger paradox. Although other theories offer explanation as to why low-income people in general are heavier, or why one group or another may be at greater risk for obesity, my theory about *estranged eating* can account for each constituent piece of the fat-hunger paradox puzzle and, in doing so, offers a coherent explanation for the disparate manifestations of this phenomenon among various low-income groups. It is in this sense that my thesis contributes significantly to the extant literature on the subject.

My theory addresses two fundamental questions about the fat-hunger paradox: a) Why does the burden of excess weight in America "follow a socioeconomic gradient," such that the highest obesity rates occur in people with the lowest incomes and education levels? and, b) Why are there disparities in the prevalence of obesity among certain low-income groups with similar economic status (Drewnowski and Specter 6-7)? In Chapter Three, I identified estrangement as a common theme in groups most affected by the fat-hunger paradox: the poor in general and low-income women, People of Color, and female food stamp recipients in particular. Marx's theory, that estrangement causes people to seek solace in base human functions like eating, drinking, sleeping, and sex, is central to my thesis as regards estrangement and its role in the fat-hunger paradox. In making my argument, I relied on Marxist theory to describe why and how workers, especially the working poor, are estranged in four primary ways under capitalism. I then turned to contemporary theorists, Habermas and Fraser, respectively, for a critical discussion of welfare. I first used Habermas' insights to explain how welfare further estranges people and, second, I added Fraser's argument, that the experience of welfare is worse for women who are, not accidentally, the primary recipients of food stamps and other female-geared "relief" programs. Next, I focused on the works of W.E.B. Dubois and multicultural theorists to discuss the alienation and marginalization of People of Color in the United States. Following my analysis of estrangement with respect to race, I utilized Socialist Feminist theories to describe additional ways that women experience estrangement under patriarchal-capitalism. After establishing these points, I explained the concept of *estranged eating* as it applies to the fat-hunger paradox. Finally, I wrapped up Chapter Three with a discussion about consumer culture and how it can increase the tendency to overeat, especially for people with limited resources.

Some aspects of my thesis raise the need for further research. First and foremost, I addressed race and ethnicity with regard to estrangement in Chapter Three. However, this area of research deserves full attention in its own right to ensure the diverse experiences among People of Color are adequately represented. As it is, the discussion I offer is one of generalized terms and issues, in spite of my objective to *not* simplify or reduce the multiplicity of cultural perspectives. This happens in part because of the limited scope of my thesis, but it is also attributable to the limited scope of my own cultural perspective as a white person. It is my sincerest hope that the deliberations I put forth regarding the fat-hunger paradox, estrangement on the basis of race/ethnicity, and *estranged eating* will spark interest in future, more-comprehensive scholarship on these subjects. Furthermore, the anomaly of Asian slimness is another topic that warrants investigation in a manner that is culturally sensitive and specific. This is an area of research that could generate future scholarship, as well. Finally, other theoretical applications may be derived from my thesis or, perhaps, from ideas presented in the remainder of this chapter.

If the association between obesity and socioeconomic status has indeed weakened, as some current research suggests, it is important to explain factors involved in the overall increase in U.S. obesity rates that correspond time-wise to such a shift. According to a report by the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC), the rates of overweight and obesity were relatively stable from 1960 to 1980. Between NHANES II and NHANES III, however, and in the next two decades which followed, the prevalence of overweight and obesity increased dramatically throughout the American population as a whole (FRAC 4). Recent evidence indicates that demographic changes in the relationship between obesity and socioeconomic status occurred during that timeframe, as well. Reiterating from Chapter One, Zhang and Wang observe that higher socioeconomic status groups are catching up to the poor in terms of weight gain. This shift appears to have occurred after 1980, coinciding with the sharp rise in U.S. obesity rates overall (Zhang and Wang 1628).

All of the following is speculative.

What can explain the remarkable increase in the prevalence of obesity during recent decades? The wide range of environmental factors typically implicated in America's obesity epidemic certainly seem to play a role: e.g., a decrease in manual labor jobs, more sedentary entertainment pursuits, an increase in labor-saving devices and technology, vast expenditures on food advertising, larger portion sizes, and a relative reduction in food costs (Chang and Lauderdale 2127). While I agree with all of these suggestions, I want to say that changes in the food we eat itself and our relationships to it have also contributed to obesity's rising rates in recent decades. In what follows, I suggest that we are alienated from our food in numerous respects, and that our alienation from food, in turn, exacerbates the estrangement we experience from nature, place, and other human beings. If changes in the food landscape over the past twenty-plus years have increasingly alienated us from our food, and the timing of these alterations correspond approximately to the post-1980 period when obesity rates among Americans increased so dramatically, the ensuing analysis could prove fruitful.

To begin, our diet bears little resemblance to that of our ancestors, or even my grandparents. A hundred years ago, much if not all of the food eaten was grown, raised, trapped, and hunted by individual households or produced locally. The majority of fruits and vegetables available were usually varieties that grew in season in one's particular climate and region. Moreover, variety in other food groups was limited as well. Day to day, meal patterns and the kinds of foods eaten remained quite consistent, with some change occurring, of course, according to the passage of seasons or the outcome of a hunting trip. "Special foods," however, were saved for special occasions (Lair 8).

Prior to this last century, humans survived on foods grown in nature. Previous generations were therefore fundamentally connected to “whole foods,” i.e., foods in a natural, unprocessed state, which were the basis of everyday meals. Whole foods are minimally modified after harvest, if at all, and usually have a single ingredient, that food itself (Lair 9). For the purposes of this discussion, the term “whole foods” specifically refers to foods that can be pictured as natural and healthy living entities or the direct product thereof. Stalks of corn growing in the field, a carrot rooted in the ground, clusters of blackberries hanging on their vines, egg-laying or “fryer” chickens scratching around a coop or roaming freely, and milk cows and “beef” cattle grazing in a pasture all meet my criteria for the sources of whole foods. Factory-farmed *anything* does not.

Meals prepared by my grandmother, and even my mother, for that matter, featured locally grown, whole foods to a much greater extent than what exists in my diet. However, I still do prefer whole foods when the rare occasion arises that I manage to cook something. It appears that the biggest shift in my eating patterns away from how I was raised, then, at least with respect to whole foods consumption, involves the relative infrequency of meal preparation on my part, rather than the kinds of foods I choose to prepare. In comparison, just one generation later, my son, who is now thirteen years old, considers “whole foods” and “good foods” to be mutually exclusive categories (perhaps with the exception of a whole piece of meat). Given what appears here to be a pattern of nutritional decline, I worry most about the health of my son’s generation and the generations that follow. No one, though, can say with any certainty how our changing diets and relationships with food will affect the psychological well-being of the next generation. Therefore, I will set aside any speculations about the future and attempt to describe what I *generally* perceive to be the case in the United States today.

It seems that the vast majority of us have lost our connection to food: its wholeness, the places and seasons of its harvest, the land on which it grows, and the people who help produce it. Grocery stores, now often large chains owned by corporate conglomerates, are stocked with colorfully packaged, frozen, boxed, canned, wrapped, and ready-to-eat items produced in large factories throughout the United States and overseas. Foods are so heavily processed and modified that the original forms of their ingredients are barely recognizable in the end-products we purchase and consume. For example, it is difficult to visualize a kernel of corn or a grain of rice as even being related to the contents of most cold cereal boxes. Further complicating matters are the actual ingredients used in processed foods. Not uncommonly, ingredients lists are as long as a full paragraph, the bulk of which is constituted by items that are unpronounceable, hyphenated, numerated, or otherwise alien to consumers' sensibilities, and which grow nowhere naturally.

The produce available in supermarkets today is rarely local. Rather, it is grown out-of-state or imported from countries around the world, sometimes traveling thousands of miles to reach the consumer. In order to extend their shelf life, fruits and vegetables are routinely irradiated, waxed, and placed in long-term cold storage facilities before ever being shipped to the grocery store. Thus, even our selections of “healthy” foods have a diasporaic quality: raspberries from Guatemala, oranges from Australia, avocados from Brazil, almonds from Israel, and pineapples from Costa Rica are just a few examples among many that illustrate my point. Neither knowing nor caring where our food comes from estranges us from nature and place. We are separated from the seasons and cycles of nature when food is imported from around the globe in order for us to have “our” strawberries in December and tomatoes in January, regardless of their chemically-maintained “freshness” and regardless of the cost to the environment. Moreover, the nature of modern food production estranges us from the people who grow and harvest our food, now usually underpaid migrant workers whose paltry wages mean cheaper food for us, and additional profits for food companies, supermarkets, and corporate shareholders.

Alienation from our food and other human beings also occurs when the process of preparing food and the act of eating it together as a family are routinely eliminated by the hectic pace of our lives. Women’s employment is increasing, both in terms of statistics and economic necessity, and a growing number of women are struggling to support themselves and their families single-handedly (Fraser 42). Given the changing social order of our society, it is no longer feasible to expect women to be both the home-cook and nutritional gatekeeper of families, and yet, not enough men have stepped up to share in these roles. Paradoxically, I have observed a corresponding increase in both the number and variety of “home” and “cooking” magazines. Full of ideas and recipes, these magazine target women who, for the most part, have neither the time nor the energy to bake and decorate. Myself included, women do in fact buy these magazines anyway, perhaps to vicariously relieve their feelings of guilt through the idealized images of food, home, and family.

When one considers the current pressures on families in general and on women in particular, who have traditionally assumed the responsibility of meal preparation, it is not surprising that studies do, in fact, indicate that eating out is becoming more common and cooking at home less so. And, restaurants are not the only alternative to cooking, to be sure. “Take out” and “delivery” options are also growing in popularity. Additionally, after extensive research into eating trends, manufacturers created and now market what the food industry calls “Home Replacement Meals,” the increasing array of family-sized entrees and side dish ensembles located in the freezer aisle of stores. Supermarkets apparently caught on to this trend themselves, for they too have their own selection of hot, fully-prepared “family combo” meals to purchase and take home from their expanded deli sections.

In spite of all of these new meal choices, however, families are sitting down to eat together less. Much of this is likely to do with longer work hours and non-traditional shifts of the adult/s in families, and the numerous extra-curricular activities of the children, all of which must be juggled. The practice of eating with others, people with whom one shares some form of group membership, can be observed across cultures and throughout time to such an extent that it seems almost primal to being human. Eating together strengthens bonds between the group members, be they family, friends, coworkers, or otherwise connected. Furthermore, the dinner table is a place for conversation between adults and children, a place where family history and cultural traditions are often passed from one generation to the next (Lair 7). The breakdown of this ritual adds to our estrangement from others, and possibly even from our humanity.

Moreover, international cuisines, once rooted in particular place and culture, are now mass-produced commodities in the American fast food marketplace. In the process, a whole range of "ethnic" food faire has become Americanized, placeless, and re-placed. Shopping malls, strip malls, college campuses, airports, high-traffic streets, and freeway exits are prime locations for re-placed cuisines. In fact, conglomerations of such restaurants are often assembled in the same place. At a typical American mall or airport, for instance, people can experience simulacrums of the world's cuisines, one right after another, if they desire. As David Harvey aptly observes, "Chinese takeaways, Italian pizza-parlours (run by a U.S. chain), Middle Eastern felafel [sic] stalls, Japanese sushi bars…the list is now endless in the Western world" (88). The reverse scenario, the spread of American fast food around the world, has a similar effect in terms of increasing our estrangement from place. Global fast food chains are homogenized to such an extent that the eating experience they evoke is one of being everywhere and yet nowhere at all. A person can sit down at a McDonalds in Prague, Dresden, Tokyo, Paris, or Mexico City—the location actually matters very little—order a Big Mac with fries and a Coke, and be reasonably certain their meal there will taste, look, feel, and smell the same as one ordered in Anytown, USA.

Clearly, the American food market has changed a great deal over the past twenty years (Harvey 88). Some of the alterations in the food landscape of the United States are new to the last two to three decades; others were already trends prior to that time period but have gained significant momentum since. When taken together, these changes suggest an alienation from our food that has both expanded and intensified, which could amplify the degree of estrangement experienced by humans at any income level who are immersed in the permeating capitalist environment that fundamentally defines the American “way of life.” It follows that as one’s experience of estrangement increases, so too does the need to seek solace in base human functions, such as eating and passive forms of entertainment. Incidentally, both of these means of escape can contribute to weight gain.

There is little debate that numerous and widespread permutations in the food system have altered our eating habits. In this chapter so far, I have speculatively reasoned that our eating habits have likewise altered us in various ways. Alienation from our food, I have surmised, can exacerbate estrangement experienced from nature, place, and other human beings. I shall now examine several food-based initiatives in the United States that share in the goal of restoring our relationships in these areas. If increased alienation from our food has any bearing on the concept of *estranged eating* or obesity rates in general, programs that work to rectify the alienating aspects of our food system may help address weight issues for those involved. I have selected three food-based initiatives of national scope in the U.S. for the following discussion: School Gardening/Kitchen Classroom Programs, Community Supported Agriculture, and the Slow Food Movement. To be sure, any and all speculations offered raise the need for future research to determine, first, if connections between overweight/obesity and our alienation from food can even be made and, second, to see what effects, *if any*, such strategies might indirectly have on helping participants achieve a healthier body weight.

School Gardening/Kitchen Classroom programs combine lessons in gardening, ecology, and cooking to teach youth how to grow, harvest, and prepare nutritious in-season produce. Students learn about the food they eat and its connection to the land while cultivating an ethic of environmental stewardship. A paradigmatic model of one such initiative is the Edible Schoolyard in Berkeley, California. Envisioned as "part of the national effort to restore the connection of farms to communities, meals to culture, and health to environment," the Edible Schoolyard steps outside the conventional classroom and has successfully transformed school lunch into a rich educational opportunity for kids and the community alike (www.edibleschoolyard.org/homepage).

The Edible Schoolyard was founded in 1995 by Alice Waters. Troubled by the deteriorating condition of Martin Luther King Middle School in her Berkeley community, Waters applied her culinary knowledge and her passion for local, in-season ingredients to education. The idea was to transform an abandoned lot adjacent the school into a garden where students could learn about food, agriculture, and nutrition using ecological principles in a hands-on environment. Waters secured the necessary funding to proceed by asking parents and business leaders for donations and, in December, the project “broke ground” with the removal of asphalt, debris, and weeds that overlaid the parcel of land. Volunteers from the community helped plant the first cover crop that year, which added nutrients to the soil and prepared the ground for cultivation. Since 1997, the Edible Schoolyard has produced many seasons of bountiful harvests. A few years later, a kitchen classroom was added and the garden was expanded to include tea, as well as culinary and medicinal herbs (www.edibleschoolyard.org/garden).

According to its website, the Edible Schoolyard offers a true “Seed to Table” experience in which student participation occurs at every step. Youth engage in activities such as preparing garden beds, planting seeds and seedlings, tending to crops, and harvesting produce. Fruits, vegetables, grains, and herbs grown in the garden are then incorporated into seasonal dishes which students prepare. Fresh-cut flowers, also from the garden, grace the dining tables in the kitchen. Teachers and students eat together, converse in an unhurried social environment, and share the responsibility of clean-up. The “Seed to Table” cycle is completed by taking the compost-friendly food scraps back to the garden at the end of each kitchen class. Through the “Seed to Table” experience, children learn about food production, ecology, and nutrition in an atmosphere that “fosters an appreciation of meaningful work, and of fresh and natural foods” (www.edibleschoolyard.org/garden).

As Waters sees it, children's disconnect from nutritious food and the environment is deeply rooted in a pervasive culture of consumerism. Speaking at a 1997 conference entitled "A Garden in Every School," Waters remarks:

> Gardening, cooking, serving and eating, composting…These are truly basic things, but the lessons they could teach are obscured and drowned out by the clamor of the media and the insidious temptations of consumerism. Kids today are bombarded with a pop culture which teaches redemption through buying things. School gardens, on the other hand, turn pop culture upside-down: they teach redemption through a deep appreciation for the real, the authentic, and the lasting – for the things money can't buy: the very things that matter most if we are going to lead sane, healthy, and sustainable lives. Kids who learn environmental and nutritional lessons through school gardening – and school cooking and eating – learn *ethics*" (qtd. in www.edibleschoolyard.org/ppl_aw. Emphasis mine).

In 2002, Waters addressed fast food culture specifically in her presentation at a Resource Efficient Agricultural Production (REAP) Conference in Madison, Wisconsin. The following is an excerpt from that address, in which Waters enumerates the values children learn from fast food (qtd. in Abbey). I have abbreviated her list here for the purposes of this discussion:

> Eating is primarily about fueling up in as little time as possible: you drive in, order, pick it up, and dump it in the garbage can. Food is supposed to be fast and available pretty much twenty-four hours a day.
>
> It doesn't matter where the food actually comes from, or how fresh it is. The seasons are of no particular consequence. The place you're in is of no particular consequence. Meat, fries, and Cokes…should taste exactly the same everywhere.
>
> Resources are infinite, so it's perfectly okay to waste. "There's always more where that came from." This glorification of disposability is reflected everywhere in our culture.

> Work is to be avoided at all costs; there are more important things to do. Preparation is a drudgery, anyway, and other people are better at it than you are. Cleaning up is drudgery, too.

Reminiscent of Marx's theory of human nature (i.e., "Species Being") and our subsequent estrangement from it under capitalism, Waters offers these comments about the "lesson" that work is something to avoid:

> But the really important and deep thing about life is that you have to do things! Work is not to be avoided at all costs. We have been told that work is here, and pleasure is there; but in fact, the real pleasure is in doing. Work can feed our imaginations and educate our senses. And if you want someone else to do that for you, you miss out on the real juice of life. Even the hard physical work we're so eager to delegate to others can change us for the better. And if you believe work has value, then you begin to see why making an effort to make a meal at home is a desirable thing (qtd. in Abbey).

The problems observed by Waters denote several kinds of alienation, some of which were discussed in Chapter Three. Overall, Waters' remarks highlight immense concern over consumerist values that foster a childhood estranged from: a) work, b) nature, c) food, d) place, and e) oneself. School garden programs, especially those that offer a cooking component, bear potential to redress these forms of alienation by offering youth the following opportunities: a) engagement in work that is meaningful, b) a tactile connection with the land and a deeper understanding of how the natural world sustains us, c) an appreciation for fresh, healthful foods and hands-on lessons in food production, preparation, and nutrition, d) a heightened awareness of seasonality and natural cycles in one's environment, the cultivation of a personal relationship with a particular location and piece of earth, and a greater sense of belonging in one's community, and e) realizing the value of one's contributions to and collective participation in "something real with tangible results," a unique and memorable experience for most children (www.edibleschoolyard.org/gar_manager).

Community Supported Agriculture programs (CSAs) are part of a growing sustainable agriculture movement that strives to localize food production, connect farmers to consumers, and support the distribution of fresh, nutritious foods within communities. Typically, members of CSAs pay farmers a flat fee early in the year and then receive a weekly share of the harvest throughout the growing season. The upfront cost for one household's CSA share, however, is around $350.00, which makes such programs financially prohibitive for many families (McMillan).

Just Food is one example of a non-profit organization that works to increase financial access to CSA membership, with particular emphasis on benefiting residents of poorer urban neighborhoods (www.justfood.org/csa). Based in the New York City region, Just Food has organized fundraising and secured grants to subsidize the cost of CSA shares for low-income members. Those who qualify receive their shares at reduced cost and can pay for their food on a biweekly basis, rather than having to come up with all of the money at once. Moreover, because of Just Food's efforts, approximately fifty-percent of the CSAs in New York City now accept food stamps (McMillan).

The benefits Community Supported Agriculture programs offer for combating alienation are several. First, CSAs address alienation from others by bringing people together on a grass-roots level: consumers to farmers, volunteers to the community, and neighbors to neighbors. Second, CSAs help connect consumers to the food they eat, and the place and season in which it is grown. As Sarita Saftary, a Just Food organizer and CSA member, puts it, “You’re kind of forced to think about how to use what’s available.” She says the adjustment that members make to simply taking whatever the farmer brings them is part of the point. “It gives people a much stronger connection to agriculture and to the idea of not having whatever you want, whenever you want it, in whatever quantity you want, at the expense of whatever else” (qtd. in McMillan). In this respect, CSAs serve a third role, as a counterweight to ubiquitous consumer-culture. Finally, because of their relative ease of establishment, CSA programs empower individuals and groups with the knowledge that they can make a difference, thereby reducing alienation from oneself.

The Slow Food Movement also seeks to rectify our alienation from food, nature, place, and other human beings. The philosophy of Slow Food is based on the premise that the prevalence of industrialized agribusiness threatens biodiversity in our food supply and degrades the environment, natural landscapes, and farm ground. Since its inception as an international organization in 1986, the Slow Food Movement’s mission has been to demonstrate to consumers that the mandates of productivity, such as standardization and uniformity, are eclipsing values of taste, culture, tradition, and diversity. Slow Food advocates believe that eating should be pleasurable and that, by protecting the heritage, culture, and tradition of food, people can ensure such pleasure remains a possibility. Furthermore, food itself should be wholesome and produced in a ways that are not detrimental to the environment, animal welfare, or personal health. And, finally, Slow Food supporters believe that food producers should be justly compensated for their work. Based on these principles, the Slow Food Movement is committed to connecting producers of “excellent” quality foods to both its members and non-members, and to reconnecting people worldwide to the pleasure of eating (www.slowfood.com).

In 1989, Slow Food USA was founded as part of the International Slow Food Movement. Slow Food USA, an educational nonprofit organization, now has 12,000 members and 140 local chapters throughout the country. Each chapter, called a “convivium,” advocates for ecological stewardship, sustainable farming practices, and biodiversity in food production on a local level. Slow Food USA’s mission is to honor and support the food traditions of North America, such as regional and cultural cuisines, heirloom varieties of produce, artisan cheeses, handcrafted wine and beer, and breeds of animals that are now rare. By slowing down, cultivating an appreciation of local and seasonal foods and supporting the people who produce them, and celebrating the diversity of nature’s harvest, it is held that we can experience more joy and meaning in our everyday lives (www.slowfoodusa.org).

At both the international and national levels, the Slow Food movement is based on core principles that target alienation on several fronts. For instance, Slow Food’s commitment to care for the land, protect biodiversity, and promote sustainable food production helps remediate our alienation from nature. Another part of its mission involves working to preserve traditional foods and the cultural heritages they represent, and encouraging the consumption and appreciation of locally grown, in-season foods. These efforts enhance people's connection with place. Furthermore, the education and outreach provided at Slow Food events helps build a sense of community and shared values. Slow Food programming also supports connections between consumers and producers, and advocates respect for the people who grow, produce, and market our food. By fostering recognition of our interdependence as human beings, these types of forums reduce feelings of alienation from others. Finally, the Slow Food Movement is based on values that explicitly oppose rampant consumerism. It urges people instead to slow down, relearn the pleasure of taste, and celebrate culinary traditions and the local character of foods (www.slowfoodusa.org).

To summarize and conclude, I have suggested in this chapter that alterations in how our food is produced, processed, distributed, and marketed have increasingly separated us from what we eat. The rapidity and extent of such transitions over the past two to three decades appear to coincide with obesity's increasing rates of the same period. It is my speculation that both the stark and subtle changes I described in the food environment during could add to the estrangement experienced by people immersed in American-style capitalism at any income level. As people's sense of estrangement is amplified, so too is their need to seek solace in base human functions. Eating and engaging in passive forms of entertainment are among the most popular leisure activities in the United States and offer Americans a temporary sense of escape and release from estrangement. Both can also contribute to excessive weight gain. My speculative characterization of alterations in the food landscape that have increasingly alienated us from what we eat, where it grows, and the people who produce it may potentially offer new insights into factors influencing the alarming climb of obesity rates over the past twenty-five years.

It seems today that many of us try to bridge our collective sense of alienation by eating, but are left with a vague, empty feeling nevertheless. Moreover, the foods which are the most natural and least processed are also the most expensive, regulated, and sparsely available. So, while making a conscious effort to choose more fresh, whole, organic products may seem like a reasonable remedy for the alienation experienced from food, the cost and/or availability of these items limits the number of people for whom that is even a choice. I would like to offer a few final thoughts in closing. It is often difficult to imagine a world significantly different than the one we inhabit. Thus, I deeply respect the visionaries who coupled their ideas with action to initiate the movements I have discussed in this chapter. Equally impressive is the benevolence and commitment of countless individuals whose efforts make positive change a genuine possibility. It is my hope that, by working collectively to understand and address the problems of obesity, the fat-hunger paradox, and *estranged eating*, we may yet realize a more just, sustainable, and healthful future.

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