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Finger Lickin' Good: An Analytical Investigation into the Urban Diet

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Finger Lickin' Good:
An Analytical Investigation into the Urban Diet

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Liberal Studies*

By

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Master of Liberal Studies Program*

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*Dedicated to my loving mother,
who fed me unconditionally with love.*

And my family, who are living examples of everything I want to be.

Special Thanks To,

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culture inspired me to research this topic.

I. Introduction

Every once in a while, my mind flashes back to my childhood. It was a happy childhood filled with fond memories of bright Florida sunshine and happy family moments. I also recall being a traveling buddy for my mom. Everywhere she went, I went; walking side-by-side, my hand glued to hers. I also remember the days when my mother would take me grocery shopping with her. It was always a long ordeal, but because my mother was both picky and meticulous about where she got her food, the trip always seemed intriguing and insightful. In a single day, we could easily go to three or more different grocery stores because, according to my mother, each store had its own specialties. My mother always ensured that her children ate well—a product of my mother’s Jamaican upbringing and our rearing in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church.¹ Therefore, we would frequent health-food stores and fresh produce markets. Cooking with quality ingredients gave my mother great pride.

There was something special about those shopping trips, especially trips to the health-food market. Looking through the aisles of the unusual product names and analyzing the variety of organic nuts; the tantalizing sights of vivid red strawberries, shimmering green Granny Smith apples and bright yellow bananas would fill my senses.

When my family relocated from Miami to Orlando, Florida in the summer of 1992, things began to gradually change in our area. At one point, my neighborhood was bustling with a variety of grocery store options, but over the years as the demographic of our area changed, so did our food options. My mother found herself having to travel

¹ One of the fundamental beliefs of Seventh Day Adventists is to maintain a healthy diet: “... because our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit, we are to care for them intelligently. Along with adequate exercise and rest, we are to adopt the most healthful diet possible and abstain from the unclean foods identified in the Scriptures”. Please see <http://www.adventist.org/beliefs/fundamental/index.html>

farther and farther away to obtain the foods she enjoyed. As my siblings and I got older, we began to invest more of our money in fast-food options instead of eating at home. It was obvious that our new socio-economic conditions were a major determining factor when it came to our consumption of food.

My story is not so different from many others, particularly those who come from similar socio-economic backgrounds. The reality is many of the lower-income urban areas in the United States are saturated with stores that only provide unhealthy options when it comes to purchasing food. Lower-income urban areas are over populated with liquor stores, fast-food restaurants and corner stores. This places the residents of lower-income areas in restricted positions to choose from limited food options. Often fresh fruits and vegetables are unavailable, unless you think of canned fruits and vegetables as “fresh.” Moreover, although there are indeed “discount” grocery stores in lower-income urban areas, many of them only carry generic food-brands that are saturated with salt and sugar.

This paper will discuss the eating habits of lower-income urban areas. After analyzing the prevalence and consequences of fast-food culture nationally, I will then analyze similar conclusions and the uniqueness of my hometown, Pine Hills, FL. Additionally, I will discuss the social and economical implications of the fast-food industry on lower-income urban areas. Lastly, I will offer potential solutions to address these issues arising from the over saturation of the fast-food industry, including health implications, economic dilemmas, a disconnection between consumers and their food and issues of social classification.

II. The Scope of “Fast Food” Determined

Before I offer my analysis, it is imperative for me to define the word “urban.” Generally speaking, *urban* usually characterizes those things associated with music, fashion and Hip-Hop in African-American culture. In addition, some have used the term urban as a substitute for discourteous language such as “low-class” or “poor” in terms of social classification. In this sense, urban is represented by “the street” and is often thought of as seedy, crime-filled, and/or of lower quality. However, a more traditional definition of *urban* simply entails those things that are “characteristic of or accustomed to cities.”² Although it is more accurate, this classical definition of *urban* is nevertheless problematic. Given this definition, *urban* could refer to both the Upper East Side of Manhattan as well as The Bronx. This general definition of urban does not differentiate the obvious social and economic differences between the two areas. In which case, a more appropriate and applicable definition is required. For the purpose of this paper, I will use the following definition for the term *urban*: Characterized as or pertaining to a city, distinguished by having a lower-income economic status and that is not predominantly white. The distinction between white and African-American in this definition is important to make because much of the research that is used to classify lower-income urban areas also make that distinction.

It is also important to define the term *fast food*. The term *fast food*, in its most common form, refers to food that is prepared and served quickly often through drive-thru windows. The types of fast-food restaurants range from vegetarian and health food restaurants to restaurants that serve hamburgers and French fries. Although both kinds of restaurants offer food that is prepared and served quickly, they are vastly different in

² <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/urban>.

menu options and therefore, they are different in terms of the quality of ingredients.

Block, Scribner, and DeSalvo provide a more precise definition: “*chain restaurants* that have two or more of the following characteristics: expedited food service, takeout business, limited or no wait staff, and payment tendered prior to receiving food.”³

Research suggests there is a higher concentration of fast-food restaurants in urban areas. In 2004, a study was conducted using geographic information system software to geo-code the placement of fast-food restaurants such as Church’s Chicken, Pizza Hut, Subway, Burger King and Taco Bell in New Orleans. The results demonstrated that predominantly African-American, lower-income neighborhoods had 2.4 fast-food restaurants per square mile and white upper-income neighborhoods only had 1.5 restaurants per square mile; nearly two times as many fast-food chains.⁴

These findings were echoed by the research done by Powell, Chaloupka, and Bao as well.⁵ Additionally, a University of Michigan study conducted in New York, Maryland, and North Carolina also found that neighborhoods of color and racially mixed areas had half the number of supermarkets as predominately white neighborhoods and twice the number of smaller corner and bodega like stores, which carry little fresh produce.⁶ Furthermore, low-income neighborhoods were found to have half the number of supermarkets as the wealthiest communities, but four times as many of the smaller stores. Low-income and non-white communities in general had fewer natural food stores and produce markets.⁷

³ Jason P. Block, Richard A. Scribner and Karen B. DeSalvo, *Fast Food, Race/Ethnicity, and Income, A Geographic Analysis*, 212.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁵ Powell, L., F. Chaloupka, and Y. Bao, *The Availability of Fast-Food and Full-Service Restaurants in the United States, Associations with Neighborhood Characteristics*, 240.

⁶ Mark Griffith, *How Harlem Eats*, www.dmiblog.net.

⁷ *Ibid.*

I have spent much of my life growing up in Orlando, Florida in the small-unincorporated area of Pine Hills. Over the past 18 years, I have seen a lot of changes in my neighborhood, specifically with the increase in population, traffic and changes in ethnicities. I can recall when I was younger; riding home from my private elementary school located 20 minutes away from my house on an empty two-lane road. I also remember I was the only kid on my block and my family was the only African-American family living there. Most of my neighbors were older white couples who had been living in the same homes they had purchased in their youth. Things are a lot different now. For example, most of Hiawassee road has been widened into four lanes and a lot of my neighbors have either passed away or moved. Currently, most of my neighbors are African-American or Caribbean-American. The grocery stores in my neighborhood have also significantly changed. There was once a Winn Dixie and a Publix supermarket located across each other on Hiawassee and Silver Star road. There was a K-Mart, a privately owned pizzeria and a Chinese restaurant. Since then, the Winn Dixie has been replaced with Super Beauty Depot (a supermarket size hair and beauty store), Publix has been replaced with Bravo Supermarkets (a Hispanic/Caribbean based grocery chain), and when the K-Mart closed, a private buyer converted the space into a J-Mart, (a discount urban indoor flea market). Both the pizzeria and Chinese restaurants are now closed. There is now a Subway, KFC, Wendy's, Burger King, and McDonald's fast-food restaurant all located in the same shopping centers, most of which opened in recent years.

My personal observation of the changes of Pine Hills is confirmed in the statistical data about this growing trend in urban areas. The current population of Pine

Hills is approximately 50,000, most of whom are African-American and Caribbean.⁸ Pine Hills, Florida is a lower-income area with the estimated household per capita income being approximately \$15,000.⁹ The average home or condo is valued at \$134,000.¹⁰ This is far different from the way Pine Hills use to be. In the 1950s, Pine Hills was prominently white and by 1970, the average population was 13,832 with 10% of residents being African-American, however, by 2006 this number jumped to 72%.¹¹ At one point, Pine Hills used to appeal to the white working class. The change in population occurred after early migration of African-Americans began during the 1970s. During the 1980s, a forced plan for the desegregation of public schools also propelled the influx of African-Americans, and in that single decade, whites declined 27%, while African-Americans grew more than 203%.¹² This amount tripled again in the 1990s and now African-Americans account for more than 50% of the population.¹³

Overall, the evident change in the ethnic demographic of my hometown helps illustrate the subsequent change in the consumption of the area. For example, as previously stated, at one point there was a Winn Dixie and Publix in Pine Hills, both of which relocated. These store spaces were left vacant for years, turning these once vibrant shopping centers into literal food deserts. Since it opened, Bravo has been thriving and is feeding the community successfully, since it is the only supermarket within an approximate two-mile radius from any other supermarket. It is important to consider that Bravo is a Caribbean/Hispanic supermarket that provides food options that is somewhat

⁸<http://www.city-data.com/city/Pine-Hills-Florida.html>.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Jeff Kunerth, *Blacks Move In, Move Up*, *Orlando Sentinel*, October 2, 2006.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

different from the food options offered in Publix. Both supermarkets offer basic food essentials such as eggs, milk, bread, etc. However, Bravo is one of the only supermarkets where one can also add beef tripe (cow intestines) to their shopping cart. They also offer a wide variety of unique Caribbean and Hispanic groceries, such as sheep head, cassava (a popular Caribbean, South American and Nigerian edible root) and a variety of yams. In contrast, Publix also offers special groceries, but instead of offering unique ethnic groceries such as beef tripe, they pride themselves in offering organic foods. They do so by heavily marketing their “GreenWise” brand. The same cannot be said for Bravo, which only offers a small inventory of organic products. Subsequently, some would conclude that Bravo is more heavily targeted for urban areas thus, creating a social class association towards the Bravo chain.

In comparison, Windermere, Florida is a small town in the city of Orlando that is distinguished as an upper-income area. Its average population is only a little over 2,000 residents, most of which are white.¹⁴ The estimated per capita income is close to \$60,000, with the average home and condo value being close to \$700,000.¹⁵ The town’s history is also very different in comparison to Pine Hills. Although both areas started out predominantly white, Windermere was much smaller in the 1950s, boasting a humble population of only 317 people.¹⁶ From the very beginning, Windermere’s residents took pride in the fact that their neighborhood was small and quaint with scenic beauty and a small-town appeal. The town was incorporated in 1925 and adopted its first zoning regulations in 1952. Also, unlike Pine Hills, Windermere has virtually stayed unchanged in principle and appeal. It is still a very small town and is still predominantly white.

¹⁴ <http://www.city-data.com/city/Windermere-Florida.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Carl Patterson, *Windermere Among the Lakes, The Story of a Small Town*, 43.

Therefore, Windermere is an excellent counter-example in analyzing the relationship between food trends and economics because it has stayed very close to its original form for more than 75 years. The consumption patterns of Windermere should match the postulation that higher-income areas lack fast-food restaurants and have more supermarkets and better access to healthier foods. It should also provide an indication to the class association attributed to health foods. As a result, not only does Windermere have a Publix supermarket, but they have a total of five in an approximate five mile radius of each other. Likewise, it is not surprising that the closest Bravo Supermarket is approximately six miles away from the town of Windermere. Windermere is also close to one of only two Whole Foods supermarkets in Orlando. Whole Foods is a high-end grocery chain that specializes in organic and natural groceries. Incidentally, I noticed that the nearest Burger King restaurant to Windermere is seven miles away. By comparison, my zip code of 32818 demonstrated that there were a total of ten restaurants within seven miles of my neighborhood. The results were the same for McDonald's as well. Zip code 34786 showed the nearest McDonald's being almost nine miles away, whereas there were 11 McDonald's for the 32818 zip code search. There seems to be a clear difference between what these two areas are consuming and the demographics of that region—in particular the economics and social classification of that region.

III. “You Gotta Do, What You Gotta Do”: A Story about Priorities, Institutions, and Restrictions

Concerning Steve¹⁷

A phone alarm sounds off, a distant voice across the room groans and Steve yawns and opens his eyes. He stretches as he crawls out of bed and apologizes to his roommate for the loudness of his alarm. It is not even light out as Steve prepares for another grueling day of work. He dresses and gathers his things as he heads out the door with bus pass in hand. It is a two to three hour bus ride to his job where he works as a fast-food restaurant employee. So far, he is feeling fine until he reaches his job around 8:00 a. m. and then his stomach begins to experience hunger pains. Steve has yet to have breakfast and did not have dinner last night. In fact, he has not eaten in the last 24 hours, which is extremely ironic considering he is surrounded by food the majority of his day. Unfortunately, he is down to his last \$5 until he gets his paycheck next week and he is trying to save it for when his weekly bus pass runs out. Sometimes Steve gets a free cheeseburger if an order is returned. He can sneak it in the back and try to gobble it down while no one is watching. But this does not happen today and when he finally leaves work, he is hungrier than when he started.

On the two hour bus ride back, he tries to zone out his hunger pains by listening to his music player and closing his eyes. It is a nice distraction until he has to open his eyes to watch for his stop and the pain comes back. He states, “It is something I’ve gotten use to. I barely make enough money to have a place to stay, let alone eat. When there’s no other choice, you do what you have to do.”

¹⁷ For privacy, the interviewee asked that his real name not be used.

When I asked Steve what his plans were for dinner, he said, “I do not know. I am hoping my roommates make something to eat that they may offer me. They look out for me a lot. If not, my girlfriend might stop by. She always buys me something to eat if she has the money.” It seemed ridiculous for me to even ask him my next question, but it was important to ask none-the-less. “So, do you ever get to eat any veggies, fruits any healthy type foods?” He laughed and said, “Yeah. I eat greens all the time—lettuce, tomatoes, pickles...” I cut him off and finished his sentence with him, “Oh, right! Whatever is on a number one.” We both laughed, but obviously the situation is not funny and is, in fact, very grim. Steve says he knows his health is slowly deteriorating because he is not eating properly. He says sometimes he feels like an old man. “I can remember when I use to run around with my friends as a kid for hours and even when I was older I would play basketball all day and all night. Now-a-days, I barely have enough energy to run to the bus.” The sad part to this statement is that Steve is only 26 years old.

Steve’s story presents a paradoxical problem when it comes to food, health and economics, namely: How can we advise someone on what to eat when they are not eating at all? For Steve, although an unhealthy option, the few fast-food meals he gets from his job is his only option. And even with his paycheck, his budget is so tight that he relies on dollar frozen dinners and \$0.50 canned goods to get him through the day. It is a disparaging reality that demonstrates how Steve’s economic status directly relates to his diet. Even he admits, “Yeah, if I was making like beaucoup bucks, I would definitely eat better. But for now, I got to do what I got to do. You know?”

IV. Fast-Food Rituals: Inside and Outside Meaning

The fast-food restaurant is a modern social phenomenon that has shifted the perception of food socially and has revolutionized the food service industry. For a moderate price, customers can enjoy meals on the go in little to no time in which case they are able to keep up with their fast pace lives. The suburban working mom can afford to feed her family on a tight budget quickly by simply stopping at a fast-food restaurant on her way home. The busy account executive can pick up a burger in route to an important meeting. Fast-food companies delight in reminding their consumers of the quickness of their services without sacrificing quality for their customer—you. Throughout the years, McDonald's has reminded consumers that "McDonald's is Your Kind of Place" and that "We love to see you smile."¹⁸ Likewise, Burger King has reminded consumers that they can always "Have it your way."¹⁹ On the other hand, the convenience that fast-food restaurants promise in marketing campaigns overlooks the social implications and dilemmas that have surfaced from the introduction of the fast-food model in modern America.

First, fast food has completely reshaped how people respond to, interact with and consume food. One of the major indications of the social implications of fast-food restaurants is the ritualistic behavior that has derived out of the phenomena. Conrad Kottak offers a description of this behavior. According to Kottak, in his article entitled *Rituals at McDonalds*, consuming food products and propaganda can lead to ritualistic behavior in that it conditions the behavior of people through the repetitious actions associated with ordering and eating fast food. As Kottak explains, ritualistic behaviors

¹⁸ *McDonalds Ad Campaigns*, <http://www.mcdonalds.com/us/en/home.html>.

¹⁹ *Burger King – Company Info*, <http://www.bk.com/en/us/company-info/index.html>.

are defined formal events that occur in special places, at regular times and “include liturgical orders—set sequences of words and actions laid down by someone other than the current performer.”²⁰ Although these characteristics of ritualistic behavior are often associated with religious or sacred affiliates, Kottak makes the point to acknowledge the primary definition and function of ritualistic behavior. He states:

Rituals convey information about participants and their cultural transitions. Performed year after year, generation after generation, they translate enduring messages, values, and sentiments into observable action...all people who take part in joint public acts signal their acceptance of an order that transcends their status as individuals.²¹

Through this simple definition, fast-food restaurants can easily be classified as ritualistic places in which people exhibit ritualistic behavior, at least metaphorically speaking. Symbolically, a customer who attends McDonald’s regularly from childhood would develop certain ritualistic or “sacred” habits associated with the act of eating at that particular restaurant, thus fostering deep-rooted emotional connections that help define their identity. For example, the ritualistic behavior of fast-food consumption could be figuratively compared to the rituals of a church. A customer can be considered a “follower,” their sacred space would be the interior of the restaurant, and they would be engaged and focused on the “religious doctrine” or lightened menu divinely displayed above their heads. “Religious utterances” would be memorized orders recited and said in beat: “I’ll have a number one, no pickles, with a diet coke, please.” Sometimes suggestions are made by a “pastor” or a representative of the holy order to encourage the follower to try something that might make their meal better: “Would you like to try one of our desserts today?”

²⁰ Conrad P. Kottak, *Rituals at McDonalds*, 370.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 371.

This ritualistic behavior subsequently becomes habit forming and can result in a deep connection between the consumer and the fast-food experience. The repetitive nature of the food ritual or any ritualistic behavior, for that matter, would result in deep rooted behavioral changes that would add to a person's culture and self identity. Therefore, this connection is much deeper than the connection with the actual food itself and the appeal of McDonald's, for example, can run far deeper than engaging in carnal compulsions. The view of the Golden Arches, the bright colors of the interior of the restaurant and the iconic image of Ronald McDonald engage other sensory satisfactions besides hunger. Therefore, when one thinks of McDonald's, they are not just thinking of food, but also of their childhood, traditions, familiarity, etc. It can trigger a wide array of memories. Subsequently, the ritual of consuming the fast-food experience as a whole is important because it satisfies a variety of hungers, whether emotional or physical. In addition, when other emotional and sensory responses are triggered by the fast-food ritual, at times, the food itself becomes a minor player in the overall experience. Essentially, the ritualistic behavior associated with fast-food culture can disconnect the consumer from the food itself and where it comes from.

As a child, I recall my mother frequently taking me to McDonald's for a Happy Meal after school. The fun of placing my order into the speaker and the joy of receiving my colorful Happy Meal box from the attendant in the window was all accumulated in the joy I received in pulling out my toy and unwrapping my tiny cheeseburger like a present. There was delight in going through the process of the experience, so much so that I would not even eat the whole meal. I would remove the bun from my cheeseburger

and eat the meat alone with a few fries on the side. I spent most of my time enjoying my toy, my colorful Happy Meal box and living in the moment.

From childhood, I learned “my order.” I learned what I liked and how to place it, which resulted in a common ritual that continued as I got older. The only difference that occurred was instead of Happy Meals, I began eating from the “grown up” menu and replaced Happy Meals with a “Number one” (Big Mac, medium fries and medium drink). In light of this, from a child on to my young adult life, I never cared to think of where my food came from and what it consisted of. I was primarily motivated to crave the McDonald’s experience. I likely never thought of my burgers as beef. Well, truthfully speaking, it was not a “beef burger;” it was a “Happy Meal” or a “Number One.” I never called French fries “potato fries,” and eventually they were not even French—they were just “medium fries.” Nothing had names to match the source of their origins. I no longer was a consumer of food; instead, I was a consumer of the process—the ritual.

This may explain the perception of food in lower-income areas. When food is treated as an experience and there is no connection to the source of where the food is coming from, how can there be a concern—especially, when economics are involved? If I am on a tight budget and hungry, then I am going to make an economical choice and buy the cheapest food that grants the quickest and easiest satisfaction to my needs. Often in impoverished neighborhoods, a “buck” burger can bring more than a satisfaction for hunger; it can also bring a moment of relief and happiness in hard times of stress.

Thinking of food in terms of ritualistic behavior then allows us to understand how as a culture it can change under various circumstances and conditions. Sidney Mintz makes a similar point as that of Kottack’s, however instead of using the term ritual, he

developed his own terminology: *inside* and *outside* meaning. According to Mintz, “The daily life conditions of consumption have to do with *inside* meaning, the environing economic, social and political (even military) conditions with *outside* meaning.”²²

He further explains:

Inside meaning arises when the changes connected with *outside* meaning are already under way. These grand changes ultimately set the outer boundaries for determining hours of work, places of work, mealtimes, buying power, childcare, spacing of leisure, and the arrangement of time in relation to the expenditure of human energy.²³

In contrast to *inside* meaning, [*outside* meaning] is those larger forces expressed in particular subsystems, together with the state, that have to do with what I mean by the term *outside* meaning. Thus, *outside* meaning refers to the wider social significant of those changes effectuated by institutions and groups whose reach and power transcend both individuals and local communities, those who staff and manage larger economic and political institutions and who make them operate.²⁴

In his book entitled *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom*, Mintz analyzes how society, concepts or institutions that are in power (outside meaning), help define the daily behaviors (inside meaning) of individuals, including their daily consumptions. In particular, his work discusses how the early sugar business affected the consumption of Great Britain in the eighteenth century. Of course, here, I contend that Mintz’s concepts are easily transferable into contemporary conditions, especially if we think of the power that corporations have in marketing campaigns. Corporate institutions of power have helped shape how and what our society eats. For example, let us reconsider the working mother scenario I introduced earlier. Let us further imagine that she is single with four children. Her daily routine would include various errands such as getting her children up

²² Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the past*, 20.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 21-22.

and ready for school in the morning, working an average nine hour day in an office, picking her kids up from school, picking up the dry cleaning and dropping Timmy off at 7:00 p.m. for his Karate lesson. As she drives around town completing her very full day, she will pass several fast-food billboards and restaurant signs. She will also hear several advertisements on her car radio. She possibly may have come from a single parent home in which her very own mother had the same lifestyle. Therefore, her response to solving the very familiar question, “What is for dinner tonight?” will be to stop at a fast-food restaurant on her way from picking up her kids. She is not the best cook anyway, since her own mother never taught her how.

This mother is operating in a system of several institutions that are governing over her consumptions: A) Her working class status does not permit her the time to actually learn to cook or to shop for healthier foods. B) Her economic status has determined how much she is willing to spend on a meal for her family. C) The generational imprint left by her mother has fostered her trust in fast food. D) The marketing and media stimulation she has continuously been bombarded with has encouraged her that their food will solve her problems in their promises of quality and quickness. This scenario is a clear example of how people are met with decisions of their consumption, but are limited to options based on the restriction of the institutions they are governed by. Mintz explains, “Individuals are thus presented with a series of situations within which they may begin to make meaningful constructions for themselves, as long as such constructions do not violate the outer situational boundaries that have been established for them.”²⁵

²⁵ Ibid., 21.

A. The Dichotomy of Pine Hills, Florida

Earlier, I explained the concentration of fast-food restaurants in Pine Hills in comparison to the higher-income area of Windermere. It would be poor scholarship to simply overlook the prevalence of farmers markets that are also present in Pine Hills. Within a two mile radius of my home, there are at least four farmers markets, two meat shops and three ethnic grocery centers; all of which sell fresh produce, meat, and fish. So, despite the abundance of fast-food restaurants, there is also a high amount of farmers markets that offer healthy fresh food options as well. This has occurred because Pine Hills is unique in that although they are predominantly black, they are predominantly Caribbean migrants or of Caribbean decent. Coming from a Jamaican family myself, one thing I can attest to is that many Caribbean-Americans are very hands on with their food simply because many Caribbean people come from rural areas in their country where they work with the land as farmers, fish or raise their own cattle. If they do not work directly with farming, they would be exposed to farm life and shop at meat and fish markets. I would also go as far as to point out that the same is true for the small Asian American demographic, who also resides in Pine Hills. These food traditions were subsequently brought over and were incorporated into Pine Hills. This would explain why Caribbean and Asian Americans privately own all of the farmers, meat, and fish markets in Pine Hills.

Using Pine Hills may seem to contradict my original argument because of the prevalence of healthy food options in the area. I would further argue however, that Pine Hills is not the norm. Research by Morland, Wing, Roux and Poloe demonstrates that predominantly white neighborhoods had more supermarkets and fewer neighborhood

grocery stores than lower-income areas.²⁶ This is important research because it helps to establish that supermarkets had more “heart healthy” foods when compared to urban neighborhood grocery stores, bodegas, and convenient stores.²⁷ Another study conducted by Zenk, Schulz and Hollisneely also demonstrates that fruit and vegetable intake among African-Americans in the City of Detroit are lower, since there are few grocery stores located in the city.²⁸ Therefore, Pine Hills is the exception, not the rule, and can be viewed as an example of how lower-income areas can incorporate healthier food options into their communities. For the community members of Pine Hills, there was a direct need for fresh produce and meat markets for the Caribbean migrants who supplied the demand in their community.

Nevertheless, Pine Hills still exhibits the over saturation of fast-food restaurants that Block, Scribner, and Desalvo discuss in their research. As previously demonstrated, Pine Hills, overtime, changed and so did its food options. This could be a result of either direct targeted marketing from fast-food chains to Pine Hills or that community members of Pine Hills demanded a need for more fast food. I postulate a different explanation for the prevalence of both fast-food restaurants and fresh produce and meat markets that exist in Pine Hills.

Consider another example. My mother relocated to the states in the late 70’s from Jamaica. She recalled a time when being Jamaican or a “foreigner” was not always respected among many Americans at the time. She tried to avoid scrutiny from her new fellow citizens as much as possible. Indeed, she dressed differently, tried to cover her

²⁶ Morland, Kimberly, Steve Wing, Ana D. Roux, and Charles Poloe, *Neighborhood Characteristics Associated with the Location of Food Store and Food Service Places*.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Shannon N. Zenk, A. Schulz, T. Hollisneely, R. Campbell, N. Holmes, G. Watkins, R. Nwankwo, and A. Odomsyoung, *Fruit and Vegetable Intake in African-Americans, Income and Store Characteristics*, 1

accent and tried to reference her rural childhood as little as possible. More significantly, my mother tried to understand and eat like an American to appear American. However, trying to participate in the dietary customs of a new country can be difficult—particularly American dietary customs, considering many cannot identify any type of true American cuisine. Therefore, it may be easy for most migrants to revert to fast-food customs, since it is an American invention and institution and consistent of rituals that are easily recognizable and teachable through advertisement. The addition of these new customs typically cannot erase old food customs. This may explain why my mother would be proud to feed us Domino’s Pizza for dinner. Oddly enough, the next morning, she would feed us cornmeal porridge and fried plantains. She was the product of what I call *consumptive confusion*. Mintz also explains:

We cannot easily imagine the Chinese people giving up rice to eat white bread, or the Russian people, black bread to eat maize. Such deeply cherished tastes are rooted in underlying economic and social conditions, and they are surely far more than simply nutritive. But they must also be viewed in terms of the equally telling fact that *some* preferences, even in diet, turn out in fact to be quit readily surrendered. To be sure, it is far more common to add new foods to one’s diet than it is to forgo old and familiar ones

...When much else is changing, food habits may change, too, and such changes are often unpredictable. Where and how power comes to permeate these processes of change, projected in part against continuing stability, are not always apparent.²⁹

Essentially, in attempting to appear “American,” my mother tried to add on the new dietary customs of her new society, but was reluctant to forgo her old ones. Therefore, she created a hybrid diet of both. Her *consumptive confusion* created a dichotomy in her identity where she was no longer Olive, the Jamaican—she became Olive, the Jamaican-American.

²⁹ Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the past*, 24

The dichotomies in Pine Hills have come about in a similar way. Although foreign migrants bring along meaningful traditions, customs and special food culture that are important to them, there is still a strong desire to appear “American” and what better way than through consuming fast food, especially, since fast food is a uniquely American phenomenon. Donna Gabaccia explains:

Yet consumers in other parts of the world have few doubts about what constitutes American food. Mass-produced foods intended to be prepared or eaten quickly are considered ‘American’ around the globe. What makes foods American—at least to outsiders—is how they are produced, packaged, and served, not who manufactures or eats them or how they taste.³⁰

This would explain why there is a thriving Church’s Chicken directly across from two flourishing farmers market on West Colonial Drive and why my mother prided herself in feeding us chicken nuggets for dinner, but still thought it important that we ate homemade callaloo.³¹ In this, Pine Hills community members are able to participate in the ritualistic behaviors that are dictated by the governing economic and social institutions that they operate in. They are also able to participate in the ritualistic behaviors of fast-food culture to allow them to create new experiences, meanings and values under their new American identity. Mintz explains,

In spite of their significance for everyday life, they [outside meanings] originate outside that sphere and on a wholly different level of social action. In consequence of these changes, however, individuals, families, and social groups must busily integrate what are newly acquired behaviors into daily or weekly practice, thereby turning the unfamiliar into the familiar, imparting additional meaning to the material world, employing and creating significance at the most humble levels. This is what happened to tea drinking, once people tasted tea and were learning to drink it regularly, and what happened to pipe-smoking, once tobacco had

³⁰ Donna R. Gabaccia, *As American as Budweiser and Pickles? Nation Building in American Food Industries*, 175.

³¹ Callaloo is a Caribbean dish made from a green leafy vegetable. It is often steamed and served as a side dish.

been tried and liked. People alter the micro-conditions as much as they can and according to their emerging preferences—the where, when, how, with whom, with what, and why—thereby changing what the things in question signify, what they *mean* to the users. New behaviors are superimposed upon older behaviors; some behavioral features are retained, others forgone. New patterns replace older ones.³²

³² Sidney Wilfred Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the past*, 20

Pine Hills Food Environment

Intersection of Hiawassee and Silver Star Rd.



West Colonial Dr.



V. “I Loved Making You All Happy:” *A story about a mother and her children*

Concerning Olive

It was a regular warm Sunday morning and I had plans to finish up some research for this project. I was downstairs in my bedroom rushing to get ready and prepare my things, so I could get to the library quickly. I did not want to waste any time that day. There was not much that could get me unfocused of my primary goal, since I was on such a time crunch, but suddenly something did. I barely had my jeans on when my entire body became frozen as my nose perked up and whiffed the faint tantalizing aroma of my mother’s cooking in the air. At that moment, I had a new priority—to make it upstairs to the food. With each step I ascended, the aroma permeated my surroundings stronger. There she was, my beautiful mother preparing a delicious breakfast. She peaked over the counter as she saw my figure coming from the side of the dining room, as she greeted, “Good morning ‘my likkle Jefener,’” with a huge, white smile.

My step dad was sitting on a side bench we have that is adjacent to the wall. He had one leg up extended across the bench and was rubbing his knee—his unique way of expressing his anticipation for whatever my mom was working on in the kitchen. He looked to me and greeted, “Hello Darling.” The room carried one of those feelings, as if to say, “Jennifer, you’re going to have a great day.” It had a lot to do with the smells from the kitchen and the cheerful attitudes we all had. I sat at the table and started “chatting it up” with my parents. I could tell what my mom was working on in the kitchen simply by the smell. She had already started frying some eggs, sautéing some salt fish with callaloo and had a pot of boiling yams, green bananas and dumplings on the stove. Watching her movement in the kitchen reminded me that I still had to conduct an

interview with her for my project. She must have had the same feeling because before I could say anything, she asked, “So, when are you going to interview me for your paper?” I had not prepped for the interview yet and I was still working on other parts of my project. I just wasn’t sure when I was going to be able to get around to sitting down with my mom. So, I responded, “Yeah, it has been on my mind, but I am not sure when I’ll get around to it.” “What’s your paper on again?” She asked. We did not realize it at the time, but it was with that question that sparked a conversation, which transformed into an informal interview. As my mom continued to cook, she started revealing parts of her past that helped explain how and why she fed us the way she did.

My mother was born and raised in Westmorland, Jamaica and lived in the city of Kingston for many years. She recalled fond memories of fishing, riding her bicycle and the different suitors that tried to win her affection when she was younger. Eventually, she met my birth father and a few years after they were married, she had my sister and eldest brother. My mom relocated to New York in 1979, as did many others, after the political changes in Jamaica had eluded their apparent change into socialism. The time of her relocation was convenient because my father and paternal grandmother had already been working in the states and had filed for residency. A few years later while in New York, my brother and I were born. It was during those times that my mother and father’s relationship began to change as they separated. She did a lot of things for her four children, one of which was taking us to the movies. She would get all of us dressed up, feed us lunch at McDonald’s before the movie, and then during the movie, she would order us popcorn and ice cream. If anyone was still hungry she would feed us whatever we wanted. My mother explained, “I loved making you all happy. I would give you all

that you wanted.” In patois (the popular dialect spoken by most Jamaicans) she concluded, “Lawks, mi did pwile unuh wit di fas food!” Which loosely translates into: “Oh boy, I really spoiled you all with fast food.”

After a few more laughs, I asked my mother, “What made you feel American when you first came to the states?” She was cutting onions into a pan with olive oil as she slightly turned to face me and explained, “When I first came up here, I loved getting into winter clothes. The boots, coats, gloves...everything.” I could only imagine how much of a culture shock winter in New York must have been for her. She also explained, “I also liked figuring out the subway. It made me feel like I was just like everybody.”

“Did you think there was a stigma about being Jamaican in the ‘70s or ‘80s? Was there ever a reason you thought to cover up your culture?”

My mom explained that she never felt a cultural stigma against being a Jamaican. She said she figured it had a lot to do with the fact that she spoke proper English, and so her accent resembled more of a British accent. Therefore, people were terribly fascinated by her exoticism. She also explained how Americans loved talking about Jamaican food.

“I have to be honest, at the time I was very prejudice against Rastas, and so were many others. So I never spoke patois until I moved to Florida. And now that I am older, I feel a lot more open about speaking patois and accepting dreadlocks.”

My step dad chimed in and also explained how at the time, upper class Caribbean migrants did not feel the stigma as much as others. In a way, although Americans were excited to know about Jamaica and its culture, many people tried to cover up their “Island-ness” by acting more American. He stated, “Most of the Jamaicans I knew tried hard not to be categorized as a ‘dread’ or ‘Rasta,’ so in an effort to distance themselves

from that part of the Jamaican culture, they would try and connect closer to their British roots or try harder to pass for American.”

I then asked my mother, “Do you think fast food made you feel more American, too?” She smiled and looked up as she thought for a second and reasoned, “It really did. I was so fascinated at how the McDonald’s sign would tell you how many burgers they had sold in a day. I used to say, ‘Wow! How do they make so many burgers?!’”

“So, mom, why did you feed it to us?”

“Well, you all loved it so much. And it was so fast, easy and economical. I could take you all to the restaurant, everyone would get what they wanted and everyone was so happy. It was so easy for a good price. My favorite was the cheeseburger. I loved cheeseburgers,” she proclaimed laughingly.

By the end of the conversation, my mother had already finished preparing plates for me and my dad. I had a little bit of the callaloo and salt fish with a piece of hard dough bread (white, rectangular shaped Jamaican bread similar to the Pullman loaf). My step dad had a little bit of everything. It was apparent that although we were talking about my mom’s experience with fast food when she first came to the states, it still had not changed what she cooked at home. To my mother, fast food was fun food you got to eat when you were out of the house, but at home she would serve us food from her heritage—her heart. Her new identity became a dichotomy of assimilating into American culture while still retaining some of her authentic self. These principles transcended to her children, who now are official cultural hybrids of American and Jamaican culture.

As I finished my breakfast, I was grateful that I got to get into this topic with my mom. It had given me more motivation and interest with my work. As I got up to leave,

she proclaimed, “I am so happy you got to eat something before leaving. I do not like it when you leave the house with an empty stomach.” My mother is incredible. She truly loves making her children happy, and her favorite way to show it is by feeding us.

VI. The Fast-Food Dilemma—Consequences of fast-food culture: Health implications, economic dilemma, issues of social classification, and disconnection between consumers from their consumption

A. Health Implications

The research presented earlier demonstrates that the prevalence of fast-food restaurants in urban areas also correlates to how such restaurants may lead to obesity in communities.

Predominantly black neighborhoods (i.e. 80% black) have one additional fast-food restaurant per square mile compared with predominantly white neighborhoods (i.e. 80% white). These findings suggest that black and lower-income populations have more convenient access to fast food. More convenient access likely leads to the increased consumption of fast food in these populations, and may help explain the increased prevalence of obesity among black and low-income populations.³³

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) define being overweight and obesity as followed:

Overweight and obesity are both labels for ranges of weight that are greater than what is generally considered healthy for a given height. The terms also identify ranges of weight that have been shown to increase the likelihood of certain diseases and other health problems.³⁴

For adults, overweight and obesity ranges are determined by using weight and height to calculate a number called the "body mass index" (BMI). BMI is used because, for most people, it correlates with their amount of body fat.³⁵

- An adult who has a BMI between 25 and 29.9 is considered overweight.

³³ Jason P. Block, Richard A. Scribner and Karen B. DeSalvo, *Fast Food, Race/Ethnicity, and Income, A Geographic Analysis*, 215.

³⁴ <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/defining.html>.

³⁵ Ibid.

- An adult who has a BMI of 30 or higher is considered obese.³⁶

For children and teens, BMI ranges above a normal weight have different labels (overweight and obese). Additionally, BMI ranges for children and teens are defined so that they take into account normal differences in body fat between boys and girls and differences in body fat at various ages.³⁷

Additionally, Block, Scribner, and DeSalvo weighed in on this discussion. They explain, “While obesity has a range of causes from genetic to environmental, the environment is a key factor in the rapid development of the obesity epidemic.”³⁸

In these terms, it is be important to analyze the difference between being overweight and obese in terms of health implications. The way “overweight-ness” and obesity is calculated and measured is important to examine and identify because neither classification may actually indicate the quality of health in an individual. For example, someone who is overweight may be healthy, an obese person may have great range of motion and quality of life, and yet someone who is of average weight may have hypertension and cholesterol.

In addition, it is also important to note “that although BMI correlates with the amount of body fat, BMI does not directly measure body fat. As a result, some people, such as athletes, may have a BMI that identifies them as overweight even though they do not have excess body fat.”³⁹ Therefore, BMI ranges should not be looked at as a direct calculation of individualized health. Individualized measures of health can be determined after the personal consult of a doctor. However, BMI is an effective guide in screening weight categories that relate to certain weight related health issues in groups.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Jason P. Block, Richard A. Scribner and Karen B. DeSalvo, *Fast Food, Race/Ethnicity, and Income, A Geographic Analysis*, 211.

³⁹ <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/defining.html>.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, “Studies examining the relationship between food environment and BMI have found that communities with a larger number of fast-food or quick-service restaurants tend to have higher BMIs.”⁴⁰ The CDC has determined the health related issues that increase in individuals who fit into the overweight and obese category according to BMI guidelines. They include:⁴¹

- Coronary heart disease
- Type 2 diabetes
- Cancers (endometrial, breast, and colon)
- Hypertension (high blood pressure)
- Dyslipidemia (for example, high total cholesterol or high levels of triglycerides)
- Stroke
- Liver and Gallbladder disease
- Sleep apnea and respiratory problems
- Osteoarthritis (a degeneration of cartilage and its underlying bone within a joint)
- Gynecological problems (abnormal menses, infertility)

Consequently, the health implications of areas that have a higher concentration of fast-food restaurants are more likely to be overweight and obese. Subsequently, this confirms the propensity for the above health risks in these areas.

B. Tomlinson Weighs in: What can we do to help fight obesity?

To help combat these health issues, the Dietary Guidelines of America have established some key recommendations to help balance calorie intake:

- Prevent and/or reduce overweight and obesity through improved eating and physical activity behaviors.
- Control total calorie intake to manage body weight. For people who are overweight or obese, this will mean consuming fewer calories from foods and beverages.

⁴⁰ *Dietary Guidelines for Americans: for Good Health*, 11.

⁴¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/causes/health.html>.

- Maintain appropriate calorie balance during each stage of life—childhood, adolescence, adulthood, pregnancy and breastfeeding, and older age.⁴²

This would mean that a direct change in diet among individuals that consume fast foods regularly (i.e. urban areas) would be necessary. The top ten sources of calories among Americans include grain-based desserts, yeast breads, chicken and chicken mixed dishes, soda, pizza, alcoholic beverages, pasta and pasta dishes, tortillas/burritos/tacos, beef and beef mixed dishes, and dairy desserts.⁴³ All of which, except for alcoholic beverages, are associated with fast-food intake. The Healthy Eating Index-2005, although originally used to evaluate quality of foods consumed by Americans, was also used to evaluate the quality of foods provided by fast-food restaurants. The HEI-2005 was used to examine the dollar menu displayed at a fast-food restaurant and determined that the dollar menu received 43.4 points (100 possible points).⁴⁴ “According to the HEI-2005, for the offering at a local fast-food restaurant to align with national dietary guidance, substantial shifts would be necessary: A replacement of refined grains with whole grains; and reduction in foods and food products containing sodium, solid fats, and added sugars.”⁴⁵ The USDA Dietary Guidelines suggest that individuals should:

- Reduce daily sodium intake to less than 2,300 mg and further reduce intake to 1,500 mg among persons who are 51 and older and those of any age who are African-American or have hypertension, diabetes or chronic kidney disease.
- Consume less than 10% of calories from saturated fatty acids by replacing them with monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids.

⁴² *Dietary Guidelines for Americans: for Good Health*, 9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴⁴ Jill Reed, Susan M. Krebs-Smith, Claire Bosire, *Evaluating the Food Environment, Application of the Healthy Eating Index-2005*, 465.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

- Consume less than 300 mg per day of dietary cholesterol.
- Keep trans fatty acid consumption as low as possible, especially by limiting foods that contain synthetic sources of trans fats, such as partially hydrogenated oils, and by limiting other solid fats.
- Reduce the intake of calories from solid fats and added sugars.
- Limit the consumption of foods that contain refined grains, especially refined grain foods that contain solid fats, added sugars, and sodium.
- Improve intake of whole grains, vegetables and fruits, reduce intake of sugar-sweet beverages, and monitor intake of 100% fruit juice for children and adolescents, especially those who are overweight or obese.⁴⁶

The evidence demonstrates that these changes in diet can help protect against obesity and provide missing nutrients that may not be met when consuming fast foods regularly.⁴⁷ Subsequently, eating foods that combat weight gain and obesity can lead to a decrease in developing health related diseases and conditions. This would require a direct change in the consumption in urban areas. Either urban residents would need to eat less fast food and consume healthier foods or fast-food companies would have to offer more affordable healthy options in order to help meet the dietary needs of these communities. Both options remain problematic. For one, as previously stated, it would be difficult for urban residents to seek out healthier food options due to the limitations that govern their consumption. They would need better access to healthier foods and the resources to afford it. The second requirement of fast-food restaurants offering healthier food options also brings up complex economic issues. The details to these economic issues are detailed in the following section.

⁴⁶ *Dietary Guidelines for Americans: for Good Health*, 16-21.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

C. Economic Dilemma

First, it is important for me to clarify that *I do not believe McDonald's is the devil or evil*. However, over time, McDonald's as a globalized industry has made it into a larger than life entity that can seem overwhelming. The company's globalized market, unsurmounted economic success and almost perfected marketing has made it into a seemingly monstrous creature. What cannot be denied is McDonald's business success and innovation in creating and introducing the business model and cultural staple we now know as *fast food*.

The McDonald's empire is the successor to the curb-service restaurants of the 1920s and carhop drive-in restaurants of the 1930s. In 1937, the McDonald brothers, Richard and Maurice, opened their first drive-in in Pasadena, California, where they originally served hotdogs.⁴⁸ In 1940, they relocated their restaurant to San Bernardino, a booming up-in-coming working class area. The McDonald brothers found early success catering their restaurant as a hang out spot for teenage patrons. They quickly became escalated into the status of the "San Bernardino's newly rich."⁴⁹ Their early success was met with some initial problems. By 1948, other drive-in competitors began opening up shops in their area and started to spread thin the already limited teenage market.⁵⁰ Their economic qualms came about as they discovered that their signature low prices were burdened by "an increasingly high cost, labor intensive format."⁵¹

They were being clobbered by turnover rates in their work force. They found themselves competing with the newer drive-ins for carhops almost as much as they were customers. And if they did not lose them to competitors, they lost them to higher-paying jobs in other industries that

⁴⁸John F. Love, *McDonald's: Behind the Golden Arches*, 12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

were fueling California's booming economy. Thanks in part to their teenage clientele; the turnover of eating utensils was as bad as the turnover of carhops. Paying the tab to replace stolen or broken flatware ran counter to their New England thrift ethic.⁵²

As a result, the McDonald brothers decided to reformat their entire restaurant operation after briefly considering changing their drive-in into a full service restaurant at a nearby shopping center. After studying their sales receipt and focusing on ways to improve speed efficiency, Richard and Maurice decided to keep their current location open and focus only on burgers (after discovering burgers sold the most) and removing their barbecue items, which resulted in a 25 to 9 item decrease. All flatware and china were replaced with paper bags, wrappers and cups. They fired all of their 20 carhops and turned the carhop order windows into self-service windows where customers could place their own orders. Their new goal was efficiency and speed.

“Our whole concept was based on speed, lower prices, and volume,” says McDonald. “We were going after big, big volumes by lowering prices and by having the customer serve himself. My God, the carhops were slow. We'd say to ourselves that there had to be a faster way. The cars were jamming up the lot. Customers were not demanding it, but our intuition told us that they would like speed. Everything was moving faster. The supermarkets and dime stores had already converted to self-service, and it was obvious the future of drive-ins was self-service.”⁵³

Subsequently, this new format allowed the McDonald brothers to tap into a new market, the working class family and children. Their new restaurant format had matched the changing environment of modern society, “Faster paced, more mobile and more oriented to conveniences and instant gratification.”⁵⁴ The McDonald's story is a story of reinvention, hard working tenacity and great American success, which explains why their business success and model is highly admired.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 14.

The McDonald brothers saw a market they could tap into and a way to achieve profit that many others could not easily mimic. Their empire has significantly grown with the early franchising help of Ray Kroc who helped McDonald's grow as a corporation globally. McDonald's and the fast food industry are examples of great economics and good business—finding a product that is easily sellable, creating a demand through clever marketing and minimizing expense to produce a product for the greatest profit.

Nevertheless, all actions trigger a reaction or consequence, and unfortunately, the fast-food industry created a dilemma between economic prosperity and great social implications. The research in the health implication portion of this paper acknowledges that urban areas that are heavily marketed by fast-food businesses may be tied to health related and social repercussions. It may also infer that heavily marketed areas can limit the food options of individuals that result in unhealthy eating and health risks.

This subsequently creates a “chicken and the egg” scenario. Which came first? The demand for the service or did the availability of the service create the demand? It could be suggested that,

Restaurants and stores adapt their selection to the food preferences of individuals living nearby. Therefore, they may not offer healthy food options in black and low-income neighborhoods because their market research indicates that demand for such products is weak in those communities.⁵⁵

On the other hand, it would seem the best argument demonstrates that demands are dictated by what is available to one's environment and the institutional systems that one lives in (i.e. economic, social, working, education status, etc.). Therefore, the

⁵⁵ Jason P. Block, Richard A. Scribner and Karen B. DeSalvo, *Fast Food, Race/Ethnicity, and Income, A Geographic Analysis*, 216.

prolong supply of fast food to lower-income areas could be viewed as exploitation because as long as fast-food restaurants remain a predominant food source in urban areas, a demand will continue to exist.

Food preferences could partly be dictated by available selection in a neighborhood, especially because of the lower access to transportation in black and low-income communities. Likewise, because of limited financial resources, black and low-income populations may simply seek out the most calories for the lowest price.⁵⁶

But if fast foods were replaced with other food options, then individuals in urban areas would be confounded to using the alternative food sources. Over time, this could increase a new demand for healthier products.

D. Tomlinson Weighs in: What will fix the economic/fast-food dilemmas in urban areas?

Some researchers have suggested that food taxations on soft drinks, snack foods, and/or fast foods would help in decreasing the rising obesity epidemic in America. One rationale for this proposal is that a statewide tax could aid in funding more marketing campaigns for healthier foods to help counter-act the numerous fast-food commercials currently on air.⁵⁷ For example, McDonald's spent \$1.2 billion in 2001 and all other fast-food companies spent \$3.2 billion in 1998, while the National Cancer Institute's 5 A Day for Better Health Program to promote fruit and vegetable consumption was \$1-\$2 million annually in 1991.⁵⁸ This may have resulted in distorted information among consumers

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Kim Daniel, Ichiro Kawachi, *Food Taxation and Pricing Strategies to "Thin Out" the Obesity Epidemic*, 431.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

about healthy eating.⁵⁹ Others have advocated for a statewide tax because the costs that obesity transfers to society. Daniel Kim and Ichiro Kawachi explain, “Negative externalities may occur from obese individual onto individuals in the general populace in the form of increased premiums for health and disability insurance and Medicaid.”⁶⁰ In comparison, this could be implemented in the same way that taxes are levied on cigarettes. “Economic analyses have estimated that smokers appear to ‘pay their way’ through cigarette excise taxes...”⁶¹

Additionally, the overall argument for a tax on fast food is the belief that it could potentially modify the consumption of these foods that could help aid in the prevention of obesity. It is believed that higher taxes on fast food would increase its overall cost, thus making it a deterrent in lower-income areas.⁶² This suggestion is derived by the examination of the state-level taxation on snack food/soft-drinks from 1991-1998 and relative increases in obesity prevalence over the same time period.⁶³ It was evident that “States without a soft drink or snack foods tax were more than four times as likely than states with a tax to undergo a high relative increase in obesity prevalence.”⁶⁴

Despite these reasonable suggestions for taxing fast food to help prevent the obesity epidemic, there could be some unwanted behavioral consequences. “Behavioral economic theory posits that access to some behaviors may positively or negatively reinforce the choice for other behaviors.”⁶⁵ In other words, if low-income individuals who are restricted by their economic limitations are further taxed on fast food, they may

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 434.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 431

⁶⁴ Ibid., 434

⁶⁵ Ibid.

simply substitute bad eating behaviors with other unhealthy foods or other non-dietary health behaviors such as food restriction or smoking.⁶⁶ Or it could also cause people to spend more on fast food without deterring any behavior. The primary problem with this suggestion is that it attempts to use a government plan to provide a solution for an interdisciplinary problem.

What can be more effective is commissioning fast-food corporations to consult with community leaders, community members and health officials for proper discourse to develop solutions to do “good.” “Good” in business is also known as *corporate social responsibility*. *Corporate social responsibility* is defined by Philip Kotler and Nancy Lee as, “A commitment to improve community well being through discretionary business practices and contributions of corporate resources.”⁶⁷ “Good” in this case would be for fast-food companies to provide healthier foods options in urban areas where there are limitations and restrictions preventing people from accessing healthier foods options.

People can argue extensively that leaders of businesses should hold some moral responsibility whenever negative environmental or social consequences follow from their practices. The truth remains that good business and economic prosperity comes about when profit is the primary goal. Therefore, corporation’s social responsibility will come about if there are incentives that will help promote the overall growth of their organization.

Such incentives for corporate social responsibly are simple and obvious; i.e. doing “good” makes good business. Participation in corporate social initiatives *looks good* to

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Philip Kotler and Nancy Lee, *Corporate Social Responsibility: Doing the Most Good for Your Company and Your Cause*, 3.

potential consumers, investors, financial analysis, business colleagues, etc.⁶⁸ Doing good also makes employees, customers, stock holders and board members feel better about where they work and what they are investing in.⁶⁹ There is also evidence that suggest that it helps in branding and helps companies last longer.⁷⁰

There are 6 distinct ways in which a corporation can participate in corporate initiatives according to Kotler and Lee:

- *Cause Promotion*, where a corporation provided funds, in-kind contributions or other corporate resources to increase awareness and concerns about a social cause or to support fundraising, participation, or volunteer recruitment for a cause.
- *Cause-Related Marketing*, where a corporation commits to making a contribution or donating a percentage of revenues to a specific cause based on product sales.
- *Corporate Social Marketing*, in which a corporation supports the development and/or implementation of a behavior change campaign, intended to improve public health, safety, the environment, or community well-being.”
- *Corporate Philanthropy*, in which a corporation makes a direct contribution to a charity or cause, most often in the form of cash grants, donations, and/or in-kind services.
- *Community Volunteering*, where a corporation supports and encourages employees, retail partners, and/or franchise members to volunteer their time to support local community organizations and causes.
- *Socially Responsible Business Practices*, where a corporation adopts and conducts discretionary business practices and investments that support social causes to improve community well-being and protect the environment.⁷¹

McDonald’s has already done great work in all six categories by participating in programs such as being a major sponsor of the Olympic Youth Camp in 2002, and

⁶⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.,23-24

spearheading a volunteering program for the Ronald McDonald House Charities and other children programs in 2002. McDonald's also connected with the American Academy of Pediatrics back in 1994 to help spread the importance of families immunizing their children against vaccine-preventable diseases, through marketing awareness campaigns. Their corporate philanthropy also includes their close relationship with the Ronald McDonald House Charities and their community volunteering outreach include a long history of using members of the McDonald's organization to help in disaster relief programs. One of their socially responsible business practices includes McDonald's transition into a recycling oriented business back in the 1990s.

All of the programs that McDonald's has participated in are clear examples that *corporate social responsibility* is not an unusual characteristic of good business and actually adds to a business' overall wellness and economic success. In terms of helping lower-income areas increase their healthy food options, corporations like McDonald's could accomplish this through *corporate social marketing* and *socially responsible business practices*.

The great principle about *corporate social marketing strategies* is that it tries to implement changes in behavior. It would use the same successful strategies used in advertising corporate services to instead "influence a target audience to voluntarily accept, reject, modify, or abandon a behavior for the benefit of individuals, groups, or society as a whole."⁷² Often times, corporations can accomplish this goal by making partnerships with public sector or non-profit organizations. Corporate partnerships include Subway with the American Heart Association both of whom hope to educate people to practice "healthy heart habits" and Best Buy, whose partnership with local

⁷² Ibid., 114

government agencies hope to increase awareness of recycling used electronics by allowing consumers to drop them off at their stores.⁷³

In addition, although partnerships like these may be a beneficial and a straightforward way to accomplish *socially responsible business practices*, there may also be a resistance from some corporations that believe partnerships with certain causes may potentially characterize them as the cause of a problem. For example, I do not think we would ever expect the tobacco industry to begin openly funding anti-smoking/preventive cancer campaigns. On the other hand, it would not seem unreasonable to suggest fast-food industries could contribute to healthy-eating marketing campaigns such as the 5 A Day for Better Health Program. I also do not believe that the fast-food industry would suggest eating healthy foods everyday is not important. Furthermore, I doubt they would advocate the daily consumption of fast food that occurs among some communities.

Also, as previously noted, the eating habits of urban areas are very complex and involve a variety of social concerns and therefore is not something that can change quickly. Corporations that participate in *corporate social marketing* should be aware that it would require a long-term commitment. Kolter and Lee explain, campaigns require more “than simply writing a check to work well.” For a successful campaign, it will require time, strategy and careful communication with experts to effectively develop a plan to stimulate actual change.

Other solutions can come about through the *socially responsible business practices* corporate initiative. The story of the McDonald brothers is inspiring in many ways, but what it also demonstrates is the McDonald’s initiative for innovation and

⁷³ Ibid., 117

creativity. One solution could come from this very element that has made McDonald's so successful. If McDonald's recognized that lower-income neighborhoods, where transportation and economics help dictate diet trends, offered healthier food options at reasonable prices to residents of these areas, then in time they would create a new demand and create a profit. More significantly, it would allow them to meet the health needs of those areas. This could be considered a *socially responsible business practice* because McDonald's would be developing a system that would required time to develop a profit. Therefore, profit would not be the primary focus in this endeavor, but instead it would be done solely to improve the health needs of urban areas.

This would not be a completely unusual system; since McDonald's already makes menu accommodations for different countries they have established franchises in. For example, India is the only country in the world that does not offer beef burgers at their McDonald's restaurants.⁷⁴ Instead, their burgers are substituted with a "look-a-like" burger patty that consists of potatoes, peas, and carrots, and Indian spice.⁷⁵ This menu accommodation was created as a result of the large Hindu population of India that believes in the karmic effect that eating meat has on the afterlife. Other examples include the halal meat products that are offered in most of the Middle East to fit the religious dietary needs of the Muslim population. A kosher menu is also offered in Israel and Argentina to accommodate the Judaic dietary requirements.

My solutions therefore would require creative and innovative menu changes from fast-food chains like McDonald's. They would make menu accommodations based on the dietary needs of urban communities. As previously stated, the HEI-2005 is a tool that

⁷⁴ Erin Petrum, *Where's The Beef?*, 1.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

evaluates quality of foods consumed by Americans, and can also be used to evaluate the quality of fast foods offered in specific areas that show an epidemic. And because research indicated, “the choices people make about what to eat are limited by the food available to them,”⁷⁶ and based on the definition of *socially responsible business practices*, then it would be important for fast-food operations to accommodate the missing nutrients of targeted areas to stimulate healthy eating in these areas. The HEI-2005 shows that in order for fast-food restaurants to align with the national dietary guidance, there would need to be an increase in the intake of “fruit, dark-green vegetables, orange vegetables, legumes, and nonfat milk; replacement of refined grains with whole grains; and reduction in foods and food products containing sodium, solid fats, and added sugars.”⁷⁷ Therefore, in theory, fast-food restaurants could alter their menus to make these needed accommodations for populations that have an obesity epidemic or limitations to access healthier food options.

E. Analyzing the disconnect between consumers and their consumption

A consequence of the learned ritualistic behavior in fast-food culture forms a disconnection between the consumer and their consumption. As previously stated, fast-food culture provides rituals that draw consumers into the experience instead of the actual food. Food that is quickly delivered and wrapped in colorful packaging removes the customer from the cooking process altogether, to the point where they are very unaware of what they are eating. This unawareness of consumption can lead to unintended

⁷⁶ Jason P. Block, Richard A. Scribner and Karen B. DeSalvo, *Fast Food, Race/Ethnicity, and Income, A Geographic Analysis*, 215.

⁷⁷ Jill Reed, Susan M. Krebs-Smtih, Claire Bosire, *Evaluating the Food Environment, Application of the Healthy Eating Index-2005*, 465.

consequences, both physical and cultural. Individuals who have no connection with where their food comes from are least likely to question the quality of their meal.

This was the primary concern of Monet Parham, a 41-year-old mother of Sacramento, CA, who felt the toys featured in McDonald's Happy Meal advertisements were trapping her children into an unhealthy relationship with fast food. In December 2010, The Center for Science in the Public Interest filed a lawsuit on her behalf, claiming that McDonald's use of advertising toys is deceptive under "California's consumer protection laws."⁷⁸ They believe that the advertising "targets children less than eight years who do not have the ability to understand advertising."⁷⁹ The mother's overall concern is that the incentive for a toy in the Happy Meal has altered her children's experience and tastes for "food that is high in calories, sugar fat and salt which contributes to obesity."⁸⁰ This is an example of a mother who recognized that her children had begun to grow eating customs that connected them more to the fast-food experience instead of the food itself. She stated, "Happy meals are among those things frequently requested, and the first thing they ask me to do is open the toy. I am really concerned about the health of my children, and I do not think it is OK to entice children to get Happy Meals with a toy."⁸¹

It is also important to realize that whenever any entity balloons into a "mega-system," they may operate and produce poor quality goods as a result of their swelling expansion, especially in terms of food. Food quality and public interpretation is one of the principles that are currently being questioned in the recent Taco Bell "seasoned beef"

⁷⁸ April Fulton, *Consumer Group Sues McDonald's Over Happy Meal Toys*, 1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

lawsuit. Recently, an Alabama law firm filed a class action lawsuit against the major food chain, claiming that Taco Bell does not properly distinguish the meat used in their food as regulated by law. Legally, the government defines beef as being at least 70% beef and 30% fat. However, it is being alleged that Taco Bell beef is only 35% beef and the rest is considered fillers. One of the lawyers, Mr. Dee Miles explains:

Its things like soybeans and wheat and oats, non-meat products. There are things I cannot even pronounce and do not know what they are, but they are non-beef products, and so you have basically almost 65 % of this beef product being something other than beef.⁸²

Even internally, Taco Bell's beef is not categorized as beef; it is referred to as "taco meat filling," however their advertisements refer to it as beef.⁸³ According to the lawyers pursuing the case, the lawsuit hopes to accomplish two things. Miles explains:

One, label your products correctly, if it is taco meat filling, then call it that. And secondly, the way you advertise your product, if you cannot call it beef it is does not meet that definition, and if you're not going to do those things on our own, that is what the lawsuit does, it requests injunctive relive, which basically means Taco Bell, if you're not going to make these changes, we're going to ask a court to impost these changes on your practices.⁸⁴

More importantly, it accomplishes something else. It helps expose the lack of awareness that consumers have about their food, where it comes from, how it is reared and what it consists of. When fast-food companies use marketing tools, such as toys, to entice customers, and when companies expand so massively that they begin offering low quality foods, then it creates the potential for exploitation. The exploitation becomes possible due to the lack of awareness of food knowledge and the many limitations that dictate the food options of people in urban areas. True justice comes about through

⁸² *Taco Bell Faces Lawsuit Over "Seasoned Beef"*, transcript from NPR broadcast of All Things Considered

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

awareness and enlightenment. If society stays unaware of what they are consuming, then they run the risk of being exploited through false or subjective advertising campaigns. In

How Harlem Eats, Moriba Jackson, a New York food activist, explains that:

Food justice is not only about supporting local farmers, battling the corporate hold on food production and breaking the tyranny of bioengineering foods and a fast-food nation; It is also about using food as a means of re-education, reinvigorating and liberating the black community.⁸⁵

Therefore, it would be important for our society to begin breaking the ritualistic behaviors that are associated with fast food and to begin a better relationship between the sources of their food.

Malcolm X's story, for example, conveys a message of the prosperity that comes about when people are made aware and enlighten through education. It took Malcolm X a stint in prison and a religious experience to encourage him to begin reading and self-educating himself. He started with the basics by reading the dictionary. His back-to-basic approach is an example of how society can be educated and reconnected with healthy foods. Lower-income areas need better exposure to fresh fruits and vegetables to start the building blocks of food knowledge, which is why Pine Hill is such an amazing example. They, as a community, have made healthy eating accessible to its residents and for future generations. Incorporating fresh food markets in lower-income areas can provide a start for educating people about healthy foods and where their food comes from. It also keeps a balance between healthy food options and fast-food industries, provides urban communities with better choices, while also providing the building blocks to educate them to know how to make their decisions.

⁸⁵ Mark Griffith, *How Harlem Eats*.

Assantewaa Gail Harris, a community activist, is also hoping to fulfill her vision of encouraging the growth of neighborhood farmers markets in New York City. She states, “In the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, one in four adults and one in three children are obese, and the neighborhood is home to 131 bodegas, where fresh produce is a rarity. We had been around to all of the Greenmarkets in the city and did not see farmers of color.”⁸⁶ Also in the article, *Black Farms, Black Markets*, Habiba Alcindor describes how David Haughton of New York and Richard Pearson of Virginia, are both succeeding in setting up organic farms and selling healthy produce in their communities.⁸⁷ David Haughton even boasts that his produce is “better than 100 percent organic, it is natural.”⁸⁸ Jason Harvey, a food activist also showcases how the Mandela Farms Market in Oakland, California is now an epicenter of food commerce and social interaction among the people in his community.⁸⁹

The incorporation of self owned fresh food markets also benefits the community in that it stimulates self-entrepreneurship and economic prosperity among community members. Take for example Raw Spot, a thriving healthy eatery in the heart of Harlem. Mark Winston Griffith writes:

The buckwheat, carrots and flax topped with a walnut/brazil nut cheese and sun-dried tomato pizza sauce is not fried or dripping with flavorful grease, and still serves as a nutritional and healthy-lifestyle educational center, as well as a hub for a diverse group of people who are determined to shift Harlem’s food conciseness.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Habiba Alcindo, *Black Farms, Black Market*.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Mark Griffith, *How Harlem Eats*.

These stories provide great models for what communities can do once they are made aware of healthy dieting and are given the opportunity to choose. Awareness, resources and time can truly develop great change.

F. Social Classification

Perhaps one of the most popular social occurrences in human culture is its tendency to indirectly and directly classify people. In recent centuries, any social occurrence generally related to being “urban” was and is often culturally distained. Great literary works such as Emile Zola’s *Nana* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* demonstrate examples of the negative side of street culture that stemmed from the Industrial Revolution. In the early 1960s, rock music was often associated with urban street culture and perceived as lower class, criminal music. Hip-hop fashion of the 1980s was negatively viewed as young adults began to “sag” their pants, wear Kangol hats and lace-less Adidas sneakers. In the same way, food has always been a distinguisher of class. For centuries, honey was considered a luxury in the New World and a staple of wealth and class considering that most of the general populace did not have the resources to partake in such a luxury. Glenn Sheldon shares, in his analysis of working class and “white-trash” cooking that “how we eat, what we eat, and who prepares and serves our meals are all issues that shape society. Similarly, who we are in terms of class backgrounds shape what we eat, and the facts and myths of class mobility.”⁹¹ In recent years, a similar movement has sprung up among the American wealthy in the form of the new “organic way of living.” The recent health movement has helped shape the opinions

⁹¹ Glenn Sheldon, “*What’s on Their Plates?*” or *Feeding the Hungry Mouths: Laborers, Families, and Food in the Late Twentieth Century*, 564-565.

of many in believing that organic, fresh and pesticide free food is the better and therefore “classier”. In contrast, “urban food” or fast food is usually associated with lower-class unhealthy eating.

Healthy eating is distinguished by its exclusivity. To be a healthy eater requires certain resources that are not available to all. First, a healthy eater needs to be aware of what a healthy diet consists of. To gain knowledge of healthy foods may seem easy to most and some would suggest that people who are unhealthy should just get a health cook book and learn to eat better. However, it is hard for people to read health books if they have limited education—or simply cannot read. Secondly, if a healthy eater was not afforded the knowledge of healthy eating from his/her childhood, he/she would then need to have a significant amount of leisure time to acquire literature on healthy dieting and to consult experts. It would also require time to practice different dishes in the home. Many working and lower-income households work labor jobs full-time. It is also statistically shown that lower-income families generally have bigger families. It is hard to imagine a warehouse worker making time after a 12-hour shift and taking care of his family when he gets home to read materials on healthy dieting. It is even harder to imagine this person having time to execute the information into his everyday life. Third and more importantly, healthy eating requires a reliable and reasonable amount of money. In comparison, health food supplies are generally more expensive in stores that specialize in healthy eating. Discount grocery stores such as Save-a-Lot supermarket promote their products as cheap and affordable. Their discounted products are non-organic, they offer a limited fresh fruit and vegetable section and their shelved products are all generic brands with plenty of canned goods and products with high-fructose corn syrup. All of

these factors and limitations categorize healthy eating as a privileged ability only obtainable to those who can afford it.

Fast-food stores also differentiate the prices on their menu based on the healthiness of the item. Take for example, McDonald's Dollar Menu which consist of a small fry, McDouble (double cheeseburger), McChicken (fried chicken sandwich), hot fudge sundae, small beverage, Fruit N' Yogurt Parfait, baked apple pie and a small side salad. Every option on this menu is more than 300 calories with the exception of the Fruit N' Yogurt Parfait, which is 160 calories; baked apple pie, which is 250 calories and the small side salad, which calorie intake varies based on the salad dressing that is chosen. The same is true for the value meals that are offered. A traditional "Number one," which consists of a medium fry, Big Mac and medium drink consists of 1,130 calories if you order a Coke. In Orlando, a "Number One" will cost roughly \$6.00, which sounds inexpensive. For just \$1.00 more, one can add two apple pies (and add an additional 500 calories to the meal). In contrast, a premium salad alone costs about \$6.00, not including a side or a drink. Adding those to your meal will cost about \$8.00 to \$9.00—a \$2.00 to \$3.00, and significance difference. Therefore, even at McDonald's, the healthier options are priced higher, marketed for those who can afford to opt for a "better" option.

Ordering a salad does not guarantee that one is necessarily choosing a healthier option. Salad dressings that accompany premium salads run anywhere from 40 to a whopping 170 additional calories. Furthermore, this does not include the actual salad itself that can range from anywhere from 90 to 360 calories, depending on the salad type and whether or not one orders grilled or crispy chicken. This does not include the

calories from the fries and drink one may order as well. Therefore, even in their “healthy” options, McDonald’s, overall, still does not meet the healthy gourmet cuisine expectations that “health buffs” might qualify as healthy.

Wealthier people eat healthier because they can afford healthier foods.

Statistically, occupants of Pine Hills are predominantly service workers, fulfilling occupations such as construction and food service. Roughly, 20% of the males in Pine Hills are construction workers and 12% work in accommodations and food services.⁹² The range is much higher in these occupations than the majority of males in other parts of the metropolitan area. Additionally, 13% of females hold occupations in health care.⁹³ 12% of females work in accommodations and food services, which is the only area in which they exceed the city’s average. Pine Hills residents are also distinguished by their diversity, which explains the heavily fast food marketed demographic.⁹⁴

In contrast, Windermere holds the majority of the city’s entertainment workers, professionals, scientists, and technical services. For males, 13% hold occupations in the arts and entertainment industry as well as professional athletics.⁹⁵ Another 11% hold occupations as executives and in the sciences. For females, 18% hold occupations in educational services and 12% works in health care.⁹⁶ Windermere is typically viewed as a family town; with 67% of occupants being married and approximately 14% separated, divorced or widowed.⁹⁷ Therefore, Windermere holds the qualifications to partake in a

⁹² <http://www.city-data.com/city/Pine-Hills-Florida.html>.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ <http://www.city-data.com/city/Windermere-Florida>.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

healthier diet, which is why health food markets such as Publix and Whole Foods have established their stores in this area and many other areas like it.

The economics and food distribution of regions offer an explanation on the role food plays in identifying social classification. In this case, a successful executive that lives in Windermere may identify his status by shopping strictly organic and eating at higher end restaurants. In contrast, a Haitian working immigrant living in Pine Hills may unknowingly demonstrate his social classification by eating frequently at the seven Burger Kings in his surrounding area. The signifying difference between these two individuals is one has the choice to shop at his preference, but the other is restricted based on what his budget and environment may offer him.

The mental barrier between what classifies as healthy/wealthy eating is even more enforced with the physical barrier that has pushed health food stores further away from urban areas. For example, the story of Moriba Jackson, who explains her experience of finding seven McDonald's within walking distance of her Harlem apartment, but having to take two trains and a bus to get to a market that sold organic fruits and vegetables.⁹⁸

Fast-food eating helps reinforce classifications of wealth and superiority among individuals who can afford to eat "healthier" instead of those who have no options but to choose their consumption based on price. Health is a distinguisher of wealth, because wealthy individuals are afforded the ability to *choose*, while non-wealthy individuals are restricted. This is not to say that wealthy people do not eat fast food. Essentially, this is what makes fast-food restaurants, like McDonald's, so successful in that they appeal to almost all demographics. However, what makes a major difference among social statuses is that wealthy people have the option to not eat fast food regularly and have the luxury to

⁹⁸ Mark Griffith, *How Harlem Eats*.

choose. Healthier communities are not targeted as much as lower-income areas and they are not as restricted to their choices as urban community members.

Taking into consideration all of the variables in urban dieting, one can observe how these specific food occurrences differentiate the classifications between urban areas and wealthier areas. What should be mainly understood is that simply providing any food to an area is not enough. The argument is not that urban areas are not eating, but rather urban areas are not eating well based on the economical and residential boundaries. A person should not be entitled to health based on financial security; therefore, food as a social class distinguisher should be eliminated in our social consciences. Something as pure and simple as pulling a vegetable from the ground should not be tarnished by the overpricing and pretentious social classification of clever marketing. The irony remains that all of the “processing” that goes in to processed foods is what is offered at a lower price to lower-income consumers. Good, simple and healthy foods should be a basic and essential privilege for all.

VII. “I Use to be a Fast Food Junkie”: *A story about awareness and change*

Concerning Stacey and Craig

I could tell this was not going to be an average shopping trip when I pulled into a tiny parking lot covered with gravel, behind two small-sized buildings, and waited in my car for my friends Stacey and Craig. This would be my first co-op market experience and I was looking forward to it. I was busy fooling with my car radio when Stacey pulled up and knocked on my window. It was big smiles and quick jokes as we made our way out the car and into the store. The name of this co-op is Homegrown and it is located in downtown Orlando, Florida. Homegrown makes locally grown, owned and reared products available to the community. Customers can place orders using the online shopping tool and can pick up orders or have them delivered for a fee. There is a \$40 annual fee to become a member, and guests are allowed to use the services for free twice.

Two bright yellow and green small sized buildings house the operations. One smaller building holds the various orders that customers place. The main building hosts some general surplus items, including honey, apple cider vinegar, olive oil, eggs and some meats that can be purchased without a membership.

Since Stacey had an order to pick up, we went inside the main building and she quickly began telling me about the services while we waited for her order to be brought up front. She showed me where they kept their meats and frozen products and informed me that anyone can ask for detailed information on where every product comes from. Homegrown provides goods within 50-miles of Central Florida and a part of their mission is to keep consumers very well informed as to where their various products come from. Everything is organic, eco-friendly and locally sourced.

Over the years, as Stacey and I became closer as friends, I became more aware of her opinions towards food. She is a vegan and finds it very important that she knows where her food comes from and what she puts into her body. She details:

We'll scrutinize everything we buy and the companies that produce it. We care about genetically modified organisms. We'll see a new product in the grocery store, but we won't buy it. I'll check out the company first and find out their stance on genetically modified organisms.

I meandered around the facility a bit on my own, and ended up grabbing a carton of organic, cage free eggs and a bottle of organic orange blossom honey. After we checked out, we continued our conversation in the car and Stacey and Craig continued to tell me about their journey in veganism. Stacey became a vegetarian in 1993 and transitioned into veganism in 1996. She recalled the last two things that she gave up were M&M's and scallops:

I grew up eating meat; I grew up eating really bad meat. I ate a lot of processed food as a kid—cheap food. I do not really remember what sparked my interest in it, but going to Gatorland and seeing the production of it was what made me go, ok I cannot do this because you see the whole production.⁹⁹ But I had already been considering vegetarianism at that point, so going to Gatorland gave me the push. I do not know why I had been considering it, having lived all my life eating meat. You know I liked the taste of it, but it was just all about the ethics.

Craig became a vegan soon after meeting Stacey in 1998. He explained his reasons why he made the transition, “As soon as you realize how impactful the way you get your food is in a big picture, and if you're the kind of person who is inclined to change how you make purchases over ethical choices, it becomes natural.”

Although the ethical transition was an easy decision to make for Stacey and Craig, they also explain some of the limitations they had in the very beginning. Stacey became a vegetarian before the Internet was popular and more readily available. At the time, she

⁹⁹ Gatorland is a Florida alligator themed park that also rears gator meat and sells gator taxidermy products.

prescribed to *Vegetarian Times Magazine* for her early source of knowledge, and although she described it as somewhat of a “fluff” magazine because “it did not really hit hard issues” it was enough to make her curious and helped spark her awareness that allowed her to continue research to change her life. She became a vegetarian first for ethical reasoning because she did not have the knowledge on the dairy industry. She became a vegan when she read a pamphlet from Chamberlins on dairy.¹⁰⁰ As Stacey became more aware and knowledgeable, she began to change various aspects in her life, including what type of clothes she wore. She was able to make these changes in her life, despite the early limitations she may had in finding adequate material.

When you do something for an ethical reason, I think it opens you up to more information and more education. So when I switched I would learn about the next thing and the next thing, and I am still learning now... because as you become more aware you realize that; well if I am eating meat, then it does not make sense to be wearing leather.

Craig also explained, “It becomes everything: the soap, shampoos, deodorant—I mean I figure we’re on the extreme end of it, but it just affects everything because we know that everything you buy has a process.”

Stacey and Craig’s experience with food is very interesting to consider because they both were average eaters and once regular customers of fast food.

I use to be a fast food junkie and think that is one of the main things that I missed the most is the convenience—the fact that you can swing in any where no matter where you are in the country and be able to just grab something to eat and get it cheaply.

For Stacey, all it took was a trip to a theme park to give her conviction to change, and a magazine to provide her the building blocks of her immense amount of growing knowledge. For Craig, it was his relationship and early knowledge of the environment

¹⁰⁰ Chamberlins is a popular Orlando natural foods supermarket.

that sparked his interest in his food. He explains, “I was environmental before I became vegan. So I cared about environmental issues even before I met Stacey.” What’s interesting about Craig and Stacey is that they are just like everyone else, even if their amount of food knowledge makes them unique. In the same way the rest of us have the ability to learn, they were able to develop their food knowledge from basic literary materials, continuous discourse and self discovery.

From their process, change comes about from first having an ethical conviction. For Stacey and Craig, their change came about through personal ethics and environmental concerns. For others, it may be concerns with personal health or distrust in institutions. Whatever it may be, a conviction is required and comes about through self-awareness. Once one becomes aware, he/she can either choose to live in ignorance or take steps to begin adjusting his/her life to fit his/her new value system. For Stacey and Craig, they decided to not eat meat or animal products and shop from local organic farmers. Craig said it best, “It is a mind thing, and it is a total switch to how you process your beliefs.”

Lower-income urban areas are lacking the self-awareness to stimulate change. People in these communities are disconnected from the source of the food and therefore do not have the knowledge or even the articulation to discuss or question where their food comes from. Consumption in urban areas is primarily dictated by economics—what I can afford to buy vs. what I can buy that is healthy for me. They then become stuck in a mode of survival and self-preservation; seeking the most with just a little. But what should be known is that simple healthy eating is not unattainable and can be

accomplished despite what we may think is limiting us. Stacey and Craig are great examples of this.

VIII. Final Analysis.

Food consumption is a significant and essential human practice that is laden with biological and cultural benefits and consequences. In this analysis, the origins, customs and implications of fast-food culture has become more apparent, with important focus on the customs of fast-food urban eating. It is now evident that lower-income urban areas are more likely to consume fast food. Because of this, they are also more likely to develop obesity related health issues. This also creates an economic dilemma between community leaders and health advocates, who desire to combat the prevalence of fast food with healthier options and the fast-food industry that believe they are accommodating a legitimate demand from the consumer.

In addition, the continual consumption of fast food through generations can develop ritualistic behaviors that disconnect consumers of fast food from the source of their food. This disconnection reinforces an ignorance to food health and knowledge that becomes a greater barrier between social systems. This subsequently leads to food as a tool to distinguish between social classes, thus creating deep physical and cultural limitations for people in lower-income areas.

Subsequently, it is evident that there would need to be solutions to these various implications to ensure the foremost important goal, which is to allow all people to have proper knowledge and information about health, healthy eating habits and the source of their food. These solutions could include educating lower-income areas about the proper diets as indicated by the CDC and USDA dietary guidelines that can combat obesity related health diseases. The Healthy Eating Index could also be used to evaluate the level of health in fast-food restaurant menus to determine the need for any possible menu

remodeling/accommodating. What should also be noted is that I do not postulate the entire eradication of fast food in lower-income areas; rather, I simply suggest that they deserve more choices. I am also offering solutions based on the tools that are already in place. The ultimate goal is to meet the dietary needs of lower-income areas.

Additionally, after proper education and exposure to healthy foods, community members and entrepreneurs would have the desire to implement local self-owned farmers markets. This could also aid in the development of healthier eating habits and stimulate local economies.

A. Personal Analysis

More significantly, this project became a personal journey into my intimate relationship with food. I never really had the opportunity to examine my food habits and how they originated. Subsequently, a newly developed understanding of myself has allowed me to have a better understanding of the food relationship of my community, family and heritage. If one was to ask me why I thought lower-income areas ate poorly before, I would have ranted about how “it is the system trying to keep us down” or some other residual-left-over theory I developed from participating in a variety of community, Afro-centric and neo-feminist campus organizations I belonged to while in college. Just like most things related to humanity, food behaviors require a complex explanation—something I did not have before.

I also assumed that my hometown, Pine Hills, Florida would have fit into the standard statistical data that concluded lower-income communities had less access to healthy foods. I thought this way because for years, I have complained about the growth of fast-food restaurants in my town, while completely ignoring the fresh food markets

that had developed right along with them. I never really recognized the rarity of what Pine Hills has restructured into. At first, when I became aware of this dichotomy, I did not know if this discovery would completely shatter my argument that had been established after conducting my research. But as the various research indicated, I became pleasantly surprised at the uniqueness of Pine Hills. This experience allowed me to fall in love with my neighborhood again. It allowed me to be proud of the rarity that is Pine Hills. It also granted me the knowledge and self-discovery of what food is in my life, and how I've developed an identity because of it. Now, I can only hope for more change in our community through the growth of more farmers and co-op markets and more methods of food awareness. I also hope the change can come to other lower-income areas that are suffering from a lack of adequate healthy food choices.

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