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Free to Serve? Emergency Food and Volunteer Labor in the Urban U.S.

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Free to Serve? Emergency Food and Volunteer Labor in the Urban U.S.

Abstract: Since the 1980s, cutbacks to welfare programs, widespread economic insecurity, and increased federal funding for nonprofit agencies have led to a massive expansion of emergency food providers (EFPs) such as soup kitchens and food pantries across the United States. These anti-hunger organizations are often staffed exclusively or predominantly by volunteers who are empowered to care for their communities. But, like all caring labor, volunteer work is shaped by race, class, and gender inequalities. Hunger and poverty motivate poor women to become volunteers, and contradictions around how this labor should be remunerated, recognized,

and regulated create conflicts within EFPs. By mobilizing large numbers of poor, hungry people as volunteers to distribute surplus food, emergency food providers transform both wasted food and people who are typically considered “burdens” on the state into an important new form of free labor for a struggling economy in ways that deepen existing social inequalities.

Keywords: voluntarism, informal labor, food insecurity, welfare policy, urban inequality

I MET FABIOLA, a forty-five-year-old Puerto Rican woman, the first night I volunteered at the North Brooklyn food pantry.¹ She had been helping out for about a year and had taken on something of a leadership role among the volunteers. That night, she was overseeing a mix of high school students and community residents. They were filling plastic grocery bags with rice, microwaveable meals that had been market failures, USDA raisins and dates, and a few random canned goods that came from the food bank as donations.

She sat at a table in the back of the church sanctuary at the end of the night, counting her change to see if she had enough money to take the bus home or if she would have to walk. Her apartment was about two miles away and it was a cold November night. She would be back at the pantry the next morning by 8 a.m. to help distribute the bags that were being packed as we chatted. She also stops at a nearby convenience store before the pantry opens each week to pick up any leftover food they have. She said she would do more, but she does not have a car. I marveled at her dedication. She smiled and responded, “It’s all love.” As we came to be friends over the next two years, my initial impression of Fabiola, as a selfless, dedicated volunteer, gave way to a far more complex picture. What brought Fabiola to the food pantry every week was a complicated mix of altruism, need, fear, and resilience. This love was complicated.

Discourses of care and compassion are central to emergency food providers (EFPs). In the United States, food

pantries and soup kitchens are typically thought of as private charities compassionately responding to the needs of the poor. Conservative politicians heap praise on charitable volunteer work that comes from the heart while they scorn cold, bureaucratic state-run welfare programs like food stamps. But, as feminist scholars have long pointed out, caring labor (especially the work of feeding families and communities) is more than just compassionate—it is deeply political (Camey 2015; Counihan and Kaplan 1998; Devault 1991; Kornbluh 2015; Van Esterik 1999). Fabiola is a case in point. While her volunteer work is motivated by love for her community, it is also the product of her deep poverty and need. Volunteering at the North Brooklyn food pantry has become an economic lifeline for Fabiola and many other volunteers in the context of weakened welfare protections, widespread economic insecurity, and growing precarity in the United States.

The massive growth of food pantries and soup kitchens in the United States since the 1980s expands opportunities for women like Fabiola to care for their communities. But like all caring labor, volunteer work in soup kitchens and food pantries is shaped by race, class, and gender inequalities (Colen 1995; James 2012; Mullings 1997). Within EFPs, contradictions around how to classify this labor and how it should be remunerated, recognized, and regulated create conflicts between volunteers, clients, and pantry directors. Emergency food providers have become a competitive survival niche for hungry people who provide much of the labor on which soup



FIGURE 1: *Food pantries could not function without volunteers to distribute food.*

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kitchens and food pantries depend. By mobilizing large numbers of poor, hungry people as volunteers to distribute surplus food, emergency food providers transform both wasted food and people who are typically considered “burdens” on the state into an important new form of “free labor for a struggling economy” (Adams 2012) in ways that exacerbate entrenched social inequalities.

This research is based on two years of ethnographic research in a food pantry and soup kitchen in North Brooklyn. I worked alongside volunteers to pack and give out pantry bags and hot meals. I also assisted people applying for public benefits. I accompanied pantry clients and community residents to the food stamp office to document their interactions with caseworkers, filled out food stamp applications, and mediated problems with cases as they arose. These daily activities and interactions were documented through extensive field notes.

I also conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with a range of individuals, including food pantry clients and volunteers, local pantry directors in North Brooklyn, and anti-hunger advocates who work on the city, state, and national levels.

The Growth of EFPs

Stagnating wages, insecure work, and threadbare social protections have become prevalent in many industrialized nations in the late twentieth century, leading to increasing economic uncertainty (Allison 2012; Kalleberg 2011; Molé 2010; Standing 2011). Fabiola was intimately aware of these changes in her own life. She was born and raised in North Brooklyn, a working-class, Puerto Rican neighborhood dominated by factories and rundown tenement housing in the post-World War II period. Married at eighteen, she moved from her parents’

house to her husband's in 1985. After a year, she gave birth to her eldest child, a daughter who was born with a severe physical disability. Fabiola had done small jobs off the books and seasonal work at local factories, but never had much steady employment. A few years after the birth of her daughter, she and her husband divorced. She applied for welfare, which at the time did not require mothers of young children to perform work assignments in order to qualify for benefits. Six years later, she had another child. She spent their childhoods caring for them, volunteering in their schools, and taking her daughter to her numerous doctor and physical therapy appointments.

Fabiola was always poor, but between welfare, a subsidized apartment in public housing, and odd jobs, she was able to keep a roof over her family and food on the table. She and I often talked about changes in the neighborhood and the challenges of raising a family as we worked side by side in the pantry. She reflected, "It was much easier to survive and take care of your family back then than it is now. These days it's nearly impossible."

As Fabiola's children grew, both the neighborhood and the city in which they lived changed dramatically. Local factories closed and many were renovated into expensive housing as gentrification took hold in the neighborhood. In the 1990s Mayor Rudolph Giuliani instituted some of the most punitive welfare reforms in the country, drastically reducing the welfare rolls in New York City and making it increasingly difficult for poor families to access assistance. As life became more difficult for people like Fabiola and her family, emergency food programs began to proliferate widely. In North Brooklyn there was one small program in the area in 1980. Today there are twelve, with several of these serving well over a thousand people a month. In New York City, the Food and Hunger Hotline identified thirty emergency food providers in 1979. By 1987, that number had grown to 487 and by 1991 the tally was 730 (Poppendieck 1998: 8). Today the Food Bank of New York City, which distributes food to local emergency food providers, claims to serve over a thousand of these institutions; the New York Coalition Against Hunger, an umbrella advocacy organization, puts the number at over eleven hundred.² These programs are typically started by and housed in faith-based institutions, senior centers, grassroots community organizations, and increasingly, on college campuses.

Nationally, Feeding America estimates that 46.5 million individuals utilized an emergency food provider (EFP) in 2012, a substantial increase over the 37 million estimated to have used one in 2009 (Malbi et al. 2010; Wienfield et al. 2014).³ The vast majority of people who access emergency food today rely on it as a regular source of sustenance and, for some households,

EFPs supply the bulk of the food consumed (Carney 2015; Mares 2013; Wienfield et al. 2014). At the North Brooklyn food pantry, like many EFPs nationally, the vast majority of clients are weekly or monthly customers, depending on how often they are allowed to come and get food (Wienfield et al. 2014). This represents a dramatic change in poor New Yorkers' survival strategies. As Fabiola put it, "I was born and raised in this area and I never knew anything about pantries. I went for myself maybe once or twice years ago with a friend of mine, but I never had the necessity to consistently go."

The expansion of EFPs was not simply a response to growing need in the face of welfare retrenchment and unemployment caused by deindustrialization. It was spurred on by federal funding. While food pantries and soup kitchens existed before 1980, they were typically small and received no regular or reliable state funds. In 1983, Congress passed legislation establishing the Temporary Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP). TEFAP provided funds for the distribution of surplus commodities and, importantly, to reimburse local and private agencies for some administrative costs (Fitchen 1988; Poppendieck 1998). Initially designed as a temporary measure, TEFAP was quickly and continually renewed. In 1990 Congress finally dropped the word "temporary" and renamed the program *The* Emergency Food Assistance Program. This regular infusion of surplus commodities and administrative funding drew ever-growing numbers of "community organizations into the food distribution process, and communities without food banks were given a new incentive to develop them" (Poppendieck 1998: 103). It was a very effective incentive.

The explosive growth in the number of EFPs and the number of people served represents what Andrea Muehlebach (2012: 23) has called "the opulence of virtue" which "flourishes in proportion to marketization." The initial growth in EFPs emerged as a direct response to cutbacks in federal entitlements (Dehavenon 1995; Poppendieck 1998). EFPs have become an essential (and expanding) component of the U.S. welfare state, albeit one that obscures state involvement, because these institutions can "do more with less." In response to the increasingly grim economic outlook for the poor and working people since the early 1980s, federal TEFAP funding has unleashed an unprecedented outpouring of care in the form of grocery bags and hot meals and has conjured up an unprecedented volunteer labor force to carry out this work.

The growth and institutionalization of EFPs is part of a significant push toward contracting out social services from direct state provision to nonprofit service agencies, a process that began in the 1960s in the United States and more recently in Europe (Crenson and Ginsberg 2002; Muehlebach 2011;

Ranci 2001). Emergency food providers, like other nonprofits that are contracted to provide social services, “expand the welfare state without expanding the state itself” (Crenson and Ginsberg 2002: 225). As Feeding America boasts, “food banks combine TEFAP commodities and storage and distribution funding with private donations of food and funds, infrastructure, and manpower to leverage the program far beyond its budgeted amount. In this way, TEFAP and the emergency food system exemplify an optimum model of public-private partnership.” A central component of this optimum model, in contrast to traditional state-run welfare programs, is mobilizing an enormous volunteer labor force that can carry out this work for little or no compensation.

Emergency food providers rely heavily on volunteer labor to distribute these resources. Sixty-eight percent of food pantries and 42 percent of soup kitchens in Feeding America’s national network report relying entirely on volunteers and have no paid staff. Approximately two million Feeding America network volunteers provided more than 8.4 million hours of service each month in 2012. If these volunteers were paid at the prevailing federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, their work would cost more than \$60 million in additional monthly wages (Malbi et al. 2010). When I began volunteering at the North Brooklyn food pantry, unpaid volunteers carried out almost all of the day-to-day operations. The church diocese paid Pastor Jan, the pastor at the church where the program was housed, and she used some of her time to order food and oversee the food deliveries each week. But no one was paid directly for their work with the hunger programs.

Pantries vary widely in the number of paid staff they employ; the larger the pantry, the more likely they are to have paid employees. These staff members can be paid from a range of sources, including church funding, private donations, grants, and state funding. At least two of the pantries in North Brooklyn received funding from their local City Council member to pay for a regular staff member and some overhead costs. But even the largest and best-staffed pantries still rely heavily on volunteers. By involving large numbers of community members in these local projects to fight hunger, EFPs “expand the limits and maximize the powers of city government by making the people self-governing” (Cruikshank 1999: 9). State funding streams summon volunteers and voluntary efforts into being. Although EFPs appear to come from the heart and not from a mandate, the reality is that most of these institutions could not function without government funding. In New York, federal TEFAP money is supplemented by HPNAP (a state program) and EFAP (local city funding). However, unlike previous expansions of the welfare state, the jobs produced

by this expansion of resources are largely unpaid, unregulated, and unrecognized as employment at all.

Labor or Love?

Previous expansions of welfare benefits have made the state a target of collective political action for poor people demanding access to more resources (Kornbluh 2007; Nadasen 2004; Piven and Cloward 1979; West 1981). Expansions of the welfare state through contracting out to nonprofit organizations make these kinds of collective political actions less likely, since the public interface of emergency food providers is not a street-level government bureaucrat whose job depends, at least to some degree, on serving clients, but a volunteer. As Andrea Muehlebach (2011: 8) argues, “compassionate labor operates not as a mitigating force against, but as a vehicle for the production and maintenance of a new exclusionary order.” EFPs are not organized around a right to adequate food, but on the institutionalization of sympathy—the sympathetic response to need. These shoestring operations do the best they can with what they have, but they often run out of food and have to turn people away (Koible and Stampas 2016). Pantry staff and volunteers care deeply about hunger, but EFPs are organized in ways that ensure these institutions cannot fully meet the needs of the people who rely on them. Volunteers play a crucial role in deflecting the demands of clients who need more than EFPs can provide. In the public imagination, volunteers are moved to help out of a sense of compassion, rather than by a paycheck. The proper response is gratitude—embodied in food pantry clients’ endless repetition that the volunteers who hand out food “don’t need to be doing this.”

However, many volunteers do, in fact, need to be doing this work in order to make ends meet in their own households. The core volunteers who showed up every week and did the bulk of the work at the North Brooklyn pantry were generally older, unemployed or marginally employed women and a few men. These core volunteers depended heavily on what they could take home with them from the pantry. With almost no income, Fabiola needed the food she took home with her every week. Like many of the other volunteers, coming in to pack bags and hand out groceries also meant she could pick and choose what she needed for her own kitchen. Though this was not her plan, volunteering at the pantry had become Fabiola’s lifeline. “I never thought a year or two years later that this is where I would be. My pay comes in my food and I really am okay.” Fabiola’s dedication, coming in every week, was a response to deep and devastating food insecurity. She



FIGURE 2: *Volunteers do the labor of lifting, sorting, and moving boxes of donated food.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER TRONTZ © 2016

quite literally worked for food, and missing “work” for a week would mean not eating.

There was a tacit understanding at the pantry that the people helping out sometimes took a little extra food for themselves. The five core pantry volunteers who came each week were the backbone of the operation. Angela was a single, middle-aged Puerto Rican woman who had lived in the neighborhood her whole life. She and her adopted daughter lived off of a small disability allowance, food stamps, and a stipend she received as a foster parent. She never missed a week at the

pantry and was reprimanded several times for taking too much food home with her at the end of the day. Katherine, Ana, and Grace were all retirees who received social security and stocked their kitchens with what they could take home from the pantry. And then there was Fabiola, who had virtually no income at all. She was too young for social security and, with little formal work experience, it was hard for her to find employment. She did informal work as a party planner, organizing salsa nights and other events, but she earned very little from these efforts.

Conflicts often erupted among the volunteers over who could take what from the pantry. The lines between compensating oneself, taking too much, and stealing were very blurry and constantly policed by the volunteers. Fabiola explained that taking food was okay because “that’s all we get, what we take.” But all of the volunteers worried about people overdoing it and calling the practice to the attention of either the pastors or other pantry clients, who, they feared, might report the pantry to city authorities. For their part, the pastors were aware that the most dedicated volunteers relied heavily on food from the pantry and that their need ensured that the pantry had a regular, reliable labor force each week. However, explicitly acknowledging this arrangement was impossible. Nonprofit organizations have to comply with wage and hour laws, like any other employer. Fabiola’s view of herself as a quasi-employee whose “pay comes in food” was in direct contradiction to the legal definition of a volunteer who performs services for a nonprofit entity without compensation. For Fabiola and the other volunteers, working at the North Brooklyn food pantry was an important part-time gig in an economy where informal, unregulated labor has become widespread (Sassen 1994). Part of the job was maintaining the illusion that these women were truly volunteers, acting selflessly, while hiding or ignoring the degree to which they depended on this work to fulfill their material needs.

It was common to meet retired men and women living on fixed incomes or people who were unemployed volunteering at pantries. Javier, the unpaid director of another small pantry in the area, described how he was able to staff his organization:

I can’t give stipends or a tip to the person downstairs who is giving the food. He was two years on unemployment, so he was able, for the time he was on unemployment, to help me. There’s another lady doing the same thing now. But what is going to happen when the unemployment is over? I don’t know. And then each year it’s a little less support from public funding, less support from church funding.

For all of these men and women, their participation as volunteers was structured by their relationships to the labor market and to various social welfare programs. When they lose jobs, or Social Security does not pay enough for rent and groceries, soup kitchens and food pantries provide access to needed resources.

Volunteers also gain access to valuable forms of social standing. The five women at the North Brooklyn food pantry all had deep ties to the neighborhood. As volunteers they played important roles in their social networks, distributing extra food to family and friends. The first few weeks that I volunteered I was oblivious to these exchanges. I would often pick up bags of frozen chicken or extra milk and ask why they were tucked under a pew in the sanctuary of the church, only

to be told by one of the other volunteers that they were for a cousin or a friend who was coming by later. Other pantry clients worked to establish relationships with volunteers by offering gifts or small tokens of appreciation. Rarely a week went by without someone bringing a homemade dessert or cups of coffee for the volunteers in an attempt to curry favor with the women handing out the food.

Although the need that motivates many volunteers to come to the pantry each week is often no different than the need that brings clients, the difference between giving and receiving is no small matter. Stacey McCarthy, who helps oversee HPNAP grants for several hundred pantries in New York City, observed, “I’ve seen it at every pantry. There’s a contentious relationship. It’s like the lucky few who are giving it out. And then you get the lucky volunteers who may have been people pulled off the line to help out.” Becoming a volunteer, as opposed to a client, means that you have access to more food not only for yourself, but to distribute among family and friends. This dichotomy, between those “on the line” and the lucky few who are allowed to help, reflects the broader dichotomy of emergency food. Volunteers are transformed from objects of pity into people who can pity. To go back on the line after being inside is unthinkable. It is a demotion because volunteers lose the ability to distribute resources in ways that directly contribute to economic survival. Helping family and friends was a way to strengthen reciprocal relationships that have long sustained poor households and communities (Caldwell 2004; Stack 1997). Emergency food has become a competitive survival niche for the very poor, particularly those few who are invited in “off the line” to become volunteers.

But there were limits to volunteers’ informal compensation. When it became egregious or impossible to ignore, the pastors had to enforce the rule that no one was supposed to take more than what the clients on the line received, no matter how dedicated the volunteer in question was. Angela was by far the most aggressive at taking food. She often filled her shopping cart to the brim for her own kitchen and loaded her close family members with extra bags of groceries when they came to the pantry. After several warnings, Angela was finally asked to leave. Her dismissal rattled the remaining volunteers. Their positions as valued volunteers no longer felt secure. There was a sense that everyone needed to be more cautious and restrained in taking food and giving preference to others.

Volunteer Labor and Work First Welfare

Most volunteers relied on several resources, including social security, food stamps, informal work, and help from family and friends in addition to what they took from the food pantry.

Fabiola had talked to me for months about applying for food stamps, weighing the pros and cons and worrying about whether it would cause problems with her housing or her healthcare. Part of my research was to set up a food stamp outreach program for the North Brooklyn food pantry. I became a resource to many of the volunteers and clients as they applied, recertified, and handled disputes with the food stamp office. After years in the welfare system, Fabiola was hesitant to apply. In her assessment, getting food from the pantry was far more stable and less risky than engaging with a welfare system designed to enforce labor market participation and to punish unemployment (Collins and Mayer 2010; Dickinson 2016; Peck 2001). She feared the stringent work requirements associated with welfare. As she put it, “the system has changed so much. I could go back to welfare right now, but if they’re going to put me to work in a place and cleaning up trucks, no, I’m sorry. It’s not that I’m better than that, it’s just that I can do more.” I tried to assure her that food stamps were different, but she wasn’t convinced.

Sometimes you’re like, is it worth it? When you’re in that peaceful place, you don’t wanna disrupt it. Because all it takes is one little thing. And that could just escalate into I don’t know what. I guess that would be my biggest fear. I don’t wanna mess up what I have, which is not much. But my home means everything to me. So as long as I can pay my rent and my light—I’m not talking about buying food or buying clothes or going anywhere. My rent and my light is important. The rest will come.

Sensing that her position at the pantry might not be entirely secure after Angela was asked to leave, however, she changed her mind. After several years of not being able to go to the grocery store to purchase food, she told me, “I might as well do the food stamps. I want to be able to go to the supermarket and buy something.” We submitted her application and several weeks later she was approved. She described going to the grocery store for the first time with her food stamp card and picking out some meat. When she took it up to the cash register her eyes welled up with tears. The cashier asked her if she was okay. Fabiola, pretending to wipe tears away as she told me the story, said she replied, “I’m just so happy.”

A month or so later, Fabiola pulled me aside with a worried look as soon as I arrived at the pantry. She handed me a letter from the welfare office, requiring her to come in for a work assessment. She was beside herself. “This is why I didn’t want to do this. I’m not gonna clean up the park,” she whispered so that the other volunteers could not hear. Work requirements for food stamps were passed as part of the 1996 welfare reform bill. Working-aged adults who are not disabled or caring for a young child are required to work twenty hours a week or to perform a workfare assignment in exchange for their food stamp benefits. At the onset of the recession in 2008, the

USDA granted a blanket waiver to these work requirements because unemployment was so high nationally. However, Mayor Bloomberg refused the waiver, making New York City one of the only places in the United States where poor people were made to work for food stamps at the height of the unemployment crisis. This rule had been enforced sporadically in New York City. I knew Fabiola was taking a risk in applying, but I was still surprised when I saw the letter. Unbeknownst to me, New York City’s welfare offices had begun enforcing this rule more stringently just a few months before Fabiola had applied for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).⁴

In New York City, unemployed food stamp applicants were being assigned to the Work Experience Program (WEP). Instituted under the Giuliani Administration, WEP is a notoriously punitive and stigmatizing workfare program (Krinsky 2007). Welfare applicants are typically assigned to clean up the parks, subways, or streets. Fabiola saw engaging with the welfare system, whether for food stamps or for cash assistance, as a threat to her incredibly meager, but stable situation. She was willing to suffer serious hardships, including having almost no income and struggling with severe food insecurity, in order to avoid what she saw as a destabilizing and demeaning system of work requirements. At the same time, being able to go to the store and choose her own food literally brought tears to her eyes after two years of eating whatever the food pantry had to offer.

Fabiola’s worry was palpable and I felt a sense of responsibility for convincing her to apply for SNAP. We spent the afternoon debating how to handle the situation. Pastor Jan suggested we write a letter to the welfare office explaining that Fabiola was a volunteer and that her work at the pantry ought to count as her work assignment. As Jan noted, “people who have to do WEP assignments are one of our most reliable forms of labor around here.” While volunteers were admonished for treating volunteering as a job and compensating themselves with food, this same labor was treated as an appropriate “work activity” when the welfare office assigned welfare applicants to these tasks. Poor people who apply for cash assistance and are subject to work requirements are frequently assigned to do voluntary service at a nonprofit like a food pantry.⁵ Fabiola was skeptical about this plan. After years of negotiating the system, she was unconvinced that the welfare office would let her choose her own work assignment. Ultimately Fabiola, who had serious back problems, was able to submit a letter from her doctor saying she was not fit for employment and was given an exemption from the work requirements. This exemption had an enormous impact on her ability to feed herself, significantly alleviating her experience of hunger and

food insecurity. It also allowed her to maintain control over her own labor as a volunteer.

Volunteer Labor and Social Inequality

Fabiola's experience illuminates certain aspects about the kinds of labor regimes that are emerging out of the growth of EFPs. Poor women like Fabiola are caught up in the ironies of the current economy. There is a shortage of work for all the people who want it and work conditions have deteriorated steadily for low-skill workers like Fabiola (Kalleberg 2011). And yet the work-first welfare system is designed to punish those who cannot secure employment by subjecting them to stigmatized, unpaid workfare programs (Collins 2008; Dickinson 2016; Peck 2001). At the same time, the growth of the voluntary efforts to feed the poor gave Fabiola the opportunity to create a job for herself, one where she could, like many informally employed workers, "determine the schedule, pace, and intensity" of her work (Millar 2008: 48). Fabiola was engaged in what James Ferguson terms "a kind of improvisation under conditions of adversity" that characterizes the precarious livelihoods of the very poor (Ferguson 2015: 94). But, like so many informally employed workers, she could not represent this labor as a job to welfare officials in a way that would exempt her from work requirements, much like poor women can no longer represent the care of their own children as socially valued work.

Susan Hyatt (2001: 288) argues that "neoliberal governance masks the withdrawal of public resources from all communities by making volunteerism an obligation of citizenship for the working and middle classes, while simultaneously diminishing the significance of volunteerism in poor communities toward the end of creating an extremely low-paid workforce." However, as I have shown, contemporary urban governance is characterized by more than just the *withdrawal* of public resources. New kinds of resources and funding produce novel institutions, such as food banks, food pantries, and soup kitchens. Hyatt's argument that volunteerism masks the effects of austerity cannot properly explain the massive growth of EFPs in the last three decades, particularly since state funding is what brought these institutions into being. In the name of efficiency, new forms of public resources come into being that are socially valued because they can "do more with less" and, in the case of EFPs, do so by mobilizing hungry people to do the work of distributing these resources. This arrangement saves the state substantial funds in actually paying people to do this work. Further, it creates value out of both surplus food and surplus labor in the form of good feeling and new forms of public recognition for poor women like Fabiola.


At the same time, food pantries are, quite literally, the embodiment of a failed welfare apparatus and a failed labor market to provide sufficient resources to poor people living in New York. They occupy the negative space of welfare and work—the spaces of human need that are no longer filled by these regulatory institutions. Volunteers, often desperately poor themselves, are the workforce maintaining an enormous network of EFPs that does more than just distribute meals and groceries for the poor. They produce good feeling. In an era when providing for the poor is no longer understood as a collective social responsibility, but a voluntary choice, "giving back" by volunteering in one's own community becomes a mode of establishing citizenship and belonging. But as Fabiola's experience shows, these new forms of recognition are tenuous at best. Where middle-class volunteers really do act freely, poor New Yorkers need to do this work in order to access resources for themselves and their families. The poorest and most marginalized are often assigned to volunteer as a condition of receiving welfare benefits, often in places they do not choose and with which they do not have personal connections. These "volunteers" lose even the modest benefits of unpaid volunteer work, including determining one's own work schedule and choosing where to volunteer.

This becomes a public expression of who has the right to care for their communities. Struggles over who can volunteer to feed the poor and on what terms reflect the raced and classed struggles of women of color and poor women who have long fought for the right to care for their own children (Colen 1995; Mullings 1995, 1997). Women like Fabiola have long been engaged in unpaid caring labor. But, like the private care of children and families, poor women's public contributions to their communities are carefully regulated and controlled. Poor women like Fabiola are celebrated as volunteers only so long as they can maintain the illusion that they are giving freely, from the heart. Once they ask for something in return—food assistance in Fabiola's case—their need erases their service.

Because Fabiola could not claim an identity as a worker—the identity she was expected to assume as a poor, single woman—both her service and her need were subject to intense scrutiny by the welfare office. She became a burden to the state despite her volunteerism when she applied for food stamps. In this way, the growth of EFPs brings into being new kinds of inequalities. For Fabiola, her chosen role as a volunteer was part of the "scramble for recognition" where "citizens wrangle over the right to work" (Muehlebach 2012: 227), even when this work is unpaid. Food programs, where volunteers pay themselves by choosing their own food, are a socially valued avenue for poor women to access needed household resources. However, the kind of public, caring labor carried

out by volunteers is shot through with new kinds of inequalities, including who is able to take on these socially valued labors and under what conditions. For the poor and unemployed, engaging with the welfare system can transform one's service into an obligation. For poor women like Fabiola who are "there because they need," expressing love and care through community service is complicated by their own hunger and poverty.

What Fabiola's experience begins to illuminate are the myriad ways that the growth of pantries and the ways these resources are used by community members are both intricately tied to the labor market and to welfare policy. Emergency food providers, structured by state funding, but not identifiable as state institutions, are inextricably linked to both the market and the state. People come to rely on them to varying degrees that are dependent on their integration into the labor market and/or the safety net.

The remarkable growth in these institutions—from thirty in 1980 to over a thousand today in New York City—has created an institutionalized form of crisis management. There is a self-perpetuating cycle at the heart of funding for emergency food providers—the intensification of poverty creates more need, which creates more demand. Emergency food providers document this increasing demand and lobby for more funding. As the need expands, food banks get more efficient at dealing with it. In doing so, they employ more volunteers, often hungry people themselves who may choose or may be obligated by the welfare office to do this work. This cycle, however, does not address the root causes of hunger. In the process, new consumption patterns and new forms of labor emerge. There is a political economy of virtue that poor people, donors, and nonprofits all depend on that is composed of growing need and measurable response and that produces a tremendous amount of free labor to fulfill growing and urgent social needs. But the degree to which this labor is freely given is shaped by raced, classed, and gendered exclusions built into the waged labor market and the welfare systems. 

Acknowledgments

I want to thank all the volunteers at the food pantry who so generously shared their time, stories, and friendship with me.

NOTES

1. All names have been changed, including the name of the food pantry where this research was carried out, to protect the privacy of my research participants.
2. Janet Fitchen's findings from the early 1980s confirm this pattern nationally.

3. It is difficult to estimate the number of people who access emergency food because EFPs are not required to keep detailed records. Feeding America, which is an umbrella organization that represents food banks nationally, estimates these numbers by surveying their members. Though exact numbers are difficult to produce, the sheer number of providers and the increased numbers of clients they uniformly report confirm a marked increase in demand.
4. Since 2014, several other states with Republican governors have voluntarily foregone these waivers, and since 2016, falling unemployment rates across the country have meant these work requirements are being enforced more broadly.
5. It is difficult to know exactly how many people are given WEP assignments in nonprofit organizations. HRA keeps statistics on the number of WEP workers in city agencies. In September 2013 there were 10,549 participants assigned to WEP according to the Mayor's Management Report. Of these 5,178 were assigned to a city agency. The other 5,000 were "housed in the MTA and non-profit organizations." Community Voices Heard, a welfare rights organization, estimates that there are at least 1,000 individuals assigned to nonprofits at any given time. But, as with the number of WEP workers in particular city agencies, these numbers most likely fluctuate over time.

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