Introduction

Fast-Food Kids

In early fall of 2008, just as the school year has begun, I sit on a sunny Sunday afternoon at Baskin-Robbins, one of the many commercial food spots I have visited over the last several years, trying to understand how food figures in young people's daily lives. I watch as three high school girls walk to the shop's counter. Each is in athletic sweats sporting their high school logo, wearing traces of eyeliner and their long hair in that disheveled top bun I have come to associate with suburban girls who are into sports. One of the girls softly sings a current pop song. She has a beautiful voice and she sings to herself, playing with the melody, while the other two exchange small talk with giggles interspersed. They order a large sundae with three scoops, all chocolate, dripping with caramel and topped with whipped cream, to be shared among them, and I watch as a young woman appearing to be in her late teens prepares the sundae behind the counter. She is one of the few teen workers I have seen stand behind any fast-food counter in the five years I spent collecting data for this project. Most of the commercial fast-food workers at Panera, Chipotle, Baja Fresh, McDonald's, or Taco Bell in this area are immigrant adults, brown and accented, though many are in their early twenties.[1] (I learned later that this young worker's parents, immigrants from Korea, own the franchise, where the whole family works.)

One of the girls hands a carefully folded ten dollar bill to the girl behind the counter, who smiles as she returns her change and hands over the sundae, which is received with a polite "thanks," and the three girls find a seat at a small table to share the large ice cream sundae. All three sit lounge style, one girl with bent knee cradled against the edge of the table, another slouched in her seat with her legs extending forward toward the floor, her sloping back resting against her chair. Their talk is full of laughter, with giggles interjected between words as each

clamors to speak over the other in fits and starts, all the while eating this single sundae. I hear one girl say, "I'm so full, so full!" and another chimes in, "Oh my god, look at my stomach!" A moment later the same round of comments is offered again —"I'm so full"; "Seriously, look at my stomach, it's bigger"—laughter bursting from the group, spilling over to where I sit two tables away. They seem simultaneously aware of and indifferent to the activity of others around them. Just then, one of the girls lets out a resounding burp. She giggles. Our eyes meet as she and I both glance in each other's direction. She offers, "Sorry," and I respond with a slight smile, "Quite alright." Our eyes break away and she returns to her friends as though I am no longer there and remarks to them that people think she is a trucker. They laugh at the apparent contradiction since she looks nothing like a typical trucker, and their talk resumes about the world of school, parents, friendship drama, and how some guy commented to some girl that she looked good in the jeans she was wearing. It is hard to miss the obvious pleasure these girls experience, reveling in this moment of what sociologist Randall Collins would likely characterize as "emotional entrainment," a cosmic bubbling up of girl energy as they play with gender boundaries and the feminine scripts that guide girls to adulthood, but also rein them in.[2] Theirs is a public act performed for me, for each other, and for anyone else who may care to take notice. And it serves multiple ends all in one fell swoop. Their performance helps to constitute them as a friendship group; it transforms this ordinary encounter into play; and it enables them to lay claim to this public space.[3]

And as tasty as that sundae may be, the ice cream's value, shared among them, is as a resource used for different conversational and social ends. This sundae's meaning lies in the extent to which it enables these girls to construct a social encounter and define the situation as a form of play that is central to the public display of youth culture and youth identity.[4] Anthropologist Mimi Nichter regards this type of talk as speech performance, which serves to provide freedom for girls, preempting scrutiny from other girls and serving to build rapport.[5]

Young people play with food all the time. They throw it—sometimes in an effort to thwart disclosure of an embarrassing tale told by a friend; they hold it over each other's heads as a kind of symbolic ransom or quid pro quo (You can have this piece of gum, if you help me with my

homework); and they render strange the conventions and norms that govern how we "decipher a meal," to borrow a phrase from the anthropologist Mary Douglas. They reverse the order of foods—ice cream and cookies first, sandwich second. They consume obscene quantities in short order during food contests (sixty-four ounces of Yoo-hoo in sixty seconds, thirty White Castle burgers in a single sitting), which are popular among teenage boys.[6] These contests are then often posted to YouTube for the world to witness. Young people push the envelope with and through food and also play with food simply to pass the time. They actively invert accepted food categories and the appropriate time of day to eat them—spaghetti, moo shu pork, or pizza for breakfast— and proudly detail to friends their various food transgressions. What we eat and when we eat it are bounded by social rules that reflect our collective efforts to create and maintain a semblance of order out of the slices of activity that comprise our everyday worlds.[7] While very young children are learning and interpreting these social rules, older youth test them. Mary Douglas makes the point that these cultural categories are bound to and reflective of a moral ordering of objects that preserves hierarchical arrangements in groups and solidifies group membership and boundaries. Indeed, most of these categories find their origins in adult worlds, rising usually from the middle class. Thus, to play with these categories is to engage with an entire complex of social meanings that distinguish childhood from adulthood. Food is often about play for young people, used for strategic ends in a complex peer system of exchange and gift giving. Food is a social object through which social identities are conceived, tried on, and solidified (think about vegans) and with which youth display, sometimes in dramatic fashion, claims of belonging to age-based groups as well as demonstrate their proficiency in deciphering the cultural signs that mark the distance between youth and adult worlds. Food is thus a key cultural object in youth worlds, in large part because of the social ends food fulfills as gift, identity marker, and object of play.

Yet as much as food provides endless opportunity for play for youth, food is also bundled up with a broader set of economic and social relations that structure the everyday landscape of modern life, often providing context for the specific form play takes. Most food consumed today in what we now call the Global North is bought, despite a small

but growing interest in homesteading, the revival of canning, and urban small-plot farming. Money is exchanged and food has been prepared and processed outside the home as part of what Anthony Winson refers to as "the industrial diet," comprised of foods that are mass produced by a small number of food-industry players into edible commodities that are highly processed, aggressively marketed, and nutritionally limited, especially when compared with whole foods. Contradictory forces of change at large-scale levels have reorganized food and its production, distribution, and consumption in profound ways in the last century.[8] While helping to reduce food shortages in the Western world, for instance, the rise of industrial agriculture has failed to improve nutritional health and food security and instead has spurred a new set of health risks with substantial global reach. The dynamics of food scarcity and food abundance, under-nutrition and over-nutrition, that mark today's food landscape express deepening economic inequalities locally and globally and are grafted along complex gender, national, class, ethno-racial, and spatial lines.[9] The dominance of industrial agriculture has also given rise to a global food movement calling for wholesale change to what many regard as a fundamentally broken and unsustainable food system, bad for our health and the environment. This movement for food reform is at once a movement to create equal food access for all and reduce food insecurity and at the same time a movement to reclaim the symbolic and cultural import of food, and thus it is motivated by moral considerations alongside economic ones.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas once described eating as "a field of action," a fitting characterization given the powerful symbolic resonance of food on the one hand, and its political-economic dimensions on the other.[10] Eating is both an economic and a cultural activity, part of a complex system of exchange in which food can be both commodity and gift, what the anthropologist Nicolas Thomas has called "entangled objects." In a strictly market-driven economic calculus, food is a commodity, not a gift. But of course, food does not simply have economic value. Other systems of value, what the anthropologist Fred Myers calls "regimes of value production," also organize the meaning of food, helping to explain why we eat some foods rather than others and how food fits into our social relations in a market-based economy.[11] As part of a gift economy, the exchange of food expresses and affirms group membership as well as

boundaries of exclusion, communicating meaning about reciprocity, social obligation, and care.[12] As the anthropologist Arun Appadurai argues in *The Social Life of Things*, "a commodity is a thoroughly socialized thing."[13] As part of a gift economy in a market-based society, food exists within multiple spheres of exchange.

Food dwells in the realm of symbolic meaning, representing social distinction and inequality on the one hand, and belonging, intimacy, and care on the other—that is, the core dimensions of our collective life. Food consumption is tied to distinct taste communities, with each having different value commitments.[14] Today, in the Global North, our food choices are as likely to be determined by our aesthetic and moral sensibilities as by individual preference. (Consider, for instance, how ethical consumption of such food items as fair-trade coffee and chocolate serves as a means to project a moral self.)[15] Our ethnic selves are realized through food preparation and food consumption; feminine identities materialize through the provisioning and serving of meals for others on the one hand and the denial of food for self on the other.[16] Bound by and filtered through gender, race, and other cultural schema, food is used to classify and determine group boundaries. Groups of all types are sorted through food.[17] Again and again, kids remind me of this fact. I remember one afternoon when I first began this project, sitting at a McDonald's observing a group of kids munching french fries and sipping on twenty-four-ounce sodas after school. A mixed-race group of boys and girls sat across from me at two adjoining tables. Amid chatter about food kids have at home, one white girl with two long braids stretching to the middle of her back announced, "I have Kool-Aid at my house," to which a black boy, also at the table, quickly declared with wry incredulity, "You're not black." The group collapsed in laughter. Here Kool-Aid, an artifact of consumer culture that reached its heyday in the 1970s, is imagined in terms of racial belonging and membership. This was neither the first nor the last time I heard comments of this type. Instead racial, class, and gender constructs were fundamental to youth's engagement with food.

This central tension between food as material object and food as symbol organizes the core set of concerns examined in this book. *Fast-Food Kids* is an ethnography about food in the lives of American youth and the places where they eat. I hope to show how the entanglements of

class, social context, and cultural meaning shape the ways youth relate to food as both symbol and material object, as both public and private good, while also accounting for the set of broader economic and political forces that have reshaped the current food landscape where young people eat. Looking at contemporary food practices—from family dinners with extended kin to solitary snacking in front of the screen, from take-home Chinese on Fridays to the drive-through for Taco Bell's breakfast burrito on Mondays, from school lunch to McDonald's fries after school—provides an opportunity to see the different types of relationships youth forge with food and food markets.

What Kids Eat and Why

In the last decade, the issue of what kids eat and who's feeding them has sparked an outpouring of public and policy discussion as increasing attention has been given to childhood obesity, a widespread phenomenon recognized by many from the world of public health as a global crisis in its own right.[18] The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation reports that obesity rates for children between the ages of six and eleven have quadrupled in the last half-century. Over twenty-three million children and teenagers are either obese or overweight.[19] The CDC (Centers for Disease Control) estimates that one in three American children is either overweight or obese—a number that is disproportionately higher for children living in concentrated poverty.[20] Though the CDC recently reported optimistically a small but significant downward trend in the prevalence of obesity among low-income, preschool-age children and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has reported modest decline across age groups in communities where comprehensive action to lower obesity rates among children has been taken, enduring inequalities in communities, schools, and homes have long structured young people's access to different types of food, shaping life chances, well-being, and a host of health outcomes.[21]

Young people as food consumers are now key figures in public health debates as schools and community health activists struggle to find creative ways to offset the tide of weight gain among our youngest children and, in some cases, work to create a platform to redress community-based social inequalities. Consider, for instance, First Lady Michelle

Obama's Let's Move campaign, spearheaded in 2008 to tackle childhood obesity, and federal and municipal policy reforms such as the 2010 D.C. Healthy Schools Act and the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010. Designed to promote improved health and well-being through diet, all of these programs have helped to usher in change in public schools, though their long-term impact remains unclear. As a nation weighs in on the meaning of youth's food consumption and crafts policy and practice to transform what young people eat in an effort to stave off a host of diet-related health risks, it is important that we understand the social meaning young people themselves assign to food, and the cultural systems of value that organize those meanings. A core aim for this project, then, is to bring the tools of cultural analysis to bear on a topic that has captivated interest on the policy and grassroots levels. Policy work and practical interventions to increase access to and consumption of healthy foods have not focused enough on the collective meaning formed around food nor the schemes of value that organize those meanings. For example, while food is part of a complex system of gift exchange through which group boundaries are formed among youth peer groups, little policy attention has been given to how this matters to young people's food choices. Without attention to these considerations, health policy promoting behavioral change runs the risk of having only limited impact.

How is meaning about food formed? Consumer markets play an undeniable role, shaping our food preferences significantly. The interviews I conducted with young folks testify to this fact. Their lives are immersed in this commercial realm. Young people eat a truly staggering number of meals out. Food is largely sorted in terms of commercial brand: Subway is regarded as healthy, Burger King, not healthy. I remember when I first began this project, my daughter, then seven, and I were watching TV and a Subway commercial came on clearly marketed to preteens called "The Power to Choose." The commercial begins with the voiceover of a well-known preteen actress: "Everything's decided for me: when to get up, what to wear, what to read, and of course, when to go to bed." As the commercial runs, we are presented with a series of images of the girl: struggling to get out of bed; her mother's reproach for her punk-inspired outfit; doing math homework in her bedroom. In the commercial's final scene the girl stands at the Subway counter poised to place her order as

she proudly declares, "But at Subway I have the power to choose and I eat it up." At the commercial's end, my daughter leapt from the floor declaring, "I want to go to Subway!" The content of the commercial rather than the food itself generated my daughter's enthusiasm. Indeed, marketers from food and beverage industries have been hugely successful in aligning consumption of an infinite number of processed foods—7-UP, Lucky Charms, Cheetos, Capri Sun (Respect the Pouch!), and Hot Pockets, to name but a few—with particular social meanings that resonate with young people: empowerment, freedom, irony, and irreverence.

While the appeal of eating junk food can certainly be explained by the fact that it is rich in salt, sugar, and fat, as well as heavily marketed, it is also a means to solidify young people's identity as being different from adults'—bound up in belonging and membership in age-based groups, which are socially, not biologically, structured. Eating bad food, on the fly, is what you do during final exams. As with an all-nighter, the story is recounted to friends as evidence of student suffering, sacrifice, and dedication to studies. In this sense, eating is performative, and food can be an important staging prop.

For young people, food's cultural logic is both idiosyncratic and patterned, shaped by institutional context and social milieu and informed by a range of identity considerations. Adolescent girls in the Victorian era, as historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg shows us, used food refusal as a means to exercise control and to manage sexual meaning tied to the female body and respectability.[22] For young women who are involved in the pro-ana movement, a contemporary and mostly online community forum in support of an anorexic lifestyle, the denial of food is a moral claim about the strength of resolve and the exercise of restraint—high-premium American cultural values.[23] For a number of the young women I interviewed, who carefully distanced themselves from the adolescent girl who worries obsessively over food and her weight because "that girl" is a poster child for low self-esteem and powerlessness, and is often thought to be too concerned about the evaluations of others, I often heard bold declarations: "I eat." "I like food." "Food is good." One girl, when I asked her what her favorite food was, laughed and replied, "Food is my favorite." While I heard very few young women explicitly talk about dieting, many expressed concern for healthy eating in a way that suggests that health talk is often a foil obscuring what is really a set

of concerns with diet and body image for girls.[24] Kristen, who recently swore off Chipotle, explains her rationale: "I feel like for health reasons, just like not health, I'm trying to get in shape. I don't know, just like appearance." "How many calories, how much fat is in that?" as one high school girl explained. "I get grossed out just thinking about it, especially from all those health projects, oh my god! I always think about health." Health discourse, in this sense, is a way for girls to talk about traditional feminine concerns with calories and fat without running the risk of being characterized as the type of girl who is overly concerned with such trifling matters as caring too much about what you look like or what others think. Their words speak to the extent to which our growing preoccupation with health can serve to discipline and constrain the self, perhaps especially for women and girls. I also spoke with many girls who refused to be concerned with health, proudly recalling their unhealthy food habits, and often suspected that they were actually rejecting the conventional feminine concerns about the body. In this way, girls' engagement with food is also an engagement with gender.[25]

At the same time, food is often an afterthought; many young people, in part because of their age, really did not care that much about food and preferred to save their money for more coveted items. As one young woman explained, "I try not to spend money on food if I don't have to. I'd rather spend money on clothes." For many, balancing work, school, and a range of extracurricular activities, eating something other than fast food requires too much of their time, which is often in short supply. In talking about cooking at home, I often heard remarks like, "I don't have time," "I'm pretty cheap," "I hate spending money on groceries." As one college student explained, cooking "takes too long. . . . It's not like I don't enjoy cooking. It's just not convenient." College students especially placed an enormous premium on ease and were more likely to report having a bad diet than high school students in this study. As one college sophomore explained, "I would just get a crap ton of junk food." "Junk food" was often collapsed with "typical college stuff" and thus is conceived of as part and parcel of a particular stage in life. Most young people I spoke to did anticipate an eventual shift where cooking at home would occupy more of their time as they transitioned fully into adulthood—though one does wonder if that expectation will be realized, given the demands of work they are likely to confront as they transition to adulthood.[26]

To be sure, young people's relationships to food are complex. This is the case because a host of social forces shape these relations. Yet, the way youth food consumption is differently structured along regional, ethno-racial, class, and gender lines, the systems of value through which meaning is created, and the way youth food consumption is mediated by larger social practices and processes extending beyond immediate local settings are understudied. This becomes most evident when one compares the dearth of research on *youth* food consumption to an otherwise robust field of food scholarship encompassing studies in the political economy of food and the way food meaning and practice is structured along race-ethnic, national, gender, and class lines in adult society.[27] *Fast-Food Kids* utilizes a range of qualitative research strategies, including participant observation in school cafeterias and fast-food settings, in-depth and focus-group interviews with high school and college-age youth, written narratives about family and food by young people, and analysis of contemporary media and food policy documents, to map the contemporary food landscape as it is lived by young people. I make use of the literatures focused on the political economy of food, the social organization of food consumption, and the social relationship of food to the body and modern subjectivity, all belonging to the emerging field of food and critical nutrition studies, while also drawing upon the conceptual tools of cultural sociology and critical youth studies.[28]

The Moral Weight of Food: Health Food vs. Junk Food

Youth food consumption (of the fast, cheap, and processed variety), whether occurring at home, in school, or at a McDonald's after school, increasingly occupies a morally charged sphere of meaning. Cultural brokers, from parents and advocates for junk-food-free schools to members of food-justice movements, public health researchers and the antihunger lobby, all have much at stake here. From anorexia to obesity, seemingly opposite poles, the youthful body has emerged as a highly contested site upon which cultural categories and moral meanings about national well-being, public and corporate interests, health and risk, and changes to the social organization of everyday life in late modernity are given expression. In market and health policy discourse as well as our everyday talk, youth as a group and childhood as an identity category

are symbolized through food choice and consumption.[29] One only has to think for a moment about the classification scheme of "good food" and "bad food," moral categories that align in such a way that kids' food is almost always regarded as "bad" food. The endless iterations of terms like "typical kid fare" and "kid-friendly food" and the constant collapsing of kids' food with junk food has become self-referential—assuming a sort of truth of their own. The trope of the veracious junk-food-consuming teenager (usually male) is a familiar one in popular culture and in debates surrounding the place of food in young people's lives. I admit I was sometimes confounded by the curious food choices of young people (young men especially). I can recall one young man in his first year of community college explaining that the day before he had had six Red Bulls (a high-caffeine energy drink) and a TV dinner for breakfast, followed by half of a banana cream pie his dad had made, having forsaken lunch altogether. Yet, the easy conflation of "kids' food" and "junk food" serves to obscure the range of social forces that shape the contemporary food landscape where young people eat, while also limiting the identity-making possibilities for young people of their food consumption. Young people are often straitjacketed by and tethered to a framework that presumes that biology determines adolescent desires and behavior. Biology is often a prevailing frame in the way we talk about young people and food. So taken for granted, it emerged again and again in interviews, suggesting its influence over the way young people understand their own food practices. As one boy explained, "So, you know, three teenage boys in the house. I mean we'd go through three to four gallons of milk a week. We would just demolish food." I sometimes overheard boys complain about portion size at the school lunch line: "That's it? I'm gonna starve." Though I do not want to minimize the often significant physiological changes and growth in play during adolescence, I do want to caution against a biological criterion as explanatory basis. We need to be careful not to presume that food choice is driven by the all-too-familiar naturalizing refrain "biology is destiny" when thinking through adolescent food consumption. Young people's experiences with food are profoundly social in nature. Rather than thinking about youth consumption as a set of discrete behaviors expressing a biologically rooted developmental trajectory, *Fast-Food Kids* examines youth food consumption as a realm of social meaning,

a symbolic sphere through which identities and a complex of social relations materialize, and through which conceptions of childhood are contested, played with, and worked through—by both youth and adults.

Cultural ideas about the meaning of childhood as being distinct from that of adulthood are manifest in the way food is sorted. Take, for example, the fact that much was imputed by the media when President Obama's daughters first enrolled in the elite D.C. private school Sidwell Friends because of the school's lunch menu, which includes items such as fennel and arugula salad with parmesan, curried chicken salad, organic pear and gorgonzola salad, and grilled Portobello mushrooms. How's that for school lunch? New ideas about childhood butt up against old ideas as the status of the child is subject to a historical shift. The playful and mocking tone of media commentary on this story rested on the expectation that sophisticated tastes and food entitlements—that is, what is appropriate for adults and what is appropriate for children to consume—are sorted in terms of a value scale in which class and age are collapsed and used interchangeably. In terms of value schema, food and childhood belong to a sacred realm, each conjuring significant moral sentiment.[30] Yet their sacred value, or "sacralization," to borrow a term from the sociologist Viviana Zelizer, is cast in such a way as to exist in a chronic state of potential collapse as both teeter precariously above possible contamination and defilement by a profane world of corrupting commercial influence. In this sense, youth food consumption is a "morally mediated form of consumption" belonging to "a moral economy."[31]

Nowhere can we see the moral weight of food more clearly than as it has unfolded in recent years around the issue of childhood obesity, an enormously complex issue that reflects an obdurate reality, a measurable phenomenon, and ideological motivations. While childhood obesity is not the focus of this project, *Fast-Food Kids* does seek to complicate our discussions about youth and food and thus inform the way we collectively respond to calls to reduce childhood obesity, as it draws attention to the different levels of social organization that pattern where youth eat, what they eat, and what food has come to mean. *Fast-Food Kids* brackets, in the phenomenological sense, childhood obesity, in order to ward against its reification. Anti-obesity rhetoric, policy, and interventions are an important part of the backdrop of the contemporary food landscape.[32] As a discursive idea, "childhood obesity" circulates widely

today, galvanizing action at the individual and institutional level. Different stakeholders, as they mobilize around the *childhood obesity frame* as a public problem, have harnessed its power for their own ends.[33] In the language of semiotics, "childhood obesity" is a floating signifier, such that military leaders have been able to frame childhood obesity in terms of national security risk; and at the same time urban community health activists, a very different group with a different set of priorities, have seized the childhood obesity frame as a means to confront food insecurity in their communities and work against the degradation of public space, including community parks and playgrounds. Educational policy actors were successful in applying pressure to the federal government to increase reimbursement dollars for the National School Lunch Program under the banner of eradicating childhood obesity. And then there are the marketers for children's snack foods who have capitalized on childhood obesity to gain greater market share in the highly competitive processed-food market, with an emphasis on "healthy" and "better for you" as part of recent advertising campaigns.

Childhood obesity as a cultural and historically specific idea is powerful in its diffusion, such that weight has become a major agenda item at yearly wellness visits at many pediatric offices and teachers feel compelled to ban sugary drinks from their classrooms, having identified fruits and whole grains as "appropriate" school snacks and having requested that chips and candy remain at home. As a parent, I can appreciate this as an admirable effort of local schools to positively reshape young people's relationships to food. As a parent, I also admit that I have grown tired of the succession of birthday cupcakes (how many birthdays can you celebrate in one school year?) and the regular round of candy inducements for just about any positive behavior displayed in school. But I have little hope that "fruit kabobs," as one teacher proposed, could actually serve as a reasonable alternative to sprinkles and frosting and the welcomed break from the monotony of the school day such a treat signifies for kids.

We have fixed our individual and collective anxieties on the obese child. We must ask why. What purpose does it serve for us? Think back to my earlier mention of childhood obesity as a national security risk. Congressional testimony has noted that a high and ever-growing percentage of young people are in fact ineligible to serve in the military

because they have been designated as too overweight,[34] suggesting then that childhood obesity is tied to the fate of our nation and our ability to remain competitive on a global scale. Whether true or not, this claim certainly signals a set of economic and political priorities and interests in play and a particular orientation to the future. As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu once remarked, "Health is a disposition toward future."[35]

Many scholars have noted that the rapidly growing concern for childhood obesity has developed in a specific historical period where new strategies of governance demand a self-disciplining citizenry and an ethos of personal responsibility over a collective one, rewarding those who conform and penalizing those who don't or who can't. A number of social scientists have argued persuasively that the panic around childhood obesity is bundled up with new forms of governance centered on the body and body control, what scholars following after Michel Foucault have termed "biopolitics."[36] Incessant talk about health and betterment through lifestyle choice produces a sort of disciplining control whereby the individual aligns her behavior to fit with a prevailing discourse of dietary health, lest she be cast as delinquent in the care of the self.[37] In the words of Kathleen Lebesco, "[T]he language of health and risk has become a repository of a new kind of moralism," with the self as a site of "ongoing moral transformation."[38] In this context, a disciplined, self-reliant, and enterprising citizen who is in command of her own trajectory is valorized. She is neither beholden to nor reliant on collective entities such as government, nor is she enslaved to her own desire, and in this sense, she is free.

Critical nutritional scholar Charlotte Biltekoff demonstrates that campaigns aimed at "improving people's eating habits" have long been seen by social reformers "as a way to improve their moral character."[39] In this sense the current focus on childhood obesity reflects "the social valence of eating right over the last century," at the same time expressing a new set of social considerations that have found expression in our focus on dietary health.[40] A number of cultural critics and scholars have rightly identified a narrowing of our gaze on obesity as symptomatic of broader political, economic, and cultural currents that coalesce around a changing set of social relationships of state and the individual. This shift is often associated with a neoliberal project that privileges personal

responsibility, a declining investment in any notion of the "public" as binding, and a trend toward privatization of what were once regarded as public goods, including school lunch programs.[41] In what is often called a neoliberal era, empowerment is thought to largely reside in individuals and not collectives; *personal* empowerment is thought to be the most effective pathway to social change.

The obese body is cast as anathema to a neoliberal imperative that demands a citizenry that is self-regulating and disciplined, what Biltekoff calls "the unhealthy other."[42] In this context, the fit body is idealized, and moral judgments about deviant bodies intensify. It is also in this context that prescriptions for self-change proliferate. "Health," itself, "is a term replete with value judgments, hierarchies and blind assumptions that speak as much about power and privilege as they do about well-being," argues sociologists Jonathan Metzel and Anna Kirkland.[43] Obese children are often cast as victims of their own deficits—seen to lack self-control, with parents demonized as too incompetent, too uncaring, or too indulgent to teach their children "to make good choices." Recall the child who in 2011 was removed from the care of his mother by the state courts on the grounds of medical neglect because he was too large.[44] In this case, responsibility for obesity rests entirely with the mother and the choices she makes, independent of a social context. In addition to gender stereotypes, racial and class stereotypes are often invoked, as well as a deep-rooted racial and class bias that presumes that white, middle-class parents are morally superior ones.[45]

Campaigns to reverse obesity trends among the young sometimes look more like a crusade against fat, giving rise to what anthropologist Susan Greenhalgh has termed "bio-bullying," wherein overweight kids whose bodies do not conform to that of the fit, self-disciplined citizen-in-the-making are the subject of increasing scrutiny and "a new freedom among the general public to demonize fatness under the aegis of 'health' is commonplace."[46] Few antibullying school initiatives include as part of their programming a focus on fat, but perhaps they should.

As a cultural idea, childhood obesity is impossible to separate from our moral and aesthetic judgments. The overt moralizing tone in talk about childhood obesity, itself a mechanism of social control, is widespread, while the ability to recognize it as such is often lost on us. As childhood obesity has gained greater traction, it has become increas-

ingly difficult to parse out a public health concern with childhood obesity from a moral rhetoric focused on long-standing American values of self-care and self-reliance and our cultural disdain for lifestyles that depart from middle-class ways of being.

Yet as much as childhood obesity is bound to a moral sphere of meaning, childhood obesity in the world of public health is presumed to exist in objectified form, as a set of discrete numbers. Supported by the weight of an ever-churning stream of statistics, it is taken as fact, with little reflection given to the motivation or warrant for intervention that obesity statistics, as numerical claims, serve to bolster.[47] While I am happy to leave the work of enumeration to other social scientists and public health researchers, let me again stress caution in our quick rush to lay blame on the numerous woes of weight. It behooves us to proceed cautiously as we respond to what can be alarmist rhetoric around childhood obesity as epidemic. As food scholar Julie Guthman wisely proclaims, obesity requires social explanation and medical explanation.

Critical nutrition studies, with its focus on "nutrition as a cultural practice that both shapes and is shaped by other cultural practices taking into account issues of power, identity and ideology,"[48] has been particularly attentive to understanding the moral weight of food and how it can be used to govern. Critical nutrition and health scholars also recognize that disparities in health and well-being are a part of the obesity puzzle. It is worth noting here that the majority of children and adolescents who are classified as obese are not low income; however, obesity prevalence decreases as income and education increase: poor children have a higher obesity risk than higher-income children, which suggests that inequality is an important part of understanding the causes of obesity.[49] There are very real and deepening health disparities arising from place-based inequalities, which are also related to racial segregation, that have been well documented.[50] Take, for example, poor urban areas where fear of crime drives many indoors in front of the TV and out of public parks, and where access to nutritious food requires a level of ingenuity often beyond human possibility since there are so few grocery stores nearby[51]—or rural poor communities where travel to grocery stores to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables presumes access to a car, or money for gas. In such ways, health and risk are spatially structured, tied to is-

sues of immobility, segregation and isolation, and lack of resources and opportunities.[52] As nutrition scholar Marion Nestle has observed, "[P]overty continues to be the single most important danger signal for nutritional deficiencies in American children."[53] For young people, health disparities, usually manifestations of income disparities, spatial location, a legacy of racial segregation, or some combination of the three, have been linked to a number of negative outcomes, including school readiness, academic performance, and greater likelihood of dropping out of high school.[54] It is the case that some communities, usually those that are poor, isolated, and of color, run a higher risk of diet-related health problems than others, and this has little to do with moral values but instead results from economic and social policy, social support and social networks, access to transportation, and the economic opportunity determined by where youth live.[55]

Where Kids Eat

Fast-Food Kids explores what food reveals about the cultural and economic factors of young people's lives as they move from home to school to commercial settings. Yale's Rudd Center on Food Policy and Obesity's *Fast-Food Facts: Evaluating Fast-Food Nutrition and Marketing* reports that one-third of children in the United States get 17 percent of their caloric intake from fast food every day.[56] "Eighty-four percent of parents reported taking their child to a fast-food restaurant at least once in the past week; and 66% reported going to McDonald's."[57] In 2013, 40 percent of teenagers consumed fast food every day.[58] The fact that so much time is spent eating fast foods is hardly surprising given that in 2010 an estimated $4.2 billion was spent by fast-food industries on advertising.[59] Children and adolescents represent a key target market, with African American and Hispanic children disproportionately targeted, according to the Rudd Center. The way food is marketed exercises a significant influence over the foods youth choose. But it is not simply a matter of young people and their parents seeking out commercial foods; commercial foods worm their way into the very places where most of young people's lives unfold—that is, home and school, institutional arenas thought to exist outside the world of commercial influence and market forces.[60]

Public schools have failed to avoid the influence of marketization and commercial creep as public resources for education recede and transnational food corporations and their political counterpart, the GMA (the Grocer's Manufacturers Association, a powerful food and beverage lobby), provide funding to schools, stocking their lunchroom freezers and school vending machines. These machines, which dispense, at a minimum cost, low-nutritional-value food and drinks, are mainstays of American high school cafeterias; only in 2013 were federal nutritional guidelines established for them. Schools face a double bind because in the absence of resources, they depend on vending machines as a lucrative revenue stream. In 2003 in Texas alone, vending machines produced $54 million in revenue for schools, and companies cashed in on this easy sell.[61] Soft drink companies have long brokered exclusive and often unequal contracts that enable "pouring rights" with school districts, obligating schools to sell their sodas in vending machines and at school events in exchange for the dangling carrot of "free" educational resources.[62] Since most public schools have no allotted food budgets apart from reimbursements from the National School Lunch Program, food directors are reliant on sales of what are called competitive foods (e.g., Otis Spunkmeyer cookies, Rice Krispy treats, Pop-Tarts, Doritos) to break even.[63] In the wake of a declining public investment in schools, many food companies have realized the sizeable market share to be gained and have aggressively partnered with schools. Consider Krispy Kreme's "Doughnuts for A's" program, whereby every A awarded earns the student a free doughnut. Advertising for Lay's potato chips, Oreo cookies, and Rockstar energy drinks can be found on book covers and educational posters in high schools across America, as can "healthy" foods, such as Dole pineapple. Advertising in schools is ubiquitous, but is largely taken for granted. Many advocates for school food reform have worked diligently to highlight the connection between nutritious, healthy eating and academic performance, exposing the glaring irony of a public educational mission at odds with a public health mission.[64]

Readily recognizable commercial fast foods and processed snack items are woven into the everyday fabric of school. Perhaps one of the most straightforward instances of branded fast foods' presence in school I came across was at a private high school I visited a few times during lunch over the course of my research for this project. The school,

Piedmont, which caters mostly to upper-income families, is without a working kitchen. Absent a kitchen or kitchen staff, the PTA, comprised almost entirely of mothers, has partnered with local fast-food franchises Chick-fil-A, Honey Baked Ham, and Domino's pizza to provide student lunches several days a week. The franchises make the food, the PTA moms serve it, and parents pay for it. Students submit menu selections in advance of the lunch with their payment, which can runs upwards of eight dollars per meal, with the exception of Domino's pizza, which is much cheaper. The mothers volunteer their time (though they refuse to wear the standard hairnets kitchen workers are required to wear), handing out lunches during the lunch period, and the small margin they gain is used to cover the PTA's operating budget.

How we got overly processed, energy-dense, nutritionally poor commercial foods in school is a long and complicated story. Sociologist Janet Poppendieck's *Free for All: Fixing School Food in America,* which examines the rapid rise of competitive foods (also called à la carte items) in the last quarter of the twentieth century, shows how the food and beverage industries were able to exploit a weakening system of government funding and regulation for school lunch, transforming what passed as food in school cafeterias.[65] These revenue-driven foods—nachos, Doritos, Rice Krispies Treats, Pop-Tarts—because they are excluded from the federal reimbursable meal program, operated until very recently beyond the reach of federal oversight.[66] Much of this has passed unnoticed as kids moved through lunch lines. Kids may complain about the food, but apart from these intermittent grumblings, it is all a matter of course. As Dan, the food director from one of the public schools I observed for this project, opined, "Everybody always forgets the food."

Transformations in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) in the late 1970s set the conditions for an influx of market-driven, overly processed foods, what Poppendieck has called "carnival fare." While the NSLP, established in 1946, was originally a program conceived to feed all of our nation's children nutritious meals to promote a healthy citizenry, in the 1970s it converted to a program of poor food for poor kids. In an effort to reduce government spending during the '70s and '80s, federal dollars for school lunch waned and so did student participation, especially among middle-class children, since the federal government was suddenly much less willing to subsidize their lunch. A larger number of

middle-class students withdrew from a program that was increasingly defined as a program for the poor, with the heavy weight of stigma attached. This resulted in a significant loss in revenue. With declining revenues, school lunch programs were forced to economize, to cut corners on taste and nutrition to overcome budget shortfalls. Enter competitive foods.[67] These foods are not included in the NSLP but are an important source of revenue for lunchrooms; their ubiquity in school lunchrooms reflects public schools' heavy reliance on the commercial food industry's offerings of cheap, processed, and nutritionally poor foods to meet their operating costs.[68] Healthy and nutritious meals, as part of a public food-provisioning system, became even more difficult to come by.[69] As Poppendieck writes,

> Our spectacular failure to provide fresh, appealing, healthy meals for all our children is the result of a series of specific and identifiable social choices that we have made: a massive disinvestment in our public schools, an industrialized food system, an agriculture policy centered on subsidies for large-scale commodity production, a business model rather than a public health approach to school food programs.[70]

While reforms in the public school food system to address the presence and influence of commercial entities are underway with efforts to tighten nutritional standards, for example, these efforts have also been met with a significant counteroffensive by different commercial players. Public records reveal that food and beverage industries spent $175 million between 2009 and 2011 alone to lobby against tougher nutritional standards for food marketed to children, to ensure that exercise drinks could still be found in high school vending machines, even if soda can't, and to guarantee that french fries remain on the menu in public schools as part of the National School Lunch Program.[71] Consider also the hefty financial muscle exercised by what is sometimes called "big soda" to defeat the proposed excise tax on soda in Washington, D.C., a tax that was intended to defray costs associated with the 2010 D.C. Healthy Schools Act.[72] This larger complex of arrangements serves as a backdrop for understanding youth's food consumption in school, and thus warrants serious investigation.

Public schools are not the only institutional setting increasingly shaped by commercial forces. Family arrangements also have been

subject to increasing marketization, radically reconfiguring the family meal, for example. The accelerating pace of life for a large number of Americans has meant transformation in both food production and food consumption. Shared meal times have declined over the last several decades as families confront a range of transformations that impinge on the quotidian dimensions of family life, with snacking emerging in its place. Janet Poppendieck notes that "speed and preparation ease" are primary consideration in meal planning today.[73] The 2009 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census reveals that less than 60 percent of parents surveyed reported having dinner with their twelve- to seventeen-year-old children daily during a typical week.[74] Young people's increased obligations outside the home, especially among upper-income youth, combined with parental work demands, impose upon shared meal times, with consequences for the way family members understand the nature of collective life at home. As sociologist Arlie Hochschild has argued, "[J]ust as market conditions ripened the soil for capitalism, so a weakened family prepares the soil for a commercialized spirit of domestic life."[75]

These changes in family life are compounded by the changing economic realities of so many families who labor to put food, any food, on their family table. Millions of Americans continued in 2012 to struggle to afford enough food, according to food hardship data from the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC).[76] To be more precise, one in six Americans (18 percent) said in 2012 that there had been times over the preceding twelve months when they did not have enough money to buy food that they or their families needed. This is well illustrated in the powerful 2012 documentary *A Place at the Table*, which chronicles the struggles of "the new hungry," or those considered to be "food insecure." While older forms of hunger were a result of food shortages, captured in the haunting images of Depression-era breadlines, the new hunger is not marked by an absence of food necessarily but by an absence of nutrient-rich foods.[77] In the wake of declines in government food assistance and the rise of charity-based food donations, those who are food insecure and rely on charitable food giving rarely suffer from shortages of crackers, cookies, chips, packaged ramen noodles, peanut butter, and other food items that have a long shelf-life, since they represent the bulk of donated foods.[78]

While for families with resources, their busy lives drive them into the commercial worlds of the drive-through, processed snacks, and ready-made meals, for families at the other economic end, a different set of circumstance is in play. Thus, whereas the accelerating pace of daily life helps to explain how the middle and upper-middle classes eat, for the poor, especially for the young and old, boredom, immobility, and deacceleration often characterize their daily routines. Middle- and upper-income kids in the suburbs, where much of this research was completed, busily move from activity to activity, grabbing something that approximates a meal in between. But this is not the case for poor kids, whose afternoons instead are often spent passing the time at McDonald's, bored and often stranded, waiting for the last school bus to take them home.

Yet, despite changes in the economic realities and time burdens of American families, food preparation and consumption remain expressions of intimacy and care, even as both activities have been radically altered by large-scale economic processes, among them changing work-family patterns, the movement of large numbers of women into the work force, the geographical dispersal of family units, the expansion of commercial markets, and the outsourcing to those markets of responsibilities historically performed at home.

The complicated relationships among markets, material constraints, and meaning are what I seek to better understand in *Fast-Food Kids*. School food, uniformly characterized as bad, for instance, reflects our deep cultural ambivalence about the public provisioning of food to children. We largely associate feeding children with the private sphere of home, motherly care, and the durable bonds of family. And while school food assumes a sort of mythic status as "gross," home-cooked food is locked in what historian Stephanie Coontz terms "the nostalgia trap."[79] As both a private *and* a public good, food is entangled with a moral sphere of sentimentality and care and also an economic sphere of production, exchange, and consumption. Of course, these two spheres of activity, as sociologist Viviana Zelizer has repeatedly shown, are not so neatly divided in the actual world as they are in our thinking.[80] In the actual realm of daily interaction and institutional practice, economic transactions and sentiment are falsely separated. Instead, the arrangements within these spheres of social meaning are convoluted, complicated, and contradictory. In the case of food, this is especially glaring.

Food is a moral object, an economic object, an object of play, and an aesthetic object, bound to multiple registers of health and well-being. As food travels across private (home) and public spheres of social life (community, school, consumer realm), family, and peer group, its meaning and value transform. The exchange of french fries in the commercial realm, for example, often has more to do with status displays and tests of friendship for youth than with market logics (recall the girls sharing the single sundae at Baskin-Robbins recounted at the chapter's beginning). Markets and the social meanings that flow from them play an ever-expanding role in the lives of youth at home, at school, and in the spaces in between, often sites we regard as noncommercial, even if in truth they are not and never have been.

Yet as we talk about food in an institutional setting, we are more likely to look to macro-level processes to understand them. And as important as it is to understand how industrial agriculture and government food policy has transformed what kids eat in school, such a focus often overlooks the meaning-making activities that both inspire and constrain action in these institutional realms. Thus, while a core aim of this project is to map how moral categories and commercial logics have come to shape youth's food consumption at home and at school, *Fast-Food Kids* examines these processes as they are given expression in the local organization of young people's lives as they move through lunch lines in their school cafeteria, order a #2 at McDonald's, or eat their reheated dinner alone, in front of the television, as they complete the last leg of homework after returning home from basketball practice long after other family members have eaten. The way these changes are understood and experienced by young people themselves is important to understand as they organize their activities in and beyond home, in and around school, and has relevance for the way we address concerns about young people's food consumption and health as scholars and advocates for food policy change.

The Study

The idea for this project emerged in late 2007 while I was involved with another interview-based project on youth that didn't seem to be going anywhere. I entered the field in 2008 with only a small inkling of where

this project might lead me and the questions I might answer. As with my other ethnographic projects, which also focused on youth, the first on high school proms and the second on youth and cars, I was interested in taking a single object or event that on the surface appears trivial but upon closer inspection of the meanings, social relationships, and cultural logics around it reveals deep cultural significance. High school proms, cars, and fast food all provide opportunities to explore mediations on consumer culture, how it refracts in cultural scenes and settings out of which everyday life is built. So I began with an open mind, a pen and pad, and a few projects behind me, and went to a McDonald's only to discover a robust social space. I returned to that McDonald's for several years, while also expanding my observational field to include a number of other fast-food settings where kids gather en masse directly following the end of the school day. Settings were selected on the basis of proximity to public high schools. In total, two Subways, one Baskin-Robbins, one Dairy Queen, four McDonald's restaurants, two Chipotles, three Starbucks stores, and one Baja Fresh were observed, with sustained observations conducted at four McDonald's settings and one Chipotle from 2008 to 2010.

Pretty early on in the project I decided I wanted to look at food and the relationships formed around food across different institutional fields—school, family, the commercial realm—to map in the tradition of multisited ethnography the connections between and across fields. In this sense, I have been less concerned with comparative dimensions of the project (how kids eat at home, how kids eat in a commercial setting, how kids eat at school) and more interested in understanding how the logics and practices that constitute these institutional settings, which themselves are not truly separate, bleed into one another, shaping and organizing the practices of each. The pull of the commercial food realm, for example, is as much about the push of packed family schedules and bad school food as it is about the food itself or its marketing. In this sense, the private provisioning of foods historically undertaken in the home and our increasing inability to do that work, combined with our deep cultural ambivalence toward food as a public good, help to push young folks toward the commercial realm and its food offerings. To understand youth consumption of commercial foods, then, we must also understand the meaning of food as it is consumed in other spheres of

social life. And thus, systematic observations in school and commercial settings came to represent a core part of this project. I spent several month observing school lunches at two public high schools: Thurgood High School in the fall of 2010 and Washington High School in the spring of 2010. In different ways, as I undertook my observations, each school was at the forefront of school food reforms inspired by a call for improved dietary health. Thurgood and Washington belong to different school districts, but both are public. They provide interesting points of comparison owing to differences in the cultural and economic base of students, the schools' academic records, and each food director's vision and commitments. Thurgood High School enrolls twenty-two hundred tenth-, eleventh-, and twelfth-grade students and is ethnically and racially diverse, with 43 percent of the students being African American, 27 percent Hispanic, 21 percent white, and 7 percent Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian.[81] Washington High School enrolls just over eight hundred eighth- through twelfth-grade students and is less diverse racially and economically, with 73 percent of its students being white, 6 percent African American, 9 percent Hispanic, and 11 percent Asian/Pacific Islander. Washington has been nationally ranked for the last decade as a top public school, while in 2010 Thurgood was awarded by the U.S. Department of Education the unlucky designation "persistently low-achieving school." Both schools are located in relatively wealthy communities in a major metropolitan area, but in the case of Thurgood, a large base of students is bused in from the district's periphery, where lower-income and subsidized housing is concentrated. At Thurgood in 2010, around 60 percent of students were on free or subsidized lunch, while less than 8 percent of students at Washington were. Both schools' cafeterias are settings where larger narratives about market influence in school settings, cultural discourses on health, and gender, class, and racial inequalities come to bear, structuring the types of interactions that unfold therein. A third school (private) was visited, though only a few times, as a point of interest because they had no working kitchen and relied heavily on the PTA to organize lunch.[82]

Fast-Food Kids also draws on interviews and focus groups conducted with fifty-six young adults (aged fifteen to twenty-three) representing different economic situations, family forms, and racial/ethnic groups, as well as a small collection of adults involved in community- based food

work. Principles of theoretical sampling guided interview procedures. Interview and focus-group participants were recruited through purposive and convenience sampling, with the explicit purpose of developing a racially and economically diverse pool of respondents; I included youth enrolled in high school, community college, and four-year college because I was particularly interested to understand how school figures in youth's food lives. Like the observations, all interviews were conducted with young people residing in a major metropolitan area, with recruitment occurring in some cases from the observational sites. What this means is that the experiences of rural youth are not represented in these pages, but instead youth living in and around a city and its surrounding suburbs. I consider this a meaningful omission and hope other scholars will work to fill that lacuna. Focus-group and in-depth interviews with young adults allowed me to gain a sense of the cultural significance youth attach to food consumption in school, at home, and in commercial settings from the perspective of young people themselves, a group whose perspectives rarely inform policy discussions or interventions.

Another rich data source upon which this analysis rests is written narratives collected about family life and food beginning in 2007. I amassed just over 260 one-page narratives about family food memories written by college students between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three. The written narratives offer a window into the practical and symbolic dimensions of contemporary family life as understood and narrated by young people, revealing what young people, on the cusp of adulthood, think about families of the present, their own and others, as they make sense of the internal transformations in families as children grow older, families migrate and move, parents divorce and remarry, and mothers return to work. These narratives served as a meaningful supplement to interview data and are the primary basis of the analysis in chapter 1, focusing on food provisioning at home.

A broad range of policy and media materials focused on local and national food reforms that impact young people were also collected. Close analysis of contemporary documents relating to youth, food, and public health initiatives has allowed me to trace the language and framing of policy and public discourse with its current focus on childhood obesity and its impact on the work of school food directors in schools.

While the focus of this research is youth, *Fast-Food Kids* also investigates the institutional conditions in which kids articulate their relationship to food.

The Book

Each of the chapters zeroes in on a particular aspect of youth and the changing food landscape— school, home, and commercial realm—with attention to three core tensions through which youth food consumption as a sphere of social meaning is created and ultimately understood. The first core tension takes shape around two competing frames: the first casts food as a private good, rooted deeply in relations of home tied to our most durable social bonds, and the second casts food as a public good, and thus part of a public provisioning system of care to which we are collectively obligated. A second and related tension takes shape around food as gift, and thus part of the symbolic order, and food as commodity, arising from an economic order. This tension points to how food is an objectified form shaped by economic and relational imperatives. The final tension exists between food as an object of play, central to youth cultural worlds, identity making in school, and the commercial realm, and food as an object of care through which intimate ties of home and social ties in and to the public institution of school are forged. These three tensions—gift/commodity, public good/private good, and play/care—are explored across the chapters.

Chapter 1 explores food and family life, focusing on changes to modern families as expressed in the interviews and narratives about family meals as a form of private food provisioning that is increasingly shaped by tensions between commodified social relations on the one hand and food as object of care, tied to a gift exchange between parents and children, on the other. This chapter documents the symbolic currency of longing and belonging for young people as they talk about food and family life, with the aim to examine the tension between family as a sphere of practical activity and family as symbolic sphere, both shaped by processes of marketization that prevail in the period of late capitalism. The next three chapters follow young people as they travel from home to school, and thus examine food as it is transformed from a private good to a public good.

Chapter 2 examines what is on the lunch menu at Thurgood High School, focusing on the work of Brenda, Thurgood's food director, and her effort to bring into being a public food-provisioning system promoting students' recognition and respect alongside dietary health. Chapter 3 returns to Thurgood's lunchroom, exploring food as an object through which youth forge relationships to the institution of school and each other. Attention is given to the complex spatial arrangements in the cafeteria and the role food plays in group boundary and social identity making for youth, thereby complicating Brenda's vision of school food as a means to address inequality rather than reproduce it. Chapter 4 focuses on Washington High School and its cafeteria, examining the different types of food found there—commercial food, school food, and food brought from home—and the role parents play in shaping the cafeteria and students, with specific attention to social class and its consequence for a public food provisioning system. All three chapters are organized with an eye to understanding how social inequalities pattern students' relationship to the cafeteria and the food therein, highlighting how social meaning expresses and informs that relationship.

Chapter 5 explores youth food consumption in commercial food settings as youth leave school at the end of the day, focusing in particular on McDonald's and Chipotle as popular after-school destinations. Attention is given to two core elements of youth food consumption in the commercial realm—play and gift exchange—examining the extent to which youth food consumption fulfills youth cultural ends alongside and against commercial market ends. The conclusion to *Fast-Food Kids* considers how we might think about youth food consumption, as a sphere of social meaning constituted in the everyday spaces of school, home, and commercial realms, and its relationship to our democratic future. A discussion of the methodological issues at stake in doing multisited ethnography can be found in the methods appendix.

For an ethnographer, food is one way into the worlds of young people. Studying youth's food consumption as shaped by systems of meaning that hold value in youth cultural worlds promises to shed light on how young people negotiate a set of shifting arrangements in the social organization of school and home, the relations of constraint therein, and the connection between social inequalities in daily life and health and well-being. The meanings young people attach to food as cultural object

tell us much about their social world and their place in it.[83] This book is my attempt to demonstrate the value of cultural analysis for a topic that has generated tremendous policy and public interest and to make a case for what greater attention to culture, with its focus on collective meaning, schemes of value, symbolic action, and social interaction, yields for health policy and public decision making.