The *Less Eligible* Eaters: Calorie Counts, No-Frills, and Vending Machines in Prison

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ABSTRACT

The Least Eligibility Principle (LEP) has been variously engaged throughout US history to sort service populations into the deserving and undeserving. The no-frills prison policy movement of the 1990s was heavily influenced by LEP morality. Food was one focal point of the discourses and policies that negotiated the floating signifier "least" to place prisoners at the bottom of the presumed hierarchy, encouraging a punitive penal diet. Based on ethnographic data collected from a US prison for women, I explore women's practices that negotiate their relationship to this diet. Following Abu-Lughod's (1990) suggestion, I consider these daily acts of resistance to reveal the workings of power. The hollowed-out diet disciplines as it presupposes the moral classification of LEP, indexing the unworthiness of those who must consume it. The impacts of the disciplinary diet are far-reaching, encouraging the accumulation of debt while incarcerated and placing unyielding financial pressure on incarcerated individuals' kin networks. State and civil society are continuous in the ideological negotiation that supports the punitive penal diet. Women's practices that challenge the moral implications of this diet claim humanity and dignity in a system that presupposes their unworthiness and positions them as morally bankrupt.

Better conditions than some on the outside. Two bottles of water a day is adequate, for a few days and 1,000 to 1,500 calorie is a nice and generous weight loss diet. So, I don't think they are hurting, just complainers.

– rts 1737

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In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, the *Houston Chronicle* ran an article about the conditions in Beaumont's federal prison (Alfonso 2017). The prison was not evacuated because, according to the prison's administration, the facility maintained adequate conditions despite the compromised power and water supply. Prisoners described a lack of drinking water, overflowing toilets, no air conditioning, and only three cold meals of peanut butter and bologna sandwiches a day. The article spawned a heated comment board with posters polarized between sympathy for the prisoners and outrage at their complaints. Among the more popular comments, with multiple likes, dislikes, and replies, are those of rts 1737. Many posts positioned the reported prison conditions as better than those faced by nonprisoners after the storm and labeled prisoners voicing concerns as "complainers," "victimizing," and "babies" that deserve poor conditions; a belief exemplified by the multiple posts that repeat, "don't do the crime if you can't do the time."

The heated message board illustrates a cultural preoccupation with prison conditions, including, as I focus on in this article, what prisoners eat. Rts's claim that the restricted diet is "nice" and even "generous" indicates that prisoners only have a rightful claim to mere survival, to conditions of "bare life" (Agamben 1998). The comment animates a centuries old moral principle—the least, or less, eligibility principle (LEP). Throughout US history, LEP has been variously engaged in public and policy discourses to sort service populations (including prisoners, the homeless, and welfare recipients) into the deserving and undeserving (Seih 1989; Sparks 1996; White 2008). "Least" operates as a floating signifier, negotiated in public discourses and, often, codified in policies. The no-frills movement of the 1990s, one such codification, consisted of penal policies that removed or restricted various goods, services, and programs that were redefined as "frills," including necessities such as food and medical care (Sparks 1996; Lenz 2002; Hensley et al. 2003). These policies largely endure in current prison conditions. In addition, LEP rhetoric, as evidenced in the *Chronicle*'s discussion board, remains prominent in public discourses, negotiating the floating signifier least and setting the tone for current carceral policies.

Using ethnographic data collected from 2012 to 2013 in Summerville, a state prison for women located in the Southwestern United States, I explore the reverberating impacts of these discourses and policies for prisoners and their support networks.[1] Women consider the prison diet, or "state issue," inadequate, at best, and illness causing, at worst. I focus on women's daily practices—including

1. The prison and all participants are referred to with pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

discourses of grossness, alternative food practices, breaking the rules of consumption, and narratives of indulgence—that navigate their relationship to this diet. These practices largely aim to minimize perceived or actual reliance on the state issue diet and often depend on financial support from kin networks outside of prison, who sometimes participate in narratives of indulgence around the visitation table. As Abu-Lughod points out "where there is resistance, there is power" (1990, 42). It is in women's daily practices that the techniques and consequences of LEP become apparent—the hollowed-out diet disciplines as it presupposes the moral classification of LEP, indexing the unworthiness of those who must consume it. Women's practices challenge this presupposition and continue the semiotic negotiation of "least" to remove themselves, if not all prisoners, from the category. The impacts of the disciplinary diet are wide-ranging, encouraging the accumulation of debt while incarcerated and placing unyielding financial pressure on kin networks attempting to maintain contact with an incarcerated individual. Ultimately, attention to LEP reveals the complexity of power in prison. Rather than an institution of total domination by the state, state and civil society operate in concert to produce ideological support for the punitive penal diet. Women's practices that challenge the moral implications of this diet claim humanity and dignity in a system that presupposes their unworthiness and positions them as morally bankrupt.

Prisoners as *Least Eligible*: A Semiotic Negotiation

Ochs et al. (1996) build on a long history of anthropological inquiry into food to claim that "eating and taste are central to social and moral order" (8). LEP discourses reveal a fascination with prisoner diets that negotiate the social groups' moral worth vis-à-vis their relationship to food. The outraged comments on the *Chronicle*'s discussion board imply that prisoners are overstepping these moral boundaries by claiming a right to food and water beyond that necessary for mere survival, and, therefore, construct a priority list for aid in the aftermath of the hurricane. These posts negotiate the floating signifier least. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and later elaborated by Laclau (1996, 2000), empty and floating signifiers reveal sites of hegemonic production. Laclau's theory of signification expands Gramsci's notion of hegemony to consider its source in the interpretive struggles made necessary by the openness of the social, rather than a predetermined ideology.[2] Empty signifiers are unifying and frequent, yet vague,

2. Broadly, Gramsci (1971) defines hegemony as power by consent; the ruling class (hegemonic bloc) asserts power through a shared worldview, or ideology, built into political and cultural institutions.

which allows their signifieds to be treated as self-evident, such that the signifier overpowers the signified. The floating signifier similarly lacks a referent, though this "results from the unfixity introduced by a plurality of discourses interrupting each other" (Laclau 2000, 305). Laclau bases his semiosis on Saussure's structuralist view, considering empty and floating signifiers as distinct from other signs in that the signifiers are detached from their signifieds. His theory of signification expands Saussure's view to destabilize the fixity of the linguistic system and tie it to the political.

Peirce's semiotics (*PWP*, 98–119), which has been productively elaborated to connect the linguistic to the social world in a continual, dynamic construction of meaning (see Mertz 1985; Irvine 1989; Parmentier 1994), can enhance Laclau's attempts to understand signification as political. Instead of taking signs as cohesive units, Peirce complicates the relation of signifier and signified by positing that signs operate as a triad: containing the object, sign vehicle (or representamen), and interpretant (or mental representation). Each sign stands in some way related to the physical world, and the interpretant leaves open the constant possibility for change in the relation between the object and sign vehicle. Peirce's concept of indexes—signs that relate to their object through a spatiotemporal connection—has proved useful for unpacking the production of cultural meaning. Silverstein (2003), for instance, argues that signs presuppose a cultural context while indexing various ideological stances and interpretations. Thus, attention to empty and floating signifiers helps us recognize the role of signs that tend to index shared or contested worldviews as sites of hegemonic struggle. As Cloyes (2007) explains, "While empty signifiers operate as nodal points in discourse by underpinning assumptions, everyday practice often pivots around the struggle to fully articulate floating signifiers into one or another account of 'how things are'" (205). To solidify meaning, various accounts of "how things are" attempt to make a signifier hegemonic, or universally linked to a shared interpretant.

"How things are" is therefore emergent from a struggle to define a moral hierarchy of deservingness. In public discourses on prisoner diets, least is a floating signifier that forges commonsense views for appropriate prison conditions. Rts's opening line, "Better conditions than some on the outside," presupposes a hierarchal moral order—that some social groups are more deserving of hurricane relief than others—and indexes a fundamental divide between those inside prison and those outside of prison. The blanket comparison of the prison's conditions to the outside constructs an inside/outside binary and indexes those "inside" as the least eligible, constituting a moral order in which prisoners occupy the bottom rung.

While commenters overwhelmingly follow rts's assertions, sympathetic posts index competing versions of least. Rarely do these posts step outside the terms of LEP and attempt to humanize prisoners. More often, the presupposition of a hierarchal moral order is maintained as they carve the prisoner population into those more and less deserving. One poster, JohnCLeigh, discussing a son in the facility, critiques the unification of prisoners into one social group:

> As for Cosmo, lilithwhythe's & other wicked comments below, my son HAD NO VICTIM! Beaumont LOW is supposed to be for LOW security prisoners, NOT hardened criminals! My son could be your son, brother or friend being served a death sentence in Beaumont for making one mistake by a ruthless prosecutor & crooked lawyers in Dallas TX!

The critique positions "hardened criminals" in the least eligible slot of the moral hierarchy, beneath low-security prisoners whose crime had no victims. It assumes that hardened criminals deserve these terrible conditions, while low-security prisoners gain humanity as someone you may know and love. Among comments that did not challenge a moral hierarchy but instead indexed differing interpretations of least, the cultural entrenchment of LEP is clear—they sympathize with some prisoners while defining others as least eligible.

As sites of resource competition, natural disasters highlight, but do not produce, LEP discourse. A 2010 comment in an online support group for individuals with family incarcerated in Arizona reacts to a 2010 policy change reducing prisoners' weekday hot meals:

> You know what ladies . . . I am certainly not sticking up for the prison system in any way, but I don't eat three hot meals a day and the last time I checked I was pretty darn healthy. In fact, there are law abiding citizens in the free world who are so poor that they don't even have as much food as the average inmate. It IS prison and they DID put themselves there. They've got no one but themselves to blame for the menu.

JJ4EVER, like many of the *Chronicle*'s posts, reinforces the state's classification system, dividing prisoners from "law abiding citizens in the free world" and using all caps to naturalize the divide and attach stigma to the prisoner group by emphasizing intentionality in crime. In her evaluation of the prison diet, prisoners are less deserving than the poorest of the free world group. Like rts, posters construct the prison diet as adequate, even healthy. Further, both JJ4EVER and JohnCLeigh, posting about their own incarcerated kin, remind us that prisoners and their kin often share culturally entrenched moral classification practices.

These examples follow a long history of LEP negotiations, which, while varying in degree, have continually influenced prison practices in the US (Seih 1989; Sparks 1996; Lenz 2002). From the 1990s to the 2000s, across the political landscape "tough on crime" dominated political rhetoric and gained popularity as an ideology of punishment (Lenz 2002). Politicians and other elected officials ran on campaigns of cleaning up the streets, coupled with welfare reform, and the prison grew in the cultural imaginary and in the reality of the lives of countless individuals and communities. Comfort (2002) points out that in the wake of mass incarceration and welfare retrenchment, "the prison stands out as the most prominent, powerful, and 'reliable' state institution in the lives of the poor and dispossessed" (491). As I explore below, the reach of the institution expands far beyond its walls, calling into question the inside/outside binary so easily drawn in public discourses.

The no-frills movement codified LEP in prison policies. A national trend of policy changes peaking in the 1990s, no-frills was generally aimed at eliminating or restricting prison "luxuries" (Finn 1996; Lenz 2002; Hensley et al. 2003). Federal-, state-, and local-level politics are varied and complex, and, consequently, no-frills played out differently in different contexts, though the movement was unique in its scope of influence across jail and prison system levels.[3] Federally, LEP influenced the "No Frills Prison Act" of 1996, which prohibited porn, computers, and unmonitored phone calls, among other so called "frills" (Hensley et al. 2003). Alaska was the first state to pass an explicit no-frills act in 1997, banning tobacco, charging for electricity, and limiting "recreational litigation" (Alaska State Senate 1997). Senator Dave Donley, who authored the bill, made clear the dual motivations of curtailing crime through punitive punishment and gaining taxpayer support. Positioning no-frills as a deterrent to crime, he stated, "I feel confident this law will make people think twice before committing a crime in Alaska." The senator also makes clear the financial incentive of his no-frills legislation, "Now that . . . our correctional facilities are cost effective and not overly comfortable, I believe there will be public support for building the additional prison facilities the state so badly needs." While his first statement implies the anticipation of a shrinking prisoner population through punitive punishment-as-deterrent, his second makes clear the overburdened prison system that requires taxpayer support to build additional facilities. Many no-frills policies in the Southwest focused on the prison diet, including eliminating lunch

3. Jails, which are county-level facilities, house individuals awaiting sentencing, those sentenced to jail time (typically for a misdemeanor offence), and often undocumented immigrant detainees. Prisons house those convicted of a felony offense completing their sentence.

on weekends and serving a sack lunch instead of a hot lunch during the week. Further, many states outsourced the duty of feeding prisoners to private companies that run state prisons' meal service, commissary, and vending machines commonly located in visitation. Economic relationships that privatize provisions and services in public prisons are often overlooked aspects of prison profiteering.

The negotiation of least placing prisoners on the bottom rung allowed the peculiar expansion of the category "luxuries" to include entertainment, education, work programs, convenience items, and necessities. In combination with the widening gap between the rich and the poor and welfare reform, LEP was a powerful, yet undefined, motivator in setting the extremely low bar for prison conditions—the worse off the "legitimate" poor, the worse prison must become (Seih 1989). Hence, the removal of necessities such as food that offer a higher living standard than the generic "prisoner" (based on the lowest-class free person) might achieve outside of prison. For prisoners constructed as an undeserving, stigmatized, distained group, LEP demands the bare minimum necessary diet at best, and, at worst, a diet that does not exceed that of the worst-off free persons.

The overlaps between LEP public discourses, "tough on crime" political rhetoric, and no-frills policies highlight the intersections of state and civil society. As Worsham and Olson put it in describing Laclau's understanding of hegemony, "hegemony is not a simple matter of forceful domination by an elite but, rather, is a process of ongoing struggle to constitute the social" (1999, 6). The state and civil society are continuous with one another in hegemonic production. For instance, in a survey of corrections personnel, Finn (1996) notes, "the experts and managers disagreed about whether legislators are *responding* to public pressure to get tough on criminals or are introducing no-frills legislation *on their own initiative* in the hopes that their position will stimulate public support" (36). Lenz (2002) also notes this "chicken-or-the-egg conundrum" (502). The binary of imprisoned and free has become embedded in public discourses and central to the negotiation of deservingness in LEP moral hierarchy. Thus, while it is unclear whether lawmakers responded to calls to end prison luxuries in public discourses or inspired them, the floating signifier least has motivated constructs of the prisoner as least deserving for decades, even when policies produce practices that make it harder to manage prisoners, cost taxpayers more money, and have no demonstrable positive impact on recidivism (Finn 1996; Lenz 2002). Following Melossi's (1993) claim that the form and character of hegemony is the motivation for LEP, these aspects of no-frills policies reveal negotiations of eligibility as an ideological project rather than simply

an economic one.[4] As I explore below, the negotiation of the floating signifier least continues in prison, as incarcerated individuals negotiate their relationship to food and, often, challenge their position as least eligible.

The Punitive Diet: State Issue

Transcript 1. Toni's Visit

1	Toni:	Have you seen the bread? Have you seen the bread we eat?[5]
2	Researcher:	Yeah
3	Toni:	Have you touched it?
4	Researcher:	No
5	Brother:	Don't touch that shit
6	Researcher:	Why?
7	Toni:	Cause when you take it, and you take a piece of it, and you pf:: roll it,
8		like you [just] roll it [up] and you tuck all the sides in so it fits in the palm
9	Researcher:	[Uh huh] [Uh huh]
10	Toni:	of your hand? And then let it go, it goes pluh:::::
11	Researcher:	It goes right back?
12	Toni:	To a full piece, no creases!
13	Researcher:	Hell no
14	Toni:	Mhm
15	Brother:	[What if], [if you're]
16	Researcher:	[That's] not right, [what does] that mean?
17	Toni:	It means we shouldn't eat it

During my ethnographic fieldwork on a minimum-security yard of Summerville, I joined Toni, a white woman in her early thirties, for part of her visit with her brother. Toni's brother visited regularly, sometimes joined by their father. They welcomed me into their boisterous conversation and competitive games of Sorry or Rummy and always purchased Toni an array of food from the vending machines. In this exchange, Toni asks me if I have seen or touched the bread they are given as part of their state issue. While I had seen a lot of bread—state issue provides multiple slices of bread at every meal, bulking up its calorie count—I had not touched it. Toni's brother jumps in telling me not to touch it, calling the bread "shit" (line 5). He participates in constructing the state issue bread as gross, anticipating Toni's description of its unnatural qualities

4. This isn't to imply the economic is irrelevant. There is evidence that the hegemonic bloc is at least somewhat more likely to support "frills" when informed that prisoners pay for them, as they typically do (Lenz 2002).

5. Transcript conventions:
:: = Elongated sound; Word = Speaker emphasis; [ ] = Overlapping speech; - = Sharply cut off sound; ? = Rising intonation; ! = Animated tone; (.) = Brief Pause; (?) = Unable to transcribe; (( )) = Transcriber comments

that follow. This conversation, in part, expresses the importance of the vending machine meal Toni is eating to her family, who she depends on for a weekend meal (these meals are explored in the next section). It also echoes public discourses that construct prison diets as punitive, bare bones, and lacking in the pleasures of consumption. It is distinct from these discourses, however, in that Toni distances herself from the least eligible, negotiating her moral worth as someone who should not eat the morally tainted prison fare. Her use of "we" in line 17 is significant. She is including all prisoners in her negotiation, challenging their position as least eligible and claiming they deserve better diets.

Conversations like Toni's are incredibly common at both the visitation table and on the yard among incarcerated individuals negotiating the enduring prison conditions set by LEP-inspired no-frills policies. As Phillips and Earle (2010) argue, LEP has capitalized on the punitive power of food in prisons, seeking to "extinguish the sensuousness of food, its artistry, and the desire and appetites it stimulates and satisfies" (144). Their exploration of men incarcerated in the United Kingdom highlights how men challenge hyper-masculine stereotypes of prisoners to share in these properties of food in communal cooking spaces. This section explores the punitive power of Summerville's state issue diet and women's practices that forge alternative relationships with food. Like Toni's expression of disgust over the bread, the diet was largely considered inadequate, gross, and even illness causing. Beyond its content, the diet was governed by strict rules about when, where, and how it could be eaten, allowing it to be mobilized to enact further punishments. Incarcerated women continually negotiated their relationship to this diet through discourses of grossness, like Toni's; creating alternative food practices; breaking the rules of consumption; and, as explored in the next section, narratives of pleasure and indulgence.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Summerville, and the rest of the state's prison system, limited state issue diets by providing only two meals on weekends, switched from a hot lunch to a sack lunch, and outsourced their meal services to a private company. These food policy shifts initiated a reassessment of prisoner diets, redefining the caloric needs of inmates to set the terms of private contracts with food vendors. To reassure prisoners that their sack lunch delivered as many, or more, calories than the lost hot meal, the state created a video for closed-circuit inmate TV breaking down the nutritional content of the new food plan. Through this emphasis on calorie counts, the state issue diet is positioned within what Bourdieu (1984) calls the "taste of necessity," making nutritional needs the only metric for evaluating diet. For Bourdieu, class is embodied, in part, through relations to food, "Taste, a class culture turned nature, that is, *embodied*, helps to

shape the class body. It is a . . . principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporation, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically" (190). Those in possession of capital are distanced from mere necessity and thus emphasize freedom of choice in consumption exhibiting "taste of luxury/freedom." The poor, on the other hand, are defined through the "taste of necessity," produced by conditions that, while not precluding enjoyment, provide a "forced choice" (178). While scholars have noted these forms of taste are expressed by social groups across classes, and the value and means of expressing them vary in relation not only to class but also to culture, gender, and other aspects of identity (de Morias Sato et al. 2016), the state issue diet expresses the taste of necessity through its emphasis on calorie counts and strict rules of consumption. Interactions like Toni's emphasize the forced nature of the diet, claiming they have no choice but to eat the unnatural food.

Those who depended completely on state issue often went hungry, especially on weekends, when some women would drink extra water to try and trick their stomachs into feeling full. Many of the incarcerated women I spoke with refused to eat state issue meals at all or minimized their consumption as much as possible. This required significant support from kin networks outside of prison, trading skills for food in an (illegal) hustle, and/or support from another incarcerated individual. Women's preparations of culturally and locally meaningful cuisines out of the gas station style fare available from the commissary challenged the punitive relationship to food. For birthdays and other celebrations, women often prepared elaborate meals, with individuals chipping in ingredients, equipment, or skills for the celebration. The most common celebratory food was cake, which could be made with only cake mix, soda-pop, and a microwave; melted candy bars made a prized frosting (fig. 1). Menudo and tamales were two other common celebration foods, impressively and creatively made with the limited tools of microwaves, "stingers" (hot metal rods placed in liquid to heat it up), plastic bags, and garbage cans (fig. 2).[6] These celebratory feasts defy the reduction to bare-bones, poor-quality, caloric minimums set by the institution and challenge the moral connotations of the state issue diet. They express taste of luxury and enact culturally valuable forms of consumption, creating community and socializing over traditional cuisine.

6. Stingers were no longer available for purchase from commissary. Only women who had been incarcerated for a significant period had the prized commodity.

Figure 1

Figure 2

In addition to special celebrations, daily practices revolved around constructing meals out of the food available from commissary. While sometimes an individual endeavor, the common rooms in the dorms, where the microwaves were located, were often the site of communal cooking and shared meals. Brisman (2007) argues that commissary serves to keep incarcerated individuals docile, as it offers some food choice, preventing rebellion against the significant institutional power asserted through the state issue diet. The availability of commissary for those who could access it relieved some of the punitive pressure of the state issue diet as it allowed women to express choice over consumption and to emphasize the social nature of food. Following Abu Lughod's (1990) suggestion, I view these daily acts not as a preventative to large-scale rebellion but as a window into the workings of power. The no-frills policies that shaped the diet also removed privacy and promoted constant surveillance in the dorm-style unit. This amplified instability in daily life, in part because incarcerated women's actions were on display, promoting suspicion and uncertainty in women's relationships with one another. The communal nature of food consumption thus carried with it significant risk, as women were pressured to share their limited resources and were sometimes stolen from if others assessed they had more than they deserved. Women's interactional moves to claim eligibility therefore were partially necessary to negotiating their access to resources and to prevent challenges to their alternative food practices.

For instance, meal preparations often coexisted with discourses of grossness that justified women's need for commissary fare. In the following exchange, Little Baby and her girlfriend, Tonka, white women in their early twenties, are eating ramen noodles with dehydrated beans and a cheese sauce made using the communal microwave:

Transcript 2. Commissary Meal

1	Tonka:	Does that even look good or does it look gross?
2	Little Baby:	It looks delicious!
3	Researcher:	It reminds me of, actually it looks like Hamburger Helper to me
4	Tonka:	Yeah?
5	Researcher:	Mhm (.) how is it?
6	Tonka:	Have you tried it with beans?
7	Little Baby:	It's delicious
8	Researcher:	Is this the first meal you guys have eaten today?
9	Little Baby:	Not me. I don't miss meals very often
10	Tonka:	This will be the only meal I eat today
11	Researcher:	Wow
12	Little Baby:	No shit you're going to dinner
13	Tonka:	No I'm not!
14	Little Baby:	Yes you are!

Transcript 2 (*Continued*)

15	Tonka:	No I'm not!
16	Little Baby:	Every meal [we] have this fight
17	Tonka:	[She] she wants me to go to the kitchen and I
18		don't want to go
19	Little Baby:	You're going!
20	Tonka:	No I'm not!
21	Little Baby:	What's for dinner?
22	Tonka:	Chicken salad,
23	Little Baby:	You're going!
24	Tonka:	Onion salad. I've never been, no I'm not going. I'm not going
25	Little Baby:	You're going!
26	Tonka:	I will throw up the second I walk in there
27	Little Baby:	I don't care

Tonka asks me if their creation looks good or gross, recognizing that their prized commissary meals may be unappetizing to an outsider with more food options. Little Baby quickly jumps in to say it looks delicious, and I compare the creation to a common household meal, diminishing its potential oddness. After negotiating the meal's desirability, I ask if this lunchtime meal is their first of the day. Little Baby explains that she rarely misses state issue, while Tonka states that this will be her only meal today. Little Baby adamantly disagrees, emphasizing the importance of eating state issue with an expletive in line 12 and arguing back and forth emphatically multiple times. Tonka insists that she will throw up if she goes to the kitchen in line 26, claiming a visceral response to the food—her body will reject it. Tonka is both constructing the nastiness of the prison diet and distancing herself from its moral connotations, portraying herself as a person who cannot eat it and therefore needs the commissary meal she and Little Baby are creating. With this stance, Tonka claims eligibility as someone with choice over her diet, and it results in her continual hunger, as she cannot sustain herself on what she and her girlfriend can afford from commissary. While Tonka may be using throwing up hyperbolically, throwing up from the prison fare was, according to my participants, quite common. Many women told me they got H. pylori when they first entered the prison, a digestive bacteria blamed on the food. Those who received treatment from the prison's medical services, in the form of a strong round of antibiotics, were charged a co-pay that few could afford. Eating the food could make you sick, making Tonka's strategy both a moral project and potentially a necessary move to maintain health as much as possible in the toxic environment.

A further way the prison diet disciplines is by defining how, when, and where the state issue meals must be consumed. Women must eat at the cafeteria at the

designated time, which often involves standing in long lines in the unforgiving desert heat with no shade, and they are not allowed to trade food or take it with them to consume later. Like all rules in the prison, these rules were commonly broken and women were sometimes punished for the infractions. In the following exchange, Muñeca, a young Latina woman, and Berry, a young white woman, discuss the lunch Muñeca has taken from the cafeteria:

Transcript 3. Contraband

1	Muñeca:	Try and keep calm cause this is contraband ([*laughs*])
2	Researcher:	The sandwich?
3	Berry:	Where's the popcorn?
4	Muñeca:	Yours?
5	Berry:	Uh huh
6	Muñeca:	Under your pillow
7	Berry:	Oh ok
8	Muñeca:	Did you want it?
9	Berry:	No it's ok
10	Muñeca:	Ok
11	Berry:	I just [didn't know where] it was
12	Muñeca:	[Want half of this?] Sure?
13	Berry:	I'll take part without crust

In line 1, Muñeca warns me not to draw attention to them as she pulls out a sandwich from her lunch. She smuggled her lunch in her bra, a common move that can result in punishment, as women are sometimes searched when they leave the cafeteria. Defying the rules of consumption, Muñeca reappropriates her state issue meal and transforms its indexical force. She expresses ownership over the meal and emphasizes the social aspects of food by sharing it with Berry. Outside the rigid cafeteria with metal stools and constant guard supervision, state issue can be remade into something desirable, or at least manipulated to express some choice over consumption. Many women took their sandwiches out of the cafeteria not to share them but simply to microwave the mystery meat, in the hopes of killing off any harmful bacteria. These reappropriations carry risk, as they may be observed by guards or incarcerated women who may challenge someone's use of their meal. Muñeca therefore must continue to negotiate her ownership of the meal even after removing it from the cafeteria. She begins by telling me to keep calm in line 1, both alerting me to the rule breaking and asking me not to do anything about it. Berry then expresses ownership over the popcorn from Muñeca's meal in line 3, which Muñeca has already hid under Berry's pillow. This move may indicate their close friendship—Berry and Muñeca had been close since they met in county jail before they were transferred to state

prison—or it may be Muñeca's way of ensuring Berry's compliance with her stolen meal or gaining her favor for later food sharing. Likely, it is each of these at once, as women continually navigate friendships and resource sharing in the highly restricted and risky environment. Finally, Muñeca offers Berry half her sandwich in line 12, and Berry expresses her desire for a part without crust (line 13), both asserting choice over the meal and continuing to negotiate her relationship with Muñeca. The shared meal expresses eligibility by emphasizing ownership, choice, and social bonding through food, which both challenges the presupposition that the state issue meal is solely for caloric necessity and mitigates the significant risk created through its reappropriation.

These practices continue the semiotic negotiation of least in public discourses that position incarcerated women as unworthy of adequate and culturally valued relationships with food. The women's discourses that express the grossness of the diet, their alternative food practices, and their rule breaking index their worthiness and deny the validity of the image of a desperate eater presupposed by the state issue diet. These practices reveal the complex power of the prison institution, indicating the ideological force of the state issue diet and the continual navigation of identity and worth in the LEP-shaped prison landscape. When prisoners are positioned as least worthy and outside the moral order, social practices such as these are critical to maintaining dignity and humanity. The next section explores the vending machine meals at visitation, significant both for supplementing the prison's meager diet and maintaining kin ties during incarceration.

"The visitation room get you fat": Claiming Eligibility

Transcript 4. Lee-Lee and L on Yard

1	L:	Last Sunday I had uh, I didn't want no burrito or nothing I burned out on
2		them, so I had me some, uh, (.) th- the chili corn chips?
3	Lee-Lee:	Mhm.
4	L:	Uh, (.) the almond joy
5	Researcher:	Oo:: I like almond joy
6	L:	Uh some popcorn,
7	Lee-Lee:	Mhm
8	L:	it was just junk after junk, and then my granddaughter bought a top part,
9		and she didn't want the rest of it, and so we sat there for about twenty
10		minutes, then my grandson wanted that, (.) what is it, that uh, that, that
11		Danish?
12	Lee-Lee:	Yeah!
13	L:	The cheese Danish? And he didn't like it after he got it so I said you ain't
14		wasting this! so I ate that
15		((*all laugh*))

Transcript 4 (*Continued*)

16	L:	Yeah
17	Lee-Lee:	Saturday [(?)]
18	L:	[I] was so full when I got back there eating all that junk
19	Lee-Lee:	Let me tell you Saturday I kept, we kept spending and spending and the
20		quarters would not run out?
21	L:	Mhm
22	Lee-Lee:	And I was like I'm done, y'all can go home. I'm tired ((*laughing*)) now
23	Researcher:	((*laughs*))
24	Lee-Lee:	I was so [fu:::ll]
25	L:	[Usually] I get the burrito, enchilada, whatever it is? but it's four
26		dollars or something
27	Lee-Lee:	Yeah
28	L:	Cause Arline said get what you want, they run a candy store
29	Researcher:	Oh:::
30	L:	And that's where all the quarters come from
31	Researcher:	That's nice
32	L:	Yeah ((*long pause*)) yep she said, and don't worry we ain't gonna run out
33		of quarters
34	Researcher:	((*laughs*))
35	L:	But I'll be eating too much, even more than all that stuff, I would have to
36		watch my girlish figure
37		((*all laugh*))
38	Lee-Lee:	((*laughing*)) (?) girl!
39	L:	That means that all this junk, this, this place up here, the visitation room
40		get you fat

Hanging out on the prison yard one day, Lee-Lee and L, both African American women in their early fifties and old friends, discuss their last visit with me. Visitation occurred only on weekends and was limited based on a prisoner's phase-level in the reward classification system. It was also regularly suspended as a punishment for rule infractions. Some women, like Lee-Lee, received regular visits they could rely on. Others, however, received sporadic visits or no visits at all. L and Lee-Lee's narrative centers around the food they enjoyed, marking the importance of vending machine meals in visitation. Lee-Lee makes this abundantly clear in lines 19–24, joking that she got so full she asked her family to leave. Visitors to Summerville can bring with them up to $20 in quarters to purchase highly overpriced vending machine fare with selections ranging from soda-pop and chips to microwavable meals like the burrito and enchilada L mentions. These overpriced vending machine meals are common in prisons across the US (Brisman 2007), adding another financial burden to the already significant cost of visitation. Despite the expense, these meals are essential for many incarcerated women as they replace a nonexistent state issue lunch. While calorically necessary to avoid hunger, they also serve as critical sites to challenge the punitive power of food in prison.

This section explores the food narratives women construct during and about these vending machine meals. These narratives allow women to challenge their position as least eligible by expressing an exaggerated taste of luxury, thereby denying the desperate prisoner presupposed by state issue. Further, I argue these narratives are critical to maintaining kin ties and demonstrating their moral worth to the kin networks whose financial support they rely on to supplement the prison's meager diet. Since prisoners overwhelmingly come from poor communities, these financial pressures are significant. Coupled with the surveillance and degradation kin face to maintain ties, or what Comfort (2003) deems the "secondary prisonization," the cost of maintaining contact is sometimes insurmountable.

In sharp contrast to talk about the state issue diet, which overwhelmingly emphasizes grossness and scarcity and aims to distance, narratives during and about vending machine meals often highlight choice, pleasure, and overindulgence. As Ochs and Capps (1996) argue, narratives "interface self and society" and are a critical resource for negotiating identity (19). These narratives reposition women's relationship to food, defying the taste of necessity embedded in the state issue diet by expressing an exaggerated taste of luxury. L begins her narrative by highlighting her choice in the vending machine cuisine, explaining she was sick of the burrito so she chose chili-flavored corn chips. For Bourdieu (1984), freedom of choice is the hallmark of taste of luxury. The food choices that express luxury are variable according to class, gender, and other aspects of identity—including preferences for dining out, pleasurable foods, health foods, and ethnic foods—and social groups often value both the taste of necessity and the taste of luxury (de Morias Sato et al. 2016). For instance, Ochs et al. (1996) found that Italian middle-class families heavily valued pleasure in food (taste of luxury), while Caucasian American middle-class families emphasized nutritional value and food as a material good (taste of necessity) alongside considering food as a reward and, rarely, food as pleasure. These forms of taste and their value are thus contextually dependent. I consider narratives about and around vending machine meals to be an exaggerated taste of luxury in that they emphasize desire, pleasure, and excess and minimize nutritional value completely. This minimization is clear in this transcript as Lee-Lee emphasizes the large amount of food she ate (lines 1–14), including her grandchildren's leftovers; stresses how full she was (line 18); and, critically, repeatedly calls it "junk" (lines 8, 18, and 39). Her retelling of the feast positions it as purely a pleasurable endeavor, downplaying its necessity even though she has no alternative for lunch. The value of this form of taste is emergent in these interactions as participants co-construct the taste of luxury. Lee-Lee and I contribute to the narrative of excess and pleasure, with my contribution that I like Almond Joy in line 5, and Lee-Lee's continual affirmations and talk about her own vending

machine meal that emphasizes her fullness (lines 19–24). Both Lee-Lee and L highlight how much they spent, ignoring the limitations on quarters to create an aura of excess. In lines 19–20 Lee-Lee claims, "the quarters would not run out," and L says her family assures her they have plenty of quarters from their candy store (lines 28–33). Finally, L ends her narrative by claiming she ate even more than she described and joking that the visitation room makes you fat and that she needs to watch her girlish figure (lines 35–40).[7] Her joke enhances her narrative of excess, indicating she is able to consume so much food on the weekend that the scarce and minimal state issue diet can be overpowered. Rather than the least eligible, dependent on state issue—disgusting food scraps tossed their way—women often use food narratives to claim relationships to food that challenge public discourses on prisoner deservingness.

Similar narratives were common at the visitation table itself, as incarcerated women and their visitors gathered face-to-face, typically over a vending machine meal. The cafeteria-style room that held visitation was busy, loud, and crowded, with visitors and prisoners gathered around small square tables and officers walking through the tight isles between them, their radios adding to the constant chatter. A row of vending machines lined one wall of the stark white cafeteria-style room (fig. 3). Prisoners were not allowed to touch money or use the vending machines, a line on the floor marking the distance they had to maintain from the automated commodity exchange. Women would often stand behind their visitors, pointing or yelling out the items they desired. Other visitors came anticipating their loved one's desires and purchased food while they waited for them to arrive. Microwaves in the room often had long lines as individuals waited to heat up their ready meals, which were both expensive and meager.

The following exchange, like transcript 1, occurred between Toni and her brother over a vending machine meal. Toni begins the visit by discussing her breakfast this morning, which contrasts starkly with her description of the state issue bread in transcript 1:

Transcript 5. Toni's Visit (2)

1	Toni:	So, I go to breakfast, ok, because it was supposed to be a good breakfast
2		this morning, alright. I didn't eat my peanut butter, I didn't eat my cereal, I
3		gave it all away, 'cause I knew my visit was coming
4	Researcher:	Right, [right, right]
5	Toni:	[You know what I'm saying?] I don't need to double

7. Her joke draws on heteronormative standards of beauty, both relying on and questioning the assumption that fat is negative. The negotiation of beauty standards was a critical part of women's social interactions and identity negotiations on the prison yard.

Figure 3

6	Researcher:	Uh huh
7	Toni:	But I go to give my breakfast away to someone, so I ate my eggs a little
8		bit, well you have to understand, it's like that much (.) [eggs] and ham,
9	Brother:	[Mhm]
10	Toni:	you know, it's not like a ((*laughing*)) full serving of food, so I'm eating
11		((*quietly*)) and the guard's in there. And he's eating his made to order
12		breakfast. Which is like a fucking egg (.) over easy, I mean over easy.
13		Like I haven't had yolk in a whole year and he didn't finish it, and he left
14		a whole egg, a piece of toast, his fried fucking hash brown potato, the
15		onion!
16	Researcher:	((*laughs*))
17	Toni:	Then he's like 'you want this,' I'm like, y-, y-, yes! ((*laughing*)) I put the
18		egg in one piece of toast put the potatoes and went ((*biting sound*)) and the
19		yolk, I went oh:::! ((*laughs*)) There was yolk dripping down my face
20		((*laughing*)) it was so good! It was like I was having sex [at the breakfast]
21	Brother:	[With an egg]
22	Toni:	table. With an egg
23	Researcher:	Wo:::w!
24	Toni:	I went like this, I went ((*licking face*))
25		((*all laugh*))
26	Toni:	I did! They, my friend was like, it's drip, I went ((*licks*)) I'll get it
27	Researcher:	I got, I got that!
28	Toni:	I got it! No big deal ((*laughing*)) Yolk is so great

Transcript 5 (*Continued*)

29	Brother:	Yeah
30	Researcher:	Wo:::::w!
31	Brother:	I like the way it smells

Toni begins by explaining that she only went to breakfast to give it away, distancing herself from the state issue meal she has continually positioned as disgusting and unnatural in conversations with her family. She then narrates her experience eating an officer's leftover breakfast in graphic detail, emphasizing her pleasure and enjoyment of the egg yolk which, although coming from the same raw material as the state issue meal, has been prepared to order, accommodating a specific desire. Her breakfast both expresses food preferences and breaks the rules of consumption, distancing herself from the forced choice of the state issue diet and the punitive rules surrounding its consumption. Peppered with exclamations of enjoyment and facial expressions of pleasure, Toni compares the experience of eating the forbidden food to sex (line 20). Like Lee-Lee and L's narratives above, Toni expresses an exaggerated taste of luxury. Her narrative demonstrates her ability to have pleasurable relationships with food, denying the hegemonic negotiations of the floating signifier least that position her, as a prisoner, in the least eligible slot, prescribing her to the taste of necessity embedded in the state issue diet. I participate in her narrative of pleasure, expressing awe in lines 23 and 30, and her brother affirms her pleasure in lines 29 and 31, adding that he likes the smell of yolk. Her narrative does critical work to claim her moral worth to her family, on whose financial support she depends.

Although many women on the minimum-security yard were employed, these jobs typically paid about ten cents an hour. Kin networks supplemented the prison diet in multiple ways: buying food from the vending machines; putting money on an individual's books to purchase goods from commissary (which required a transaction fee for a private company); sending "secure packs" containing food and hygiene products directly from commissary; and bringing food to special "food visits" four times a year. In addition to costs related to food, visitors often had to take time off work, pay for lodging, childcare, processing fees, phone calls, and travel costs. The staggering cost of visitation and phone calls is cited by prisoners' families as one of the biggest barriers to maintaining contact (Arditti et al. 2003). Harris (2016) explores the many ways the financial burden of incarceration is now largely born by prisoners and their kin, extending beyond these costs of contact and including court fees, fines, restitution, and legal expenses, entrenching poverty for the lowest-class members of society. Interactions around

the visitation table are one of the critical ways these kin ties are maintained, and incarcerated women often use them as opportunities to demonstrate they are doing well in prison—focused on self-improvement and personal growth (Labotka 2014). Narratives of excess at the visitation table are another means of demonstrating their deservingness and fighting against the stigma of LEP that calls into question their moral worth.

The following exchange occurred between China, a young African American woman, and her aunt. Every Sunday, China curls her hair, has a friend put on her makeup, cleans her shoes, puts on her nicest uniform, and waits in the hopes that her name will get called for visitation. The expense of phone calls keeps China guessing from week to week whether her mother and/or her aunt, her two allowed visitors, will be there. In the following interaction, China reminisces with her aunt about the feast she had last week:

Transcript 6. China's Visit

1	China:	Mmm. One week, last week when my mom came, I ate so much.
2		((*Laughter*))
3	China:	I swear I felt like she brought, probably brought like almost twenty bucks
4		in quarters. I was like,
5	Aunt:	Wo:::w.
6	China:	so maybe like fifteen, twenty, it was somewhere around [there] cause I
7	Researcher:	[Wow.]
8	China:	mean I had two sodas, a bag of chips, popcorn, a candy bar, bur- bean
9		and cheese burrito, I had, um,
10	Aunt:	The hot fries
11	China:	The hot fries, I had
12		((*Laughter*))
13	Aunt:	Were your's, were you sick?
14	China:	((*Shakes Head*))
15		I was like, my mom's like, 'you gonna be sick?'
16	Aunt:	Mhm.
17	Researcher:	((*Laughs*))

China's aunt has brought quarters with her today, and China relays the feast from her last visit while she is enjoying a Snickers bar. Like L and Lee-Lee, she emphasizes how many quarters her mom brought (lines 3–6). She creates herself not as the stigmatized, disdained prisoner dependent on the state to feed her the bare minimum, but instead expresses her indulgence in an excess of pleasurable foods. Her aunt participates in this creation of self, co-constructing China's narrative. In line 10, she jumps in to add hot fries to China's list and, in line 13, she encourages the narrative of over-indulgence by asking if she got sick. China

echoes her aunt's question in line 15, reporting her mother's speech to emphasize it was enough to make one ill. Together, they construct the value of this exaggerated taste of luxury as they emphasize the meal as a pleasurable endeavor and ignore its necessity.

Later in the visit, China expresses sadness that her mother didn't come today, explaining she would rather see her mother than have money on her books. But before the visit ends, China tearfully asks her aunt to remind her mother she needs soap. She tells her aunt that she has been depressed and crying all week because of how dependent and helpless she feels. Fully aware of the financial burden she is placing on her family, China has no way to relieve that burden which is beginning to strain her relationships and compile a debt to her family. Her seemingly upbeat narrative imagines a feast of choice out of dependence on her aunt and her mother to support her for the next four and a half years of her sentence. As families are not immune to LEP morality, interactions like these can be critical to maintaining necessary financial support during incarceration.

In addition to financial costs, visitors were subject to degrading security measures to maintain contact with incarcerated women. Their interactions at visitation were monitored and they went through security each time they entered the prison. These and other security measures regulating visitors extend carceral surveillance and criminal suspicion to prisoners' kin networks. Comfort (2003) explains visitors become "quasi-inmates" as they are transformed in the liminal space while waiting for visitation—the pains of imprisonment are granted to them in a "secondary prisonization." Visitors to Summerville are subject to strict rules for all visits, including what they can wear, bring with them, and how they can interact with prisoners. They must go through a metal detector, submit to scrutiny over their clothes and property, and stand with their backs to a fence as a drug-sniffing K-9 jumps at the fence and inspects their rears on every visit. There are multiple ways beyond visitation that the false inside/outside binary is blurred for prisoners and their kin, including monitored phone calls and letters, background checks and fees for visitation approval, surveillance over their households before or after incarceration, and a considerable financial investment in legal fees. These, along with household accommodations made to maintain ties with an incarcerated loved one, demonstrate the significant transformation of the domestic sphere around the carceral space (Comfort 2002).

Slim, a Latina woman in her early thirties, had been reminding her mother for weeks not to forget the quarters when she came to visit. She hadn't seen her family in nine months, since her incarceration. After saving up enough money to make the over seventy-mile one-way trip, her mother arrived with $20 in

quarters wrapped neatly in plastic rolls from the bank. She was so scared of going through security that she was shaking, her husband holding her hand until the last minute:

Transcript 7. Slim's Visit

1	Mother:	It was horrible.
2	Researcher:	Yeah.
3	Mother:	And I was the first one in line? And then they told me I had to put the
4		quarters in a baggy. And I had to go all the way back to some Food Mart
5		at Chevron, and, and buy the plastic baggies.
6	Slim:	([*Laughs*])
7	Researcher:	Go:::sh.
8	Mother:	Two dollars and s-, what did I say seventy-nine cents?
9	Researcher:	Oh my gosh.
10	Mother:	For a little box of, of glad bags. And then I had to put them in the bag.
11		Because I said well they're in, they're in plastic rolls? Aren't they, come
12		on? No! He said no! You must, and he had, I was telling her, he had a
13		sandwich that he had eaten in his, he had a bag like that all wrapped up
14		like that? And his sandwich, w- he had, he had all, he had it half eaten.
15	Slim:	([*Laughs*])
16	Researcher:	Did you ask him?
17	Mother:	And I, and I had my hand like this and I thought if I could go like this
18	Slim:	([*Laughs*])

Slim's mother recognizes the absurdity of the rules of visitation. Her terror at entering the prison and subjecting herself to the officers, metal detector, and K9 highlights the emotional cost of maintaining contact. Without knowledge of the expansive, arbitrary, and constantly changing rules of visitation (Comfort 2003), she did her part in arriving early and being the first in line. Her narrative highlights the irony that she is sent away to purchase a plastic baggy, spending another $2.79, when the officer is eating a sandwich out of a plastic bag. Slim laughs at this absurdity, though she recognizes that there is no room for negotiation, or as I suggest, asking him for the bag. Such moves could easily lead to a denial of visitation, after all the work and monetary investment made to see her daughter.

Slim's five children, who her mother was caring for while she was incarcerated, were not there for the visit. Her mother explained, "I don't want them to know this place exists." Over half of the US prison population is a parent of minor children (Allard 2012). Many of those parents, like Slim, were the primary caretaker before incarceration. For the families that can and will care for those children, childcare is another significant cost of having a family member in prison. Many caretakers choose not to take children to visit because of

the emotional trauma and confusion caused by the degrading environment (Arditti et al. 2003; Allard 2012). Slim excitedly listens to her mom describe what each of her children are up to, knowing she won't see them for the entire two and a half years she is incarcerated. She awkwardly laughs when her mom explains that her son was begging her to bring Slim home with her. The lack of contact between parents and their children during incarceration is one of the factors that can inspire complex, enduring impacts on children, including unstable living conditions, increased chance of poverty, and severe psychological stress (Austin et al. 2001).

Slim's mother's experience of fearfully entering the prison only to be sent away to purchase plastic baggies for her quarters illustrates the emotional toll of visitation and justifies her decision not to bring Slim's children. As she frantically drove to the closest convenience mart, she realized she was not alone in the plastic bag situation:

> And uh, anyway, it uh, it was funny because I went, and there was a box open. There was a box open and somebody had taken one out and just left it there. And I was really, my mind at that moment, I was thinking I gotta get back there because that guy said twenty minutes, I had twenty minutes? And I'm like, so, I'm, push that box away and I grabbed another one put it away and paid for it, and I told her, I said there's a box over there that's open. She said, she rolled her eyes and she says, "Oh yeah. Some people do that. Ok, thank you, I know." And I said, "Well I just, I bought mine." So, I said, "It wasn't me that took anything outta the other one."

Another almost three dollars and hoop to jump through after the quarters, gas, visitation fee, time away from children and work, buying a box of plastic baggies is enough to influence a small theft for some visitors. Slim's mother makes a point to tell the cashier that it wasn't her that stole the baggy, positioning herself in a worthier category than the thief. She recognizes the temptation enhanced by the time limit set by the officer, himself sitting there with a plastic baggy in front of him, as he sent her away to purchase her own. The extension of carceral techniques, stigma, and debt to prisoners' kin networks challenges the inside/outside binary that assumes an easy distinction between prisoners and all those outside, or "law abiding citizens in the free world," constantly created or presupposed in public discourses. As these discourses negotiate the floating signifier of least, they strengthen the cultural assumption of a hierarchical moral order while negotiating which group or groups fit into the bottom rung. Even as discourses compete with one another for the filling in of least,

they simplify complex social and political dynamics and send reverberations out from the least eligible group to their extended kin networks and communities. The debt of incarceration that often requires prisoners to negotiate their own worth to their families is only one small piece of the extension of LEP outward, subjecting kin to surveillance, humiliation, institutionalization, and limited rights.

Conclusion

Following Abu Lughod's (1990) suggestion to consider resistance a "diagnostic of power" (42), this article has revealed the complexities of prison power and challenged the inside/outside binary so easily drawn in public discourses on prisons. This binary is complicated, in part, by the public discourses themselves that negotiate prisoner eligibility and influence prison conditions. These discourses often center around food—a culturally significant physical necessity—claiming that prisoners deserve diets no better than the worst-off free person. The hegemonic negotiation of least to place prisoners on the bottom rung supports punitive prison diets that presuppose the moral bankruptcy and ineligibility of incarcerated individuals. Prisoners thus embody the stigmatized social category through their weighed, measured, rule governed, and nutritionally minimalized diets, embodiments they fight against in interactions with one another and their kin on whose support they depend. The interactions explored in this essay highlight the ways women and their kin navigate the morally loaded penal diet that positions prisoners as the least worthy of culturally rich, satisfying, sensual, varied, nutritious, and chosen diets. The reverberating impacts of LEP-influenced prison policies are impossible to quantify as they move well beyond the prison walls. The punitive diet financially burdens prisoners and their kin, weakens kin ties, and accrues prisoner debt, each of which further entrench poverty for the lowest-class members of society. LEP has constructed a permanent underclass, the permanency of the identity crystalized in the increasingly rigid and prevalent felony following laws deemed by Chin (2012) as the "new civil death."

Diet is not the only aspect of prison policy subject to negotiations of prisoner eligibility, however. Currently, as I complete this manuscript from self-quarantine in May of 2020, coronavirus is sweeping across the globe. Natural disasters, like the heated commentary after Hurricane Harvey, throw power relations into sharp relief. Prisons and jails across the US have suspended visitation, cutting off a vital source of food, support, and means of maintaining kin ties. The consequences of this suspension will likely be vast and far-reaching for those incarcerated. Poor quality food, overcrowded housing, lack of medical care, and other conditions

encouraged and applauded by LEP have set the stage for the rapid, unmitigated spread of the coronavirus in US prisons and jails, many of which have become virus hotspots endangering the lives of those incarcerated. Despite this devastation, a resurgence of LEP public discourses has followed, continuing the negotiation of the floating signifier least to question incarcerated individuals' access to medical care. For instance, an NPR article about an Ohio prison in which 73 percent of inmates tested positive for coronavirus (Chappell 2020), posted on their Facebook page, was followed by another heated comment board. Many comments protested the availability of tests for inmates when "taxpayers," "ordinary citizens," and "the general population" don't have access to enough testing, arguing the healthcare in prison should not surpass that of those not incarcerated. Again, prisoners are positioned as least eligible, deserving no more than anyone outside of prison. LEP discourses remain a powerful, yet unacknowledged, force in the construction of commonsense views of prisoner deservingness. As these views continue to influence the policies and practices of mass incarceration—and to define prisoners as least, less than, other, inside—the stage is set for the continued animalistic treatment of prisoners. Recognizing and respecting the humanity of all prisoners is a critical first step to challenging this hegemonic negotiation and interrupting the logics of mass incarceration.

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