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The Dual Meanings of Artifacts: Public Culture, Food, and Government in the “What’s Cooking, Uncle Sam?” Exhibition

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The Dual Meanings of Artifacts:**Public Culture, Food and Government in the “What’s Cooking, Uncle Sam?” Exhibition**

Abstract

In 2011, “What’s Cooking, Uncle Sam? The Government’s Effect on the American Diet” (WCUS) was exhibited at the O’Brien Gallery of the National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. Afterwards, it toured the country, visiting the CDC’s David J. Sencer Museum in Atlanta; the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, and the Kansas Museum of History in Topeka. The exhibition website states that WCUS was “made possible” by candy corporation Mars, Incorporated. WCUS featured over a hundred artifacts tracing “the Government’s effect on what Americans eat.” Divided into four thematic sections (Farm, Factory, Kitchen, and Table), WCUS moves from agrarianism, through industrial food production and into mess halls, cafeterias, and individual kitchens. Photos, documents, news clippings and colorful propaganda posters portray the government as a benevolent supporter of agriculture, feeder of soldiers and children, and protector of consumer health and safety. Visitors are positioned as citizens in an ideological mélange of paternalism and patriotism. In this rhetorical walk-through of the exhibition, we consider the display of archival materials for purposes of positioning, in consideration of past and present issues of diet and governance. Making explicit unstated assumptions, we claim that, although propagandistic artifacts take on different meanings to those viewing them decades later as memorabilia, they maintain their ideological flavor.

Keywords: “What’s Cooking, Uncle Sam?” Exhibition, Public Culture, Role of Government, Visual Rhetoric, National Archives

Food. We love it, fear it, and obsess about it. We demand that our government ensure that it is safe, cheap, and abundant. In response, the Federal Government has been a factor in the production, regulation, research, innovation, and economics of our food supply. It has also attempted, with varying success, to change the eating habits of Americans. From the farm to the dinner table, explore the records of the National Archives that trace the Government's effect on what Americans eat (Kamps, 2011).

So states the back cover of *What's Cooking, Uncle Sam? The Government's Effect on the American Diet* (hereafter, "Records Book"), documenting the National Archives exhibition by the same name (Henceforth, WCUS). On display in the O'Brien Gallery from June 2011 to January 2012 in Washington, D.C., WCUS was described as a "must-see show" by the *Smithsonian Magazine* (Rhodes, 2011). WCUS also toured the country from 2014-2016, spending a few months at the CDC's David J. Sencer Museum in Atlanta, at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia, and at the Kansas Museum of History in Topeka. According to the WCUS website, the national tour was "made possible by Mars, Incorporated," the multinational purveyor of candy bars and other products.

Curator Alice D. Kamps and colleagues authored an eponymously titled account of WCUS in *Museums & Social Issues* (Kamps, Nastick, Clifton, & Martin, 2012) where they describe a successful exhibition created with a modest budget of \$200,000. According to Kamps and co-authors (2012) WCUS received considerable media coverage and social media mentions; spawned an incredible 36 public events (including book lectures, film programs, panel discussions and a game show); and even a companion restaurant in D.C., called America Eats, founded by "local celebrity chef" José Ramón Andrés (p. 41). The authors (2012) note that the exhibition contained a metamessage that "government records touch on almost every aspect of

our lives” (p. 42) and they suggest that the records displayed reflect current national concerns about food health and safety (p. 43).

The CFP for this special issue asked for the consideration of what exhibitions do, and what they ask of visitors. With WCUS, we ask, what were the main themes? Since WCUS is focused on the influence of government in determining food choices, how were changing nutritional recommendations reflected? What kinds of evidence would document claims about the government’s role in food choices? What about curator choices? Does the selection of artifacts align with ongoing national priorities? How might curator choices promote certain ideologies over others? What is the influence of the food industry, and is it evident in an exhibition with a major food corporation as the sponsor? Finally, are propagandistic artifacts (such as WW2 era posters urging community gardens, or minimizing food waste) still ‘operant’? That is, do they still serve their originally intended purpose, or are they now mainly appreciated as historical curiosities? This essay is a preliminary venture into answering these questions. To preview our findings, we will argue that, although the artifacts displayed meant something different to those who originally beheld them, they still function ideologically.

Data for this analysis include field notes and memories of Elizabeth’s visit to WCUS in 2011, augmented by existing documentary materials available in print or online. Many of the items studied can be found in the Records Book. In addition, a decade later, there are still online traces of WCUS that inform this analysis. For instance, on the [Press Kit](#) webpage there are seven “Select Images”; a pamphlet in pdf format; and a link to a [Flickr](#) page with 68 colorful images. There’s also a [Google Arts & Culture](#) website with 50 images and two videos, dated 2014. WCUS contained four sections, organized sequentially. According to curator Kamps (2011), “Farm,” “Factory,” “Kitchen” and “Table,” represent key “areas of government intervention” (p.

13). Before describing the exhibition in detail, we situate this research within the study of public culture and rhetorical studies of exhibitions.

Public Culture and Exhibitions

Hariman and Lucaites (2007) describe public culture as “those texts, images, discourses, and arts that have developed historically through use of modern communicative media to define the relationship between the citizen and the state” (p. 26). Public culture includes communication artifacts in a variety of modes, including speeches, posters, news stories, “...and other media as they are used to define audiences as citizens, uphold norms of political representation and institutional transparency, and promote the general welfare” (p. 26). From this definition we take it that the citizen’s relationship to government institutions and policies are a key consideration in public culture studies.

For Olson, Finnegan, and Hope (2008), visual rhetoric refers to “those symbolic actions enacted primarily through visual means, made meaningful through culturally derived ways of looking and seeing and endeavoring to influence diverse publics” (p. 3). Visual practices such as those employed in museum exhibits, “can provide crucial social, emotional, and mnemonic materials for political identity and action” (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 14). Lynch (2013) observes that museums have the rhetorical capacity “to fully immerse visitors into an experience and an attendant subject position” (p. 7). In a study of a science museum exhibit about cardiovascular health, Lee (2019) suggests how the “disease candidate” (p. 710) subject position is fashioned: By focusing first on the normal function of the cardiopulmonary system, then leaning into an increasingly morbid focus on common risk factors (such as overweight) and everyday symptoms (such as tiredness), the exhibit hails visitors, forcing an acknowledgement of health risks (p. 709). The question of subject position is also central to the current project.

A noted feature of exhibitions is their partiality (Blair, Dickinson, & Ott, 2010; Zelizer, 1995). Armada (1998) states “Because of the limitations of symbol-use, museum exhibits can only cue us in to segments of history—they can never represent ‘the’ past in all of its social, cultural, and political complexity” (p. 236). As with any symbolic act, museums and memory sites invite visitors to focus on some aspects of history, and not others, as artifacts are chosen to represent a time period and events. WCUS can’t include everything—so it is necessarily truncated, however, we will note even major events in the history of food are absent.

White (2009) explores exhibits created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture World’s Fair Exhibit from 1933-1934 and argues that the wide range of images stimulated viewers to see the U.S. as abundant, and to crave promises of plenty. Removed from their original context, the meanings of food propaganda can seem quiescent, yet we will argue that visitors are still being positioned to regard the state as benevolent and resources as plentiful.

To summarize this glance at the literature, we emphasize that public culture is located in the interstices between subject and state, and that exhibits, in addition to being partial, help forge identities. We hope this paper contributes to the literature about museum rhetoric by focusing on a federal institution’s own self-reflexive posturing, bringing visitors into citizenship. Themes of paternalism, duty, purposeful forgetting, public/private and whiteness will later be identified, after the description of the exhibition which follows.

Introducing WCUS

The four sections are color coded for visual demarcation. Items appear along the walls and in the middle of each room. The recommended path moves from Farm to Factory, with the Kitchen and Table areas parallel to one another, allowing visitors to circle in a clockwise direction around those sections, before exiting the exhibit. For each section below, we mention

select items from the Records Book, the National Archives website and Flickr page. Factual details about historic legislation are derived from the exhibition. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs are black and white.

“Farm”

Artifacts in the “Farm” section appear on muted, mustard-colored walls, and are primarily related to post-Civil War agricultural policies. “Foreign plant exploration” is documented. For example, a 1906 photo of agricultural explorer Frank N. Meyer (of Meyer lemon fame) who traveled the world collecting seeds and specimens. Seed packets illustrate the Department of Agriculture’s Office of Congressional Seed Distribution, which, in the late 19th and early 20th century, mailed seeds to rural citizens of congressional districts. Pictures from agricultural experiment stations illustrate the Hatch Act of 1887, which created stations affiliated with land grant colleges of agriculture. The undated *Pig Cafeteria* photo shows a (probably taxidermized) hog, standing on hind legs, holding a tray, as a pair of human hands ties a bib around its neck. It is identified as a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) exhibit to inform farmers about swine nutrition. In 1886, dairy producers prevailed upon Congress to enact the Margarine Act, which placed a tax on oleomargarine, a butter substitute made from lard. Mug shots of violators from 1886, 1915 and 1916 appear.

Throughout the exhibition, many artifacts displayed are from the twelve-year tenure of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) of 1933 (and other New Deal era agricultural legislation), reduced surpluses by paying farmers not to plant certain crops. In the photo entitled *Ever-normal Granary, ca. 1933*, dried ears of corn are piled high behind a wood picket fence. A Department of Agriculture posting stapled to a wood column states that grain is being stored to stabilize prices and protect against crop failures. A newspaper

article from the *Des Moines Tribune* in 1933 shows stakeholders' opinions on the first year of the AAA.

After the dust bowl disaster of the 1930s, conservation efforts such as crop rotation, terrace sloping and no-tilling helped reduce soil erosion. These techniques were encouraged throughout WW2, as demand for food increased overseas for soldiers and allied civilians, as illustrated by a 1942 poster. The poster "Get Your Farm in the Fight!" which appears on the front cover of the Records Book and brochure says "Use Conservation Methods for Bigger Yields Now!" (see Appendix 1). Along with patriotic red, white and blue text, an insignia says, "Food for Freedom." An illustration of a clean-shaven Caucasian man with rolled-up sleeves hunches forward slightly, hands gesturing towards baskets of corn, tomatoes, and potatoes. Behind him are abundant crops, and above, warplanes fly in formation. An oversized warship and factory flank him in the distance. The farmer, a symbol of national purity and citizenship (Motter & Singer, 2012), is paired with signifiers of industrialized war. Additional WW2 images include a War Food Administration poster with the imperatives "Grow More Sugar Beets in 1945...Meet Wartime Need for Sugar." Between the slogans, an illustrated farmer in hat and overalls holds an enormous beet.

"Factory"

The "Factory" walls are painted a muted grey-blue, perhaps invoking steel, or blue-collars. Under the heading "Food Frights" it reads:

The mid to late 19th century was an age of suspiciously green peas, deadly candy, and perfumed meat. Chemical additives were commonly used to preserve foods or disguise foods already spoiled, but food labels rarely reported more than the name and

manufacturer of the product. Without a regulating body, the industry was free to use any substance it chose to color, disguise, or prolong the freshness of products.

The Industrial Revolution is presented as introducing a host of household dangers. *Food Adulteration Notebook Documenting Toxic Candy, ca. 1890*, a hand-written government field notebook, documents a child's death from tainted candy. A photo of a man hunched over a bowl of tea illustrates the Tea Inspection Act of 1882. A can of "extra fancy cream sugar corn" sports a "seal of purity," with descriptive text stating that, after the 1906 passage of the Pure Food and Drugs Act and the Meat Inspection Act, "Product labels began to proclaim the purity of their ingredients" (Kamps, 2011, p. 42).

A 1906 letter from Upton Sinclair to President Teddy Roosevelt contains gruesome descriptions of condemned hogs rivaled by those from *The Jungle*. Cartoon postcards depicting noxious Chicago canned meats are displayed, which circulated in South Africa around the time of Sinclair's exposé. Chief USDA Chemist Harvey W. Wiley (who, in the days before Institutional Review Boards, ran human trials on the effects of chemical food additives), appears in 1906 lab photos. African American men (apparently shipping workers) are photographed holding up large banana clusters for inspection, circa 1906, in Baltimore. Photos depict seizure of "contaminated eggs" in 1908, women stuffing sausages in 1910, and men in white uniforms grading cow carcasses in 1906.

"Kitchen"

With a muted orange color scheme, "Kitchen" is the largest section in the Records Book with 29 images. W. O. Atwater (1844-1907), Special Agent in charge of Nutrition Investigations in the USDA Office of Experiment Stations, is profiled. His invention, which calculates caloric expenditure based on temperature, appears in the photo *Subject in Respiration Calorimeter*,

undated. This shows a seated Caucasian man reading a book in an enclosed chamber. Food guides are featured, like the “Basic Seven” recommendations from 1945, with the explanatory text, “Some might like to reinstate this food guide from World War II because butter has its own food group” (Kamps, 2011, p. 56). The Basic Seven poster takes up a page of the Records Book, and an entire wall of the built exhibition. This chart shows one food group for “green and yellow” vegetables; one for “oranges, tomatoes, and grapefruit”; and another for “potatoes and other vegetables and fruits” that includes pictures of grapes and bananas (see Appendix 2).

“Kitchen” has more images of women compared to other sections, such as USDA Home Economics Bureau Chief, Dr. Louise Stanley (1883-1954), and women in lab coats weighing broccoli. With the 1862 passage of the Morrill Act, land grant colleges were formed, offering vocational programs in agriculture and home economics. The USDA Cooperative Extension System was founded by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, nationalizing agricultural youth groups called 4-H (Head, Heart, Hands, and Health). A photo in the Records Book and travel brochure features two grinning women in white uniforms and matching hats (sporting four leafed clover icons), with a mound of whipped cream and cookies. One points to a placard above the dish that reads “This dairy product has merit because it is 1) Economical 2) Quickly made 3) Nutritious 4) Attractive 5) Delicious.”

A store window display from 1917-1918 promoting potato consumption, *The Potariots*, contains a sign that says “The potato is a good soldier. Eat it, uniform and all.” Above, a silhouetted soldier with rifle, stands next to the text, “He is fighting for you. You must save food for him.” Another poster touts donuts fortified with Vitamin B1 “for pep and vigor.” In a 1942 poster, a cartoon chef holds up an onion and a paring knife, with the slogan, “Know Your

Onions” and, in smaller, accompanying text, “Make All the Food Go All the Way.” At the bottom an insignia reads, “Food is Ammunition. Don’t Waste It.”

A 1918 poster encourages cottage cheese consumption, asserting that it supplies more protein, pound for pound, than meat. The Records Book states this poster is an artifact of Herbert Hoover’s “Meatless Mondays” during WW1 rationing. A 1917 poster shows Uncle Sam holding two booklets, one that says, “City Gardens” and the other, “Farm Gardens.” Behind him, a small plot of land is tended by a woman and man, and in the foreground, there are mounds of onions, beets, tomatoes, eggplants and peppers. The text says, “Uncle Sam says GARDEN to Cut Food Costs.” In the built exhibit, this image was scaled into a mural taking up a wall. The Records Book states the “USDA estimates that more than 20 million victory gardens were planted during World War II” (Kamps, 2011, p. 74).

“Table”

The WCUS Travel Brochure (n.d.) states “The most direct way the Government affects what Americans eat is by cooking for them” (p. 10). With this, the last area of WCUS, we might expect a focus on home kitchens, but images tend to portray two groups routinely fed government meals: soldiers and school children. Details about food served in the White House provides a glimpse into private lives of presidents. The room has olive green walls, and a long table with white tablecloth and formal place setting at the center of the room. A 1919 photo of soldiers in a dining hall depicts a Passover Seder for Jewish men in the American Expeditionary Forces. A 1944 photo of a crowded cafeteria at the Naval Barracks in Hastings, Nebraska, shows African American men in white naval uniforms behind the counter serving both Caucasian and African American men (mostly ununiformed).

Posters from 1944 address military cooks. For example, a rotund chef holds a cookbook, positioned between two slogans: “Use Leftovers...Mark of a Good Cook” and “Study Your ‘Army Cook’ for Recipes – Ideas.” Another 1944 poster asks “Wanna Keep ‘Em Healthy? Overcooking Destroys Vitamins!” (see Appendix 3). Between these slogans, a photorealistically illustrated Army staff sergeant (indicated by shoulder patch) hugs a large pot with one arm and holds a ladle in his fist with the other. The accompanying text states “...newly vitamin-conscious dietitians emphasized fruits and vegetables and admonished military chefs not to overcook them” (Kamps, 2011, p. 84). On his shoulder is another patch with red and white concentric circles. The meaning of this insignia isn’t certain, but it resembles the white and black insignia of I Corps, which trained forces during the Pacific theater (“I Corps History,” 2006).

According to the Records Book, soldier diet affected post-war dinner tables: “Meat and potatoes washed down with a tall glass of milk came to mean ‘dinner’ to millions of soldiers—an expectation they carried home to their families” (Kamps, 2011, p. 80). “Table” also covers the home front. A 1944 poster features a cartoon boy pitching a baseball and a girl behind him in shortstop position. The slogan, “Every Child Needs A Good School Lunch” appears above. Below, a photo of a boy in overalls, hungrily hoisting a forkful, appears above the statement: “The War Food Administration Will Help Your Community Start a School Lunch Program.” This poster marks the genesis of the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), established in 1946, which has since served billions of free and reduced cost breakfasts and lunches.

The photo *Lunch Hour at the Raphael Weill Public School, San Francisco, California, 1942* shows two smiling boys, about age eight, sitting at a lunchroom table, the Caucasian boy with his arm around another boy who appears to be of Asian descent. There are other (apparently) Asian faces in the background. The irony of this photo of inter-ethnic friendship

during WW2 is that the photo is credited to The War Relocation Authority, which forcibly relocated about 120,000 Japanese Americans to internment camps. The photo's derivation goes without comment.

Finally, "Table" focuses on presidential snack preferences, meals, menus, and recipes. The Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum provided a photo of Reagan reaching for his iconic jellybeans. There's a somehow funereal photo of Nixon's last White House meal, consisting of canned pineapple, a scoop of cottage cheese and a glass of milk. Other artifacts include Lady Bird Johnson's Pedernales River Chili recipe, menus for State Dinners hosted by Kennedy and Carter (respectively), and a letter from Queen Elizabeth II to Eisenhower with her scone recipe.

Discussion

Feminist food theorists note that food, because it is associated with domesticity, falls under the traditionally gendered domain of private life (c.f. Avakian & Haber, 2005, p. 9). Public discourse, meanwhile, is historically associated with men. Food is, on one hand, the subject of recipe books and *Better Homes and Gardens*-type publications—forms of public discourse traditionally geared towards the kitchen and the private sphere. At the same time, as part of public health and safety, government messaging around food necessarily straddles the public sphere.

WCUS positions visitors as citizens viewing a transparent account of a benevolent government, tasked with facilitating agriculture, feeding hungry populations and protecting the public against dangerous food processing procedures and additives. As documented in *The Jungle* (see, also, Blum's [2018] *The Poison Squad*), an unregulated food supply begets horrors. Tensions between private industry and the state, resulting in food safety regulations, are depicted

at WCUS, possibly leading to a mistaken impression that the problem was solved in 1906. With the heyday of regulation placed in the past, contemporary controversies (obesity; hunger; foodborne illnesses; antibiotic resistance in livestock; pesticides; a surfeit of garbage from plastic containers; GMOs, etc.) go unmentioned. Critics note that the food industry spends millions on lobbying and litigating against government regulations (c.f. Gostin, 2016). Health risks today are not only from adulterants, but from sugary foods implicated in a public health disaster of obesity and diabetes. That Mars, Inc. sponsors an exhibition about the government's role in food choices (which never mentions obesity), is a delicious irony.

Like the shriek of a train whistle pierces the calm of nature (as described in Marx, 1964, p. 13) industrial imagery contrasts with bucolic splendor. Each section tells the story of a nation emerging from an agrarian past into a fearsome industrial age where the government steps in to protect public health and safety. Contrary to a Reaganite claim that government is the problem, the passing of food safety regulations and the creation of federal agencies dedicated to protecting consumers are shown to arise from a genuine danger and to serve a vital need. The historical record displayed testifies to ecological stewardship of arable land, with imagery of sincere field specialists, sleeves rolled up, working in the fields. Government benevolence is on parade, with seeds, scientific and technical support provided to farmers, finding ways of feeding more people with less effort and resources. Food emerges as something not incidental to the health of the nation state, and the wealth of imagery from the New Deal and WW2 increases this impression of government and citizenry united in the promotion of the public good.

Patently paternalistic by cooking for soldiers and children, an exhibition of government ephemera from a government agency would predictably make itself out as benevolent. Ideology is hegemonic (that is, effective), when it rings true: when it is recognized as propaganda, but for

a worthy cause. The exhibition presents tactics such as price controls and social programs that, were they introduced today, would be denounced as socialism by the right. In this sense, WCUS testifies to an acceptable and even laudable role of the state. Like the classic text, *The Great Transformation* by Polanyi (2001 [1957]), the state emerges as a necessity, shielding huddled masses from Blake's proverbial satanic mills. In an oft-quoted passage, Polanyi describes a "double movement" in industrialization, with two principles fighting for position:

The one was the principle of economic liberalism... using largely laissez-faire and free trade as its methods; the other was the principle of social protection aiming at the conservation of man and nature (...) using protective legislation (...) and other instruments of intervention as its methods. (Polanyi, 2001 [1957], p. 132)

There might be expectations that upon entering "Kitchen" and "Table," the exhibits might move into the private sphere in predictably sexist ways. However, the focus is on government kitchens, feeding hungry army men and school children. The 1943 "Basic Seven" poster indicates a sketchy evidence base, in that distinctions between types of food we now regard as categorical (between fruits and vegetables, for example, or between leafy and starchy vegetables) were apparently not made, while other distinctions were made which are now regarded as redundant (separating butter and cheese). About changing dietary recommendations, the Records Book highlights how the number of food groups "topped out at 12 in the 1930s" (Kamps, 2011, p. 54), then endured further changes, perhaps implying inconsistency. The last nutritional advice to appear in WCUS is the 1992 Food Pyramid, while the Records Book claims that, presently, "Uncle Sam is urging Americans to eat in moderation and pursue an active lifestyle" (p. 54). Sounds innocuous, although the discourse of moderation has since been criticized for being vague and ill defined (vanDellen, Isherwood, & Delose, 2016) and the

“active lifestyle” mantra dovetails nicely with the sugar lobby’s strategy of not naming sugar as a culprit for obesity-related public health challenges (see O’Connor, 2015).

In its nostalgia, WCUS allows present-day visitors to look back bemusedly at dietary anachronisms. In one study of ideology, Baglia and Foster (2015) argue that the TV show *Mad Men* allows viewers to feel superior to those inhabiting the vintage time period depicted in the program. As the characters engage in behaviors now deemed unhealthy, the contemporary viewer is reassured that the present is more enlightened (p. 58). At WCUS, present day nutritional advice is not necessarily presented as state of the art. The Records Book states “‘what’s good for us’ is a moving target” (Kamps, 2011, p. 54), which implies nutritional recommendations, insofar as they are subject to change, are unreliable. One subtext of WCUS is that efforts to affect dietary choices are futile, since consumers will eat what they want. Efforts to change eating habits are diminutively described as “small potatoes” in the Records Book (p. 66), and efforts to break Americans’ preference for sugar? Well, “fat chance” (p. 76). Once earnest nutritional advice is presented as ineffectual in addition to being out of date. In the next section, we consider how a propaganda poster may position present day viewers as citizens, even while they no longer perform their originally intended purpose.

The Double Moment of Ideology

We argue that there are two audiences for WCUS items, and two different meaning-making trajectories. One, their originally intended audiences, and two, those viewing it years later as quaint Americana. Let’s take, as an example, the poster reminding an Army cook not to overcook the vegetables featured in the Table section (see Appendix 3). As originally intended, it was a directive: a set of instructions from higher ups that chefs were expected to follow. Although it relied on background information not stated explicitly, but presumed to already be

believed, it was thoroughly patriotic. “Wanna keep ‘em healthy? Overcooking destroys vitamins!” Vitamins are healthy—that’s never stated, but was, even then, common knowledge, and it’s a given that these soldiers (identified in “them” pronoun) must stay healthy. Therefore, al dente is a patriotic duty. For audiences present at the time, the informal reasoning making up the injunction could possibly be stated as a chain argument, with most attendant propositions unstated but presumed to go without saying:

Our nation is at war.
 The goal of war is to win.
 To win, soldiers are needed.
 Soldiers need vitamins.
 Vitamins are destroyed by overcooking. [Explicit]
 Overcooking is unpatriotic.
 Patriotic is presumably what you, the chef, are.
 You want to keep soldiers healthy.
 To keep them healthy, you will infer your patriotic duty.
 You will infer it by reconstructing the enthymematic premises.
 Your reconstruction removes the need for an explicit injunction.
 The injunction to keep them healthy comes from you, not us.

If every proposition making up an argument were overtly stated it would be tedious but inferring the missing components can help reveal unstated assumptions. The poster isn’t adorned with obvious trappings of patriotism such as flapping flags and soldiers standing at attention, but it can be inferred that nationalist deontology underwrites the humble question and statement in the poster.

There are forms of propaganda that, while intelligible to their intended audience at the time, become obscure for contemporary viewers. That’s why ideology has two meanings here. To WCUS visitors, the poster no longer performs the speech act originally intended, yet it may still function as nationalism. A segment from a chain argument for visitors might be:

WW2 was an ‘all for one’ effort.
 All were united for a common cause.
 A just cause of defeating fascism.

Defeating fascism was worth fighting for.
Fighting and dying was what the state sent men to do.
Yet the state is (arguably) benevolent.
The benevolence is indicated by its concern for soldier nutrition.
Nutrition helped prepare for battle.
Being prepared for battle protects the state.
As the state protects citizens, so they were called upon to protect the state.
But the call is not an order in the imperative mood (“don’t overcook”).
Instead it’s an enthymeme relying on the inferential capacity of the audience.

The above chain argument is but one possible interpretation; however, it may be illustrative if it seems probable that visitors aware of WW2 tropes might see it that way. In the first case (the message directed to the cook), there was a specific task in the kitchen, while the contemporary viewer may reflect on an anti-fascist war effort, and a form of propaganda that, unlike an officious command, respected the audience by allowing them to fill in the enthymematic blanks. In both cases, patriotic ideology casts a wide net.

The “Uncle Sam” origin story is worthy of inclusion here. Meatpacker Samuel Wilson supplied the U.S. Army with barrels of beef during the War of 1812, each barrel stamped with “U.S.,” so soldiers began referring to it as “Uncle Sam’s” (“United States Nicknamed Uncle Sam,” 2019). This suggests a martial origin of our idioms, and reinforces the connection between food provisions and war, so evident in this exhibition. An avuncular United States evokes a congenial relationship, however, the iconic image of Uncle Sam pointing at the viewer, saying “I want you” is about duty. Asking of Uncle Sam, “What’s Cooking?” (like asking “what’s up?”) suggests familiarity; the interrogative phrasing, positioning the visitor/citizen as having low power-distance. It’s a way of initiating a conversation, using a food metaphor, but while the exhibition title may make the relationship between citizen and government more colloquial, visitors hoping to find out what’s currently ‘cooking’ may have been disappointed by a mostly

backwards facing exhibition missing some key details. In an exhibition about food, how much history is necessary to provide context for governmental interventions?

What's Missing, Uncle Sam?

The four WCUS sections don't receive equal emphasis. "Factory" had the fewest images in the exhibit, and most of the pictures were taken over 100 years ago, making industrial food production seem like something from the distant past. Remembering is, at the same time, forgetting, and by memorializing the bad old days of *The Jungle*, later food safety horror stories are omitted. This is among the most noticeable instance of purposeful forgetting at WCUS. What might the inclusion of more contemporary food issues add?

What is conspicuous is what is missing in an exhibition about food. Any exhibition is necessarily limited by available artifacts, but using the search term, "food" delivered 7000 pages of results when searching the National Archives Catalog online. About 48 million Americans are sickened by foodborne illnesses each year (CDC, 2020), but culprits like *Listeria*, *E. coli*, *Norovirus* and others were presumably too unappetizing to make an appearance. The same year the exhibition was on display the CDC (2011) reported 15 *Salmonella* outbreaks, including the case of food behemoth Cargill recalling 36 million pounds of ground turkey after over one hundred were sickened by an antibiotic resistant strain. This specific case is mentioned here to indicate food safety was then, and remains, an ongoing concern. The FDA is only required to inspect food production facilities once every three to five years (Bagenstose, 2020), so the pictures of inspections featured in the Factory Section of the exhibition may make inspections seem more frequent and numerous.

The Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) signed in 2011 (putatively) gave the FDA greater regulatory authority, including mandatory recall of products if required. In addition, the

new MyPlate recommendations were released in 2011, the same year the exhibition was installed. Museum professionals understand that exhibitions are planned and fabricated long before their installation, but since USDA food guidance is so iconic, the omission of MyPlate seems like a missed opportunity to inform the public. The most contemporary item featured was a color photograph of First Lady Michelle Obama planting a vegetable garden on the White House lawn from April of 2009.

The whiteness of WCUS can hardly go without comment. Except for a few images, African Americans seldom appear. No African American scientists, inventors and food technologists (such as Norbert Rillieux, Lloyd Hall, Joseph Lee and Frederick McKinley Jones) who helped modernize food production and preservation (Spyrou, 2020)? There may be nothing obviously linking these figures to the government, but FDR created a national monument for agricultural scientist George Washington Carver, for whom the National Archives catalog returned 4,499 results. Given the focus in “Table” on presidential diets, it seems like an oversight to not mention James Hemmings, Thomas Jefferson’s chef at Monticello who was born into slavery, or Zephyr Wright, LBJ’s cook whose humiliations under Jim Crow reportedly influenced the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (Wright-Ruiz, 2019).

The most shocking omission is that WCUS makes no mention of slavery or the plantation system which propelled the United States to economic dominance. As Mintz (1985) notes, because of sugarcane, “literally millions of enslaved Africans reached the New World” (p. 71). In place of historical details, the Records Book mentions the Jeffersonian “agrarian myth” or “the belief that the family farm stood for all that is pure and good in America” (Kamps, 2011, p. 14). In WCUS, racial atrocities in agricultural history are substituted with (in words sung by Billie Holiday) “pastoral scenes of the gallant south.”

Conclusion

To summarize, “Farm” portrayed the government befriending agriculture and providing material support, in the form of seed distribution and nascent eco-conscious insights about more sustainable farming. “Factory” marks the dawning of a federal government tasked with protecting the health and safety of consumers from foodstuffs, suggesting that health threats from industrial food production ceased being a concern after the passing of the 1906 Acts. “Kitchen” showcases the government adopting a more directive stance as food policy tightly couples with wartime policy and propaganda. Nutritional information in charts, based on the discourse of quantification (Mudry, 2010), reflects a numerical, science-based approach to food (Nestle, 2010). Finally, “Table” shows a benevolent state feeding soldiers and children. The menus, recipes and homely meals of former presidents induces a “gosh, they’re just plain folks” (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006, p. 227) impression.

Food is portrayed as consubstantial and unifying; something consumed uniformly across hierarchies, and as a symbolic leveling device. The folksy association of food and kitchen, while it has some awkward moments (the 4H women extolling the virtues of some confectionary oddity), is not overtly sexist. Entering the kitchen, however, may steer the topic of food back into the private sphere, avoiding a deeper look into public sphere concerns of food today, such as soil depletion; factory farms; antibiotic resistance in animal agriculture; corn subsidies; pollution from chemical fertilizer runoff; and food industry lobbyists schmoozing politicians on K Street as childhood obesity triples over the past 40 years.

Returning to some of the research questions posed earlier, the overall theme of WCUS could be nostalgia for a benevolent paternalism. Changes in nutritional guidance over time are covered in the past tense eliding present controversies. The influence of powerful agricultural,

chemical, food and beverage lobbies goes unmentioned, leaving open the question of corporate influence¹—and possibly suggesting that poor nutrition is a matter of the consumer’s personal responsibility (Thomson, 2009). To the extent that previous dietary recommendations now seem dated, it may be implied that government efforts will, in the future, be regarded as similarly capricious and ultimately for naught, since the consumer, then, as today, will resist Sisyphean efforts to discipline eating. Note the congruence here with the food industry’s rhetoric around regulation.

As far as propaganda serving its original purpose, we instead advance here a notion of artifacts’ dual meanings. Stating underlying meanings by surfacing implicit propositions in enthymematic, informal chain arguments involves “converting visual and multimodal arguments into syllogistic ones, with missing premises or conclusions, allowing for the specification of what is inexplicit” (Lee, 2019, p. 390). This involves ‘assuming the position’ of the intended audience. Because the component propositions made explicit are nowhere to be found in the artifact, the technique seems, at best, informed speculation, but as such, is not without merit as a thought experiment for reconstructing rhetorical ploys.

Even as it omits crucial historical events, and all but bypasses the present and future, WCUS still testifies to an admirable record, exemplifying state interventions since hampered by decades of neoliberal reforms. An interventionist federal government is worth remembering today as (even prior to the pandemic) the FDA—which continues to be historically underfunded (Steinzor, 2011)—became derelict in its protective role under the current federal regime (Piller, 2019), and hunger ravages a nation (Keith-Jennings, 2020) plunged into inequality reminiscent of the robber-baron age. Soothing New Deal era imagery from a forgotten age shows a federal

¹While the corporate sponsor had no say in curating the exhibition (A. Kamps, personal communication, October 15, 2020) we here suggest that the food industry may broadly influence nutrition discourse.

government that seems activist rather than laissez-faire; caring rather than cruel. The artifacts displayed position visitors as citizens vulnerable to the blithe shucking of federal protections. Despite disturbing omissions, a different America is glimpsed, which valued rights, but also social responsibility and service. We claim that propagandistic artifacts are, at least in this case, dually ideological, because they were meaningful to those who originally beheld them, as well as to those in the present who admire them, in different (but also nationalistic) ways. As Polanyi (2001 [1957]) spoke of a double movement between commercial interests and resolute consumer protections, WCUS evinces a doubly ideological message about the role of the state and the promise of plenty.

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