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Octavia Davis

Lunch Money in the Wrong Pockets

Every day across the United States, millions of public and private school children eat lunches that are prepared and served at school rather than brought from home. School lunches, meals that come to American schools through the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), vary somewhat from cafeteria to cafeteria, but the ingredients tend to be similar across the states because the program is controlled nationally by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The USDA provides agricultural products and cash subsidies to participating schools who, in return, offer free or reduced-priced lunches to lower-income children and serve food that adheres to Federal dietary guidelines. Unfortunately for American school children, the USDA derives its dietary guidelines not just from the advice of medical experts, but from the financial and political interests of the agricultural industries it exists to support. Despite the fact that the National School Lunch Program has greatly benefited millions of children since its inception, its administration by the USDA now jeopardizes the health of children because the interests of children and industrial agriculture are no longer compatible.

From the beginning, the NSLP served the dual purpose of feeding hungry children and providing a market for American farm products. The program started in the days of the Depression when farmers could no longer rely on a strong market in which to sell their goods. While farmers could find no buyers for their wares, many children went without sufficient nutrition due to widespread poverty. In 1935, the government found a way to subsidize farmers and feed children; it authorized the USDA "to purchase surplus farm commodities and distribute them to the school lunch program," so that farmers could sell their products, and children could eat at least one good meal a day (Food). The NSLP became a permanent program in 1946 when the National School Lunch Act was passed, in partial response to the large numbers of would-be soldiers who reported for military duty during WWII, but were rejected because of health problems caused by insufficient eating and malnutrition

(Food). At a time when farmers needed a market for their goods and youngsters needed a stable source of nutrition, the NSLP made good fiscal and social sense.

Today, the National School Lunch Program continues to help farmers by feeding children agricultural surpluses. In fact, since the middle of the twentieth century, the US government has steadily increased both the funding to buy surplus farm products and the number of meals served to children. Now the USDA provides milk and dairy products, meat, and other agricultural surpluses for some children three times per day with its school breakfast, lunch and after-school snack programs (Food). While the kids continue to receive food, the beef and dairy industries continue to receive funds. Even forty years ago, the level of funding authorized for the purchase of agricultural commodities was at the high level of \$95 million per year (Food). With American agriculture subsidized and schoolchildren fed, the USDA seems to benefit everyone.

For most children who have access to schools, however, insufficient calorie consumption and malnutrition no longer pose a health threat. As a matter of fact, the nutritional problems that face young people today are very different from those fifty years ago. At the beginning of the 21st century, children in general eat too much, not too little, food. According to the American Dietetic Association, though children have been getting healthier overall for the past thirty years, "during the past decade the number of children who are overweight has more than doubled" (Dietary Guidance). Today, more than 25% of children are either overweight or at high risk of becoming so (Dietary Guidance). In fact, "overweight is currently a much more prevalent condition among U.S. children, including low-income children, than underweight and growth retardation" (Dietary Guidance). When one in four American children risks heart problems, diabetes, and other illnesses associated with obesity, something is definitely wrong with the way kids are eating.

While children have been gaining weight over the years, medical professionals have been studying their dietary needs in order to identify the problems that are causing the widespread problems with overweight. At present, both the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Nutrition and the American Dietetic Association recommend that school-age children limit their intake of saturated fatty acids, fat, and dietary cholesterol to levels far less than they are currently consuming (Dietary Guidance). How should children limit fat? Health professionals agree that all children should limit their intake of calories from animal fat, and some should avoid dairy products altogether because not all children respond to milk in the same ways. According to the American Pediatric Association, the need to avoid dairy products depends on ethnicity: "Lactose intolerance is more common in African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Pacific Islanders than in whites" (Dietary Guidance). Not only should children reduce or cut animal products from their diets, but they should also increase the calories they derive from fruits and vegetables. The USDA's Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a minimum of five servings of fruits and vegetables per day, but "ninety-one percent of children aged 6 to 11 years" fall short, "averaging 2.5 servings daily" (Dietary Guidance). Study after study indicates that the vast majority of American children simply do not eat the foods they need to be healthy.

Given the role of the USDA in generating the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and given the fact that the National School Lunch Program must follow these guidelines by law, it seems logical that the best place to look for a well-balanced meal would be in the nearest school cafeteria. In fact, the relationship between the NSLP and the USDA has jeopardized the benefits of this great program. The USDA began revising its "Basic Four" food guide more than ten years ago in the face of evidence that proved nutritional guidelines needed rethinking (Food). However, the new Food Guide Pyramid was produced in a pressure cooker of special interest groups. According to a press release dated October 2, 2000, "the U.S. Department of Agriculture violated federal law by keeping secret certain documents used in setting federal nutrition policies and by hiding financial conflicts of interest among members of a diet advisory committee" (Chaitowitz). The Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine successfully brought suit against the USDA, proving that eleven or more of the members of the group that created the guidelines for the Food Guide Pyramid "had financial ties to the meat, dairy, or egg industries that made it more likely that unhealthy foods would remain in the government's diet plan" (Chaitowitz). The violation of the law by the USDA proves that it cannot successfully

serve both agricultural big business and the dietary needs of American schoolchildren.

In the economy of unprecedented prosperity now enjoyed by the nation and given the fact that even lower-income children are suffering from overeating, the National School Lunch Program should no longer be used to bolster the market prices of meat and dairy products. Children need to eat less, not more, of these products, no matter how cheaply they can be acquired by the USDA. Furthermore, the ongoing debates about the long-term effects of exposure to pesticides and genetically modified foods, already approved by the USDA in the interest of the agricultural industry, suggest that an agency other than the USDA should be studying and making recommendations about what children eat in federally funded programs. As long as the USDA must support the production of agriculture above all other missions, it jeopardizes the health of children because it cannot serve them disinterestedly. While there is no question that government funds should be used to subsidize meals for low-income children, the content of those meals should be determined by medical professionals and nutritionists who have no financial ties to agriculture. Children should be fed according to their own needs, not those of the agricultural commodities market.

December 15, 2000

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Note: "Lunch Money in the Wrong Pockets" was originally composed as a model research essay for college writing students.

Bad Subjects

<http://www.badsubjects.org/>

Michael Basinski, *HEKA*

Factory School, 2001

142 pages, handbound, paperback, \$15

Michael Basinski's *HEKA* offers a playful blend of text, visual poetry, drawing, performance script, and word art. A rare kind of mythopoetic page-turner, *HEKA* (an Egyptian glyph translation meaning "magical utterance") combines a series of discrete works, each using its own vocabulary of typeface, symbol, space and line.

Composed to be performed as much as read, *HEKA* seeks, according to Basinski, the "end of words in elemental speech, the speaking of the unspeakable and the incomprehensible"—a kind of "spirit speech" invoked in the book's performance. As performance text, the "frozen words" of *HEKA* are "attractions for [the reader's] voice to flutter about, to improvise around." In the tradition of Blake's "Thel," *HEKA* lives in nature, far from the mundane and human normal, but close to an imagined landscape populated with goddesses, gods, frog princes, and mushrooms. Words grow in odd shapes and sounds to break into various readings, causing meaning to spread like spores. Losing sense is as much a part of the pursuit as finding or making it. As Basinski tells us, meaning "will surface and disappear like sea beasts breaking the water's surface and then sinking." In these times of strange poetry, *HEKA* will surprise readers with its exotic scripts, complex visual arrangements, and magical frog-prince utterances.

Reviewed by Z2 Staff Member

(Quotations from "Some Notes on Reading *HEKA*")

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"The revolution
begins in your
refrigerator."

Jimmius Jackson

BIOJUSTICE 2001

CELEBRATION & ACTION TO RESIST BIOTECHNOLOGY

San Diego, California, June 22-27 2001

Join thousands of activists, scientists, farmers, and concerned communities from around the world for a week of education, strategy and empowerment. Be part of the growing global movement to stop genetic engineering. Protest BIO 2001, the largest ever convention of the Biotechnology Industry Organization. From June 24th to 27th, in San Diego, leaders of multinational biotech, pharmaceutical corporations, industry scientists, bureaucrats, and marketers will meet at the Biotechnology Industry Conference (see www.bio.org).

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For more information about getting involved:

619.237.5496
<mailto:biojustice@riseup.net>
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Teach-In June 22-23, San Diego, California
“Beyond Biodevastation: The 5th Grassroots Gathering to Celebrate Biodiversity and Question Genetic Engineering.” (Visit www.biodev.org to pre-register for space.)

Panels will include:

- Food safety
- Farmers issues
- Science of genetic engineering
- Biowarfare
- Biopiracy (corporate patents on life)
- Organics and sustainable agriculture

Friday, June 22

1st Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego, 3-10pm.

Saturday, June 23

Starlight Bowl, Balboa Park, San Diego, 10am-6pm.

San Diego City College, 5-10pm.

Scheduled speakers include

Vandana Shiva, Jim Hightower, Andrew Kimbrell, Percy Schmeiser, Steve Wilson and Jane Akre, Anuradha Mittal, Dr. Peter Rossett, Beth Burrows Victoria Corpuz-Tauli, Debra Harry, Luke Anderson, Dr. Martha Crouch, Andrew J. Imparato, Brester Kneen, Cathleen Kneen, Dr. Miguel Altieri, John Kinsman, George Naylor, Bill Christison, Dr. Richard Strohmman, Dr. Paul Billings, Dr. Ricarda Steinbrecher, Dr. Marcy Darnovsky, and others.