

Jerusha Klemperer:

The good food movement when it has talked about fast food has focused on what's wrong with the industrialized system that produces the burgers and buns and fries, or sometimes on the food's negative health impacts. Occasionally criticisms have noted the deep ties between McDonald's and the Black community, sometimes blaming communities of color for making bad food choices, sometimes blaming the fast food industry for being predatory with its advertising or store locations. But the relationship between fast food and Black America is way more complicated. As Dr. Marcia Chatelain explains in her Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America*, fast food restaurants have represented a business opportunity for Black franchisees, an employment opportunity for community residents, and a dining opportunity for Blacks who were excluded from meeting elsewhere. In today's episode, I talk with Dr. Chatelain about the history of that multifaceted relationship.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

Hi Jerusha. How are you?

Jerusha Klemperer:

Hi, good. How you doing?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

Good. Nice to meet you.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I'm Jerusha Klemperer and this is *What You're Eating*, a project of foodprint.org. We aim to help you understand how your food gets to your plate and to see the full impact of the food system on animals, planet and people. We uncover the problems with the industrial food system and offer examples of more sustainable practices, as well as practical advice for how you can help support a better system through the food that you buy, and the system changes you push for.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

So I am a historian of African American life and culture, and one of the things that I try to do with my writing is to bring people to a common table of reference, to get everyone to a common point of understanding. And for me, as someone who during graduate school was very engaged in these questions about food justice, this was about more than 20 years ago, I was hearing about all of these different community based projects, the small garden plots, the rethinking food distribution systems, getting people to a place of consciousness about the industrial food system. And what was really interesting about it was on one hand there was a great deal of concern for health, but there was very little conversation or analysis of racism, nor was there any grace that was granted people who had very limited choices on what they ate and how they fed themselves and their children.

And so increasingly I found that fast food became a proxy for talking in a really derisive and dismissive way about people of color and their choices. And the thing that always struck me about these conversations is that they were deeply ahistorical, that they may have recognized perhaps the advent of the food stamps program and some of the policies around it, or they may have recognized the impact that African American migration may have had on the African American diet, which I also question the extent to which we make those links. But very few people really said, "Well, how exactly does fast food become such a fixture in Black communities? Can we talk about that?" And if we talk about that, maybe

we're able to get at some of these food justice issues from a different perspective. And so that's what kind of got me started. And once you take a look at some of the dynamics between fast food and this question of economic and opportunity in racial uplift, there's so much there.

Jerusha Klemperer:

You start with fast food and civil rights, how race, civil rights and hamburgers converged, which I love. And that history of the link between the fight for civil rights and the establishment of fast food in Black communities. Can you talk a little bit about that first stage and set the scene for who gets to eat what and where?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

Well, one of the associations we often make with civil rights and food are the protests against segregation in dining facilities. So we have these incredible images of students from North Carolina A&T in 1960 and throughout the period between '60 and '64 trying to challenge these restrictions on being served on an equal basis. But I think that what we often lose sight of is that transitional period from the segregated dining facility to one in which restaurants and restaurant culture has to open up to a lot of audiences, is also really important for understanding how fast food becomes Black.

Because the fast food industry is really predicated on this idea of a standard kind of experience for customers, wherever you are. But McDonald's and other franchises really were pushing the limits with customers on segregation policies on the local level. So I talk about that, but what my book really is trying to understand is this period after Martin Luther King Junior's assassination in 1968, when fast food restaurants came to symbolize an economic opportunity for Black communities that had been left behind, not only by social policy, but left behind by business, that this was going to be the new frontier of opportunity.

And I think that from the vantage point of the experiences many people had during the summer of 2020, which I call the George Floyd Summer, where we started to see these demands for racial justice translate from the quest to end the police brutality to one in which business was saying, okay, we're going to support Black creators and Black producers and inventors, and we're going to really encourage partnerships with Black businesses, it really did replicate some of the things that I saw in the late 60s where people are talking about housing, and schools, and equal opportunity at jobs, and the end of police violence and what they're being presented with is an opportunity to open a business. And it feels ridiculous, but we've all experienced it very recently.

And so McDonald's was one of many businesses that saw an opportunity by partnering with Black franchise owners, by using federal subsidies to get Black-owned businesses on its portfolio. It could expand to a Black consumer base that was expanding in terms of its financial discretionary income as well as fewer barriers to participating in public accommodations. So you have this perfect storm and it's all wrapped around this idea that this is civil rights, that this is a fulfillment of King's dream. And so we start to see how that slippery slope gets activated and it brings us to the present moment, where the response to George Floyd's killing is support Black businesses.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Can you come down to brass tacks for a second? And just in case there's anyone who doesn't understand what a franchise is and what a franchise model is?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

So when we think about franchising in terms of businesses in the US, we often think of fast food, that has become a shorthand for companies like McDonald's and Burger King, Dairy Queen. And it's this idea that there's a corporate head that makes a lot of big decisions about location, about advertising, about product, about training standards, and then they give the opportunity to an individual or a group of individuals called franchisees or operators, and they operate the business on behalf of that corporation with the promise that they pay certain fees, they adhere to certain guidelines, and whatever is left over is their profit. And so franchising happens across a number of industries. Childcare, elder care, car repair, hotels. This is a type of business that I feel like is quintessentially American because it's the promise to be successful, not because you've acquired advanced degrees or special training, but because you follow the rules of the franchise.

It can be incredibly lucrative, it can be incredibly financially risky. And there's certain franchises that have really created a strategy by concentrating on certain communities. So immigrant communities are often approached with franchises for businesses like Subway and Dunkin' Donuts. McDonald's in the 1960s was still accessible to a middle class person who may have access to bank loans, may have a little collateral. For many African Americans, this was an impossibility before McDonald's really targeted and created their minority recruitment programs. Now, to get into McDonald's, you have to have a lot of money liquid, and the entry fees can be in the seven figures. So now it's not as accessible. But the point is, is that franchising was part of a post World War II American dream, that an everyday person can own their own business, that they can be successful, and that they would have the means of accumulating capital that had previously been only available to people from the wealthiest families who owned legacy businesses.

Jerusha Klemperer:

Why did McDonald's see the Black community as a business opportunity?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

McDonald's has always been one of the most strategically... I don't know, they're just a smart business. The past 20 years, not so much. But in the early days, McDonald's was always willing to shape shift to cater to the market. And so even in the early days in the 40s with the McDonald's brothers, they used to sell barbecue, which they really loved making barbecue and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. And then they realized, this cuts into the bottom line, you do burgers, fries, drinks, get out of there. And so in the 1950s and 60s, McDonald's really saw itself as a suburban company. It really saw itself as a feature of a kind of white middle class rendering of America with disposable income, in bedroom communities.

But the urbanization of McDonald's was about a number of things. One, for the white franchise owners who had set up businesses in communities that were changing demographically along racial lines, they needed to protect those investments. So neighborhoods that had gone from all white to all black, white franchise owners increasingly didn't want to do business there. And they also knew that the federal government under Richard Nixon, through his Black capitalism campaign, was going to actually underwrite Black business ownership through grants and through loans. And so the risk was not tremendous.

But the other part of it was that, again, this consumer base that starts to expand in the 1960s among African Americans who are no longer legally barred from equal access to restaurants, there is a cohort of Black Americans who are making more money and who are having more options in terms of how they spend that money. But also, I mean, this was a very low level experiment in the middle of the questions about racial reckoning that were happening after King's assassination. But what happened very shortly is that they realized that McDonald's could be successful in Black communities, that there was low

overhead, a lot of risk was absorbed by the franchise owners. But more importantly, as we get into the 1970s, running a business in urban America was cheaper than suburban America because of fuel costs.

And that suburban market, that would drive their kids to McDonald's for a hamburger on the weekends, they're not doing it during the oil embargoes, and they're not going to those lanes to spend money the way that the urban market, which had very little competition in terms of other businesses was. And so they took a risk and they realized how it paid off, and then they created a narrative that they always wanted to be on the right side of history.

Jerusha Klemperer:

What is Black capitalism? And then we can get to its limitations as especially evidenced in the franchise system.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

Black capitalism is an ideological position that says, in the absence of equal rights, equal access to the promises of citizenship, African Americans can use the accumulation of wealth, of capital, of businesses, as a way to mitigate the gaps between what is promised and what is actually received. And so throughout the 19th century, there were advocates of Black capitalism who became quite wealthy, creating banks, funeral homes, shops of various sorts, who were advocates for creation of all Black towns like Boley, Oklahoma, and cities in the West. And so what happens with the ideology of Black capitalism though, is that there's two things that are unspoken.

One is that Black entrepreneurs and Black capitalists become the unofficial spokespeople of Black America. They are negotiating with white power structures. They're determining what happens and what doesn't happen. The second thing that happens as a result of this ideology is that you see in moments of racial crisis, and I think a lot of despair, where King's assassination really exposes how much unfinished business, how many of the promises of the 1950s and 60s were not being fulfilled. It emerges as a practical and adult or mature way of looking at what's really possible. So we're not going to get equal housing. Well, what if we have a lot of businesses in our community, maybe that can provide jobs, maybe that can create the path forward.

And I think that's important to understand because it's very easy for us, from the perspective of 2023, to ridicule people for thinking that a McDonald's would transform what could happen in communities and neighborhoods. But by the vantage point of 1968, this is really unbelievable. I often tell my students that for a Black franchise owner to be recruited to McDonald's in '68 and '69 is the equivalent of Mark Zuckerberg giving me Meta and saying, you now own Facebook and WhatsApp. I couldn't even wrap my head around that type of financial kind of opening into my life. I wouldn't know what I was doing. I would probably ruin all the apps more than they've already been ruined. But regardless, it is access at a level that was unimaginable for a generation of people who had been systematically kept out of every kind of avenue that was supposed to deliver the American dream.

So of course, civil rights organizations lined up for McDonald's. Of course, you see people who had been King's Associates, now in McDonald's Corporate chatting with people about their Black advertising strategy, it's because it was something that was unimaginable and that people did imbue a lot of hope into it.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And of course it hits an inevitable wall. And so in the 70s you start to see this replication of the way that whites lord it over Blacks in this country, was then repeated in the franchise model. What was that wall that Black franchisees hit?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

So Black franchise owners in that early generation that come into the McDonald's system between '68 and... I would say between '68 and '80, they are facing the realities of a racially discriminatory marketplace that always reminds you that no matter how successful you are or how financially stable you are or how innovative you are, you will hit a wall. And the walls included the fact that they did not always have access to capital, that some people lost their franchises because they were cobbling together a mileage of above board and underground financial lending systems, often referred to by shark metaphors. They were also dealing the fact that they were doing business in places that had a lot of concerns about worker development and training and security and high insurance costs and high real estate taxes. And so the burdens of Blackness that I think increasingly we've become aware of in terms of real estate and physical mobility across highways and on airplanes, it replicates itself in the business sphere even when you have the backing of McDonald's.

And so this group created an organization called the National Black McDonald's Operators Association, and it really was about negotiating with the power structure of McDonald's. And some of them liken the relationship to sharecropping, which on its face it's like, whoa, that's a very loaded metaphor, because it's about white land ownership and the subjugation of Black workers. And when you look at some of the struggles that these men had experienced and some of the context in which they grew up, sharecropping becomes the most accessible way to talk about what does it mean when you know how hard you worked, and then to feel like you can't get ahead because of these different structural barriers.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And some of that math that you share in the book about what stays local, and what goes elsewhere is quite eye-opening.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

The dilemma of the 1970s, which I think is also the dilemma of the, what are we? In the 2020s, is that when we say to support Black businesses, what exactly are we supporting and to what ends? Can we ever have a pure Black-owned business in which all of its engagements from its accountant, its lawyers, its land managers, everyone is from the same community? Well, we can't. And at the same time, is it disingenuous for McDonald's to present its franchises that are franchised by African Americans as Black-owned businesses as well? And this was part of the criticism that was leveraged at McDonald's in the 1970s as people are still trying to figure out what is the strategy, what is the way forward? If we are to believe that freedom, struggle and movements need to pivot in a direction, is it towards a greater embrace of capitalism or is this a moment for us to dig in our heels and critique the system of capitalism?

Jerusha Klemperer:

One of the economic drivers there too, in addition to, while franchise owners can be becoming millionaires by doing this, it's just the promise of local jobs as well.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

A lot of the appeal of Black franchising, whether it was McDonald's or other brands, was this idea that you can provide jobs in your community. And we don't use this term as much, but when we think about the youth unemployment rate in the 60s and 70s, it's more than 50% in cities like Chicago. And so the idea that you create this job opportunity, create training and skill building through fast food, was a completely, totally and reasonable proposition in the late 1960s. And that perhaps a fast food worker in a family system could actually make enough to survive was within the realm of possibility. By the late 1970s, this is impossible. But the other, I think grift of it all, was this idea that a person could work as a fast food worker, stay at the same fast food company, become a manager, and then eventually become a franchise owner. This was something that was sold to African American communities often in various advertising campaigns.

Speaker 3:

Hey, isn't that Calvin?

Speaker 4:

I haven't seen him for a while.

Speaker 3:

Wonder where he's heading?

Speaker 4:

I heard he got a job.

Speaker 3:

Is that right? Well, it's about time he got himself together.

Speaker 4:

Now that you mention it, there is something different about him. Just goes to show you can't judge a book by its cover. Looks like responsibility's been good. Well, I'm just glad somebody believed in him enough to give him a chance.

Speaker 3:

Wonder where he is working.

Speaker 5:

Welcome to McDonald's, may I help you?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

But the thing that we have to really think about, if we are going to be very serious about food justice, is not just workers need better wages, we need to live in a different kind of world. And this is where it becomes I think, a little overwhelming, because regardless of where you're working, the fact that we don't have paid sick leave, we don't have family leave, we don't have free childcare, we don't have Medicare for all, we don't have free college. This is about all of us, and it isn't just about fast food workers. And so we imagine a world that we say, well, if we just get wages up to 15, most cities that are

employing the Black and brown workers who are working in fast food, \$15 an hour is not enough to live. I mean that number in many ways is subject to more analysis, but even if we get the wages, what value are wages without healthcare and sick leave and childcare?

So I think that in terms of food justice, we often think about the ability of people to eat a diverse diet of foods with fewer additives and less harm as the end goal. It's like, well, that's just the start. How are we going to afford the electric bills to refrigerate this food? Who's going to have time to cook this food if you're working two or three jobs? How are we imagining food being prepared and given to those who are sick, who are elderly, who don't have the capacity to do this, because we have time. Because we don't have to work 16-hour days.

And so I think that when we think about the ways that the business sector is called upon to solve problems of racial and economic inequality, we say, well, they've provided a job. Well, congratulations. You've done absolutely very little towards moving us forward.

McDonald's has not called me and asked me for advice, but if they did, I would say, "Hi McDonald's, it's Marcia. How are you? Here's an idea. If you really want to be on the right side of history, if you want to live up to this idea that you were doing the right thing after King's assassination and if you really want to back up the fact that in 2020 you tweeted Black Lives Matter, all of the money that you spend on lobbying to keep wages low, to keep our supply chains where they're at, to keep the price of tomatoes and sugar as low as possible, if you take all of those resources and lobby for congressional commitments to free college, childcare for all, Medicare for all of these things, I promise you, you will have a better business if you play the long game." That's how we really need to think about what it means for people to have a healthy diet. A healthy diet means absolutely nothing if we don't have healthy lives and a healthy world that we can enjoy them in.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I didn't want the record to reflect, but the Black community was just like, "Yes, thumbs up to McDonald's all around." A big part of your book is dedicated to the fact that, and I'm quoting you again, fast food's attempts to colonize Black America did not go unchallenged. So I wanted to talk a little bit about what have those various kinds of resistance to the expansion of fast food into Black communities looked like? What do they continue to look like? You know, have all these incredible photos in the book of fast food restaurants as a locus, like a backdrop to protest. What did the Black community resist?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

So this is really interesting to me because I think before I wrote this book, I often thought about resistance to fast food as a feature of elite and wealthy and affluent communities. So there's a reason why you're not going to see the golden arches in Aspen. If Aspen has a McDonald's, I don't think they do, but if they do, it's going to at least be taupe and fit into the background. Places like West Palm Beach resisted McDonald's for a long time. The Upper West side of New York City also resisted it for a long time. So there's a lot of ways where, if you don't have a McDonald's, it says this is where a lot of rich people live.

And at the same time, in the late 60s and 70s, a lot of Black and brown communities resisted McDonald's on a number of points, which I thought was really fascinating. I talk about in Portland, Oregon, the Black Panther party opposes McDonald's because they think they're bad neighbors, they're not giving to the free breakfast program for children. In Cleveland, McDonald's is at the center of this question about, yeah, you serve us, but are you really serving us by providing us an opportunity to own McDonald's? And there are a number of experiments in which community development groups that are

Black-led try to franchise McDonald's as a reinvestment tool into the community. Then there are people who are saying, "This isn't really a black-owned business, if you really think about where the money goes and how far it has to travel." And others are saying, "We are not even against fast food. But when we think about a development strategy for a community, like the case I talk about in Philadelphia, why don't we talk about mental health centers or libraries? Why can't we decide what comes in and what comes out?"

And so all of these issues, whether it's about pollution, noise pollution, fast food restaurants have long been associated with juvenile delinquency, regardless of the terms, I think in this nascent moment that McDonald's is moving in, people are saying, "Let's really think about what this means." And I think that there is a characterization that again, I think is part of the racist ways that we map on limited choices in terms of the food environment onto different communities, where people are saying, "We are really trying to imagine self-determination in this moment, and how do we respect that and how do we really explain that our communities may not have everything that we want, but we still value them?"

And while this is happening, there is a race to the bottom in terms of businesses that are saying they're authentically Black owned, and it's not McDonald's, but they're still buying into this idea of that the franchise model is the route to liberation. And I thought that was just such an important part of the story, that there is nothing inevitable about our relationship to any marketplace. It has to be massaged and nurtured and manipulated and that we have to recognize that if we really want to address these complex problems.

Jerusha Klemperer:

And to that point of the manipulation and massage as well as the what communities were missing, McDonald's was definitely trying to fill some of those holes, not just with food but in other weird ways. And you chronicle some of that, you said as fast food expanded, the choice between a McDonald's and no McDonald's might be a choice between a McDonald's and no youth jobs program. What are those holes in the social fabric of our country, particularly in Black communities in the 70s and 80s were there that McDonald's was at least on the surface attempting to fill and why it was sometimes well received for what it was providing?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

I think we think of McDonald's as not very special because it's everywhere now, but in these emergent years, McDonald's is really a big deal because it's the first publicly traded fast food company. It is an iconic brand by the 1960s and it isn't even the largest fast food brand. Our hamburger chain in this period of time, I think Burger Chef was bigger and then kind of collapses. But all of this is to say that McDonald's actually means something.

And so I think that that is the most important part of the conversation. We can't demean where people get their food. We have to understand that if it is meaningful and if it's powerful in terms of its image, we respect that and then we see the places we can go. But McDonald's as a meeting place, McDonald's as the facilitator of playgrounds, McDonald's as the first jobs program, McDonald's as the defacto senior center, McDonald's as the contributor to the United Negro College Fund, as the creator of employee scholarships, McDonald's as the underwriter of NAACP talent programs, a sponsor of major events in Black communities that continue today, including gospel music tours, the Essence Fest. McDonald's as a large partner in a lot of the diversity programs that allowed a generation of college educated African Americans to become accountants and lawyers and ad execs.

And this is a really big deal. McDonald's as a major advertiser for programming like Soul Train and on BT, and kids, ask your parents about radio, radio stations would have a lot of ads on the local level with Black McDonald's content. This is a very big deal. I write in the book about my first entrée into serious Black history was because of a quiz bowl show that local Black operators underwrote.

This is something that I think is such an interesting racial Rorschach, what McDonald's means to you. I remember when I was touring the book and even when it was in progress, people would come up to me and say, "How in the world would I know who franchised my local McDonald's?" And often those people were white, and then African Americans would say, I totally know what you're talking about. This guy in Detroit who had 30 McDonald's, everyone knew who this guy was. And I remember growing up in Chicago, knowing who Black franchise owners were before I even understood what that business model was. And I think that visibility for good and for bad means something to people. And McDonald's is very good and was very good, especially at this time of helping create and cultivate consumer loyalty, not on its products but on its visibility and its symbolism of Black success.

Jerusha Klemperer:

You also talk about their advertisements and I was shocked to read that they were produced by a Black led ad agency. Can you talk a little bit about that, seeing yourself in advertisements?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

In the late 1960s when these Black franchise owners are starting to acquire businesses, every franchisee pays into an advertising fund and they were paying into advertising funds and saying, "You're not advertising where our customers are." And so McDonald's agreed to hire Brill communications out of Chicago to start doing ad content. And this ad content is really, it is cringey. I mean some of it's just 70s, so it makes it awkward.

Speaker 6:

(Singing) At McDonald's we do it all for you. Mama wants to get to church. She's been waiting up since dawn. She wishes I would hurry up and get some breakfast on. But after working hard all week, I'd like to get my rest. So we can just get to McDonald's, just as soon as we get dressed.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

But yeah, so that is cringey, some of it is trying too hard and some of it is immersed in racial stereotypes, and at the same time it is showing images of Black America that a lot of consumers wanted. It is showing a lot of Black celebrities that people admired. And before the era of someone like LeBron James or Michael Jordan for my era, who could promote products across racial lines, having talents like Patti LaBelle and Gladys Knight and the Pips, having commercials that are scored with gospel music or showing 1990s styles and scenes from colleges and stuff. This is really, really unusual. This is very different. And I think that something I try to tell my students, there was a time when someone being on television was a big deal, and I say it in this way that I feel strange saying it, and I think they think it's kind of strange, but the odds that someone I know could become famous for a tweet or something on Instagram is very high. I know people who are now famous for a number of reasons.

When I was a kid, I didn't know a lot of people who were on television. That was the only place, right? Television and radio. And so the fact that McDonald's had an entire space in which Black people saw cultural creation on television and on radio was a really big deal. And so in some ways I think a lot of the fast food companies replicate that culture work through social media, which is cheaper, more efficient,

and you can use algorithms to segment your market. But in the days of television, this is a huge thing and I wanted to pay tribute to that. It's a large part of the nostalgia I have for my childhood. It's a lot of the associations people have with the brand and even with all of my criticisms of it, I understand that it's significant and that the culture work of food companies is also the place and the terrain in which some of the investigation and some of the pushback against them has to happen.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I open by sharing some of the criticisms of fast food, certainly from the good food movement and the food justice movement. What do those criticisms miss or overlook, especially criticisms of fast food's negative impact on Black bodies?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

Well, I think sometimes the criticism does not take into account the multiple meanings of place and space, the dynamics of representation, why it is sometimes hard for Black workers to organize against Black franchise owners. The reasons why even with all of the critiques of the fast food industry, when franchisees talk about racial discrimination, people can at least acknowledge that it's a problem even if they don't love the venue in which it's happening. I think what we miss sometimes is an acknowledgement that the marketplace is really smart, smarter than most of us, and that advertising can get us and that nostalgia is real and that simply explaining why something is bad does not help us understand why something is harmful for us.

And so I think the communication strategy has to be what do we want to see in our world? What do we want to feel, and how do we move away from a set of logics that say some food is bad, and some food is good? Because what it ultimately leads to is some people are good, and some people are bad. Into what would we want for ourselves and others? What would we imagine if we had all of the resources available to us?

Because people don't eat fast food necessarily because they don't know other food exists. They eat fast food because they have to get to their third job, they eat fast food because it's on the way. They eat fast food because their kid can buy it by themselves after school. They eat fast food because it's delicious. They eat fast food for a lot of reasons. And I think that we have to presuppose that people have a lot of important reasons why they make their choices. And then we can suggest, well, what if we had more choices? What if we had 10 more choices or 100 more choices? What are the different things that we can impact? And I think that that's where we have to start the conversation.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I wondered if you had specifically any advice for public health officials or hopes at how they would look at these issues and determine solutions?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

Yeah, read history books. I mean, I can't imagine fields that are oriented towards public policy and it's not just public health, I think a lot of fields are like this, that no one reads history books. It's bananas. And so the few times that I've had the opportunity to be in policy spaces, people come up with ideas and I say, "Well, this is an idea from '75 or '87." And they're like, "Oh my god, that's crazy. Do you have a time machine?" And I said, "No, I just have a lot of history that I read." And because something didn't work in '73 doesn't mean it can't work in 2023, but knowing that it happened in '73 might give us some

insights. I feel like history gives us an opportunity to peek around the corner. And I wish more policy people started with a historical analysis of a problem, rather than a trend.

This is why I adore the Maintenance Phase podcast, because they're really trying to critique all our ideas about health and wellness. And I think it's a difficult one. We don't want people to ever be in a position where they can have the most optimally healthy life that they can and they didn't have the opportunity to pursue that. And at the same time, what we're marking as healthy, what we are marking as optimal, what we're marking as obese, all of these metrics have a history and they have often a flawed history. And 9 out of 10 times it's a racist history. Actually 10 out of 10 times, it's a racist history.

And so what does it mean for us to use these faulty tools and then say that we're doing it for equity reasons and we're saying we're doing it in the spirit of anti-racism. It doesn't make any sense. One of the things that has been particularly heartening is to hear people from that space say, "Your book was really helpful. I never really thought about how fast food gets to Black America." Because that story of how it travels is actually important for the ways that people talk about fast food and the ways that they engage. And I think what it does, it opens up the spaces of where we fight. So while someone's doing nutrition education, someone's trying to get all the lobbyists out of the school food world, and someone else is trying to help people get health screenings, someone else can say, "You know what? If we had real infrastructure, if we had a real social safety net, then maybe McDonald's doesn't appear like this wonderful magical presence in communities. It can just be one of many options for food."

And maybe we don't have the brand loyalty we have, or maybe we don't have the kind of contentious relationship with the fast food. So I think that I will always say reading history is your best route out of problems. And I just really hope that what I've offered the conversation is an opportunity to have another set of tools to looking at these complex problems.

Jerusha Klemperer:

I will often ask guests who know a ton about something like, oh, you know exactly how sausage gets made. Do you ever eat sausage? You mentioned before we started that you have a newish baby that I'm just curious, given the nostalgia that you have for McDonald's, I know the nostalgia I have for McDonald's, the French fry was my first real food after a bottle, if you've thought about yet what that relationship might be?

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

So my son turns two in a few months and food dirty has always been really interesting to me with this child. So I grew up eating tons of fast food and it was before it was a thing. So in the 80s, the 80s was just a disaster in terms of how we consumed. The Surgeon General told you to not eat eggs but eat 40 bagels a day and you're like, "This is great." As long as it was oat bran, I don't think I had a slice of white bread until I was in my 30s. I didn't eat butter really until I was maybe in my 30s because we ate margarine. Oh my God. I mean it was just dreadful. You know what's interesting? I'm 43 and so my transition went from the terrible, diet fads of the 80s to that late 90s embrace of food that we're in, where everyone is eating truffle butter and still obsessed with dieting and weight, but now there's an enjoyment in food that as a kid, food was not fun. It was bland chicken breasts and just nothing tasted good.

So all of that is to say, with my son who is just adorable, I like this question because I like talking about him, but as a parent you find yourself in a position to be judged about your choices. And my kid eats food now. He was slow to eat solids and this was all this concern about it. And one of our doctors was like, "Well, give him Doritos and french fries." And he was just like, "Give him all of these things. They're

texturally exciting, just get him on something." And I was so shocked that a doctor would say that. And I think it's interesting, because it's also an interesting class thing because I didn't grow up with money. And so there was a certain set of assumptions, I think, about it being okay that we ate fast food and my mom's a working, single mom, who cares?

But I think that now that I'm in the position I'm in, there's a very interesting way that people talk about food and their kids. A lot of people come up to be at talks and say, "Well, my kid doesn't even know what McDonald's is." Like, congratulations. I don't care. But there's a way that it becomes a thing. So to look at the doctor saying to me and my husband, and we give off upper middle class parents vibes, we're very pleasant, but we're a little type A. We're a little on the older side. For him to be like, who cares? Give your kid Doritos, was just really fascinating to me and I really appreciated that.

But all of this is to say, I hope I do not have my son eating as much fast food as I did because I felt like I didn't enjoy a diversity of foods because I ate so much fast food. But the other day, my husband did take him to McDonald's, he couldn't find a good way to get him out of the car and keep driving. So he had fries and Chicken McNuggets and he was more interested in the fries than the McNuggets. And everyone was like, "Are you going to let people know that your kid ate McDonald's?" And I was like, "It is okay." I don't want it to be a fixture of his life, but as he gets older, I do want to talk to him about making this choice actually does make a difference. It has an impact on other people and we're going to try to make as many choices as possible that impact people in the best way possible and not harm them. And sometimes we have to make those negotiations.

But yeah, so my husband broke the seal. I think if it was up to me, he probably wouldn't eat McDonald's quite yet, but I can't control these things and I think that if I fixate on him not eating McDonald's, he's going to eat for the rest of his life. So it's all about balance. But I do think that there is something really instructive about thinking about the ways that we talk about a food in front of kids and the ways that so much I think of our identities in this particular moment, is about what we eat and what we don't eat. And I really want to raise him to have a respectful relationship to all foods versus one in which everything's bifurcated as bad or good. That's my very long answer. Parenting is very difficult.

Martin Luther King Jr.:

I'm delighted to see each of you here tonight in spite of a storm warning.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

When I was writing Franchise, I was trying to stay focused on why I was writing this book. And a large portion of it was to think about the ways that King's legacy has been conveniently used for a number of purposes. On every political spectrum, every issue and the way that King's legacy was being used in the fast food industry to talk about McDonald's as giving these opportunities to African Americans. But I listened to King's last speech at Mason Temple in Memphis, April 3rd 1968, often when I was writing this book because I think it is the most perfect statement about the importance of solidarity. And what he does in the speech and why it's so powerful to me is that he does a historical overview of oppression. He starts in the Bible with the escape from Egypt.

Martin Luther King Jr.:

Whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

And he goes into that day in Memphis where the sanitation workers are in struggle, they're on strike.

Martin Luther King Jr.:

The issue isn't justice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants who happen to be sanitation workers.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

And he talks about this incredible expanse of history and the importance of why everyone must feel the pain of what is happening to these sanitation workers. And he talks about economic boycott.

Martin Luther King Jr.:

Go out and tell your neighbors not to buy Coca-Cola in Memphis.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

He talks about being jailed. And then he gets into this incredible reflection, and this is the part that I think most people really memorialize as he talks about his own life and the threats on his life.

Martin Luther King Jr.:

Before I knew it, I had been stabbed by this demented woman.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

And then he talks about, I may not get there with you, but I don't fear anything.

Martin Luther King Jr.:

Because I've been to the mountaintop. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place, but I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.

Dr. Marcia Chatelain:

What King is asking everyone to do is see themselves as part of communities that are the most stepped upon, that are really suffering because they're standing up for economic and racial justice. And I'm thinking to myself, gosh, what else do you need to hear to get you really grounded and to remind yourself that everyone has an ability to do something? I will not be a charismatic movement leader in my time, probably not. And I'm not a sanitation worker and I have the ability, through the gift that I have, whether it's writing or teaching, to do something of substance. And I think that that message is so powerful and it's just so beautiful and it's just 45 minutes that can change everyone's life.

Martin Luther King Jr.:

But I want you to know the night that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

Jerusha Klemperer:

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