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Overcoming the social stigma of consuming food waste by dining at the Open Table

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Abstract
Stigma is often encountered by recipients who receive food donations from charities, while the consumption of wasted food, also traditionally considered to be a stigmatized practice, has recently become part of a popular food rescue movement that seeks to reduce environmental impacts. These two stigmas—charitable donation and the consumption of waste—are brought together at the Open Table, a community group in Melbourne, Australia, that serves community meals cooked from surplus food. This paper examines how Open Table de-stigmatizes food donations through food waste discourse to enable greater social inclusion. I draw on the experiences of donors, cooks, volunteers and eaters gathered from diverse Open Table sites. Taking a 'follow-the-thing' approach, I analyze how food 'waste' becomes re-valued by embracing goals of environmental justice enacted through local processes of care and conviviality. Relying on networks of volunteers and not-for-profit agencies, Open Table provides a simple, effective and adaptable model for possible replication for overcoming drawbacks of traditional charity practices. Critically though, as hunger in society continues to grow, this approach is increasingly threatened by the need to 'single out' disadvantaged recipients to justify continued supply. This paper contributes to food poverty, waste, and Alternative Food Network literature in two important ways: first, by analyzing the outcomes of community food redistribution approaches with regards to stigma and inclusion; and secondly, by arguing that such holistic approaches need to be acknowledged, valued and supported to shift current discourses and practice.

Keywords Food rescue · Food sharing · Donation · Charity · Care · Alternative food network

Abbreviation
AFN Alternative food network

Introduction

Food waste has become a global issue in recent decades. Gustavsson et al. (2011) estimate that approximately one-third of edible food produced for human consumption is wasted globally every year. In Australia, householders' discarded $AUD five billion worth of food in 2009, where embedded resources of water and nutrients, and fuels for transportation and retail, are wasted along the food chain (Baker et al. 2009). This global food waste crisis is inherently political as its growth parallels a rise in hunger: Foodbank Australia recently reported (2019) that the number of Australians seeking food relief had increased by 22% in the last year. Rather than blame the victims, Gidwani and Reddy (2011, p. 1625) acknowledge waste as "the political other of capitalist 'value' … the things, places and lives that are cast outside the pale of 'value' at particular moments as superfluity, remnant, excess, or detritus". This paper explores how both 'othered' produce and people are being re-valued through the creation of spaces of alternative consumption, conviviality and identity formation.

Food surplus redistribution

Since the early 2000′s in Australia, there has been a growing movement to redistribute food from waste to donate to people in need. Open Table exists along a contiuum of surplus redistributors in Melbourne motivated primarily by

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environmental factors. These protagonists include 'freegans', people who choose to eat still-edible, yet discarded food as a protest against overconsumption while others go hungry (Edwards and Mercer 2007). This provocative declaration of food waste as an ethical and environmental problem emerged alongside the rise of Australia's food rescue sector with FareShare (then *One Umbrella*) established as Australia's first food rescue organization in 2000. FareShare is now joined by two other large rescue organizations, SecondBite and OzHarvest, with their presence recognized in all Australian states.

Australia's food waste movement occurred alongside an emergence of a global food waste movement and Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) in general, a variety of often community-led initiatives that seek to provide alternatives to the conventional food system based on industrial, large-scale, mono-cultural and for-profit production by favoring local, socially just and environmentally sustainable solutions (Jarosz 2008). In Australia this expansion extended into policy, where Good Samaritan laws were established to protect retailers from redistributing donated produce, through to more recent digital platform applications that capture and redistribute food from waste. Politicized redistributive surplus programs have a historical legacy, where examples include the San Francisco Diggers, Black Panther Party, and Food Not Bombs, all frame food as a human right transforming the redistribution of 'free food' from a "pacifying to revolutionary" act (Patel 2011, p. 125; also Heynen 2009; Spring et al. 2019).

However, AFNs have, in turn, been criticized due to their predominance towards exclusivity, racism and elitism, in addition to confusing conflation of AFN types and characteristics, and the continued impact that the capitalist market has on their goals (Alkon and McCullen 2011; Edwards 2016; Goodman et al. 2011; Guthman 2008; Harris 2009; Slocum 2007; Tregear 2011). This imbalance between desire, need and access is expressed by Hodgins and Fraser (2018) who describe the food system as being 'multi-tiered' consisting of 'the haves', 'the have-nots' and the 'have-lots', acknowledging how the middle-class can participate in AFNs by being able to "vote with their fork" (Hodgins and Fraser 2018, p. 150). Furthermore, the redistribution of waste does not simply resolve complex issues of waste and hunger. Indeed, such good intentions can perpetuate harm if the motivations behind such actions are not considered (Guthman 2008).

The stigma of 'free food'

This paper began from a conversation where I sought to find initiatives that donate free food for all. I realised that in order to receive free meals that people often must identify as disadvantaged, and that by doing so, charity can reinforce social stigma. Goffman (1963, p. 3) describes the categorization of stigma as reducing an individual "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one", resulting in alienation, shame, self-hate and self-derogation. Food banks are acknowledged as frequent sources of social stigma which, while emergency food supplies may meet some immediate needs of the poor, can undermine peoples' rights, entitlements and cultural basis of support (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk 2009; Poppendieck 1999; van der Horst et al. 2014; Purdam et al. 2016). Food banks tend to propagate asymmetric relationships of gifting where those who have "the right (and is empowered) to give" (Askins 2015, p. 472) can cause recipients to feel disempowered and marginalized when they are "constructed as needing care" (Askins 2015, p. 472). By experiencing a loss of sense of self, attendees may in turn reject services and skip meals, further promulgating hunger and social isolation. As a consequence, many food relief agencies seek to employ strategies to provide assistance with dignity. To achieve this aim, hidden connections between care, space and power should be made visible and questioned (Askins 2015; Darling 2011).

Defining care

Care extends from the individual to include collective and non-human actors as an "activity that includes everything we do to maintain, contain, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Fisher and Tronto 1990, p. 40). Care, while often ignored in policy (Stensöta 2015), underpins much practice, where it can hurt as well as help, can be expressed from afar or up close, and can convey an ethics of who or what should be cared for, and in doing so, can channel and validate value and power. Definitions of care are thus varied, with their sources requiring unpicking to unsettle their political implications. This paper draws on Tronto's (1993) expressions of care—'caring about', 'taking care of', 'care-giving', 'care-receiving' and 'caring with'—to explore the dynamics of AFNs, focusing on redistributive food sharing.

This paper unites AFN and care literature to examine how sharing food waste in a care-full way can displace and counter stigma from charitable donation. The research focuses on Open Table, a not-for-profit community group based in Melbourne, Australia, that redistributes food from waste to the broader community at the shared table. Their website in 2016 stated their goals as: "Open Table is based on two key ideas—reducing food waste and meeting the neighbours. We use surplus food to create wholesome community feasts, bringing together people from all walks of life". Seemingly a subtle shift from other approaches, I argue that by bringing pertinent issues of waste, hunger, and the environment together on a societal, rather than individual level, that stigma is displaced by revaluing both the meal and those who consume it. This paper examines value making through

a 'follow-the-thing' approach to reveal the physical, material, emotional geographies that emerge over a composite day for Open Table.

Methodology and methods

This paper borrows a 'follow-the-thing' approach (Cook et al. 2004) to acknowledge the connections, relationships and values that are formed along the physical route from the collection of ingredients, to assembling the meal, to being seated at the shared Open Table. This 'more-than-food' approach likens an Open Table feast as one among many events as assemblage of care practices (Edwards and Davies 2018). This approach recognises the "relationalities of food, space and place" (Goodman 2016, p. 258), while welcoming the "dynamic, diverse and unexpected" (Sharp 2018, p. 271) towards "imagining and practising food differently" (Sharp 2018, p. 266).

Qualitative research was conducted in Melbourne, Australia, from September through to December 2016, complemented by a follow up visit in December 2018. Data collection included: participant observation at thirteen events at seven venues (see Table 1); three long semi-structured interviews with Open Table's General Manager, the Vice President (who is also highly involved in FareShare, a large food rescue organization in Australia) and a representative from the donor organization, SecondBite; three short, on-the-spot

Table 1 Characteristics of Open Table venues

Location and description of site	Characteristic of attendees
The first Open Table event established c. 2012, the *Brunswick Open Table* is held 6 km from the Melbourne CBD. Traditionally a working class area, it now has a bohemian culture with a large student population. It is currently experiencing gentrification	All ages attend from local lodges that provide accommodation and assistance for people who do not have the ability or capacity to live independently. It has a strong volunteer group who have been consistently overseeing the event for years
The *Fitzroy Open Table* was the second event established in c. 2012, held 3 km from the CBD in Fitzroy, a cultural hub known for its music, art, food and shops. Previously working class, Fitzroy has experienced much urban renewal and gentrification with corresponding high rents. The Open Table is held in a room at the bottom of the Atherton Gardens Estate, a large public housing complex. The venue sits beside a community garden and co-houses many cultural food activities (Wray and Christensen 2014)	A high number of elderly Asian people attend from the nearby flats: "I think we are connecting with people more through established community centres, and established community groups. In Fitzroy for example we have a lot of the Chinese women that come. They all do ballroom dancing at the adjacent centre, and they come over after they've done their dancing" (Open Table General Manager)
The *Fawkner Open Table* was established in 2013 and is situated 12 km from the Melbourne CBD. Fawkner has a large elderly population and immigrant population, with Italians being the largest ethnic group, followed by Pakistani and Lebanese (ABS 2016). The Open Table is held in the Senior Citizen Centre	There are children everywhere, it is quite noisy, the queue gets long, and the two rooms fit approximately 50 people. "There's lots of new arrivals in Fawkner and so therefore really low incomes as well. Maybe one spouse working; large families. So lots of food insecurity" (Open Table local coordinator)
The *Carlton Open Table*, established in 2016, is held 2 kms from the CBD. It is a wealthier region with medium- to high-density housing, consisting of public housing complexes, student and private dwellings. The Open Table feast is held at the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre, a community managed not-for-profit organisation that offers a range of community courses	Attendance is diverse and includes backpackers, residents from the nearby flats, and students who attend language classes. People who attend often volunteer both in the on-site community garden and at the Open Table meal
The *Coburg Open Table* was established in 2016 and is 9 kms from the CBD in a culturally diverse area where 62.1% of people were born in Australia. The most common ethnicities are from Italy, Greece, Lebanon, England and Nepal (ABS 2016). The Open Table feast is held at Robinson Reserve Neighbourhood House, an incorporated, not-for-profit organization that aims to reduce social isolation and promote community cohesion	Many regular attendees to the Neighbourhood House join the lunch. The Neighbourhood House Coordinator explains: "a lot of people that come to Robinson Reserve have really severe anxiety so for them to be in a room with thirty people is terrifying. So to learn how to do that is a skill in itself"
The *North Coburg Open Table* was established also in 2016, 11 kms north of the CBD. The Open Table event is held at Newlands Road Neighbourhood House. Highly residential, it is characterized by weatherboard houses and industrial activities	The site was still building its community having held only three events at the time of the research (2016). Attendance averaged twenty people including many young families and elderly people who live nearby
The *Richmond Open Table* was established in early 2017 and is 3 kms east of the CBD. The suburb is known for its factory outlets along Bridge Road, Little Saigon along Victoria Street, and its illicit drug dealing. The suburb has undergone gentrification since the 1990s and now is home to converted warehouses, public housing and Victorian-era terrace houses. The Open Table event is held at the Belgium Avenue Neighbourhood House	The local coordinator explains: "I know there are a lot of commission housing around that area, also a lot of cultural disconnect or just community disconnect, a lot of transient communities and a lot of crime in the past. And now I think it is changing a little, but because of that volunteering that I saw that I thought, well, this would be a great place to have Open Table."

interviews with local venue Open Table Coordinators and staff from shops that donated goods; and an intensive focus group with two local venue Open Table Coordinators and the Open Table General Manager. Participant observation and informal conversations were preferred methods for participants with disabilities, elderly or from CALD backgrounds. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and thematically coded using the software program, NVIVO. Coding noted the types of relations between initiatives, their histories, operations, motivations and activities. Contributing to a larger study on urban food sharing (Edwards and Davies 2018; Davies 2019), twenty-six interviews were conducted with representatives from local and state governments in food health, safety and planning, umbrella food sharing networks, academia, community organizations, and from other local food sharing and waste case initiatives. Analysis involved triangulating data from these diverse perspectives across the coded themes whilst reflecting on the author's experiences at each field site. The diverse sample of stakeholders provided a holistic understanding of Open Table's practices and an overview of the issues and influences informing food sharing in Melbourne.

Introducing Open Table

Open Table began in 2013 by graduate students in Melbourne, Australia, who were inspired by a Swedish food sharing project. Returning home from their travels, they started a 6-week pilot program in a Community House to provide free meals. Open Table's General Manager explains:

> That was one dinner every week on a Sunday evening, and there were maybe six people that were involved… It started out with food coming from FareShare. They were donating cooked food … the project was more about community cohesion at that point, so they were getting in people from some of the Lodges in the area.

In 2016 Open Table had become a not-for-profit incorporated association community program that cooks meals in shared kitchens at Neighbourhood Houses and Senior Citizen Centres from ingredients donated from SecondBite, a large food rescue, not-for-profit organisation, and local businesses. Their key goal was conviviality rather than food security, with a strong focus on overcoming social isolation. The meal signifies to a great extent an excuse to bring people together—a key concern when at least 10% of Victoria's older population experience loneliness (Commissioner for Senior Victorians 2016), and when indigenous, culturally and linguistically diverse, and socially isolated people often experience a high rate of food insecurity in Australia (Rosier 2011). As explained by Open Table's General Manager:

> We want to create a welcoming and inclusive environment. We don't want to have any agenda for getting people together rather than just eating food. It is about sustainability, but that's more of an undertone. We don't preach that, we don't want to make people feel excluded if they are not environmentally conscious. We don't want to exclude people that are not food insecure, we want to include everyone together. … We try adamantly to refrain from being a soup kitchen, or from serving people. We also sit down and have lunch together which is important to us.

Open Table serve one community meal each month at each venue. The seven Open Table venues are located predominantly in Melbourne's north where Table 1 shows their diverse characteristics as they have developed over time. Factors that influence their site selection include: funding support and resource availability, the possibility to be placed in pre-existing community hubs, and locations are selected for being in food insecure areas (by locating feasts in disadvantaged areas, the opportunity to provide services for people-in-need are increased). Sharing their kitchens, dining halls, and when available, community gardens, these sites vary in longevity, and in their degree of community ties, local ownership, cultural diversity, and community outreach. For this latter point, ranging from regular participants in community centers, to bringing in new participants from the local area. In 2016 Open Table was supported by two local councils "which pays for the running of those events, so transportation, groceries, we have some account keeping fees" and earned additional funds through catering. Table 1 below shows different characteristics for each venue. As explained by the Open Table General Manager: "We run on basically no money because everything else is donated. My time is mostly donated and voluntary, I get paid on a part-time basis for administration through other private funding ventures we have done, through catering, crowdsourcing".

In 2016 Open Table had one paid staff member (the General Manager), a board of advisors, and local venue coordinators for each Open Table site. The General Manager established relationships with community centres that included Neighbourhood Houses and Senior Citizen Centres with kitchens and who often provide one staff member to help promote the events, coordinate volunteers and prepare meals. Volunteers provide the mainstay of their support. Volunteers are not vetted or trained but join by simply showing up. The General Manager remarks that: "Volunteers seem to be, pretty easy to retain and recruit because it is a pretty fine way to volunteer your time. It's very creative, you get to meet a lot of new people, and you get some free food." During the research period, Open Table had approximately thirty regular volunteers while many casual volunteers attended one to two events. Volunteers represent a range

of ages, socio-economic positions and life experiences who may be part of the local community, travellers, the disadvantaged, students, or new arrivals to the area. This diverse social identity complicates often assumed notions of "the 'white, middle class' volunteer who is privileged to give" requiring careful examination about the details behind the politics of encounter (Askins 2015, p. 473). After demonstrating consistent interest and reliability, the General Manager may offer volunteers to lead their own community feast depending upon the availability of venues and resources. The next section describes a typical day for an Open Table event and the layering of care that is ascribed through the preparation of the meal.

Follow-the-food: a composite day at the Open Table

Collecting the ingredients

SecondBite, a large food rescue organization that redistributes surplus fresh food donated by farmers, wholesalers, markets, supermarkets, caterers and events to community food programs around Australia, is the first collection point for an average Open Table day. Founded in 2005, SecondBite now operates in the eastern Australian states of Victoria, Tasmania, Queensland and New South Wales. In 2013 SecondBite rescued and redistributed over four million kilograms of primarily fresh fruit and vegetables to approximately one thousand providers (SecondBite 2013). SecondBite collects from hundreds of major Australian supermarkets, manufacturers and wholesale producers receiving a variety of prepared and fresh goods including: "… Simplot who do prepared meals, a bit more pastas and sauces. Montagues apples who have not just apples but also stone fruit" (SecondBite spokesperson).

SecondBite provides the bulk of ingredients for Open Table's community feasts. Rather than accept any surplus food, SecondBite commits to redistributing 95% nutritious food, as defined by the *Australian Guide to Healthy Eating* (Australian Government 2017), and 75% fresh fruit and vegetables. While this produce may be nearing its best-before date, it is still edible with its 'ugly' appearance hidden by preparation and cooking.

SecondBite's donation criteria includes the need to "support programmes, not individuals" where:

> … at least a majority who access the food need to be people in need, and we are very on board with inclusion and people feeling part of a group and having it as a social occasion. So as long as it's not more than 30% of people accessing the food could actually go out and buy their own food from the supermarket. (SecondBite spokesperson)

SecondBite recognise that the statement 'people in need' is subjective. They further explain:

> Our role is to work out that the charities that we are supporting are doing all the right things and they are supporting people we believe are in need, but at the end of the day they [the charities] are making that call. … We are logistics. We are collecting the food. We are giving it out to the agencies, not to people. (SecondBite spokesperson)

In this respect, due to their size and dual purpose, Open Table differs to other charities in being able to receive donations without having to categorize—and hence discriminate—their attendees as 'in need'. Likewise, Open Table are also eligible to receive produce from small food retailers being protected by the Good Samaritan law, a state law that protects retailers from possible recrimination, while their small size enables them to collect food from a variety of retailers. Hence care is taken by SecondBite to source healthy food for those in need, while Open Table takes additional care to build goodwill with suppliers receiving gourmet donations from florists, bakeries and organic goods. Open Table's small size means they can sustain themselves on smaller quantities of food donations, enabling them to anchor within local communities, such as local stores and related food sharing activities. The Open Table General Manager describes this as a food *sharing* culture:

> It's about sharing things as a group […] which brings people together whether they know it or not. Some people come and they don't know what to expect. And think it's going to be intimidating where they are going to have to get up and speak in front of people and meet a bunch of new people. But you can kind of do what you want. You can come with a takeaway container and leave, or sit down and chat for an hour.

As a result, Open Table's feasts are often healthy and nutritious. By providing healthy meals, Open Table is able to overcome the stigma of consuming bad quality food as "second class food for second class people" (Schneider 2013, p. 761). This fresh, and mainly vegan, food has the additional advantage of lowering the risk of food contamination as explained by Open Table's Vice President:

> For them if you donate to a place, and it's not just us—there are many community meals programs around—if you donate to them and they cook it on the premises, in registered food premises that are designed for that who have people with food safety certificates working in them, a lot of the risk is gone. And of course that doesn't matter a fig for rice, pasta, fresh fruit and veg. So say like

> SecondBite, they distribute mainly fresh fruit and veg, their risk is minimal.

Furthermore, by fostering relationships with luxury health food stores, eaters dine on a range of high quality ingredients that expand their dietary diversity, reminding them they are 'worth it'. This valuing of diners beyond basic provisioning is symbolized by the addition of normally expensive flowers as table dressings. These flowers, like other ingredients, have lost their economic value outside of the marketplace yet through care-full collection and presentation assert value. Gourmet edible additions emphasise that feasts are special events, deserving effort, and should be celebrated.

As part of a global food rescue movement, Open Table's ingredients are also sustainably coded extending care to an environmental, more-than-human arena, where key tenants include deep connections, reciprocity, and moral commitments between nonhumans and humans (Whyte and Cuomo 2016). Sharp (2020) drawing on Puig de la Bellacasa (2011) highlights the need to carefully consider the views of often neglected actors and their relationships to animate and inanimate others. In so doing, care in food scholarship has the potential to expand into many aspects, values and approaches. Regarding Open Table's produce, aspects of care are considered in the many attributes of sustainable sourcing that include the logistical companies, vendors, farmer owners and labourers and environmental resources of energy, water, phosphate, agro-chemicals and fuel.

Nguyen et al. (2014) analyse how freegan's behaviour becomes symbolic of reverse stigma: consumers are no longer considered to be cultural dupes succumbing to market-driven forces of material consumption but instead actively contest the paradox of hunger versus waste. The emergence of formal food waste organizations and businesses have converted the re-use of 'waste' into a respectable, and even fashionable, act. By preventing food from going to waste, eaters are not only personally benefiting from free meals but also contribute to environmental sustainability—beyond themselves and beyond the meal—by reducing demand for further waste and pollution.

Healthy, gourmet, culturally appropriate, site-specific and sustainably-coded ingredients represent the first steps to re-valuing discarded produce and championing the people who consume it. Through this process of selection, collection and by placing local consumption as part of a global environmental movement, the meal takes on social and environmental "regimes of value" (Appadurai 1986, p. 4). This layering of values through practices of care displaces echoes of stigma to reframe the meal from threat of famine to feast.

Assembling the meal

Everyone—coordinators, volunteers and eaters—is welcome to arrive early to help prepare the meal in the community centre kitchen. This act of contributing, if they are needy or not, promotes a cyclical form of dignity as "when people engage in dignity work intended to promote others' dignity, they often find that their own dignity is enhanced as well" (Jacobson 2012, p. 151). Importantly, there is no judgement or expectation for eaters to participate in the meal preparation, while alternatively everyone is welcome to suggest and cook dishes for the shared menu. A key job for the local venue coordinator is to find something for everyone to do, should they wish to participate. Both low-skilled contributions to encourage participation, or support to skill up are on offer, as explained by Open Table's General Manager:

> So we do have a lot of people that will help in their own way, sweeping 'or doing the dishes. And then there's some people who really want to help out with cooking, who have limited cooking skills. Particular in Brunswick, we have a lot of people in supported housing nearby to help us. But maybe we just get them peeling fruit or helping the table decorations or things like that.

There is no 'right' way to make a dish as people respond to the haphazard ingredients at hand. The process of sorting jumbled produce at different stages of deterioration from the boxes, combined with its preparation, elicits demonstrations of skills and stories, embedding personal, material and experiential values into the anticipated feast. Most people ask what needs to be done, grab a knife and start chopping, while others peel, stir, bake, clean, arrange flowers and set the table. Simple tasks grant an easy access point for people to participate, especially important for those who are shy or unsure. For example, a frequent attendee is an elderly Italian gentlemen who participates at three venues (many people only attend one) who chooses not to design meals but only to chop, cut, grate, pluck, stir and sauté for others. This kitchen camaraderie resonates with a feminist ethics of care that is based on interconnection and relationality (Askins 2015; Beasley and Bacchi 2005; Lawson 2007) where participants are learning a capacity to care through watching interactions by others. Opening opportunities for connections to be made, assembling the meal is guided by an understanding that "people need each other in order to lead a good life and that they can only exist as individuals through and via caring relationships with others" (Sevenhuijsen 2003, p. 183). This exchange of roles blurs power relationships where "a donor transforms his or her status in the relationship from the dominant to the generous" (Hattori 2001, p. 640).

Kitchens vary in autonomy with some volunteers choosing to acquire more leadership over time. For example, volunteers at the Brunswick site have participated for more than 4 years resulting in little need for support from the Open Table General Manager. This duration has enabled a strong bond between attendees and volunteer chefs to develop.

> I think that a lot of people really enjoy the communal aspect. And I think the guys who come to Brunswick, that have been coming since the very first week. They have taken a lot of ownership over the events. They all know all the dates … and who's going to be there. (Open Table General Manager)

Alternatively at the Fawkner site, a new arrival to Australia started making Pakistani food to share. Her chicken biryani quickly became extremely popular, attracting donors who supplied specialist ingredients to ensure the dish remained on the menu. The volunteer chef's confidence in her cooking grew through volunteering where she has since taken on similar roles in the broader asylum seeker and refugee community. Hence, care to not only facilitate entry to the meal but to also grant flexibility for skilling up, to take on new responsibilities, and for reciprocity within and across roles are essential factors for empowering volunteers to grow their own sense of self whilst also sustaining volunteer-dependent initiatives.

Offering the kitchen as a shared, equitable space provides another possibility for social inclusion and dignity as many people feel safer in the familiar kitchen than in the open dining space (Martin 2017). Ahmed (2000, p. 279–280) recognizes that "collectives are formed through the very work that we need to do in order to get closer to others". Here the kitchen becomes a shared space of constant gentle negotiations as participants offer help and provide instruction, chipping away at the boundaries between giver and receiver (Askins 2015). An Italian grandmother who is a new arrival to the Coburg Open Table offers a good example, as recorded in the author's field notes:

> S. tells us that she has cooked all her life and does not want to cook! But she remains within the kitchen to watch us work and as I begin to cook the pasta, she says that I have no idea how to do it! It needs salt! Salt! Oil – put oil in! You must stir it! Time it! Test it! Test it with the sauce! Her input is relentless. I start to tease her a little, in a good way, and her response is to further torment me with instructions! Both our efforts finally pay off as she pronounces the pasta a success and when I go to leave, she blows me a kiss and asks if I'll be back.

Bedore (2018, p. 220) speaks of how dignity is ascribed through "a person's enjoyment of having status, rank or being of 'merit' compared with others. It is through individual or collective 'dignity work' that people work to rescue, repair or promote their own dignity, in either affirmative or defensive ways". The Italian grandmother's knowledge of how to produce good spaghetti symbolises affirmative dignity work. From being initially nervous, she was comfortable to enter via the kitchen, which, after sharing and asserting her skills, said that she would return to join future activities.

A seat at the table

Finally, the meal is served. The author's field notes describe a typical Open Table feast:

> When I arrived, dinner was at least halfway prepared, with salads and bits and pieces chopped and being used for this and that. It was all quite random with people just creatively doing what they could with the ingredients on hand. (…) There were the normal dishes nicely done – a fruit salad sprinkled with pomegranates, kiwi fruit and mint, a salsa salad finished off with lemon, a broccoli dish, some sautéed Chinese greens.

Open Table respects their eaters' specific needs. While Open Table generally serves vegan meals due to food safety factors, depending upon the preferences of attendees, meat and dairy may also be served on occassion. For example, as there is high multi-cultural attendance at the Fawkner venue, Open Table also offer halal meals, and even separate dining rooms for the women and children. As explained by a volunteer local coordinator: "Yes, we do always share something that will meet every criteria. We get a lot of vegetarians, vegans". Another local coordinator states: "So it's about catering for your community and being culturally appropriate". This consideration evokes what Spring et al. (2019), drawing on Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy (2013) and Hayes-Conroy (2017), refer to as 'visceral food access' where Open Table acknowledges that attendees have "specific bodily histories and prior and current affective/emotional relations with alternative foods" (Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, p. 82) that "comingle with embodied sensations of food handling and eating to (re)shape visceral access, body–food relationships and encounters" (Spring et al. 2019, p. 845). To make participants feel comfortable they both invite them to prepare, and prepare for them, specific foods that are healthy, enjoyable and suitable for their backgrounds. This eclectic meal not only follows bodies' needs but also acknowledges "experiences of social position(ing), norms and difference" (Hayes-Conroy 2017, p. 51). A flexibility to accept ingredients to mark special moments is also appreciated, such as the gold coins and Christmas cake illustrated in Fig. 1.

Open Table volunteers often take care to invite local people to attend the meal by walking to nearby public spaces, doing a letterbox drop, and knocking on neighbors' doors. This strategy is effective and essential for people who are socially or physically isolated or for whom social media does not reach. The North Coburg Open Table is one such example where Open Table volunteers door-knocked a

Fig. 1 Selection of donated food and flowers for Open Table events

nearby housing complex to personally invite elderly people to participate.

Each venue appeals to different attendees (see Table 1 above). Like the meal's ingredients, attendance is unfixed, dynamic and sporadic—sometimes many people will attend, at other times, only a few. Participants' often reflect a mix of motivations, ages and backgrounds. Open Table is adaptive to social difference where people are not forced to integrate with each other. Choice is important as not everyone can tolerate the same degree of social interaction. For example, one lady at Coburg was too shy to eat with others so she eats her lunch in the quiet kitchen, while at Fitzroy a homeless man shows up regularly before the meal to receive a take-away container packed with food to go on his way. For those who chose to stay, eaters sat either together or apart. Dining tables may be arranged as one large table, as a series of tables placed from end-to-end, or as clusters of grouped tables. While not demanding people to sit together, Open Table offers an opportunity for diverse people to share a physical space in a safe, respectful, joyful and well-fed atmosphere. Here too no judgment is made — people have the option to stay, sit and eat together or to grab food and go. This adaptability allows people to maintain their dignity where: "To be dignified or have dignity is first to be in control of oneself, competently and appropriately exercising one's power" (Sayer 2007, p. 568). Rather than restrict or judge an individual, Open Table's focus remains on care for the individual, the environment, and on the meal itself. One amusing incident occurred at the Carlton Open Table where a very large group of elderly Asian people entered the dining room, grabbed take-away containers, took a majority of the food that had been carefully prepared, and then immediately departed. Rather than be upset, the General Manager was happy that the food was appreciated and was no longer going to waste.

Discussion

The monthly Open Table feast illustrates the layers and iterations of care that come together to de-stigmatize food donation. While Open Table is largely a successful case study, here I apply criticisms of AFNs to Open Table's experiences.

Criticisms of alternative food networks

First, AFNs are often criticized for tending towards racism, exclusivity and elitism. For example, Valentine (2008, p. 334) recognizes that "proximity does not equate with meaningful contact". In other words, by putting people together you cannot claim they will be happily 'integrated'. Indeed, Valentine argues that there are "many examples of socially mixed neighbourhoods that are territorialized by particular groups and rife with tensions over different ways of 'doing' and 'being' in shared space" (Valentine 2008, p. 328). The Fawkner Open Table exemplifies this aspect where an initial clash of cultures, personal identities, expectations and understandings had to be negotiated over time. The Open Table local coordinator explains this emergence:

> So we've had to slowly slowly build our relationship with the locals and welcome newly arrived migrants into that community as well. … I think Fawkner is probably a great success story on that front, given that we have bridged the gap between a lot of Muslim migrants and a lot of traditional people that have been living there their whole lives with Catholic and Italian backgrounds. So we have to keep in mind different culturally appropriate food. So it has to be Halal, but at the same time we have to offer Italian type dishes as well to keep people happy.

Care is grounded in practice by responding to specific needs (Tronto 1993). The successful outcome acknowledged cultural dietary and spatial needs, providing a separate room for Muslim women to eat together with their children. Indeed, this integration of cultures became more complex due to the volunteer chef's enthusiasm for Pakistani cuisine, inviting more Pakistani guests to attend (often women with their children). Rather than forcing people to eat the same meal or to share their lunch at the same table, flexibility within a safe, tolerant space allowed people to express their identities. This event evolved from this volunteer's dishes merely satisfying both groups to celebrating difference across cultures. While racism may not be resolved in the suburb, Open Table granted a safe space for people to dine together where they could start conversations to understand each other's diverse backgrounds.

With regards to being exclusive and elitist, caution needs to be taken at the Open Table to ensure that both chefs and eaters' needs, interests and experiences are equitably considered. The Richmond Open Table provides an example where a new volunteer venue coordinator assembled an enthusiastic and talented team of cooks, all from outside the region. This team purchased exotic ingredients to heighten flavours, and while they produced a delicious gourmet lunch, little effort was made to engage residents in meal preparation resulting in scant local attendance. This situation was remedied by the General Manager who walked the neighbourhood to personally invite locals to attend the meal. Hence, the proximate relationality of care must be maintained to continue relevance, and thus ensure the success of the shared feast.

Another common criticism is the capitalist market's dominance on AFN goals. While food waste initiatives are becoming increasingly popular around the world, so too do they rely on waste and other resources produced by capitalism to exist. Open Table is no exception where they

depend on food waste, other institutions and volunteers to survive. Open Table's Vice President expressed this concern, commenting: "One of the things I want them to get is DGR [Deductible Gift Recipients are organisations that can receive donations that are tax deductible] because you cannot apply for a lot of grants without it". Hence, Open Table is not self-sustainable and must seek new strategies to ensure their longevity. One threat for Open Table is that, as urban hunger increases, donors may soon begin insisting on classifying which attendees are in need, hence re-enforcing stigmatization. Open Table's Vice President explains:

> So you've got levels … So 'A' is emergency food relief. Then if there is any left over I am happy to give it to people who are doing community building, training and the like ... If need gets too high and people are not getting enough food to eat then the obvious thing for me to do is cut out funding, giving free food to those other programs.

Blurring boundaries to displace stigma

Open Table's ability to blur boundaries and to exist 'in-between' enables them to overcome stigma through declassification and care. Care is performed throughout Open Table's operations. Drawing on Tronto (1993), Open Table's founders and donors 'care about' societal issues of hunger and loneliness and environmental concerns of food waste, where Open Table along with the support of Neighbourhood Houses and others come together to 'take care of' these issues by committing to providing an ongoing service. However, definitions of care 'giving' and 'receiving' become blurred where roles are exchanged and diluted in the Open Table kitchen, where personal stigma is displaced by all being welcome to 'care with' or 'care for' global issues of environmental concern through re-valuing food from waste.

While creating a space for difference, Open Table seeks to close physical, social and symbolic gaps. This space "for self-care and care for others" (Bedore 2018, p. 226) gains capacity through sharing actions and produce to enable alternative forms of consumption to persist. Embedding an environmental ethics through consuming food waste—as an overt practice or not—transforms relationships from charity to care (Darling 2011). Belonging as 'longing to be' (Probyn 1996) is reflected by participants' regular return, where the community feast becomes a yearning for social attachment, to feel part of a larger whole to others through place, convivial ritual and food.

Care as a disruptive force for change

Open Table employs an adaptive model that allows for novel connections to be made between local agencies, spaces, stores and communities. Many opportunities and some tensions emerge from their existing 'in-between' traditional approaches and roles: Open Table seek to be more than a soup kitchen yet still convey this function, while bringing together participants whose interests vary from preparing good food, to combatting food waste, to feeding the socially marginalized. So too does their size allow them to act as an intermediary between large food rescue operations and charity food donation models, whose large-scale or single-purpose approach prevents them from taking advantage of such opportunities. By being complementary, rather than competitive, Open Table is also cared for by other agencies: "They [FareShare] are kind of mentoring us in a sense. … [FareShare's Operations Manager] she's kind of taken our project on as her own … personal interest in getting us to be sustainable".

Occupying this constantly negotiated space that is based foremost on social relationships, Open Table represents an alternative form of food bank following Cloke et al. (2017) that exists 'in the meantime'; disrupting conventional boundaries between giver and receiver, need and want, and acceptance and resistance to the status quo. With these events largely accessible seeking to be inclusive, open, and non-judgmental, Open Table's feasts have become representative of 'micro-publics' (Amin 2002), events of organized group activities where diverse eaters can come together "to break out of fixed patterns of interaction and learn new ways of being and relating" (Valentine 2008, p. 331). Such disruption based on dialogue and gentle contestation allows change to occur.

These interactions become politically transformative as they re-play across different venues to carve out new communities (Askins 2015). Open Table's venues act as important 'third places', defined by Oldenburg (1999, p. 16) as "public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work". Becoming 'second homes' through the building of social relationships, such shared third places also become political as they push back gentrification in defence of marginalized people who are losing accessible social spaces (Oldenburg 2000).

> So it's kind of addressing the issues surrounding gentrification, with splitting between the communities. Melbourne … is very much about community. And each suburb had its own kind of little subculture or micro-environment which we are losing now because of gentrification and the housing process. (Open Table General Manager)

Suggestions for future research

Future research could interrogate the gendered role of care in food redistribution practices, the ethics of care practices in community, versus state and corporate-based organizations,

and how food surplus redistribution could be better sustained within capitalist-centric food systems. So too could different lenses be explored for their potential to displace individual stigma towards positive action to address global issues, such as linking to food justice solidarity movements. By bringing care more centrally within AFN literature complemented by employing methodologies that listen to hidden and marginalised animate *and* inanimate perspectives, more holistic understandings of contemporary food systems can be produced to identify better junctures of, and motivations for, care-full change. So too could research into complementary activities investigate how such care-full moments can be both spatially and temporally extended from the table and from the monthly meal to remain within the community between courses. Open Table reveals connections between care and space, where future research could interrogate how political-economic structures showcase or blind transformative change for community benefit. Recognising Open Table's contribution to building inclusive spaces of belonging while retaining vulnerability to resource dependencies, this paper recommends governments recognize the multiple, holistic values of community food programs to prioritize their support.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this paper, Open Table's unique strength is their ability to displace stigma through practices of care for one's self, others and for the environment. By ascribing values to food waste through a careful approach that celebrates 'others' based on principles of flexibility, adaptability and openess, Open Table is both accessible and resililent to their community needs. This paper has connected complexities across food waste, dignity, food sharing and communities of care. Applying the case study of a small-scale local food initiative, it demonstrates that neither consuming food waste nor food sharing are enough to address environmental and social issues. Instead, the politics of encounter underlying the spaces and motivations to give and receive must also be considered. Indeed, the gentle interplay and blurring between these roles obscures whom most benefits—which could alternatively be the food insecure, foodies or sustainable eaters. In providing food in a non-stigmatizing way, Open Table provides an example of doing food banks differently. Rather than stop short at food rescue, they illustrate how shared meals in cosmopolitan spaces can support 'living together with difference' where 'caring with' extends both the scope of food rescue into community, and charitable donation into environmental concerns (Valentine 2008). Such complementary community-based programs that sit 'in-between' large food donors and charity models and that care for others by anchoring within neighborhoods provide important connectors across society that support not only food security, but also social inclusion, dignity and environmental benefits.

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