

DECIPHERING A NON-MEAL: *Pantawid-Gutom* and the Everyday Negotiation of Hunger in the Philippines

GIDEON LASCO

University of the Philippines Diliman
Ateneo de Manila University

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6402-682X>

JHAKI MENDOZA

University of the Philippines Manila

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8063-290X>

“It’s also *pantawid-gutom*,” Jarod,¹ an eighteen-year-old street vendor, told Gideon Lasco as he was hanging out with Jarod’s *barkada* (peer group) in a port community in Luzon. Jarod was referring to *shabu* (crystal methamphetamine)—an illicit stimulant—in the middle of a conversation about its effects, particularly in relation to work. Loss of appetite came up—which Gideon considered a bad thing. But Jarod, who on the side also works as a porter, construction worker, and occasionally engages in sex work, claimed otherwise: “That’s another advantage with *shabu*. When you use it, you don’t have to eat.”

This conversation marked the first time we encountered *non-food* (in this case, an illicit stimulant that has emerged as the main target of the Philippines’ punitive antidrug campaigns), referred to as *pantawid-gutom*, but the claim quickly found validation among Jarod’s peers. A portmanteau from the Tagalog (Filipino) words *pantawid* (something to help bridge or tide over) and *gutom* (hunger), *pantawid-gutom* had not previously struck us as anything other than food people consumed between meals. Sometimes, we ourselves—as local medical anthropologists

living and working in metropolitan Manila—would refer to *pantawid-gutom* in our everyday lives, for example, when we, caught in the capital city’s notorious traffic jams, would buy a snack from vendors boarding the buses to prevent ourselves from getting hungry until we could have a proper meal at home.

Throughout fieldwork that spanned six years (2012–2019)—as part of ethnographic work on drug issues and, later, President Rodrigo Duterte’s “drug war” (Lasco 2014, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c)—drugs as *pantawid-gutom* would surface as a recurrent theme, inspiring us to explore the term further and more deliberately. For Gideon Lasco, this exploration involved *pakikitambay* (Lasco 2014), or “hanging out with” mostly young men in urban poor communities in Luzon, beginning with the port community where he initially met Jarod and his friends. The long-term relationship allowed him not just to talk to them but also to observe their daily routines, including their consumption of food and other substances. For Jhaki Mendoza, this inquiry entailed *pagmamasid* (Bennagen 1985), or “observation” in a low-income community in Quezon City, where she also approached and interviewed various individuals passing by one of the city’s major thoroughfares. These conversations, initially facilitated by the fact that Jhaki lived in the same city and spoke the same language, were preceded by a disclosure that we, as local researchers from the University of the Philippines, were studying *pantawid-gutom*. In keeping with local research conventions, these interviews—sixteen in total—were followed by giving a token of 300 pesos (around \$6 USD).

Food insecurity, we soon found, proved a sensitive topic for people. They regarded questions about whether they experienced hunger a matter of personal dignity, reminding us of Hanna Garth’s notion of *alimentary dignity*, or “the ways in which individuals or groups of people define their cuisine as meeting locally determined standards for a civilized, well rounded, calorically sufficient cuisine that also meets local standards of symbolic value” (Garth 2019, 5). Which makes us wonder if surveys—like a recent one that estimates that 2.3 million families experienced “involuntary hunger,” representing 9.5 percent of the entire population (FAO 2021)—are missing out on a larger picture of hunger. As Joan Gross and Nancy Rosenberger (2005, 2010) have illustrated, survey questionnaires assessing food insecurity fail to capture the larger context in which hunger operates and how individuals continually strive to employ different strategies to make ends meet, such as utilizing different forms of capital. Such sensitivities underscore what is at stake in our topic, given how, as Garth (2019) observes, “alimentary dignity is central to debates on food security and food sovereignty.”

From various interactions with our interlocutors, as well as from archival research on the figurations of *pantawid-gutom* in the scholarly literature and popular culture, it was clear that *pantawid-gutom* was consumed in contexts of difficulty or deprivation. Dabet Castañeda (2007, para. 17), in a report on sex workers, has a passage that well describes the predicament of the people we met: “Days when there are no customers, Sandy said, her mother would scavenge scrap materials at the nearby dump and sell these to the nearest junkshop. The small earnings from junk could at least provide them a meal, Sandy said. ‘Pwede na rin pantawid-gutom’ (Just to tide over the hunger), she said as she shrugs her shoulders.”

In addition, we identified various practices and substances—both food and non-food—that people referred to as *pantawid-gutom*, making it clear that while a food category, it also unsettles the very idea of what constitutes “food,” particularly in relation to hunger. How does deprivation change people’s categories and standards of what is good to eat? What is the encoded message in the very existence of *pantawid-gutom*? These are some of the questions informing our ethnographic engagement, and the answers—as we discuss—lie in the *in-betweenness* of *pantawid-gutom*, its being a liminal category between food and non-food.

REVISITING FOOD

Anthropologists have long documented the various classifications of food in different cultures: from the cultural materialism exemplified by the works of Marvin Harris (2001) and Julian Steward (2006), which views food systems as adaptations to the physical surroundings, to the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1983) and Mary Douglas (1972), which give more prominence to the symbolic meanings embedded in food, meanings revelatory of patterns in human social relations. Some of these perspectives are implicit in the inevitable discussion of food and beverage in full-length ethnographic monographs that focus on a particular locality (for examples in the Philippines, see Jenks 1905; Cole 1913; Ewing 1963; Scott 1990). Eventually, over the course of the twentieth century, food and food categories would receive greater attention as an explicit object of study in relation to growing public health concerns over nutrition and food insecurity, as well as emergent theoretical directions in the social sciences (see Mintz and Du Bois 2002; Messer 1984; Pottier 1999).

Lévi-Strauss (1983) posited the existence of a “cultural triangle” with three kinds of food—raw, cooked, and rotten—the latter two corresponding to culture and nature, respectively, and all three are distinct based on the degree of human intervention. Building on Lévi-Strauss’s attention to categories but also departing

from his dependence on a universal culinary language, Mary Douglas asserted that “food categories encode social events” (Douglas 1972, 61). In her categories, she moved away from food preparation to the unwritten rules governing combinations of food and beverage, their sequence, the time of the day, and the particular social groupings and contexts of meal consumption: “Drinks are for strangers, acquaintances, workmen, and family. Meals are for family, close friends, honored guests. The grand operator of the system is the line between intimacy and distance” (Douglas 1972, 66).

For Douglas, food categories are reflective—and constitutive—of a broader social world. Pierre Bourdieu (1979) would add the element of “taste” and class distinction: food categories do not merely encode intimacy or belonging but also social class—tastes of luxury and tastes of necessity. Expanding on the element of taste, Deborah Lupton (1994) and David E. Sutton (2010) highlight the multisensorial dimensions of food and its value in memory construction and place-making (i.e., private vs. public and local vs. global) shaping our food categories. Anthropologists have also extrapolated on gender distinctions and bodily dimensions embedded in food categories, foodways, and consumption (Lupton 1996; Counihan 2018). Other anthropologists link food categories and taxonomies with ethnomedical concepts (Manderson 1981; Nichter 1986) and ethnoecological precepts (Wallace 1983; Wassmann 1993). Tanis Furst and colleagues (2000, 349) argued, “The fundamental imprecision of ordinary language does not nullify our understanding of spontaneous food classifications, yet its effect must be acknowledged in any attempt to make sense of the ways people classify foods.” Following the social life of food amid politicized food insecurity problems, Kristin Phillips (2018, 85), for instance, posits that as people produce, consume, and ritually engage with food, “they affirm, negotiate, reconstitute and contest their place in the world and the social categories that mark them and others.”

Some of the food categories identified by Douglas will have analogues in the Philippines, in part owing to the country’s long colonial history under Spain (1565–1898) and the United States (1899–1946). As in middle-class London, an invitation to a full meal in middle-class Manila (i.e., dinner or lunch rather than snacks or coffee) signifies greater intimacy; the same can be said of inviting someone to one’s home rather than to a restaurant.

Nonetheless, key material and structural differences also render local food categories distinct. Rice, for instance, is central to food in the Philippines, and its presence or absence distinguishes full-blown meals from snacks (Negrillo 2019; Aguilar 2005; Fernandez 2001). The anthropologist Propero Covar affirms rice

as a *sine qua non* of a Filipino meal, alongside *ulam* (any dish or food item that is paired with rice, usually translated in the Philippines as “viand”)—which he defines as either *karne* (meat), *gulay* (vegetables),² or preferably both. Of the Filipino, he writes: “If you do not eat rice, you will look for rice because it is obligatory” (Covar 1998). Doreen G. Fernandez (2019) adds that the temporal, rather than the spatial, dimension figures prominently in defining and distinguishing between different meals: *umagahan* (breakfast), *tanghalian* (lunch), *hapunan* (dinner). Meals serve as stopping points and landmarks of the day.

All of the above categories and conventions, however, assume that people have something to eat, that they have the time and money to choose what to eat, and that, in any case, these categories remain somehow independent of the people or the environment. However, as Garth (2019, 4) observes, “The categories of ‘real food’ and the decent meal often index larger historical, social, political, and economic processes.” Indeed, as the very existence of *pantawid-gutom* implies, food rules are suspended in exceptional times—particularly in situations of food scarcity and insecurity—making these instances important to explore beyond just acknowledging the existence of substances like coffee, tea, and sugar as “proletarian hunger killers” (Mintz 1979, 59). In the following sections, we highlight the embodied realities and situated practices surrounding *pantawid-gutom* to illustrate that beyond the structuralist and rigid classifications attached to food categories, the corporeality of hunger leads people to reconstruct these categories in their everyday lives. In doing so, we also hope to offer some insights into people’s notions of dignity and pleasure in contexts that seemingly deprive them of both.

DECIPHERING A NON-MEAL

To talk about *pantawid-gutom* means to elide the sensitivities of hunger while eliciting a variety of responses. Some associate it with the government’s Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program—a conditional cash-transfer program started in 2008 that provides financial assistance to the poorest households as long as they meet certain conditions, like ensuring their children’s school attendance and regular health checkups (Reyes et al. 2013).

Many, however, speak of *pantawid-gutom* as a set of products and practices people use to stave off hunger—due either to lack of funds, long, uninterrupted working hours, or both. Jarod and his friends, for instance, work long and irregular hours in the port—waiting for passengers and various income opportunities—which makes the hunger-suppressive effects of *shabu*, though not the sole reason for using the drug, especially useful despite its cost (100-200 pesos or \$2-4 USD

per shot, though it is usually shared with one or two companions). As the twenty-two-year-old Tupe told Gideon Lasco: “You cannot leave your work, so you just endure the pain, because you think that you need to finish your job. Even if you feel that your stomach hurts. But with *shabu*, you don’t feel that. You can last the whole night without feeling hungry, sleepy, or tired.”

Jerome, who is twenty-five, who works as a tricycle (i.e., motorized pedicab) driver, notes *shabu*’s ease of consumption. “It’s even faster than eating in Jollibee,” he says, referring to the country’s most popular fast-food chain. “One or two hits, and you’re feeling better. You have *gana* [appetite or desire] to work, but you don’t have *gana* for food anymore.” By “hits,” he is referring to sniffing or insufflating the powdered, crystalline methamphetamine that he and his friends heat using a lighter and some aluminum foil. Odorless and colorless, the smoke leaves no trace, and they can easily take those hits in nondescript wooden houses—euphemistically called *puwesto* (simply meaning “place”)—near their workplace. When a *shabu* sachet is shared with up to three friends, its cost basically equals that of a meal in a fast-food chain or is just a bit higher than one in the many *carinderia* (eateries) in the port.

Our interlocutors think of *shabu* as a potent hunger suppressant, but it is not the only substance they consider a *pantawid-gutom*. *Yosi* (cigarettes) are also seen as having a hunger-suppressing effect, on top of their ability to kill boredom. A few of our informants also recalled sniffing *rugby* (volatile solvents or industrial adhesives with toluene as an active ingredient), like Tupe who claims it has no euphoric effect, “but you won’t feel hungry.” Twenty-nine-year-old Dante finds it makes him “feel happy and entertained,” alongside serving as a *pantawid-gutom*. Readily available bottled in hardware stores at a cost of 50-100 pesos (\$1-2 USD), *rugby* has long been recognized as a hunger suppressant in urban poor communities from India (Seth, Kotwal, and Ganguly 2005) to Mexico (Gigengack 2014); one study among children in metro Manila found that 40 percent used such substances (Porio and Crisol 2021).

Other strategies such as sleep or distraction through the use of mobile phones or other activities also help to endure hunger, and our interlocutors occasionally referred to these practices as *pantawid-gutom*. As Dante, a thirty-seven-year-old street dweller, says: “*Pantawid-gutom? Yung didiskarte ka* [You find ways to make ends meet]. You beg. You ask for money or food. You can also scavenge for scrap metals and sell that, so you can buy something to eat. If there’s really no option left, I just sleep.” Ambet, a port vendor aged twenty-four, agrees: “Even illegal activities, you will be tempted to [engage in]. It’s *pantawid-gutom*, so you can have

money and you can buy food.” In these encounters, at least for some of our interlocutors, *pantawid-gutom* encompasses both non-food coping strategies, intended to detach oneself from the sensation of hunger, and non-food food, meant to suppress hunger altogether (Hadley and Crooks 2012; Black 2009).

But a majority of *pantawid-gutom* remains what most would classify as food, something ingested. The materiality of *pantawid-gutom* must fill one’s stomach, must be corporeally felt. Candies, crackers, and instant noodles, for example, are identified as *pantawid-gutom* food items, although others consider the latter a meal. Jarod explains the rationale for staving off hunger in terms of the health consequences of an empty stomach:

Anything to fill your stomach is *pantawid-gutom*. Just so that the stomach has something. Because if the stomach is left empty, and if you’ve gone past your hunger [*malipasan ng gutom*], it will be acidic, you will get sick with ulcer. That’s why many passengers are really waiting for us to sell them something—candies, bananas, donuts. They’ve come from other cities, and it will take another three hours to reach Manila, so their stomachs will not be empty.

Beverages like water, coffee, and milk—in order of popularity—are also seen as *pantawid-gutom*, underscoring the fluidity of food and water given that, in other settings, food items are seen to counter dehydration (Wutich and Brewis 2014). As Rody, a fifty-seven-year-old tricycle driver in Quezon City shares, he always brings water because it “alleviates hunger and at the same time quenches thirst,” making it an important *pantawid-gutom*. Coffee is also seen as having a satiating effect (“the feeling really is like my stomach is filled up,” says Rody of Kopiko, a powdered coffee brand high in sugar), mirroring observations elsewhere on how high-calorie liquid stimulants such as sweetened coffee and tea “hit the spot” (Mintz 1986, 118) for overworked and undernourished individuals.

The same satiating effect informs the view that soft drinks and energy drinks are *pantawid-gutom*. “They’re heavy in the stomach, and they will make you *dighay* [burp],” Joseph, a twenty-eight-year-old construction worker, told Gideon Lasco, referring to Coca-Cola and Cobra, a popular energy drink. Anthropologists have written about Cobra and other energy drinks in terms of their ability to make people stay awake and alert longer amid the demands of a 24/7 economy (see Hardon 2021), but accounts like Joseph’s make us wonder whether hunger suppression also forms part of these products’ appeal.

Ultimately, however, the goal of *pantawid-gutom* is not just to suppress hunger but also to avoid *nalipasan ng gutom* (literally, “to go past one’s hunger”), given that, beyond its sensations of pain and discomfort, prolonged hunger is perceived as a dangerous condition that can lead to stomach problems like ulcers, in turn associated with fatal complications. Our interlocutors’ accounts remind us of the popular expression *malayo sa bituka* (far from the digestive tract), which refers to indifference toward illnesses and injuries physically far from the digestive tract (e.g., joint pains). Such an expression, however, implies that the converse also holds true: something perceived as close to the *bituka* (digestive tract) is seen as especially problematic. Ippolytos Kalofonos (2021), in an ethnographic account on HIV and hunger in Mozambique, speaks about the danger of medicalized hunger as a result of social and economic problems like food scarcity exacerbated by health interventions. In his work, people described hunger as the most disturbing side effect of anti-retroviral (ARV) therapy, making the struggle to find work and food sources even more difficult in Central Mozambique. While people living with HIV managed to live longer, the experience of intense hunger from ARVs resulted in “social death” because of weakened social solidarity and the individual dignity of already disenfranchised people (Kalofonos 2021). Given its corporeal consequences and at times dehumanizing effects, hunger evokes a primal fear, and accounts of *pantawid-gutom* show how it also constitutes an attempt to prevent and even treat a more dangerous and serious state of hunger. This resonates with the words of Nena, a fifty-two-year-old single parent living with five children and four grandchildren in Quezon City: “Biscuits like Skyflakes [a common local brand of crackers] and milk are important *pantawid-gutom*, because they are medicine for ulcer. Although not totally filling, they can help reduce the acid in the stomach, which is *mahapdi* [painful].”

PANTAWID-GUTOM VERSUS A REGULAR MEAL

If *pantawid-gutom* is a substitute for a regular or proper meal, what, then, constitutes the latter? What counts as, in the language of Fernandez (2019), a “serious meal”? There is no exact equivalent to the word *meal* in Filipino; there are only names of specific meals according to the time of the day (e.g., *umagahan* for “morning meal,” *tanghalian* for “noontime meal,” and *hapunan* for “afternoon meal”). In terms of content, most of our interlocutors consider a meal as something with *kanin* (rice) and *ulam* (viand), or *kanin, ulam, at gulay* (rice, viand, and vegetables), mirroring the anthropological accounts we referenced earlier. Yet when disaster strikes—as in the case of the more than twenty-four typhoons that

batter the country annually, people switch to root crops (Bertuso 2019, 82), just as people elsewhere turn to “hunger foods” or “famine foods” in times of crisis (Matalas and Grivetti 2007; Lasco et al. 2023).

Typhoons may be less of a concern for our interlocutors, most of whom live in urban communities insulated from the effects of natural disasters on food supplies. But in a way, they consider their personal circumstances a state of exception—given that they would consume their own *pantawid-gutom*, while also agreeing that, ideally, rice is consumed thrice a day. As twenty-four-year-old Leoben, a construction worker who lives with his wife and two children, says: “Of course, there are times when you have to make do with whatever is available, like *tuyo* [dried fish]. But I will do everything because I need to be able to provide three meals a day [to my family].”

Although our interlocutors did not unanimously find rice essential to every meal (for instance, some consider instant noodles a meal), everyone found a rice meal to be ideal. “I don’t feel *busog* [full] if I don’t eat rice,” we often heard not only from our informants but also from our friends and colleagues. They also affirm the idealness of three meals a day for a typical Filipino household. In other words, their responses show striking consistency with dietary patterns identified by nutrition scholars (Angeles-Agdeppa, Sun, and Tanda 2020) and anthropologists. Following these food patterns, the components and the timing constitute the first point of comparison between a *pantawid-gutom* and a meal. While *pantawid-gutom* can be anything that staves off hunger and therefore can be consumed at any time, a regular meal is temporally delineated and must have rice, alongside *ulam*, which is ideally meat or fish but can be anything savory that complements rice (see Table 1).

While the value (or efficacy) of *pantawid-gutom* lies in its ability to stave off hunger, a meal must have *sustansiya*—a word derived from the Spanish for “substance,” but which loosely signifies food with good nutrition and quality. “Human bodies require *sustansiya*,” Jerome, the tricycle driver, tells Gideon Lasco. “That’s why you need vegetables, fruits . . . *pantawid-gutom* lacks *sustansiya*, you just eat it so that the stomach has something.”

A regular meal that has rice and viand is also perceived as providing the needed energy for the body, especially for people engaged in physical labor, bearing striking resemblance to Anson Rabinbach’s (1992) “human motor” concept, a metaphor that succinctly characterizes how the imperative of productivity in industrial and modern times has transformed the depiction of and discussion about the human body. A related ethnography of food riots in Chile also emphasized the interconnectedness of concepts about food, strength, and work: the scarcity and

Table 1. Comparison of local food categories in the Philippines based on certain domains and qualities

Domains	Meal (<i>umagahan, tanghalian, or hapunan</i>)	Snacks (<i>merienda</i>)	<i>Pantawid-gutom</i> in the context of poverty
	Qualities		
Access	Difficult	Easy	Easy
Time	Morning, noon, evening	Between meals	In place of meals
Nutrition	With rice and viand (combination of vegetable and meat), high nutritional value	Without rice, high to low nutritional value	Without rice, low or no nutritional value
Desirable characteristics	For perceived nutritional value (<i>suntansiya</i>), energy (<i>sigla</i>) and satisfaction/pleasure (<i>sarap</i>)	May be for satisfaction/pleasure (<i>sarap</i>) and/or to bridge hunger.	To bridge hunger in a fast, affordable, accessible, and effective way
Cost	High	High to low	Low

unaffordability of meat left people hungry and drove them, especially the working-class poor, to initiate food riots. Much like rice, meat in Chile makes a meal complete and nutritious, as it provides the much needed *fuera* (strength, power) for work (Orlove 1997). Eddie, a fifty-eight-year-old tricycle driver in Quezon City, pointed to a similar notion relating to food and strength when he used fuel or batteries as a metaphor for the body to explain how a regular meal “recharges” it:

Because they provide energy for the body. *Nakakargahan ka* [you are being recharged]. Even though you eat rice thrice a day, your body will not get used to it, because it gives your body life. . . . But with bread, no matter how much bread you eat, it will easily get dissolved in your body, right? Because imagine, when you dip a bread in coffee, it gets dissolved easily, right? So, the same thing happens once you digest it. But not with rice. It stays inside the body much longer, so I get to work much longer.

As the following conversation with Narciso, a forty-three-year-old construction worker in Quezon City, illustrates, food provenance and preparation also inform the distinction between the two categories: “For me, *pantawid-gutom* can be stuff that you don’t even know where it came from, like fish balls and *kikiam* [street food].” Jhaki Mendoza further explored *pantawid-gutom*’s difference from other

foodstuffs like *kanin* and *ulam*, and Narciso responded: “Ah, that’s better, because you really know how they were prepared and they were cooked well.”

Other points of distinction arise from the context in which the two categories are consumed. *Pantawid-gutom* are readily available at our informants’ workplace or sites of income, from candies and crackers sold by ambulant vendors, to *lugaw* (rice gruel) and other street food at corner stands, and *shabu* consumed in unmarked houses. They can also be consumed—gulped, inhaled, eaten—in a matter of minutes, and prove much more affordable than a meal with rice and viand. All these attributes prove valuable in an informal, precarious economy that demands constant presence if one wishes to earn money and where there is no place to eat (cf. Lasco 2014). In contrast, a regular meal takes time to prepare: rice and viand have to be separately cooked and are not amenable to instant consumption, typically requiring a spoon, fork, and a plate. It is also relatively more expensive. Given that most of our interlocutors lacked access to a refrigerator, they also had no means to preserve either the meal itself or its constituent ingredients, underscoring not just the desirability but the necessity and suitability of so-called instant food in their life settings.

In some cases, however, *pantawid-gutom* like canned goods and other pre-packaged foods can be transformed to approximate a regular and well-cooked meal by preparing them in certain ways to make them decent and “categorically complete” according to our interlocutors’ own standard of a good food (Garth 2019; Wheeler 2018). A conversation with Abby, a twenty-five-year-old masseuse living in a Quezon City slum, illustrates as much:

Sardines and noodles are *pantawid-gutom*. I don’t think they have enough nutrition. But it’s up to you *paano mo reredyuhan* [how you will augment them]. They can be nutritious. For instance, I cook the sardines with lots of vegetables, then now it’s nutritious. With noodles you can put egg and other vegetables as well. But I don’t really think noodles are inherently nutritious, because aside from the fact that it’s readymade, it doesn’t get dissolved easily [in the stomach].

Pagpag, *terter*, or *tira-tira* (i.e., leftover food, usually meat, that are picked from garbage bins and dump sites either to sell or for personal consumption) can also be modified to become a regular meal, as described by Nena: “Sometimes we also eat *pagpag*. We experience that. We re-cook the *tira-tira* [leftover] chicken we scav-

enged from Jollibee. First, we wash the chicken to clean it, then cook it right away. We turn it into adobo. It's enough to get us by for a day."

One final distinction worth mentioning is the positive state of *pagkabusog* that accompanies a regular meal—as compared to the negative state of *hindi gutom* (not hungry) that is the goal of *pantawid-gutom*. To be *busog* means to “feel energetic and lively,” as Emily, a woman of fifty-three living on the streets, explains, “Rice and fish . . . they’re *nakakabusog* [filling]. Biscuits and bread, they just remove the hunger.” Bernie, a forty-year-old construction worker, agrees: “a full stomach and you burp a lot.” Julian, a street vendor of sixty-one, shares a similar view: “You are energetic in your work when you are *busog*. That’s why *kanin* and *ulam* are important, because they are *pampatataq* [for endurance].” These descriptions of *pagkabusog* are mirrored by the account of Rachel Winter (2017) who finds the same affective reality accorded to rice among her Filipino interlocutors. Similar to our findings, she argues that people view rice as a “heavy food” and a more “serious” energy source, while they consider bread a “light food” that lacks energy for the body.

The duration of satiety also differs between regular meals and *pantawid-gutom*. The latter is often described as *saglit lang yun sa katawan* (lasts just for a short time in the body) or *hindi pangmatagalan* (not for long). On the other hand, a regular meal is often perceived to have a more lasting effect, as described by Vivian: “*Pantawid-gutom* only lasts for a short period of time. If you eat *kanin* and *ulam*, that will take you longer. You can go for four hours without eating anything after a meal.”

The duration of satiety comes into play in the context of feeling hungry just in time for the next meal. Estrella, a forty-seven-year-old homemaker, shared: “With rice, you can really last longer. When you eat that in the morning, it can last until 12 noon. But if you eat bread, that will only last until 10 in the morning, and then you are hungry again. So, you see, it’s [bread] not meant to keep you satiated for a long time.” Dante expressed a similar idea: “*Kanin* and *ulam* really make me *busog*. But if you eat biscuit, you will only feel *busog* for a short time and eventually make you *gutom ng wala sa oras* [suddenly feeling hungry, or much earlier before the next meal time].”

Like food categories, definitions of *busog*, *hindi gutom*, and *gutom* are deeply embodied, their sensory attributes (Sutton 2010) subject to everyday negotiation. The example of Vivian and her husband makes this clear: both only consume bread, biscuits, and coffee during the day, saving the resources for their children

who need the proper meal: “For *hapunan*, that’s when we eat *kanin* and *ulam*. So that we don’t get hungry, because it’s very hard to sleep with an empty stomach.”

PANTAWID-GUTOM AND THE URBAN FOOD LANDSCAPE

In our exploration of *pantawid-gutom*, we inevitably reference the urban food environment, with frequent mentions of prepackaged, ready-to-consume food and drinks such as instant noodles, instant coffee, energy drinks, soft drinks, candies, and other cheap and sugar-rich commodities that have also characterized the food landscape in other contemporary urban contexts (Mintz 1986; Errington, Fujikura, and Gewertz 2012; Baviskar 2018).

On the one hand, gross economic and nutritional inequities characterize this landscape; it is one where food exists in excess but out of reach (Scheper-Hughes 1992; MacClancy, Henry, and Macbeth 2007; Wentworth 2017). Even amid widespread hunger, an estimated 2,000 tons of food are wasted in metro Manila daily (Cos 2022), and our interlocutors could only get hold of the literal leftovers of this food through their own efforts (Diamante 2015) and “informal food systems” (Tefft et al. 2017). Our interlocutors resorting to *pagpag* or *terter* resembles what Rachel Black (2009) identified as “urban foraging” in some European countries, where people from marginalized communities sift through refuse (usually market waste) to look for their next meal. Black (2009, 272) refers to the phenomenon as an “expression of both hunger and of human resourcefulness” in a consumer-oriented urban foodscape. As pointed out by Cora Alice Du Bois (1987) in her ethnography among the Alor in Indonesia, the experience of hunger propels people to specific practices, including learning new skills. To some extent, this corresponds to the notion of *diskarte* in the form of scavenging and begging as identified by one of our informants as his idea of *pantawid-gutom*.

On the other hand, such a landscape is also filled with so-called hunger killers directly marketed to people like our interlocutors, catering to their need for *pantawid-gutom*. Like poor, low-caste consumers in India (Baviskar 2018) and those at the “bottom of the pyramid” in Papua New Guinea who turn to instant noodles (Errington, Fujikura, and Gewertz 2012), our interlocutors may feel “pleased with their access to a world-pervading, competitively priced, convenient, satisfying, daily belly filler—pleased with their access to this particular kind of contemporary hunger killer” (Errington, Fujikura, and Gewertz 2012, 28). Coffee, soft drinks, and energy drinks fall into a similar category, allowing our interlocutors to meet the demands for various kinds of labor amid contexts of “capitalist transformations” and “performance consumptions” of labor (Mintz 1986; Roseberry 1996;

Rodrigues, Lopes, and Hardon 2019). *Pantawid-gutom* illustrates the overlapping meanings attached to these resources and unsettles rigid ideas assigned to food items and other sources of sustenance.

One wonders if *pantawid-gutom* are necessarily low quality and lack nutrition, or whether such definitions are specific to our interlocutors' urban food and economic environment. In rural figurations, *pantawid-gutom* may take a different form. For instance, in coastal communities in Central Visayas, root crops and maize might complement rice in times of food scarcity (Balatibat 2004). Notably, in the same area, seasonality drives the locals to gather certain "hunger foods" such as sea urchins, seaweed, mollusks, snails, and other organisms thriving in shallow waters (Sobritchea 1994; Balatibat 2004). Yet in another fishing settlement in southern Luzon, where fish is a staple item, Francisco Datar (2002, 61) mentions further un nourishing *pantawid-gutom* items whenever seasonality hits: "This [meager catch] is evidenced by the long list of loans made to every household for every purchase. The usual items purchased on credit are rice, sugar, kerosene, bread, and the rest are salt, cigarettes, and coffee."

In other urban food environments, meanwhile, the food items we discussed are categorized differently, further reminding us of Emily Yates-Doerr's (2015, 319) observation that categories "emerge through specific, situated practices." For instance, in another ethnography exploring food consumption in urban areas of Vanuatu, white rice occupies an ambivalent category in the locality's diet, as it is considered "imported" and therefore less nutritious than the area's more traditional root crops (Wentworth 2017). However, given the more cost-effective and satisfying qualities of white rice, it has become a diet staple and a key ingredient of a "complete meal," especially in households struggling to secure food on a daily basis.

Far from being determined by the urban food environment, then, our study shows how the corporeality of deprivation and the cultural meanings assigned to hunger (Chao 2021; Kalofonos 2021) constantly produce and reconstruct people's notions about food and food rules, nutrition and sustenance. In refusing to acknowledge *pantawid-gutom* as a real food, are they also evincing some kind of "discursive resistance" (Garth 2014), or perhaps articulating an idiom of hope? While our interlocutors speak of the inability to provide food for their children as a moral failing, their accounts of consuming *pantawid-gutom* so that their children can eat "real meals" speak of an attempt not only to negotiate hunger but also to meet a moral imperative amid difficult circumstance—to achieve some semblance of well-being and the good life for their children and, by extension, their own

future (Fischer 2014). Such a narrative illustrates the symbolic efficacy of *pantawid-gutom* in mending the morally painful and “socially disruptive” effects of hunger (Kalofonos 2021, 31).

CONCLUSION: The Multiple Efficacies of *Pantawid-Gutom*

Sidney Mintz (1986) suggests that by revisiting long-standing topics of anthropological interest such as food by paying attention to their meanings, anthropologists manage to see patterned relationships between substances and human groups as forms of communication. In a departure from rigid definitions and assumptions of what counts as hunger, nutrition, and good satiety (Kristensen et al. 2002) in nationwide surveys, or from how people categorize food (cf. Hardin 2021; Gross and Rosenberger 2005), our examination of *pantawid-gutom* reveals hunger as not just a discrete state characterized by the absence of food but also as a nebulous spectrum that involves active intervention through various substances and practices (Gross and Rosenberger 2005, 2010). Moreover, in exploring how people define *pantawid-gutom* as opposed to regular meals, we see the *suspension* of the standards of *what is good to eat* amid the resort to substances or practices that instantly alleviate hunger.

Clear material differences exist between *pantawid-gutom* and the regular meals people strive to approximate or substitute. To recapitulate our interlocutors’ accounts, meals cost money, take time to prepare and consume, offer a full sense of satiety, and have nutrients that people need (especially rice). Conversely, the efficacy of *pantawid-gutom* lies in its accessibility, affordability, and its ability to stave off the sensation of hunger regardless of its nutritional quality (in some cases, none). Finally, meals follow a temporal pattern no longer sustainable amid the 24/7 demands of the global economy (Rabinbach 1992).

Might the *merienda*, or snack, serve as a healthier alternative to *pantawid-gutom* to fit this temporal context? In other words, can there be more nutritious *pantawid-gutom*? Feeding programs, nutritional innovations, and even information campaigns in the Philippines have been largely meal-based, that is, their goals have been to either provide meals or educate the public on what makes for a good meal. By nutritionally surveying the different kinds of *pantawid-gutom* in urban and rural food environments; by addressing the unavailability of healthy snacks; and by creating enabling environments for people to prepare, afford, and access healthy foods, nutrition policy can attune itself better to the context-specific realities of food insecurity. Such ethnographic insights on food scarcity, as well as how such insights can contribute to public health and nutrition, have been previously laid out

in the literature (Hadley and Crooks 2012; Gross and Rosenberger 2005, 2010); they can serve as inspiration for similar studies in the Philippines and elsewhere.

These material considerations aside, the efficacy of *pantawid-gutom* also operates on a symbolic level, that is, in its categorization as a non-meal, its occupying a different conceptual domain. A meal is meant to be *nakakabusog* (filling) and *masustansiya* (nutritious)—and neither deprivation nor our interlocutors' coping strategies change these standards. Drawing on fieldwork in Cuba, Garth (2019, 5) observed that amid “(nonextreme) food scarcity, where certain ingredients are nearly impossible to acquire . . . alimentary dignity is negotiated through this discursive practice of only categorizing particular foods as ‘real.’” Aside from emphasizing the temporal dimension, that is, the need to eat three times a day, what our study adds to this notion of dignity is that even in extreme cases of hunger, such definitional practices endure and include not just defining what counts as real or ideal food according to locally desirable standards but also (re)defining which other foods (or non-food substances) count as *something else*.

Indeed, by placing *pantawid-gutom* on a different register, individuals who occupy marginalized positions in the urban, informal economy maintain their “alimentary dignity” (Garth 2019), their expectations of what constitutes a “good food” (Hardin 2021; Trapp 2016; Wentworth 2017; Wheeler 2018), and ultimately, their aspirations for a good and dignified life (Fischer 2014), all while satisfying the more pressing demands of hunger as they continue working or looking for work (Orlove 1997). By framing their food insecurity in ephemeral terms, by using the metaphor of crossing or tiding over, the notion of *pantawid-gutom* carries the hope that they can bridge their socioeconomic and moral predicaments.

ABSTRACT

Pantawid-gutom literally means “to bridge hunger” and refers to a range of food and non-food products and practices in the Philippines that allow people to survive in between “serious meals.” What does its existence as a liminal category between food/non-food or serious/non-serious meal signify, particularly for millions of Filipino families who regularly experience hunger? Drawing on fieldwork in low-income urban communities on Luzon Island, and from a review of the scholarly and popular literature, we use local conceptions of pantawid-gutom—hitherto overlooked in the scholarship—as a starting point for exploring the lived reality of food insecurity in the country. The efficacy of pantawid-gutom, we argue, is both material and symbolic, providing temporary relief from the feeling of hunger and allowing people to suspend their ideas of what is good to eat while maintaining the hope that their

socioeconomic predicament is something bridgeable. [pantawid-gutom; hunger; food insecurity; food categories; nutritional anthropology; Philippines]

BUOD

Sa Pilipinas, ang tambalang salitang “pantawid-gutom” ay tumutukoy sa mga pagkain at iba pang bagay o gawain na ginagamit o ginagawa ng mga tao upang “maitawid” ang kanilang gutom sa gitna ng kahirapan o mahirap na sitwasyon. Ano ang maaari nating matutunan sa pagsasabuhay ng mga tao sa konseptong ito, at sa relasyon nito sa pagkain, lalo na sa milyon-milyong pamilyang Pilipino na araw-araw nakararanas ng gutom? Hango sa isang etnographya (pakikiag-usap, pakikipagkwentuhan, at pagmamasid) sa iba’t ibang mga komunidad sa Timog Luzon, at sa pagsasaliksik ng mga nauna nang naisulat tungkol sa naturang paksa, ginamit namin ang mga lokal na pag-unawa sa “pantawid-gutom” (isang paksang sa pagkakaalam namin ay hindi pa napagtutuunang-pansin sa antropolohiya) upang simulan ang isang malalim na pagtanaw sa karanasan ng pagkagutom at kakulangan ng pagkain sa bansa. Mula sa aming pagsusuri, ang bisa ng pantawid-gutom ay nakaugat sa silbi nito bilang isang bagay na sadyang nakakapawid ng gutom at sa pagiging simbolo nito ng pag-asa: pag-asa na may mas ‘tunay’ na pagkain na nakaabang sa kanila, at, gaya ng gutom, maging ang kanilang mga suliranin sa buhay ay maaari ring ‘maitawid’. [pantawid-gutom; gutom; food insecurity, pagkain; antropolohiya, nutrisyon, Pilipinas]

NOTES

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Note that *vegetables* as a food category in the Philippines may include potatoes, root crops, and other starchy foods.

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