

Vimala Cooks Everybody Eats: Domesticity, Community, and Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

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Vimala Cooks Everybody Eats: Domesticity, Community, and Empowerment
(Under the direction of Dr. Marcie Cohen Ferris, Dr. Patricia Sawin, and Dr. Michelle Berger)

Nearly once a week for 12 years, Vimala Rajendran, joined by her husband, and volunteers, hosted Indian community dinners out of her home to approximately 175 donation-paying guests. In June of 2010, Vimala opened a restaurant, Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe, in downtown Chapel Hill, relocating her underground kitchen, community, volunteers, and family helpers to a more formal place of business. This thesis addresses how through her dinners, Vimala constructed a "purposeful domesticity" and examines how in her home kitchen and restaurant kitchen she creates shifting and multiple visions of "home" through food, community, and expressions of "creative ethnicity." Vimala's transition from an underground economy to a public local restaurant provides an example for an investigation of the possibilities and hardships of sustaining an alternative, feminist, community-supported economy.

To Vimala and her beloved community.

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In addition I would also like to thank members of Vimala's community, including her family, volunteers, guests, customers, and employees who welcomed me into their homes, kitchen, and tables with a notebook, camera, and lots of questions. In particular I would like to thank Shannon Harvey for the use of her photos, which beautifully captured the essence of Vimala's community dinners.

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I am extremely thankful to the members of my committee—Dr. Patricia Sawin, whose work on women and performance was invaluable to my own, Dr. Berger who helped me to realize the academic value of writing about women and creativity, especially my chair Dr. Marcie Cohen Ferris, without whom this thesis would not have

been possible. Her own work in the field of foodways, as well as her support, guidance, friendship, and humor is continually an inspiration.

Lastly I would like to express my sincere gratitude and love for Vimala Rajendran. Though initially this was just a semester-long project, I soon realized that Vimala's compelling and inspiring story was important, and needed to be told through the lens of folklore with a collaborative ethnographic approach. I would like to thank Vimala for her willingness to invest in this project as equal partners, for her honest answers, time, invaluable guidance, and for always welcoming into her home and kitchen, with a cup of tea, cardamom brownie, and a hug.

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INTRODUCTION

*In my **own** cultural background
of growing up in a **family**
where my parents always
cooked extra food,
hoping,
expecting,
and anticipating
neighbors and friends to drop in during meal times.*

*When I was growing up,
there were no telephones,
so people didn't call in advance before coming,
they would journey for 2 hours across
the
city of Bombay,
and would show up.*

*So this extra food that we would have—
I remember **hoping** people would come
so that we would have
a party.¹²*

These are the words of Vimala Rajendran, speaking about family communal dinners in her childhood home of Bombay, India. When she was twenty-two years old, Vimala (as she prefers to be called) moved to the United States—initially to Ann Arbor,

¹ Rajendran, Vimala. personal interview with author. April 5, 2010.

² Throughout the paper I include ethnopoetic transcriptions of Vimala's and other consultants' words. These are transcriptions from recorded interviews that I have lined out in ethnopoetic format, in an attempt to make visible emphasis and emotion of voice. This methodology is described in detail in Dennis Tedlock's "From Voice and Ear to Hand and Eye" appearing in *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 103, No. 408. (Apr. - Jun., 1990), pp. 133-156. In my personal transcription, I use bold to indicate vocal emphasis, and line breaks to indicate pauses in speech.

Michigan and later to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where she still resides. With her two master's degrees (one in political science before arriving in the United States and another in early childhood education received on a two-year stint in India between Michigan and North Carolina), she planned to attend law school in the United States. After facing much difficulty in transferring her transcripts from India and securing a full-time job in her field due to her immigrant status, all while in the midst of an abusive marriage, Vimala began hosting dinners for her neighbors. Though Vimala never made a direct profit, attendees' donations helped defray the cost of ingredients, sustain future dinners, and ensure that both Vimala's family and her community ate well. She sourced whole, local foods and grocery store seconds, seeking to operate outside the industrial agricultural framework. Often she held her dinners as benefits for local community causes usually related to food security and sustainable agriculture, but extended occasionally to global issues such as Haiti and Katrina relief fundraisers.

In June of 2010, Vimala opened a restaurant, Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe, in downtown Chapel Hill, relocating her kitchen, community, volunteers, and family helpers to a more formal place of business. The start of this new business was made possible, almost entirely, by community investments and support—connections Vimala cultivated through her home community dinners. At the center of this new venture is Vimala's social mission of a sustainable local food system and a healthy, supportive, and culturally vibrant community.

I began working with Vimala in January 2010, for an ethnography project in Professor Glenn Hinson's Art of Ethnography course. I was fascinated by Vimala's story. Having been excluded from the work force due to her immigrant status, Vimala's

community dinners provided an alternative way to create economic and social opportunities for her family. These gatherings were truly an example of a “hidden kitchen” as documented in the work of radio producers Davia Nelson and Nikki Silva, National Public Radio’s “Kitchen Sisters.”³ Vimala reinterpreted the workplace, repurposing the domestic space of her home kitchen into a place of business. This business was not merely to make money, but also provided nutritious food for her family and community, integrated her home and work life, and allowed Vimala to engage politically, what Erin Branch describes as a “purposeful domesticity.”⁴ In doing so, Vimala re-envisioned her labor by refusing to make her work solely a commodity. Though she has now transitioned her business to a more formal entrepreneurial model, she continues to approach work beyond a simple monetary goods exchange. She brings her family and community into her workspace, not only as customers or employees, but as participants. She sources food from local farmers. She talks with friends and customers---the distinctions between the two are often blurred---about menu items and community events on Facebook. She sponsors benefit dinners. Vimala is constantly talking to her customers, giving hugs, and offering samples to taste and discuss. Even in the restaurant venue, Vimala’s work is not only about making food. She facilitates social and political conversations and connections whose value cannot be measured monetarily.

This paper will focus on how Vimala has constructed a “purposeful domesticity” and will examine how Vimala has created shifting and multiple visions of “home” through community, notions of domesticity, and evocations of place. My analysis and

³ Nelson, Davia and Silva, Nikki. *Hidden Kitchens: Stories, Recipes, and more from NPR’s The Kitchen Sisters*. (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2005.)

⁴ Branch, Erin. personal communication, 2010. Branch is a UNC Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English, writing on women’s food memoir.

engagement with Vimala's work is supported by a collaborative ethnography between Vimala and myself, beginning in January 2010. This research includes interviews with Vimala, dinner volunteers-turned-restaurant employees, and community dinner guests and restaurant customers, as well as my observations as a volunteer and guest at Vimala's community dinners and finally, as a customer at her restaurant⁵. My analysis is divided into sections devoted to different "homes"—physical and evoked—that Vimala has inhabited, beginning with the ethnopoetic transcription above, which takes us to her childhood in India and an initial notion of "home." Part I focuses on Vimala's "home" kitchen and community dinners and considers how her vision of "purposeful domesticity" engages with emerging notions of alternative domesticity, in particular, emerging discussions of "radical homemakers."⁶ It will also address other examples of hidden kitchens and how food is used as a source of empowerment. This section addresses how Vimala re-purposed her home kitchen as a locus for business, community, and activism. Part II examines Vimala's transition from an underground economy to a public local

⁵ My interviews and documentation consist of extensive filmed and audio interviews with Vimala and six primary consultants. Of these primary consultants, three of them, Andrew Wood, Peter Brayshaw, and Rob Jones, had been regular volunteers at Vimala's community dinners, and are now full-time employees at Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe. Another consultant, Shannon Harvey, was a volunteer at Vimala's dinners and conducted photo documentation for a community documentary photography course. She is now a frequent customer at the restaurant. Danny Blose was a regular volunteer at Vimala's dinners and is now a customer, and Lindsay Perry was a one-time dinner volunteer and frequent guest, and is now a customer. I also conducted brief filmed and unrecorded interviews with several anonymous consultants, who were guests at her community dinners and/or customers at Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe. In addition, I attended Vimala's weekly community dinners from January 2010 through April 2010, and am a frequent customer at Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe, starting in June 2010. At the dinners and the restaurant, I observed, took extensive notes, and conversed with guests, customers, volunteers, and employees as well as participated as a cooking volunteer, guest, and customer.

⁶ Hayes, Shannon. *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture*. (Redondo Beach, California: Left to Write Press, 2010.)

restaurant. I draw on scholarship on “creative ethnicity”⁷ and performance of identity, discussing how Vimala’s identity and shifting homes are communicated through the food she serves, as well as through the physical space of the restaurant, interactions with customers and community, and a larger social and personal mission. I discuss ways in which Vimala is now re-imagining a traditional workplace in terms of domesticity, community and social engagement, drawing on ideas of alternative economies that include non-monetary exchange. Part III addresses the gains and losses of the transition from an alternative “hidden kitchen” to a more formal place of business through her own words, interviews with guests-turned-customers, volunteers-turned-employees, and my own experience. In my conclusion I expand on how Vimala provides an example of how an immigrant foodways narrative can be paired with a radical⁸ re-envisioning of local food systems and notions of community.

⁷ Stern, Stephen and Allan, John. *Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Ethnic Life*. (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1991)

⁸ The definition of “radical” I employ throughout this paper is based on the Oxford English Dictionary definition of radical, “Characterized by independence of or departure from what is usual or traditional; progressive, unorthodox, or innovative in outlook, conception, design, etc.” I expand my definition to mean, more specifically someone or something that positions his/her or itself as an alternative or in direct opposition to the status quo, via a progressive ideology stemming from a motivation towards social justice.

CHAPTER I

Please Come Over For An Indian Dinner

Nearly once a week for twelve years, Vimala, her [second] husband Rush, and community volunteers began work at eight in the morning (with some preparation the evening before, such as grinding spices) to make, from scratch, enough curries and chapatti, chutneys, rice, and cardamom brownies to feed dinner to approximately 175 donation-paying guests. These guests and friends, again, these lines were blurred, were notified about the weekly dinners through a 1,500-member e-mail listserv. Vimala's e-mails addressed her guests as "Dear friends," and invited them to "Please come over for an Indian Dinner." She asked for an R.S.V.P. and if guests would like to participate in meal preparation. Most e-mails ended with, "Thank YOU my beloved community," as if Vimala were writing to 1,500 close friends.⁹ Guests, or "friends," began to arrive at 5:30pm, entering through the side door of her one-story ranch home. They lined up at the kitchen counter and left a donation in a small ceramic urn, unlabeled except for a sign on the wall,

*Please make a
Contribution to
Sustain these
Community dinners*

⁹ Rajendran, Vimala. personal communication with author. February 1, 2010.

Guests served themselves from a twenty-gallon rice cooker filled with basmati rice, large ceramic bowls full of curries, dal, and vegetables, and a cooler of bright red hibiscus iced tea. They ate wherever they could find a seat---at Vimala's kitchen table, on the couch or the living room floor---and shared the meal with friends, family, and strangers.

Vimala was usually in the kitchen, behind the counter, rolling and frying chapatti on the stove, refilling bowls of food, and talking to guests. Her husband and cooking volunteers packed the small kitchen as they washed dishes, helped refill bowls, or brought utensils and other food up from the basement and the grill on the porch.

This was the scene I encountered when I met Vimala and attended my first community dinner in January of 2010. Vimala's community dinners began twelve years earlier, in Vimala's first home in Chapel Hill. Vimala had much difficulty transferring her education transcripts from India and securing a full-time job in her field. Having a dependent spouse VISA, and being relatively confined to the home due to an abusive marriage, Vimala began to host dinners for her neighbors upon their request. They asked if she might be interested in cooking for them occasionally and offered to pay. Vimala soon realized the multiple benefits of these dinners, beyond the small amount of money she made. By sharing meals with neighbors, Vimala re-captured the communal family dinners she had enjoyed as a child in Bombay. She recounted,

*When I moved to America
I really missed
my
home,
the festivities we had
on a weekly basis,
and I also missed going to the market
every day for fresh food as we did,
to the streets of Bombay.
the quest for seasonal,*

*local,
daily
purchase of produce lead me to the farmers market...
subsequently we started growing our own
and the first 14 years of my life in America,
we grew our own food.*¹⁰

In holding these dinners, Vimala evoked her childhood home in India in her new home in the United States, layering home upon home in both food and practice, recapturing a tradition she was a part of as a child and adapting it to Chapel Hill. In Leanne Trapedo Sims' work with Dalia Carmel, an Israeli immigrant who came to the United States in the 1960s, Sims speaks to this common immigrant narrative of using food to tie oneself to place while shifting homes. She writes,

*Food for Dalia Carmel is home. But "home" for Dalia is not an anchored place. This food biography addresses the body, food, and narratives in exile (I am using exile in the broader sense to mean not only a physical banishment but a psychological, self-imposed one). The body, the food, and the stories have traveled not only physically across seas; there is also an emotional transportation of the food and the stories, which are stored in the archives of Dalia's memory.*¹¹

This evocation of home for Vimala was not merely related to the actual food items she was preparing. Additionally, the practice of sharing food with others contained emotional meaning that helped her feel "at home" in a new environment.

By cooking for others in exchange for payment, Vimala could prepare the labor-intensive meals she learned to make from her mother and father in India, and in doing so, share her ethnic identity with her neighbors as well as her children. Psyche Williams-Forsen discusses the kitchen as a place where historically, disenfranchised women, like

¹⁰ Rajendran. personal interview with author. April 5, 2010.

¹¹ Sims, Leanne Trapedo. "A Menu of Food Memories" from *Pilaf, Pozole and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2001),55.

Vimala, have engaged in identity formation and cultural exchange. She writes, “These women not only used their homes to feed their families but also used their kitchens to engage in cultural transmission. By practicing certain rituals, customs, and habits, they exhibited a measure of self-definition and instilled in their children and community aspects of socialization.”¹² On a more practical note, these dinners allowed Vimala to work from home and be available for her three children, which would have been very difficult had she held a job outside the home. In addition, the dinners ensured that her family ate well. Providing nutritious, joyful meals for her children, said Vimala, “was always the bottom line.”

*Simultaneously,
my family needed to eat
and I had to fend for them,
so
doing a dinner
and asking people to donate to the cost of the meal,
I always anticipated there be a little extra to buy more food
and then the cycle continued
and it became
a very festive gathering.*¹³

As the dinners grew, bringing others into her home, Vimala gradually made more friends, forging a community through her cooking. Some of these friends were lawyers and social workers, who helped her understand her rights. Eventually Vimala believed she could leave her abusive marriage, and moved with her children to a basement apartment elsewhere in Chapel Hill. The community dinners sustained Vimala and her children in this transition period when she was without child support, alimony, or public

¹² Williams-Forsen, Psyche. *Building Houses Out Of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2006), 112-113.

¹³ Rajendran. personal communication with author. April 5, 2010.

assistance. Vimala held dinners three times a week, in addition to a monthly Saturday dinner advertised as a “Rent Party.” She commented,

*First of all I felt like
the Chapel Hill/Carrboro community
embraced
my uniqueness,
and all that I had to offer
and it became a great interaction,
they became my family,
and often times we’ve done fundraisers to meet some of my needs
like immigration legal fees.
One such friend became my financial sponsor
because when I applied for my green card,
someone needed to be a financial sponsor.¹⁴*

These opportunities occurred when Vimala opened her home to her community, and was both vulnerable and empowered by the support network she developed at her dinners. She tapped into community resources by volunteering and sharing food. This exchange allowed her children to attend summer camp, and obtain free art and music classes.

Initially it was hard for Vimala to give up her hopes of becoming a lawyer, but she saw how food created community and leveraged power. She became a community leader and her kitchen became a community hub of social activism. She discovered connections between food and social change, similar to Georgia Gilmore, an African American woman who held secret meetings in her Montgomery, Alabama home during the Civil Rights Movement and baked pies to raise money for the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Gilmore’s work is documented by the Kitchen Sisters who celebrate women who use domestic skills to create underground food economies, which address greater societal needs.¹⁵ Vimala’s story is part of this tradition. She said,

¹⁴ Rajendran. personal interview with author. April 5, 2010.

¹⁵ Nelson, Davia and Silva, Nikki. *Hidden Kitchens*.

*People started staying
and eating
and networking with one another,
so
Then discussions came out of these gatherings,
discussions about the local food movement
and food conferences,
and activities that growers were engaging in,
like food conferences and lectures,
or food related documentaries that we would show at the house to have discussions
about
the relationship of good food to healthy community and healthy bodies.*

*And of course, social justice issues like
minority rights,
rights of oppressed people,
worker rights,
are all intertwined in
access to food.*

*I started to receive invitations to **speak** at gatherings where the focus would be
social justice issues
and if I didn't go
my food went, inevitably.*

*The organizers of social justice issues, whether they were conferences or seminars,
would ask me to
cater events so therefore the
cooking
and the food business,
so to speak*

Grew over time.¹⁶

The fact that Vimala was holding dinners in her home kitchen, though sometimes inconvenient, had multiple benefits that would not have been possible in a licensed, professional kitchen. Vimala's home kitchen provided an informal setting where she could engage in creative "play" in the kitchen, developing recipes and honing her skills as a chef in an environment that was supportive and relatively low pressure. Vimala's

¹⁶ Rajendran. personal interview with author. April 5, 2010.

first volunteer, her friend Liane, initially referred to volunteering as “playing,” asking Vimala, “Can I come play with you?” In *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, Victor Turner writes that play or “leisure” are states in which the social order and rules can be subverted or changed. He says, “Leisure is potentially capable of releasing creative powers, individual or communal, either to criticize or buttress the dominant social structure values.”¹⁷ By framing their work as a playful activity, Liane and Vimala facilitated a space for experimentation and uncovered the advantages of working in an informal, home kitchen setting.

Gradually as the volunteer base for Vimala’s dinners grew, she attracted a diverse group of people, including many young activists and students from the nearby University of North Carolina who were interested in both food justice and learning to cook. In Vimala’s home kitchen, these young people learned to cook and to contribute to a dynamic community event. In this way, Vimala became a leader in a revival, re-skilling home culinary arts that many of this generation, had lost. She aligned herself with young people and activists committed to a “handmade” food revival¹⁸. Vimala says,

*I am surprised that some people who come here to help—
have never processed vegetables before
or they have not used some of the vegetables I cook with*

¹⁷ Turner, Victor. *From Ritual To Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 37.

¹⁸ This interest in ethnic foods by young politically minded individuals follows the precedent set by countercultural groups in the 1960s and 1970s, who turned to ethnic foods as an inexpensive, healthy alternative to industrial foods. The counterculture aligned themselves with an “countercuisine,” popularizing ethnic foods in America through cookbooks like Francis Moore Lappé’s *Diet For A Small Planet* (1971), Molly Katzen’s *Moosewood Cookbook* (1978), and Edward Espe Brown’s *Tassajara Bread Book* (1970), all of which featured versions of ethnic dishes, particularly Indian and Middle-Eastern, and championed whole grains and foods. The popularization of ethnic food in America was largely due to this movement and Vimala and her group of young activist volunteers provide an example of how the 1960s and 1970s counter-cuisine continues to influence alternative food movements today. From Belasco, Warren. *Appetite For Change: How The Counterculture Took On The Food Industry*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 62-63.

*even if they are from an American market like
eggplant
or
bell peppers.*

*People have not actually **handled them**
either because they only ate it in restaurants or
the vegetables in their home came from a
freezer or a **can**.*

*So cooking **whole foods**
whole vegetables
is a **new** thing for
many of my
helping friends.*

*It's a fun process
to
teach folks
the use of things,
how to cut it,
what parts are edible.¹⁹*

In operating out of her home kitchen, which was essentially open to her community, Vimala made her domestic space not merely a place of production, but a place of learning where she taught young people her culinary heritage, as well as basic cooking skills.

Peter Brayshaw, a father, herbalist, and cook at Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe, was one of Vimala's most important volunteers. He said,

*I didn't really know that much about cooking,
but
I learned a lot, in her kitchen
mostly from her...*

*She makes it a point to,
at moments,
make everyone feel at ease,
and to teach lessons,
about, 'we prepare a vegetable this way because of this. It's not just like 'chop it like this.'*

¹⁹ Rajendran. personal interview with author. March 3, 2010.

I have to say, I learned so much

*about cooking
and really developed an appreciation for it,
you know, striving to produce quality food
and healthy food,
good tasting food*

*and also to just explore flavors...
combinations of flavors.*

*Indian cooking
is nothing new,
but for me it was...
it was exciting.²⁰*

This exchange was one that was both cultural and communal—a mutually beneficial relationship where Vimala’s volunteers became her students, and she their teacher. In doing so, Vimala re-created the teaching and learning kitchen she knew in her home in India. She learned to cook at an early age from her father, learning simultaneously alongside her mother. She recalled,

*There are some things
that I cook that
I made up on my own
And
introduced it to my mother.
And there are traditional things that she made...
But all my life
with **her**
I was trying to learn everything she made
so perfectly and beyond perfectly
that’s **traditional** to the region where she was born
and **I** would teach her creative dishes that I had made up
or learned from
people from other cultures and there was a great exchange.²¹*

²⁰ Brayshaw, Peter. personal interview with author. December 7, 2010.

²¹ Rajendran. personal interview with author. 3 March, 2010.

The community dinners allowed Vimala to transmit a family tradition from childhood to Chapel Hill, layering and evoking home upon home, kitchen upon kitchen.

This cultural and communal transmission occurred in both directions. Vimala's volunteers exposed her to community organizations whose missions paralleled her personal social mission. These were groups like Crop Mob²²—a group of young activists who mobilize to assist small-scale organic farms when there is a need, or the Internationalist Bookstore—a non-profit info-shop in Chapel Hill that supports human rights causes.²³ Vimala was already a radical who valued sustainable food systems, fresh local food, a community farmers' market, and sought out vibrant community dinners. These institutions, resources, and gatherings she found in the United States paralleled those that she was accustomed to when growing up in India. She found that much of that which was common practice in India—shopping at a market, sourcing and cooking with fresh whole foods—was not a part of mainstream American culture, but was being practiced and encouraged by an alternative movement of organic farmers and food activists. In meeting local Chapel Hill residents at her dinners, Vimala tapped into a local network and found an effective outlet for her activism. She would often hold her dinners as benefits for these organizations—many of them organizations like those previously mentioned that worked to create a sustainable local food system or make the Chapel Hill community a more just environment, but sometimes she would raise money for broader global causes. Essentially her home kitchen became a community center, plugged into

²² Muhlke, Christine. "Field Report: Plow Shares," *New York Times*, February 24, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/28/magazine/28food-t-000.html>

²³ "Internationalist Books and Community Center," <http://www.internationalistbooks.org/>

both a local and global network of activists working for social change²⁴. As her awareness of the local food system grew, she forged connections with local farms and food producers, sourcing ingredients from their fields and grocery store seconds—cosmetically imperfect leftovers from a store that would otherwise go to waste.

Through the community dinners, Vimala effectively opted out of the traditional work force, initially as a means of survival, but in doing so, created a more self-sufficient home. Vimala combined her familial, community, and political values with her livelihood. Shannon Hayes speaks about a growing movement of people who are engaged in similar work in *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity From A Consumer Culture*. Hayes writes, “Radical Homemakers have chosen to stop investing their life energy in any employment that does not honor the four tenets of family, community, social justice, and ecological balance. Instead, they invest themselves in the support of family, community, and environmental stewardship so that those things, in return, will pay them lifelong dividends.”²⁵ Like Vimala, many “radical homemakers” learned sustainable subsistence practices during childhood, but for others, these skills are a “revival” of lost practices. Hayes writes, “Unlike so many people my age (I’m thirty-five) basic homemaking and self-reliance skills were part of my childhood foundational

²⁴ Again, this alignment of and activist agenda with food—which is exists today in alternative organic agriculture, the local food movement, and communities like Vimala’s, is a continuation of an American tradition, most directly the 1960s-1970s counterculture. As Belasco writes, “Indeed, throughout American history, food fights have often accompanied grass roots political struggles. Thus in the fiercely contentious Jacksonian period (the 1830s), radical vegetarians resisted mainstream medical authorities (who advised a heavy, meat-based diet). The critique of processed foods during the Progressive era (1900-1914) mirrored widespread concern about irresponsible corporations and dangerous urban-industrial conditions. And in the Johnson-Nixon years (late 1960s-early 1970s), the rediscovery of organic foods and holistic healing accompanied the ecology movement, which was itself a reaction against the wholesale destruction of nature and tradition both here and in Southeast Asia.” Belasco, *Appetite For Change*, 15-16.

²⁵ Hayes, *Radical Homemakers*, 39.

knowledge. My community and family practiced subsistence farming, food preservation, barter and frugal living as a matter of course.”²⁶ However, what marks Vimala’s experience as different from the “radical homemakers” Hayes includes in her work is race and class. Hayes’ informants are from white, middle class backgrounds, largely from the Northeastern United States. They live a sustainable domestic life as a *choice* rather than out of *survival*, as Vimala initially did. Essentially, though, Vimala has done *exactly* what Hayes describes: “I was looking for a different type of homemaker—someone who wasn’t ruled by our consumer culture, who embodied a strong ecological ethic, who held genuine power in the household, who was living a full, creative, challenging, and socially contributory life. For lack of a better word, I wanted to find folks who were more...*radical*.”²⁷ So why, then, does she not look at a racially and ethnically diverse community of women and men— also engaged in similar work? I propose that “radical homemakers” movement is broader than white, middle-class youth. This movement has been embraced by a diverse group of people, of whom Vimala is a potent example. I see potential for learning and more influential work when this notion of young radicals who engage in alternative domestic lives of subsistence and social engagement is broadened to incorporate a diverse group of people that includes minorities and immigrants. These include the African American women whom Psyche Williams-Forsen studies, Mildred Council, or Mama Dip, as she is known at her local home-cooking Southern restaurant in Chapel Hill,²⁸ The Chili Queens of San Antonio and the “old stoves” who the Kitchen

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 15.

²⁸ Council, Mildred. *Mama Dip’s Family Cookbook*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

Sisters discuss.²⁹ These women have and are drawing on traditional, and residual practices and are acting not just out of choice but also out of survival.

”Radical homemakers” re-envision domestic space as a place where multiple productive activities occur in the spheres of business, community, social engagement, and family. Hayes writes, “These families did not see home as a refuge from the world. Rather, each home was the center for social change, the starting point from which a better life would ripple out for everyone.”³⁰ Vimala has not just re-fitted her labor, but has re-envisioned the domestic space of her home and specifically her kitchen as a center for multiple activities, open to others. In a society where most homes are a closed, private space, Vimala’s repurposing of her kitchen is both alternative and radical—what Raymond Williams refers to as a “residual” practice.³¹ He writes in *Marxism and Literature*, It is crucial to distinguish this aspect of the residual, which may have an alternative or even oppositional relation to the dominant culture, from that active manifestation of the residual (this being its distinction from the archaic) which has been wholly or largely incorporated into the dominant culture.³² Vimala’s residual work is one way in which her work and revival are “radical.” Her practices run counter to the

²⁹ Nelson and Silva. *Hidden Kitchens*.

³⁰ Ibid, 18.

³¹ Williams defines residual, “The residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation.” From Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977),122.

³² Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 122.

dominant culture of the industrial food system and harkens back to the vision of home as a center of production that existed in pre-industrial economies.³³

Shannon Harvey, a graduate student who began attending Vimala's dinners as part of a community photography project and eventually became a cooking volunteer describes the physical space of Vimala's home:

*The dinners
are sort of
chaotic...
it really feels like,
when the dinners are going on,
her house has been **given over** to the dinners.
Completely and totally...
I mean there's her kitchen, her eat-in kitchen,
is absolutely,
given over to
spending all day
prepping
and then **cooking**,
and then **having** the dinner
and then **cleaning up**
and then during the dinner itself
people are sitting everywhere they can
so they're in the eat-in kitchen,
standing in the kitchen while people are still cooking,
there's people in the living room,
not usually in the bedrooms,
but in the hallway,
and on the porch,
she has these gas or propane powered burners,
so her **front porch** is totally not usable for anything
except for cooking pots of dal and other stuff,
and people sit in the basement too,
so that willingness to sort of yield your **house**, and your whole...
which to me, **my house** is **my house**.
Like I want people in it only under limited circumstances,
but just letting strangers come in!?*³⁴

³³ Hayes. *Radical Homemakers*, 186.

³⁴ Harvey, Shannon. personal interview with author. November 10, 2010.

In her book, Hayes discusses how radical homemakers view their homes as “living systems.” The home is not kept pristine and on display, but is a place of work, life, and play. In a physical sense, Vimala’s ranch home was surrendered to these pursuits. It was not exactly tidy—the porch was covered with grills and basement filled with three refrigerators, rice cookers, stock pots, rolls of toilet paper, napkins, bowls, and utensils. The furniture and floors were worn from accommodating so many people each week.

Vimala spoke about this:

*The disadvantage...
is the mess that the house became,
no amount of clean-up is ever enough
to put the house back together.
That was
quite a disadvantage,
but I think the pleasure
from having the community core come together made up for it.*³⁵

Despite the mess, Vimala carved out a compromise between dividing the workplace and home. In re-envisioning her domestic space, she provided for her children, not just with food, but with care and availability, a challenge faced by other single mothers working outside the home. Though her home may not have been tidy, by inviting her community in, both she and the community reaped social, political, and health benefits.

Through her community dinners, Vimala displayed creativity and improvisation in times of adversity. This occurred in the way in which she re-envisioned her home as a place of business and activism, where she fed friends and friends-of-friends. She expressed her ethnic identity and created a community network. Vimala also improvised with her ingredients, preparation, and cooking methods. She often sourced grocery store seconds, and was not always able to get the Indian spices and ingredients she preferred.

³⁵ Rajendran. personal interview with author. April 5, 2010.

Rob Jones, a food activist/organizer, former volunteer at Vimala's community dinners, and now an employee at her restaurant, described her creative ability,

*One of the things that amazes **me** about Vimala's cooking is the way she can use whatever ingredients happen to come in that day, and that was one of those things, one of the real characteristics of the community dinners is that there would be produce coming in from **all** different sources, and it wouldn't necessarily be stuff that she had **ordered**, it would just be like, whatever came in that day and she would make up the menu based on whatever it **was**, and **that** level of creativity is pretty impressive to feed, you know 100-150 people off of just whatever happened to **be** there that day... Yeah and anybody can just like take whatever scraps came in and throw them together and make something that's like **edible**, but the stuff that comes out of that **kitchen** are **phenomenal**, it's on a whole 'nother **level**, so yeah, it's just impressive.³⁶*

Vimala's community dinners were initially a survival mechanism, but became about more than survival, transforming an expressive act of art and skill that benefited not only her family, but also the entire community.

In my first recorded interview with Vimala, mid-way through the conversation, Vimala began to interview *me*. We had been speaking about the basics of the methodology of collaborative ethnography, as seen in the work of Luke Eric Lassiter,³⁷ Elaine Lawless,³⁸ and Glenn Hinson.³⁹ She asked me about my research interests as a

³⁶ Jones, Rob. personal interview with author. December 7, 2010.

³⁷ Lassiter, Luke Eric. *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

³⁸ Lawless, Elaine. "Reciprocal" Ethnography: No One Said It Was Easy," *Journal of Folklore Research* 37 (2/3): 197-205.

folklorist, and when I replied that I was interested in “women’s creativity in domestic spaces” our conversation split open. With that statement, we bridged a mutual understanding, of my interest, but more importantly, of Vimala’s story and with that, forged a level of intimacy—what I refer to as an “ethnographic friendship” not present previously. She responded emotionally,

WoWWWWWW!!...

AlIIIIII

*the ways I had to **improvise***

to

stay

alive

[begins to tear up] in the 16 years of my [first] marriage

and because I came here as an immigrant without permission to work,

I found creative ways to exercise what I thought was a brilliant mind...

I

exercised

that

skill

in giving talks in the community,

participating in discussions or book groups

and keeping a high level of recognition

of anybody’s attempts to stifle that.

So

I had to improvise early on,

early on,

if I had a recipe in mind and I didn’t have an ingredient,

I would think of substitutions without access to a library or transportation or cookbooks,

because our resources were so limited...

Now my home has become a hotline for folks to call and ask me for creative ways to

problem solve domestic issues or culinary matters,

baby care,

pregnancy care,

that just came out of creative ways of problem solving domestic issues.⁴⁰

³⁹ Hinson, Glenn. personal communication with author. January-April 2010.

⁴⁰ Rajendran. personal interview with author. March 3, 2010.

This moment of understanding, more than any other moment in my ethnography, revealed the benefit of collaborative ethnography, or what Elaine Lawless refers to as “reciprocal ethnography.” She writes that this is “an inherently feminist and humanistic approach” that operates under the “denial of hierarchical constructs that place the scholar at some apex of knowledge and understanding and her ‘subjects’ in some inferior, less knowledgeable position.”⁴¹ Had we not approached this project as equals engaged in dialogue, I would not have reached this level of intimacy with Vimala, nor gained the appreciation I have for her work. This moment crystallized the creative problem solving Vimala has long employed as a means of survival. This issue of improvisation as a means to transcend adversity continues to be a primary theme in our discussions and work together. Our ethnographic friendship and employment of collaborative ethnographic methodology mirrors the feminist and humanistic approach Vimala undertakes in her own work and community relationships.

Vimala describes how she effectively engaged in a non-monetary economy, a gift-exchange, or an economy of reciprocity. In Linda Murray Berzok’s chapter “My Mother’s Recipes” in *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food* she speaks about the anthropological notion of “reciprocity” citing Anna Meigs’ research on the reciprocal gift exchanges among the Hua people of New Guinea, as well as Marcel Mauss. She writes,

Meigs refers to Marcel Mauss’ The Gift, a treatise on how reciprocal gift exchanges, often of food, bind members of a society together in relations of mutual participation and unity” (102). It works, Mauss says, because the obligation to repay comes from the undeniable fact that the gift is part of oneself. Isn’t this exactly the case with a recipe that has been developed and nurtured over time, nudged along the road to perfection? Food acts as a vehicle for symbolizing and expressing ideas about the relationship between self and other. ‘Through his

⁴¹ Lawless via Lassiter, *The Chicago Guide To Collaborative Ethnography*, 5.

or her continual acts of food exchange, both as producer and as consumer, the individual is constituted as part of a physically commingled and communal whole.’ (Meigs 10).⁴²

Vimala uses food and the domestic space of her home kitchen as both symbolic and tangible currency in this reciprocal gift exchange of which Mauss, Meigs, and Berzog write. When she was not able to find work in the field of political science, Vimala turned to her domestic skills and her home. In doing so, she follows in the tradition of many women—immigrants, minorities, and others facing adversity who turned to food and their kitchens to create opportunities for themselves. Williams-Forson writes, “Many communities were committed to mutual food sharing in an attempt to stretch resources. Food sharing and networking were ways in which women reached out in collective unity to help themselves and others survive amidst the rapidly changing conditions of their lives... This survival mechanism also allows for connections between food and power to be revealed.”⁴³ Vimala has long been aware of the power of food, particularly *her* food. This was most clear when her first husband became angry if she brought an “ostentatious dish” to a potluck. He understood the expressive power of Vimala’s food, and resented that she possessed that power and attention. Her ex-husband’s reaction to her skills emphasized for Vimala how her food could be employed as a communicator, which she ultimately realized through her dinners and subsequently at her restaurant.⁴⁴

⁴² Berzog, Linda Murray. 2001. “My Mother’s Recipes” from *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food*. P. 96-97.

⁴³ Williams-Forson. P. 85.

⁴⁴ Rajendran, 2010. Personal interview with author. 5 April.

CHAPTER II

A Community-Supported, Home-Cooking Restaurant

In April of 2010, Vimala held the last community dinner at her home. In June, she opened a restaurant, Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe, in downtown Chapel Hill, relocating her kitchen, community, volunteers, and family helpers to a more formal place of business. The start of this new venture was made possible, almost entirely, by community investments and support—connections Vimala made through her home community dinners.

As Vimala gradually realized that going to law school was not possible, and as her dinners became more successful, she considered opening a restaurant. In doing so, she would bring value to her own work, showcase her culinary skills, and take on a great personal challenge. She said,

*If you ask me **now**,
there's nothing menial about **being a chef**.
It **does** use a high level thinking of chemistry and **art**
that comes together in preparing a meal.
And the skill that I have that I find is rare and unique is
taking a recipe that might be **easy** to cook for
a family of four
and scaling up for 175 people
and the food still tasting as sharp as it would if it was made in a small batch.
And that I think is a **miraculous** gift and such a skill to have
that I marvel at myself
and I want to take it to the next level
of being a chef in a restaurant*

*and I like the fast-paced frenzy that it's going to be.*⁴⁵

In addition, she felt that the public venue of a restaurant would allow her to broaden her community, expanding the reach of her social mission to a greater audience, as well as extend the small-scale sustainable local food network she had facilitated at her home dinners. She commented,

*I've started valuing **myself** for the first time,
and **that** is what has given me the confidence to go on and start this restaurant
because I feel like what has been as a
closely guarded secret
to having the dinners at the house
for friends and friends of friends,
I wanted to open it to the whole community,
and in doing so,
help the local farm-to-fork continuum as well
the local economy.*⁴⁶

Despite this move to a more traditional restaurant business model, Vimala's enterprise is rooted in radicalism. She continues to approach her work beyond a simple monetary goods exchange. She is engaged in an entrepreneurial model that is feminist and community-centric, as I will explain.

Within five days of talking about opening a restaurant, the word spread throughout her network, and Vimala raised three-fourths of the funds she needed via investments from family and friends. This restaurant was made possible *because* Vimala is so rooted in her community, and is valued as an important resource. This model for a business is feminist and democratic in nature.⁴⁷ Though Vimala is at the center, she runs

⁴⁵ Rajendran. personal communication with author. March 3, 2010.

⁴⁶ Ibid. April 5, 2010.

⁴⁷ Here I draw on bell hooks' vision of feminism, which fights against oppression of women regardless of race and class and bucks against the "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" through women-

her business in a manner that poses an alternative to a top-down hierarchy, where decisions are guided and controlled by a principal funder or boss. Instead, Vimala is beholden to her customers and employees because they are her funders, patrons, friends, and even her family. Her husband Rush and two of her children, Manju and Rajeev, work at the restaurant. Rob Jones commented,

*If they **had** the money needed to just open this restaurant on their own and didn't need the community support, I think that... we wouldn't be as **tied** to the community, right? I mean the fact that the community came together to fund this restaurant means that the community feels both a **financial** investment, but they feel, like invested **emotionally** in the business. But then, yeah, also it's **humbling**, right? to have the community come together to support making this business happen and it's like we feel a certain responsibility to the community to do it right and figure out how to do it and we can't just throw money at problems. We have to really like sit down and **figure out** how to do this stuff and how to do it well, how to do it right.⁴⁸*

Vimala's customers, who include her friends, former guests/volunteers from the community dinners, as well as first-time visitors, feel this emotional investment. The emotional connection compels customers to support her restaurant through their patronage, but also give honest feedback with the motivation that this "community-supported home-cooking restaurant," as Vimala calls it, succeeds. Shannon Harvey spoke about her experience,

centric models based on equality. From hooks, bell. *Feminism Is For Everybody: Passionate Politics*. (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2000), 37, 42-43, 46.

⁴⁸ Jones. personal interview with author. December 7, 2010.

*As a customer, I've been here quite a few times...
 and there is this sense where I am really picky about restaurants,
 and I'm really sort of **hard** on restaurants,
 and if I went to a place and had a bad meal,
 I probably wouldn't come back, you know,
 and I don't think I've had a bad meal here,
 but sometimes I'll be like,
 "I don't think these greens are as good as they normally are,"
 which is strange
 because I think at any other restaurant I might,
 I would sort of
 make a note, and if you got enough sort of strikes,
 I would just sort of not go back there any more,
 but I feel like that would just never enter my **mind** here,
 I think because I am so aware of their process,
 and like how they're getting started working on making changes,
 so my role is,
 like if something is a problem,
 I want to let them know so they can like work on it and do better,
 so they can be **successful**,
 because I like really want them to be successful and I know a lot of people do."⁴⁹*

What Harvey stresses here is the way that Vimala had engaged her community in her “process”—the process of becoming a restaurant from a home kitchen, and becoming a chef from a cook. Vimala’s story is a community narrative in which all can take pride and be involved. Vimala is *of* her community and is empowered and supported by that community. She has created an environment where she, her investors, and customers have a hand in how the business is run. Here one sees the same flexibility and play from Vimala’s home kitchen transferred to the restaurant. Though Vimala’s invested customers may hold her business accountable in ways that they might not with other businesses, they are also more *forgiving* because they are participants in this shared narrative and feel responsible for the restaurant’s success. Jones spoke to this,

*The other piece of getting all the community investment is that
 I think*

⁴⁹ Harvey. personal interview with author. November 10, 2010.

*Vimala and Rush really feel
though,
the weight
of that investment and
they feel like this business just doesn't need to succeed for **them**
but for the whole **community**
and I think that's a really heavy weight
for them to carry
and whatever we can do to
I mean, as a whole community,
to make the restaurant successful,
I think, takes a little bit off of **their** load.⁵⁰*

Vimala continues this dialogue between customer and community through constant conversation about menu items and events both in the physical space or “house” of the restaurant, and digitally, on her blog and Facebook page, which is updated daily. Through these digital formats, customers and friends leave comments and suggestions to which Vimala responds. By approaching her customers as friends and community engaged in conversation, both Vimala and her customers are part of an exchange that is more than just monetary. In the “home” space of her restaurant and in a digital format, Vimala has created an alternative economy through both a social exchange and a gift exchange. The ceramic urn for donations that sat on the counter in Vimala’s home kitchen now sits on the counter of the restaurant, next to the register. Though it now has taken on more of a symbolic presence than functional one, donations are still accepted and encouraged via the donation jar. Andrea Wood, a former cooking volunteer and now employee of Vimala’s reported,

*We do have a jar for donations
for people that can't afford food,
so people who can afford it, to pay a little bit extra,*

⁵⁰ Jones. personal interview with author. December 7, 2010.

*will put that money in for people that can't afford it,
and so, we do have that system going still,
but it's a little more official
than it used to be.⁵¹*

It is part of Vimala's "community-supported" philosophy that no guest at the restaurant be turned away. Vimala often serves extra dishes to customers, to ask their opinion on a trial recipe, or to ensure they had enough to eat.

This exchange between equals exists not only between Vimala and her community of customers and investors, but also between Vimala and her employees.

Brayshaw spoke about the work environment,

*Something that I've found interesting, is
I've worked in other restaurants
where there's been much more
hierarchy,
or the people who work in the kitchen have no idea what the
daily total is,
and they're not at all encouraged to know,
or even like go into the front of the house,
and
whereas at the restaurant,
any worker can
run a report
and see what we made for lunch or for dinner,
and people do that.
I think the workers there have, I feel like they have an interest in how they're,
you know, how much is coming in.⁵²*

Vimala's business model coincides with alternative economies and exchanges explored in J.K. Gibson Graham's *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Gibson-Graham examines alternative and often hidden local economies, like the Kitchen Sisters "Hidden Kitchens," that operate under different rules and in direct opposition to capitalism. She writes, "the

⁵¹ Wood, Andrea. personal interview with author. December 7, 2010.

⁵² Brayshaw. personal interview with author. December 7, 2010.

specific economic meaning of, for example, non-market transaction, unpaid labor, and communal or independent modes of generating and distributing surplus are lost in the hegemonic move to represent capitalism as the only viable form of economy.”⁵³ By working with the community to create a sustainable business drawing from community support, operating in *conversation* with customers, upholding a “no one turned away policy,” and creating a gift exchange that operates in tandem with a monetary exchange, Vimala is creating an alternative community economy. Gibson-Graham writes,

*By highlighting the sociality of all economic relations, the community economy approach seeks to recognize the interdependence of a broad variety of economic and so-called ‘non-economic’ activities... We are interested in fostering the community-economy—building capacities of social surplus, the dynamic interaction of multiple and diverse economic relations, and the crucial interdependence of economic and non-economic activities.*⁵⁴

Vimala’s alternative business model maintains a triple bottom line, one that Jones says is “taking care of people, and the environment, and the financial bottom line.”⁵⁵ Community support makes Vimala’s Curryblossom Café’s triple bottom line feasible and sustainable:

*So we’re trying to create a business with that ethic,
and what that really requires is a
community support
and a community that shares those **values**
and that is willing to
effectively **pay** for those values and
that I think is something that, so far has been pretty
special about Vimala’s is that
a lot of businesses **don’t** have the community support necessary to make that
triple bottom line work.*

*And **because** Vimala has come up through the community,
because it’s been a grassroots thing,
because she’s been cooking for this community for over 13 years,*

⁵³ Gibson-Graham, J.K. *A Postcapitalist Politics*, 56.

⁵⁴ Gibson-Graham. *A Postcapitalist Politics*, 95.

⁵⁵ Jones. Personal interview with author. December 7, 2010.

*she and **we** have been able to create a business that can hold more closely to those values and oftentimes businesses come to this triple bottom line from a different place , I guess.*

*Oftentimes they come to it from a place of **environmentalism**, which **certainly**, Vimala **has** that, but I think in order to make a triple bottom line business work, you **really really really** need to be **firmly rooted** in community. And I've seen **soooo** many businesses that claim to be triple bottom line feeling like they really have to compromise their values and it's, we're just getting started and it's hard to **know** how things will **develop**, but it seems **really** promising to me. And I think that that **rootedness** in this community has been **really** really key to us being able to **hold** those values more closely.⁵⁶*

As I will discuss further, Vimala is held accountable by her community—those volunteers who cooked at her home, guests who squeezed on to Vimala's living room couch to eat, and those who helped fund the restaurant. They are invested in Vimala's success *and* her mission. These community members are involved in Vimala's social values and want the restaurant to stay true to the radical mission of its predecessor—what Hayes calls in *Radical Homemakers*, a “life-serving economy.” She writes, “Individuals who had taken this path in life were building a great bridge from our existing *extractive economy* where corporate wealth was regarded as the foundation of economic health, where mining our earth's resources and exploiting our international neighbors was accepted as simply the cost of doing business—to a *life-serving economy*...”⁵⁷ Vimala maintains the values of “radical homemakers” in her transition from home to business, as she upholds the triple bottom line of family, community, social justice, and ecological balance.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Hayes, *Radical Homemakers*, 13.

CHAPTER III

Losses and Gains

The transformation from home kitchen to industrial kitchen comes, however, with both benefits and drawbacks to the “community economy” Vimala has established. In this section I will investigate what is gained, but what is also lost, in this move from home kitchen to formal restaurant. For Vimala, the benefits of transitioning from home community dinners to restaurant are social, economic, personal, and practical. The practical benefit is mainly due to the improved equipment and larger space in an industrial kitchen equipped with professional sinks, stoves, and refrigeration. In the industrial kitchen, Vimala prepares food for the restaurant and catering engagements in a much more efficient and timely manner, without commandeering and creating a mess in the space of her home kitchen. When asked about the benefits of the restaurant kitchen, Brayshaw commented,

*Well definitely
efficiency.
You know the commercial sinks
are amazing.
Wash the
same amount of dishes
in a quarter of the time, half of the time...*⁵⁸

No longer needing the flexibility of “working from home” with her children grown, Vimala can now separate her work and home spaces. However, she now complains of

⁵⁸ Brayshaw. personal interview with author. December 7, 2010.

never being at home, and always being at the restaurant. In that sense, the restaurant has become another “home.” The restaurant home is where her friends and family know she can always be found.

Becoming a chef and restaurant owner has enhanced Vimala’s self-worth and standing in the community. Both Vimala and her family, friends, volunteers, and employees feel she is finally receiving the recognition she deserves. But the title is largely unimportant. Long before the restaurant began, Vimala established herself as a leader and skilled cook in the community. She was frequently invited to speak at conferences and had many requests to cater events. It is most important to Vimala to reach a broader audience with her social mission and engage the community in the micro-local and sustainable food system she has facilitated. Vimala still fulfills her teaching role, but has transitioned from a one-on-one teacher at home to a much bigger “classroom.”

Vimala’s “teaching” at the Curryblossom Cafe is an expression of what Stephen Stern and John Allan Cicala describe as “creative ethnicity,”---“the creolization and sharing of an ethnic identity.”⁵⁹ The cafe menu includes many of Vimala’s dishes inspired by the American South, and North Carolina in particular, such as barbeque, dinner rolls, and slaw. These foods stand alongside the regional dishes of India. Vimala has engaged in this “creolization” of cuisine since she began cooking at the age of three. She said,

*I have a curiosity for different kinds of aromas that came out of **neighbors**’ kitchens that were totally different from what we had in our home, because India is a conglomerate of so many different **cultures**, so we were from Kerala and we had neighbors from the state of Gujarat*

⁵⁹ Stern and Cicala. *Creative Ethnicity*.

*and they put different things into the oils
 that they made
 the infusions of garlic and oil that was not something I saw in my mother's Kerala
 cooking
 so I would wander into those homes—
 I remember when I was 3 or 5
 And wanting to **have** what they have,
 and they would let me
 taste it
 and I would come and ask my mother to cook it exactly like that,
 and she would say
 “**You** do it!”
 So early on I started **experimenting** with what we consider foreign cuisines [giggles].⁶⁰*

This practice of experimenting with “foreign cuisines” whether from a different region of
 India or the Piedmont of North Carolina demonstrates how Vimala evokes her family
 home in India in her new home in the United States. Vimala explains,

*So later on,
 Coming to America,
 I
 as an international faculty wife in
 Ann Arbor, Michigan,
 I had the opportunity to
 be around women from
all
over
the world,
 and I learned to cook international food as a result.
 One of my first gifts
 for my birthday
 from close friends
 within 2 months of arriving here
 was Betty Crocker's International Cookbook [laughs].
 I have to go get it.
 I spent so many days, years...
 Betty Crocker's International Cookbook!
 And I have cooked practically every recipe from this cookbook.⁶¹*

⁶⁰ Rajendran. personal interview with author. April 5, 2010.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

Clearly one way that Vimala has learned to feel “at home” in America is by sharing her own recipes and adopting those of her new home. She did this in the community dinners at her home, and she continues this process in her Chapel Hill restaurant. Through her food, Vimala layers many domestic spaces—the family kitchen in India, first home kitchen in the United States, kitchen of the community dinners, and the restaurant kitchen.

Vimala and her community especially enjoy access to “good food all the time, every day.”⁶² Employees have lunch together before or after the lunch rush, and Vimala’s family enjoys leftovers from the restaurant and catering engagements. Vimala always worked to provide good food for her family, but the expanded kitchen, network and inventory of the restaurant has enhanced her efforts.

Vimala also feels the social benefits of opening the restaurant. She commented,

*The other benefit is
having lived in this town for 25 years,
I feel like
some
portion
of my personal history
with people in this town
tends to
walk in the door.
often.
almost everyday.
and it’s, uh, you know,
I’m a party animal,
I love parties,
I love people,
and being around people energizes me
and I feel like
there’s a constant party in my*

⁶² Rajendran. personal interview with author. November 17, 2010.

*“house” as we call it now,
so that’s awesome! I just love it.*⁶³

The restaurant creates an open space where Vimala’s friends, new and old, close and distant, acquaintances, and strangers alike walk in the door and find her. At the community dinners, this accessibility was restricted to weekly gatherings, limiting the opportunity to a smaller pool of guests—Vimala’s immediate friends and “friends of friend.” The restaurant allows, in some ways for more possibility—friends Vimala may have not seen in twenty years come, as well as new customers who never set foot in her home. All are greeted with a hug and a friendly greeting. This was not possible at her home. But the restaurant also restricts possibilities, leaving less time for Vimala to converse with new friends, because she is constantly busy as head chef and proprietor.

Vimala’s community refers to the front of the restaurant as her “house.” This is a term commonly used in restaurants to refer to the area where customers are served, but in Vimala’s case, speaks to the transference of domestic space. Evoking and maintaining the *community* aspect of those dinners is key to this new venture, and an important way that Vimala evokes her home in the restaurant space. In addition, even though the location, space, and name of the restaurant has changed, customers still refer to the restaurant by the same name they called her home: Vimala’s. Although customers are at the restaurant instead of her home, the language has remained about “home,” featuring Vimala’s “home-cooking.”

⁶³ Ibid.

In employing the term “home-cooking” to describe her restaurant, Vimala directly makes reference to her home community dinners and origins as a home cook, where she made food for friends and friends-of-friends. In their cookbook, *American Home Cooking*, Cheryl Alters Jamison and Bill Jamison articulate this, “home cooking differs from fine restaurant cooking in multiple respects...most essentially perhaps in the elementary distinction about who eats the food. Restaurant chefs cook for clients...while home cooks prepare meals for themselves, their families, and friends.”⁶⁴ The “home cooking” label for Vimala’s restaurant, alludes to that notion that Vimala is cooking for friends and friends-of-friends, even though her patronage is now much broader. “Home cooking,” a term familiar to most Americans, particularly southerners, also clearly denotes the style of food to expect. Bill and Cheryl Jamison write, “[home cooking] suggests a certain style of food—what some call peasant, country, or bourgeois cooking—simple, hearty, seasonal fare, brought to the peak of flavor through years of practice and perfection in thousands of home kitchens”⁶⁵ Though typical “home cooking” restaurants in the United States might not generally offer vegetable samosas or Tandoori chicken thali, Vimala’s food evokes a similar essence, with hearty meals delivered in a casual atmosphere. In addition, the food at the restaurant is “sharper,” as Vimala said, than the food at her community dinners, with artful plating in individual servings, rather than the self-service buffet employed in her home. However, “home-cooking” marks the Cafe as the humble, community restaurant it seeks to be.

⁶⁴ Jamison, Cheryl Alters and Bill. *American Home Cooking*. (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 2.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

There are certainly elements lost in Vimala's transition from home kitchen to professional restaurant kitchen—when the donation urn turns into a cash register, when volunteers become employees and guests become customers. Economically, Vimala has a much higher overhead, with rent, utilities, and a paid staff of nineteen members. Where Vimala often sourced grocery store seconds as ingredients for her home dinners, she is now unable to do so, due to restaurant health regulations. The cost of running the restaurant, Vimala reported, is approximately 10,000 dollars each month, which is much more than she anticipated.⁶⁶ With the greater need to take costs into consideration, Vimala has had to change her management model. She commented,

*I've started thinking more about
the **efficiency** of time,
you know.
I **want** people to have fun,
and I want people to have relationships with the people they work with,
but sometimes I think about how if we don't work in an efficient manner,
if they are just hanging out
and visiting,
it makes me concerned that we are not,
you know,
being productive.*⁶⁷

Vimala did not worry about the “efficiency of time” at her community dinners. The atmosphere was more relaxed because her volunteers were not “on the clock.” There was a push to prepare the food by five o'clock, but no steady stream of customers as there are at the restaurant. Brayshaw, Jones, and Wood admit that they miss the “laid back” atmosphere of the dinners, where they were able to sit down to work and spend more

⁶⁶ Rajendran. personal interview with author. November 17, 2010.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

time talking to Vimala and guests at the dinner. At the same time, they have turned their volunteer work into gainful employment from an employer they believe in. Wood said that Vimala still encourages her employees to sit and converse with their friends who patronize the restaurant, but they must “clock out” first. The personal pedagogical exchange between Vimala and other volunteers that happened at the community dinners has also ended. Vimala’s teaching is now directed toward producing an excellent product rather than highlighting a sharing of knowledge about food, culinary traditions, and cultural background. The relationship between volunteer and manager has shifted to a more traditional exchange between employee and employer, though Vimala still retains ties with her friends and community.

In the transition from guest to customer, those who attended the community dinners and left a donation of their choice, must now pay set prices for their meals. They order selections, rather than serving themselves buffet-style. Wood commented,

But there were aspects of the community dinners that was really nice because people...

there was no

***money exchange** really.*

I mean there was, but

you didn’t have to,

you weren’t part of the money exchange

and it kind of happened

behind the scenes,

and that was really nice

because people who really couldn’t afford it could end up paying zero

*and people that **could** would end up paying \$40 or more,*

and that was nice.

Because Vimala,

if she had it her way,

she would never have to ask anybody for money and would feed

however many people came in the door.

*But she doesn't even own her own house.
And she
needs to have money to live off of,
as we all do, unfortunately...*⁶⁸

The money exchange at the community dinners was subtle and minimized; the good food and community were emphasized. The donation urn was small and unobtrusive, and set off to the side. No one asked for money. Now at the restaurant, the money exchange is overt and primary, with customers ordering and paying at the counter before the food arrives. This brings the monetary exchange to the forefront, and places the value of community in the background. Though it is clearly stated on the menu board that no one is turned away by the inability to pay, the monetary exchange likely restricts some potential customers, although it appeals to others who might be uncomfortable in a community dinner setting. Harvey noted,

*As a customer,
I've been here quite a few times...
I don't eat out a lot,
this is one of the few restaurants that I do eat out at,
and I think it's definitely different [from the community dinners]...
you pay and there's the set prices,
and you have to wait in a way that you didn't before,
where you used to just come in
and grab your stuff,
so there's this... it's like a little bit weird
and there's this sort of formality that isn't **formal** compared to a normal restaurant,
but it **feels** formal compared to this other setting...*⁶⁹

Though customers feel more connected and invested in the Cafe than other restaurants, the transition to the restaurant has altered their experience of eating “Vimala’s food.” The end of Vimala’s weekly community dinners represents a big loss. Harvey noted,

⁶⁸ Wood. 2010. Personal interview with author. 7 December.

⁶⁹ Harvey. personal interview with author. November 17, 2010.

*I do [miss the dinners].
I do.
I think cause in a way there's this...
it's like there's just one day a week where you have this opportunity to...
like I really made this effort to go there,
and to do that,
and so it's,
it's a little bit different when it's a restaurant,
you can sort of come and go as you like,
and there's not this sense of coming together and converging on this place like it was
when it was a weekly ritual.⁷⁰*

Guests who attended Vimala's home dinners lost a weekly tradition where they encountered friends and strangers alike. Now they must make more of an effort to attend the restaurant, and are not necessarily sure who they will find, although they will likely find a familiar face behind the counter. Customers who were guests at the community dinners comment particularly on the loss of the informality of the community dinners.

One aspect of the loss of informality is the diminished access to Vimala. Guests who are used to the dinners no longer have the same amount of contact with Vimala, something I can sympathize with as our project continued. One frequent guest said of the dinners, "you don't just come for the food. You come to talk to Vimala. Everyone wants to talk to Vimala." At the restaurant, however, those who know Vimala and are used to conversing with her, are lucky to be able to pin her down for a full conversation. Harvey explained,

*yeah, they don't have as much time to talk,
you know I came in today and this was one of the first days where I really got to talk to
Vimala.
Normally she's like running around like crazy...⁷¹*

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Harvey. Personal interview with author. November 10, 2010.

People come for “Vimala’s food,” but have less opportunity to talk to Vimala herself. Via her restaurant, Vimala has established herself as a local celebrity, effectively becoming a “brand” through “Vimala’s food” yet compromising those personal conversations that used to accompany the food. Now that personal relationship with Vimala is more abstract and less immediate, communicated through the food itself and the general community narrative of the restaurant. Simultaneously, this limited access contributes to Vimala’s standing as a local celebrity, where customers who frequent the restaurant, desire that personal connection with Vimala, because it is a limited commodity.

Moreover, to those new customers who are unaware of the community dinners, the restaurant may feel more like a community hub than other restaurants. They may feel the tangible connection Vimala has to her community and desire that connection, but they also may not understand some of the restaurant policies and communal, relaxed atmosphere. Jones commented,

*With the restaurant,
you get a lot more people who can just come in
off the **street**
and then they may not **know** the history of the restaurant and of the community dinners
and stuff like that, they may not appreciate,
you know, having the neighbors
right up next to them,
which happens sometimes...*⁷²

Customers who were familiar with the community dinners worry that the connection with Vimala and other customers will be lost as time passes. Harvey says,

*I mean
they started the restaurant with this community base that’s been eating there since,
but what I’m curious about is how the farther we get from those community dinners,
it’s going to change,
sort of at the restaurant
how there are going to be fewer and fewer people who never attended those*

⁷² Jones. personal interview with author. December 7, 2010.

*or knew what they were like,
 and I wonder...
 you know,
 it's a sad thing to think about if it's going to lose that quality
 if it's going to be less like those dinners in that sense of...
 I mean every time I go in I know several people...
 I wonder if it will be the case at some point,
 and maybe the community that went to those dinners has been in Chapel Hill
 long enough that they're sort of going to continue to come and
 bring their friends.⁷³*

As the home community dinners become a memory, Vimala's community will inevitably change. Vimala and her employees will face the challenge that Harvey describes—to maintain a community that is tied to Vimala, the employees, and other customers. How will it not become “just another restaurant?” In economic terms, Vimala's reliance upon community investment will keep the restaurant unique.

Vimala has plans for ways in which the business will maintain its radical mission and its devoted community. Some of these have not been implemented yet, due to start-up time, space, and financial constraints. Vimala reported,

*I'm going to **make** a plan for
 just like CSA, which stands for community supported agriculture,
 I'm going to do a plan for CSR [community supported restaurant], where folks **pre-pay**
 and have access to foods they can pick-up or come **eat**
 with their entire family or however they want to do it...
 that's the community building part.
 We will **continue** the **opportunity** to build community at the restaurant
 by **having** family-style community tables
 where folks can come sit
 at a table
 with people they haven't met before from the community
 and have a way to interact with one another—
 we might even
help
provoke
conversation by having everyone answer a question...*

⁷³ Ibid.

*“how was your day today,” or
“what do you plan to do this weekend,” or
“what’s the farthest you have traveled”
any kind of question that will make people to know one another.
I **truly hope** the restaurant will become a
meeting place for people of all walks,
especially I hope that the
people that come there will be racially diverse.”⁷⁴*

Community supported agriculture (CSA) is a model employed by small-scale, local farmers, beginning in North America in the 1980s. CSA members or “shareholders” pay a season price up-front to a local, often organic farmer, and in return, receive a “share” of the harvest each week. This model is one of the foundations of the alternative food movement and is key in the success of local food systems.⁷⁵

Vimala and her employees hope to expand the business. Vimala’s son Rajeev, who currently works in the restaurant, would like to add a bar and create a evening venue for live, local music. Both Vimala and Andrea Wood would like to add couches in the “house” to create a relaxed atmosphere that evokes the domestic space of Vimala’s home. They also hope to create a meeting space for community groups. Currently the Literary Council holds classes at the Cafe several times a week, but the restaurant space is limited. Vimala commented,

*I would like to be able to give more space for
social justice
interactive theatre
or poetry
or performing arts that actually have a
social message
and our dining room is too small for something like that.*

⁷⁴ Rajendran. personal interview with author. March 3, 2010.

⁷⁵ Winnie, Mark. 2008. *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Table in the Land of Plenty*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 137-138.

*There was actually more room in my home to seat people in the past.*⁷⁶

Vimala wants to create an equitable relationship for workers. Vimala pays her employees a livable wage and hopes to establish a co-worker collective that provides health care and profit sharing for employees.⁷⁷ Wood commented on the ideal outcome,

*Ultimately the dream would be
Vimala could afford a house
and afford such that she could
give out more food for free
and not feel that money was an issue
at all.*⁷⁸

In the twelve years of community dinners leading up to the opening of the restaurant, Vimala realized that her dream of going to law school and securing a position in social justice was not possible. As she established herself as a community leader in social and food justice, Vimala realized she can achieve her dream, but from a different angle. The establishment of the restaurant has made this dream evident. I asked Vimala what will happen next, now that she has become the owner and chef of the community-supported restaurant she had imagined. She replied,

*I'll tell you what.
I really do have a good answer.
My undergrad degree is in political science
and I have
a Masters degree in political science and
higher education-- educational media technology.
Initially
I couldn't get work at all
I couldn't **accept** work **legally** because I didn't have a green card.
Later when I got my green card in 2005,*

⁷⁶ Rajendran. personal interview with author. November 17, 2010.

⁷⁷ Wood. personal interview with author. December 7, 2010.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*

*I realized that my degrees were not up to date to get a job in those fields,
so I decided to go to Law School,
and tried that out for about
close to 3 years,*

*I
did the **ground work** that it took for me to get into Law School.
And someone who recommended me for law school
senator Ellie Kinney—
she knew why I wanted to be a lawyer and it was to actually do
**social
justice
movement
work***

*and the other day when she came here to eat, she said,
“you are **doing** social justice movement work, though your **food**,
through hosting the community members over here for meetings,
board meetings,
gatherings,
so on one hand, this **seems** like this is all I ever wanted,
but I have a feeling
I will continue to impact
policies,
related to food justice and sustainable practices in growing and sourcing of food,
so this is
**not
all.**
there’s more work to be done and I will definitely be doing it.”⁷⁹*

⁷⁹ Rajendran. 2010. Personal interview with author. December.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Vimala re-imagined her workplace in community dinners, transforming the domestic space of her home kitchen into a place where “business” occurred. I use quotation marks in this instance to emphasize the fact that this “business” was not merely economic; in fact, monetary exchange was secondary. The “business” allowed Vimala and her family to eat well. It granted them social and communal opportunities, and allowed Vimala to become politically engaged in her community. These benefits were reaped not only by Vimala and her family, but by a greater network of friends. In engaging in this “purposeful domesticity,” Vimala created an underground economy. She aligned herself with food activism and a revival of sustainable domestic and communal practices. In doing so, Vimala became a teacher, instructing others in practices she had learned from her mother and father, friends, neighbors, and her own creative experimentation.

This alternative, underground economy laid the groundwork for Vimala’s public “community-supported home-cooking” restaurant. Although monetary exchange has become primary, the foundation of Vimala’s underground business and community built a restaurant that respects community, ecological balance, and financial sustainability. The restaurant operates as a grass-roots, non-hierarchical and woman-led business, strongly

anchored in the values of its community. It creates a broad network for the social activism and food justice Vimala values. The restaurant also provides a larger audience for Vimala to share express her “creative ethnicity.”

Food ties us to place. It is from the earth, and if it is sourced locally, like Vimala’s food, it comes from the same place as its consumers. Vimala’s food ties her to the place in which she lives, a direct connection to the land and people she discovered in her homes outside of India. However, Vimala’s food also ties her to place socially. Through her cooking, Vimala made friends who supported her and made her an integral member of the Chapel Hill community. As she has relayed through our interviews and in her practice, food allows Vimala to feel “at home.” Food forges a connection to her past homes through her use of traditional and improvised recipes, and locally sourced food. By sharing that food with friends and guests, Vimala expresses her identity and gives her friends and guests a “taste” of her past homes.

Turning to food and domestic skills as a survival mechanism is a common narrative among populations facing adversity, particularly immigrant and minority women. Simultaneously, Vimala revived sustainable, communal and pedagogical domestic practices that are residual in American society, all the while engaging in social and food justice activism. Vimala aligned herself with students, young activists, and “radical homemakers,” many of whom are from white, middle class backgrounds, and live this lifestyle out of *choice* rather than *survival*. She saw herself in both of these populations—the woman immigrant creating opportunities for her family, as well as the young, socially engaged activist. Vimala bridged the immigrant narrative with the

contemporary narrative of revivalism, demonstrating important links between *survival* and *choice*. What began as cooking for her neighbors as a means of survival for Vimala, became a demonstration of her own agency. Vimala envisioned creativity, community, and empowerment in her survival tactic. Young, radical homemakers and activists may not necessarily *need* to live a sustainable domestic life that fulfills the “four tenets of family, community, social justice and ecological balance” to survive. They make the *choice* to do so because they recognize this lifestyle will allow themselves and *others* to survive and thrive. Vimala is a potent example of broadening and expanding these two communities. The work that radical homemakers are undertaking is not solely a story of white, middle-class young people. This is a story of engagement in a sustainable and communal domestic space. It is a story of shared learning and traditional meals that immigrants like Vimala have practiced for decades. The community that Vimala created in her home dinners reveals what is possible when two alternative communities combine efforts and recognize their similarities. At the close of a recent interview, I asked Vimala if she had anything else to add. She stated,

*I would just say this one thing, and that is,
if I can do it, anyone can,
because what I have really done is
taken the catastrophic events in my life
and creatively problem solved,
not by myself,
but with the help of community members and community resources.
So having done that I have turned around and just given back to the community,
so no matter what your circumstances, know that
A) You're not alone
B) It's not like you cannot pull yourself through*

*and be able to give back to the community.*⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Rajendran. personal interview with author. November 17, 2010.

APPENDIX I

VIMALA'S COMMUNITY, REFERENCED AND CONSULTED

Vimala Rajendran, *owner and head chef, Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe*

Vimala's first husband (Unnamed)

Manju Rajendran, *Vimala's daughter, Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe employee*

Rajeev Rajendran, *Vimala's son, Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe employee*

Rush, *Vimala's husband*

Peter Brayshaw, *one of Vimala's most important volunteers at her community dinners, now a cook at Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe*

Rob Jones, *formerly a volunteer at Vimala's community dinners, community activist, and employee at Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe*

Andrea Wood, *formerly a volunteer at Vimala's community dinners, manager of the South Estes Farmer's Market in Chapel Hill, employee at Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe*

Liane, *friend of Vimala's and first community dinner cooking volunteer*

Shannon Harvey, *volunteer at Vimala's community dinners, customer of Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe*

Lindsay Perry, *one-time volunteer at Vimala's community dinner via Prison Books, customer of Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe*

Danny Blose, *volunteer and musician at Vimala's community dinners, customer of Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe*

APPENDIX II

VIMALA COOKS: ONE LAST INDIAN DINNER IN MARCH

I pull up on an overcast, darkening March evening to find more cars than ever lining both sides of the street and up the cul de sac outside Vimala's Lexington Dr. home. As I drive past her house to park, I catch a glimpse of Vimala, standing in her driveway, smiling and nodding, hugging a group of young people gathered around her. I notice people milling about the yard, sitting at tables eating, standing in groups making jokes, sitting on the ground cross-legged, backs pressed against one of the tall pine trees. With the assortment of people of all ages and styles, the scene could be mistaken for a graduation party, the spring's first potluck, a Sunday picnic in a park. Everyone seems happy to be able to spend time outside at last, though there is clearly some other cause for celebration, for gathering.

As I approach the driveway, more details come into focus. I pass Vimala's husband, clad in a Carolina blue UNC t-shirt, talking to a group of friends and Vimala, whose dark shoulder-length hair is pulled back in a low ponytail, sports one of her beautiful t-shirts made by a friend and fan of hers. "Vimala Cooks," it says across the top in green ink on off-white fabric, and features a hand-drawn truck, which reads below, "Everybody Eats." She is talking with a long-, dark-haired woman who appears to be about my age. Vimala stops me and says, "I want you two to meet." At first I didn't

realize that she was speaking to me, but I turn and shake the woman's hand. "Emily, this is Victoria, Victoria, this is Emily." She tells me that Victoria wrote the *Independent Weekly* article about her last April. "Without getting emotional," Vimala pauses, swallowing, "but I'm already getting emotional, that article was largely responsible for what's happening here tonight."

She is referring to the fact that tonight is the last community dinner to be held at her home. In less than a month, Vimala will move her community dinners, which have been happening for twelve years, and working "kitchen", including her basement storehouse of bowls, pots, 10-gallon soup pots that hang from the ceiling with foreboding vastness, and other professional cooking equipment, to her new restaurant, Vimala's Curryblossom Cafe, on Franklin St. in downtown Chapel Hill. I know this is an exciting and gratifying move for her and her family, but one with known risks. In an e-mail sent to her listserv earlier in the week, she writes,

Thank you everyone for the many years of support shown, since 1993. I will never be able to express my gratitude to many who have encouraged and supported me through these years. I approach the next new phase with great excitement and trepidation. I am still looking for micro-loans (with interest) to finance the restaurant. This restaurant will be a gathering place for the community. Local food, local music and events will keep the place a lively place to visit. Please consider investing.

As Victoria, Vimala and I chat, a tall blond woman with a shoulder bag, which I assume is full of containers of Vimala's egg roast and curry, stops on her way to the car

and says goodbye, “Congratulations, Vimala. This is very exciting,” she waves, stepping into the street, “and thank you for the beautiful meal—it looks amazing.” Vimala smiles sincerely and thanks her.

I walk into the front yard of grass-- finally green, brown leaves, and ground ivy that dots the ground with tiny purple flowers—remnants of fall mixed among the irrefutable signs of spring, and sit on the edge of a raised garden bed just to the right of the house. I observe the scene and take notes. All of the assorted chairs that surround the three tables are full of people—friends, families, with ceramic plates that hold dinners in various states of completion—some full with warm hand-rolled chapatti, cabbage bhaji and vatana usal, others emptied except for chutney dregs and a cardamom brownie crumb. Paper cups filled with deep red hibiscus tea are in hands or placed on the colorful batik tapestries that cover the tables. Even in the fading light, there are still birds chirping faintly, sounds joined by the clink of silverware on plates, laughter, and the low drone of cars speeding past out on Smith Level Road. A Caucasian blonde boy and African American dark- curly haired boy, both about 8 years old, take turns jumping off of a pickle barrel-sized orange rock and a young couple tickles each other, play-fighting. I recognize a few undergrad students from the Southern Studies class I TA, gathered around one of the tables. I wonder if they notice any connections between tonight’s dinner and topics we’ve discussed in class-- southern mutuality, cultural diversity, leisure, and sense of place—The “Southern piece of heaven” ideal we’ve both complicated and upheld.

On the porch of Vimala’s red brick one-story ranch, the porch light and a star-shaped lantern illuminate a propane grill, a deep fryer and foil pans of additional chicken

curry and vegetable stew. Her husband emerges from the porch and into the yard and says to everyone, “In a month this will all be happening at the courtyard [at the restaurant]—people hanging out, eating, having a good time, maybe live music in the corner.” Vimala is out in the yard, greeting her friends and neighbors, smiling and giving hugs. Though the smiles and hugs are normal, she is not usually away from her post in the kitchen—refilling the huge white bowls of curry or frying chapatti at the stove. Tonight she has extra help and her volunteers encouraged her to go outside and enjoy her company. “It’s ‘Vimala Cooks,’ but we could add in parenthesis, ‘with a lot of help from a lot of friends,’” she said.

In addition to the opening of the restaurant and closing of the in-home community dinners, there is another reason for the celebratory air to the evening. Vimala’s daughter Manju, just moved back to North Carolina from Chicago to help her mother with the restaurant. The moving truck, containing “her life!” as she said, is parked out front. I move to the picnic table, sitting between Manju, who I had met earlier, and Victoria, across from my friends Matt and Shannon [Harvey], who were recently married. I begin to eat my dinner at last, and we discuss Universal Life Church and 1950’s food science. Victoria asks me about the Folklore program and my foodways class, and Manju, on my left, greets and hugs old friends. I overhear her tell some of them about brewing kombucha. I feel pulled to take more notes, but am pleasantly engaged in conversation and my dinner. When I finish my last bite of cardamom brownie and sip of hibiscus tea (which is, as I’ve learned, an excellent pairing!) I return to my seat on the raised garden bed that is ready to be planted. Shannon takes my picture and we joke of Malinowski’s famous photograph of his “ethnographic tent.” As I complete my notes, it begins to cool

off and get dark, though there are still about twenty people scattered across the lawn.

Danny, a friend of Vimala's and cooking volunteer gets out his mandolin and begins to play, though I hear the strings' din carry across the yard before I see him playing. He sits at the table with the pink batik tablecloth, now empty, and timidly picks out a tune, still learning it. It is an evening bird song, the last sounding of the day. This seems an appropriate marker of the end of these dinners, the movement to a new space, a transition, with excitement, trepidation and new things to learn.

APPENDIX III

ILLUSTRATIONS



Vimala with volunteers Rob Jones and Andrea Wood, preparing for a community dinner.
(Shannon Harvey, 2010)



Volunteers chopping vegetables for a March 2010 community dinner
(Shannon Harvey, 2010)



Vimala and daughter Manju preparing for a March 2010 community dinner
(Shannon Harvey, 2010)



Vimala and volunteers preparing for a March 2010 community dinner
(Shannon Harvey, 2010)



Bowls of food at the last community dinner, March 2010
(Shannon Harvey, 2010)



Vimala in the kitchen with guests and volunteers at the last community dinner,
March, 2010
(Shannon Harvey, 2010)



Vimala in “Vimala cooks” T-shirt at the last community dinner, March 2010
(Shannon Harvey, 2010)



Guests and volunteers eating outside at Vimala’s last community dinner, March 2010
(Shannon Harvey, 2010)



Vimala and me inside Vimala's Curryblossom Café, April 2011
(Joseph Hilliard, 2011)

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