

A BIGGER PART OF OUR LIFE IS CONNECTED TO FOOD: OLDER ADULT FOOD
MEMORIES AND FOOD REALITIES

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ABSTRACT

Sandra Davidson: A Bigger Part of Our Life is Connected to Food: Older Adult Food Memories and Food Realities

(Under the direction of Patricia Sawin, Marcie Cohen Ferris, and Amanda Holliday)

The symbolic importance of food—its power to connect us to others in our community, past and present—is important for older adults. This thesis examines the symbolic importance of food to four diverse older adults in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Powerful notions of personal biography and identity are crafted through their stories about food memories, stories about making food, and stories about food and their community of peers. Food connects them to formative childhood memories and experiences. Food enables them to perform significant familial roles at this stage in their life. Food functions as a symbol of how one chooses to age and perceives one's peers in the aging process. These seniors have complex food philosophies deeply shaped by childhood memories, gender, race, ethnicity, and an awareness of their life stage, and reveal that the symbolic significance of food becomes an expression of how a person experiences aging.

To my grandfather, William Archibald Johnson.

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PREFACE

The topic of older adult foodways is deeply personal to me. Before graduate school, I worked as a caregiver for Janet, a ninety year-old woman whose daily rhythm was determined by mealtime. Her social interaction hinged on the singular occasion of nightly dinner—the only time she left her apartment to dine with others in a communal dining room; arguably the best part of her day was eating the frozen waffle I toasted and covered with butter and syrup each morning. Of even greater importance is the role food played in my relationship with my beloved maternal grandfather, William A. Johnson, or Daddy Bill, whom I grew up five minutes away from. He and I had a special relationship, often forged over meals and through our mutual love of eating, and eating frequently. I ate lunch with him almost every day during holidays and summer breaks for most of my childhood, and well into life as a young adult.

Daddy Bill was a demanding customer for local businesses in Lillington, North Carolina. Upon—or likely about two minutes before his arrival at any given restaurant—he wanted a glass of unsweetened iced tea, a pile of Sweet N’ Low, a small Styrofoam cup full of lemon slices, and a cup full of just ice. Even after a sextuple bypass in the mid-nineties, he wanted his hushpuppies extra crisp at Howard’s Barbeque and an entire pepperoni pizza for himself at our local Pizza Hut’s lunch buffet. He ate enormous mid-day meals that harkened back to his childhood on the family farm, but to my family’s amusement, typically finished his day with a dinner of “gorp” (glorified trail mix) and Duplin County Wine. He hosted Christmas day breakfast every year—the only event he cooked for himself other than the occasional grilled steak—and made sure to make oatmeal for me, though he and I were the only family members out of about ten who wanted that with our grits, canned biscuits, eggs, bacon, sausage, and country ham.

I learned many things about my grandfather through food and over meals. The impact of the Great Depression lived with him for a lifetime, and he never wasted food. The impact of the unexpected death of my grandmother—a homemaker and the love of his life—was made visible in his shift away from eating at home to eating out. I am the youngest grandchild in the family, and she died before I had the chance to form memories of her. Often the least painful way he could talk with me about her was to share stories about her talent as a cook. Food structured my grandfather's day, it connected him to his childhood and lost loved ones, and around it he built family.

My grandfather died peacefully at ninety-two of natural causes in January 2013, but the stories he shared with me about food, and the stories my family tell about him and food are legendary in our family history. This thesis is dedicated to him.

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INTRODUCTION

Food never exists in its own right. It comes in a context—social and cultural. It is always a matter of ritual and symbol, in some cases richer than others but never absent.

Barbara Myerhoff, “Bobbes and Zeydes” 203.

Older adults are one of the fastest growing groups in America. In a recent report, the US Census Bureau projects that the number of adults over 65, largely baby boomers, will double in size by 2050 (2014). These demographic changes will continue to shape the fabric of families and communities. For decades, federal, state, and local governments, non-profit organizations, communities, and families have grappled with the economic, social, and medical implications of an aging population.

The growth of older adults in the United States has shaped scholarly and popular discourse about health, the body, and society. The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being not merely the absence of disease or infirmity,” but aging, viewed primarily as a biomedical process in the west, is treated as a problem to be solved (1946). Western discourse has pathologized the process of aging, and in turn constructed it as a condition to be treated (Dumas and Turner). United States youth-obsessed culture makes aging with dignity particularly challenging for adults who become increasingly dependent as their physiological bodies degenerate (Black and Dobbs). Cultural narratives of older adults in the West cast them as expensive to care for, frail, and undignified. Older adults are stigmatized because societal values like independence, self-determination, and pleasure are mythologized as unobtainable at late stages of life (Higgs and Gilleard).

Popular culture is interested in aging, too. In an October 2014 essay for *The Atlantic* titled “Why I Hope to Die at 75,” author and physician Ezekiel J. Emanuel—brother of Rahm Emanuel mayor of Chicago—laments the cost and prevalence of life-prolongation efforts in medicine and the American obsession with “consuming various juice and protein concoctions, sticking to strict diets, and popping vitamins and supplements all in a valiant effort to cheat death and prolong life as long as possible.” Emanuel estimates he will have maximized his quality of life and contribution to society by 75 and does not wish to live past it. That same month, the *New York Times Magazine* published a digital essay featuring photos and interviews with high-profile, working 80+ year olds ranging from Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg (81), to the tenacious actress Betty White (92), to Carmen Herrera (99), a painter who sold her first painting at 89. Herrera’s work is now a part of the Tate Modern and Museum of Modern Art’s permanent collections. Clearly, definitions about older people’s usefulness after 75 vary greatly.

Who though, is talking to ordinary older adults? Amid scholarly and popular discourse and the many statistics that portray aging as both a political and economic problem are few qualitative studies about the lived realities and daily life of older adults. How do they experience aging? How do they internalize and adapt to cultural forces and institutions that shape daily life? How does personal biography and culture shape their hopes, wishes and expectations of life? Qualitative research can help scholars understand the important influence familial and cultural experiences have on individual expectations of aging and health (Bookman and Kimbrel). Deep ethnography with older adults could highlight strengths and weaknesses of current social and health services for the elderly, and enable providers and community networks to better serve and include seniors.

In his work with older adults, folklorist Pat Mullen argues, “folklore is a resource through which a person can work out and then project to others a certain changing self-image” and that as a discipline it is a study “of present situations informed by the past” (1-3). Older adults can help us

understand how to age successfully and the importance of integrating folk traditions into our lives as we age (Mullen 2). As a folklorist, it seems imperative to me to include the voices of older adults in our society's discourse about aging.

I do that in this thesis, which examines the symbolic importance of food to four diverse older adults in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I chose food as my ethnographic focus for several reasons. Ordinary people make informed choices about how, what and with whom they eat, and the answers to these questions may change as one ages. As alluded to by Emanuel, food is often the locus of healthcare intervention and lifestyle moderation for older adults. Indeed, healthcare practitioners often focus on nutrition as the key to solving aging (Mykytyn). Food also happens to be a central target of social service programming for older adults. In 2010, federal, state, and local governments collectively spent \$1.4 billion on site-based congregate meal programs and home delivery meal programs like Meals on Wheels (Moats and Hogland 10).

The significance of food is not simply practical. Not only does it provide sustenance needed to fuel our bodies, but is integrally tied to personal identity and regional culture (Jones 2007). This symbolic importance of food—its power to connect us to others in our community, past and present, is particularly important for older adults. In her work with an aging Jewish community, Barbara Myerhoff observed that, “through ritual and food, the old people momentarily retrieve their past, as individuals and as a culture” (“Bobbes and Zeydes” 208). Food provides a space to examine the intersection of individual voices and macro—institutional, political—forces. Or, as articulated more clearly by Tom Hanchett, by asking “who is eating what, where, and why” we can “get to know our neighbors and see our community and ourselves more clearly” (181).

This thesis is built around a series of interviews I conducted with four individuals, who are primarily connected through their shared roles as volunteers, visitors, and diners at the Seymour Center for older adults in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. The Seymour Center is one of two state-of-

the-art senior centers in Orange County, and it coordinates recreational, health and lunch programming for older adults in Chapel Hill. Every weekday between the hours of 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. the gymnasium in the Seymour Center is converted to a makeshift dining room for the publically subsidized federally mandated Congregate Lunch Program (CLP).¹ By 11:15, a group of English and non-English speaking older adults—white, African American, Chinese, Taiwanese, Indonesian, Indian—who are registered to eat lunch at the program, line up behind a table to receive a first come, first serve ticket for lunch. At noon, an average of sixty older adults break bread using china plates, non-disposable silverware, and cloth napkins. For a brief time each day, this diverse group of older adults with life stories that span decades and continents come together for a meal.

During my first visit to the center, I was immediately struck by the noise and energy in the dining room. Visitors congregated by its entrance prior to the meal, and swiftly filled the room and its tables when the time came to eat. After people settled at tables, a staff person shouted out several general announcements, called for a moment of silence, concluded that with an “amen,” and lunch began. That day the center served deliberately portioned plates of hearty pot roast, steamed carrots, white potatoes, a cup of thawed, frozen mixed fruit—pineapple and strawberries—a roll, and a rice crispy dessert. Guests had a choice of milk, water and sweetened or unsweetened ice tea. The food looked palatable, and from the number of empty plates I saw, it appeared to be tasty. During lunch, tables were relatively segregated by race and ethnicity, conversations were loud, and people who finished eating early waited for the ‘okay’ from staff to return to the buffet line for a second serving of food.

The lunch program menu, designed by its coordinator Isabel Jackson, changes every month, but each meal typically includes meat and two vegetables (never fried), a side of fruit, and a roll.

¹ See Appendix for Congregate Lunch Program background for a history of public food programming in the South.

Food is prepared off site, brought to the Seymour Center by caterers and warmed for the noon meal. Jackson attempts to modify and adapt each month's menu to the preferences and tastes of diners. When she first began at the center, caterers only served fish once a month. Fish is now on the menu twice a month because many Asian visitors requested additional seafood. Though she cannot accommodate everyone's needs, Jackson, who develops the menu for both senior centers in Chapel Hill, makes an effort to honor the food preferences of the center's diverse population.²

The Seymour Center's diversity is reflected in the older adults who have participated in my research—Ed, a male immigrant from Taiwan; Fae, a female immigrant from Indonesia; JR, an African-American woman born and raised in rural Bynum, North Carolina, and Zoe, a Jewish woman born and raised in the Bronx.³ Using open-ended qualitative interviews, formal and informal, recorded and not, I sought to understand their food memories, and what these memories reveal about life history and racial and ethnic backgrounds. How do those memories shape current food realities, and lastly, how does the symbolic significance of food become an expression of how a person experiences aging?

These food histories detail the who, what, when, where and why of each collaborator's food practices throughout their lives and most importantly, reveal much about the importance of food to these individuals in the later stages of life. My collaborators have complex food philosophies deeply shaped by childhood memories, gender, race, ethnicity, and an awareness of their life stage. Three important themes stand out from the narratives and food histories I collected. Powerful notions of personal biography and identity are crafted through stories about food memories, stories about making food, and stories about food and their community of peers. Their narratives reveal that food

² See Appendix for a sample monthly menu from the Seymour Center

³ All quotes and transcripts are taken directly from interviews with each participant. These participant's names have been changed to protect their identity. Abbreviations are used for longer quotes. The transcripts will be destroyed when this research is complete.

reflects much about how each interviewee perceives him or herself, how they interpret who they are to family and close friends, and who they are in relation to their peers and broader cohort. Three chapters in this thesis correlate to these themes: Food Memories, The Act of Making, and Food and Community.

This research has led me to both expected and unexpected places. These participants are not united by a shared cultural or ethnic identity, though Fae and Ed are both culturally Chinese. The group I worked with is small, but the participants reveal a wide array of food issues—some shared and some unique—in the older adult community. This thesis is about a range of older adult food experiences and issues in the South, not about explicit, culturally specific foodways. These stories do not function as community or cultural narratives about Taiwanese, Indonesian, Jewish or African American older adult food communities in Chapel Hill as a whole.

It is interesting, though, that the food histories I did collect reflect the food histories of minorities. Myerhoff argues that, “A sense of continuity with the past is vital to all integrated adults, especially for the elderly, for immigrants, and for people whose society has been dispersed and whose original culture all but obliterated” (“Bobbes and Zeydes” 208). Each of my collaborators fits into at least two of these categories. It is worth noting that the food histories I collected do not reflect the experiences of white older adults in Orange County—despite the fact the population of Orange County is 77% white (US Census: Orange County Quick Facts). I did not identify a white collaborator to work with for this study. Part of this may be due to the fact that the demographics of the Seymour Center’s visitors differ greatly from the broader demographics of Orange County. Many minorities use the facility. Another possible explanation may be that the four seniors who worked with me were more willing to participate because they feel invested in the center. Each interviewee is deeply engaged with a variety of programming at the center—not just the lunch program—and it is possible that they viewed this project as an extension of their work.

These food histories detail the surprising, unique, powerful association each individual has with food, and collectively provide a window into a large food community, but I must note that the older adults who participated in this study represent a small percentage of the seniors served by the lunch program at the Seymour Center, and their stories, however deep and diverse, are not totally representative of the group who eats at the center every day. These seniors are not food insecure, but some served by the center are. In a future iteration of this study, I hope to include the voices of marginalized seniors, like those whose only meal comes from the center's lunch program. Their perspective on food may be significantly different than the ones present in this thesis.

METHODS

I began visiting the Seymour Center in May 2014 and started interviews in August. I met with each collaborator at least once before the formal recorded interview to introduce the project, provide a release form and answer questions about the research. I gave each collaborator a copy of questions I would ask prior to the interview, and met with each collaborator in private rooms at the center for the actual interview. The standard questions provided an outline for our conversations, but I always allowed for casual conversation, which often led to richer material.⁴

Getting to free-flowing conversation was a challenge. None of my collaborators had participated in a qualitative research project before, and building the rapport and understanding essential for ethnography took time. Myerhoff wrote, "The study is an artifice and resembles nothing but itself, a collusion of two viewpoints meeting in a middle terrain, created by the artificial circumstances of the foreigner's visit and project" ("A Crack in the Mirror" 325). This felt true for my work. When I began working with my participants, several expected me to measure vitals like heart rate, blood pressure, cholesterol or blood sugar. The center regularly conducts health screenings for visitors, and because the topic of this work is food, the participants originally

⁴ See Appendix for the study's interview questions

expected the study to be medical in focus, much like the center's regular programming. It took time for me to shake a sense of the circumstances as contrived and to arrive at a shared understanding with my collaborators about our conversations. Bakhtin wrote that truth "is born between people collectively searching for the truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (110). Lengthy, thoughtful conversations built rapport with each interviewee and brought us to the 'same page.' I spent much time explaining the ethnographic, qualitative research approach of folklore with each participant. Some conversations were more successful than others. My preconceived notions of what would come of these interviewees also reflected my disciplinary bias. Many of the narratives differed greatly from the nostalgia-laden stories I expected to record.

Two things surprised me about this community: finding participants proved to be more challenging than I anticipated, as was finding time to interview that worked with their schedules. A stereotype exists about elderly people's enthusiasm to talk about their lives in their endless free time (Kaminsky 12). When I first embarked on this project, many supporters said I would have to turn away volunteers. Though sixty to seventy-five older adults access the lunch program every day, it was a struggle to identify willing participants. Relying on my adviser Amanda Holliday, a consultant for the center, the generous support of Isabel Jackson, and ultimately word of mouth among the volunteers, I found participants. To my surprise, several participants bristled at the thought of devoting more than thirty minutes to the study. They had things to do at the center—volunteer, play Ping-Pong, or meet with social workers—and working with me was an interruption. Again, the hesitation to share stories violated notions I had about older adults willingness to talk and their availability.

CHAPTER ONE: FOOD MEMORIES

Life itself has no narrative. It is a serial and multiple; a million things happening at once, and then another million things happening at once, forever and ever. Narrative is one of the ways we apply order to that unimaginable overabundance of information

Bruce Jackson 4.

The Bitter Melon

I would say a bigger part of our life is actually connected to food. Be it through generations or through your personal life. You make that kind of connection. I think it's really important. It's a common thing.

Bitter melon...that is definitely a connection. Those bitter melons are bitter. Most people don't like it. It is an acquired taste. It always reminds me of the time I spent with my father. When I was little that was what my father usually had, especially during the summer. So when I am on vacation and that is the only time I catch my father, he would call me [in] because I already had my meal. He would say, "Accompany me." Sometimes when he was eating he would pick it up, and say, "Try this." I always cringed when he wanted to give me that, but later we kind of picked and talked, and I got the taste of it.

It seems to be normal because you are talking.

That is how I remember.

That was a quality time to me because that is the closest time I had with my father to tell him my life or [hear] whatever he wanted to tell me...just one on one, and you treasure that.

Even as of yesterday, I went to my little garden plot. I just harvested some bitter melon. Immediately my father's image it just kind of popped up...somehow it just stayed there. That bitter melon. But it's not the fruit itself...it's just by looking at it. It somehow evoked the memory. His image. It's just...somehow it's always there.

I would say a bigger part of our life is actually connected to food. Be it through generations or through your personal life. You make that kind of connection. I think it's really important. It's a common thing.

An Ethnopoetic Transcript from Ed

How do narratives about food communicate who you are and where you come from? In *On Longing*, Susan Stewart echoes Jackson's sentiment in the quote above; she argues that people generate narratives about things, and in this case food, to make sense of the world around them. Stewart argues that people generate narratives about objects out of a desire to relate our possessions to broader experiences that transcend time and space. These narratives create continuity and help bridge present realities with our past experiences (Stewart 135). They can help us understand how individuals, "make sense of history, how they remember the past, and what is important to them about the past" (Ferris, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* 11). Narratives of a person's food history can reveal, "social, psychological, and symbolic challenges involved in people's having to make sense of and cope" (Jones 147). It stands to reason that bridging present realities with past experiences is particularly important to older adults as they adjust to aging. This seems to be true for all of my interviewees, but it is particularly noticeable in the stories shared by Ed and Fae, who each migrated to the United States from Taiwan and Indonesia respectively. For Ed and Fae, food memories from childhood bridge their pasts and presents.

FOOD FROM HOME IN A FOREIGN LAND

I first met Ed when he was playing Ping-Pong at the Seymour Center. Isabel Jackson was giving me a tour of the facility and noticed Ed as we descended the stairwell to the ground floor. She immediately guided me towards him and playfully cajoled Ed to step away from his game. Ed dropped his paddle and extended a sweaty hand to greet me. Isabel said Ed would be a great ally for the Asian community. He was eager to participate in the project, and understood the aim of my work immediately. During our initial meeting, he explained that at this point in his life he refuses to substitute healthier versions of Chinese food for the traditionally prepared dishes he knew as a child. He wants to eat food that reminds him of his childhood, and was eager to share stories about that food.

Ed grew up in Taiwan, the youngest boy in a family of ten. His father owned and ran a small grocery store and bakery, and Ed grew up immersed in the family business. He was steeped in a coastal Chinese culture deeply shaped by food rituals. His earliest food memory was of eating forbidden food purchased from street vendors on his daily walks to school, “Sometimes it’s a cup of peanuts, roasted peanuts or chickpeas,” he explained. His family worried about the sanitation of street food, but Ed regularly indulged in these special treats.

Ed immigrated to the US in 1968 for graduate school and has lived here since. Years after immigrating to the US, he encountered chickpeas while eating hummus and suddenly remembered eating this snack as a child on the way to school. Over the years Ed recalls food moments, like the visceral chickpea memory, that carry him back to his life in Taiwan. Food has helped Ed stay connected to his home country, while deeply integrating him in life in the United States.

Several years ago Ed visited an event branded as an exotic seafood festival in Beaufort, North Carolina where he sampled many dishes that were, in fact, not ‘exotic’ to him, such as sea snails. He was amused by the branding of the event and explained, “The so-called strange seafood is actually nothing strange to me.” However, Ed is aware that some of his food preferences seem strange to southerners, and he is proud of this. The boundary between what he considers mainstream white America’s classification of what is edible and what is not often reinforces Ed’s identity as an immigrant, and he often uses reported speech as a narrative strategy to create a more vivid picture of the boundary negotiation that takes place around his food preferences. Ed communicates the judgment he has perceived about his tastes by reporting what others say. You can see it in this anecdote about his first trip to the coast in the US:

Ed: I remember grouper is a prize fish either in Hong Kong or Taiwan. It’s an ugly fish. It’s not really pretty, but the meat is always pricy. The first time I went to the coast, those were the trash fish that sat on the side. You could buy them very cheaply. That is the first thing we would check [for] at the pier—for all the fish not put on display. The other thing was squid because Americans only use squids as bait, so when we would buy the whole case [of squid], they would say, ‘Oh are you going to stay here for the week or a month?’ [I say] ‘No!

We take this, we go home, and we have a feast.’ They say, ‘It’s like rubber. How are you going to eat those?’

Looking at the contextualizing power of reported speech is pertinent in this story (M. Hufford 535).

Ed uses reported speech to frame food as a site of cultural empowerment. He firmly positions himself as an ‘insider’--someone with great knowledge about fish--to the North Carolina fishmonger when he responds, ‘No! We take this, we go home and we have a *feast*.’ Reporting what the local said is a quick and effective way for Ed to communicate the assumptions he made about Ed, and reporting his own response is an equally effective mechanism for conveying how he feels about those assumptions. He is fiercely proud that he can make a feast from food some Americans might find unappetizing.

Eating “defines our race, gender, class and religion” (Ferris, *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* 9), and it is clear that Ed knows this, yet he also sees similarities between his home cuisine and southern food. Ed has lived in the United States for forty-seven years, and believes the eating practices of black rural southerners most resemble the eating practices of the Taiwanese. He explains:

Ed: So culturally—I’m pretty sure in the United States the one closest to that would probably be in the rural areas, or during the slavery system. Those are what the black people—I have observed a lot of [their] eating habits is similar to what we’d practice. Because they eat what you didn’t serve for the master—the organ meat...pig feet—which are quite common. They say, ‘You eat that?’ I say, ‘Sure! You even serve that in restaurants. It depends on how you prepare it.’ I remember one thing is pig ear. You thin slice it, and you actually make a salad. It is crunchy; it is gelatinous. I mean cannot describe it, but with the right seasoning it is so—it is different, it’s the bar food. You used to see the pig ear in bars. It’s usually not beer at the time, most of the time it is hard liquor, but you eat those things ‘crunch, crunch’ and then you drink. That reminds me [of Chinese cuisine]. A lot of those—liver, kidney—all of those things are only [eaten] in rural areas where they don’t want to waste any food. They find a way to make it good. They make it into sausage or whatever. You don’t see it.

In this story, the conversation Ed reports is far less antagonistic, and the overall narrative conveys a sense of partnership or cultural collaboration, and in this interaction, a black southerner is happily surprised that Ed, too, enjoys and knows how to prepare and eat nutritionally important, yet marginalized, foods long disregarded by whites. Standing alone, it could be easy to interpret the

black southerner's 'You eat that' question as judgmental, but Ed's verbal intonation and overall narrative framed this question as a site of pleasant surprise and camaraderie. Ed also quietly implies that Chinese and blacks are more resourceful with food because of a shared history that speaks of resilience and trauma.

Food is also a site of cultural negotiation for Fae, who immigrated to the United States in the late 1980s with her husband, an American soldier she met when he was stationed in Indonesia. I met Fae through Ed. Fae moved from Fayetteville, North Carolina to Orange County several years ago when her two sons began college at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. She attends the Seymour Center for the lunch program, dance classes, language classes, and visits with a social worker. She is a shy, warm person, and is still building confidence as she improves her English language skills.

Fae is ethnically Chinese and was banned from public school in Indonesia after a coup forcibly expelled the Chinese-supported regime in the mid 1960s. She was twelve then, and began helping her mother at home full-time. They prepared food for her siblings, extended relatives, and employees—three meals a day, every day of the week for well over a dozen people. Despite the difficulty of this work and the memories of this painful period of her life, Fae grew to be a skillful Chinese cook.

Fae was not fluent in English when she immigrated, nor was she familiar with American cuisine. This became a point of cultural contention between Fae and her husband after she immigrated, illustrated by the story below:

SD: What other types of meat did you eat regularly? So you mentioned pork.⁵

Fae: Yeah we have pork or chicken or beef, and for the Chinese if the good cook—the best cook can [take] one meat [and] cook [it] for three different courses. So just for the chicken

⁵ The abbreviation SD represent my initials, Sandra Davidson.

[the cook] can take a pot of it to fry, and a pot of it to stir fry, and then the rest maybe go to the soup.

SD: I see. So you learned all of that working with your mom?

Fae: Yeah, but later on when I married my husband see—he doesn't agree with it. So he says, "If you cook chicken, its just chicken. Don't make it for stir fry, or cook another way."

In Chinese culture, a skillful cook is creative with meat preparation; she can stretch meat into three different courses, yet when Fae moved to the United States with her husband, he wanted her to change the way she cooked and ate. Fae's husband described her eating manners as "unladylike." Fae was and still is embarrassed by her lack of education, and the most important skill she brought to the United States—and to her marriage—was cooking. Though she never directly said this, it is likely that her husband's rejection of her cooking was painful. Shortly after immigrating, Fae began taking American cooking classes in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I asked Fae if it was difficult to adjust to her husband's culinary preferences, and she recalled a time she was publically embarrassed by her husband's dislike of Chinese food when she was still living in Indonesia:

SD: So was it stressful when your husband—when you were cooking food for your husband, and he was like this isn't the kind of food that I want to eat?

Fae: Yeah.

SD: I bet it was.

Fae: When—even before we married we were in Indonesia, we ate in the restaurant, so I ordered the food, but he said he just liked [to] have French fries. He ordered French fries in Chinese restaurant!

SD: I'm sorry!

Fae: So even the cook came out to watch (laugh)! [He said] "Who came to [eat] with us—eat Chinese dishes—[and ordered] French fries?"

Here, Fae's narrative reveals how her husband frequently embarrassed her, often using food to shame his wife. His adamant dislike of Fae's native food pointed to a marital relationship fraught with struggle. Fae moved to the United States because her husband wanted to return to his home

country, but her access to education was limited because of the political tumult she had experienced in Indonesia. She could not speak English and was isolated from a supportive community in the United States. Soon after they arrived, she became pregnant and did not learn English until after the birth of her second child.

Ed came to the US under very different circumstances than Fae, and his stories about food memories from his home country and his new life in the United States shows the power of gender, class, and education. He arrived with an undergraduate degree, several years of English language training, and the support and structure provided by a graduate program. He also came with his family's blessing, high expectations, and the promise of a bright future.

Zoe and JR's ethnic and racial heritage also positioned them against predominant, white American foodways, but food was less of a negotiation as they were born in the United States. Unlike Ed and Fae, they did not speak of food as being central to family identity in their households.

Zoe grew up in a Jewish household in the Bronx. Both of her parents worked full-time, so she and her sister learned how to prepare meals for themselves as soon as they could. Her family did not celebrate Jewish holidays in their home—they traveled to relatives for significant religious feasts, and they only kept kosher around her grandparents. She says, "We knew we were Jewish, but we didn't go overboard with it." In *Matzoh Ball Gumbo* Marcie Ferris argues that food plays an important role in Jewish religious ceremonies, but the responsibility of performing that tradition was passed on to extended family because Zoe's parents' first obligation was to economically sustain the family.

It is likely that food was not a daily contested site of cultural boundary negotiation for JR who grew up in a rural African American household in the segregated South. She was raised in Bynum, North Carolina—twenty miles south of Chapel Hill. As a child, she was structurally and socially prevented from entering public and private places where she could have encountered possible differences between black and white food beliefs and practices. She also lived miles from

public eateries. When she moved to Chapel Hill after she got married, she did not frequent its restaurants. She explains,

JR: I went out occasionally. Occasionally. It wasn't something that you did every day because back then I mean—it was just a no-no for black people, you know? I guess you could go, but we didn't go. Now it's totally different. If you've got green money, you can go anywhere. So no I didn't. No we didn't go out often. We ate at home. We cooked at home, we ate at home.

Though they were never hungry, her family was self-sufficient because they had to be. They grew vegetables and raised livestock, and only relied on store purchases for flour, sugar and dried beans. As the youngest in the family, her older siblings and mother prepared food for the family, and she did not learn how to cook until she was married and living outside her childhood home. Food came, but it was not something JR remembers as celebratory. They ate what they did because it was all that they had.

FOOD AND FAMILY: SENTIMENTAL NOSTALGIA

Food memories reveal how my interviewees navigated structural and cultural boundaries, and they also connect my interviewees to their ancestors. Throughout his life, Ed used food to both celebrate his native culture and to explore United States culture. Food memories also profoundly bind him to relationships with now deceased relatives. Many important memories of his mother are tied to food. When he visited home from college in Taiwan, he would accompany his mother on her daily visits to the outdoor food market each morning to purchase fresh produce. Ed would carry the basket while his mother browsed. These trips to the market were social affairs. He explains:

Ed: Because you shop every day they know each other, so they would address you. The vendor would address you...Of course my mom would be very proud to introduce me, "This is my youngest son. He just came back from college or vacation." And they would say, "Oh I heard so much about you!" Every time you carry you are like—you know mom is showing off "my son" right? And I was kind of dutifully carrying this basket. Whatever she purchased they put in there.

He continues:

Ed: It seems like I also came to know each one of them because it's like my mom—I'm going through the same routine with her. This is a huge community—even if its local, but some of those vendors are actually coming from the countryside, but somehow we are in a town more or less like a city center, but then you get to know these people that come into the city, and that strike some kind of friendship. I like that part of closeness of the community. Even though you live in two different environments.

SD: Urban and rural?

Ed: Urban and country or rural.

SD: So that is something that you would notice when you went home to visit your family?

Ed: Yeah and that more or less evoked a memory with my mother. That is the activity. I got to know how she spent time because she is shopping for the day's meal. She also had the other social life. This become enjoyable. Each morning she is going to see her friends more or less.

Ed has traveled the world and loves to visit grocery stores and outdoor markets in foreign countries.

Some market visits take him back to vivid memories of his childhood.

SD: So what was—so there was a town in France that reminded you of this, is that right?

Ed: Yeah when I see the market people talking about, “Try this!” or “Try that!” That kind of friendliness remind me a lot of when I was growing up, and maybe that is why the impression I have when I told you about what I like so much is because it certainly made me feel—its so lively. The whole thing—everybody! That's what a community is supposed to be.

SD: It took you back to that?

Ed: Exactly. Yeah. And with my mother—it seems like that is my routine. I'm kind of looking forward to carry that heavy basket. We're coming back, and its like it's loaded with the memory...friendly...friendship in that basket...you're carrying it. I'm usually walking with my mother from the market back home. We don't do anything, you just kind of stroll like a morning walk. You go to the market, and you talk—and she's happy I can tell because she's so proud to introduce [me], “My son came back to visit me. He staying at home for the summer, and this is going to be an everyday thing.” I think people—and they'd ask me, “When are you coming back?” Sometimes my mom—when I would talk to her—she would say, “So and so is asking about you.”

Ed uses a variety of narrative strategies to communicate the importance of his visits with his mother to the market, and the story he tells is vivid and evocative. It spans decades. He learned about his mother by experiencing her routine, which also affirmed his own identity by reconnecting to his community. Ed's narrative emphasizes the conversational interactions between vendors and

customers, and the frequent pride his mother expressed for her son in those moments. Ed's mother mentioned that vendors asked about him after he returned to school, again reaffirming his deep connection to home. To this day, the connection he experienced in those trips to the market, as well as the market's convivial atmosphere, evoke memories of nostalgia and joy. A young man's intimate experience of shopping for food with his mother shaped his expectations of what a community should be.

In this story the basket is a symbol of friendship, respect, and childhood. It allows Ed to be the good son his mother talked about. His description of the market paints an evocative picture of the significance of that routine and a loving mother. When Ed moved to Mississippi in 1968 for graduate school—never having visited the United States before—he brought a rice cooker with him given by his mother. This item traveled with him as he moved place to place. The rice cooker became a symbol much like the basket, holding his mother's love and the food of his beloved homeland.

Ed was not as close to his father. His father spent most of his time building the family business, and Ed describes him as distant. One of the most powerful memories he has of his father, though, is connected to food. During his childhood, Chinese tradition maintained that women and men eat separately in different shifts. The men ate first, followed by the women. This pattern was disrupted by his father's desire to eat in the second shift—with the women—so he could enjoy his food more slowly. Ed's father began inviting him to join the second shift of dining to eat bitter melon—a Chinese melon that eastern medicine links to digestive health. The transcript at the beginning of this section suggests the important role of the bitter melon in building Ed's relationship to his father. To this day, that melon—which Ed grows in his Chapel Hill garden—evokes the memory of his father and connects him to his father.

Ed devotes much of social life to procuring and eating food with loved ones—like his father and mother did. Ed established a weekly ritual of going out to eat with his daughter, modeled after those one-on-one moments with each of his parents. Each week, Ed took his daughter to the Pizza Inn in Durham, reserving this special time for one another. Ed is amused that they chose Pizza Inn as their meeting place, but he is confident that what matters is taking the time to eat and be together—not the food. His stories about the bitter melon, the basket, and the rice cooker reveal a sentimental nostalgia that connects childhood memories to current food practices.

FOOD AND FAMILY: PRACTICAL NOSTALGIA

Ed was the first participant I met in my research. Our conversations helped me understand how central food would be in conversations with my other collaborators. For the final narrative analysis of this section on stories about food memories, I examine food memories from JR, the African American woman from North Carolina. Her food narratives differ drastically from Ed's stories about food and childhood.

Like Ed, JR's food memories connect her to childhood, but with less sentimentality. JR remembers the small farm where she was raised in the rural Piedmont region of North Carolina. The family lived several miles from the closest general store. Their life was much like those described by UNC sociologist Howard Odum in the 1920s. He spoke of the “subsistence diet of the masses of marginal folk” (qtd. in Ferris, *Edible South* 166). They raised livestock, and canned and preserved vegetables and meats throughout the year, and traded the hog cuts “most white people wanted” like “hams and the shoulder” for flour, dried beans, and sugar—goods they could not grow at home. Her mother made a pan of biscuits every meal, “because it was a big family and bread was very filling.” Though her childhood was filled with iconic southern foods that have attained near mythological status in the South—sweet potato pie, okra, corn, bacon, biscuits, collard greens—food was not a romantic symbol of JR's childhood. Food was for survival. Her mother made

biscuits, because they were filling; her family traded the best cuts of meat because that's what whites wanted, and would buy. Reviewing our interview, this lack of nostalgia surprised me. I asked JR to share special stories about food on several occasions. I see I was seeking a sense of 'longing' in these stories, as evidenced from this excerpt:

SD: So were there special meals for birthdays and for holidays?

JR: Not that I can remember. We had the birthday—happy birthday, and I think that was it. I don't ever remember having a cake when I came up. Christmas time—you got one or two things.

SD: Like what?

JR: Like a doll and fruit. Now we have fruit all the time. We buy what we need when we need it, or what we want when we need it, or what we want when we want it, you know? It wasn't like that when I came up.

JR had already explained that she did not “remember extra money floating around. We always had enough to eat. We were always clean. We were always happy, but as far as having the luxuries that they have now...no.” I had expected JR to have pleasant, rather than solely practical, memories of food. I had fallen into a stereotype about food and African Americans. Many scholars argue that “southern food might be *particularly* meaningful to African Americans because of its association with times of enslavement” (Latshaw 122). Once I really started listening to JR though, I began to understand how her childhood memories of basic food, impoverishment, and hard work inform her present. It was important for JR to communicate that food and money was precious in her childhood, and she is proud of the varied diet she eats today. She can even purchase fruit, a delicacy of her childhood. She is proud of her cooking skills, which include a basic repertoire of simple, southern recipes. She does not deviate from these food patterns because she hates to waste time or money preparing “fancy” recipes from cooking shows and cookbooks. Though self-sufficiency is not a necessity, JR still values the resourcefulness of the African American women cooks in her

family, which reveals a more practical type of nostalgia. Her pride in resourceful, simple, southern cooking is an extension of her childhood relationship to food.

The juxtaposition of Ed's childhood food memories and JR's reveal a range of how food memories shape food practices of older adults. The two individuals come from vastly different worlds, and each had different perspectives on the symbolic importance of food shaped powerfully by childhood. These food 'values' are embodied differently in each collaborator's life in and beyond the Seymour Center, which I explore in the final section.

In the next chapter, I explore narratives of food preparation. Each of my interviewees spoke of food preparation as a source of creative expression, family experience, and identity.

CHAPTER TWO: THE ACT OF MAKING

The act of preparing and serving food has represented different things for each of my interviewees at different points of their lives. Stories about making food reflect each interviewee's position as a "historical subject defined by gender, class" and the time period in which they lived (Sawin 53). The act of making and presenting food one has made "can send signals" (Jones 134). These signals varied at different points in each collaborator's life, as did the importance of making food for each interviewee. I explore the meaning of preparing food to each collaborator in two parts below titled "homemakers" and "creativity."

HOMEMAKERS

JR and Fae, the two women I interviewed with children, filled the traditional role of homemaker and cook for their families, but their journeys to that role differed greatly. A look at each woman's path reveals how immigration status, history, family birth order, and gender shaped each woman's relationship to food and cooking.

The role of homemaker and cook was thrust upon Fae at an early age, and it is a role she has not escaped. For many years food was an oppressive force in Fae's life. She was forced out of public school after the Chinese government was overthrown in Indonesia. Had Fae been born earlier, she may have attained a high school diploma like her siblings, and consequently, had different opportunities. Fae was expected to help her mother prepare three meals a day, seven days a week for their large family. She went to the market every morning, and spent the rest of the day working alongside her mother in the kitchen. After her father died and her siblings moved away, Fae and her mother prepared less of their own food, yet this relief was short-lived. When Fae moved to the

United States with her American husband, she was expected to be a homemaker again, but struggled to adapt her food to her husband's liking. Fae took lessons to learn American cookery, and regularly prepared elaborate meals for her husband's colleagues. She discusses these meals and the exasperation she experienced in the story below:

SD: Was there a time when you moved to the US when you didn't celebrate Chinese Year?

FH: Yeah at first. The first five years, six years I did not.

SD: I imagine that was hard.

FH: Yeah, but the ingredient that is really hard to find and takes time to cook and that is hard, and even if I—and nowadays I don't cook a big meal...my husband used to—he liked to entertain, so I have to cook. Later on I said, "It is too hard for me." At the time when my youngest son [was] two years old, I remember we entertained every week, and [I'd] do entertaining, and my baby is crying and [I'm] holding him, and then cook.

SD: That sounds stressful.

FH: Yeah, and then later on when [my] children [are] getting bigger—it was so stressful. So I did not enjoy the meal [or] enjoy the cooking. After the guests left I just collapsed to sleep...too tired and cannot clean up the table and so on, because at that time I worked in the deli shop. Although I worked part-time, I'd go there from 8:30 until 2 o'clock. They closed at 2 o'clock, but I'd take my boys to school. I'd pick them up. He finished class at 3 o'clock, so I finished my work at 2 o'clock, but he liked to do sports, so he told me to pick him up by 5 o'clock, so I do my errands and do anything, pick him up at 5 o'clock and then go home and cook. And then we'd have to do entertainment. That is too hard.

The story reveals how traumatic entertaining became for Fae. At the time she and her husband were entertaining guests, Fae was her children's primary caregiver; she was still learning English; she was mastering a new culinary repertoire, and she was disconnected from cultural networks that might have supported her transition to life in the United States. Her time and energy were stretched too thin during her early years in the United States, and she eventually reached a breaking point where she refused to host group dinners for her husband. Even now she is hesitant to cook large dinners because of those early experiences.

Rarely are gendered food identities one-dimensional though, perhaps best articulated by Warren Belasco's question, "Is food a tool of female empowerment or enslavement? Agency or

objectification? Pleasure or anguish” (41)? The tension of these dynamics can play out in a single person’s life, much as it did with Fae. Despite the troubled association she has with cooking, hard work, stress, and marital discord, Fae began cooking Chinese food again after she had children. She often prepared an American meal for her husband, and a Chinese meal for her children. Belasco argues, “women have enormous power over children and through their foodwork they may hold families together (42). “Cooking Chinese” empowered Fae to express and transmit her culture. It is understandable that Fae does not romanticize cooking. However, it was important to Fae that her children eat Chinese food, even though cooking two separate meals undoubtedly created twice as much work. Isolated from her native culture, food allowed her to connect her children to their heritage. Fae still cooks Chinese meals for her two college-age sons.

JR grew up in rural North Carolina, the youngest of ten children, and did not learn to cook while growing up. She explains, “I was sort of the laid back one. Even though I was willing, it was just that I didn’t have to do it.” When she married, she slowly, but painfully taught herself to cook, which she did for her husband and daughter throughout her adult life. JR rarely cooks large meals now, except for a weekly Sunday lunch she hosts after church for her daughter’s family. JR’s Sunday lunch is classically southern:

SD: What do you cook normally for Sunday [lunches]?

JR: I used to cook string beans, cabbage—slice the cabbage you know sort of—and then not like slaw either, but they’re cut pretty fine, macaroni and cheese. I usually do the fried chicken with the gravy, or I’ll do the Boston-butt with the gravy, or I’ll do spare ribs. You know I’ll just boil them and put the barbeque sauce on them. So its—and then I make corn bread. I make the Jiffy [cornbread]. I make it up with the corn and the eggs...so that’s what I do every Sunday.

SD: Oh wow.

JR: And then sometimes I cook pinto beans. Everybody likes—sort of likes pinto beans which is a good source of fiber. I don’t eat pinto beans that much.

SD: Do you season it with ham?

JR: I season it with either neck bones—the fresh ones or the pork ones—or the um...the smoked ones—well they are fresh. Fresh neck bones.

JR typically eats the leftovers for the rest of the week, until Saturday when she begins preparing for the Sunday lunch. Every week she makes the same thing, and occasionally reminds her family not to expect experimentation, but they still come. That her daughter's family continues this tradition, despite the consistent menu confirms that JR's staple dishes and company are the heart of this experience. The ritual of making Sunday lunch gives JR an opportunity to be present for her daughter. This ritual calls attention to her family role because it is done every week in a "repetitive, formal, precise, highly stylized fashion" (Myerhoff, "We Don't Wrap Herring" 129).

Providing a consistent, delicious meal every week—one that harkens back to the food she ate as a child—allows JR to assume her rightful role as matriarch of the family.

Both Fae and JR continue to make food for their children, just less frequently than they did as young mothers. The act of preparing food for allows each woman to savor her role as caretaker and mother by both providing culturally significant food and spending quality time with their children and grandchildren.

CREATIVITY

Eating and food preparation is not solely about labor; it is often a "vehicle of self-expression" (Belasco 43). In contrast to Fae and JR's complicated memories of food preparation, Ed and Zoe focus on the joy they find in expressing their personality and creativity through cooking and hosting meals, though each experience this joy in different ways. Zoe, who seldom cooks anymore, experiences that joy by evoking memories of successful meals. Ed, who regularly cooks for himself and his family, experiences this joy through preparing meals for his community.

Zoe once enjoyed hosting and preparing food at her home, as well as the former senior center in Chapel Hill. She frequently describes herself as a creative person. Zoe views hosting meals and cooking food as a creative outlet, much like her hobby of photography. But like other hobbies,

Zoe has less time to cook and host these days. She fondly remembers a time in her life where hosting and preparing food came more easily:

Zoe: I may get back into entertaining again. I don't have the time, and I'm very creative so when I present food it's in a very, very nice way.

SD: How do you mean?

Zoe: Well it's not only what—it could be the simplest of meals, but it's the way it's presented. The way the table is set, where the food is on the plate—because that is my thing. I love to do that. I used to do it at the old [senior] center. I would have a few—every month I would do something different, and people would have to sign up, ten or twelve people would sign up. It was free, okay? It was great because I got a chance to express my creativity.

SD: So what would you do? Give me some examples?

Zoe: Give you an example...it could be bruschetta for instance, okay? Maybe I would have it decorated in such a way that you can't help but want to taste it at least. There could be penne pasta with spinach and broccoli and peas and chicken in there laced with sweet red pepper. Yeah I mean make it edible! Al dente. That's just one simple thing.

SD: So you would host a cooking thing every—

Zoe: I'd always have somebody help me okay. It was so long ago my God that's right. It's been about eight—we're here eight years, so it's been at least ten years since I've done that. I won't do it anymore because it's a lot of work.

SD: Sounds like it.

Zoe: I don't have time for this, but I like to see other people do it. They have enough things going on with food here that they don't really need me.

Hosting and cooking once gave Zoe a sense of pride. She begins her story declaring she may get back into entertaining. Zoe happily reminisces how she made her food irresistible. Sharing stories about entertaining with me, a younger woman, also gave her an opportunity to remember how proud she was of her skills. However, Zoe rarely cooks for herself—let alone others now. On the one hand, Zoe explains that both the labor of cooking and the other aspects of life that keep her busy disincentives cooking, but she also feels the center does not need her help. Zoe is not bitter about this though; she helps in other ways, such as staffing the front desk several days each week. Zoe sees it as practical, consistent with her current relationship to food. Zoe prefers to eat at the

Seymour Center and pick up premade meals from Whole Foods because it is less work and easier to monitor the nutritional quality of her food. After a series of health issues, Zoe changed her diet dramatically over the last year and nutrition now trumps other aspects of eating and dining.

Ed cooks regularly for himself and his wife who is still employed fulltime. He is proud of his cooking skills:

SD: So what is—tell me your food—what is your food life like now?

Ed: My food life—probably [is] basically still Chinese because I can concoct anything just by opening up the refrigerator immediately.

SD: So do you cook for most meals?

Ed: I cook most of the meals because I'm faster, and I only use one wok, not like my wife. She has to have this to cook this and cook that, and then you end up washing all these dishes. For me it's like in the sequence—which one goes first, and then you don't even have to wash the wok.

Food prep has not always meant labor to Ed. He learned to cook by watching his mother, but only began cooking for himself when he left home for college. Since then cooking has become an expression of his creative personality. Ed is well traveled, bilingual and a dual citizen, and as mentioned earlier, he often compares and contrasts different cultural experiences by exploring food customs and culinary traditions. Ed likes to experiment with international flavors in his stir-frys:

Ed: As far as seasoning, I think I came along with a lot of new seasoning [that] I never used before over the years. When I travel more I expand my taste to a different country's food that I [then] also incorporate into my cooking. Like my stir-fried potato...my daughter always says, "So what's today's flavor?" (Laughs) that's what she likes to tell me.

SD: Really?

Ed: Because (laughs) usually it's just—most of the time it's just—well you sauté the onion and then have [it with] some black pepper and salt and soy sauce. That's general. Then later on I have [it with] the celery salt, or sometime I have [it with] Old Bay. Sometimes I try different things.

For Ed, seasoning symbolizes his international background, as well as the playfulness and spice he brings to daily life. He spends most of his days playing Ping-Pong at the center, serving on

organizational boards, and acting as a cultural liaison between the Chinese population and center staff. He is eager to help, share, and open to talk with all. He is proud of his ability to navigate different cultural roles, and equally proud of his creativity as a cook and host.

Narratives of food preparation reveal the varied, context dependent practical and symbolic function of food by showing the ever-changing tension between the labor and creative dimension of food preparation. In the final chapter of this thesis, I further explore the tension between the practical and symbolic importance of food to these four older adults by analyzing stories they share about their peers and food choices.

CHAPTER THREE: FOOD AND COMMUNITY

Food is a lens my interviewees use to assess how peers in and outside of the Seymour Center are adapting to challenges of aging. It “defines people, events, and places and serves as a basis for assessing self and others” (Jones 134). Public eating spaces, like the Seymour Center lunch program, are powerful sites that magnify “distinctions between the private and public.” “Many important social and cultural characteristics emerge and are negotiated with and around these spaces” (Cooley 243-244). This is true for the lunch program at the Seymour Center. Every day sixty to seventy-five older adults from different backgrounds share tables, tea, and conversation. Lunch at the Seymour Center is a living theater where participants enact and observe daily food choices and behaviors. Food is a site of community building, but also a place of judgment as the community considers choices they make about eating and what these choices reflect about character.

FOOD, HEALTH AND PEER JUDGEMENT

Some interviewee narratives about the food choices around them reflect direct judgment of individual behavior, while others reflect judgment of community values. In our earliest conversations, Ed spoke of his friends’ “obsessions” with fad diets, and repeatedly said he would rather have one bite of a favorite dish prepared exactly as he remembers it than to sacrifice quality for calories. One of our meetings happened after a special dinner with several friends. His impressions of the dinner and conversations with his friends were still fresh. Below is an excerpt from the interview:

Ed: Yeah. You know what you’re not supposed to [eat]...well not supposed to—I wouldn’t say that—you should avoid, but I think my principle is that you should live the way you want, but not indulge. I think because at this point the food already made you as you are. A little bit of fat is not going to...actually [at] last night’s party people came to the same

conclusion because some of my friends, at one time they only drink juice, okay? It's terrible because they put everything into the juicer. How much they spend on the juicer or Ninja or whatever some even high end one, its \$700 dollars or whatever—one of the blenders.

So they put everything in it, and say, "Oh its pretty good. Very good. It's very tasty." But eventually no, that's not what you grew up with. So they get tired with it. So when we had the party we ordinarily say, "Just eat less. You have the taste. You're happier." I say, "See you start talking louder and louder. Before you would just say everything...you'd become very reserved." Because you actually try to control yourself not to eat those things, right? I say, "It make you happier. Just eat less." And that's my principal. I know that I'm not supposed to eat this, but that's the part of it. That's the taste of it.

Last night one of the courses we had one was the roast pork—you know the skin is the treasure part of it. It's crunchy. It's the suckling pig, and then you have the skin so crispy, and it has less fat because suckling pig doesn't have the thick layer, and you have the—it's almost like a part of the—the belly meat, so it's really tender and crunchy. So just have one piece! Don't say, "Well I'm not supposed to have that." You're watching it, and you are salivating, and you cannot have it? It's torture. Just have a small piece. Enjoy that taste, right? That sensation will make you happier right because you are already in your 70s, so (laughs) how long you want to live?

SD: (Laughs) Right.

Ed: Miserably? For another 30 years?

In this story, food for Ed is unequivocally a symbol of the quality of life, and it is a filter that allows me, his audience, to view Ed's awareness of mortality. He acknowledges what he should and should not eat at this point in his life, and also observes his friends' unhappy experiences with dramatic diets. He interweaves his food philosophy throughout story, emphasizing, "that's not what you grew up with"...and "it makes you happier" to eat the food you want because not doing so is "torture." He concludes by asking his peers how long do they want to live, "miserably for another thirty years?"

For Ed, food is a site of pleasure and community, which connects you to your past. At his life stage, Ed wants food that reminds him of his childhood, prepared how he traditionally ate it. This is much more important to him than the discourse of healthy diets. Ed argues that, "Food is the common course for a lot of things. You can make a good connection with almost anything...Different people within your family, within a community." This sentiment resonates with

his unspoken, yet clear belief that restrictive diets disconnect eaters from the social, life-enhancing aspects of eating.

Zoe, in contrast, fits the profile of the imagined peer Ed lectures to about food. After a series of health challenges, Zoe sharply changed her diet habits. She has taken advantage of the Seymour Center's programming and resources and has become a health and nutrition advocate. She has taken control of her life and health. She explains:

SD: So for you though it was several life altering health experiences, and then I guess you had—suddenly had to say what can I do to control—

Zoe: What can I do to eat healthy for the rest of what time I have left here, and to get my numbers where they should be—and yet, to eventually be able to eat whatever if I choose to within moderation because that's really what it's about. You have to know your own body. For me I reached that point over a year ago, and it's great.

SD: How'd you get to that point?

Zoe: Just by reading. By reading all these newsletters, all the magazines, and every article I can absorb. Here at the center—it's been a big help to me. Because I volunteer here—everybody has access to the center—but I have early access because I'm here all the time. There is so much information that they bring here. They partner with UNC which is fabulous, so that's how I got to this point...no matter what age you are, you need to listen and read.

SD: Do you think that a lot of the visitors who come to the Senior Center are advocates in that way?

Zoe: No.

SD: Really—how do you feel like they could be better reached by that sort of thing?

Zoe: You have to want to do it. You have to. Because if you don't care, that says it all.

SD: Sure.

Zoe: It's just like some people who are extremely overweight have cause to be aware, and they're not. They don't care, and if they do it doesn't show after a while you get to see it, and you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make them drink. All the information is out there. You have to seek it out. Some people don't want it, and that's it. They're just going to go on doing what they've been doing all these years. I have a friend like that, not in this state, but in another state. It's really pitiful to watch it.

SD: I can imagine.

Zoe: Yeah that's the way it is.

This excerpt is interesting because Zoe expresses several core beliefs. Like Ed, Zoe acknowledges her mortality, yet her health is more important than eating what she likes for the remainder of her life, although she does emphasize moderation. Her turn towards health was made possible by nutrition and medical information provided by the Seymour Center. Zoe pities peers not interested in taking control of their health issues despite having access to resources to help them. She believes these seniors are either in denial or lack personal responsibility for their own health.

Zoe states, "No matter what age you are, you need to listen and read." Her improved health at this phase of her life gives her an interesting vantage point about the power of food choices. This is not uncommon. Patrick Mullen found the older adults in his study "have something to say to all of us," but "much of it is directed to younger generations" (2). Age brings experience and perspective, and older adults need this knowledge to mean something. Sharing lessons and stories that are framed as "belonging to the world to progeny who are heirs to the embodied traditions," not "only to the individual who has lived it," allows older adults to emphatically state that their life experiences still matter (Myerhoff, "Life History" 240).

FOOD AND COMMUNITY VALUES

Many of the interviewees' food narratives reflect values and practices in the senior community in Chapel Hill. For Fae, food choices are tied to community responsibility. She shared a story with me about a Chinese friend from the center who had a debilitating stroke several months ago. She is disturbed, but convinced that he was eating too much Chinese food at restaurants prepared with heavy amounts of oil and salt. He did not have a wife or family member to prepare more health-conscious, homemade Chinese food for him. This has altered her food behavior:

SD: So you mentioned becoming more aware of what's healthy to eat. Has your relationship to food over time changed in other ways?

Fae: Yeah I have one friend, or one senior I take care of. He was very good at Tai Chi. He taught Tai Chi, and he is a musician. He plays music. He plays piano, and he composed music, and he wrote book. He wrote book in English, and he is single and unmarried, and two years ago he got a stroke, and no one finds out after three days. A neighbor noticed he didn't come out for three days, and called the police, and police find him—[he had] a stroke. So he is recovering now...but having a hard time. One of his students said because he'd been lying down for three days [it is] too hard to recover because he was good, and he was skinny...[he] looked good.

But why—what caused him to get the stroke? I noticed when he—I noticed because he went to eat at restaurant—Chinese restaurants every night. He said, he told me that he always eat lots of broccoli and so on with meat, but I said the Chinese—I didn't think the Chinese cook in a very proper way.

When the restaurants stir fry—when they cook—because when I was small one of my—near our area there was a restaurant. I was so small I'd go there everyday and watch how they cooked. Sometimes my mom said, (laughs) “I have a new recipe that I don't know how to cook. You go (laughs).” So I watched the chef. I noticed when the chef cooked, they use one scoop—one scoop is one cup or four ounces [of] the oil. [They put] one cup of oil put in there to stir-fry the vegetables. Look it's so nice, so pretty. That's why my husband said, “See the restaurant makes so good. You not so good.”

But I cannot put one cup of oil to pan fry and eat it. That is not healthy, but the restaurants always do [it]. Sometimes the restaurants they use the oil to stir fry the meat first, and then drain it, and then cook another time, so two types of oil. It tastes good, but it's not good for health. Just like Mr. Frank.

How come he gets a stroke? He looked so skinny, so healthy. He came to exercise everyday. He taught Tai Chi.

SD: So the—well first of all I'm very sorry. That's hard. What you're saying is that there is a big difference between the way that Chinese food is prepared in restaurants both here and in Indonesia?

Fae: Yeah, yeah. Sometimes when I watch the—just like fast food Chinese fast food—sometimes we can stand up and watch them how they prepare, sometimes they scoop at least half cup of oil to fry a little bit of broccoli.

SD: So you're at a point in your life where you see the impact that eating food like that has on people? And you're very aware of that?

Fae: Yeah.

SD: I bet.

Fae: Because Mr. Frank doesn't know how to cook, and he is single, so he told me he goes to eat [at] restaurants every night, so nowadays when I go I don't eat out [at] Chinese restaurants. Even I don't like to go to Chinese buffet because I (laughs) I'm afraid I eat or

consume too much oil, and I can't stop myself because I like this one. They all look good. [I] want to try to eat one piece [of each].

In this narrative, Fae connects her past experiences—observing how chefs in Indonesia restaurants prepare food—to the present. She believes Mr. Frank had a stroke because of his unhealthy choices when dining out, and that Chinese restaurants in the United States prepare unhealthy food like those in Indonesia. She contrasts her Chinese cooking philosophy—a healthy, low-oil style—to those restaurants, and conveys a sense that this is oppositional by reporting what her husband (who in earlier sections you see has problems with her cooking) has to say about Chinese restaurant food compared to hers reporting, “Look it’s so nice, so pretty.’ That’s why my husband said, “See the restaurant makes so good. You not so good.” During our conversations, Fae never directly characterized her husband as difficult, but effectively does so in this story where she makes such a strong argument for her belief in health-conscious Chinese food, and indirectly implies that he is a poor judge of quality Chinese cooking. This is also the longest story she shared with me during our conversations, which further conveys how powerfully concerned she is about this topic.

Fae also clearly indicates an awareness of her own mortality and her companions. She crafts her narrative of Mr. Frank as a cautionary tale, one that has influenced her own food practices. Quietly, Fae believes the Chinese community has failed Mr. Frank. Twice she mentions he was single and had no one to care for him. She goes out of her way to describe him as a talented, generous member of the community.

JR observed that the Chinese seniors at the Seymour Center take far better care of one another regarding food practices than African American and white seniors. JR distributes tickets for the Congregate Lunch Program each day. At 11am, she sits behind a small table outside of the gymnasium and presents tickets on a first-come, first-served basis. She knows every visitor who eats at the lunch program. She has observed the different behaviors of the Asian visitors, referred to as “the Orientals” at the center by staff and visitors including those from Asia. JR describes the Asian

seniors as cooperative, and community oriented, and compares their behavior favorably to that of blacks and whites at the center.

SD: Tell me what the Congregate Lunch Program is like?

JR: Well I really give out the tickets. It is first come first serve. We start at 11. The Orientals are always on time. Sometimes the whites and the blacks get mad. “You ran out of tickets?” Well...first come first serve. You know what can I say? If you want to stick around—if we have food, you’re welcome to it, but I can’t promise you anything. But they are always there to get that ticket. Always. And they always pay. **Much better then we or you pay.**⁶ They always give that dollar. If it’s three of ‘em, it’s three dollars, if it’s two of ‘em, it’s two dollars. I mean that’s just the bottom line, but then they take the ticket, and then they go and do whatever, and then at twelve, they gather back to give me back the ticket, and then they go in the lunchroom.

SD: See it’s funny that in some ways that the Orientals⁷ are the first in line in terms of the type of food that they’re eating is probably so different than whatever they’re ever used to having eaten.

JR: But they eat it. They eat it. And then the thing that is amazing I guess is that you notice that maybe this is the first meal for some of them all day, because they will share bread, milk—all of them bring bags and put it down in the bag. Bread, milk...maybe for the night meal, but I have noticed that, and other people have noticed that they do that.

SD: Wow.

JR: But it seems that everybody knows about who is not the one that can afford it, so they share, very much so.

SD: Very community-communal.

JR: Very much so, much more than **we** do.

SD: Why do you think that is?

JR: Well I think that—personally if I did it, I would get—well do you think I’m poor? Do you think I need that? And they don’t. I think they really know, and they just take it. And they—I guess what I’m trying to say is that they look after each other. I mean it’s sort of a

⁶ I have bolded the sections where JR refers to “we” or “you”; we being blacks, you being whites (me as the white representative) in the first bolded statement; we being whites and blacks in the second bolded statement.

⁷ Here I adopt, uncomfortably, the language senior center visitors and staff use to describe Asian seniors.

close-knit thing. Everybody knows everybody, and so they look after each other. Some of them they don't give it to. The ones that they know need it—they give it to them.

SD: Does everyone else know everyone else within the black and white community here? Do you feel like everyone's familiar with who everyone is here?

JR: They have not a clue. I guess I'm the only one here down there that knows everybody.

This story speaks volumes about JR's complex interactions with the multiethnic community at the Seymour Center. She is cognizant of race and ethnicity and deeply aware of how the Asian seniors care for one another through their food practices. They pay for what they can, save what they do not eat, and share food with those who are in need of extra sustenance, and her observations about Asians echo Fae's belief that her friend's stroke was in part caused by the failure of the community to care for him, including his food habits. Whites and black on the other hand, "have not a clue" about each other's needs, and frequently fail to pay for the meal. JR explains that before the Seymour Center opened in 2007, there were two senior centers in Chapel Hill—the Galleria and the Northside Center. She described them as racially segregated—the Northside center located in a historically black community, which drew a small number of whites:

JR: It was great because the ones that were there [whites], were happy there, and evidently they were of the type that had grown up with black people. It was no different. They sat at the domino table, we sat together and ate, I mean it was just one big happy family, and then when we moved over here—a lot of them didn't come because there was such division.

After the Seymour Center opened, Northside and the Galleria closed, and the two senior populations merged. JR believes some prejudiced whites from the Galleria quit using the center altogether because they did not want to be around blacks; she also believes that some white racism persisted, expressed in fear and dislike of the Asian seniors. JR says some whites will invite her to join their table for lunch, but will not invite Asian seniors. She refuses to eat with anyone who is not inclusive of all races. JR, resigned to the dynamics, characterized her approach to the present racial dynamics of dining at the Seymour Center as, "I could eat with you, or I could eat without you, and

it doesn't bother me. I can eat with you and talk and be sociable, or I can eat by myself and be happy.”

Given JR's historical experience in the segregated South, race looms large in her assessment of the CLP food community. During her lifetime, JR witnessed eating spaces become sites where “various combinations of race, class, ethnicity and gender challenged the ability of white southern urban authorities to define racial identity and maintain social control” (Cooley 243). She is deeply aware of the politics of public eating. JR's narrative reveals the impact that history has on a person's life. Food is still a lens through which JR perceives injustice.

On the other hand, Ed uses lunches at the CLP to build community and break down social barriers. He intentionally sits with a variety of people when he eats at the center. Ed is bilingual, and believes it is important for him to act as a cultural ambassador between the English speaking and non-English speaking seniors. He explains:

It seems like I don't differentiate anyone. I mean at least for me I make that effort. It's that I just don't want you to feel like we are different. Because I can speak English, so you can ask me anything. I don't mind. A lot of time—especially try to take care of those who are not capable of doing certain things, so like for instance, after the meal you're supposed to take the plate away. I will automatically say, “Let me...or would you mind I'll help you take this.” They appreciate it, so next time they become more relaxed. Instead of everyone just eating their own thing. I think you have to reach out.

Again, the powerful connection Ed makes with food and community manifests itself in his actions at the lunch program.

Food is a site of observation and critique in my collaborators' stories about peer food choices. They carefully observe what, where, how and with whom peers—within and beyond the Seymour Center—eat. These behaviors reflect how seniors negotiate challenges associated with aging—illness, the reality of death—and they also are a litmus test for how food communities choose to support each other in the aging process.

CONCLUSION

It was difficult to narrow down which stories to share in this thesis, and there are many issues I would like to address at some point. I could write an entirely different thesis about food programming at the Seymour Center, exploring the tension between the practical function of fulfilling the federal mandate to provide a daily, low-cost lunch and how that lunch is received by a diverse group of older adults with many different wants and expectations of what they want to eat. I could also further explore the multicultural dimension of the lunch program at the Seymour Center. The multicultural population of the Seymour Center points to a southern foodways phenomena Tom Hanchett writes about in “The Salad Bowl City:” the growing number of strip malls with multiethnic restaurants in southern metropolitan areas. Much like the Seymour Center, these strip malls hold “all of these food traditions within a space no longer than a baseball outfielder’s long throw to home plate” (176). Looking at the cultural exchange that takes place in multicultural food spaces can reveal much about urban planning, immigration policy, and the power of food to build community.

For this thesis, though, I have examined how food has shaped the lives of four diverse older adults united solely by their relationship to the lunch program at the Seymour Center. For most of Fae’s life—from Indonesia to Fayetteville, North Carolina—food has meant hard, sometimes oppressive work, yet food also provides Fae a mechanism to perform and share Chinese culture with her children, even if it meant more work. Food is a tool of empowerment and control more than a symbol of Jewish identity for Zoe, who puts more emphasis on healthy eating than keeping Kosher. This resonates with her childhood food experiences. Her parents worked fulltime and all major

Jewish meals and holidays were put on by extended family. Despite being raised in a self-sufficient farm family, JR actually learned to cook after leaving her childhood home to marry. She did so to provide food for her husband and daughter. JR now lives alone and often eats by herself, but she continues to use cooking as a tool to perform a family role. Every Sunday JR's family gathers around her dining room table to eat a handmade meal she prepared. Ed's stories of food, eloquent and laden with nostalgia, reveal how he has used food throughout his life to remain connected to his ancestors and home country and to explore the world.

Food is of deep importance to these older adults. It connects them to formative childhood memories and experiences; it enables them to perform significant familial roles during this stage in their life. It functions as a symbol of how one chooses to age and perceives one's peers in the aging process. Again and again, we see that food is a powerfully expressive language that creates and sustains individual identity and community.

It is remiss, though, to end entirely on a nostalgic note. To survive, we must eat. How we nourish ourselves varies dramatically over a person's life and across a community as evidenced by the different stories from my collaborators. Many of these stories reveal that at various times over the life course, food has only represented something incredibly practical to my collaborators. Procuring and preparing food can be fun, joyous, and relaxing. It can also be a burden and bring forth memories of trauma.

At the beginning of this thesis, I suggest that continuity is particularly important to older adults moving towards the last stage of life. Barbara Myerhoff wrote that "a person can bear almost anything but a sense of meaninglessness and chaos," and for many Americans, "the ambiguity and confusion surrounding the last phases of life...is tantamount to an absence of meanings by which to comprehend its significance." ("Aging and the Aged" 105-107). The last chapter of a person's life can feel chaotic, and confusing. Culture helps us make sense of that chaos because it enables us to

interpret one's self, one's community and the world ("Aging and the Aged" 105). Storytelling and ritual, two tools of culture, empower older adults to share culture and connect disparate life experiences.

Storytelling helps us to make sense of experiences and life events, to craft our being. We share stories to be seen and heard, literally and figuratively. Stories give us self-definition, which is "is tantamount to being what one claims to be" (Myerhoff, *Telling One's Story* 25). They help us and our audiences understand who we are. They validate our humanity because they give us "opportunities for appearing—an indispensable ingredient of being itself—for unless we exist in the eyes of others, we may come to doubt even our own existence" (Myerhoff, *Telling One's Story* 24). Having opportunities for appearing—for mattering in the eyes of one's community—grows more important as older adults—confronted with physical and cognitive disability and changing familial and community roles—become more aware of their own mortality. We can learn much about aging by looking at how those opportunities are utilized—be it through storytelling or by cooking a ritual Sunday lunch.

How one relates to food changes throughout life, but eating is a daily ritual, whether one dines with others or in solitude, prepares food alone or has it prepared by others. Myerhoff argues that, "ritual offers an occasion of personal integration in which one becomes aware that he/she is the same person now that he/she was long ago, despite so much change, in one's body and one's world. It takes up the task of allowing for an experience of continuity" ("Bobbes and Zeydes" 209). Rituals are enactments of self-definition that are "intentional, not spontaneous, rhetorical and didactic, taming the chaos of the world, at once asserting existence and meaning" (Myerhoff, "Life History Among the Elderly" 235). Food behaviors and rituals provide opportunities for the type of reflective continuity that is critical for older adults.

In this thesis I argue that food is a complicated, nuanced site of identity for older adults as well as a powerful locus of family, community, and public support. Though I did not focus on the actual lunch program of the Seymour Center, it is important to note that seniors do not have a role in the daily lunch program meal preparation. However, the Seymour Center does open its kitchen to seniors for special occasions throughout the year, like Chinese New Year. On that day, around 100 Asian seniors gather in the kitchen to prepare a traditional feast. This group of seniors, dispersed throughout the town of Chapel Hill, but united by a common heritage, can come together and perform their culture in a public space. Moments like this reinforce these seniors' sense of individual worth and group identity, but they arise through careful, thoughtful engagement and conversation between seniors and staff at the Seymour Center. I believe it is imperative for caregivers, families and policy makers, who shape the lives of older adults, to include older adults in the choices and conditions that impact their life. Food is one area of many that gives the older adults I interviewed an opportunity to have a say in what their life and spaces feel like.

I am grateful for each collaborator and the time and energy they contributed to this thesis. Their stories have opened my mind to the pivotal relationship between foodways scholarship and aging. Witnessing these collaborators in the multicultural, vibrant environment that is Seymour Center convinces me that younger generations have so much to learn from older adults, and that it is essential to engage older adults in ways that we currently may not. Seniors have witnessed vast changes in technology, politics, and society. Institutions, academics, and professionals who craft spaces, programs, and discourses that affect the lives of older adults should honor older adults by including them in these decisions that have such an impact on their lives and sense of self. Staff at the Seymour Center tries to do this every day, and each meal reveals the power of this transformative process in the lives of older adults.

APPENDIX

PART ONE: CONGREGATE LUNCH PROGRAM (CLP) BACKGROUND

CLPs are nationally mandated, locally administered programs that date back to the first major federal legislation solely for senior citizens: the 1965 Older Americans Act (OAA). The OAA mandated “each state develop a comprehensive and coordinated network that would provide services, opportunities, and protections for older Americans.”

¹ Designed to foster aging with dignity, the OAA aimed to help older adults “maintain health and independence in their homes and to be able to continue to function as a part of their community.”² To supervise enactment of the OAA, the federal government established the Administration on Aging (AoA), which supervised State Units on Aging (SUA)—entities that made state-specific “policy and program decisions in order to create more responsive supportive service systems.”³ The North Carolina Division of Aging and Adult Services (NCDAAS) is the SUA, and it “manages and distributes federal funds” from the OAA.⁴

In 1972, seven years after the establishment of the OAA, Congress authorized the establishment of the Elderly Nutrition Program (ENP) “the largest, longest standing coordinated program of home based preventive nutrition related services to the nation’s elderly population.”⁵ The ENP, a program channeled through the OAA, established and managed Congregate Nutrition Services, which include CLPs, and later in 1978, Home-Delivered Nutrition Services like Meals on Wheels.⁶ A 1973 amendment to the OAA mandated that the all SUAs divide states into geographically bound local Planning and Service Areas (PSAs) with independent Area Agencies on Aging (AAA), offices that would develop community specific plans for aging. AAAs administer

CLPs. There are seventeen AAAs in North Carolina, and the one of interest to my research is the Orange County Department on Aging, which directs the CLPs in Chapel Hill.⁷ Seniors who access CLPs are not required to prove their financial need, and public health researchers speculate that CLPs are “a primary source of support for many older adults who would not receive services under other income-based programs... [those] who may be slightly over the poverty line.”⁸ The seniors who eat at the Seymour Center range from affluent to food insecure, which creates an interesting mix of lunch attendees who regularly dine together.

Before the OAA, only limited social and nutrition services were viable through federal programs.⁹ The ENP is “the nation’s oldest framework for providing community and home-based prevention services to older persons.”¹⁰ It is important to note meals at CLPs must provide nutritional sustenance to vulnerable seniors. AAAs throughout the state independently design CLP meal plans, and nutritional content takes precedent to food quality or desirability:

An appropriate meal may be hot, cold, frozen, dried, canned or liquid, as long as it provides 1/3 of the daily recommended dietary allowances, follows the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, and accommodates the needs and capacity of the individual recipient to open, consume, store, refrigerate, freeze, and/or reheat the meals safely.¹¹

CLP meals can be culturally appropriate meals or cans of Ensure, depending on the AAA. Despite this, recognizing the benefits CLPs provide to seniors beyond the reliable, affordable provision of food, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services encourages CLP coordinators “to do a self-assessment and see how well their services go beyond meals to offer social interaction, mental stimulations, informal support systems and volunteer opportunities.”¹² In other words, programmers are encouraged to examine the social importance of CLPs.

PART TWO: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PUBLIC FOOD PROGRAMMING IN THE SOUTH

Food focused public programming and social services in the South existed long before the OAA. In *The Edible South*, Marcie Cohen Ferris traces the history of food programming in the region back to the Progressive Era. In the decade before the turn of the nineteenth century, researchers in Alabama and Virginia conducted fieldwork that documented the everyday diet of southerners, which later provided “crucial evidence in the investigation of endemic food-related diseases in the South.”¹³ In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt established the national Commission on Country Life to address “food, diet, illiteracy, public health issues, and substandard living conditions in rural America.”¹⁴ County extension agencies aimed to educate rural Americans about diet and public health grew out of the Commission on Country Life. Roosevelt’s efforts coincided with the rise of home economics, a field that originated in the urban Northeast. Women trained in home economics and domestic science often worked for extension agencies. Ferris writes, “Black and white southern women’s clubs were early supporters of home economics and food-related vocational and educational programs in the New South;” the South had many problems, and these groups, “had long recognized women’s pivotal role in reforming home life as mothers and in improving community life.”¹⁵ The extension agencies sent agents into the homes of working class women for home demonstration sessions, where agents explained nutrition, food safety, food preservation and preparation, and also gave tips for how to market home-raised food goods. This programming connected food education to health and economic independence and sustainability needed in impoverished southern communities.”¹⁶

It is worth noting that these programs provided unique, arguably unprecedented, employment and educational opportunities for black and white women in the South. Not only did these programs provide reputable, state ordained employment for women, but they also empowered white and black women and girls to experiment with entrepreneurship in segregated canning clubs,

such as the tomato clubs Elizabeth Englehardt discusses in *Canning Tomatoes, Growing “Better and More Perfect Women”*: *The Girls’ Tomato Club Movement*.¹⁷

Scholars also grew interested sociological implications present in the relationship between food, culture and nutrition in the South. Pellagra and rickets, two diseases caused by inadequate nutrition, and general hunger wreaked havoc on impoverished southern communities in the early twentieth century. Howard Odum, founder of UNC Chapel Hill’s prestigious sociology department, “connected the substandard diet of the ‘masses’ to the South’s problems in health, politics, race relations, and leadership,” and tied these diseases to a larger food system issue in the south—the dependency on staple-crop agriculture, “which impoverished thousands of white and black southerners.”¹⁸ Poor southerners who worked the land as tenant farmers and sharecroppers disproportionately suffered without access to nutritionally diverse diet. These communities’ diet and health discrepancies symbolized larger issues between the haves and have-nots in the post Civil War South, thus laying theoretical groundwork for present food scholars whose work hinges on the notion that food practices—micro and macro—communicate much about society’s values.

Federal and regional food programming has been a part of southern society for well over a century, and it is useful to examine the history behind different programs and the attempts to address specific sociological issues. Socioeconomic and racial disparities still exist in the modern South, and remain problematic in food-related public health issues, including the group I work with at the congregate lunch program in Chapel Hill. Need for these services are growing. In a 2012 pamphlet, the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services outlined demographic food realities of older adults in the state: by 2025, 16,000 seniors will wait for home and community based services, and 66% of those seniors will wait for in-home aide or home delivered meals, while a significant percentage of the remaining seniors will acquire food from publically funded congregate lunch programs (2012).¹⁹

PART THREE: MAY 2014 SEYMOUR CENTER LUNCH PROGRAM MENU



May 2014



Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
				<i>1 Cranberry Glazed Pork Roast, Yam Patties, Broccoli w/cheese, Strawberries/Pound Cake, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>2 Lemon Pepper Chicken w/gravy, Cheesy Spinach, Corn O'Brien, Fruit Trifle, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>4</i>	<i>5 Salisbury Steak, Mashed Potatoes, Gravy, Broccoli & Cauliflower w/cheese, Birthday cake, Milk, Roll</i>	<i>6 Spaghetti Noodles, Italian Meat Sauce, Tossed Salad w/ dressing, Fresh Fruit, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>7 Honey Glazed Turkey, Potato Fingers, Confetti Coleslaw, Sliced Peaches/Chocolate Chip Cookie, Milk, Roll</i>	<i>8 BBQ Beef Platter, Baked Beans, Zucchini Casserole, Fruit Cobbler, Cornbread, Milk</i>	<i>9 Maple Glazed Pork Chop, Black Eye Peas, Seasoned Green Beans, P.B. Cookie, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>11</i>	<i>12 Dixie Chicken, Zucchini Casserole, Succotash, Fresh Fruit, Cornbread, Milk</i>	<i>13 Fiesta Pork Chop, Parsley Rice, Green Beans, Poke Cake, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>14 Beefy King Casserole, Noodles Jefferson, Vegetable Medley, Sliced Peaches, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>15 Spinach, Mushroom, & Cheese Lasagna, Caesar Salad w/ dressing, Fresh Fruit, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>16 Turkey in Herb Sauce, Rice Pilaf, Broccoli, Pineapple Trifle, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>17</i>
<i>18</i>	<i>19 Tuna Noodle Casserole, Caesar Salad w/ dressing, Hawaiian Fruit Cup, Cake w/ frosting, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>20 Chicken Roasted, Bake Potato, Cauliflower & Peas, Fruit Cobbler, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>21 Italian Style Pork Chop, Pinto Beans, Sweet & Sour Cabbage, Berry Cup, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>22 Pot Roast Beef w/ Potatoes & Carrots, Pineapple & Strawberries, Rice Crunchie Treat, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>23 BBQ Chicken, Macaroni & Cheese, Calico Coleslaw, Fruit Crisp, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>24</i>
<i>25</i>	<i>26 CENTER CLOSED HOLIDAY</i>	<i>27 Beef Tips w/ mushrooms, Rice, Broccoli Cuts, Tropical Fruit Cup, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>28 Crispy Potato Chicken, Black Beans, Confetti Coleslaw, Fruit Cobbler, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>29 Cheddar Bake Fish, Bake Potato Fingers, Greens, Chilled Pears/ Cake w/frosting, Milk, Roll.</i>	<i>30 Honey Glazed Turkey, Whipped Sweet Potatoes, Spinach, Fresh Fruit, Gingersnaps, Roll, Milk</i>	<i>31</i>

PART FOUR: STUDY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Guiding Questions:

What are these seniors' food memories?

How do food memories shape their current food realities and food communities?

Does the symbolic significance of food in their lives differ across living circumstances and socioeconomic backgrounds?

How do these dining experiences shape daily life?

Questions:

- What is your name?
- Where and when were you born?
- What are some of your earliest memories of food?
- What were/are your favorite things to eat?
- What were/are your least favorite things to eat? Were there foods that your family or friends ate that you would not eat?

- Did your family eat with each other regularly? Did your family have any diet restrictions for health or religious reasons?
- What did you eat on important events (birthdays, holidays)? Who prepared the food? How was the table set? Who came to these meals?
- Do you like to cook? If so, when and how did you learn how to cook? What were the first things you learned to cook? Do you still cook?
- Did you or your family ever grow your own food? Do you now?
- Did you dine at restaurants much as a child? Young adult? Adult? Now?
- Are there things you once ate, that you no longer have access to?
- Are/were there things you wish you could try, but weren't able to over the course of your life?
- Who do you eat with most regularly (if anyone) and how has that changed over your life?
- When did you first start coming to the lunch program at the Orange County Senior Center/how long have you been eating here?
- How frequently do you eat here? Describe the first times you came to eat here.
- Do you always eat with the same people? Do you use other parts of the senior center's facilities?
- Are you able to eat culturally significant/relevant food here?
- What are your fondest memories of food?
- How has your relationship to food—what you eat, how you eat it, who you eat it with, etc. changed over time?
- How does food—what you eat, how you eat it, who you eat it with, etc. shape your daily life and quality of life?
- How could the CLP food programming improve?

END NOTES

¹Barbara E. Millen, James C. Ohls, Michael Ponza, and Audrey C. McCool. 2002. The elderly nutrition program: An effective national framework for preventive nutrition interventions. *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* 102 (2) (2): 234-40: 234

² Ibid., 234

³ Ibid., 234

⁴ Triange J Area Agency on Aging. 2014. Available from <http://www.tjaaa.org/>.

⁵ Millen, Ohls, Ponza and McCool, *The Elderly Nutrition Program*, 234

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⁹ Ibid., 348

¹⁰ Millen, Ohls, Ponza and McCool, *The Elderly Nutrition Program*, 234

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¹² Ibid., 5

¹³ Ferris, Marcie Cohen, author. *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region*, 124

¹⁴ Ibid., 109

¹⁵ Ibid., 111

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¹⁷ Engelhardt, Elizabeth. "Canning Tomatoes, Growing "Better and More Perfect Women": The Girls' Tomato Club Movement."

¹⁸ Ferris, Marcie Cohen, author. *The Edible South: The Power of Food and the Making of an American Region*, 168

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