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What's Good: Sharing Food and Meaning-Making Among Commensals

Abstract

To explore how systems of meaning are formed and reformed over an individual's lifetime in the context of food, meals, and commensality, this research applies a critical phenomenological lens to food-centered life histories centered on the life experiences of childhood, adulthood and the diffusion of food knowledge within a food centric community between individuals within age cohorts and across generations. Through reflective interviewing community members within Denver metropolitan area anti-hunger organization, this research is able to provide insight into several secondary questions, including: Is childhood a formative space for the cementation of these systems of meaning and value and do they persist into adulthood? How are commensal relationships experienced between commensals within a food centric community? Twenty food centric interviews are utilized to draw out an understanding that while childhood is a locus for individual meaning creation, the 'sturdiness' of these relationships of meaning over time is observed to be linked closely to the memories surrounding food as a practice rather than a rhetorical process of indoctrination. Change in adulthood appears commonly associated to changing commensal roles such as those of parent, caregiver, spouse; or shifts in health, economic stability, or social contexts. Diffusion of food knowledge between commensals is seen to occur based on two key factors, opportunity and desirability as defined by each individual.

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What's Good:
Sharing Food and Meaning-Making Among
Commensals

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Presented to
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In Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements of the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Lucor Jordan
June 2023
Advisor: Alejandro Cerón

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ABSTRACT

To explore how systems of meaning are formed and reformed over an individual's lifetime in the context of food, meals, and commensality, this research applies a critical phenomenological lens to food-centered life histories centered on the life experiences of childhood, adulthood and the diffusion of food knowledge within a food centric community between individuals within age cohorts and across generations. Through reflective interviewing community members within Denver metropolitan area anti-hunger organization, this research is able to provide insight into several secondary questions, including: Is childhood a formative space for the cementation of these systems of meaning and value and do they persist into adulthood? How are commensal relationships experienced between commensals within a food centric community? Twenty food centric interviews are utilized to draw out an understanding that while childhood is a locus for individual meaning creation, the 'sturdiness' of these relationships of meaning over time is observed to be linked closely to the memories surrounding food as a practice rather than a rhetorical process of indoctrination. Change in adulthood appears commonly associated to changing commensal roles such as those of parent, caregiver, spouse; or shifts in health, economic stability, or social contexts. Diffusion of food knowledge between commensals is seen to occur based on two key factors, opportunity and desirability as defined by each individual.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Commensality: Commensality is most generally the concept of eating together, but more broadly, it includes the phenomenon that occur when people come together to eat or share food.

Commensal: Commensals are individuals who participate in food-related activities together; this includes those who are part of regular and consistent food-sharing, as well as those who occupy mostly anonymous food and drinking spaces such as cafeterias, bars, restaurants or work-place break rooms.

Critical Consciousness: Critical consciousness results when individuals share a level of awareness of the circumstances—social, political, and cultural—that have shaped their present and history. In Paolo Freire’s use of the word, it was an essential step toward liberation from oppression.

Food-centric community: A Food-centric community is one that has come together around the primary purpose of accessing, sharing, or consuming food; though, their collective activities need not be limited by food related activities. For this research, a food centric community will also hold the value of voluntary participation.

Foodscape: Foodscape refers to the physical locations which are associated with your experiences with food; this can mean where you access food, where your food is prepared, where you might eat it, or places that are anchored in other ways to your literal or conceptual relationship to your food.

Food-system: Food systems are the aggregate of producers, distributors, processors, and retailers that terminate at the individual consumer's consumption of food.

TFAP: TFAP stands for Temporary Food Assistance Program and is the basis for the federal emergency hunger relief program. These foods typically originate from agricultural surplus that the federal government purchases to divert goods from the market and keep prices consistent.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

You don't have to be a professional food critic to be able to sit down to a plate of food and immediately offer your opinion; is it good? This research is primarily focused on the process of meaning-making and judgements of value around food; with the secondary focus of exploring the phenomenon of change within these established systems of meaning and judgements of value. It is situated within conversations grounded in the exploration of meal 'types' through the study of meal structures using the everyday meals as the key for decoding its variants (Douglas 2018); remembering through food (Sutton 2001); and food as a primary actant in the course of human history (Mintz 1986).

This research attempts to build on Douglas's strategy to decode the meaning of a meal in the context of other meals and apply it to answer the questions of how are these systems of meaning around food, meals and commensality formed and reformed over the course of an individual's life? Is childhood indeed a period which can be attributed as having a formative role in the formation of these systems of meaning and value?

Furthermore, if there is either change or stability of these systems, can an individual's critical reflection upon meals as a practice give insight into the criteria associated with stability or the tendency towards change?

Applying Sutton's exploration into the deeply social process of food's ability to serve as a mnemonic trigger, this research follows the exploration of an individual's personal journey with food as it's reflected within their own familial, social, and cultural experience and shifts the focus to a collectively experienced commensal space. This space is the food-centric community of Metro Caring, a Denver metropolitan area anti-hunger organization at which everyday hundreds of individuals come together to curate a free-food market, access the free food market, or both. Beyond the curation and shopping of the market, nutrition education is conducted in formal cooking classes, nutrition games or samples, and when informal meals are shared, snacks are snacked upon, and all-day long food is a conversational thread that supersedes all other topics.

While conducting my field work at Metro Caring, I collected 20 targeted food-centered life- history interviews from individuals in the following overlapping categories: volunteers, staff, and shoppers of the market. The semi-structured interview guide focused on: 1) childhood as a time of initial introduction to the constructs of good food, bad food, healthy food, and unhealthy food; 2) personal experiences with food contextualized by generational foodways as represented by known parental and grandparental experiences with food; 3) how characteristics of their experience with and around food might have been affected by life-stage events following childhood; 4) the experience of participating in a food-centric community space; 5) how have these experiences potentially impacted contemporary practice and systems of value around food; 6) possible cross- generational transmission of practices of systems of value

resulting from experiences resulting from participating in a food-centric community space.

While the sample was extremely heterogeneous, all interviewees had in common that they lived daily within the context of our modern food-system in Denver and surrounding communities. For many, Denver is quite far from where they grew up and reflecting back to their grandparent's generation, the synthesis of their relationships with food and people stretches collectively across 7 countries and nearly 130 years bringing all of that into the community of Metro Caring. Issues of migration, immigration, urbanization, two world wars, and the birth of modern food science can be considered themes in the backdrop of these individual culinary life-histories.

One of the first questions can certainly be whether such a study among commensals serves more than just as an outlet for anthropological frivolity or curiosity? To this I respond that why people eat what they eat and under what conditions they may be willing to change has and continues to be an important question for public health professionals, social scientists, and parents. This desire to understand the mechanisms of food choice are often also quite political, in the United States the food reformer movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries were projects of forced acculturation levered through a food-science, class based social division, and puritanical moralities associating character and good citizenship with food choice (Blitekoff 2013). This socially and politically charged food debate has continued and continues to carry deep consequences for public health and for the dignity and survivance of cultural groups singled out as Others.

The city of Denver for example, is concerned about the looming public health costs of a broken and inequitable food-system and is making particular steps to dismantle the complex structures that have maintained food inequity. From the stand-point of the department of Health and the Environment, the problem is more than trying to build an equitable and resilient local food- system; while not simple, this is far easier to do than it is to influence “lasting healthful changes to an individual’s default food choices” (Denver Department of Health and the Environment 2014) within a foodscape complicated with high sugar, high salt, high fat, and low nutrient options. The city found that accessibility of healthful food is only one piece of the equation, the other is the question of how—or if—it is possible to facilitate change of the default choices that individuals make for themselves and their families.

From my own experience drawn from nearly 2-decades in the grocery industry, our foodscape is not a culturally neutral construct, the foods that are either present or absent reflect the tastes of a cultural majority. Looking past the ability to access food that reflects the nutritional needs of your body to the privilege of accessing foods that let you practice your social, cultural, and religious identity is not uniformly felt across our city. It is for all these reasons that I contend that this research is not only relevant socially and academically but is also situated firmly within the framework of applied anthropology.

While this research steers clear of directing culture change, or offering recommendations for designing a process for making these changes in how individuals navigate their foodscape, as an applied project, it uses the discourse around change

within food practices as a central tool for program evaluation without compromising its desire to deepen the discourse in the discipline around food. I hope that this infusion of attention to deep consideration of the experiences of individual eaters will lead to future contributions to the development of informed policy and practice which will help to facilitate positive eating habits while emphasizing agency, dignified food access, and food security—and on how participation in *a food-centric community* might be seen as a locus for catalysts of change. I describe a food-centric community as a space where, through voluntary cooperation, individuals work to ensure or increase access to food, share knowledge, lore, and stories about food, and possibly adopt a shared culture that sets expectations on interpersonal relationships and relationships with food. Before proceeding, I would like to introduce the organization which hosted me for my field work, Metro Caring.

CHAPTER TWO: BACKGROUND

2.1.1 A Visit to Metro Caring

Metro Caring sits between Downtown, Colfax, Five Points, and a large hospital district. Metro Caring is one of several organizations in the area providing services to Denver's elders, unhoused and housing insecure, and food insecure community members; however increasingly it is surrounded by high end developments. On the south side of the structure is a large green house that stretches nearly the entire length of the building, and a fairly large parking lot directly adjacent to the building; just east of the green house is the volunteer entrance. On the West side of the building there is a ramp which leads from the parking lot to the guest exit from the market, and also one of the two guest entrances that lead to the welcome desk. On the other side of the sidewalk that travels along the west side of the building is a pair of small garden plots with vegetables growing, and a number of sites for locking bikes.

On the North side of the building is the other guest entrance at the top of a short flight of stairs. On the East side of the building adjacent to the alley is the semi- truck docking bay, and directly across the alley is a construction site where developers are building a luxury high-rise apartment complex.

Within a block of Metro Caring there are bus stops serving the four cardinal directions and linking riders with access to connecting routes which will take them

anywhere that RTD services. Directly northeast a couple of blocks there is a large senior housing complex, a community garden, and Metro Caring's hydroponic container farm where butter-lettuce is being raised by their master gardener and with the aid of two high school interns; this lettuce is a regular part of the market, providing an exciting addition to their produce displays. Taken directly from my field notes is a reflection of my first shift at Metro Caring and serves to offer a small window into the experience of being there:

My first shift as a volunteer in Metro Caring was back in the warehouse. Immediately after Gathering, all of the food access volunteers—most of us first-timers—gathered again for a short orientation. A staff member walked us through warehouse safety procedures, food- safety/quality standards. “We will let you know when we’ll be bringing product in on pallets through these double doors so during those times we want everyone to stay safely out of the way,” “also when you are sorting, never put any boxes or crates of food directly on the floor—and if you see any product that you wouldn’t personally buy at the super market, we won’t want to put it out for our shoppers.” I, and nearly a dozen other volunteers busied ourselves—some of us clearly new to the team and perpetually finding ourselves standing where someone else was walking or selecting the wrong type of collapsible crate from several stacks of nearly identical looking black plastic crates. The warehouse reminded me of any grocery back room that I’d been in over almost 20 years in the industry—though, honestly, slightly tidier and more well-kept than is usual for a lot of the back rooms I’d seen. Despite feeling like the new guy, it felt comfortable. Like most grocery

backrooms, we had the large double doors that led to receiving, where pallet after pallet would be wheeled in on a pallet-jack to designated pallet drop locations where our team would begin to break the delivery apart and put the refrigerated items in the walk-in cooler, the produce in the backstock staging area near the entrance to the full service market, and the dry grocery goods in designated backstock areas where the team who stocked the market could find exactly what they needed to keep the shelves full and appealing. Also like any other warehouse I'd worked in, we had an old boombox which pumped out either classic rock, reggae or country tunes which was usually drowned out by laughter, loud conversation, and the incessant warning honks of the electric pallet-jack. One of the regular volunteers, a retired individual who was part of a program that linked seniors to volunteer opportunities and provided a stipend for hours worked, was a natural leader and was great at keeping us on point and providing direction for anyone who seemed at loose ends or calling attention to anyone who needed a hand lifting or finding something. The deliveries also made me feel at home, since a large amount of what Metro Caring receives comes directly from nearby grocery stores. Aside from sorting product and putting it away, our other important job was quality control. There are two rules that we had to follow: 1) if you wouldn't buy it, it doesn't belong on the shelf; 2) if there are more than 12 grams of added sugar it also doesn't belong in the Market. Having experienced both sides of different food pantries in the past many things were just not the same in Metro Caring. It was no accident that everything felt so much like being at work in a grocery store.

The attention to food safety, quality, and the vocabulary all were taken directly from the grocery industry. It never felt like being in a food pantry where you were presented with the iconic assemblage of dented cans, old pastry, and government commodity foods pre-portioned into boxes; or where you were allowed to rummage through bins or tables scattered with careless piles.

Part of Metro Caring's commitment to service is to create an experience that destigmatizes food insecurity and places a priority upon dignity, equity, and respect. The market is the centerpiece of this, in that if you walk the two short aisles, everything about the execution centers on the guest's experience. Bountiful well-organized shelves, labels turned out ('faced' as they say in the industry), a long full produce case, full-service meat counter, a floral section, back filled frozen and dairy sections, and carryout assistance. Often, a small demo station provides samples of featured items, and there is abundant staff on hand to provide suggestions of outstanding produce items and exciting new items, as well as being ready to check the backstock for items that the guest can't find on the shelves. Now let us explore more deeply the experience of being at Metro Caring.

Shopping the Market

At the time of my research, a typical visit to Metro Caring by one of their shoppers would begin with scheduling an appointment for a shopping trip. Each individual is eligible for a single shopping trip each month for roughly one week's worth of groceries, or whatever they can fit into two large boxes and any bags that they have with them. However, there are opportunities to access "bonus" appointments through participating in educational programs such as cooking classes or financial planning courses. There are

services which do not require an appointment such as requesting an emergency food box, bus passes, and ID vouchers. Emergency food boxes are prepared at the beginning of each day so that they are ready for guests without requiring an extensive wait. Two types of food boxes are prepared, and the guest can specify which type meets their needs, one includes items which require either refrigeration, cooking, or other preparation; the other type is one that is assembled for individuals without access to any kitchen facilities or refrigeration.

On the first floor of Metro Caring, entering from one of the main entrances, you will face the welcome desk. From this point a set of stairs is visible to the right and an elevator to the left. Between the elevator and the desk is the entry point to the waiting room, however there is a narrow passage between the desk and the waiting room that leads to the market. From this vantage point the market looks quite small, there are two doors on the right-hand side of the market on either side of two large doored refrigeration cases. Directly opposite this is a row of shelves with The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) commodities, TEFAP has to be stocked separately in accordance with federal regulations. Bags of dried beans, peas, lentils, and rice; canned vegetables; and dried fruits are the backbone of government assistance for individuals and families experiencing food insecurity. Along that same wall the next thing shoppers encounter is a long produce display, which while unrefrigerated and without misting systems, it creates a very inviting presentation for what is often a wide variety of both common and uncommon fruits and vegetables. On the far side of the market is a refrigerated meat counter and display, and in the center of the market are double sided sets of shelves.

Often on the very front of this central shelving unit is a small set of shelves stocked with gluten free options that is immediately visible. After checking in for a scheduled appointment, a guest will go to the waiting area. There is a children's play area filled with food and nutrition related play items in the farthest northwest corner of the room in the space directly behind the elevator. There are a couple of small round tables adjacent to the play area. All of the chairs in the waiting room are laid out in several "C" shapes, this creates ample seating while not only providing more space to maneuver in and out of the seats for individuals with walkers or luggage than there would be with narrow rows; a side effect of this layout is a sense of shared space in the center.

Very often people do sit and simply wait quietly, but sometimes two or more talkative people will turn these open areas into a space for conversation with new acquaintances. More than once the initiator of these conversations was a particularly gregarious volunteer who would take breaks in the waiting room and strike up conversation. Often there are also other partner organizations providing voter registration, free health checks, and free tax preparation services. All the way back against the wall opposite the play area is a counter which has a coffee pot, telephone, bulletin board, drinking fountain, nutrition education table and a vertical display of flyers.

The volunteers who are stationed at the nutrition education table are trained to build the conversations around the knowledge, expertise and curiosity of the guest rather than taking a top-down hierarchical approach to nutrition education intervention. Typically, there are a variety of interactive components of their display table. Fake rubbery, but extremely realistic food draws the attention of children and adults and are used as a

hands-on teaching aid to explore sugar, fat, protein, and fiber. Either behind the “game” or tucked away under a cart are assorted snacks and other prizes to be shared with individuals who participate. The volunteers who are stationed at the nutrition education table are trained to build the conversations around the knowledge, expertise and curiosity of the guest rather than taking a top-down hierarchical approach to nutrition education intervention. Typically, there are a variety of interactive components of their display table. Fake rubbery, but extremely realistic food draws the attention of children and adults and are used as a hands-on teaching aid to explore sugar, fat, protein, and fiber. Either behind the “game” or tucked away under a cart are assorted snacks and other prizes to be shared with individuals who participate. The educators generally operate in pairs. While one person engages people to play the game, the other prepares a simple but creative snack using food from the market. As much as possible the actual preparation occurs in the waiting room where guests can watch and ask questions. Due to fire code requirements the cooking is limited to a toaster oven and a microwave, so frequently entirely raw or predominantly raw dishes are put together, smoothies appear to be a popular summertime option.

The food is a conversation starter, but topics regularly move past food and nutrition to life, the politics of food, and philosophy. A hallway continues on the east side of the room to the right of the drinking fountain leading past restrooms, a lactation room, and a small meeting room all along the left. While guests typically do not go past the restrooms and lactation room, turning right, there is a hallway which leads past a set of stairs, laundry room, restrooms, storage and into the warehouse. Along the north side of

the long rectangular waiting room is a row of large windows which make the room feel very open and provide plenty of natural light. Directly across from the windows there are six small offices with opaque glass sliding doors where the community navigators meet with each guest one at a time. Meeting with the community navigator is a requirement prior to shopping in the market. The navigator provides a resource as a volunteer expert on available services which they can refer the guest to and aid in making appointments and understanding processes and requirements for securing assistance. The navigators are able to assist in understanding the process for accessing state and federal relief and assistance programs such as SNAP, AFDC, WIC, LEAP, a variety of housing assistance programs, and many other services. Advice from the navigator comes through a discussion of each individual's situation, needs, and priorities, with the goal of addressing the root causes of hunger and leading to breaking the cycle of hunger or housing insecurity.

It is important to note that during the period of my initial contact with Metro Caring as a volunteer, there was a long period in which federal employees were out of work as politicians resisted approving a federal budget. During these months, Metro Caring saw a very significant spike in need for their services, and even began to offer additional appointments and maintain extended hours. This serves to highlight how tenuous the separation between prosperity and crisis is for Colorado families.

After navigation, each guest enters the Market through the narrow walkway next to the Welcome Desk and is given a cart. A shopping trip implies full access to the take-as-you-need free grocery market. Ideally each shopper is able to get one week's supply of fresh produce, meat— which is the only item rationed in the market, dairy, eggs, bread, and shelf stable staples such as grains, beans, canned goods and other dry goods. While the variety in the Market varies from day to day, it often reflects the options available at upscale natural foods markets in the area. Contrary to typical food assistance pantries, Metro Caring places a high priority upon the experience of shopping the market. At all times there is a large team of volunteers maintaining the shelves, ensuring that even during the busiest times, not only is everything kept full, but also neat, organized and appealing. Volunteers provide customer service exactly as would be expected in a small neighborhood market, constantly disappearing into the back to look for particular items which the guest can't find on the shelves, providing instructions on preparation of unfamiliar produce items, providing fresh flowers, and friendly small talk. When staffing allows, a demo station will be set up in the market, typically highlighting fresh seasonal produce which is in the market in great quantity.

Following a full shop, the carts are weighed, logged, and groceries are transferred to a large hand cart which volunteers use to wheel out and load into the guest's vehicle, to a staging area where guests can load their own handcarts, wheeled luggage, strollers, backpacks, or stacked neatly while they await a ride from friends, family, or an uber. Through every stage of the visit or subsequent wait, guests have full access to fresh hot

coffee, a telephone, a drinking fountain with a water bottle filling station, well-kept restrooms and the private quiet lactation room.

Many guests follow the above series of experiences; however, it is not at all uncommon for guests to move fluidly between the front of house experience of being a shopper, and the back of house experience of volunteering. It was regularly shared with pride that nearly half of the volunteer community is made up of community members who also make use of Metro Caring's market. While this research did not explore the demographic breakdown of the entire community, I can state that of the 17 volunteers I interviewed, only two were not also utilizing the Market. This means that for many, while a shopping visit might look similar to the above description, a *typical* visit actually begins by going in the volunteer entrance.

Entering as a Volunteer

As touched on in the excerpt from my field notes earlier based on my own experience as a volunteer, the volunteer entrance brings you in through the back, directly into the receiving area and then into the warehouse. On the north side of the bay there is a small narrow office with a single computer and then a dock with an elevator platform large enough to accommodate full pallets being unloaded from a semi. On the south side of the dock is a large scale built into the floor for weighing pallets and boxes of donations and a tall metal desk with a series of clipboards for logging food that comes in or goes out.

A double door opens to the west into the warehouse, a key fixture of the warehouse is a small boombox which provides a steady stream of music from various popular radio stations. The majority of the work in the warehouse occurs concentrated around a pair of sorting tables with a supply of collapsible crates stored underneath. While laughter is common to every area of Metro Caring, no area enjoys the consistent unrestrained bursts of laughter that take place in the warehouse around the sorting tables. Three pallets of donations can be “dropped” adjacent to the sorting tables without it being in the way of the O-shaped throughway which moves through the middle of the warehouse storage shelves. The shelving is designed to permit full pallet stacks of “dry good” backstock to be stored in neat rows above five-foot pallet stacks tucked beneath the shelving on which additional pallets of backstock are placed with the aid of an electric forklift. Dry goods are all those packaged items that do not need refrigeration such as cans, bottles/jars, boxes, and bags.

Dry goods also include items such as paper products, hygiene products, and other non-food items. In the southeast end of the warehouse there is a sink with a pressure hose for cleaning the collapsible plastic crates used by volunteers in charge of stocking to transport backstock groceries on their hand carts into the market. On the Northeast end of the warehouse is a staging area for produce that has been sorted into crates and is ready to be brought out to the market. These same crates are the ones used to display produce in a dry rack quite similar to what you might find in a typical grocery store.

If you move west of the produce staging area, you will pass a walk-in freezer which allows you to back fill the frozen section of the market. At the time of my research, this

area was predominantly used for meat, bread, and smaller amounts of frozen fruit. Proceeding another few yards past the freezer door is the door to the walk-in dairy/fresh pack cooler which also allows for back filling a display in the market. This cooler contains milk, eggs, yogurt, cheese, and a variety of drinks such as kombucha, juices, and kefir; and this cooler also contains a fairly exciting variety of ready-to-eat deli items such as hummus, wraps, salads, and tortillas. This cooler also is large enough to keep pallets of refrigerated backstock, which, aside from the items which are stocked directly into the cold displays, also includes produce such as lettuce/salad greens, radishes, herbs, plums, peaches and other highly perishable produce.

Several additional yards will bring you to dead-end at the western-most end of the warehouse, or the “bottom” of the “loop”. To the right is a doorway which leads to the edge of the market and takes you past the exit of the market. To the right takes you back through to the other side of the warehouse, first South, and then East. Along this path, you will pass an area consistently designated for baby products, and also for government commodity foods (TEFAP), which must be stored separately in the warehouse, and stocked separately in the Market. Continuing on this route to the east, you will pass two large bins with items which are either being re-donated because they are not healthy enough but technically good for human consumption, and those items which are compostable, as well as a large bin for cardboard. Near these bins is a door that leads outside to a small platform. This platform is where many volunteers and staff members lock their bicycles which you will see directly ahead. If you turn to the left, you will see a railing with compost bins just below, cardboard recycling bins directly

adjacent, and a dumpster for trash. If you turn to the right there is a door which leads to an expansive green house, well stocked with equipment and with an abundance of tables.

Taking the stairs which are just to the north of the warehouse, will lead you to the southernmost end of the second floor. Ahead of you is a long hallway that stretches from east to west, on the right side are two doors that lead to the staff member office spaces with a double row of lockers roughly 1ft by 2ft between the two doors. To your immediate left is a set of restrooms and a drinking fountain, as well as a large ice machine. Farther east there is a supply closet and two doors that lead into the community kitchen and meeting room.

The kitchen/meeting area is a very large rectangular room with several large round tables surrounded by chairs. At one end of the room is a large monitor, and on the other end of the room is a fully equipped community kitchen where cooking classes and cooking clubs take place. Cooking classes and cooking clubs led by volunteers or a staff member from the Nutrition Team. The classes are structured to be as hands on as possible, stools are set around the kitchen island which has two large countertops and a four-burner stove. Guests put on hair nets, wash up and put on gloves before sitting in front of small cutting boards. The instructor/s create a conversational space attempting to draw knowledge and stories from guests to create something that feels more like co-learning than a one-way flow of knowledge. When the meal is about to be served, a volunteer educator provides a brief presentation with questions and answers focused on a particular educational objective related to health or healthy eating. The class wraps up with everyone eating

together and enjoying conversation. Often some students remain after class to help clean up.

In the center of the room are removable dividers which can partition the room into two smaller rooms. Attached to the kitchen are two additional doors one to the east leads to a large supply closet, and the one to the south leads to a patio which has several raised beds and a little bit of seating (there is a second door to the patio on the west end of the room near the wall mounted television). Most days that MetroCaring is open there are two volunteer shifts, a morning shift that ends at lunch time, and an afternoon shift that begins after lunch, the exception to this is Tuesday, where there is an additional evening volunteer shift. Before these shifts begin something called the “gathering” takes place in this large room, as a welcoming ritual and space for communication.

Prior to the Gathering’s start there is a gradual filling of the tables in the room as many people arrive more than fifteen minutes early and relax, drink coffee and catch up with one another. A primary topic of conversation is asking for updates about what is happening in one another’s lives, and also updates about fellow volunteers who may have recently been absent— “have you heard anything about so-and-so?” or, “Oh, I saw so-and-so, he was back working the other day”.

For the most part it is the same people who are significantly early each day, and by and large they sit in the same seats spread around the room. The effect of this is that as new people begin to enter, the conversation doesn’t come across as “closed”, as after the regulars who compose the early crowd have settled in, most tables still only have 1-3

people, while at capacity they can accommodate 6 easily. Very often there is a large group which represents either a church or place of business engaging in collective service days. They typically will show up “on-time”, filtering into remaining seats near the precise scheduled time for the gathering to begin.

The actual gathering begins with appreciation and acknowledgement of everyone choosing to come to spend their day at Metro Caring, and with high energy, to thank the room. An ice- breaker activity such as favorite food, band, song or similar bit of information is shared by each person, birthdays are recognized and positive moments in the lives of people in the room are shared as desired and celebrated while also serving to add an element of fun to the start of the shift.

The “body” of the gathering is made up of internal news such as changes to policy or procedure, number of community members served recently, and updates from the various Metro Caring teams about events or outreach; and external news updates such as important votes or opportunities to get involved in social or political movements that are relevant to the dignity and social equity of the larger community. And a program called “caught you caring” highlights the specific contributions of individual volunteers who are caught by team members exemplifying the values of Metro Caring. At the conclusion of the Gathering, there is a customary moment of silence to come from a place of gratitude, and then specific volunteer groups break off to learn about their assignments, and the staff returns to their activities.

The staff office has three private office spaces where the leadership team reside and an additional office made in a large storage closet which appears to have been converted

to accommodate a growing team. The majority of the space is open and shared. There are a number of nooks which create a sort of series of team-based alcoves. The entire staff shares this area except for the Food Access team who has their office adjacent to the dock on the first floor. At the westernmost end of the long hallway, there is a set of stairs leading down to the welcome desk, an elevator, several small tables for sitting and eating, and a snack station. There is also a medium size meeting room which commonly serves as a staff meeting area and seats a dozen people fairly comfortably, also in the room is a potted plant that is perhaps too large to fit through the door.

Volunteering at Metro Caring

Observations of the volunteer community of Metro Caring identified several subcategories: volunteers who were volunteering with no compensation or coercion; volunteers who were volunteering and receiving payment through a senior program; and volunteers who were completing required community service (which I acknowledge as a form of state coercion). I made no efforts to inquire why any individual was volunteering or what category they might have come under, but there are important characteristics associated with each, particularly in relationship to their longevity or likely longevity. Voluntary un-compensated volunteers had full agency to choose how long they would remain connected to Metro Caring and are the cohort that consistently has the highest longevity. Volunteers receiving compensation for their time are often not in control of where they are assigned and can be relocated at the discretion of the organization sponsoring them. Individuals completing court ordered community

service will either terminate their time following the completion of their hours, or possibly transition into one of the other cohorts if they choose and are able.

The majority of the people who make Metro Caring work each day are volunteers, and something regularly mentioned anecdotally is that more than half of the people who volunteer are also individuals who are making use of the services of Metro Caring. It is also valuable to take notice that within the volunteer community of Metro Caring, it is quite common to see the same faces each day, or on certain days. There are individuals who are retired and able to come in 3-5 days a week, but also among those volunteers who can only come 1-2 times per week.

Since people often visit consistently on the same days and times each week, a somewhat stable social community develops with individuals able to build on these social relationships with one another as a side-effect of volunteering. Of my interviewees, only one responded in the negative to the question “I have made one or more friends as a result of my time at Metro Caring,” and in that case, the interviewee acknowledged that they still would see friends while at Metro Caring, but simply that these friends were from pre-existing relationships outside of Metro Caring.

Each of the other 19 interviewees reported of friendships forming, and one elder who lived alone and had been a former volunteer and currently utilized the market, responded that Metro Caring was still a social destination when simply getting out of the house despite no longer being able to participate in volunteer shifts. Among elders who I met Metro Caring was noted as a place to come to, a place to be, and a place to be

accepted and made welcome is an important part of the benefit of being part of the community.

Volunteer Teams at Metro Caring

There are several teams which volunteers are divided into at Metro Caring: Food Access; Nutrition, Community Navigation and the Welcome Desk (Navigation and the Welcome Desk are distinct but seem to have a very close working relationship). Each volunteer team has one or more staff members who serve as direct support for the volunteers on that team. Additionally, there are staff members who more broadly serve as contacts for all of the volunteers. Despite this it also bears mentioning that I have never seen any staff member ignore or push away a volunteer who had a question or concern. Furthermore, there was a subset of volunteers who were engaged by the urban agriculture team and may or may not be involved in on-site activities at Metro Caring. One volunteer I interviewed volunteered both with the urban agriculture team at a nearby garden plot and in the market as a re-stocker.

Food Access

Food Access is the largest volunteer team at Metro Caring, within the purview of this team is utilizing the Metro Caring pick-up truck to pick up smaller donations from local grocery stores, aiding with the intake of large deliveries from semi-trucks, sorting donations, and every aspect of the guest's experience in the market. Food access oversees check-in/checkout, keeping the displays freshly stocked and faced, and customer service. As highlighted by the excerpt from my fieldnotes, sorting of donations is not just to identify which food is safe and fresh enough to go to the market,

a large part of their work is to read labels and keep food with high amounts of added sugar out of the market. This policy is not universally supported by volunteers or shoppers and the excerpt above took no probing to elicit that critique of the policy.

Nutrition Team

The majority of the nutrition team's volunteers lead the nutrition education game and healthy cooking demo which takes place in the waiting room at Metro Caring and the point-of-purchase healthy sampling (often set up between to shelving units in the market). The other work of the Nutrition team is facilitating the cooking classes and cooking clubs that take place in the educational kitchen. Metro Caring attempts to avoid the ethnocentrism and paternalistic methodologies of the 19th and 20th century food reformers (Blitekoff 2013), but at the same time clearly attempts to be catalysts of change in household cooking practices. An intentional effort is to abandon the vertical structure of teaching in which the teacher acts as a banker of knowledge and dispenses it to the student. Instead, they approach the interaction from Paolo Freire's *problem posing teacher* (Freire 1970). The teacher frames nutrition problems that emerge from a biomedical and "scientific" nutrition just as the unfortunate food reformers did, but in the nutrition team, the final privilege doesn't belong to knowledge generated through Western epistemologies; the co-equal student teacher leads as the co-equal teacher student supports and co-creates pathways to goals such as limiting salt content, balancing fiber needs, and finding ways to add, subtract, or change dietary patterns.

Front Desk

The Front Desk is the most prominent place when you enter Metro Caring and where every visit starts. The volunteers at the desk take care of checking in guests for shopping appointments, bus vouchers, and ID services.

Navigation

After checking in to the front desk, the next point of contact for community members preparing to shop in the market is a visit to the Community Navigator volunteers. The Community Navigators meet with guests prior to their visit to the market and work to identify resources which can help guests out of the cycle of food insecurity. Each Community Navigator has a small office with a slightly opaque sliding door adjacent to the waiting room with a computer, and forms for various state and federal assistance programs. The circumstances that bring guests to Metro Caring are often similar in their consequences, and the community navigator will have to draw upon many of the same resources for people in a variety of situations. However, listening to community navigators talk about what they do, it is holding that space to hear and respond to each person that is essential to establish rapport.

This means taking time to go over forms and talk about available services. For another community navigator, the feedback that was provided by many of the guests and formed the decision to ask them to remain in navigation as their primary volunteer area was that they presented a perfect balance between being friendly and being real. At the time of this research, each navigator established their own way of approaching this work, and there was a great deal of ownership which they carried.

Each volunteer and staff member at Metro Caring works in concert to facilitate the interruption of acute hunger in the life of an individual or family and to address the circumstances which contributed to the formation of hunger as a symptom of a more complex series of issues. Next, I will unpack why hunger is an issue in Denver Colorado by providing an overview of the formation of our food system, critiquing it in the context of race, ethnicity, and Indigeneity, and finally explaining how these histories simultaneously are felt within the social memories of individuals, but are also present as continuous structures of oppression in the present.

2.1.2. Our Food System – a Brief History

Relationships with food are a social, cultural, or political construct, enacted in the present, are nestled within the context of the past. Individual and collective meanings are often rooted consciously or unconsciously within social, cultural and historical narratives and must be explored thusly. Conducting a brief synopsis of some of the key histories that need to be considered when discussing what we eat, how, and with whom, several authors come to the forefront including, Sidney Mintz with his foundational work in mapping how foods have influenced, and continue to influence, the course of human history; Charlotte Blitekoff for her work in providing critique to the process of constructing a national ideal for good citizenship through moralizing, immortalizing and othering people through food, and in turn the process of creating food-based programs of acculturation. To this historical-cultural and political-cultural discourse began by Blitekoff and Mintz, I will add discourse into the intimate relationships food generates that are symbolic and mnemonic through the explorations of David Evan Sutton and Mary Douglass.

Through these authors and others, I will begin with providing an overview of the formation of the current food system in Denver and the US; how the processes of negotiating race, as a construct, which continues to dominate food justice work, emerged as a direct result of structures of extractive colonialism and settler colonialism that were primarily concerned with converting indigenous land and non-white bodies into profit through industrial food production and export- commodity-based economies (Alkon and Agyeman 2011; Tuck, Guess, and Sultan 2014); and into some of the literature that is rooted within the food justice movements that are essential to understanding the intentional community space of Metro Caring. Finally, I will offer a reflection upon the material of memory as it is essential for opening a discourse around the memorialization of meals and what that ultimately means within the process of meaning-making and motives for managing meaning-making over time. In figure 1, I provide a map which provides an illustration to how many of the historical concepts and constructs interact in the lived experience of an individual and also in the context of the socially felt experience of a group. This illustration highlights the interconnectivity of histories, foods, individuals, and interpersonal relationships in the generation of food based meaning.

Formation of our Food System

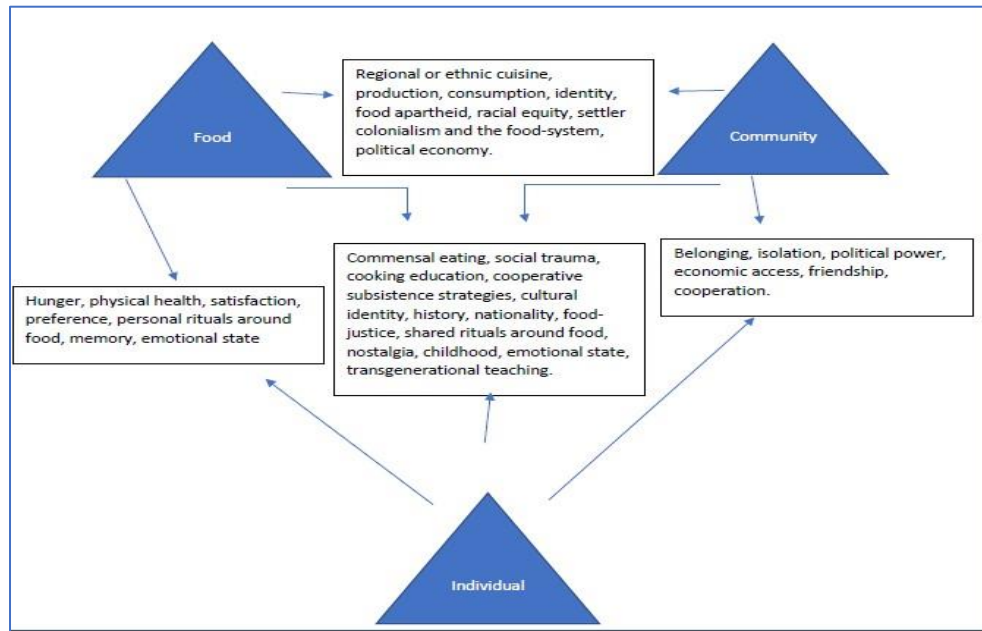


Figure 1 Social and Historical Food Map

In imagining a food system based on a presumption of its purpose being to link regions of production to consumers in a variety of urban and rural settings, it is easy to imagine that pockets of food insecurity or the presence of large-scale waste are merely symptoms of system failure. Our current food system however, with a vast number of individuals locally and globally experiencing persistent food insecurity and equally (or greater) amounts of food which is either intentionally not grown or willfully destroyed is not a reflection of system failure. I offer the counter narrative that our food-system reflects only the present version of a system for transporting high-value luxury foods to economic elites while also facilitating the introduction to a narrow selection of industrially produced commodities into formerly closed local or regional food systems. This Type of food system emerged from a period of European centered history often referred to the ‘Age of Discovery’.

The 'Age of Discovery' is often discussed briefly as a time following innovations in nautical and printing technologies born out of the 'Age of Enlightenment'. These innovations permitted exploration and more rapid communication of these explorations. Discovery was an industry of extraction, occupation, and appropriation. Sidney Mintz applies a food-centered lens to the 'Age of Discovery' and counters the narrative by asserting that this was the dawn of the 'Golden Age of Sugar'. With more than a thousand years of evidence of the use of forced labor in the industrial production of sugar cane, it has been considered the birth of the proletariat (Mintz 1986). Prior to the 'Golden Age of Sugar', sugar came to Europe mostly from sugar grown in India. Along with other luxuries which flowed into Europe from their neighbors in tropical or subtropical climates, sugar cane absolutely could not be cultivated in temperate climates.

With the theft of Indigenous lands in the Americas and East Indies, and the theft of African and Indigenous labor, European sugarcane empires grew that would anchor colonial industries of industrial production and extraction. A key system of extraction formed during this time is the Triangle Trade (Karenga 1983), which describes the abduction of Africans taken to sugar plantations on stolen Indigenous land followed by the sale of sugar in Europe and the trading of rum to slavers in West Africa. Land capable of producing sugarcane was scarce, but with the lure of the potential profits from monocropping stolen land with stolen labor the 'industry' of industrial agriculture became established.

The legacies of this are perniciously enduring, self-serving structures born in sugar (Mintz 1986), settler colonialism (Baldy 2018; Wolfe 2012; Lorde 1997; Golay and

Biglino 2010, Taylor 2011), and slavery (Mintz 1986; Davidson 1961; Harris 2010); but also continued as new innovations in transportation infrastructures emerged such as the development of the transcontinental railroad (Yong 2014; Chui and Kirk 2014) and the development of the interstate highway systems (Thompson 2005; Hamilton 2006). Big Tobacco which also got its start during the plantation era and Period of Enslavement pivots into ‘Big Food’ (Nestle 2013; Carolan 2017), and the politicizing of food of the 20th century through melting pot rhetoric, scientific nutrition, and food reformers (Blitekoff 2013; Kimura et al. 2014; Vester 2015).

Due to the geographic exploration during the ‘Age of Discovery’, there came “opportunities for direct scrutiny of radically different peoples” (Diamond 1964) and the explosion of knowledge filled a vacuum left by the church following the Enlightenment (Diamond 1964), destabilizing any sense of propriety to the universe. Western Scientists would face their first key challenge by being tasked with repairing this tumult in a manner that was true to the spirit of empiricism while being socially palatable.

Perhaps no question was so pressing to settle than what to make of all these other Peoples of whom little if anything had been previously thought or known. Theories of racial difference have been often associated with the influences of climate, food and environment (Gould 1994), as discussed by Linnaeus and Blumenbach. Early associations with race as environmentally determined left the door open for theories of food being a catalyst for race, which would be visited and re-visited (Pilcher and Yong 2012; Heiser 1927), as well as theories of the inverse where race influenced an inherent ability, or inability, to taste or use restraint on indulgence of food (De Gobineau 1999), or

even the ability to digest certain foodstuffs (Vester 2015). However racial theorists of the time framed their assertions of how or why individuals had differing physical appearances around the world, the core of their work was to reify a moral imperative—or at least justification—for the inequitable systems being set in place in colonial structures. Questions of who could own land, who could own themselves, who had full human intelligence, who could feel pain, even who had the ability to appreciate being alive were answers the race scholars of the time set to argue.

Neither these constructs of race, nor the commodified food system formed during the last five hundred or so years has been effectively dismantled, and their interwoven legacy is still deeply reflected in the present when we look at who experiences what within our food system, as well as how different ‘eaters’ are moralized. To bridge the overarching narrative of the formation of our food system and the formation of our racialized experiences within that food system I’ll first touch upon what it means that the US is a settler colonial state when it comes to the explore how food has been politicized as a tool of nation building and the legitimization of the settler state. In shifting from a conversation on global agendas of colonization to the specific case of one settler colonial state, there will be statements or assertions that appear redundant but are necessarily revisited because they specifically took place here.

2.1.3. The US is a Settler-Colonial State

The first step to collective social action, is the process of reclaiming the histories that establish group positionality and their shared fate through critical pedagogy and critical consciousness (Freire and Ramos 1970). History is colloquially thought of as a

record of the past (Holtzman 2006); however, it is often only a record of what of that past has not been erased from that particular historical record. In the United States, erasure has been a fundamental strategy for legitimizing the settler state and hiding the extant structures of settler colonialism that continue to concentrate privilege (Baldy 2018; Wolfe 2012; Smith 2012; Green 2008; Vester 2015). The flip side of legitimizing claims to settler privilege—and in the process, privileging attention to the histories, trials, triumphs and contributions of an elite narrative—is the denial of critical contextualizing narratives that can inform marginalized and erased individuals of their histories. Erasure of Indigenous presence, foodways, and epistemologies in the Americas (Deer 2015; Baldy 2018); reduction of the Indigeneity of corn by planting it according to English sensibilities in straight lines rather than in more the productive and sustainable companion planting of the *three sisters* with beans and squash; as a final step, the corn had to be re-formed within English recipes (Pilcher and Yong 2012). The erasure of stolen African lives, labor, and agricultural expertise (Harris 2010, Karenga 1983; Davidson 1961; Vester 2015), leads to the obfuscation of the apparatuses of settler colonialism.

These apparatuses continue to apply systems of murder, terrorism, imprisonment, artificial scarcity, ecocide, and displacement primarily upon Indigenous, Black, Latinx communities; these structures also severely impact individuals and groups along many other racialized or ethnic lines. Within the racialized caste system described, there are also those who are in a sort of liminal space in which their racial identity is compatible with mobility within the colonial system, but their ethnic identity is not. Here food was

leveraged as a tool of forced acculturation and tool for bringing white ethnic groups into ‘the melting pot’.

Dietary Reformers: Science, Morality, and Acculturation

While acculturation in the melting pot came from many fronts, the dinner pot was on the forefront of the effort to create an American race. Indigenous foodways were systematically interrupted, erased and appropriated as with African foodways, while an invented American diet was built, moralized, and propagandized. The American way of eating brought together characteristics taken from British and Northern European roots, and “promoted puritan self-denial as well as middle-class virtues of self-control, restraint, and rational lifestyle choices as genuinely republican and there for American” (Vester 2015; Blitekoff 2013). Dietary reformers of the 1890s and onward enlisted women as agents of acculturation within their respective households.

Central to this agenda was an effort to homogenize white ethnic groups which was colorfully referred to as the melting pot (Blitekoff 2013), while attempting to “legitimize and privilege as it normalized the tastes and beliefs of one or a few groups while marginalizing others” (Vester 2015:18). The agenda of the dietary reformers was to not only imply a scientific justification for food choice but also to connect it to superior morality and citizenship, and to also to easily identify those marked as ‘Others’ (Kimura et al. 2014; Blitekoff 2013; Vester 2015).

Dietary reformers set out as evangelists to the cause of moral eating; and article from 1894 announced that “the ministry of diet in the work of character-building is therefore one of the most important studies a woman can undertake” (Blitekoff 2013: 20). Moral

eating was unfortunately associated with bland and thrifty meals thought to fortify an individual from passionate or erratic behaviors. There is also a very strategic effort here to pressure women in marginalized groups to serve as proxy agents of acculturation within their homes in order to be considered effective wives and mothers.

Few things offer a more salient example of the concepts of race and cultural aggression like attempts at forced acculturation that are undertaken through food; and in turn demonstrate the agency and resistance of individuals when their foodways endure in spite of such attempts at structural oppression. While the food reformers had political and economic power, and their rhetoric was socially privileged, their efforts were ultimately abandoned due to lack of success in turning immigrants away from the ways of eating that were culturally significant and brought them pleasure (Blitekoff 2013).

Experiencing the Past

It is important to avoid historicizing the systems, structures, and ideas detailed in this exploration of the past. However, equally important to shift gears to the present, and bring a close to this summary of the past, in favor of answering questions like ‘so what’ and ‘what now’. In the next sections I will show that identity is still the dominant factor in predicting what experience an individual will have within our food system, and equally important, that the experiences that an individual self identifies with also create a felt experience through concepts of social memory and social traumas.

The combination of these personal and collective experiences influence how we experience our food imagined present and futures. Traumatic cultural memories are remembered “not just to explain what happens to themselves, but to the collective that

they belong to” (Alexander 2018:2). A traumatic memory such as this is thought to work more subtly and gradually in its effect on individuals and has been explored in “life course analysis” (Alexander 2018: 5), which attempt to qualify the presence of predictable or at the very least identifiable effects as they are expressed in the identity of individuals connected to these socially felt cataclysms (Alexander 2018). Or traumatic memories which needn’t even be consciously remembered, but could be passed bodily over generations (Radstone and Hodgkin 2003). Hunger and persistent or episodic food insecurity can be discussed under such a context.

Discussing changes within individual relationships to food can require a movement back from direct personal experiences into indirect embodied experiences. Not lingering on the mechanisms of memory here, I do believe it important to link these discussions of group and generational memory with Paul Connerton’s concept of *incorporating memory* from Connerton’s 1998 *How Societies Remember*. Incorporating memory “rests on generating sensory and emotional experiences that sediment memory in the body” (Sutton 2001, 19). These felt aspects of the experience serve as a powerful mnemonic focus for the remembering and re-experiencing of the phenomenon upon recreation of the emotional and sensory environment.

There is open discussion as to the degree of flexibility or improvisation which can exist within everyday ritual space without hindering the process of sedimentation of memory. Sutton frames this ritualized space within everyday life as being significant not because of a forcefulness of the meanings embedded within the moments, but rather “seeing ritual as the meaningful, or poetic, aspect of all experience” (Sutton 2001: 20). Such a consideration of memory shifts from the Freudian model of memory as a linear

thing, wherein the most recent memory will be the most readily remembered while the more distant the memory is from the present, the less intensity or clarity. Memories whether individual or collective associated with food if applied to Connerton's memory model offer repetition of the remembrance during an endless stream of commensality over the course of a person's life where foods trigger memories, and repeated triggers cement the memory as being ever more present. So, while there is a strong case for an individual to experience the consequences of the past, individuals are also experiencing the continuation of the past through food apartheid.

2.1.4. Food Apartheid in Denver

In 1974, researchers from the University of Colorado-Boulder completed and published a study *The Economic Base of Denver: Implications for Denver's Fiscal Future and Administrative Policy* by Charles P. Rahe of the Denver Urban Observatory. Based on their assessment of shifting demographics and a changing economic base:

The overall picture presented is one of Denver as an aging urban core city increasingly populated by: the poor; the less educated; the minorities; the less easily employed; the elderly; and the working young adult households. It is also one of Denver surrounded by a solid suburban ring populated by: the White majority; the affluent; the better educated; the family households with children and with adults in their most productive years; and the higher skilled and more easily employable. (Rahe 1974: 26)

From the perspective of the authors of this report, this meant that they were anticipating a ballooning unemployment rate and an elevated 'dependent population' such as elders who were migrating to central Denver because of the higher availability of elder services, and continued 'white flight' as the urban area is left to decay (Rahe 1974: 27). Their conclusion was that what Denver was experiencing was the early

stages of urban decay which had struck in certain eastern cities, wherein the opportunities for those “less easily employed” individuals to move out of poverty, become increasingly truncated by a job market that is lacking in opportunities to make a living wage; in short, by the start of the 1970s things were hard, and not expected to get any easier as household incomes were projected to decline. Their hypothesis was that white flight was an important harbinger of urban decay as it had occurred in ‘aging urban’ cities in the Midwest and East coast so that steps could in theory be taken to identify key industries to attract and incentivize to prevent full scale ‘urban decay’.

It is important to pay attention to the assumption that the resiliency of an urban economy would be so connected to the movement of historically privileged individuals out of an urban center, and the movement of historically marginalized individuals into an urban center, as an early warning sign of urban decay rather than an example of how occupational segregation, systemic racism, and other structures of oppression are so ingrained that demographics can be presented as predictive of a city’s economic future. The regional economy of the surrounding suburban communities considered was still strong, and the report acknowledged that many suburbanites were still commuting for work (Rahe 1974: 30), which means that despite some level of decline in “good” jobs which were high paying and with higher social value, the presence of these jobs was not considered an indicator for non-white employment opportunity for Denverites, but rather a continued opportunity for non-resident white workers.

Denver in the 1980s

In middle of the 1980s Denver descend deeply into a recession as a result of a rapid decline in oil and gas prices from over drilling. Unemployment rates reached nearly ten percent and as businesses closed and offices remained empty, the flight from Denver's urban areas accelerated (McClearn 2010: 189). A *Denver Post* article the 1980s were the second most grim economic era—behind only the Great Depression. By the middle of the decade, one in three businesses failed, and for the first time since the 1960s, Denver faced negative growth (Blount 1996). While the economic burdens of the recession were felt across the metro Denver area, already marginalized populations shouldered the majority of the burdens associated with food and housing insecurity.

By the 1990s, Denver's office space was the cheapest in the world, at \$13 per square ft. Most of the communities directly surrounding Denver's urban core, as a result of generations of redlining and divestment also saw the value of their neighborhoods remain low. This urban narrative primed the city for rapid development in the decades that followed. Then as now, hunger and other co-occurrences associated with resource insecurity within specific communities was not a reflection of large-scale regional scarcity; rather, the occurrence of hunger in Denver has always been a systemic problem. I say a systemic problem because it is a result of persisting systems which have the result of creating the predictable outcome of sustaining food-apartheid and occupational segregation—as well as housing segregation. Cycles of oppression, hunger, housing insecurity, and experiences associated with episodic or chronic resource insecurity are personally and collectively impactful when attempting to

understand people's decision-making calculus. Into the present the consequences of these patterns are impossible to ignore.

While the Denver Metropolitan area enjoys remarkable growth, so too has food-insecurity and obesity. In Denver, 21% of adults are obese, 15% of children aged 2 to 14 are obese, and 16% are overweight. Particularly concerning is that the rates of obesity are on the rise among preschoolers from low-income families. These growing rates of obesity across age groups is expected to lead to a marked decline in life expectancy for children as opposed to their parents (Denver Department of Health and the Environment 2014). According to this study, food security and obesity are referred to as “wicked problems” and are among the most important public health issues of this century. The report acknowledges first and foremost that our current food-system is broken, and a call for reform which ends the “plethora of inexpensive, high calorie and nutritionally deficient foods and beverages” (Denver Department of Health and the Environment 2014:1) which are now bombarding Coloradoans across various economic levels.

Food insecurity is not just a result of more general resource insecurity brought upon by a lack of economic privilege. For many years there was national attention into what were referred to as food deserts. A food desert is a neighborhood or community that does not have a full-service grocery store where community members can access fresh meat, produce, dairy, and an adequate selection of dry goods. In 2008, the US Congress included the phrase ‘food desert’ into the farm bill, dedicating half of a million dollars to research for the purpose of solving this problem. Three years later, a tool called the

food desert locator was unveiled on-line—perhaps so that if you thought that your community qualified, you could check.

Close examination of which residents are likely to experience deprivation within our food system, reveals patterns of access that follow socio-economic status, race, or nation of origin. That people are sorted by these social criteria to face increased likelihood of experiencing hunger or food insecurity in their communities, or to be likely to face social and economic structures that conspire to place them into areas which lack access to adequate, affordable, or culturally desirable foods; and most importantly to frame the system as a morally essential response to a social crisis is a description of food-apartheid (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). The statistics above do not apply equally to all residents of the Denver metropolitan area, “low-income communities and communities of color often lack access to locally available healthy food, and what is available is often more expensive than similar purchases in wealthier areas” (Alkon and Agyeman 2011 Ch. 1: 5). The term food apartheid is now used instead of food desert because activists and community stakeholders are not content to embrace an analogy that minimizes the intent at play in the creation of communities and populations that are chronically food insecure. The failure of our food system runs deeper than simply just failing to effectively meet the goal of establishing broad and equitable food security; the food system also disproportionately puts the members of marginalized communities at greater risk of illness and injury as a result of poor working conditions or the consequences of pollution related to the growing, harvesting, or processing of food. Marginalized communities are more likely to have infrastructure

necessary for our food distribution chain such as highways, train yards, and distribution centers in their neighborhoods. Residents of these marginalized populations also face a disproportionate likelihood of being displaced in order to make room for food system related enterprises and infrastructure expansion. Due to a system-wide failure for Denver's food-system to provide basic food security broadly and equitably, Denver has a booming hunger-relief charitable industry.

Poverty must be understood as both a creation of social, political and economic structures that, while extant, are grounded in the historical origins of our country; and also, as an impactful experience for the person experiencing it. And I believe that bridging adding the conceptual tool of food desertification as a process through which food apartheid creates food deserts can lead to more accountability for municipalities who shy away from speaking on how policy directly impacts foodscapes locally. Yes, we have food deserts and yes, they were created by both De jour or De facto systems, policies and practices grounded in racist and anti-Indigenous histories. It is from a critical consciousness as to how we got here, how current conditions are impacting historically marginalized communities, and the collective power that we have to disrupt these systems at play within our food system that the emergent term food justice was coined. At its core, justice calls for the acknowledgement of a crime and an intentional redress of the harms associated through restorative measures or punitive measures. Work in food justice reflects both processes, this concept will be unpacked more deeply after grounding our food system in class consciousness.

2.1.5. Class Consciousness and Class Cuisine

Living for generations within the context of race- and class-based food apartheid, as with any struggle can lead to a sense of group solidarity and identity, characteristics of the struggle to survive within an inequitable system can easily become meaningful identifiers of authentic culture and belonging. Pierre Bourdieu's examination of food and class in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* offers a critique and expands on the social judgements that are reflected in how class-based foods are established and reified.

I will build upon this and explore how the assumption of what of food which type of person should eat to become embodied, and the food of the 'other'—in this case the socially and economically privileged class—is unpalatable or unnecessary.

In Bourdieu's critique of class specific food differentiation in observed during his research, the:

working classes are more attentive to the strength of the (male) body than its shape and tend to go for products that are both cheap and nutritious, the professions prefer products that are tasty, health giving, light and not fattening. Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is embodied helps to shape the class body. (Bourdieu as cited in Counihan and Van Esterik 2013: 34).

Bourdieu explores further how among the working class, foods associated with those with a weaker constitution are unsuitable for the strong and able worker. It is also prohibited to eat things which must be eaten delicately, or which the process of eating makes the worker look childish. The formation of these trends in food preference and the class meanings associated with these foods, and the risks of embarrassment are to an informally enforced but in his field work Bourdieu found them to be consistently

followed. Bourdieu’s famous work is most attendant to the contrasts between the working class and the “professional” class, where my focus is on the contrast between the socially disenfranchised and the socially privileged classes.

While the social discourse at play is different from Bourdieu’s observations, the presence of class informed sensibilities of what who should feel entitled to eat is common played out by what is expected to be seen in the food boxes that are ubiquitous to the experience of accessing most emergency food pantries. As with *Distinction*, there is a subtle subtext at play not just in what is eaten by who, but with what judgements correspond with the rejection of class-based norms.

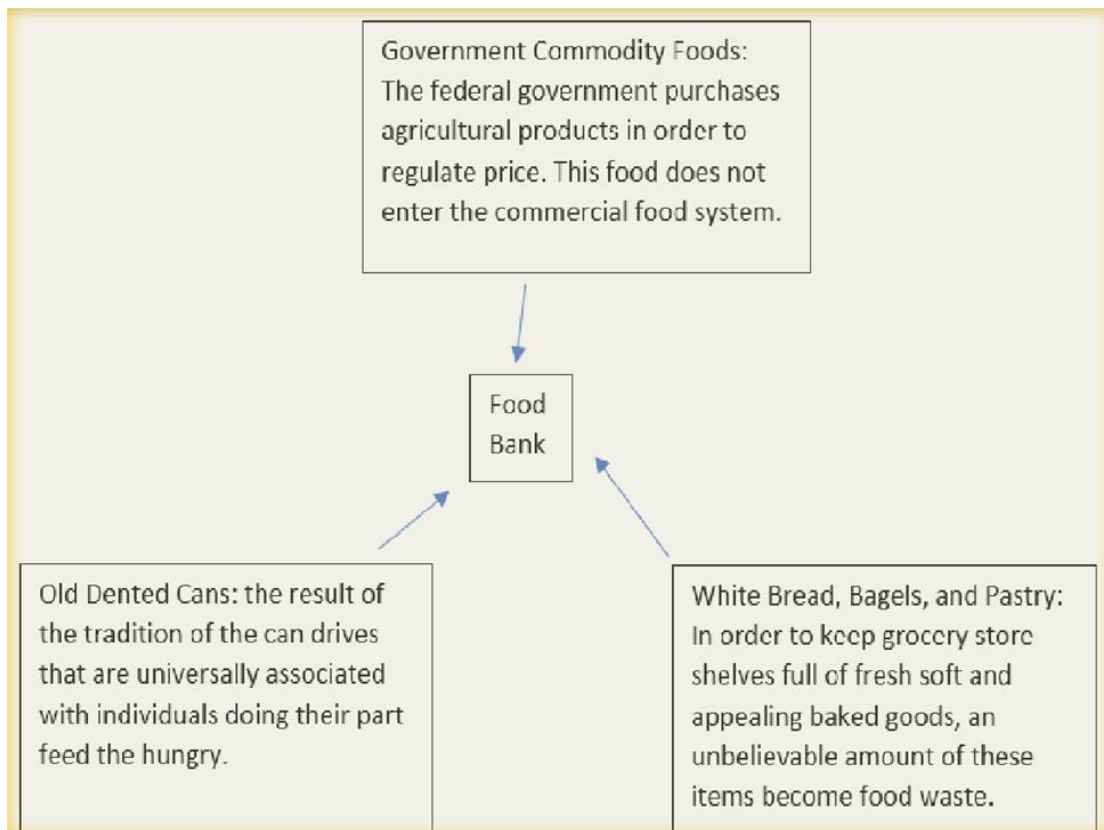


Figure 2 Proper Charitable Foods

Figure 2 illustrates how this class-based concept of appropriate food not only reinforces the structures of food apartheid but also entrenches a punitive character to experiencing hunger. While not a comprehensive accounting of foods that enter the charitable food system, this highlights the core of what individuals experiencing—and being penalized for experiencing—food insecurity is likely to be expected to feel gratitude for. Stereotypes of people in positions of need as having unrefined or at least un-particular tastes has dominated the over privileged, while pickiness is associated with moral failings.

Resulting from these is also a persistent informality which can go to the point of slovenly indifference in the manner in which “charity” is doled out. Just as quality is not a common concern, neither is choice. It is charity, in that it occurs as a result of our choice rather than theirs, and what is appropriate to feed them is also not up to the poor.

2.1.6. Food Justice

Food justice, as with many other social movements for justice are oriented toward challenging race, gender or class differentiated social realities such as food apartheid and the resulting class-based food systems. The modern food-justice movements have emerged from larger social-justice movements centered around civil liberties, economic equity, and environmental sustainability.

With a developing critical consciousness which demonstrated that conditions of food insecurity were no less intentionally inflicted upon Indigenous communities and communities of Color in the present than they were when food was used to control their ancestors early in the processes of settler colonialism, the reservation system or during

the period of enslavement (Ruelle 2017; Harris 2010). Hunger within the context of a continued pattern of oppression demanded justice; and the developing food-justice movement would integrate agendas which holistically acknowledged that food-apartheid was impossible to dismantle without attention to economic, environmental, and political inequities (Alkon and Agyeman 2011). 1974, the same year as the report that cited Denver as in the beginning stages of urban decay, Metro Caring was formed when several churches joined their efforts to address the hunger crisis within their communities.

Since Metro Caring's emergence it has occupied various spaces within the construct of food justice, starting with hunger relief through building a coalition of aligned entities, in this case local church congregations. To increase the collective impact, they decided to come together; at the time they selected the name *Central Denver Community Services*. By uniting, into a single focused hunger-relief and prevention organization, they would be able to direct their resources more effectively. Slowly they increased the services which they were able to offer hoping to help individuals and families move past crisis into stability and self-sufficiency.

Beginning in 1999 the organization now calling itself Metro Caring moved into their own building on 18th and Downing, near Denver's Historic Five Points neighborhood. After 12 years of serving community members in that first building, it became apparent that their facility needed expansion and revisioning, so from 2011 to 2014 a five-million-dollar fundraising campaign was conducted to allow the much-

needed growth. In the spring of 2015, the expanded and updated facility was open to the public.

Most prized among this new building's expanded features were their self-service market and a dedicated community meeting space and educational kitchen which served to create a community knowledge hub. As of 2019, Metro Caring's impact can be seen clearly by their impressive service numbers. According to Metro Caring's 2019 Annual Report, around 75,000 individuals accessed food through the Fresh food Market. The report also draws attention to the fact that of the more than 1000 cooking class attendees who participated in the last year, almost half of them (432) attended for the first time (Metro Caring 2019), demonstrating that the classes both appeal to return students and are able to continually attract new attendees.

At the same time as the transition into their newly completed building, a shift of perspective on their role as a food justice organization began to occur. From a messaging perspective, this new methodology was described as a shift toward "ending hunger at its root"; which would be their mission statement. Hunger can be framed as being social, emotional, and also physical, however in the framing of Metro Caring's mission, the implicit attention is on the physical circumstance of hunger, while the impact crosses between all three. However, speaking only of acute hunger and food insecurity if it only happened as a result of instances of misfortune which were essentially randomly distributed throughout our communities without one group facing a higher or lower risk or burden, then solving hunger would be as simple as providing food. And if the way out of acute hunger and food insecurity was as easy or difficult for

everyone experiencing it to navigate, and there were no barriers which prevented specific people or groups from being able to achieve stability, then it would once again be simple to provide food in the moment knowing that as the crisis passed households would return to a basal level of food security.

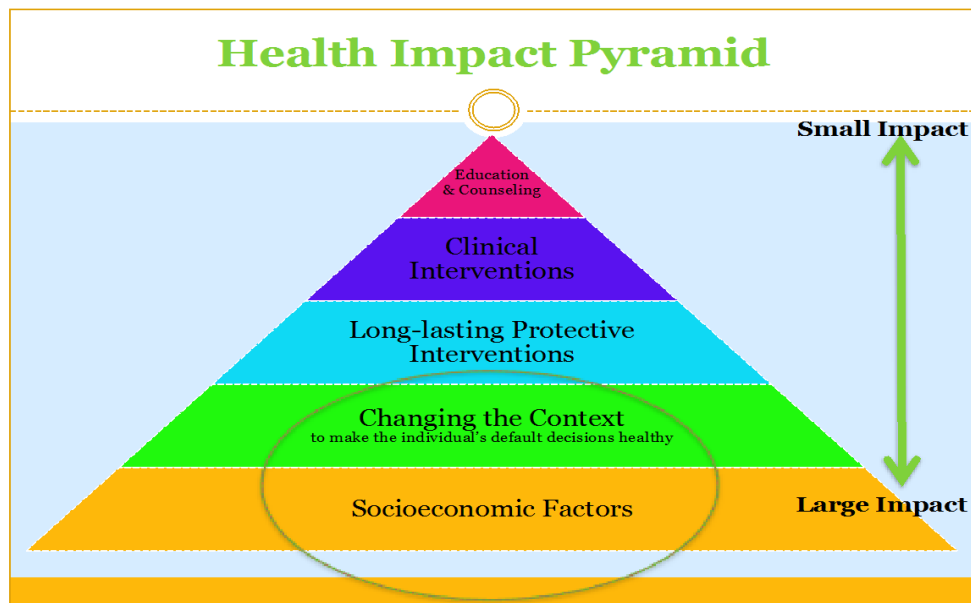


Figure 3: Health Impact Pyramid (Source: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010)

The risk of being considered food insecure is not distributed evenly across Denver residents (Denver Department of Health and the Environment 2014), and there are barriers which are not faced or felt evenly by all people; the barriers are concentrated against communities of Color and low-income communities (Alkon and Agyeman Ch. 1 2011). This commentary is regularly part of internal and external messaging at Metro Caring and informs the strategic vision of the organization. This didn't mean a shift away from alleviating acute food insecurity, but incorporating a lens toward disrupting the systems responsible and the conditions of impunity that allow public and private sector actants to perpetuate these food crimes in Denver. This would be framed

strategically as root cause work, and would align perfectly with the CDC's Health Impact Pyramid seen in figure 3.

This pyramid illustrates the assertion that addressing the socio-economic factors “changes in the environmental context in which people live, learn, work, and play” (CDC cited in Denver Department of Public Health and the Environment 2014, 5) is the foundation of implementing sustainable and impactful change throughout Denver. And while the landscape of unhealthy options for Denver residents is recognized as being related to a dysfunctional food-system, one of the most impactful opportunities for change is in influencing “individuals default decisions” toward healthy choices (Denver Department of Health and the Environment 2014: 1).

Framing this research within this conversation, I argue that if we try to change people's communities, it is important to frame our discussion about ‘community’ by exploring their experiences within their communities. This is where the strength of phenomenology as a methodology for collecting first-hand accounts of people's reflections upon their experiences in conversation with the experience of experiencing their experience within the community-based organization that houses my research community.

Though education occupies the smallest point on the CDC's visual highlighting areas of potential impact, projects and agendas of education are potentially far reaching in their positive—and negative impacts. Metro Caring's involvement in education along with their other work to challenge the root causes of hunger adds to the importance of an exploration of individual experiences within the context of education. Shaming racial

groups through ideas of “good eating” vs. “bad” eating continues to be a powerful force under the guise of getting ahead of the public health crisis looming as a result of the sum of our current food system policies.

Today, nutrition education is as political and as potentially laden with moral judgements that single out to further marginalize already marginalized eaters in our food system. Consider the rhetoric of Michael Pollan’s responsible eater vs. the ignorant lover of cheap processed sugars, flours, and snacks. Built on insights and a global perspective, to do other than pay a little more for a healthy body and a healthy planet was the height of immorality (Blitekoff 2013). These arguments quietly equated the health disparities that marginalized communities faced as being tied to failings of character rather than providing an acknowledgment of concerted and strategic efforts to push low-cost high energy foods into low-income communities as a moral imperative to be factored into conversations of food choice.

Deep at the heart of an investigation of contemporary food reformer movements is the observation that “low-income and communities of color are all too often absent from the dominant food movement narrative and are disproportionately harmed by our current food-system” (Alkon and Agyeman 2011 Ch. 1: 4). This exclusion leads to a fundamentally different experience with food in the United States for certain people. Food security, which means having “physical, social, and economic access to sufficient safe, and nutritious foods that meet dietary needs and food preference for an active and healthy lifestyle” (Denver Department of Health and the Environment 2014: 2), is a privilege that is not enjoyed by all Denver residents. For many it is the flip side of this,

the experience of “hunger due to having to skip a meal or not having enough food to serve a balanced meal due to budgetary constraints” (Denver Health and the Environment 2014).

Metro Caring situates their nutrition education programming inside of the race/class power dynamics that exist within this highly political space of ‘nutrition as a project’ (Kimura et al. 2014). Minimizing the top-down transmission of knowledge in favor of discussion-based teaching and facilitation when federally approved nutrition guidelines are being shared. The skill-based healthy cooking classes use a conversational curriculum during community led culinary education materials which position the conversations of health and healthy eating within culturally relevant cuisines. In the following chapters I will provide an introduction to the theoretical framework, an overview of my research methods, and ultimately the reflected upon food experiences which my interviewees provided.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is based on two key assertions: that systems of value and meaning, even those taken for granted, do exist; and that these systems of value and meaning can be explored and understood through a process of facilitated reflection. Building upon the foundation of phenomenology and utilizing embodiment, ethnography, and actor-network theory, I frame the individual as the center of their experience in the world, and also explores the act of experiencing the world at the center of the formation of the individual's experience with food.

Through asking individuals to reflect upon their early childhood memories around food in such a way as to map out the composition of meals in the context of other meals, the particular phenomenon present or absent can be asserted as the 'material' which allows them to be organized into meals of a 'type'. Good meals, bad meals, healthy meals, average meals, all have meaning only in relationship to one another, and can only be decoded by the individual whose embodied experience is being narrated. Because a meal is often a phenomenon shared among commensals, depending on perspective, the eater may be the center of the experience, or may be part of the network of actants that create the experience of another diner—*when I eat, perhaps you become a key part of my remembered experience of the meal while, for you, I am a remembered part of your experience of that same meal*. So too, as we shift into commensal roles, through these ascribed and prescribed identities we have the

chance to act out the various roles of child being fed, adult feeding others, solo diner eating among memories, or absent guest whose specter haunts the meal of another.

We are all from early childhood familiar with the assumptions that underlie our own culture and its literature and art [...] naturally [westerners] tend to see literature in terms that are familiar to them, however irrelevant those terms may be to the literature under consideration. (Allen 1986: 54)

At its core, the material of my research is the narratives surrounding food that individuals recollect during our time together, and it must be asserted, that while an individual is an essential expert on their own life, what the listener is able to gather from their story is dependent upon a matching of social, cultural, and linguistic common-ground such that the story-teller is able to match their narrative to the understanding of the listener. Applying the anthropological use of phenomenology as a central theory to my approach to framing my use of narratives and structuring my tools of inquiry does not serve as a wholesale expression of support for it as a theoretical methodology, and I feel that it is important for me to problematize it as a western-centric thought lineage.

Recognizing my positionality as having been educated and acculturated within Western society and its institutions, while I can apply insights from non-western epistemologies to intentionally critique what I believe to be problematic aspects of western ways of knowing, I cannot shift entirely or authentically out of understanding and interpreting knowledge from a western mind. Because of this, I will be utilizing ways of knowing built upon both the good and the bad of Western thought tempered with humility and an attention to its limitations through critiques provided by Linda Tuhiwai Smith in *Decolonizing Methodologies* and Paula Gunn Allen in *The Sacred*

Hoop. I will be particularly challenging the core concept of the discovery of new ways of knowing by colonial scholars whose process of knowledge creation was centered in ideologically extractive relationships with other cultures (Smith 2012). I will be particularly challenging the human-centered view of the universe typified by the cartesian divide in which there is the human agentic experience, and the experienced non-agentic universe consisting of all else (Allen 1992). Finally, I will be particularly challenging the ethnocentric belief that the hermeneutic cycle. Used uncritically hermeneutics privileges a reader or listener to interpret meanings across cultures even using an alien epistemology, is not suited for the original text or narrative (Allen 1992).

To establish the individual as the situated authority of their experiences with or without food, and with or without people, as mentioned before I will take a stance within anthropology's utilization of western phenomenology's theories of embodied experience to pursue an essential meaning within and between individuals in their relationship to the particular experience of participating in food-centric communality and community through commensality. Relationships between people, places, foods, moments, memories, and meanings will be democratized through the actor network theory. In its own small but powerful way, such a process interrupts the cartesian divide between mind and matter, human and universe (Latour 1996) which has quietly found traction since the European Enlightenment and shift to empiricism (Smith 2012). A person is no more the center of the universe than a non-person is not the center, and particularly when exploring the phenomenon of a meal, failing to consider it as the origin of action, and the individual as a reactive actant would be an oversight.

I recognize that these tools are conceptually embedded within western thought, theory and culture, but that it would be too far-fetched to state that they originate with western culture. It is, however, necessary to acknowledge that western imperialism, colonialism, and appropriation were not limited to material wealth. Cultural extraction has enriched western societies as certainly as settler colonialism and the theft of people, plants, animals, and minerals from around the globe (Smith 2012). My interpretations should be considered in good faith, but not infallible, and my tools carefully chosen but not implied to generate ‘true’ knowledge or be without fault.

I also recognize that there can be some question to the relevance of such a small sample size, and to answer that, I will assert that there is an inferential relationship between the particular, as represented in a single case or small sample size, and insight into generalities that occur among broader populations and “that everyone carries a minimum of everyone else within themselves” (Schleiermacher 1998:92-93 quoted in Smith et al. 2009: 38). My study of food practice is carefully informed by these cautions and this presumption in a certain level of ‘likeness’ to be found within the human experience, and further seeing that in a single person’s food narratives there is a relational flow through each era within their life which serves to establish the foundation for activity, or the impetus for change, as people, places, circumstances, and foods ebb and flow.

3.1. Phenomenology

The value of an individual's unique point in their experiences is a basic tenant of western phenomenology. At an unproblematized level of attention "phenomenology is a [western] philosophical approach to the study of experience" (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). Philosophers endeavored to the best of their abilities to articulate an epistemological shift that favored empiricism over the hermeneutic process of generating new and changing insights based on a cycle of interpretation and interrogation of their scriptures, but the transition toward individual empiricism still found itself placing certain individuals as inherently more credible than others.

Knowledge creation, while shifting from the privilege of the clergy, became the exclusive domain of a new gatekeeper: the western trained scholar. Individuals with limited education, or even with high levels of expertise from non-western cultures would be continually invalidated as lacking the sophistication and self-awareness to fully interpret their experiences (Smith 2012). Within anthropology and sociology, phenomenology has a sort of ever present yet rarely overtly discussed association with research. Cultural phenomenology as presented by Thomas Csordas with its roots in the embodiment of Merleau- Ponty and Bourdieu.

To share phenomenology at a properly nuanced level, I will introduce Husserl, Merleau- Ponty, and Sartre. Through these scholars Smith et al. provides a rudimentary introduction to the basic assertions and embellishments of the simple idea of privileging an individual as an expert on their experience, and situating the universe that they are experiencing as the source of their experienced experience. And while I am highlighting

Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu in particular for their contributions to the phenomenology of embodiment, I feel I must offer a first acknowledgement to Husserl and Heidegger who each played a pivotal role in arguing for the primacy of the individual as a credible source for their own experiences. I also feel it necessary to temper the concept of being a being in the world with Sartre's contribution to the phenomenology of absence. By exploring the individual's understanding of their own experiences, Husserl posited the potential to develop an essential truth of what the experience of being in the world was. A particular technique which I apply to the idea of meals is Husserl's 'free imaginative variation' in which I ask the individual to approach different possible variants of 'meal' carefully and intentionally through the phenomenological perspective, and to which I apply this 'eidetic reduction.' The goal here is to establish an essential thing, which we can use to expand our understanding to how that 'thing'—in this case a meal—provides meaning within our lived life experiences and in such way, we can understand the fundamental 'meaning' which this thing has in relationship to "the practical emotional features" of the thing (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009: 14).

The contribution I draw upon from Heidegger is the idea of "dasein" which is translated literally as "there-being," which in essence is being present for the phenomenon:

Dasein is essentially being-with... Even Dasein's being alone is being with the world. The other can be missing only in and for a being with. Being alone is a deficient mode of being with; its very possibility is the proof of this. (Heidegger, 1962/1927: 150 quoted by Smith, Larkin, and Flowers 2009: 17).

This is a nuanced statement, describing an irreducible relationship between an individual and their situatedness within the world. Because an individual must be

somewhere, the nature of their experience in the world is intimately related to that state of being, along with all of the context related to being there. This, Heidegger describes as a state of *intersubjectivity* or a “shared, overlapping, and relational nature of our engagement in the world” (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009: 17). This asserts that we do not move from an ‘inner’ world to an ‘outer’ world because we maintain a consistent somatic relationship to ‘both’ at all times. From Heidegger, there is the lesson that in “being-in-the-world, we are always in relationship to something and that it is possible to interpret the meaning making which other people engage in through a hermeneutic lens” (Smith et al. 2009: 18). These offer what I think is a solid foundation upon which to build a specific conversation about the phenomenon of our embodied experience in the universe—and at the dinner table. But what about the places set at the table for guests that are absent?

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These offer what I think is a solid foundation upon which to build a specific conversation about the phenomenon of our embodied experience in the universe—and at the dinner table. But what about the places set at the table for guests that are absent? Sartre with his existential thrust into the discussion places being-in-the-world as a perpetual process of becoming. For Sartre, an important attention was given to the lack of inherent form of the individual who is existing, but rather the formation of them as a body of perception is shaped by, and through the world, and the phenomena with which they engage. Absence of form, or *nothingness*, becomes central to phenomenology for Sartre, the negative space of absence is meaningful to our understanding of phenomena that are present; in fact, the absence of something is as much an occurrence as the occurrence of that thing. In “*Being and Nothingness*,” Sartre shares a quintessential example:

I myself expected to see Pierre and my expectation has caused the absence of Pierre to happen as a real event concerning this café. It is an objective fact at present that I have discovered this absence, and it presents itself as a synthetic relation between Pierre and the setting in which I am looking for him. Pierre absent haunts this café and is the condition of its self-nihilating organization as ground. (Sartre 1956/1943: 42 cited in Smith et al. 2009: 20)

Here the lack of phenomenon is a phenomenon in and of itself, for both the observer and the phenomenon are in the process of becoming, and the reflection of an experience is left to be measured against the presumed to be becoming, prospect of that event.

In this, the café is organized as a series of independent but associated events whose relationship in their becoming, is formed within the movement of a phenomenon that has passed, into existing as a template for expected experiences in near present points in time. Sartre asserts that there is an interdependency between individuals and that these relationships are important to the process of understanding their seemingly individual experiences. He highlights complexity as integral to attempting to understand the individual since they are entirely grounded within “individual life, the biographical history and the social climate in which the individual acts” (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009: 20). If anyone has ever ordered a dish in a restaurant which typically is served with a particular sauce or accoutrement, for the sake of argument, a side of ranch, if that side of ranch doesn’t arrive with the meal, each bite is tasted not as it is, but as it is without ranch. The same is true for any component of a meal or commensal partner who exists in a heightened or privileged place in your imagining of the experience of the meal.

3.1.1 Phenomenology of Embodiment

The cultural phenomenology of embodiment places a keen focus on our intersubjectivity as a component of our human experience made visible through an exploration of the commonalities of our individual experiences within the world as a physical phenomenon bounded within the flow of time (Katz and Csordas 2003: 4). For my work exploring the food values and practices of individuals within Metro Caring, I will prioritize the contributions of Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, but first the more contemporary contributions of Thomas Csordas within the practical application of embodiment theory. For Csordas, phenomenological embodiment exists on ten levels of

consideration: 1) our physical form or body; 2) our sense of being in the world as related by our senses; 3) our ability to enact movement in the world; 4) our experience of being in a certain place in the world; 5) the inborn or assisted capacities we have to do things in the world; 6) our gendered experience in the world; 7) our experience as having a body that has physiological functions and metabolic processes; 8) our experience with and within the negotiation or communication of socio-cultural constructs interpersonally; 9) our emotional experiences; and 10) our experience within the flow of a linear timeline where our perspective continually shifts along from prospective anticipation, embodied experience, and reverie (Csordas 2011). If we consider these to be the fundamental tools for communicating the human experience through the lens of embodiment, it is possible to delve thoughtfully into many parts of our own experience, but ideally as a theoretical tool to complement ethnographic research, it must surpass a way to frame passively our individual experiences, and instead dabble into generalities.

The Eating Body

This is particularly apt in the consideration of eating; eating is experienced bodily in several ways, it is of course experienced in the most literal manner—we integrate matter during that liminal space where food moves from ‘it’ to ‘I’; eating is a sensual experience, we smell, and taste, and consume the meal’s aesthetic with our eyes; we pique up our ears to prepare for ‘food talk.’ It can be said that we ‘hunker down’ to a meal, ‘chew thoughtfully’ when the meal is in front of us but our mind is elsewhere, or we might ‘raise a glass’ while we prepare to give our attention to a remembrance called by a commensal.

Our bodies are actively engaged in the processes of eating at a level that exceeds the obvious embodiment seen in the consumption of food at the level of our ‘raw’ body which literally reforms itself from the raw material we consume. This can be framed in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s ‘teleology of consciousness’, “recognizing consciousness itself as a project of the world, meant for a world which neither embraces or possess, but towards which it is perpetually directed”. (Csordas 2011: 2)

This can be interpreted as a sort of ‘sentient tropism’ closely associated with our sense of experience our bodily self as distinct from the ‘things’ that are not us— meaning that while a ‘thing’ in action can be perhaps seen as central to a phenomenon we are observing, a part of ourselves such activated, creates a ‘posture’ that focuses our being and attention into such a bodily action, or a,

total awareness of my posture in the intersensory world, a ‘form’ in the sense used by Gestalt psychology [...] this occurs in virtue of its being polarized by its tasks, of its existence towards them, of its collecting together of itself in its pursuit of its aims, the body imagine is finally a way of stating that my body is in-the-world. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 101 quoted in Csordas 2011)

Eating even as an expression of our raw form is an opening of the gates from the bodied self and the liminal space held by the yet-to-be-incorporated materials we gormandize or imbibe. The idea of posture as a symbolic affect of our existence within the universe as an agentive being, could be likened to that of a marionette with threads that both animate us and give direction and limitation to our postures—for Merleau-Ponty, these threads are ‘threads of intent.’

And while Merleau-Ponty offers us the image of a person pressing their hands upon a desk so as to support their body as a way to conceptualize the manner in which our form,

and awareness of our form, align together in the effort and experience of supporting our body as such—I offer the alternative image of ‘the eating body.’ The eating body is a body animated by threads of intent toward the embodied experience of consuming food; a homunculus dominated by a nose, mouth, lips, tongue, stomach, fingers, throat and ears—all poised to act and react to the task at hand. In observing the ways in which the body is activated during an event, assumptions can be drawn as to the nature of how the individual sees themselves bodily involved in the act and offer even a window into the intersubjectivity that Husserl and Merleau-Ponty touched upon.

Through observing other ‘bodies’ in the world with the use of our own, we can infer and interpret the ‘inner’ worlds of those other ‘bodies-in-the-world’; an example he shares is perceiving grief or anger in another person, but feelings such as desire, enjoyment, distaste, hunger, and satisfaction can also be communicated and embodied between people through their being in the world and within the influence of some shared phenomenon. A distinction however is asserted between the direct experience of the influence of a phenomenon and the different interpreted experience of another’s (intentional or incidental) communication—for example, while you may accurately identify the communication of hunger through another person’s expressive response to their experience of the phenomenon of being hungry, you may not be able to infer for what they are hungry for. Despite limitations to our interpretation of a phenomenon experienced by others, he considered it to be too valuable a source of knowledge to be ignored (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

This concept of communicability of the state of our inner world, is, I believe an excellent way to approach the deep satisfaction that is inexorably linked to the act of feeding another. As caregivers and cooks we interpret the inner world of infants, children, partners and elders in our commensal care. We not only take satisfaction in the feeding of others, but often expend deep emotional effort to bring taste and presentation to bear in generating feelings of nostalgia, which we believe will be triggered, or states of sensual delight.

Mealtime: Three Squares or the Structuring Structures that Structure

Bourdieu incorporates not just the act of acting or intending to do so, but rather the all- incorporated expression of our formation within the parameters of our little corner of there-being which is iteratively informed by our form and agency; this blurring between determinism and determination is what he calls ‘habitus’. In considering habitus, it is most excitingly expressed through its intentional diversion from the phenomenological lens—the idea popular with philosophical phenomenologists that the only state which allows reflection upon the phenomenological universe is one which removes the seer from the experience in such a way as to facilitate reflection upon the vision un-impeded by the active act of acting,

habitus is a matrix defined simultaneously by comfortable familiarity and anonymous determination, and practice as a compound term composed simultaneously of acts and constraint, behavior and environment. (Csordas 2011: 4)

For Bourdieu, it is the very practice of actively acting and doing-as-you-do that allows for the habitus to be experienced, and as such, the embodied experience of the individual to be fully expressed, which is an assertion in direct tension with Husserl’s

process of bracketing off the everyday in favor of a removal from the taken for granted world,

Because the habitus is an infinite capacity for generating products – thoughts, perceptions expressions and actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedoms it provides is as remote from creation of unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning. (Bourdieu 1990: 55 quoted by Csordas 2011: 5) In this context, and furthering his commitment to reflecting upon the razors edge between dualities that seemingly exclude one another, Bourdieu places that the ‘practical’ sense or belief is more an expression of our active and embodied experience with the world than that of a mind in a body as the phenomenologists of old would posit. This idea of the action being the seat of perspective and experience is captured by Csordas’ interpretation of Bourdieu here,

From the time of childhood, practical mastery is transmitted through practice without rising to the level of discourse, through mimesis or mimeticism rather than my imitation. (Csordas 2011: 5)

This structuring which occurs also accounts for how power dynamics become embodied as in the context of a food system structured by a socio-political economy that is built upon generations of inequity,

The relation to what is possible is a relation to power; and the sense of the probable future is constituted in the prolonged relationship with a world structured according to the categories of the possible (for us) and the impossible (for us). (Bourdieu 1990: 64-5 quoted by Csordas 2011: 5)

As a side note, I embrace Bourdieu's framing of how power becomes embedded or embodied into our experience within the world more readily than I do Foucault's vision of power as expressed in the disciplining of the physical form to a point of what I would challenge as social determinism in the extreme. In the anthropology of food, I see it as a specter haunting such projects as the food reform movement, whence scientific eating leads seamlessly away from moral turpitudes and advances the process of acculturation toward a puritanical ideal.

3.2. Actor Network Theory

The 'new material' theorists who replace the non-entity within the spaces reserved for agentive 'beings' following the cartesian divide is simultaneously a brilliant insight and a questionable re-emergence of the west's tendency to 'invent' things that are not new. As Paula Allen Gunn shares in the *Sacred Hoop*, in non-western cultures, it is not uncommon for humans and non-human entities to carry the same intrinsic intelligence and agency as a manifestation of an intelligent universe. Accordingly, individuals—entity and non-entity—all move together to maintain a "circle of being" (Allen 1996: 60). Actor-Network Theory is a western exploration marking a theoretical shift away from human exceptionalism, toward relational models which privilege interactions of fundamental expressions of agency through the use of 'actors'. In order to communicate an epistemology of interaction, Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law drew inspiration from networks as an analogy framed by science and technology. One of the most important things that ANT brings as a way of understanding, is its flexibility. ANT is becoming a popular tool for social scientists; however, Latour makes a point that ANT is not a tool for understanding social networks, because, these studies, no matter how

interesting concern themselves only with *social* relations of *individual human* actors – their frequency, distribution, hegemony, proximity (Latour 1996: 369).

ANT is becoming a popular tool for social scientists; however, Latour makes a point that ANT is not a tool for understanding social networks, because, these studies, no matter how interesting concern themselves only with *social* relations of *individual human* actors – their frequency, distribution, hegemony, proximity. (Latour 1996: 369)

Further, while ANT developed from the studies of science and technology, Latour also cautions against associating it as taking an understanding of networks in engineering and seeking to apply them as an epistemological tool limited by these structures. Such a network is only one possible way in which an actor-network might be structured at a single stabilized point. An actor- network may at times reflect no such familiar structure, retaining only conceptual similarities. However, to explore actor-network morphology attention must first be given to the ‘substance’ of the actor network (Latour 1996).

3.2.1. Actor

The only thing that exists in an actor network, are the actors present. In ANT, these are expressed in the literature as ‘nodes’ which are linked to one another through their connections of influence and interdependency. So, what is an actor according to Latour? Actors are oft times associated with the concept of the character and in the jargon of the West are both are typically associated with ‘human beings’, ‘living beings’; if we really reach conceptually toward the implied limits of inference, then *beings* of some sort. Within Latour’s definition of actor however, he “extends the word actor – or actant – to *non-human, non-individual* entities” (Latour 1996: 329).

For Latour's use of the word actor, its definition comes not from the context of stage craft, but instead from the word 'action'. An actor is an actor because some sort of action or influence is enacted from the actor. Not only does this mean that an actant doesn't have to be an 'individual' of any sort of our reckoning of the word, but the actant is not prevented from being a conglomeration of individuals or non- individuals. While narrowly paradoxically, it is wholly logical. If being is not a pre-requisite to action, and action defines actants, then of course an actant can be explored as being composed of actants. In the analogy of a garden, the soil can be an actor, as can a seed, a plant full of seeds, the 'weather,' and indeed the garden itself can also be an actor, which contains all of the other actors previously mentioned within it as 'black boxed' (Latour 1996). Even such things that are entirely insubstantial like the nostalgia that draws a gardener into the garden to commune with echoes of the past can be an actant, which in this example is also 'black boxed,' containing its own network of associated memories and characteristics of those real or imagined moments.

A black boxed node is an entire actor-network which has been collapsed to shift the level of analysis. This feature permits an unimpeded ability to account for relationships on a macro level, such as the actant 'food system' and then shifting to exploring its composite nodes such as urban consumer communities, rural production communities, water, and so on and so forth. Another essential way to utilize this concept of "black boxing" is to imagine how commensals shift dynamically from being the center of the experience of a meal, to being part of the "black boxed" network that composes the meal itself, as to another eater, they are part of the experience as a guest at the table.

3.2.2 Network

Latour brings the word network to ANT by way of 18th-century French philosopher Diderot. In response to 17th-century French philosopher Descartes and the Cartesian divide, which he postulated between the immaterial spiritual realm, and the world of matter, Diderot proposed the word ‘reseau.’ This word was meant to bridge the two and allow simultaneous attention to material and immaterial. What is an actant if it doesn’t have to ‘be’? An actant is defined by its action on other actants, this ‘action’ is exemplified by its observable influence (Latour 1996). Consider how foods bring people together just as people assemble foods into meals.

The idea of a meal’s-meaning informs how people behave and when they might partake, judgements of good, bad, healthy, and unhealthy, and will in turn determine how the individual might respond. History is much more written as the result of the agency of the domesticated plants and animals that create the center of our subsistence strategies and economies of exchange than any whisper of human agency, as in the example of the Great Famine in Ireland following the failure of the potato crop (Diner 2003 Ch. 4), which in this case, the movement of potatoes from the alte plano of Peru precipitated an Irish diaspora. Diaspora, displacement, the rise and fall of empires, while human in our reckoning, are epochal exemplars with non-human, edible catalysts of change such as sugarcane (Mintz 1985).

CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

My field Methods are informed by the following texts: Pertti Pelto's 2013 *Applied Ethnography: Guides for Field Research*; H. Russell Bernard's 2017 *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*.

4.1. Overview of Methods

To explore potential impacts upon individual practices related to food through participation in the community of Metro Caring, I engaged in: 1) Observing the ground truth of being at Metro Caring through working with volunteers and staff; and 2) Food centered case-study interviews. Familiarizing myself with the on-the-ground-reality of my research site took place primarily from June 17th to August 2nd, while formal research in the form of case study interviews August 5th through August 30th. I had proposed focus groups as part of this research plan, but after initial scoping it was found that the disruptiveness of on-site focus groups would far outweigh the potential benefit for the scope of this study.

Participant observation: in the public spaces of Metro Caring was a key aspect of ensuring that my research questions were applicable to the community, and that the questions which would form deeper inquiry. According to Pelto, there are many different types which vary in intensity of contact within the host community and vary in level of participation within the daily activities which the community members.

Pelto argues that the majority of participant observation is at a low to moderate level of engagement, citing the anthropologist actually taking formal roles and responsibilities is rare but not unheard of. Given the mission driven context of Metro Caring, there were clear spheres which can only be participated in as a full contributor. Characteristics which Pelto identifies as typical of participant observation which I incorporated include: 1) building basic rapport; 2) gaining the opportunity to see behaviors and practices that can lead to insightful questions about these behaviors and practices; 3) the majority of participation is not engaged in with the intent of documenting or writing about; 4) very often events simply unfold without particular warning or planning (Pelto 2013, Ch.7).

Case Interviews: Pelto cites case interviews as often focused on quantitative inquiry, with a more recent trend in researchers pursuing qualitative data which has led to the term of ‘case descriptions’. These vary in level of focus on mixed methods or nearly exclusively qualitative, there is also variability as to whether this method is applied to ‘most typical cases’ or attempting to form a comparison between two study groups.

Developing an effective semi-structured interview guide requires a practical understanding of how to compose individual questions, how individual questions of a type fit together to make a useful tool to work iteratively toward your research questions, and how to supplement individual questions with probing protocols. Bernard provides a deeply relevant and valuable introduction to developing a balanced and effective semi-structured interview guide and detailed explanations of when various types of questions are most appropriate or in what combinations. In the case of this

research, the intent was to create a consistency that would allow case interviews to me in conversation with each other, rather than to be directly compared with one another.

4.1.1. Entering the Field

I originally became aware of my research site while working at a Denver area grocery store. Volunteers from Metro Caring were among several charitable organizations which came regularly to pick up food. I first contacted Metro Caring in December of 2018 as a volunteer. It was my intent to learn about the organization and if possible, discuss the potential of conducting my thesis research in the coming summer of 2019.

Ultimately several things informed my decision to select this site. First, was their commitment to fostering genuine community space where interactions are centered on cooperation, sharing food, dignity, and respect. During orientation as a volunteer, I learned that roughly half of the volunteers are also community members utilizing the Market and other services. Second, I wanted to find a space that maintained a commitment toward non-hierarchical communication and education, in order to explore diffusion of food knowledge and practice rather than simply conducting an impact assessment of static nutrition curriculum.

Thirdly, I wanted a site which I could build an on-going relationship with during my coursework and potentially after. This meant that I needed a site which was not just in the Denver Metro Area, but accessible by bicycle or public transportation from either the University of Denver Campus or my home. Finally, and obviously most significant,

was that I wanted a site which wanted me there. For all of these reasons Metro Caring proved the most obvious choice.

4.1.2 Gaining Rapport

Prior to beginning my research, I joined the community as a volunteer. Beginning in December of 2018 I worked one day a week as a Nutrition Educator, and occasionally was moved to other tasks as needed by the volunteer coordinators. On June 17th, I began working four days a week from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. I worked at least one shift as a nutrition educator, and one shift on “carts” which involves transporting groceries which guests have shopped from the market to either a vehicle or to one of several staging areas where guests either waited for rides or repacked groceries into handcarts, luggage, or backpacks. To best fit into the organizational structure, I was given tasks and responsibilities comparable to those of nutrition interns who frequently crowded the upstairs office. In this capacity, I was asked to work on a variety of independent projects and activities such as cleaning, making coffee, filling in for cooking class teachers, or assisting teachers, as well as doing a variety of other tasks and attending meetings. Each day, unless I worked through lunch, I would eat at the common eating area near a table continually stocked with peanut butter and jelly as well as assorted snack foods.

Quoting two of the core values of Metro Caring, I was free to “own it” and “think outside of the box,” so I assessed several opportunities, as an outsider, to identify areas in which my previous experience could be utilized. Coming from a background in grocery and foodservice, I set to organizing the various closets and cupboards and, in

the process, created updated inventory sheets and par systems for ordering. I also attempted to observe and provide revised best practices for food safety throughout the active sampling process in order to reduce the burden of training and supervision of new volunteer nutrition educators. I also was asked to merge some of my preliminary background research with a proposed project, which had been tabled due to lack of labor; to make a descriptive list of other food pantry services and nutrition education assets available to the community to explore unmet needs. For the 28 days spanning from June 17th until August 2nd, this presented my initial in-depth introduction to the community of Metro Caring.

During this time, I was able to reflect and discuss my proposed research with members of the Metro Caring leadership to adjust my research design with attention to minimize disruption and maximize potential value to my community of study. Significant to this process was the being introduced to the seven core values of Metro Caring: 1) Pursue Equity; 2) Champion the Mission; 3) Rise Together; 4) Find the Fun; 5) Own It; 6) Are Brave; 7) Think Outside the Box.

4.1.3. Formalizing my Presence

I was transparent about my reason for being in the community and answering questions about what I was hoping to study and why, but I did not formally begin my research until July 29th, nor did I begin soliciting interviews for later. Beginning on the morning of the 29th, I received final approval of my interview guide from the leadership of Metro Caring and DU's Institutional Review Board, and received formal permission to begin utilizing my recruitment materials. I placed flyers detailing the research

opportunity, time commitment, risks, and compensation on bulletin boards throughout the building, as well as on two locations outside of the building but directly on the premises of Metro Caring. I arranged to begin formally introducing my research during the daily volunteer ‘Gatherings’ with a slide in the Power Point and brief elevator talk about my research, and to actively recruit shoppers as they waited in the waiting area. While I had been clear about my intent to conduct my thesis research within Metro Caring’s community, I made it just as clear that until the 29th of July, I was not scheduling interviews or any research-related activities.

4.1.3. Participant Observation

Pelto describes participant observation as being along a spectrum, ranging from just “being there” all the way to “active participation” (Pelto 2013: 128). I quickly recognized that anything less than full participation would place me “in the way” of the daily operations on my field site and run the risk of disrupting the work that was going on. Aside from in the moment scratch notes, I would often go off site to work on field notes.

4.1.4. Case Interviews

From August 5th until August 30th, I conducted 20 interviews utilizing a 34 question semi- structured interview guide. Design of the interview guide was based on observations, conversations and engagement during my time volunteering prior to beginning research. The actual construction of the interview guide, its order and organization were informed by chapter 8 *Interviewing: Unstructured and Semi-*

structured of Russel Bernard's *Research Methods in Anthropology*. All interviews occurred entirely on the premises of Metro Caring in private rooms which were provided by Metro Caring free of charge. Rooms varied in location, degree of noise or distraction, and likelihood of interruption but were in every case completely adequate for the purpose. Prior to the beginning of each interview, consent forms were provided, and I offered to go through them in as much depth as desired, most interviewees preferred to read the form independently all interviewees ultimately chose to continue with the interview after reviewing the informed consent form. Interviews ranged from 1 hour 56 minutes to only 21 minutes and a total of 925 minutes of total and the mean interview was roughly 46.25 minutes.

The interviews consisted of thirty-four questions consisting of self-identification, ordering, open ended, short answer, closed, and 4-point Likert-scale. Interviews, while centered around food and meals, also explored relationships between people, and systems of negotiating value and meaning around meals at three points over the course of their life-history, with a fourth point exploring 'prospective' relationships with food and meals through trans-generational teaching. A general effort was made to structure the interview guide around a story arc, as a type of facilitated storytelling. While certain unsolicited self-reported demographic information is embedded in storytelling, two questions specifically target demographic information.

Self-Identification

After careful consideration I intentionally removed gender from my interview guide; this is not because gender is not often an intensely negotiated aspect of

individual commensal identities; but rather because it carries such an intensely negotiated aspect of an individual's commensally ascribed identities. I similarly omitted questions of race and ethnicity because of a concern that for the purposes of these interviews, prompting reflection upon race, gender, and ethnicity prior to a reflective journey through practices surrounding food, feeding, and eating over the course of their lifetime could have the effect of triggering mnemonic filters that would impact the act of recollection and interpretation of their memories; in effect leading the framing of reflections in the context of race, ethnicity or gender when it otherwise may or may not have been likely to be framed in such ways.

Instead, self-identification was framed in the context of commensal relationships that speak to potential patterns in who you cook for/cooks for you, who you may eat with or without and under what contexts: considering yourself single or partnered; a parent/guardian; grandparent; adult; elder; a sibling; aunt/uncle. Aunt/uncle was the only potentially gendered question, and that is because I couldn't determine a word to describe an individual being the non-gendered relative of their siblings' children in English. Here is a breakdown of the ways in which each of these roles can inform the transformations that may have occurred for each response. Ultimately identities other than parent, caregiver, spouse, and single proved to be minimally or not at all reported as being associated with individual food practices. Deeper probing into how being a sibling, or uncle/aunt as commensal roles could potentially have drawn out more insights.

Roles at Metro Caring

A second self-identification question sought to frame the individual within Metro Caring, requesting them to select any and all that applied to them out of the list of: staff; volunteer; teacher; student; shopper. At the time of my research, I didn't appreciate the nuance that emerged within the titles of 'staff' and 'volunteer,' because many of the 'volunteers' were compensated by either Service Employment and Redevelopment (SER) or Volunteers of America—and in turn identified as paid staff while carrying the ascribed identity of volunteer.

At multiple points in the guide, I asked for interviewees to name their practice or tradition around food. This served as a to bring attention to the possibility that a respondent linked their relationship to food to a cultural, historic, or ethnic tradition, however just as possible was that it is not. I did not however want to presume that race, geography, religion, or other aspects of history or identity did or did not have a relationship to their relationship to food.

4.1. Recruitment

Recruitment was facilitated through strategically placed flyers near each of the primary entrances one on the northwest side of the building and one on the southwest side of the building; one on a metal streetlight pole at the intersection on the corner which Metro Caring is located on. Furthermore, I placed a poster inside on a bulletin board next to the coffee maker and courtesy phone on the main level of Metro Caring in the waiting area. The final flyer was located upstairs on a bulletin board that was located

outside of the ‘Gathering’ area, this area was well known to have flyers of interest to volunteers as well as the sign-in sheet that each volunteer utilized prior to their shift. After sign-in, volunteers would meet in for Gathering, this provides a short period of updates and icebreakers that accompany a short slide show. I was able to include a slide in this slide show introducing me and my presence.

In conjunction with these passive recruitment methods, I would engage in one-on-one conversations with individuals about food, and my research topic, followed by an invitation to participate in an interview. I found that beginning with a short and ‘primer’ where I shared my passion for food and the curiosity that launched my thesis would lead to more curiosity about the subject of my research.

As knowledge of my research and presence reached a saturation point it was no longer difficult to recruit volunteers, however staff and shoppers remained a challenging demographic. Shoppers in particular proved challenging to recruit if they were on site only for a shopping appointment; most people would arrive very near to their appointment, and then after shopping, there was little interest in sticking around longer. It is helpful to note that it was shared to me that nearly one half of the members of the volunteer community are also regular shoppers in the market.

4.2.1. Inclusion criteria

Informed by review of literature, as well as time spent from June 17th until July 29th working and learning about the community of Metro Caring, a 34-question-interview guide was presented to each of the 20 interviewees. Metro Caring provided a private

space free of charge for the interviews, however the precise room varied as daily activities by staff and volunteers necessitated. As was stipulated as a condition for conducting interviews with community members, a \$30.00 Safeway gift certificate was to be given to each community member; but with no requirement to compensate volunteers. Later, as my observations of the community of Metro Caring developed, I opted to offer the same compensation for each individual if they chose to take if they determined that they were eligible based on their particular situation and program which may have brought them to Metro Caring rather than attempting to separate individuals into buckets myself. The sole hourly staff member did not receive compensation.

CHAPTER FIVE: MAPPING MEALS: MINE, OURS, THEIRS

Anthropologists often approach aspects of everyday life with an attention to decoding potentially meaning-rich aspects of activities in both ceremonial and secular spheres of life. Mary Douglas applied this same anthropological lens to the often-overlooked space on the dinner plate,

If language is a code, where is the pre-coded message? [...] if food is a code, where is the pre-coded message? Here on the anthropologist's home ground, we are able to improve the posing of the question. A code affords a general set of possibilities for sending particular messages. If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries. Like sex, the taking of food has a social component, as well as a biological one. (Mary Douglas 1966, Ch. 18: 161)

Satiating our desire for food and drink, by preference of our biological needs, be something done regularly. 'Food', as a construct is being used to communicate any sort of edible material, which is more or less a source of nutrients. However, when we speak of eating food, generally implicitly or explicitly referring to more precise related constructs such as meals, snacks, feasts, nibbles, dinners, suppers, breakfasts, lunches, desserts, brunches; and all with qualifiers such as good, bad, satisfying, lonely, disappointing, unpleasant, unfamiliar, nutritious, unhealthy—or regular.

This chapter will seek to explore the varied ways in which the construct of food is present within individual's food narratives in order to offer insight into how food

as a fungible construct is able to be renegotiated based on its context to carry complex and at times paradoxical meanings.

If there is an effort to ‘map’ food’s meanings of where do anthropologists begin? Mary Douglas offered that “the smallest, meanest meal metonymically figures the structure of the grandest, each unit of grand meals figures again the whole meal—or meanest meal” (Douglas 1975, 67). Douglas also frames the study of meals not just in their material composition; their ingredients, the entrees, main courses or sides are all considered; and instead of limiting the consideration to the items on the table, Douglas places the attention upon where meals and eating are situated within our ‘social universe’. Just as the meal most common in assembled composites helps us frame those meals that diverge in form; so too can the most common assemblage of the commensals in attendance inform our understanding of how a meal is understood—whether mundane, mean, or magnificent.

Douglas places the center of the social universe as expressed through food as being the intimate, family setting. This means that the fundamental point of reference for mapping meaning around food is an average family meal, and for the purposes of situating an individual’s relationships to food, the ‘bedrock’ of this is found in childhood. As a result of our being born essentially helpless and unable to independently feed ourselves, the memory of how food is first framed for us is an irreducible phenomenological space. We have agency within this space to a point, we may like or dislike, resist or intentionally seek out specific food centered experiences, but the landscape of our experiences, are curated by our caretakers; for a deeply

thoughtful exploration of this concept of dependency and the role of the caregiver in building a foundation for all future food relationships, I recommend *Children's Gastronomie* by Christine Ripault published in 1968. A nutrition educator at Metro Caring provides the following reflection on the structure and meaning of a common meal,

Okay, every night we had one meat and three vegetables. ah that was the usual and other times we had, things like ox tail with rice or tripe with rice. That's what we had for, main evening meal every evening. On a Sunday we had a roast, usually a leg of lamb with roast potatoes with two other vegetables and dessert.

Here a nutrition education volunteer visits the everyday by offering a point of reference from which any deviation can be known and judged. Sutton paraphrases this as meaning that meals serve as metaphors which inform the systems of meaning for one another. Good food is an idea that is reflexively 'known' emotionally, sensually and bodily; it is constantly disputed, rated, or rejected; and negotiated as a symbol of national, cultural, and familial identities. It is as nuanced as the sources and proportions of ingredients, the preparations, places, times, and people who all play an integral part in our assessment of what's good, bad, and other. But before digging into an exploration of individual systems of meaning through remembered meals, I will begin with a brief introduction to the act of remembering.

5.1. Remembering and Sharing our Stories

If my primary research method is interviewing, the central assertion that my inquiry rests upon is that when prompted, individuals can reach into the personal space of their memories through recollection, reverie or remembrance to provide stories built upon their sense of the past,

Memory, for the thinkers of the Renaissance and earlier, was the seat of identity; while reason made one human, it was memory that made one a particular individual [...] Memory was the refuge of the individual – one’s own memory as well as ‘others’ were the mysterious sources from which identity issues, tantalizingly almost present, frustratingly elusive and above all, thoroughly and irreducibly private (William West; in Radstone and Hodgkin 2003: 2).

To understand how practice leads to meaning I will delve more deeply into memory and food, or more precisely delving into the remembering through food. In *Regimes of Memory*, Susannah Radstone and Katherine Hodgkin delve into many of the fundamental questions about how we should be conceiving of the material of memory. What can it mean if trauma and memories can exist across generations from an embodied space rather than being learned (Radstone and Hodgkin 2003). How the inherent ‘fragility’ of memory can be bolstered through the use of mnemonic props in what is referred to as ‘artificial memory’; along with questions of the destabilizing of memory when the props of remembering are no longer accessible (Radstone and Hodgkin and Radstone 2003). And what relationship memory and history have or could have to the benefit of a more robust and comprehensive concept of history (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003). For this research I favor this nuanced and complex explanation of how memory works over the Freudian ‘depth’ model of memory as a linear thing.

Memories are formed through temporal cementation into strata, disappearing into the past from the point of the present (Radstone and Hodgkin 2003). This is because in the experience of facilitating a narrative from a set point in the far past to a set point in the near present, the depth model would assert that the narrative would flow forward until it naturally terminates at the present moment.

In actual practice, narratives cluster in non-linear segments linked to mnemonic nodes—in the case of food-centered life histories, these nodes more often than not are the meals themselves which through repetition appear in one form or another at various points. However, because the purpose of this research was not to only collect narratives, but to also apply a reductive lens toward an essential idea of a meal or conceptual relationship between them, a methodological shift from considering memory as: 1) a thing linked to a singular moment in the past; 2) a thing that is in the past; 3) a thing that happened to the person remembering; or 4) that actually happened to anyone in the way it is remembered. To address these concerns, ‘sedimenting memory’, ‘prospective memory’, ‘social memories’, and ‘heteroglossic memories’ will be explored.

Sedimenting memory is addressed by Sutton through applying the concept of the ritual of the everyday. Ritual as a concept need not be reserved for moments removed from the everyday. The processes of ritual within the remembering of everyday life can strengthen a person’s ability to utilize memory by repeating (Sutton 2001). And is further elaborated through the concept of incorporating memory as offered by Paul Connerton in *How Societies Remember*. Incorporating memory “rests on generating sensory and emotional experiences that sediment memory in the body” (Sutton 2001,

19). These felt aspects of the experience serve as a powerful mnemonic focus for the remembering and re-experiencing of the phenomenon upon recreation of the emotional and sensory environment.

There is open discussion as to the degree of flexibility or improvisation which can exist within everyday ritual space without hindering the process of sedimenting memory. Sutton frames this ritualized space within everyday life as being significant not because of a forcefulness of the meanings embedded within the moments, but rather “seeing ritual as the meaningful, or poetic, aspect of all experience” (Sutton, 2001, 20).

Prospective memory is a concept that grows from sedimented memories who through repetition create either an anticipated future which can be remembered into, such as memories linked to events that occur based on cycles of a calendar such as harvests and holidays (Sutton 2001). These can also emerge from a moment on the other side of an event that threatens to create an irreconcilable interruption in the stability that had existed. In these cases, rather than using memory to place yourself into a likely future, prospective memory is used to understand the reality of a present through linking to possible futures. In Sartre’s example of the Café, it was prospective memory of seeing Pierre in the café that created the dissonance between expectation and reality upon finding the café minus his friend.

Social memories are memories that need not have happened, or are likely to happen to you personally so long as they happened someone you share a social or cultural identity with, in Jeffery C. Alexander’s *Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma* a defense of the theoretical relevance of traumatic cultural memories is postulated as being remembered

“not just to explain what happens to themselves, but to the collectives that they belong to” (Alexander 2018: 2). A traumatic memory such as this is thought to work more subtly and gradually in its effect on individuals and has been explored in “life course analysis” (Alexander 2018: 5), which attempt to qualify the presence of predictable or at the very least identifiable effects as they are expressed in the identity of individuals connected to these socially felt cataclysms (Alexander 2018).

Or traumatic memories which needn’t even be consciously remembered, but could be passed bodily over generations (Radstone and Hodgkin 2003). Hunger and persistent or episodic food insecurity can be discussed under such a context. Discussing changes within individual relationships to food can require a movement back from direct personal experiences into indirect embodied experiences.

Heteroglossia or heteroglossic memories might have roots in actual individual experience but they have a unique character that their factualness is less important than their believability. Heteroglossia is the formation of common sense through a glossing over of individual memories into a social sensibility, and while heteroglossic memories often have a common sense feeling of truth to them, it matters little whether they are inherently built on fact or just built on repetition. For example, three individuals I interviewed from different countries, different social and cultural backgrounds, and with generally differing ideas of how to define healthy eating, all mention vegetables of different types, starches, and some type of protein. Whether or not you ate like any of those individuals, you might when asked assert ‘parents’ encourage children to eat balanced meals composed of these different things. Whether you ate that way or not

growing up, the collective memory of ‘eating right’ hangs as a true but imagined memory.

While these quotes seem to carry very clear nutritional insight, there are ways in which the content could be subtly divergent while still being considered accurate to a healthful diet; if you interviewed more people from a vegetarian background, you might see vegetables similarly highlighted, but attention given to beans as a key protein rather than meat. Or another example, many people eat cereal because it understood to be part of a complete breakfast because of advertisements but in most cases the cereal is only placed on a table with a breakfast that would be just as complete without it, and in reality, perhaps the cereal is the only part of the complete breakfast that is regularly eaten.

These collective remembrances are not merely limited to formations of common-sense eating, but also more acute, to traumatic memories. Just as a special meal is made sensible as a result of the mundane meal, memories of eating are made sensible through the absence. While many individuals and families have known moments of food insecurity, there are significant moments in the social histories which people align themselves with that reflect societal food insecurity. For the Irish, a history of repeated periods of hunger culminating in the in the middle of the 19th century with the great famine which claimed more than a million lives and left James Joyce; the celebrated Irish writer declaring that the Irish were “Outcasts from life’s feast” (Diner 2003).

Heteroglossia ultimately is often in direct conversation with social memories such that for the Irish, a history of repeated periods of hunger culminating in the in the middle of the 19th century with the great famine which claimed more than a million lives and left

James Joyce; the celebrated Irish writer declaring that the Irish were “Outcasts from life’s feast” (Diner 2003). Such an event can easily be applied to the concept of traumatic cultural memories. Reflecting back upon the dietary reformers, you can also see how politicized food propaganda can be intentionally placed within the collective memory of a populace in an effort to influence their understanding and negotiation of the construct of ‘healthy’.

In the next section I will begin to share the process of mapping meaning within meals, beginning in childhood as an origin of the phenomenological experience and continuing over the individual’s life. I will next situate an organization at the center of the phenomenological universe, and exploring its experiences with food through the individuals who make up its ‘community’, and through this, explore the inverse—how the experience of experiencing this commensal space is enacted through individual’s practices and values with food against the backdrop of change on a personal level and as a process of cultural diffusion to individuals outside of the organization. While what happened directly to you is important when understanding how meals are interpreted and understood, it is also important what happened to people such as your parents, grandparents, ancestors, kinsfolk, and also what happens in the believable social narratives you are exposed to.

5.1.1. Childhood: Average Meal

One common theme that emerged was the relationship between where a person grew up, what they ate, and in turn some of the core experiences that formed the foundation for their expectations for meals in childhood. Here a volunteer and member

of the community navigator team reflects on what an average meal looked like as a child in the rural South. The available bounty of food fresh from the farm or garden coupled with the direct familial relationship to where the food came from is worth noting,

an extremely average meal when I was growing up always included vegetables and meat, usually some form of pig or cow, because my grandfather had a smoke house he would slaughter pigs, my other grandfather would take cows from people who had processed them, he would BBQ that meat or prepare it somehow, so we usually had pig or cow for the most part, and chickens, my great grandmother had chickens, she would kill those and we'd have a meal... we always had some form of that meat, chicken, pig, or cow... and we usually had butter beans, turnip greens mashed potatoes and gravy, that would consist of a meal for us... but always some sort of vegetable and meat, and there was usually some sort of bread available. [...] my mother [did the cooking], and even as little children they taught us how to cook, we also had an extensive garden, so we were out picking and helping plant and that sort of thing and then helping shell or husk or whatever had to be done. [at an average meal] it would have been my mother, father, and three of us kids usually during the week, on the weekends in would come my grandmother, and my great grandmother, and great grandfather... and usually my aunt and uncle. 90% of the time they were at our house, 'cause we had the biggest one, and then we would go sometimes to my grandmothers and sometimes to my aunt's house.

In the above excerpt the close proximity of extended family didn't just influence the availability of meat from their grandfather's smoke house or their grandmother's chickens; it also set expectations for who might be in attendance on an average weekend dinner when the table may be set for as many as ten, rather than the usual weekday number of five. This highlights the importance of place, proximity to potential commensals, and subsistence strategy/food access as important factors in the form and execution of a meal.

A volunteer nutrition educator and gardener shares the story below of an average meal framed by cultural heritage, who was present, who was no longer present, and what was eaten.

well, my immigrant grandparents lived with us, so from Poland, so we had (whispers/sighs) a lot of soup... lot of soup, and on Sundays, my mom would always make a big... base like a roast... dinner with a lot of vegetables... but a hunk of meat... that was on Sundays, so that is a very distinct memory of mine... my mom did the majority [of the cooking], but my grandfather lived with us too, and he made a lot of the soup... he also ate foods that we didn't eat. Pigs' feet, brain, things that we thought "ugh..." so he, and he canned, he canned mushrooms, he would go around the neighborhood and dig up mushrooms, and so but the everyday meals were my mom... the soups and the canning are my grandfather. All of us [...] I have three brothers. yeah [dinner] was kind of a command performance. my grandmother... only lived with us... she died very quickly, the reason they moved in and sold their home, and

they moved in with us was my grandmother was very sick and she only lived for six months so in the absence of talking about her is... she wasn't there.

The average meal is further nuanced by day of the week, highlighting a deviation from the general composition by acknowledging that the addition of meat on a Sunday was to be counted on. Another nutrition educator and volunteer, when prompted to recollect meals in the context of what was eaten commonly, the everyday was quickly linked to meals prepared by his mother, structured by the dictations of her education as a dietitian, and the religious rules they followed as participants of the Catholic church. The everyday becomes reflexively a node for nutrition, religion, and even a continuity that extends for generations backwards into the past,

My mother being a dietitian, when she cooked a meal, she balanced the meal, so that we had the meat- the protein, we had the starch we had potatoes or rice and then two vegetables, green or a yellow vegetable like that and she balanced them very well, things like ox tail with rice or tripe with rice. That's what we had for [the] main evening meal every evening. On a Sunday we had a roast, usually a leg of lamb with roast potatoes with two other vegetables and dessert [...] We grew up in the catholic church and at that time, on a Friday Catholics were not allowed to eat meat. So, it was traditional that three times a week... three times a month we ate fish and chips or fish and fries as you call it. and one Friday we had macaroni and cheese that was tradition. [...] My father's parents had a farm. and basically, South Africans have eaten the same foods for eons. So, nothing would have changed, nothing would have changed (more quietly). We had every night. We had a family meal. So, the core of

the family was always there. When we, became you know, teen years, one or two of us might have eaten with friends or girlfriends, but that uh that was I know my father's parents were very structured and that's the way we grew up.

Eating the everyday, as has been touched upon, is situated at the center of a network of culture, religion, geography, movements, generational narratives, family, and ideas of health and nutrition—not to mention the specific foods present and the culinary knowledge that their preparation requires.

5.1.2. Good Meal (Childhood)

A good meal can begin as being 'good' because of it being an assemblage of foods that are specifically aligned to one's tastes; and just as in this individual's childhood, the criteria of what defines a healthy meal was part of the everyday, so to was part of a special meal the temporary suspension of these rules, if healthy and the everyday were often hand in hand, so too was it possible to say that the good and the unhealthy need not be mutually exclusive. In the excerpt below a volunteer and nutrition educator offers this reflection on a good meal, and what made it identifiable as compared to an average meal, ah yes... (laughter) a good meal, a very tasty meal, when we had a BBQ or cookout, the meals weren't that healthy... we, we over did the protein now lamb chops, lamb in South Africa is... a staple. Lambchops are very greasy, very fat. The sausage that we made farmer sausage is also very fat (laughter) (laughter), so the cookouts were not the healthiest food on earth... (laughter). that, that's what I'd call the protagonist in that question... was...the cookouts.

This individual highlighted a regimented consistency as being behind the everyday, in which their dietitian mother structured meals with careful attention to nutrition, and dining in the kitchen at the table was absolutely insisted upon. In the section shared above, a good meal is characterized by an absolute suspension of norms. Food was cooked outside, possibly eaten outside, the meal was unhealthy and unbalanced. While the meal associated with the everyday was prepared by their mother, the meal considered good or special was prepared by their father. In an alternate example provided by this individual, the meal was prepared by neither parent, and was prepared at the farm of an uncle,

Oh, we used to dock the sheep when they were lambs, and ah my brother and I used to go to the farm to my uncle, we would doc the sheep and we would throw them into... take the tail off and the nuts, but you take the tail off and you skin it. and you throw it into a plough share over a fire and uh render the fat, then you take the balls and throw them in the fat... wow they were good! (laughter).

In the context of highly regimented norms during mealtime, a defining theme here is the deviation from this structure. Aside from the likelihood that docking sheep might take place along a seasonal calendar, it was specifically noted that in the context of cookouts, these occurred unpredictably, independently of any event either religious or secular.

Another volunteer and community navigator shares an excerpt below that continues with a few examples along the theme that a good meal often is prepared by a different individual, and also is eaten in a different location,

I think probably the meal that I enjoyed the most during my childhood, I think because my grandmother made it for me... it was meatloaf, mashed potatoes and gravy, uh... squash and green beans...and that was just like a comfort any time I went to see my grandmother, uhm... that's what I would have, and then when I moved away, when I was in college she would invite me over cause I went to college in my home town... she would invite me over and that's the meal I would have... if I came from Atlanta, I was in Forsyth Georgia so I moved to Atlanta, 'd come back down [to] Forsyth and my grandmother would make me that meal [...] when I moved away she was like "I know how to get her home" so that's what she did. I think, my great grandmother cooked these things... they were called ho cakes? oh my god those... it's hard to find the people who... they have to look up the recipe, and that there is—in Jackson Georgia this place called fresh air Bar-B- Que... oh my god, it's the best Bar-b-que on earth, when you say 'Brunswick stew' people go "what is that" that's a comfort food for me, and then always, always meatloaf, mashed potatoes and gravy... always... yeah, I'll sit down to eat a meatloaf, I just automatically think of my grandmother.

A similarity between these is that there is also a level of consistency in the meal having certain expected components, though the example of the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, gravy, squash and green beans sets a level of specificity to the composition of a good meal that sets it apart. It also speaks directly to the process of sedimentation of individual meals as Sutton discusses, little by little changing the individual meal over time into being an anchor between two people in the face of life changes, and eventually

serve as a reflexive mnemonic trigger to call back memories of people we have lost who are dear to us. Amid the landscape of favorite foods, meatloaf, mashed potatoes, gravy, squash and green beans moves apart from a merely sensual indulgence into a palpable bridge through time and space, connecting people through time and space.

A good meal can also be an extension to structures which define our experiences rather than a disruption from them. A volunteer nutrition educator offers this window into a particular food served during a holiday as having a consistent presence in a good meal, while everything else from where it is eaten, who makes it, and who it is shared with is in a state of fluctuation,

well, a big deal... are perogies, I don't know how familiar you are... they are basically a dough stuffed with a non-meat and on Christmas eve there's a... it replicates the poverty that Jesus was born into... and so you have a fish at the most and then a certain number of grains... and perogies are a big part of it, and so that was when I was growing up, the irony was my mom would go to the Polish bakery and buy them... where we moved they didn't exist so a huge holiday tradition is we would make our own and we make hundreds of them and my grandkids who... have you know very little connection emotionally and... besides singing [happy birthday in Polish] it's fun... because the five year old now would make her own dough and I flatten it out... she carries it to the table so now she has a functional job and feels very elevated that she's not running around... so that's a big deal for us. The prep is... are all my kids and grandkids, and my brother now and his son... the meals would be family and anyone... we invite people, we like crowds. Any friend that

was consistent was called uncle that weren't uncles... which took me... I was eight or nine when I realized... we would invite aunts and uncles, close friends. It varied sometimes it would be just us, sometimes it would be someone and all their kids... it didn't matter. We would have... my mom only had one surviving sibling, and we lived in the same town with my grandparents and that family had six kids and then there were the four of us, so we would just gather, for... it's Saturday... those wouldn't be fancy, they would be more Americanized meals, but the tradition of gathering was ingrained.

The above excerpt also shows how recollection defies linearity at times. Reflexively the speaker shifts from past to present in recalling perogies at Christmas time. This highlights what Sutton speaks about in the ritualist nature of meals and the way in which food can be a trigger for entering a liminal space where by eating a certain thing at a certain time, it is as if you are sharing a moment which is contemporaneous with every other moment which that food was used to activate that liminality. In this example, perogies at Christmas are almost impossible to consider in the context of a single moment in time or space (Sutton 2001).

5.1.3. Bad Meal (Childhood)

In much the same way that good meals are often inexorably linked to people in our lives that we associate them with, bad meals are also often associated with the people and circumstances which they are found in. Below a volunteer community navigator shares bad memories associated with food are tied to a tense relationship with a great aunt and great uncle and a feeling of not being welcome at the table during a meal with

extended family at which time the actual food was less a part of the narrative than the interpersonal subtext,

[..] the person who would prepare most of the bad meals, was... probably that great uncle and great aunt... because, my grandmother... it was my grandmother's sister, and they were kind of... snooty? because we were adopted into the family... they were nice to us, but you could tell they kind of looked down their nose at us. When it was crappy meals, it was that, "oh we're having this for dinner, but it's only for adults, you guys can have vienna sausages... spam sandwiches" or potted meat, so... we would eat it cause we liked it but there was a difference made.

In this case, the particular unpleasant character of the meal was recalled as being of secondary importance to the social context which the food was associated with. This contrasts sharply with the memory that this individual shared previously in which meatloaf prepared with love by their grandmother anchored a lifelong positive association with that food, while various types of processed meat served by a great aunt symbolize feelings of being unwelcome despite being otherwise enjoyable to eat. This volunteer nutrition educator shares the idea that a bad meal can be associated with a basic repulsion that is felt toward that meal because of its source rather than specifically linked to flavor, texture or social contexts,

Czarnina... czarnina is duck blood soup... so my grandparents when they lived... in Widing Indiana there's a suburb of Chicago, the but Chicago... it's very Polish, so they had two lots and they had chickens and ducks and... very common then when I was a little kid and zoning didn't really exist, and when they would kill an animal

they didn't waste anything... so czarnina is duck blood soup and I absolutely hated it... it was a bitter taste cause they would put vinegars and other things... I don't know maybe like a borsch? knowing the source I think as a kid really, I found it repulsive... and... yeah.

Unpleasant meals or ingredients can begin with a simple revulsion, but be compounded by the emotional experience of having someone attempt to force you to eat it as shared by this volunteer community navigator,

[...] liver. [I was] forced to eat liver, well my mom would also make me eat brussels sprouts, but I can get brussels sprouts down, but liver... not gonna happen, come right back up [...] I do not like liver, I don't care how you cook it, I don't care what you do to it, I don't like it... and my great uncle one time, was cooking liver, I thought it was steak and I was like "wow that smells good" and so we sat down to eat, and my grandmother was sitting there, and she says "that's liver you don't want this" and my great uncle had already fixed my plate... and I was like "I'm not going to eat that" and he was like "yes you are... it's steak" and my grandmother said "she knows it's liver, but she's going to eat it"... and I wouldn't touch it, I sat there for twenty minutes, and my grandmother was like "get up and leave, I can't force this child to eat liver" so I wasn't a fan then, but my grandmother had taught me to eat chicken livers... and that ruined that, I wouldn't touch it until I was in college... I'll eat chicken livers if you fry them? and put stuff all over them? other than that I won't touch liver [...] everything is great [now] except liver, you can keep that. [laughing].

There was no attempt during this research to delve more deeply into possible correlation between forced consumption and continued aversion later in life because the sample of individuals who experienced forced consumption was too small, this would be a valuable area for continued exploration. If one were to consider forced consumption as being on one side of a coin of unpleasant mealtime memories, perhaps forced ostracization or alienation from the dinner table could be on the other side of that coin. In the excerpt below a volunteer nutrition educator shares a bad meal in which the composition of the meal was entirely forgotten,

Bad meal from my childhood, hell I can't think of one... hmmm... you see I was in a position my mother was a dietitian. so, the meals that we ate were very GOOD, so trying to think of a bad meal ah, (laughter), my mother... we complained about having to have a meat and three vegetables every night. So, my mother said fine, don't worry about it, I'll fix it... (laughter), and that night six o'clock, she called my father and grandmother to the table, she made all three of them an omelet. We stood around said mommy what are we going to eat? She said I don't care, what you eat. I'm no longer cooking for you... (laughing) I think that was the worst I ever had. I can't remember what I ate that night, but for your mother to tell you I'm not cooking for you anymore. ah ha (both laughing). and then after that I sort of helped her with all the cooking. So. Yeah, mommy just said that's it, I'm not cooking for you anymore. and (laughter). My father liked organs. heart liver kidneys, ox tail, tripe, the head of the sheep. that's what my father liked. So, I grew up eating very, very unusual things.

This individual later reflected with pride in their willingness to eat adventurously as being something that they were proud of and that was unique when considering themselves against their agemates growing up. While the story above highlights the anguish of being pushed outside of their commensal circle, individually unpleasant meals from childhood seemed a rarity. The only things highlighted as being unpalatable was rice and caviar due to their texture, but these didn't count as bad meals in their opinion because there was never an expectation to eat them.

5.1.4. Healthy Meal (Childhood)

Several themes presented themselves in the context of healthy eating. As was/will be discussed in more detail it can be linked to geographies; in the form of regional food traditions such as those found in rural or farming communities, or national and ethnic cuisines; it can be the result of intentionally curated meals and serving sizes where a parent prepares food and even goes as far as 'plating' the meal as is the term in the restaurant industry. The excerpt from a volunteer community navigator below first highlights an intersection of healthy being linked to growing up on a farm, living in close proximity to their grandmother and great grandmother, with specific meals being designed and carefully plated intentionally to be varied, healthful, and with a pleasant dessert,

[...] my mom would do fairly... she actually did really well with the balanced foods, because we lived on a farm... and particularly when we went to my great grandmother's house, she lived across the path, she... we would always have some kind of protein... we would always have vegetables, we would have milk, and that

was literally fresh from the cow, some people can't drink milk [like] that, they'll throw up... but I was raised like that... and then we would have some sort of... dessert and bread... it was all balanced and measured out, there was no 'you can't eat that because you'll gain weight' it was a balanced meal, you know when you are a little kid, running around and you're out in the garden picking, you live in this kind of triangle with your grandmother and great grandmother, so everybody, eats healthy and they get a dessert included because... really? and then you're not overweight because you're running around all the time.

Above nutrition is reflected upon as being an intentionally curated component of the process of a parent or guardian's role for a child. Portions are considered based on the perceived needs of the individual being fed, but also importantly is that lifestyle is directly remembered as being in association with this process. This individual further weaves in nutrition, learning and lifestyle into this next segment,

my great grandmother was real big on... she'd take a piece of tin and put it on top of the well, and we'd sit there and cut up apples, and whatever and we'd dry fruit... we'd have dried fruit... we'd put it on the tin, let it sit in the sun a day or two, and you'd have your dried fruit [...] yeah... didn't get processed back then... you did it yourself. [laughs]

Here is a specific example of how their grandmother provides a complimentary influence on their relationship with food; creating dried fruit that has been picked freshly. It also highlights the matter-of-fact manner in which food preparation and preservation skills are modeled as part of the process of meeting the day-to-day needs

of eating. This individual would later explain that this grandmother's cuisine in particular still provide a high level of nostalgia; and that this early introduction to eating fruits and vegetables was a continued centerpiece to their relationship to eating.

Parents, particularly mothers, were often highlighted as being both a source of healthy eating knowledge and habits, and a continuous influence into adulthood as shared by this volunteer nutrition educator,

you know? until I married into my husband's family, grilled cheese meant an open-faced piece of bread and a tomato and then I married into the farm folk, and they SLATHERED it with butter, and they fried it... we didn't fry... a lot and I... I remember getting a really upset stomach when his aunt made me this (retching noise) really greasy grilled cheese and he goes 'of course you can't call it grilled cheese if it's open faced' and so we had to do the melding of the... behaviors but yeah... but the healthy was my mom... and soup, soup is very healthy and we didn't fry... that was yeah.

This highlights a constant reality I encounter discussing individual's memories surrounding food. As was mentioned my discussion on the processes and mechanisms of memory; it is not always organized in neat 'sediment', where things are clustered based on their chronological proximity. Rather as is demonstrated above, asking about healthy food in childhood immediately brings a recollection of a memory from adulthood. The contrast between how she grew up eating and the way her husband's family ate became interlinked mnemonically with her memory about childhood and linearity proves less relevant than relationality.

5.2. Since Childhood

Why do people change what they eat? Why might they choose not to change? Among the reasons shared are those changes that occur with evolving roles taken over their lifetime. Being responsible for feeding and educating a child into healthful food practices, taking care of an elder, cooking for or with a romantic partner or losing a romantic partner and cooking dinners for one are all broadly impactful across many different aspects of an individual's life, but also have been clearly identified as being catalysts for change in what we eat and how we eat it. Other more personal reasons identified by interviewees included changing health, activity levels, education, financial resources, work schedules, and trying new things. Very often, we select identities based on the life changes and life stages which we find ourselves enacting, particularly through our relationships with others. A volunteer who works in the market shares the following narrative when asked what social/commensal roles they self-identify with and it ultimately provides a journey through many of the key life events that they have been through since childhood.

Well right now, my mother, my father past, ok and I have a son, and he also passed away, I have another son, [who lives out of state] and like I said, as a matter of fact I got five kids, I got three girls, [...] and my two sons [...] they all live [out of state] [...] I'm here by myself, I live by myself, I live at the assisted living right around the corner, over here [...] I've been living there for like ten years [...] the way I found out about this place was from my brother, he was working at [...] I've been in Denver all my life, I've been married three times, I had an older daughter [...] she's

passed away, she went on with the lord, her mother's passed away [...] I had another son [...] he passed away [...] his mother still lives [in Denver] we get along fine [...] I get along fine with all my babies mothers you know. I'm 63 years old, been in Denver all my life, I've lived other places [...] but I always seem to come back home, because, I don't know, it's like all my resources is here, like if I ever get in trouble, if I ever need help, if I ever need... you know someone to come to... turn to, I got my family here, you know I know how to get food stamps, I know how to get a part time job, I know how to... I know people, who can put me in places that can help me, like find a place, food, a car, you know I could borrow money from, you know and back in them places I didn't have that type of resources, people I could fall back on. you know, help. here I have help [...] I love all the friendships I've made here, all my friends are here, all the people I grew up with, I still see them. and then where I live at, it's like another family. ok... I'm a Christian, I'm a man of God, I'm a righteous man of Christ, I'm led by the Holy Spirit, I'm a follower of Jesus, I've been following of him I've been born and saved again since 1998. [...] I go to church [...] I got to [physical rehabilitation] every day after I leave here [...] and after that, I'll... I got family here, so I'll either go hang out with them at their house or they'll come to my house or whatever... and we're a close-knit family, cause... like Saturday, this Saturday, we're having a BBQ we're having a BBQ at the park out there and [...].

For this individual the continuous influences of family and the religious institutions that they were raised within created a consistency that possibly anchored their food-

based relationships because throughout the food centric life-history interview, what they ate, how they framed meals, and the key influences in their culinary life remained the same. Returning to this individual the narrative below highlights food as practiced withing the church community that, along with family, occupies the center of their commensal life,

oh yeah, we had dinner with different churches almost every... second and third Sunday. we had different churches coming over, you know to eat and stuff, we'd go over there to eat and stuff, we'd go to Colorado Springs every third Sunday there's a church that we'd visit every day and they'd always have a meal for us, they come every fourth Sunday, to our church you know, and we'd eat and stuff, you know [...] and then we go to different churches and all over Denver visiting. They come over to our church, that's how I know... I know a lot of ministers by them coming over and visiting and stuff I know a lot of visitors from a lot of different churches [...] it's like Soul Food, it's like soul food, it's mainly soul food, it's not, sometimes it'll be Spanish, sometimes it'll you know it'll be Italian, sometimes it'll be like African food and stuff like that, but mainly it's soul food. Mainly it's soul food.

This respondent associated their food 'tradition' with a love of food and most specifically a sense of wonder which appears in line with the practice of enjoying the mystery of what might be on the menu each week at the church dinners; the tendency toward commensality between congregations could also have been structured by certain similar social and cultural backgrounds—hence the higher likelihood of soul food being served. We continue with this individual,

what am I going to make for dinner? by the time I get home, I make it I take a picture of it, and then by the time I go to sleep, I'm thinking 'what's gonna be tomorrow?' and it always has to be different. it's the same food, just different presentation. you know?

Next drawing from an individual who identifies as a market shopper, they share a window into how military service as an adult was experienced from a food centered lens, first in the army where food was somewhat similar to what they were familiar with growing up,

oh well I went into the army first, and it was just like being at home. Except they said you've got to eat it in fifteen minutes, and I said I can do that too (laughs) [...] In the Army, it was heavy duty, heavy food, you know, porkchops, chicken, heavy food to increase your muscle mass, increase your strength and muscle.

Following the army, they experienced food in the navy which was remembered unpleasantly,

the food in the navy, smelled like garbage all the time 'cause it was sea food and vegetables. and you know that combination smells like kind of like garbage [...] yeah, they ate lot of rabbit, they ate a lot of rabbit. But their rabbit tastes like chicken (laughs), I ain't [sic] never cooked no rabbit that tastes like chicken. but it's the white meat rabbit, (inaudible) I think that's the cottontails. So, they [are] breeding cotton-tails and feed'n [sic] them to the navy. we did a lot of scallops; we

did a lot of rabbit we didn't get no chicken. We didn't do no chicken. They hardly didn't do no chicken; it was that kind of food. Different kind of food.

The military approaches food in both a paternalistic and utilitarian way, food is a key variable in the equation that creates a good soldier, and it must also be procured and produced for a large number of individuals. For this individual, the biggest change in the army was the need to eat and be done rather than to savor dinner; while in the navy, it was also the food items that were a change from what they were familiar with. If you compare their general attitude or philosophy on food, it becomes clear that the military food culture was antagonistic to the mindfulness that this respondent prefers,

Food keeps you healthy, wealthy and wise, but food also, is what you need to know how to be healthy and wise, like when Christ had to pray over the food, he prayed and ate the food. And he had to pray, cause around him the entities around him were opposite of him so when he ate, if he didn't want to get sick, he had to be righteous and eat. Don't just say the prayer when you eat, you better be thinking it when you eat. Cause it's going inside you. People don't think about it [but] it works like that but ohhh boy.

The examples highlighted above of individuals experiences in social institutions being loci for either favorable, unfavorable, or somewhat ambivalent experiences, but ultimately a social institution is only an organized social space and while its norms influence the foodscape individuals navigate and the general ways in which meals are structured, there is another scale of consideration that must be visited.

Commensality

If the table is set with food to satisfy the needs of the body for nourishment, perhaps an argument for the setting the of chairs around that table is done with attention to the needs of the heart as “both everyday commensality and special feasts are often associated with happiness” (Yiengprugsawan et al. 2015). Whether we are considering food within institutions, within family settings, or in transient stages for social eating like pubs, diners, or breakrooms, eating in the company of others is an important aspect of stabilizing social relationships between individuals which is observable among people of various social and economic backgrounds, though group power dynamics can potentially overshadow the pleasant aspects of eating together. Since the experience of commensal eating is a socially contextualized experience, interpretation of that experience is dependent on the culture and history of the individual and therefore there must be attention to the fact that these individual variables of social, ethnic, and national identity will be an inseparable component to understanding their interpretations and reflections upon their experience within the commensal phenomenon (Tanaka and Melby 2017).

This volunteer and cooking class instructor shares a window into the difference between cooking for others and cooking for yourself,

I go all out when I'm choosing to cook for others, and you know make sure that there's plenty of flavor, but not too spicy because always we do that, go overboard with spice, my mom taught me the hard way... and she had come to visit I just had a

little one, I made the spaghetti way too spicy, and too much flavor all over, and nobody could eat it.

Anticipating the experience of others by imagining possible outcomes of seasoning styles is an example of how prospective memory leads to an intentional shift in how practice becomes modified when cooking for others. Implicit to the statement above is a question, would the individual cooking enjoy the meal differently if it was as spicy as they might prefer? Eating with people and eating alone are not inherently better or worse than one another, they are however inherently impactful.

The sociability of our dining can not only be understood in relationship to a contrasting lacking, but it can and must be considered and understood with attention to types of sociability, and types of isolation. Demands of life in post-modern societies have stressed individual and family flexibility to a point where many valued practices around eating are no longer able to be structured as they were generations ago- or even decades ago. New norms are emerging worldwide in which not only breakfast and lunch are commonly eaten without close family, but also dinner and celebratory meals which had been key contact or cooperation points for cementing familial relationships within our social memory (Thompson 2005; Sutton 2001).

Also, important is the necessity for mobility, as local economic resiliency is pressed passed equilibrium and people are forced to migrate locally, nationally, and to immigrate internationally to find work. This has thrown us into a position where our perception of commensal access is perceptively reduced from a generation ago, creating both nostalgia for a by-gone era, and a palpable sense of loneliness. The common theme

of urbanization is related to this and was present in the majority of interviewees experiences since childhood.

5.2.1. Eating Alone

I believe that it can be argued that eating alone is a symptom of being alone in a similar manner that any discomfort found while walking on a lovely gravel road barefoot is simply one aspect of the experience of lacking access to shoes. What is important however, is that in each case, there is not just the feelings which cannot be easily ignored that are caused by the lacking, there is also the effect of missing the pleasure and relaxation which the event would otherwise offer. As Sartre attends to the inability on his part to separate an experience from the knowledge of what it is lacking in his example of the phenomenon of the café without the friend, he anticipated meeting there, the experience of a meal alone is grounded in the self-conscious awareness of what—or who—is not there.

Another important way to consider an individual's awareness of lacking is found in relative deprivation theory. This is framed simply here in Webber's *Revaluating Relative Deprivation Theory*:

If A, who does not have something but wants it, compares himself to B, who does have it, then A is 'relatively deprived' with reference to B. Similarly, if A's expectations are higher than B's, or if he was better off than B in the past, he may when similarly, to B feel relatively deprived by comparison with him. (Runciman, 1996: 10, quoted by Webber 2016)

Here in the context of eating, the deprivation of commensal opportunities is rated against the awareness of commensal access among others or a perception of a past state that was superior to the perception of the present. So, in this context, being deprived of

the sociable aspects of a particular meal is a negotiation between 1) your perception of what others have, 2) your perception of what you used to have, 3) and what you expected to have.

In the United States, and in the majority of the world there is an increase in structural barriers to individuals having the choice of how (and with who) to structure the experience of their meals. This is most acutely expressed in our elder populations which are often excluded from the necessarily mobile nuclear family structure which many younger workers utilize to access erratic and unstable labor opportunities (Yeingprugsawan et al. 2015). Because this trend toward dining in isolation—or removed from preferred members of one’s social support network—is on the rise with no signs of reversing course, researchers are becoming keenly interested in how this phenomenon is related to physical and mental health, and to food choice. The pattern observed appears to support the theory that the social and cultural context of a meal is more significant than personal preference (Takeda, Melby 2017), or than the influence biological need (Yeingprugsawan et al. 2007) for food when observing the expression of appetite. Far beyond diminished interest in eating, isolation has been correlated to disordered patterns of eating (Yeingprugsawan et al. 2014).

Choosing to Eat Alone

Most often eating alone is highlighted within a mosaic of deprivation, however research is increasingly providing attention to dining alone within the context of it being liberating, relaxing, or empowering; or at very least, exploring it as a phenomenon which is reaching a level of normalization as our societies increasingly

move toward single households or households where individual schedules make commensal eating unrealistic (Takeda, Melby 2017).

There is little dissent that eating alone can be detrimental to people during certain life stages, or symptomatic of lack of a socializing influence as in the case of teenagers, or lack of social access in the case of elders. However, how accurate is the persistent assumption that social eating is always preferable in its impact upon the individual, however, is this always the case? Are there circumstances in which we might see this as a less simple calculus?

Peer-pressure

Eating alone can represent a freedom from being pressured into planning a meal based on other people's preferences and create a space where personal taste can be enacted and preference based on other factors such as nutrition or convenience can be indulged, whether at home or at a restaurant. For individuals who are attempting to make changes in diet for health within a social landscape where there is little support, "it is difficult for people to see the health benefits of commensality where individual control is difficult to achieve, and this encourages them to separate the idea of social eating from healthy eating" (Takeda and Melby 2017: 158). This volunteer who works across several areas of Metro Caring considers eating alone in the context of being an opportunity to indulge in healthy meals that may be met with resistance by others.

When I am eating or preparing something by myself, I just choose something more healthy [sic] than anything, because not everybody likes, (laughs) not everybody likes vegetables, and the other thing is that when you prepare for example... a vegan pizza

for example, not everybody likes it. I like the... eggplant lasagna or things like that... something that can have some fat or something but not like... with all the, you know, too much... they're so crazy for example the lasagna, they taste good but oh my god... [laughing in disbelief].

Pressure on an individual can be internalized, based on a perceived responsibility to attend to the needs and expectations of diners and can encourage greater care and attention to the variety and execution of the meal, “having company provides motivation to cook and enjoy a meal rather than pressure (Takeda and Shelby 2017: 155); while eating alone can be a type of adventure, providing the opportunity to try new restaurants or cuisines without worrying about how other people in your life might react to the disruption of routine or movement outside of their comfort zones (Takeda and Melby 2007).

Release from responsibility

Eating alone can also mean an opportunity to focus less energy on a meal than would otherwise be encouraged by a feeling of obligation to the experience of the person or people that they would otherwise be feeding. As shared by this volunteer community navigator who has been in both the role of parent and caregiver, this can be space to relieve pressure from otherwise full days, “I do what's easiest. It's like, I'll throw the baked potato in the microwave, I do what's easiest when it's just me”. Cooking an entire meal can seem like a waste when it is just for one, and so rather than look at how to restructure limited free time, it can be easier to rely on faster options on the go (Takeda and Melby 2017). For individuals with children, the responsibilities associated with the

role of parent or caregiver during mealtime; while perhaps a space for familial connection and satisfaction, it may not be a particularly relaxing time (Takeda and Melby 2017).

In most of the above examples, it is a knowledge that eating alone is either an option to be chosen or not, or an alternative to specifically problematic commensal environments that opens the space to consider it positively. And while attention was given to both cooking and eating alone from a variety of perspectives; it is important to separate dining alone from the concept of loneliness. A working definition of loneliness is provided by Thomas Hansen in his work *Development of Loneliness in Midlife and Old Age: Its Nature and Correlates* “a response to a perceived discrepancy between the desired quantity and quality of social life and actual social relationships, and definitions emphasize that loneliness is the subjective experience of being socially isolated, in contrasted to being alone” (Hansen 2018: 1). The experience of loneliness is not so easy to compartmentalize and attempts to reduce it to the seemingly discrete context of mealtime is no easier to do than to discretely locate the meaning of food access to a single sphere of our life—just like hunger, loneliness is an entirely self-conscious holistic phenomenon that influences our experience of every other phenomenon we are exposed to.

What we need to satisfy our emotional desire for sociability and under what circumstances we feel deprived is unique to each individual, with some degree of consistency associated with variables such as age, life-history, employment, and education. Food travels as a thread within and throughout all of these experiences since our circumstances both establish the contexts in which we find our meals structured

within, and to what degree we enjoy adequate, dignified access to the foods which we need and desire for health and the expression of cultural identity.

From a phenomenological standpoint, aging is an accumulation of knowledge of the world which allows us to access a greater number of phenomenological lenses. We can consider a thing, from the context of other things. Here we understand the ‘thing’ which is our loneliness, is compounded by our self-awareness of what has been, could be, or is for other people. To an extent this process leads people from midlife onward, to see the body of what is no longer considered likely possible from their social experiences to balloon “as a result of loss of social roles through retirement, widowhood, death of peers, and decreased physical mobility”, and the social relationships which are lost to time also lead aging individuals to be less content with “social contacts that are primarily aimed at obtaining information or are emotionally unpleasant” (Hansen 2018: 3). This can have a detrimental impact on food practices that were anchored relationally to former commensals, as this volunteer and nutrition educator who has been in the role of parent, grandparent and spouse, the loss of their partner led to dietary changes due to no longer having someone to feed, “since my wife passed away, I have not eaten healthy. It's difficult to cook good healthy meal for one person”.

Considering solitary dining in individual context can mean that as long as substantive social connections and opportunities to join with family, friends and meaningful community relationships are likely to be ‘on the table’, dining at that table when it is empty might not leave you feeling empty. This appears to imply that while young people are likely to feel much more precarity in their satisfaction with social

relationships, they are also more resilient to the subsequent loss of those experiences because of a relatively lower number of 'lost' social relationships and a higher number of those with apparent potential growth, while elders can be more satisfied with fewer more meaningful social relationships but are less resilient to loss of commensals.

5.2.2. Eating Together at Metro Caring

In the context of diminished opportunities to eat with others, this former volunteer and regular shopper at Metro Caring discusses commensality as a rare but cherished part of their life

to me food... food has definitely been... different now that I'm alone... I don't get to eat communally, you know at the kitchen table, or dining room table very often, and it's such a treat when I do, that's what I love about the cooking classes here... is everybody cooks and they eat together... and it's really fun to have that... and... it... for me food should be shared... it tastes better when it's shared, and it seems to... be so important as far as even the body absorbing the... the nutrition it has, I'm... I've tried to learn to be grateful for what I have... not, have such a big pity party for what I don't... it was a long road, and I still have the bumps (laughs) every once in a while, I wanted to just put that on the table because it's really important to have those times to be able to share the experience of food. and for me it's a time to rejoice and very fun, and I seek that out now. More so in the community you know?

There are several times when people come together and eat at Metro Caring; there is the formal break in the day for volunteers and staff in the middle of the day during lunch time where individuals gather in common spaces to eat and converse. Aside from

the very open social space of lunch, there are also a number of ‘closed door’ meals for which food is provided but shared primarily with a select sub-group. These include the cooking classes, cooking clubs, and staff only meetings.

And finally, there are smaller ‘snacking moments’ which are either tied to formal sampling and food demos, and informal ‘grazing’ that occurs during the sorting process in the warehouse. Lunch is an open space for eating, talking, and sharing. Nearly all the staff will eat in communal spaces each day, along with most of the full day volunteers. Because the morning shift is set to end at lunch, and the afternoon shift is set to begin shortly afterward, half day volunteers rarely participate in lunch on site. Furthermore, as with any workplace, there are a number of people each day who work through lunch. Of the possible spaces which people are able to gather, there is a space at the top of the stairs near the west end of the building with two small tables.

During lunch these tables are generally crowded to capacity. The majority of the diners at this set of tables work together in the market and in the warehouse. These two areas tend to merge, mix and socialize the most during the day because they are large teams that must cooperate together constantly to get work done.

At these tables, talk is energetic and one of the first things that each person either shares or is asked if they aren’t prompt enough, is what they have for lunch. Food choice is immediately made the center of discussion, and individuals are called out on positive and negative choices, as well as questions of where the food came from? Is it left over from something you cooked last night? Was it left over from a cooking class or staff meeting? Is there more? Did you know that there is something in the communal

fridge that you can share? Or did it come from one of the fast- food places nearby or from the convenience store across the street? Conversation also centers around one of the looming matters of concern that is on the mind of many of the elders volunteering. Whose time is almost up? Many are in paid volunteer programs which unfortunately, after a certain period, they can be moved to a new organization with little to no say in the matter. A large number of the people who regularly worked full day shifts as volunteers are participating in one of these programs.

The other area has far larger capacity for seating and is in the demo kitchen/gathering area. This area not only has more seating, but more space between seats making it feel more casually accessible or appealing to people used to having more personal space. On numerous occasions reaching an open seat in the other area required someone having to stand up and move away from the table in order to slide into a spot. The demo kitchen had a secondary advantage in that there was often some kind of leftover food from a cooking class, club, or demo which nearly everyone would investigate. Here conversation would typically begin with discussion about the dish that the instructor had made, and nearly everyone would take a turn affirming their appreciation of the talent of the cook. Conversation would also divert toward what the people were eating, generally with praise for the healthiness or enticing nature of the lunch that people may have brought. This volunteer in the market reflects upon Metro Caring as a locus for the transmission of culinary knowledge,

yeah, you know, like I always do, like (leader of Soul food cooking class) would with, (leader of Spanish language cooking class), with (another cooking class

teacher) and uh... I've conversated with, (name), she's another cook up there... I conversate [sic] with them and stuff, and even told people... people in my building how to cook different foods and stuff... I don't know I'm learnin' I've been learning a lot of stuff since I've been here! I've been learning a lot, a heck of a lot. you know it's great.

In each area, small talk would be generally food centric, with key topics being what you had, it's positive characteristics, ensuring awareness of other options desired, and then discussions about interpersonal relationships, primarily inquiring about shared acquaintances, partners, and others that are not present for some reason. In each area there was almost always conversation associated with topics of focus for the nutrition team's educational outreach. Speaking to where the content of this nutrition knowledge originates, this nutrition education volunteer with a formal education in nutrition shares the following,

Where did I get the most information from? conversations with people, mostly learning the context of their lives, uhm... I had some of the nutrition knowledge coming in, but I didn't know how that fit with each individual and also within our community. Where food-talk and nutrition education intersect is in this co-curation of heteroglossic knowledge.

Eating samples set up around the nutrition team's education outreach was always a centrally social exchange. Conversation would start around a request for knowledge about what the sample was, and how it was made, and then it would transition either to general small talk or specific request for an overview of the nutrition game associated with the

sampling. Among staff and volunteers there was often a snowball effect in which a person would recommend to others working in different areas to come to the waiting room to get a sample as well. This was also the commensal eating contact point which reached the most community members. Here the primary feature of the social exchange around the sampling was a smile or words of appreciation and praise if the dish agreed with their pallet, with a varied chance of opening the door for small talk, or even more rarely an unsolicited request for an overview of the nutrition game associated with the sample.

This could have been because of disinterest but just as likely because of the knowledge that we were actively soliciting participants for the game, so it was common knowledge that an invitation would soon follow. One common point of conversation was centered around the availability of the items sampled in the market, and occasional interest in the exact recipe (which we had on informational printouts).

The informal snacking occurred either at the upstairs tables near the shared fridge where there was also always an assortment of bread, nut butter, and healthy snacks (with occasional unhealthy snacks hidden in some crates underneath the station). This was typically a less social type of eating because on either side of lunch time, the area was deserted. It was simply a place known to be where you could get something to eat if you found yourself in need during a shift. The presence of ‘contraband’ sweet items under the snacking station upstairs, and the informal snacking to be mentioned below by a warehouse volunteer and market shopper demonstrate that the healthy food policies and

culture around valuing healthy choices is in direct tension with the temptation created by the presence of these foods as part of donations,

OH MAN! oh god! they're throwing away all that good pies and stuff... at one point my craving got so bad, to where I just had to open- cause you know they destroy it - I had to open up one and just break a little piece off, cause I know that if I take the whole thing home, it's gonna be gone in two days. I would be nibbling, nibbling but the temptation is really bad here, just get a little peice off and leave it there.

The second type of informal snacking was both discrete and conspiratorially social. Junk food, primarily identified by amount of added sugar, but also by certain other slightly more disputed criteria, was typically sorted out to be either re-donated, or composted. While not encouraged, it was not uncommon to lock eyes with someone hastily taking a large bite of a Danish with all the indulgent secrecy of someone caught with their hand in the cookie jar. There were also occasions when this secret revelry would be made even more conspiratorial with a whispered invitation to join.

Because Metro Caring is a volunteer organization, and in the United States volunteerism is predominantly filled with retirees, social interactions there must be framed in the context of this narrowing of meaningful social relationships. Friendly conversation and commensal eating at Metro Caring take on a meaningful role in many people's day, and the next section will place these conversations in conversation with possible diffusion of knowledge.

5.2.4. Food Talk in Metro Caring

In many ways, nothing that is going on at Metro Caring isn't about food, and as such, any topic associated with food or eating falls within Malinowski's "context of the situation" (Blum- Kulka 1997, 40). This means that while conversation might move across a variety of topics as people work to share food, wait for food, eat, and shop for food; the topic of food can be interjected at any moment with the general expectation that it will be received without necessarily interrupting conversations which might be occurring,

Yeah, I... we talk, when I'm on produce, I talk a lot with clients, about... they're like 'oh I can make this', 'I can make this with that' when they're picking out, which is really nice. Sometimes I don't know the like, or some of the fruit I've never tried, and their like 'you should, it's really good'

The excerpt above from a market volunteer with a deep personal knowledge about preparing different types of fruits and vegetables communicates how naturally food conversations occur even in the middle of restocking a busy market produce display. Such conversations are exempt from the normal social norms that govern how and when you may speak to whom, and also can skip many of the formalities that non-food related conversations would require. Questions about an unfamiliar food, a story about a meal, craving, or the communication of a sample, snack or meal that is available are all examples of this food talk; this allows a constant opportunity for sharing of personal and institutional food culture at Metro Caring as this shopper, volunteer and community navigator reflects upon when prompted about the food culture at Metro Caring,

the food culture here is all about healthy and nutritional eating... we don't have a lot of junk, well very little, let's put it that way... what you would call junk food, just don't do it. we have, I think we have healthy meats, I think we have healthy foods, when you go to other food banks, some of them have those options, some of them don't, you know you walk in and you see all this cake, candy and all this other stuff, I think there are [other food banks] cleaning up their act a little bit because... MetroCaring has quite the reputation. and... i've been to a couple of food banks out in the Englewood, and you get to choose what you want, but you are limited... but you can choose what you want and every once in awhile, they'll 'this farmer brought this in, fresh eggs and fresh vegetables' but it's not always that way... but then they also always have the option of the cake and the cookies, and all that, so yeah compared to other food pantries... I don't... we're not a food bank in my opinion, we're food and resource center and we make it a point to healthy food so, we rise above them by far because we have so many nutritional options and we purposefully do that.

The food culture cultivated within Metro Caring as described above is extremely intentional and the discussion of what sets this culture apart from other organizations often makes an appearance in conversations that you overhear while working, resting or navigating spaces. This also means that—more often than not—the conversations about food, if they are not directly related to the actions of working around food, then these conversations are grounded in these values, meanings and judgements that dominate Metro Caring's food discourse. The result of Metro Caring being a focal point for

social interaction and conversation, and to have the conversation revolve around certain thematic narratives associated with nutrition, health goals, creative uses of nutrient dense ingredients, and the daily struggle against old habits is that this type of talk begins to become habitual. Ultimately this thesis will close with a conversation highlighting the prevalence—or lack thereof—for the result of this food talk and exposure to new foods and techniques for preparation of dishes, to become diffused throughout an individual’s larger social network or as part of generational teaching and acculturation.

Exploring Metro Caring’s Impact

The primary activities at Metro Caring are centered around the redistribution of food which arrives from many different sources, into households scattered across the Denver Metropolitan area. These food items that come and go through Metro Caring are carriers for ideas, knowledge, and social values, “Goods are not only economic commodities, but vehicles and instruments for realities of another order, such as power, influence, sympathy, status and emotion...” (Stack 1975, 42 quoting Straus). This quote from Levi Straus encourages us to consider with an additional level of nuance what the movement of goods can mean in the lives of individuals who exist contemporaneously with the goods that move around them.

Phenomenology applies a pretense that a part of the phenomenological universe can be explored through the reflection of the experience of experiencing that thing. In this case the thing being considered is the food culture present in an organization and whether that culture could be considered impactful upon the individual’s attitudes that

surround food. The basic question is, what can the food culture of Metro Caring be distilled down into, and following that, is there evidence that key components of this food culture are being diffused through individuals in Metro Caring and across their personal social networks? This chapter will attempt to at least begin to answer whether any impacts might not only be present when individuals reflect on their own personal thoughts on food, but also quite importantly whether any of these ideas—or even actual foods—are moving through their personal networks of family, friends, neighbors, or other potential commensals.

Metro Caring's culture comes through in interviews as prioritizing health, dignity, and sharing of literal food and food related knowledge moving from seed to stomach and covering nutrition as well as core skills; however, is it necessary to be a direct member in the Metro Caring community to participate in and be impacted by any or all of these? In the long excerpt below a shopper and market volunteer takes us on a 'tour' through how they have observed Metro Caring's culture being enacted in the market and how they have perceived the impact that it has had in the lives of other shoppers,

oh uh, the food culture, culture here, is centered around nutritional healthy eating, and that's a big plus for me, I'm glad to participate, I work for an organization that's focusing on healthy foods, 'cause regardless, healthy foods, produces healthy bodies, and they need that... and I'm glad that Metro Caring is involved in that because that's going to trickle down to the infant now, the infants that are now infants, because our food, the way our food is grown and distributed and, and versus all the things that are put in it, it's going to be really helpful that people know that

their tradition of their passing down healthy nutritional eating has to sustain during their time also, and so uhm... by us offering food, cooking classes and stuff, it's going to install it in homes, kids see all of these vegetables and they want it, their gonna know how to use it, even just having friends over and their like 'let's just fry some zucchini' vs, you know trying to go out eating some potato chips or something 'let's fry some zucchini or...', 'we got some toast and tomatoes and basil, let me show you this'.

The healthy nature of the food curated in the market of Metro Caring is framed above as a resource which creates an opportunity to role model eating habits facilitated by food access, nutrition education, and cooking classes. Continuing upon a perceived impact upon youth in the community that radiates from Metro Caring this interviewee adds,

I think kids like finger foods and quick stuff, and vegetables can do that for you, you just have to ask the kids how they like it and they can tell you, they like to play with stuff, and, that they eat, especially the little kids play with their food, and carrots and peas I think is one, sweet, and peas are easy to grab and it's good for their system, the whole thing is, healthy eating is for our bodies, nutritionally so we can live longer and have healthy functioning parts, not just because it's healthy for our bodies, but it actually causes us to see better and feel better, it has uh, a function in our life in our bodies, ah... the soul food, the food, it is nourishing to our wellbeing, you know it leads to... so we need to implement that so here being at Metro it really trickles over to uh, a healthier lifestyle of eating, a longer life, a healthier life.

They shift from considering Metro Caring's impact in the context of young people building a foundation for healthful food choices in the future, and move on to Metro Caring as providing an opportunity to integrate healthful changes and habits that challenge health disparities that are increased among certain communities when healthful food is not an option,

you know even with people that do drugs a lot of times, they'll be eating, let's say you got a lot of drug addicts which you do cause I see 'm [sic], all of um, a lot of... I like to see them shopping for healthy food because its gets them off of the sweets, because when you do drugs, you got to eat... I don't, it just... being honest, if you gonna do something you got to eat good, especially you know, if you are doing uppers stuff and your heart's racing, and you haven't been eating well, as soon as you eat, your body starts feeling better, you know, I like that because it's giving, its making the uhm drug user community, sustain a healthier life and helping them feel better in an addiction that makes... you know when your addicted to something you already know you feel bad, but food is a way of making you feel better and keep the brain functioning uh, try to find some kind of balance there vs a person that uses drugs and just eats sweets and pop, and no water. when you eat healthy food your gonna drink water, I mean it's just, it just goes hand in hand, and it's like 'no I'm gonna drink water with this'.

Healthy eating here is presented as a type of harm reduction in the context of drug abuse. Below the conversation by this volunteer grows to include brain health more broadly in association with healthy eating,

you know stuff like that, I kind of look at Metro Caring doing a lot in the community in different ways that people may not know, people with mental illness you would be surprised how the green food agrees, dark greens, dark food is really important if you got mental problems you know for your brains, I like to see them eating dark things like vegetables so it can help their minds in any way possible, or disabled people, you never know what a bunch of mushrooms will do when you cook them with carrots, just all these different functions of life style people walking in here and getting the opportunity to have not even, even if they don't know it's helping them whether they know it or not.

Supporting mental and physical health through consumption of micro-nutrient dense vegetables and mushrooms continues,

Or try an artichoke or an eggplant, something different besides just lettuce and tomato, that traditional salad, here you get to explore more with all those different vegetables-- because you can't do nothing but think about it, I think the majority of the people that come, they end up saying 'ok we gonna find out how to COOK this, let's call somebody and see' vs 'lets just let it rot and throw it away' they're gonna let it rot and throw it away until one time they decide to start using it we have so much of the same food people are like 'hey I can, that's cheaper here, I can get it free at MetroCaring, hey I saw this recipe but it needed mushrooms and onions and bell peppers, and jalapenos. That stuff's expensive, but hey you know, I make an appointment at MetroCaring...

And finally, this volunteer finishes with sharing the potential for the removal of the financial barrier to trying new things as a catalyst for generating experimentation that leads into ‘food talk’ as a way to share and gain new cooking techniques by drawing upon food knowledge within their larger networks.

Sharing Into Network

Talking about voluntary cultural diffusion is like skipping a stone... if an idea or value—or stone—doesn’t bounce at least one time, it doesn’t really count as skipping a stone or as diffusion. So, is Metro Caring a silo in the lives of individuals who visit, where food knowledge and values are shared and exchanged or is it a node that effectively radiates these values and ideas through shared meals, conversations and teaching moments to individuals who have never visited Metro Caring? A total of 12 individuals specifically shared that they had already participated in a conversation with someone in their larger social network related to something that was learned at Metro Caring. The themes presented in how individuals share food knowledge outside of Metro Caring includes: literal sharing of foods; direct sharing about the market of Metro Caring; sharing about the cooking classes of Metro Caring; sharing specific recipes or dishes; sharing expanded understandings of social justice in the context of food; and unspecified food knowledge.

The themes that emerged highlighting who in their larger network communication involved was: neighbors, children, parents, aunt/uncle, elders, or entire family. An important note regarding this exploration of impact when it comes to the future generations, is that many interviewees noted that they did not have an opportunity yet

to pass on any of these ideas, values, or bits of food knowledge to the next generation, rather than an intentional decision not to.

Sharing withing the Family

For the market shopper below Metro Caring creates a core of family experiences, from adult members of their family network working through an organization that pays elders to volunteer in community organizations, to Metro Caring being a place where grandchildren enjoy playing, Metro Caring exists as a node not just for access to market resources, but also participation in the culture of Metro Caring through food,

yeah, my whole family knows about metro. My ex-wife's at the front desk, my girlfriends in the warehouse yeah, we have it like that, every week we bring the grandkids here to play in they play area (laughs) have to drag them out of here when it's time to go we're like 'come on' [long inaudible] toddlers. (laughs).

The individual above did not state that the substance of their relationship to food had changed as a result of visiting Metro Caring, however in there culinary life-history themes of intentionality and the importance of food choices for personal health make for a clear alignment. Also, through utilization of the market to bring home food that would be shared with children or grandchildren, the healthy nature of the food and values shared by them and upheld by Metro Caring are able to circulate.

The closest sphere of influence that an individual often has is their immediate family, and it is also a sphere of influence which is often already centered around the sharing of thoughts and ideas about health, eating, and recipes or cooking skills as was previously explored. Many interviewees explicitly called out the practice of sharing

food from the market within their close or extended families such as this volunteer and market shopper who identified as a parent, grandparent, elder, caregiver, and single, yes, I've shared it with my mother, some of my family members, and I tell them about Metro Caring, about how we look at the labels, and we don't just give people junk and we try to give people a good start and with nutrition and they're very impressed and a lot of them have come and checked it out, even my mom looked around.

The next excerpt from a market shopper navigating the process of eating in the US after coming from a rural community in the Philippines, and the benefit gained from the market at Metro Caring. They highlighted the temptation to try exciting fatty, salty, or sugary foods that are easily available as a key threat to health and longevity, having spent more time in US foodscapes, the interviewees adult children in particular are negotiating potential pitfalls,

especially my daughter, she don't like fast food, she don't like the greasy or something, she really be careful that. Here, yeah, you pick up what you want here, you know, what they have donation, so my kids they be careful what they eat because, sometimes when I cook Filipino, they don't like to eat, but my daughter she like to eat that, not so much greasy, she don't like sugar, she be careful of that too.

For other individuals, sharing knowledge into their network is more about sharing knowledge about the existence of the market or Metro Caring than information about a food, recipe, or nutritional principle as is discussed in the next section.

Sharing that Metro Caring Exists

One of the most effective ways to facilitate the transmission of food centered knowledge and values is simply to introduce a person to the very fact that Metro Caring exists. The impetus for this sharing is built upon the value which the person serving as a mouth-piece places upon their own experiences here, and the opportunity they see as most pressing for the individual or audience that they are delivering this information to. Because ‘food talk’ is a welcome component of any commensal discourse, it is an easy way to spice up a conversation with friends, neighbors, or family to simply pepper into a conversation information about the existence of free and delicious cooking classes geared toward healthy eating.

Here a volunteer and market shopper shares briefly that they find it an easy and natural thing to talk to others about Metro Caring, “yeah, but I've actually told a few people about the classes, I think it's so interesting, just cook healthier...”. A market shopper who is the younger half of the only pair of interviews I conducted with two family members, here they acknowledge that it was their grandfather who shared that Metro Caring exists, “mostly I think it was the other way around you know my grandpa [told me about Metro Caring” and then immediately moved into a description of the food from a shopping visit serving as an educational introduction to their roommate of the joys of cooking with fresh rather than canned potatoes and other vegetables to make a stew, which would ultimately be shared with their neighbors to make sure that none of it went to waste.

[...] my roommate, he was like where'd you get all these fruit- we got like fruits and vegetables and he was like 'wow these, this is really cool' but he got in there and started cooking, and yeah... with him, with my roommate mostly... I really don't interact with too many people cause I had an anxiety... situation and it was real... but it has nothing to do with the food. I shared it with him... he seems to be cooking more, (laughing) it was the potatoes that got him cause he was like 'I could fry these potatoes, I could bake them, I could...' (laughing) I was like 'do whatever you want with them you can cook them I guess, don't let them go to waste' (laughing)

The roommate mentioned above was particularly excited about fresh potatoes because prior to Metro Caring, they had only ever cooked with canned potatoes. And below is that market shopper's grandparent sharing their work to make sure the knowledge of Metro Caring's market is available to their neighbors; during their interview they made a point to share that even when out and about, they would make an effort to tell people they would see resting in the narrow parkways that border several busy streets in the neighborhood that they should come down and make an appointment,

I tell a lot of my friends where I live, I live (named particular hostel) I said 'hey, why don't you guys make appointments, come get food... it's free food you know?' and uh... about two years ago they changed policies about having an ID and all that crap, ok, and now you just come in without an ID and say I need food, they give you a 25-pound necessities box. and you make an appointment three days later and get as much food as you want.

The act of either casually or intentionally sharing information about Metro Caring as a resource in the community is very common, and one can easily overhear volunteers, whether they themselves shopped in the market or not, mention that as a natural part of their day-to-day life, they would share knowledge about the market and how to access it as is demonstrated in the excerpt below from a market volunteer and shopper,

I tell, I tell, I send I don't know...about ten or fifteen people here that have come up here and shopped... this lady came up here today, and made an appointment... she came up here today and made an appointment... [...] I'm turning people on to this place all the time, I tell 'em come up here and make an appointment, make an appointment, come up here and shop, see that this place is different from any other place that you might have... any other food bank you have been to... to me it's, there's nothing like it, and you know, it's like a different experience, it's like [...] and adventure, you know you come, but you want to come again, you'll want to come again.

The quote below highlights another important facet of Metro Caring's measurable impact; the interviewee below often participated in healthy tasting and nutrition education in the waiting room, and after encountering numerous guests who were interested in trying the sample but unable to because of dental pain or lack of false teeth, this volunteer reflects on sharing their experience at Metro Caring through networks of influence. While this is on one hand an effort to introduce knowledge of local resource gaps to those in a position to align their philanthropic efforts with community voice, it also serves to open the conversation around health and healthy eating on an interpersonal level; since Metro Caring is so heavily 'branded' with their

commitment to health, it is necessary to include talking points on food and health along with personal experiences. Here a nutrition education volunteer reflects on the act of sharing Metro Caring's existence into their own networks as a process of weaving solidarity with resource gatekeepers,

yes... what this has presented to me in my sheltered life... I'll lay it out there, 'cause I [...] was an executive... insurance and finance, I wasn't around people that I am now at Metro... and there's things that I hadn't thought of before, like dental care and eating... I mean it's so obvious when you think about it... so I've worked with my dentist and said... 'what do you do as far as philanthropic... and you know how do you...' and I talked to professionals, there's a big, accounting firm one of the big four here... my nephew works for them, my son works there, these are high dollar places, and yeah... I talk to them about Metro... we need to get services and more resources... so that's on my mind.

And while many people offered vague assurances that they regularly or often shared some type of recipe or idea, another was able to speak directly to a couple of favorite recipes that had been shared by them. Observing food talk among commensals at Metro Caring, a hypothetical window into the natural way in which to bring up pleasurable, interesting, or topical recipes was often a way to not only draw interest of individuals toward the speaker to hear about the dish, but it also primmed the conversation for context such as where the recipe came from and its health benefits. This staff member reflects on sharing recipes learned at Metro Caring "yeah, I've shared some recipes here... like the cauliflower burrito bowl I learned here is one of my favorites... I know

I've shared some eggplant recipes that I've learned here". Particularly for staff members since they are present every day, and each day the nutrition volunteers create new interesting recipes and samples, the staff at Metro Caring receives more opportunity than any but a few 5-day a week volunteers to see and taste new dishes. And while only one full-time staff member conducted an interview, observationally, the majority of staff members showed delight in tasting and spreading the word about the daily samples or cooking class leftovers.

Metro Caring, as I have shown through the earlier chapters, curates a space where ideally both health centered ideas and foods are available for people to take or leave according to their own interest, need, and desire. Central to my observations is that the voluntary nature of this exchange is essential to the willingness which people do choose to pick up either or each. Delving more deeply into this, I will first attempt to contextualize the choice-based market as a catalyst for diffusion of food practice across individual's networks.

5.4. Healthy Market

Interviewees broadly agreed that whether as shoppers or volunteers it was clear that the market was stocked with attention to 'healthy' eating. This meant prioritizing fresh fruits, fresh vegetables, dairy, eggs, meat, and canned or packaged foods with less sodium and low added sugar. Items such as cake, cookies, packaged foods with added sugar, and candy are conspicuously absent. This excerpt from a market shopper describes the value of being able to choose what to take home during a market visit,

what do I know about it? they good and they're constant. you don't have to worry about getting what you want (laughs) or at least what you need, you gonna get what you need. they... yeah... I get to pick over stuff 'yeah I need that, I don't want, ain't going for... I need that, I need that, I need that'. I do needs, and then I got a big old parcel of needs I'm cool.



Figure 42 New Foods Found in Market

Shopping the market as it is curated in this manner, results in a shopping experience where, as shoppers move through the shelves and racks, new healthy, interesting foods abound despite the small physical space. Figure 4 shows a list of foods which interviewees identified being introduced to for the first time in the market. Observing the information shared in figure 4, you can see that fresh produce of one type or another is most commonly cited, and this is reflective of where much of the enthusiasm that people feel toward the produce selection in specific as part of the market experience. Here a self-described customer service volunteer who distributes fresh flowers and grocery bags reflects on reactions noted by shoppers of the produce on display,

yeah, the produce is always different and good, and, and uh and good things you want to try. some things you never tried but want to try. you know so, yeah [...]
yeah, and see most people really get on the produce and then they do a lot of the stuff um-hmm.

In the next excerpt a warehouse volunteer digs more deeply into the value of fresh fruits and vegetables over the canned options that might otherwise be considered a luxury item for families on a budget, creating the choice to shop based on preference for healthier options rather than needing to consistently compromise on canned produce which often has added salt or sugar,

yeah, yeah... well like I tell people you know sometimes you go to the supermarket and you can't afford to buy all of that stuff, and then the canned goods, and then come here and actually get healthy stuff, you can get greens fresh fruits and all that, and all the people... we need to eat a little bit healthier and so it's helped out a lot with that.

Healthy is a core theme that emerged when discussing the food culture at Metro Caring, one of the first ways that this value is communicated both to volunteers and shoppers is in the actual items presented in the market. Sub-themes presented in this include the market being healthy because of limiting access to food with added sugar, protein rich foods and a well-stocked fresh fruit and vegetable section. However, in the same manner in which healthy was a dynamic idea that did not emerge from individual's culinary life-histories in a homogeneous manner across interviews, it is also a value which means different things to different people in practice within the market. The

following excerpt from a warehouse volunteer draws attention once again to the importance of access to fresh vegetables and fruits in partnership with the nutrition education programming, particularly among elders in the community,

I think that it is... healthy. and I think that you know that they just select the food that they ah... they think that is good for health, and have some kind of programs here, that is about health, nutrition and they need to show that to older people right? and I think that is awesome, they have a lot of vegetables, they have you know like low sodium, low protein, low sugar, and you know and that's something that you know has been affecting many people like for decades

Many interviewees noted in contrast to other food pantries in the Denver Metro area, or framing Metro Caring as being part of a shift that is happening across the Metro area, this volunteer community navigator considers Metro Caring in the context of other food pantries who are either inconsistent in their access to healthy choices, or overly reliant on high sugar low nutrient items to fill their shelves,

the food culture here is all about healthy and nutritional eating, uhm... we don't have a lot of junk, well very little, let's put it that way... what you would call junk food, just don't do it. we have, I think we have healthy meats, I think we have healthy foods, when you go to other food banks, some of them have those options, some of them don't, you know you walk in and you see all this cake, candy and all this other stuff, I think they're [other food banks] cleaning up their act a little bit because uhm... Metro Caring has quite the reputation.

The nutrition team’s educational messaging includes helping to frame this commitment to keep sugary, low nutrient high calorie food out of the market as more than just a matter of health, but also helping to challenge the myths associated with hunger with the reality of how hunger and food insecurity are enacted, and what for some is counterintuitive—that you don’t have to “look” malnourished, to be experiencing hunger and food insecurity. A nutrition team volunteer shares their perspective on the trend within food pantries, and the deeper challenge that those high calorie low nutrition options can actually serve to make hunger invisible. These unhealthy foods create an appearance of nourishment, but lead to a “hidden hunger” (Kimura et al. 2014),

I love that they try to have healthy food for people, and when I've stocking or sorting the food, I've been taught [not] to put it out if it has 11 or more grams of sugar in it, if it has 350 or more grams of salt, and I think that a lot of places that help people with food, they just have a whole table of all kinds of donuts and cake and all kind of junk that's not good for people... and [...] people will fill up on that if they don't have anything else and I've learned since I've been at Metro Caring that just because someone is overweight or obese, that doesn't mean that they're not hungry, because they aren't getting the right nutrition, they aren't getting what they need; so, they are still starving like any skinny person.

This intentionally curated market selection is communicated as an entry-point for a shift in praxis around eating, linking access to healthy food to generating excitement around cooking, this market volunteer and shopper of the market in the excerpt below

not only captures the healthful impact of shopping a healthy market, but also the often revolutionary energy that exists when people talk about how access to healthy food can lead to transformative circumstances in the lives of individuals and families,

it's, it's great, I like it because, they care about what they feed you, no sweets- [it's] off the menu, they don't give you no junk. they care that they're giving you food, that is good for your health. and then for, for, for your body, you know for what you're eating instead of... it's gonna nurture you, it's not... the food is nutrition where it's gonna, it's gonna grow your family, it's gonna develop, and it's gonna grow, and they're gonna be stro[ng]- they're gonna grow naturally and strong, and they're not gonna be dependent on like, fast... nothing, fast this, fast that it's just, they're gonna develop into 'let's cook, let's cook a meal-' you know let's 'let's get in there and cook a meal for EVERYBODY and then, it's like... it's like educational, like educational.

Being a reflection of a communitarian investment in the well-being of others, below framed in the context of a question about whether you would give food you knew to be unhealthy to a loved one with a health condition that could be worsened by unhealthy foods. A theme that came up in several interviews was an idea of Metro Caring's food culture and practice reflecting the type of intentionality that you would apply to members of your own family, this volunteer who has spent time working in the warehouse, market, and front desk shares their thoughts,

I think that, you know, it's about taking care of people.... it's like some kind of uhm... you know, uh... educate them even when they don't know that they are being educated and you know those things I think are important, because if you take... if

you care about somebody, you don't give them something that isn't healthy. it's like if you know that your mother for example, I hope [nothing] like that happens, but if you think your mother has something, has a problem with blood pressure or diabetes, you're not gonna give to her the things that maybe have many chemic[als] inside.

However, the items in the market are only one part of the experience I want to frame. The market doesn't simply prioritize health, but also dignity, creating an experience that shifts being in the market from a more passive 'collecting' of donated food, to a more engaged 'shopping' for chosen groceries. This idea was touched on in the quote above, but will be revisited from a volunteer and nutrition educator,

well, I think one of the things is the respect, they are so respectful, it just, it coincides with my belief. I mean people, and... but it's not just words, 'we respect all people (in nasal superficial voice)'. There's a behavior pattern... so even, people get food... we call it shopping... you know? they're not trading money for people, but we still call it shopping. That's a big, small thing. and 'oh you shopping today?' and I always look at the market, to see what's in there... and 'you shopping today?' and people feel humbled... they feel 'yeah, yeah!' , I said "oh my gosh, today, a tremendous number of tomatoes, make sure you get tomatoes, you love tomatoes?' we talk about tomatoes... you're not bad because you're shopping today.. it's not a slogan, it integrates words and behaviors, I appreciate and admire that behavior.

This shopping experience creates an opportunity for incorporating the on-the-spot education that I was so familiar with while working in a grocery store where customer

service is able to merge seamlessly into education on how to work with unfamiliar items, or ‘up selling’ such as was mentioned above with tomatoes where you use customer service as a tool to encourage guests to try new items. A different volunteer who refers to herself as “the produce lady” particularly enjoys encouraging adventurous shopping of vegetables by offering tips on their preparation. Nutrition education that occurs in the market is only one facet of how knowledge is shared and potentially picked up, next we will explore nutrition education as it is experienced at Metro Caring.

Education

A key component of nutrition education as a project is that its content and delivery be palatable and lead to an actual desire to engage, rather than simply being a space for rhetorical top- down education,

I think it's, like healthy, uhm I'd say like accessible, and like easy, something that, I mean it's hard cause I don't know how to cook, but I feel like it's something anyone could do...

Above a shopper reflects on the new feeling that after seeing the food in the market, and all of the variety, that despite not currently knowing how to cook, the act of cooking seems like something both interesting and as being something that ‘anyone’ is capable of, thus opening a space of curiosity for cooking discourse. The next several reflections by some of the knowledge bearers of Metro Caring who share their experience and passion for food from seed to stomach. Below an urban agriculture volunteer who also does food pick-ups from local grocery stores shares their role as a gardening instructor linking the idea of food back to the soil during some of Metro Caring’s classes,

oh yeah, we teach'em, like I was teaching a class about three years ago to the kids I tell'm how to grow fruit and how to grow vegetables... what... what vegetables are [actually a] fruit, [...] what a seed does, germinating a seed an everything.

At the time of my research, there was a children's cooking class series that partnered directly with the urban agriculture team which had planted a 'pizza garden' which allowed a hands- on experience from harvest through preparation and into eating together. The cooking classes and clubs were divided into three parts generally. The class included preparation and instruction, a short nutrition education lecture, and finished with eating together. One idea was being explored to increase class attendance by offering a shopping appointment on the day of the class in addition to their regularly scheduled visit, this extra shopping visit could be used later if preferred. A nutrition education volunteer takes a moment to reflect on the way in which exploring new food combinations or culinary techniques can lead to a shift in thinking about individual ingredients,

the nutrition... healthy tastings and the cooking classes... have taught the clients, to look at food in a in in a more positive way and look at the... products and produce we have and made them think of... the value of the different items...

From my own experience working in grocery stores and leading cooking classes in that space I have also noticed that when regular customers would begin to experiment with cooking with more raw ingredients, I would begin to see them more and more often filling their baskets with these things they would prepare at home rather than the ready-to-eat deli items that might have been more commonly in their baskets.

However, the impact of the cooking class needs to be considered in terms of the benefit to the teacher as well as the guests, on one hand it is a space for students to learn new cooking methods and techniques, but it also offers an opportunity for knowledge-bearers to find a space to maximize their generative impact as this volunteer and cooking instructor shares,

I found my niche, and it was helping people pay their utility bills and then somewhere along the line they asked me to do nutrition... and of course when I got involved, I realized that [they had] Hispanic, they had an African cooking club, they had a Mediterranean cooking club you know? [...] where is African American food? [...] one day they said put your money where your mouth is [...] the thing I like about is... you can influence what they do if you bring it to their attention, that's what I like about working here. because I feel like I'm a part of something and I can contribute... when I walk through the door, I feel welcomed.

Teachers come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and many come directly from the community of shoppers and volunteers, at the time of my field work, no cooking classes or clubs were led by full time staff members. The classes were all designed and led by individuals such as the one above who stepped into the role because of a desire to see their culinary traditions anchored in Metro Caring. This same instructor also reflects on insights into the lived experience of many people they had spoken to about what they actually have access to for cooking at home, this inspired a shift to include microwave cooking classes that didn't assume that the students would have access to a full stove and oven,

I know a lot of folks who come here go home, and their home is an efficiency with a microwave. you know? so I want to show them you can cook anything that you want in the microwave so... ah, I love it here, all of the things that they let me do, I've experienced... everything in here. you know? and they trust me enough that I don't think they treat me as just a volunteer it's almost as if I'm a staff? without being in that position. I like it. I like that I can come in here, jump on the computer and do data 'cause I see that 'you know you guys are going slow today' I like that the ability that I can challenge them... it's really a wonderful place to be.

Inclusivity of the nutrition education programming and cooking classes is also linked by this staff member to the work of building solidarity and Metro Caring's core value of *doing with, not for,*

I would just reemphasize community. yeah, we really do well, especially in classes and clubs, of... of bringing folks together. enough said... and our value of solidarity falls in line with that... you know making we're doing things with each other, and not just passing down what I feel like I want to pass down or need to pass down or want to pass down to someone else. we really try to emphasize everyone being a part of the process. everyone having a seat at the table

Volunteers noted both being able to share their own knowledge about healthy eating in the context of holding an equitable and dignity centered space in the market, this was alluded to above in the discussion about the market, but it deserves more attention. In those moments when a person is 'on-the-fence' about selecting either an unfamiliar item or considering how much of a fresh fruit or vegetable to take home, a respectful

and knowledgeable grocery clerk—or volunteer—can step in and hold space to see an item in a new light. This exchange on knowledge can have far reaching ripple effects, perhaps even leading to a new family favorite recipe that in a few decades could be cemented mnemonically with cherish people, places, and times. At the very least, it can lead to taking a chance on a new idea and creating a context for re-sharing any anecdotal health or technical/preparation information later to any number of types of commensals.

well, from a volunteer standpoint, it's being ah, aware, and sensitive, compassionate, to other people, realizing that needs... being respectful of their needs, and not, being judgmental about them regardless of... how they look, or anything like that, it's just you've gotta [sic]... you have to, should be accepting of them, they're here, generally because they're in a bind, and their situation is a difficult one, and we've got to remember that, and we're here to be... we as a volunteer has to be respectful as I said... yeah. and every once and awhile... and I don't get this as much as the folks that are out in the market, people will ask... 'what's this' or 'what can I use this for?' or some try to give them suggestions... I think there's a little bit more of that out in the marketplace... and that's a good thing I think for a volunteer to be engaged... to be aware... well here's what you can do with these lentils, or this squash or what have you.

In the excerpt above a, volunteer nutrition educator shares some of their thoughts on how to approach on-the-spot education and how it is linked directly to providing high-quality customer service which values respect and a key tenet maintaining an inclusive

space. This ties directly back to the idea of building solidarity, because Metro Caring's market isn't just a market, but it exists in direct conversation with the larger critical consciousness of current and historic systems of inequity that lead to individual shopper's lived experiences and how that in turn informs the lens that volunteers approach their work. Education is ultimately distilled back into a matter of community space and attempting to keep the flow of knowledge between commensals horizontal, blurring the lines of teacher and student, holding a space where everyone is welcome and encouraging people to share the richness of their experiences with one another. Part of this means continuously challenging how and why different things are done, and creating an internal culture that requests people to draw attention to inequities as this volunteer and market shopper shares,

it's like here, they tell you here, and I fight a lot here, I say why don't we cook more for the staff especially the volunteers, because the staff has those little things they have every now and again. but the volunteers? look around you, where's the only place that they have to get something to eat? Seven Eleven! you know? most of them don't have a car.

As was mentioned in the section on eating together at Metro Caring, most of the conversations I witnessed during lunch included at least one portion devoted to either exploring whether there were leftovers that volunteers could share or communicating to other volunteers the location and type of leftovers that were available from either a meeting or cooking class. The volunteer's words caution that by not bringing more attention to curating more opportunities for volunteers to share nutritious meals during

their shifts, it inadvertently leaves them navigating a foodscape limited by transportation and a short window of time before their next shift starts.

We've seen how Metro Caring's food culture is experienced, how 'food talk' shows up during a wide variety of activities, and how the intentional curation of the market and nutrition education feed into both the conversations about food, and the sense of food culture. However, how do the themes highlighted in these sections relate to an understanding of Metro Caring in the context of the values and practices that form individual systems of meaning with and around food? And whether we have found sufficient cause to assert insight into the origins and influences for the formation of these systems of meaning that allow individuals to almost instantaneously evaluate the desirability and relative value of various meals?

Conclusion

This research set out to explore if childhood was an appropriate period to look for a foundation to the systems of meaning and value that individuals either carry or change over the course of their lives; how the individual who are present—or absent—during meals interact as commensals and act upon one another's practices and values around food, and finally if this case study conducted at Metro Caring effectively opened a window into the impact of food centric community upon commensals. Furthermore, this research through my time conducting interviews and working alongside volunteers in the market, in the waiting area doing nutrition education demos, and assisting in cooking classes and outreach events sought to identify strengths and a few areas for future growth at Metro Caring.

Eating in Childhood and Adulthood

While this research didn't provide either the depth into individual food narratives or the breadth of statistically significant sample sizes; drawing upon the themes that did emerge, I believe that childhood experiences create a sufficiently relevant period in an individual's life as a commensal to warrant consideration. Among interviewees, positive childhood relationships between a person or people and either particular meals or their entire system of eating proved to be a likely link to continuation of those practices in one form or another as an adult. Negative childhood relationships to food, situations or to individual commensals occasionally were cited as continuing in adulthood but not highlighted by the interviewees as remaining particularly important to them. No individual noted an aversion to an entire 'type' of foods as a result of a food trauma that would limit their health or commensal relationships, which given increased agency that adults often carry in their ability to eat or not eat something, a dislike of a couple of things appeared to simply lead to not eating those things.

An area for further exploration would however be warranted to examine possible overall patterns in the number of positive mnemonic anchors to childhood commensality and the general satisfaction that an individual carries to their entire experience to eating and commensality as an adult, based on my small sample size there appeared to be sufficient co-occurrence to encourage this more specific inquiry. The most commonly acknowledged influence in adulthood on food practices and systems of value was that of a parent, guardian, or close relative, followed closely by health. Health was referenced more often in the context of care for the wellbeing of someone being fed

but was also noted in reference to either responding to personal health changes or concern for developing future food related illnesses. Among food related illnesses mentioned diabetes was the most common either being experienced by an interviewee or one of their close commensals; or as being a concern for themselves or a close commensal. Other health concerns identified as influential to adult eating choices were weight regulation, blood pressure regulation, cholesterol, reducing reliance on unspecified medications, or general longevity.

Loss of either access to individual commensals or loss of access more generally to commensal opportunities particularly among elders interviewed (all but three interviewees self- identified as elders or as one shared laughingly, a former elder), so again while not statistically significant, is both important to take note of within this case study, and also in the context with the wealth of research exploring patterns and consequences of commensal isolation among our elders. Among reasons for loss of individual commensals, death of a spouse, loss of custody of a child, adult children being less available, adult children passing away, parents or siblings passing away, and migration or immigration away from extended family networks all appeared.

Inferentially based on the frequency of individuals reporting the use of food from the market to share with others and the positive reflection upon social relationships or positive recognition emerging from sharing of entire meals or gifting favorite treats/snacks, one space for additional research would be into to co-occurrence of lessening access to new commensal opportunities and relationships and either episodic or sustained food insecurity/resource insecurity. It would appear that by prioritizing the

distribution of food when extra is available into existing or new social relationships, that the inability to share food adds to isolation or dissatisfaction with current commensal access. The high priority individuals shared in sharing food even while still experiencing food instability personally alludes to the importance of building or rebuilding these commensal relationships.

Urbanization was a theme present in many interviews with it common for individuals to have either spent time occasionally or consistently in non-urban areas where subsistence gardening if not larger scale farming was the norm. Satisfaction in these non-urban food-ways was linked to several themes including higher quality foods; the experience of participating in the growing, harvesting, and processing of the foods; and proximity to extended family. Nostalgia either for actual positive mnemonic anchors to memories related to food as well as imagined nostalgic experiences that past generations experienced in non-urban settings was also something that appeared to influence current satisfaction with food but not necessarily current practices around food.

As a methodological model, the application of an elaboration of Mary Douglass's process for decoding meals in the context of other meals appears promising, by integrating Sutton's focus on commensals to Douglass's attention to content, I believe that a more complete picture can be developed of "What's Good", when it comes to meal time.

Metro Caring

Metro Caring is more than just an anti-hunger organization, they are also in their own way part of the long history of food reformers. An essential question to address is whether they succeed in their effort to provide nutrition education as part of their programming and curate a healthy-food centered market that is palatable and leads to healthy choices without reinforcing the negative aspects of past food reformer movements. While these are somewhat linked, I will address them each independently and highlight strengths and areas for opportunity based on responses from my field work.

The market at Metro Caring, during the time of my research was broadly acknowledged as providing a regular assortment of foods generally considered to be healthy. The availability of certain core foods such as meat, eggs, and milk, as well as foods accommodating dietary preferences and needs such as vegetarian and vegan diets, or gluten free diets was something that based on shifts spent restocking, was all greatly in demand. As noted by several volunteers working in the market, unfamiliarity of produce items was commonly an issue that needed attention.

Volunteers with cooking and produce experience responded that they felt empowered to coach shoppers on preparation, but since this knowledge and passion was localized to a handful of individuals the potential impact of this on-the-spot education was limited. Furthermore, language and culture limit the inclusivity and desirability of these on-the-spot educational moments because if someone shares a recipe that is also unfamiliar or unappetizing it may not be welcomed.

Similarly, if these produce and culinary knowledge bearers do not speak the preferred language of a shopper, that opportunity to share food knowledge will be lost. The focus in the market on healthy food was popular by the majority of individuals interviewed, however a vocal subset was concerned that it went too far and limited individual agency as well as risked taking the joy out of eating by being too dogmatic. Revisiting sugar guidelines in some way could be an effective way to address this, though not without challenges in its implementation.

Healthy tasting food demos provided a more systematized process, in that knowledge and recipes were shared and compiled by the nutrition team to allow for volunteer nutrition demo leaders to draw from a collective knowledge base. Language accessibility proved a primary barrier to the impact from this program, but cultural representation in what was prepared also could potentially be built upon. A strength of the nutrition demos is that they use ingredients from the market, so each demo is relevant to the shopping experience that day, and if found to be enjoyable, with the aid of the printed recipe the entire dish can be recreated at home for their friends and family.

The execution of the nutrition demos was also a strength, a team of two individuals would work together, one preparing and serving the sample, while the other leading a “nutrition game” which would focus on one or two ideas such as the role of fiber in the digestive system, or visualizing added sugar in popular beverages. These would be accompanied with realistic looking food props which would be a strong draw, and also participation in the nutrition game was a known way to access a variety of fun or tasty

prizes. The conversational focus on how to lead the games and discuss topics of health and nutrition often elicits discourse between several guests together.

Another strength of the nutrition education game is that it becomes a known access point for gregarious conversation, which makes it a space where guests know it will be possible to engage in friendly conversation. Very often during my nutrition education volunteer shifts individuals would remain at the table to talk to me or other visitors until they were called to shop. Among the models of memory, I discuss in this thesis, the concept of heteroglossic memory, and particularly the creation of heteroglossia seems possibly one of the most powerful things that might occur in food-centric community spaces during protracted and permeable conversations. As ideas are shared reformed or reframed and repeated, as well as being consistent as entrée points into additional positively received conversations, their chance of transitioning into ‘common-sense’ or shared knowledge increases.

As a phenomenon, I believe that this is what I was continually observing in snippets of conversation that followed the learning objectives of the nutrition team’s education programming. As for generational transmission of knowledge, particularly to the next generation, while acknowledged often as something interviewees were interested in, given that no one ultimately in the sample group was the primary commensal caretaker for a child limited the degree to which individuals participated in food-based acculturation. Elders engaged to a certain degree with adult children and possible grandchildren, and those without regular commensal interactions with young children shared that given the opportunity there were things they would share, but they had not

yet engaged in such an opportunity. A follow up exploration following parents of children below the age of 18 could eliminate this question to a greater degree.

It seemed apparent to me that Metro Caring's nutrition education programming successfully navigated their goals of sharing nutrition education without participating in or perpetuating agendas of acculturation. The voluntary nature of participation is a key consideration in this assertion, that a person would not face any stigma or consequence for not participating, and more so for choosing to openly disagree as individuals occasionally did.

A second strength was the methodological choice to prioritize community leaders, though limitations placed on exactly how nutrition education concepts can be communicated remains a politicized process and there is progress that remains to be made to address the ethnocentricities embedded in the discipline. For the constraints and for the way that the nutrition programs were discussed in the interviews and in the persisting food- centered conversations I would not consider Metro Caring's nutrition program to be a continuation of the food reformer movements.

This research was not without limitations which must be acknowledged before closing, the next section will attempt to give attention to these and also offer some final thoughts about future research that could be helpful towards refining an understanding of how we understand meals.

Limitations

Because this thesis focused more deeply on exploring the totality of the experience of few individuals rather than being focused on broadly exploring a few experiences across a deep sample of Metro Caring's community, a conclusion such as "*the values surround food and nutrition within this organization are consistently transmitted from individual to individual on the premises, and as well transmitted to such and such % of individuals with no first-hand experiences...*" Instead, what this thesis can say definitively is that the excerpts of first-hand experience which are reflected in this chapter, and throughout this thesis, are things which *meaningfully came out of these individual's experiences at Metro Caring, and within their lives elsewhere*; moreover, it can be asserted unequivocally that none of these experiences which served as catalysts in any individual's life occurred within a vacuum. This work provided a window into dynamic, complex and expansive moments shared by countless individuals, replicated with variation daily, and even hourly or more.

Individuals noted moments when they experienced the impacts mentioned above, or observed the impacts mentioned above, for all intents and purposes, demonstrating that these impacts are occurring. A follow-up series of more quantitative studies could test for these emerging themes against a larger sample should it be desired at a later date.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview

Questions

Below are the questions of which the semi-structured interview guide utilized for the case interviews. The purpose of these questions was to facilitate a reflection backward into taken for granted aspects of their past experiences with food framed by value judgements. Probing question protocols were utilized to draw as similar as possible a set of responses from each individual.

These questions focused on discrete periods of time defined by their relationships to several 'epochal' life changes: the division between childhood and adulthood; and the division between pre- and post-participation in the community of Metro Caring. This led to a tentative exploration of meanings framed within the remembered contexts that formed them.

1. Please select any terms you might use to describe yourself socially, you know, parent, grandfather, elder, aunt uncle, sibling, caregiver, single

Childhood

2. In your opinion looking backward, what would you say is an extremely average meal from your childhood. Something common place which perhaps you ate often.

3. Next, take a moment to think of what you might consider a particularly good meal. It can be based on any criteria you choose. Can you tell me a little about what made it good?
4. Now can you think of an example of a bad meal from your childhood? Again, it can be based on whatever criteria you think of. Please share what made it feel like a bad meal.
5. I would like next for you to tell me about a healthy meal from your childhood. What made it healthy, how did you know, and what did you think of it?

Digging deeper,

6. Could a good meal be un-healthy?
7. Could a healthy meal be bad?
8. Now, can you remember if the adults around you seemed to agree on what was good, bad, healthy and unhealthy?

Thinking about eating as a child,

9. Are there foods that you either developed a fondness for, or are associated with good memories such as people, places or times? (Please tell me about that)
10. Are there foods you can think of that you developed a particular distaste or dislike for? Can you remember anything about how or why you began to dislike those foods? Do you remember ever being forced to eat foods that you really didn't like?

11. How do you feel about those foods now? (both the positive and negative)

Probe: Are you familiar with any family stories about what life was like surrounding food for your parents and grandparents?

12. Based on what you know or have heard about what life might have been like for your parents growing up, how do you think your early experiences with food might have been different if you had been born back then?

Probe: What kinds of things would you have eaten and what were the circumstances that came into play?

13. Similarly, what do you think things might have been like if you had been born in your grandparents' early days?

Since Childhood

14. If you were to think of how you ate growing up as part of either a family tradition, or part of a larger historical, cultural, or religious tradition would you say it was:

Probe: Would you say it is very much intact, somewhat intact, not very intact, not really intact.

Probe: Can you explain why you feel that way? And are there things that have changed that you would like to bring back if you could?

15. Who or what has been the biggest influence to what you would choose to eat in the years since childhood? In what ways do you feel that your thoughts on food

are either similar or different as an adult from what your parents or guardians raised you with?

As an adult, but at some point, in the past after you have begun to shape and take ownership of your practice and traditions associated with food,

16. Tell me about an average meal, about a good meal, a bad meal and what a healthy meal might look like for you.

17. In the following sentence, you will have four words (Time, Money, Health, Education) to choose from to complete it. Select the ranking and order from first to last based on how significant you feel each is to the meaning of the sentence for you. “What I eat has changed most because of _____”

18. How have these specifically been expressed in how you related to food and what you eat?

Probe: Aside from these; are there other significant factors you feel have caused changes?

19. If there are parts of your tradition or practice around food that have remained intact or changed very little, can you tell me about those? If it was a choice to keep them intact, can you tell me about why you made that choice, what that tradition or practice meant to you? Was it easy to hold on to?

Since visiting Metro Caring

Metro Caring has many different things going on, from community navigation, to the market, nutrition education, cooking classes and clubs, community activation, gardening, and health screenings.

Take a moment to think about what of these or others you have participated in at MetroCaring and estimate about how many times or how often you have participated.

20. Within the community space of MetroCaring there are a variety of roles which a person may take at various times. What roles have you taken while at MetroCaring

Probe: for example, are you or have you been a volunteer, client/guest, teacher, student, etc.

Probe: About how long have you been participating in the roles you have identified?

21. How would you describe the food and food culture of MetroCaring compared to what you have experienced elsewhere?

Probe: These next questions will focus on your thoughts on how experiences here at Metro Caring may or may not have impacted your practices or traditions around food and eating.

22. Choose the answer that best reflects the following statement: “I have been introduced to new foods which I now am comfortable eating and preparing”
- I strongly agree, I agree, I disagree, I strongly disagree
23. Has your opinions about what healthy food is, or what the choices you make around food might mean since beginning to visit MetroCaring changed in a manner you feel is significant?
24. “I have shared knowledge gained at MetroCaring about Health, Nutrition, or Cooking with other people in my life” (Yes/No)
25. “I have participated in informal conversations about Health, Nutrition, or Cooking with other people while at MetroCaring. (Yes/No)

If you utilize the market at MetroCaring,

26. Who do you primarily shop for? (just you, household size)
27. Do you share groceries from the market with members of an extended network such as other family, friends or neighbors?
28. Has food from the market, experience in cooking classes or clubs, permitted/helped you to prepare or participate in the preparation of a meal that was also a social gathering of some sort? (Yes/No)
29. “I have attended at least one cooking class or club” (Yes/No)

Probe: If yes, did you learn something that you think fits into your life?

30. Are there any foods you have been introduced to through your time at MetroCaring that you would incorporate into teaching a child or other young person in your life about food, cooking, and eating. (Yes/No)
31. Is there anything related to health, nutrition, or cooking that you have learned through your time at MetroCaring that you would share while teaching a child or other young person in your life about food, cooking or eating? (Yes/No)
- Probe: If you have not had the opportunity yet, is there something you would share?
32. Choose the answer that best reflects your opinion “I have made friendships as a result of my time and involvement in MetroCaring”
- (Yes/No)

Finally, in considering if MetroCaring has impacted your general day to day practice surrounding food,

33. Has your average meal changed in your opinion in form or composition from your involvement in MetroCaring?
34. Is your opinion of what makes a food or meal good, bad or unhealthy changed since your involvement in MetroCaring? Can you give me any examples of how this might be expressed?
35. If you were going to give a name to your practice or tradition associated with food, what do you think it would be?