Stories from the Ethnoburbs:
Tracing Cherished Foods Through Space and Time

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Abstract

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This thesis celebrates food traditions of immigrant families in the west San Gabriel Valley—my home, a region of Los Angeles County notable for its majority Latinx and Asian American population. In 1997, Wei Li first coined the term "ethnoburb" to articulate this voluntary shift in multi-ethnic concentration from downtown enclaves to the suburbs of the west SGV, a phenomenon that challenged intimately-bound associations of suburbia and whiteness.[1] In this thesis, my family's story serves as a point of departure; our backyard cultivation of pomelo (Chinese grapefruit), its budwood brought from China, holds significance in our collective memory. Additional stories of this kind highlight the shaping of land, both physically and symbolically, through foods of personal and cultural value. It is an in-depth study of place through narratives of resistance, redefinition, and resilience.

1. Wei Li, "Anatomy of a New Ethnic Settlement: The Chinese Ethnoburb in Los Angeles," *Urban Studies* 35, no. 3 (1998): 479–501.

stories from the ethnoburbs: tracing *cherished foods* through space and time

a master's thesis by Lauren C. Wong

In memory of my grandpa,
who always made sure I had enough to eat
(1933 - 2016)

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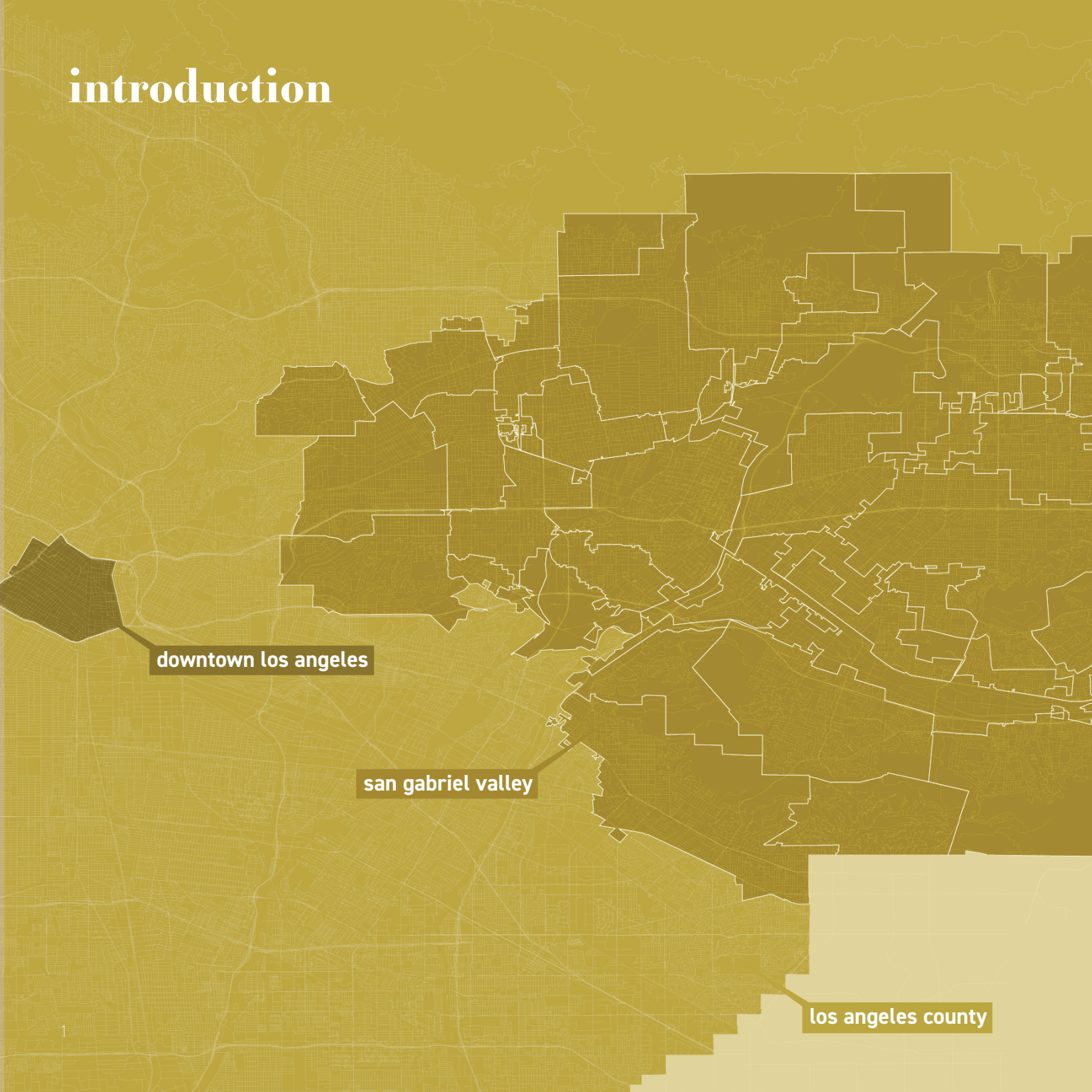
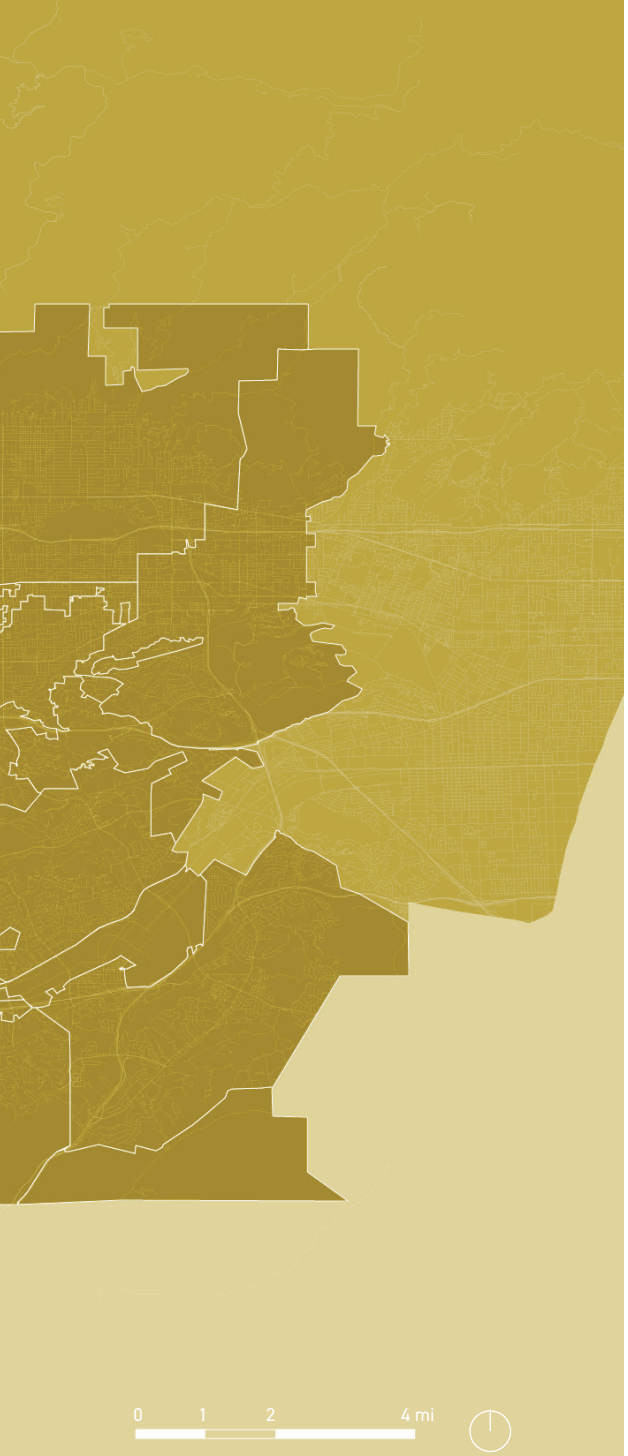
left: sunset views of downtown los angeles
all photos are my own, unless noted

introduction





The San Gabriel Valley, or the SGV, is a region of Los Angeles County east of the city of Los Angeles. Approximately 2 million people are spread among 47 neighborhoods encompassing almost 400 square miles.[1] Not only is it one of the most ethnically diverse areas in the United States, it is also the largest majority Latinx and Asian American region in the country, at around 45% Latinx and 28% Asian as of 2010.[2]

Importantly, labor, immigration, and land use conflicts have characterized the formation and evolution of this region.[3] Land ancestrally inhabited by the Tongva was colonized by Spanish settlers, who established in San Gabriel the first mission in the Los Angeles area and were responsible for an estimated 6000 deaths of indigenous people.[4] Large landholdings were held by powerful and wealthy whites as the exploitation of land and labor continued, with Mexican Americans and Asian Americans building railroad infrastructure and providing the workforce for the growing citrus agricultural economy. The adjacency of the San Gabriel Valley to downtown, the LA River, and the railroad made this region ripe for concentrated industry.

Post-World War II, as manufacturing and other industries began to replace agriculture, Mexican American and Asian Americans (largely Chinese and Japanese) began moving out of ethnic enclaves in East LA and Chinatown to settle in suburbs of the west SGV that were less racially exclusive than others. Monterey Park was one of these suburbs. Located only 7.5 miles east of downtown, it provided relatively easy access to Chinatown as well as to realtors who were willing to sell to a more diverse audience.[5] This large-scale suburbanization by populations formerly denied access to homeownership in the suburbs created the opportunity for increased immigration from Asia, many of whom were from Taiwan, Hong Kong, or were refugees from war in Southeast Asia. Around the 1970s to 1990s, increased transnational flows of people and capital contributed to the transformation of this region, as the white population dropped dramatically from once the majority to now the minority.[6]

In 1997, Wei Li first coined the term "ethnoburb," short for ethnic suburb, to articulate this phenomenon taking place in the west SGV.[7] What Li and a number of other scholars have since observed was a new kind of voluntary suburban multi-ethnic concentration, formed and shaped to maximize personal and social networks that replaced traditional downtown enclaves as new ports of entry.[8] Not just a place of residence, the ethnoburb is also a thriving center for ethnic businesses both locally and globally, effectively integrating where people live and work.[9] Building upon these ideas, Wendy Cheng has written about the west SGV as a multiracial, majority-nonwhite, place-specific culture that has been able to challenge intimately-bound associations of whiteness and suburbia.[10] However, the increasing access to homeownership afforded to many Asian Americans and Mexican Americans in the ethnoburbs was often aided by racism against African Americans, during the same time of African American hypersegregation in areas such as South Central Los Angeles.[11] The residential landscape of the SGV and greater Los Angeles County today bears marks of these racialized negotiations and differential access to homeownership. Poignantly, Pulido, Barraclough, and Cheng have stated, "[the SGV] is home to a diversity of people who have sometimes been complicit in their own and others' oppression, but who have also struggled to

right: a multilingual strip mall sign


DEL MAR
FOODS
MERCADO DEL MAR
Carniceria Latina
at&t


WONG'S PARADISE
CANTONESE AMERICAN FOOD
FOOD TO GO
Model BAKE SHOP
WONG'S PARADISE
WATCH FOR GRAND OPENING
ABES' SAMSONITE LUGGAGE
Model BAKERY

create community and a more socially just world amid these forces. The end result is a fascinating landscape."[12]

My parents were born in Los Angeles and grew up in the west SGV, both a part of this larger move from downtown enclaves to the suburbs. Our known roots in California trace back as far as my paternal great-grandfather, who immigrated from Guangzhou in southern China with my grandpa following him shortly after. In 1962, they opened one of the first Chinese restaurants in Alhambra—it was called Wong's Paradise, serving Cantonese American food to a largely white clientele for 16 years.

My great-grandfather also brought budwood of a pomelo tree with him from China. With the help of a local horticulturist, he planted grafted trees in different places where he and his growing family lived—an apartment in Alhambra, a house in San Gabriel, and so on. Today, the only grafted tree that my family has access to is in my parents' backyard. I once told my parents that if they ever decided to move, we would need to figure out how to move the pomelo tree too. Our tree's annual crop is reliably good: the fruits are mostly large, heavy, evenly golden, and subtly sweet. Living away from home, I look forward to their presence and taste each year when I return.

Perhaps intuitively, my attachment to this tree extends beyond an enjoyment of the fruits themselves. It is largely related to less tangible aspects, such as the meaning the tree carries and the people folded into its story along the way. I never knew my great-grandfather, who passed away before I was born. Yet I am captivated by this budwood story—drawn to this side-by-side migration of people and plants, bringing familiarity and remnants of home to an American suburb lacking both. I am drawn to this act of agency in making marks on a place, through a practice burdened today by regulations and permits. What my great-grandfather left behind are these trees, bearing fruit for generations to follow. It is a connection to people I have never known, and an origin country I have never been.

Of course, in this story, there is also a connection to people in my life whom I hold dear. In the fruits, I can find loving traces of my dad and my grandpa.

left: wong's paradise, serving cantonese american food in alhambra

Memories of my dad lining them up on the dining room table, giving away the biggest and most beautiful ones; memories of my grandpa peeling them for me as a child, and me peeling them for him in his last months of life. The thought of losing access to this tree—one that has traveled great distances across space and time, holding significance in my family's collective memory—is too big for me to comprehend. The specificity of this fruit to my family and to this place has motivated a curiosity to learn about other peoples' stories of shaping land—physically and metaphorically—through culturally-specific cherished foods, giving rise to this exploration.

Research questions:

1. In the ethnoburbs of the west San Gabriel Valley, how does the growing, cooking, and sharing of culturally-relevant foods by immigrant families foster preservation and continuity of identity?
2. In what ways do these cultural practices challenge hegemonic spatial imaginaries?

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right, series: grafted pomelo tree, in seasons

literature review

"My food tells the story of my migration."[13]

Many scholars across disciplines have reflected on the centrality and importance of food in immigrant connections to home, community, and personal and cultural identity. Food is a universal essential need, yet it is experienced differently and intimately both individually and collectively, making it an especially important tool for understanding how immigrants navigate processes of adaptation.[14] Sustenance in more ways than one, food is a tangible medium that grounds "body-place-memory," especially for immigrants experiencing dislocation and re-envisioning what constitutes home.[15] Eating culturally special or traditional foods can create linkages with the past, easing the transition of adapting to a new context while also potentially heightening the physical separation from home.[16] The conceptualization of food by Weller and Turkon as a "cultural tether," a "bridge," and a "reservoir" in the immigrant experience speaks further to its embodiment of linkages with the past, and with people, places, or practices that may otherwise feel physically or metaphorically far.[17] Ultimately, using food to maintain connections with self and with community is a powerful claim and assertion of cultural identity, amid disruptive lived experiences of migration.[18]

Along these lines, immigrant narratives of asserting cultural identity and agency specifically through food-growing spaces is something well-explored in literature. Mares and Pena have looked at Latinx foodways—"the eating habits or food practices of a community, region, or time period"—and written about a concept they refer to as autotopographical agency: a way of intentionally reshaping the physical landscape in order to sustain connections with traditional foods and to create something more resonant with one's cultural identity.[19,20] Physical transformations of landscape reflect symbolic transformations, as people find rich and robust ways to create familiarity and express their identities in new environments. Relatedly, Klindienst challenges the narrative of immigrants as vulnerable "objects of history" subject to forces such as war and poverty, and instead emphasizes the immigrant gardener as "a person who shapes the world rather than simply being shaped by it."[21] Acts of agency and claims to space are echoed by Huynh, who writes

left: plumeria and pomelo, catching light and breathing life into an adjacent alley

about the production of knowledge that occurs in Asian immigrant food-growing spaces and the ability of these spaces to actively challenge a multitude of oppressions such as poverty, poor health, and displacement.[22]

Despite extensive explorations by scholars on the significance of food in immigrant connections to home, community, and identity, as well as the agency and expertise of immigrant gardeners, these narratives continue to be underrepresented in many conversations about reimagining the food system. Alkon and Agyeman, through the lenses of food justice and just sustainability, argue that "the food movement narrative is largely created by, and resonates most deeply, with white and middle-class individuals"—calling attention to what they see as a contemporary emphasis on the relationship of food to topics like sustainability, community, and health, rather than racial, economic, and environmental justice.[23] Inequities inherent in the built environment, resulting from legacies of racist zoning, lending, and other policies, affect access to food, how land is distributed, and whose labor is involved in producing food. Calling attention to this inequitable imbalance, specifically in regards to the wealth of immigrant contributions to the food system, Klindiest emphasizes, "their personal stories have rarely, if ever, been included in books about gardens, though they have helped to shape American land, culture, and cuisine for centuries."[24] Finding ways to honor immigrant narratives and other marginalized narratives in a re-envisioning of the food system can move conversations towards a more "reflexive" food justice movement that is situated in understandings of power and privilege.[25]

Ethnoburbs as significant sites of in/exclusion

The ethnoburbs of the west San Gabriel Valley are uniquely significant in how a new pattern of ethnic settlement has subverted traditional narratives of complete immigrant assimilation as well as tightly held associations of suburban, middle-class, and whiteness.[26] A sustained "intrusion" of nonwhite immigrants into "the traditional turf of white Americans" challenged the history of discriminatory housing policies and resulting legacies of white property ownership.[27,28] Relatedly, Cheng argues, "if conceptions of whiteness and property have been inextricably

linked, so too have varying constructions of nonwhiteness and denial of rights to property"—long-engrained perceptions disarmed and destabilized by the movements en masse of Latinx and Asian Americans.[29] The ethnoburbs represent a new kind of ethnic spatial transformation that redefines the landscape of immigrant residential possibilities in this region, as downtown enclaves were not simply transported and replicated in the suburbs.[30] Multiethnic and encompassing an economic spectrum, they highlight an agency of ethnic people to maximize their networks and forge familiarity in territory previously unavailable to them.[31]

As ethnoburbs coexisted alongside ethnic enclaves, gradually growing and replacing them as ports of entry to the US, subsequent generations in the ethnoburbs took the opportunity to redefine "their own visions of the valley."[32] Saito and Cheng both call attention to the differences in lived experience between immigrants who moved to the ethnoburbs and their children who were raised there, exploring how these children of immigrants navigate multiple worlds and a growing regional identity based on their racialized experiences of growing up in the United States.[33] The emergence of an "east of east" identity—the SGV is geographically east of East Los Angeles, east of East Asia—celebrates the "loosened cultural boundaries" of being adjacent yet distinct from enclaves, and reinventing and reimagining identities separate from it.[34]

It is important to situate the relative wins of the ethnoburbs within a context that acknowledges the persistent marginalization of other groups. While Latinx and Asian Americans were increasingly able to find their footing and access homeownership, this success was often enabled by racism against African Americans, occurring at the same time as their hypersegregation in South Central Los Angeles.[35] Cheng calls attention to how "the west SGV suburbs' relative openness was not uniform across racial minority groups," with many realtors still unwilling to sell to African Americans.[36] Therefore, the gains achieved by Latinx and Asian Americans in the formation and evolution of the ethnoburbs should be recognized alongside larger narratives of anti-Blackness and exclusion. The fact that the African American population in the region today is still relatively low compared

to Latinx and Asian American populations is a reminder of this history.

Ultimately, the ethnoburbs reflected a shift in the demographic composition of the classic white American suburb, and with that, a shift in spatial imaginaries of the west SGV. Conceptualized as "socially held stories, ways of representing and talking about places and spaces," spatial imaginaries refer to collective visions that perpetuate ideas such as who belongs where.[37] Spatial imaginaries "have a strong connection to 'otherings', or the belief that certain people, places, or ideas are naturally different and unequal," defining widely-accepted boundaries around what is normative, and what is not.[38] Lipsitz builds on these ideas, writing about the spatial dimensions of race and racial dimensions of space particularly in regards to the landscape of housing discrimination in the US.[39] The partial yet substantial subversion of norms that continues to occur contemporarily in the west SGV is a significant example of a changing suburban landscape—carrying potential for shifting a larger consciousness and defining a continually greater range of possibilities for the future of this region.

Ethnographic approaches

Interested in an exploration of immigrant foodways grounded in the compelling conditions of the ethnoburbs, I looked to examples of critical ethnography focused on immigrant communities and food. Studying Latinx foodways in Seattle and New York City, both Mares and Marte have utilized ethnographic fieldwork (through interviews and mappings) to learn about lived experiences and to better understand connections between food, home, community, place, and memory. Marte explains the choice behind doing ethnography, noting the weightiness of the relationship between food and forces such as slavery and colonialization: "to ground this gigantic scale I focused on the miniature—the performance of food in households and kitchen spaces," where the intimately-scaled anecdotes provide a welcome tangibility.[40] Relatedly, Mares' interviews of Latinx immigrants were able to ground vast transnational flows in everyday experiences, where backyard cultivation of specific foods opened up conversations about lives lived in places far away. Using interviews to learn about Asian foodways in Los Angeles Chinatown, Huynh emphasizes honoring the

richness of immigrant narratives, rather than using them as "ambiguous references" in effectively tokenizing ways.[41] Within the context of her specific research, Huynh argues for the re-centering of immigrant narratives, given that when they are used in vague or peripheral ways they perpetuate a reductive and commodified vision of Chinatown culture. With the underrepresentation of non-hegemonic narratives such as these, finding ways to learn about people's lived experiences through interviews is increasingly important—not just to address an inequitable representation for representation's sake, but because there is an incredible amount of knowledge and complexity to be revealed.

Opportunities for exploration

In approaching this project, I recognize an opportunity for exploration in the nexus of immigrant foodways and the ethnoburbs, given the aforementioned robustness of scholarship on these topics separately. As Mares, Marte, and Huynh demonstrate through their ethnographic work, I see interviews as a way to learn about non-hegemonic narratives of a particular place—in this case, the ethnoburbs—using food as a lens to reveal and unpack connections to memory, identity, family, and community. In building upon and bringing these discourses together, my goal is to learn about the ethnoburbs in a way that reflects deep dives into people's lived experiences. In addition, the shift over time from enclaves to ethnoburbs as ports of entry for new immigrants further invites a consideration of the nuanced ways that these ethnic communities have reshaped and adapted to the suburbs. Thinking about how intimately-scaled interactions with food (through growing, cooking, and sharing) have helped to establish familiarity in this place opens up new points of inquiry and informs my research questions.

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right: at sam woo bbq, inspecting the roast pig

approaches & methods

Approach to interviews

Because I was primarily invested in listening and learning from people's stories, I chose to use a qualitative approach and conduct in-depth interviews so that people could tell their stories in their own words and in their own ways. As a result, I used an unstructured interview protocol rather than generate a standardized list of questions to strictly adhere to with each person. Typical of unstructured interviews, I kept the following topics in mind as conversational touchstones in light of my research questions:

- Culturally-specific foods and memories associated with them
- Connections of these foods to self-defined concepts of home, community, and place
- Flows of foods and people through space and time
- Intersections of food and identity, especially for descendants of immigrants

As a result of this unstructured approach, the interviews were informal and flexible allowing for deeper dives when people felt compelled to do so. I conducted a total of 13 interviews. Six were face-to-face at peoples' homes in the west SGV, six were conducted over the phone with those living outside the west SGV, and one was conducted over email. For interviews conducted face-to-face and over the phone, I obtained consent prior to recording the interviews and later transcribed them. One interview I did not record, and instead took notes. Interviews ranged in length but were approximately 60 minutes. For the interview conducted over email, I asked the interviewee to provide an introduction to herself and her family, and to share any stories she wanted to around food, memory, home, community, and identity. I then asked some follow up questions in a subsequent email.

Sampling strategy and interview participants

Aligned with this idea of wanting to hold space for people's stories to emerge organically, I utilized a snowball sampling technique to identify people to interview. Snowball sampling, or gathering research participants by way of connections, can "open possibilities for an expanding web of contact and inquiry" and allow for entry into situations and

conversations that may otherwise be difficult to access in other approaches.[42] I was also interested in using this technique because of its resonance with my own experiences of how information and contacts are transmitted among family and social networks, through powerful word-of-mouth from person to person.

Given my use of snowball sampling, the people whom I interviewed are my friends and family. Spanning multiple age and immigration generations, they include dear childhood friends, long-time suburban neighbors, and friends of my parents and grandparents for many decades. All have histories in the west SGV and continue to be rooted to this place in various ways, carrying their own unique stories of how and why they got there. All are either immigrants or descendants of immigrants, representing a range of different ages and ethnicities from Asia and Mexico. Names have been changed to pseudonyms, recognizing the personal nature of insights that have been shared with me. Joy, Julia, Kay, Kara, Allison, Rachel, and Molly are from my age generation; they are children and grandchildren of passionate gardeners who grow and cook foods from their homelands. Their families have histories in Taiwan, Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, and Mexico. Jo is from my parents' age generation and is too an avid gardener, with family roots in Japan. Caroline is from my grandparents' age generation and is the only interviewee who does not garden, though she is connected in other ways through food to her Mexican heritage. Celine, my grandma, is from the Philippines and grows culturally-specific foods in her garden. My other grandma, dad, and uncle were the final three people that I spoke with; their stories served to ground and inform my understanding of our family's context in the west SGV, and were not coded for thematic analysis in the way that the others were.

In interviewing people that I knew, I was cognizant of how my personal relationships with interviewees could potentially invite more intimate conversations and reveal insights I may not otherwise have access to. However, I see this mainly as a strength. Along these lines, Saito has done critical ethnography in the SGV on multiethnic and multiracial community politics, with deep prior involvement in the communities that he interviewed. Acknowledging

the advantages and disadvantages of this choice, Saito writes, "questions of distance and objectivity that arise from my involvement should be weighed against increased access to people and events and the possible insight that comes from in-depth knowledge."[43] Interviewing people that I knew felt like a meaningful way to see, through different eyes, a place with which I am familiar. In addition, I chose to include people of a variety of cultural and ethnic identities among my interviewees, to speak to the inherent diversity of the west SGV. It is also, simply, who my community is.

Coding and thematic analysis

In order to speak to phenomena shared across interviews, I utilized open coding to identify themes that emerged from people narrative upon which I could reflect further upon. Saldaña defines a code in qualitative data analysis as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for portion of language-based or visual data."[44] Functioning as more than simply labels, codes are an "interpretive act" and a way of "linking," or forming connections between data and ideas.[45] With my research questions in mind, I searched for consistent occurrences of phenomena across the interview transcripts, to assign codes—these underwent multiple iterations as I continued to understand the data and develop my analysis. Ultimately, I generated eight codes, "cherished foods," "making marks," "food as care," "strength in struggle," "homesickness," "family expectations," "navigating identity," and "in lieu of language," with descriptions unpacking their meaning. As an example, the code "cherished foods" was used to identify instances in the transcripts where people spoke about foods holding personal or cultural significance, accompanied by a recognition of the cherished foods' physical ephemerality and significant potential for cultural loss. These eight codes directly inform the theme chapters to follow.

Taken together, the memories and musings of my interviewees offer significant insights on the nuanced connections of food, place, and identity. In representing a portion of possible perspectives, they present opportunities for further investigation.

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cherished foods

"Because my mom doesn't have enough time to look over her garden like my grandma did, a lot of the vegetables we used to eat we haven't eaten in a long time. **I feel like when my grandma passed, so did a lot of these foods that I used to eat because they're not as easily found in a grocery store.**"

Joy

Many people I interviewed shared fond memories of their parents and grandparents growing and preparing food. These cherished foods, with intertwined personal and cultural significance, ranged from starfruit to Christmas empanadas. Notably, the fond memories were often accompanied by a darker, somber recognition that these foods could one day fade into obscurity, if the people responsible for them passed away or the recipes were never passed on. As a result, there is an ephemerality that is evoked through these stories, recognizing that the loss of a cherished, culturally-significant food is also the loss of something deeper and more symbolic. Some people I interviewed conveyed a sense of holding on tightly to a food and a heritage, learning a recipe while it is still available, while others reached a place of acceptance that certain foods will pass with time as all else does. Ultimately, in all of these stories, we are transported across time and into relationships. Through both homegrown and home-cooked foods, there are elements of recalling the past, enjoying the present, and speculating about what the future holds.

Homegrown

Homegrown foods, specially cultivated within families, represent much more than mere sustenance. For example, Joy had many reflections to share about the significance of homegrown foods in her life. Her grandparents were farmers in Taiwan and Brazil, and they brought their farming expertise to the west San Gabriel Valley when Joy was five years old. Joy recalled the wide variety of vegetables and fruits grown in their backyard, things that were common in Taiwanese cooking:

"There were rows and rows of Chinese bok choy, Chinese broccoli, cabbage, leeks, bamboo,

left: freshly picked asian pears—small, speckled, sweet

spinach, and peppers, with peas hanging on the back wall and bitter melon and radishes elsewhere. We also grew guava, longan, tangerines, peaches, and oranges."

Joy's clear and detailed recollection of their garden, including specific references to spatial placements, speaks to the impression it left upon her. It also highlights her grandparents' expertise and care—given that a garden of this abundance requires work and dedication to maintain. Reflecting on how hard her grandma worked to grow this food, Joy shared:

"Through eating her food, through the vegetables, watching her do something that she really loved, I felt like it really bridged us together, and I felt like it brought her a lot of joy to watch me eat and enjoy the food that she so laboriously planted and nurtured. Whenever I think of vegetables, I immediately think of her—she passed away about five years ago. Because my mom doesn't have enough time to look over her garden like my grandma did, a lot of the vegetables we used to eat we haven't eaten in a long time. I feel like when my grandma passed, so did a lot of these foods that I used to eat because they're not as easily found in a grocery store."

Here, she speaks to the garden, and the plate, as places of reciprocity and connection with her grandma. By eating and enjoying these homegrown foods, Joy was able to show her appreciation and recognition of her grandma's efforts. This served as a point of connection between them, a willing exchange they were partners in. But interwoven with this joyous narrative is the recognition that losing her grandma has also meant losing access to these certain culturally-specific foods: ones laden with childhood memories which, in turn, have connected her to the joys of living with her grandparents. There is a sense of permanence in the way Joy talks about no longer eating the foods she used to eat after her grandma passed, and how intimately connected these two losses are.

Like Joy, Kay has memories of her grandparents' abundant backyard garden. Kay's grandparents immigrated from Vietnam, and they took care of young Kay and her brother while their parents were at work. Their garden was filled with fruits they were accustomed to eating in Vietnam, including

jujube, lychee, longan, kumquats, oranges, and starfruit. Kay recalled the taste of her grandma's starfruit, and its distinct profile:

> *"Oh, my grandma also had starfruit! We ate that a lot too. It was really good. Some of them are a bit tart, but the ones my grandma grew were actually really good. It was nice and sweet too. It's just refreshing; it's really light and juicy. I can't say I've found starfruit too often in markets, so that was kind of nice."*

The unique sweetness of Kay's grandma's starfruit is amplified by its commercial rarity—a trace of Vietnam, that can only be reliably found in their backyard.

Home-cooked

Home-cooked foods, prepared uniquely in each family, were often cited as reminders of home, comfort, and familiarity. Just as Joy and Kay cited a lack of availability of certain foods in grocery stores, others cited a lack of availability of certain foods in restaurants. Rachel, whose family immigrated from Hong Kong, told me about some of her favorite dishes that her grandma would prepare at home:

> *"There are still things that I ask for every time I go home, or my grandma will just prepare for me, because she knows I want it. The first thing that comes to mind right now is a steamed egg dish that has the consistency of silken tofu; it's really just egg and water, and a little bit of ground beef... My grandma makes a soup with a salt duck egg and a mustard green that I really like—it's a wintery mustard green that's hard to find in Chicago."*

Intrigued by the minimal ingredients of these dishes, I asked Rachel what made them special to her:

> *"One of the things that's special about is that it's really Chinese home-cooking, because it's really Chinese home-cooking, because it's not Chinese food you can buy even if you go to an authentic Chinese restaurant; I've just never seen it anywhere."*

The specificity of these favorite foods to Rachel's

home—and their lack of availability at restaurants claiming authenticity—heightens an awareness of how special and critical these recipes are. Rachel mentions a mustard green that she likes but has been difficult to find in her current place, suggesting a struggle to replicate this recipe from afar.

Similar to Rachel, Julia reflected on foods that her family would prepare that could not be found at a restaurant, because of their specific ethnic context:

> *"Since my family has this mixed background—we're ethnically Chinese, but with a lot of Vietnamese influence—when I think about home cooking or dishes that I like, they're not something that I can find in a restaurant because we don't just eat Vietnamese food or Chinese food. It's this interesting fusion that is very familiar to me and I consider comfort food, but I can't find it outside of my family. One of my favorite things is my mom's chicken noodle soup. It's really good and I really like it, and when people ask that question, "if you could only eat one thing for the rest of your life, what would you eat?" I always say that. I really need to learn how to make that, because I don't go home as often or things like that. Even though San Gabriel Valley has a lot of cultures and a lot of Asian Americans live there, and cook the food and eat the food and commune around the food, even distinct Asian American groups have foods that you can't just find."*

Julia recognizes a delicate connection between herself and this chicken noodle soup, cherished and specific to her family, and there is a sense of urgency to learn how to make it because of her current distance from home. She also recognizes the uniqueness of her family's "fusion," despite the presence of many other Asian Americans in the west SGV.

Like Rachel and Julia, Molly talked about cherished homemade foods made in specific ways by her family. Her grandparents are Mexican, and make tamales and empanadas each year for Christmas. When I asked her if she worries about one day losing access to these foods and their cultural connections, she replied:

> *"I do think about it. No one wants to think about it,*

but I don't want traditions to be lost once they're gone, you know? Or we're trying to replicate something and we're like, "shoot, it can never be replicated," because it was just different when it was them... I seriously feel it's that concept of your mom makes you a grilled cheese and it's way different than when you make it; you could watch them, do the exact same thing, and it just doesn't taste as good. I don't know. I worry about it, but I think that's just what's going to happen. It won't be the same and it's partially just because of the person who's making it for you, and the memories you have associated with it."

Molly touches on the tenuousness of her connection to cherished foods cooked by her loved ones, recognizing they are cherished because of the people associated with them and the specificity to her home. Highlighting their ephemerality with pragmatic resignation, she offers a different but important perspective, also suggesting an amplified appreciation in the present moment. In all of these stories of cherished homegrown and home-cooked foods, there are connections to family and cultural heritage that are intimately rooted in the home context. This specificity heightens the potential for loss, but is also incredibly meaningful, leaving lasting imprints in other, intangible ways.

making marks

"Originally when we moved into our house, the land where it's now our garden was just a patch of green grass as decoration. **They totally ripped that apart and put that land to use.** It's like, such an immigrant thing to do."

Allison

One of the most prominent themes that emerged during the interviews had to do with the physical and symbolic transformation of space, as people found opportunity in places with very little spark of life. Through skillful personal touches, people in these stories transformed these places lacking life into places that better represented their cultural context and fulfilled their specific needs. This phenomenon is ultimately about making marks. Allison, born and raised in the west San Gabriel Valley to parents who immigrated as adults from Hong Kong and Guangzhou, reflected on an example of land transformation that she witnessed in her own backyard. She told me about her grandma's garden, recalling her family's approach to the suburban lawn that preceded it:

> *"[The garden] is really well thought-out and really utilizing the land, basically. It's a reflection of where they came from. Originally when we moved into our house, the land where it's now our garden was just a patch of green grass as decoration. They totally ripped that apart and put that land to use. It's like, such an immigrant thing to do...Just this random patch of grass by our pool. But now it has a purpose. It feeds us."*

Allison highlights what she sees as an immigrant perspective on the lawn: it is merely decorative, better replaced by something useful. This exists in opposition to conventional understandings of the suburban lawn as symbolic of success, order, and uniformity. Her reference to their ripping apart of the lawn and "putting that land to use" as "such an immigrant thing to do" suggests a particular ethic of seeing productive potential in all resources and taking none for granted as a result of facing struggles both past and presently. There is power and agency in reshaping land, especially in ways that defy hegemonic suburban ideals. She also

left: delightful backyard curation of textures, colors, and repurposed objects

highlights the ultimate accomplishment of this change: the land now sustains them.

Like Allison, Celine reflected on immigrant ways of shaping and personalizing land in a lacking place. She shared a story of her niece and nephew, who immigrated from China, and how they transformed the space in front of their apartment in the west San Gabriel Valley:

> *"They were farmers in China. Before, the sidewalk in our apartment and the backyard really dry dirt, nothing grow, even the green grass won't even grow. They cultivated that dirt, and she added fertilizer, tofu. It's not really exactly tofu that you buy from the market and start throwing on the soil, no. She has a friend that works at the restaurant...They squeeze that tofu and then the residue, you just throw it away, so they get the juice. Use the liquid. She found out they have that, it's good for mixing on the soil, so bags of that one, like four pounds imagine that, so she takes them and she cultivated that dirt, dig it upside down, and she added that tofu. And it's so moist, she can grow any vegetable she want. So when I saw it, it looked so neat, the green beans—oh my god."*

Previously discarded tofu liquid could be judged by some as an unconventional soil amendment, but Celine highlights the robust success of this technique, alluding to the skill and ingenuity of her niece and nephew in using their connections and maximizing their limited resources. She speaks with admiration and amazement of their transformed productive garden, and how they can now grow anything they want in a place that was previously unable to support any plant life.

In parallel, Kay talked about personalizing a place by expanding upon the potential already present in the land. She expanded upon the origins of her mom's garden, and the various factors that influenced what her mom grew:

> *"The backyard already came with an avocado tree, a lemon tree, and a fig tree. My mom's also really into flowers, so we started out more with that. Eventually, she started getting into fruits as well. I think for her, she chose to grow the foods that she loved to eat growing up...She got into dragon fruit, and we would have this sprawling*

vine all along our fence in the backyard, which she was really proud of...She started a little herb garden too, with all the Asian chilis and things because she loved spice in her food. She grew lemongrass because it's a main ingredient in Vietnamese food that she would make, and we had basil, cilantro, all the herbs she would cook with. I know she added kaffir lime, she started growing her own aloe...she had a lot back there. Honestly, I'm not even sure if I knew everything that she tried growing because there was so much."

Reflecting on her mom's choices to plant certain foods, she calls out their relationships to childhood memories and inclusion in Vietnamese cuisine—cultivating exactly what was wanted and needed in the space available. Kay alludes to feelings of pride she saw in her mom as the garden thrived, and a deep care and devotion to this garden that was sustained over time.

Other people shared accounts of their parents and grandparents sourcing their plants from culturally-specific nurseries as well as bringing seeds back from places abroad, demonstrating a utilization of global resources in order to personalize a place. Allison's family collectively grows hawthorn berries, dragonfruit, pomelo, avocados, winter melon, and many other kinds of Chinese vegetables. When I asked her about the origins of these plants, she shared that they came from a Chinese nursery in the west SGV, which sources their seeds and stems from China. Similarly, Rachel's family obtained their persimmon trees and other trees from the San Gabriel Nursery, a Japanese-American, family-owned and operated business in the west SGV specializing in rare and difficult to find species. Her family replaced what was previously "just grass and a giant maple tree" in their backyard with species from the nursery that were better suited to their wants and needs. This is also evident in Joy's stories of her grandma who went a step beyond the nursery to obtain the plants she needed:

"I have memories of whenever my grandma would go back to Brazil or Taiwan, she would always come back with seeds. She has some siblings who also live in America, in surrounding San Gabriel Valley areas; they would already have the plant, and she would take some of the

plant and replant it at our house. Those were the two main methods where she was able to grow her plants."

Here, Joy calls attention to how her grandma relied on trusted resources that were both local and from afar. This constellation of people and resources, created by simultaneous actions of reaching out and bringing back, demonstrates her grandma's dedication to cultivating what she could not find elsewhere and bringing familiarity to her current garden space.

Collectively, these stories highlight some ways in which people have been able to alter their physical landscape to better resonate with their culturally specific wants and needs. In turn, these physical transformations engender deeper and less tangible ones, as people surround themselves in meaningful ways with reminders of childhood or reminders of home.

right: various offerings of food, drink, and other momentos at the cemetary

food as care


JIANZHUANG
CHINESE LIQUOR
SPIRITS DISTILLED FROM 36% SORGHUM
10% WHEAT,8% CORN,18% GLUTINOUS RICE
375ML ALC 50% BY VOL
IMPORTED BY: DIAMOND HONG INC
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK 11232 USA
PRODUCED AND BOTTLED IN CHINA

"Menudo is tripe; it's tripe and it's hominy...**he does it every year and everybody loves it; the way he does it, he does it with a lot of TLC.** He cleans it, and washes it, and oh my word. And he does it, prepares it days ahead, because it takes a lot of time...Just to clean that part. And that's the way he likes it."

Caroline

The most prominent theme that emerged during interviews was the intentional use of food to express care for family, friends, and sometimes even strangers. Nearly every person I interviewed reflected in some way on this phenomenon, often with a deep sense of gratitude and awareness of its role in maintaining relationships. Stories that people shared about their family members included references to fruits of their labor, personal touches, and the phrase "have you eaten yet" as a stand-in for "how are you"—reinforcing the intimate quality of these expressions of care. Stories that people shared about their friends included references to exchanging foods on local and global scales in ways that affirmed connections and community ties. Lastly, there were stories of longevity, of people presenting and sharing food at altars and cemeteries to express care even after loved ones have passed. The following unpacking of these sub-themes— "fruits of their labor," "pride and personal touches," "have you eaten yet," "connections with community," and "longevity"—speak to the nuanced dimensions of using food to show care. Ultimately, these stories (in their nuance and complexity) reinforce that foods shared between family and friends are more than simply gifts of physical sustenance—they are affirmations of care and fulfilments of emotional needs as well.

Fruits of their labor

Many people that I interviewed directly referenced the hard work and dedication that their families poured into growing and preparing food for them. Rachel reflected on the enormity of food prepared by her grandma for an average weeknight dinner, with just her immediate family at the table:

"When my grandma cooked when I was growing up, every single night had a soup, and at least four—if not five—dishes of different kinds of food. Which now that I think about it, is ridiculous, as I make myself one-pot meals and eat it for a week."

Rachel draws attention to a dramatic difference between the way she grew up eating and the way she eats today, the weight of which might not have been fully realized until she was living away from home. Her amazement at the number of dishes her grandma prepared daily underscores her recognition and appreciation of this effort. Similarly, Allison reflected on how hard her grandma worked to grow food for her while she was growing up, and described the significance of this effort in descriptive and emotional detail:

"Growing up, my grandma would always bring over fresh produce. For me, it was literally the fruits of her labor. They all came from the village; they grew up really dirt poor. Seeing them harvest this fruit and seeing how successful they were—I think that really taught me to appreciate grit, and patience. It's just so special, you know? Your grandma puts all this hard work into growing these delicious fruits for you to eat. It's just a lot of love, and it tastes so good because it's so fresh."

Calling out the poverty and associated struggles that her grandma faced, Allison provides context to why her grandma's fruits are so special to her—they are intimately connected with resilience, where knowledge of her grandma's struggle amplifies the gratitude she feels about this gesture of care. While Rachel's and Allison's anecdotes are about being *recipients* of their family's generosity, Kay remembered a satisfaction in the act of *giving,* through dedicating time to share the bounty of their avocado tree with family members:

"My mom would grow all these fruits and we would share them with the rest of our family, especially the avocados. We'd spend a lot of time outside picking avocados from the tree, collect them in bags, and share them with the whole family. I don't think anyone ever bought avocados because they would just wait to get it from us."

She shared this memory of their harvesting routine with a sense of pride, remembering that

they always had enough to provide for their family. There is both a literal abundance, and an abundance of effort that is reflected in Rachel, Allison, and Kay's stories, in everyday experiences that are made special.

Scaling up from everyday experiences, other people that I interviewed shared memories of their families working hard to prepare food for specific holidays. Caroline, a friend of my grandma for many decades whose family is from Mexico, told me about her husband's Christmas menudo and the immense amount of time it requires:

> *"Menudo is tripe; it's tripe and it's hominy...it might sound gross to you—but it's the lining of the cow's stomach...You put it together and he does it every year and everybody loves it; the way he does it, he does it with a lot of TLC. He cleans it, and washes it, and oh my word. And he does it, prepares it days ahead, because it takes a lot of time just the hours and hours just to clean the menudo. Just to clean that part. And that's the way he likes it."*

She describes the steps to prepare this dish that take him days to complete, and his patience and satisfaction in devoting time to make something special that his family enjoys. Like Caroline, Molly also talked about a beloved family Christmas tradition, and how her grandma upheld the tradition this year despite feeling unwell: *"Another thing my grandma always makes is empanadas on Christmas. Every year everyone's like, "did she make the empanadas?" Even this year, even though she had health problems, she still made them."* Molly also shared that the filling for these empanadas is made from pumpkins grown by her grandpa: further evidence of the care and work that has gone into the preparation of this special food. She highlights her grandma's dedication in prioritizing the continuity of the tradition and her family's enjoyment of them.

Pride in preparation; personal touches

Another noteworthy motif that often came up in discussions of family, food, and care involved the pride and personal touches with which families prepared food for each other. Kay talked about her love of her mom's home-cooking, and how her mom would use plants from her garden to add a

special element to her dishes:

> *"My mom cooked a lot while I was growing up. One of my favorite things was always having home-cooked meals. My favorite dish would be her chicken pho; most of the ingredients she'd buy outside, but she included a lot of the herbs and spices. She used cilantro, limes, and lemons from the backyard. I personally didn't eat the chilis, but she for sure used that. It was always just adding a little extra touch to all of her dishes."*

The "little extra touch" of homegrown herbs added a level of personalization that elevated staple dishes and left marks of her mom's efforts. Similarly, Rachel recalled the pride her grandma felt in incorporating homegrown produce into dishes that she prepared for her family: *"I have memories of my grandma cooking the food that she grew—and that being presented at dinner, as a point of conversation. Like, "the tomatoes this year are really sweet." My grandma was really proud of the way that she presented the food to us."* Julia also discussed the pride her grandma felt to be able to cook for her family. She shared memories of her family's Sunday afternoon tradition, revolving around a noodle soup that her grandma prepared so their extended family could spend time together:

> *"A tradition that I had growing up, was that Sunday afternoons we would always go to my grandparents' house because my grandma would cook up a huge pot of noodle soup. Not because there was anything special going on, but just because my grandma was cooking, and we wanted to spend time together."*

Interested in this "just because" tradition, I asked Julia's thoughts on how this has strengthened connections between her family members, especially intergenerationally:

> *"I think it is very important for my grandma that she can still cook these traditional, home dishes for her children and her grandchildren. And you know, she's getting older now, so sometimes my dad or my aunts and uncles will tell her, "don't work so hard, don't cook these elaborate things, because you're getting older; you're tired, you might hurt yourself," but she's pretty stubborn about continuing to do it. And I mean, I think that*

that's right. It is something that we can share, and it brings her joy when she can see that we're enjoying it and coming together because of it."

The stubbornness that Julia observes in her grandma—despite the hardships involved in making elaborate foods—suggests a sense of pride in being able to take care of family through food. Like Julia, Joy had memories of her grandma preparing dinner for their large extended family, for no particular reason other than to simply spend time together. She also told me about a specific vegetable that her grandma grew for one of her cousins, speaking to how her grandma made them feel loved through these kinds of personalized actions:

"On my dad's side, we have 12 cousins; we're all super close, and we're all mostly based in southern California. My grandma would cook for all of us...I remember my oldest cousin really loved this one vegetable that is basically a radish, and my grandma would especially plant this vegetable...whenever she was there, my grandma would prepare it. I remember the first time I ate it, because it's such a distinct taste—it's sour. In Taiwanese, it's called 'big head vegetable.'"

Joy's distinct memory of this specially-grown vegetable demonstrates how her grandma took the time to care for individual needs even within a big family. Across these excerpts, food is used in both small touches and grand gestures to show care for family members—a loving expression not just reserved for holidays or special occasions, but for everyday moments that add up to something meaningful and leave their impressions in memory.

"Have you eaten yet?"

"Have you eaten yet?" is a phrase that some people shared with me as a question their family members would ask them in lieu of "how are you," and another way to express care. Kay's grandparents would often ask her this question; she expanded on their insistence in making sure she always had enough to eat:

"Food in a way is the same thing as love, right? Whenever I talk to my grandparents, they always ask me, "have you eaten yet?" You know, that's their way of saying, "how are you?" Food's a

pretty big part of our lives; you know how when you eat, and your grandparents are trying to shove food on your plate? They always have to make sure you eat enough. They keep giving you more."

She points out an equivalence between love, food, and abundance that she sees in her family, which is something that Allison also speaks to:

"In Asian culture, and especially in my family, food equates love—whenever my mom or my grandma will call me, the first thing they ask is always, "have you eaten yet?" Do you get that? (laughs) I think it's the nourishment; they're really big on nourishing the body and providing the best food, so I think that trickles down to the very basics—having that salvation, that garden, personally harvesting it, and giving it to your family. There's something very special about that. It seems so low key, but it's that steadfastness and dedication."

Allison further highlights this connection between food and love, with food functioning as both physical and emotional nourishment that comes from a humble place. Growing and sharing food with family may seem like a minor or "low key" acts of care, but she calls attention to something profoundly meaningful to her in this provision for the most basic needs. While Allison particularly situates these ideas in Asian culture, both she and Kay demonstrate the power of "have you eaten yet?" in their families to evoke care in tangible ways, and to serve as a warm welcome upon returning home or reuniting in some way. The fact that their families share the exact same phrase suggests that others may experience this as well.

Connections with community

Just as people have shared in their stories about food as a way to express care for family members, there are also many instances of food being shared between friends, and the meaningful connections maintained through those acts. Rachel shared a detailed memory of her mom and grandma's annual persimmon harvesting tradition, and how the persimmons are carefully sorted and distributed to friends each year:

"They always get bags and share with different

people, and my grandma makes a big point of picking out the very best ones to give to the people that she cares about. Or, to the people who she feels like she wants to impress the most, even if she's not quite as close to them. My mom gets the second pick after my grandma has removed all the very best ones—to then share with her friends and stuff. There's been some friend politics about what happens in the year that you don't get the bag of persimmons from my mom or my grandma, or people will start asking about them."

Bringing up the "friend politics" that sometimes result, she draws attention to the relationships that are intentionally maintained (or perhaps neglected) through this sharing. There is a perception of closeness—an affirmation of continued friendship—tied to each bag of persimmons. Rachel continued to reflect on the ways these fruits connect her grandma to others in their neighborhood:

"I think that for my grandma, because she can't drive and is too afraid to take public transportation, she's very limited in her mobility, but giving away fruit—and talking to people about food and her garden—is a way that she connects to people in our neighborhood. They will walk by and see fruit trees, or see my grandma working in the yard, and they'll stop and talk to her. She's made a few friends across the alley and down the street that she talks to and keeps regular correspondence with, and they obviously get a bag of persimmons every year."

Even though Rachel's grandma has limited mobility within a small geographic sphere, sharing fruits and working in the garden has enabled her access to a wide breadth of people—strangers, neighbors, and friends—and effectively widened her community. Rachel's observations of this phenomenon demonstrate how these fruits are not just fruits, but communicative tools and means of building and maintaining friendships. In parallel, Joy told me about how her grandma connected to others through her abundant homegrown vegetables:

"She always gave vegetables to her friends at church, neighbors, people she didn't really know…I have so many memories of her loading

huge boxes of vegetables for a neighbor, someone she thought would appreciate it. I think that spirit of giving—giving the one thing that she could do well, and serving people in the one way she knew how to—that's something that's really stayed with me."

In addition to Rachel and Joy, there were many other stories that people shared about bringing homegrown vegetables, fruits, and seeds to their friends locally as a way to express care. Julia told me about her grandma, who brought along items from her garden each time she went to visit a friend: *"I remember my grandma had a friend that lived within walking distance of her. Sometimes she would take us there to visit, and whenever she took us there she brought something—whether it was a vegetable, or some honey."* Julia noticed that her grandma brought a food item each time she visited her friend, suggesting an almost ritualistic way of showing care. Celine spoke of bringing homegrown green onions to a friend, noting how happy it made them both to share and receive this gift: *"Today I delivered a bundle to my friend because she's making wonton soup. I give her like ten stalks, big. She was so happy. It's nice to make people happy from your garden. (laughs)"* She speaks to the reciprocal delight experienced through this exchange, showing how her garden allows her to joyfully care for herself and others. Kay shared another example of reciprocity, thinking back to when her mom would exchange homegrown fruits with the professional who maintained their pool: *"He somehow got into conversation with my mom about fruit, and every time he would come, he would bring his own fruits that he grew at his own house and they would exchange fruits with each other."* Here, Kay provides an example of how these fruits created an opportunity for connection and a way to show friendship and appreciation.

In addition to local sharing, interviewees told me about sending homegrown products to people across greater distances, indicating a commitment to showing care beyond what is readily accessible and a geographically unbounded definition of community. Jo, a friend of my mom's from childhood, said that she ships boxes of homegrown persimmons to loved ones in Seattle, in addition to sharing her abundant garden bounty with local coworkers, friends, and family. In parallel, Celine told me about a friend who was trying

unsuccessfully to locate a moringa plant—an edible plant Celine remembered many households having in the Philippines. She described visiting the Philippines, and looking to bring back what her friend requested: *"She was looking for that plant, but the nursery ran out; and then when I asked her what kind of plant she's looking for, she said moringa! So when I went home, I asked my neighbor for seeds…I gave one to my brother in Canada. I mailed him the seeds and he planted it."* This arc of seeking out, carrying back, and sharing widely speaks to this constellation of connections that is reinforced through these seeds that have crossed borders in big and small ways.

Longevity

Lastly, some people spoke about how they used food to remember or show respect for people who had passed away, suggesting a sense of continuity or longevity in this act of care. Rachel and Kay both shared stories about leaving homegrown fruits at altars and cemeteries. Rachel grew up with altars at home for her great-grandparents and Buddha, and told me about how they—before any of the living—received the very best of the homegrown persimmons every year: *"they were the original top tier. They were tier zero for persimmons."* Like Rachel, Kay's family presented elaborate food offerings at the cemeteries where her great-grandparents were buried:

> *"My grandma's Buddhist; whatever fruits she grew, she put it at her altars as offerings to our past relatives. When we go to Rose Hills to remember my great-grandparents, we always bring food, lay it there, and pray. There'd just be food everywhere. You pray with the little incense sticks, and then everyone eats together."*

In a slightly different but parallel vein, Celine told me about a neighbor who gave her a tiny loquat tree decades ago that now stands 20 feet tall in her backyard:

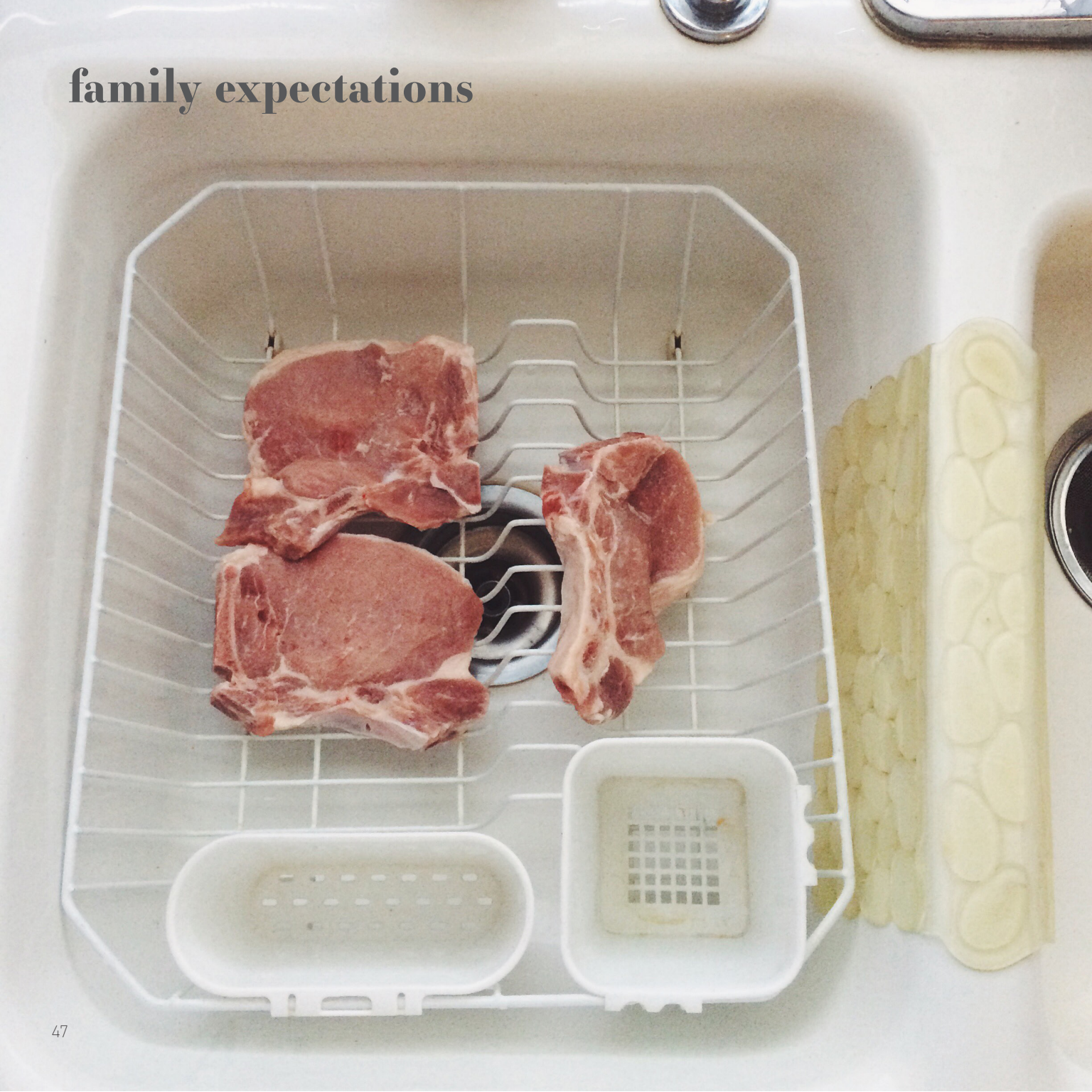
> *"That's your grandpa's friends for a long time…He pass away already, may he rest in peace. So we talk to him all the time, when he goes on vacation, we go on vacation, we tell each other to pick up our mail, like that…now, he's gone, we have his plant, every time we see it blooming, we always think of him. And it was really sweet. I gave some*

seeds to my sisters in the Philippines, and hers grew. I've been sending them seeds every time we have seeds in here."

Even though Celine's neighbor has passed, a piece of their long-term friendship carries into the present through this tree. His gift—a tangible object symbolizing care—has a life beyond him, embodying reminders with each year's bloom. This continuity extends even further, in Celine's sharing of loquat seeds with family in the Philippines, who have then cultivated their own trees. From neighbor to neighbor in the west SGV, to homes abroad, it is noteworthy how far a single gesture of friendship has reached years later.

Across all these stories, food is used to express care in families, friendships, and in relationships with people who have passed—ranging from vernacular experiences to special traditions, and from local exchanges to global mailings. The crossing of boundaries and borders that occurs in these excerpts speaks to food's power as one kind of social glue, in helping to connect and maintain a richness of relationships over distance and time.

family expectations



However, if the sesame leaves were ready to be picked, I would have the additional task of picking them from the garden first. I didn't particularly enjoy the extra work for a vegetable I disliked, especially when **I didn't understand why a woman's place was in the kitchen**."

Kara

Another theme that emerged during interviews was about family expectations in relationship to food and the kitchen. These expectations, held by older generations, focused on upholding traditional roles of women as the main entities responsible for preparing food and maintaining food traditions within the family. The people whom I interviewed recognized, with empathy, their parents' and grandparents' motivations for ensuring the continuity of these cultural practices—as well as the power inherent in being the ones to safeguard this knowledge. However, a clear thread of frustration and resistance to these gendered expectations and obligations was also present. The stories presented here speak to an inherent messiness in navigating the contemporary kitchen as a daughter/granddaughter of immigrants.

Kara shared memories of her family's Sunday barbeque tradition, in which they would wrap pieces of barbequed meat in homegrown sesame leaves. She described helping her mom prepare the food, as her dad and brothers were freed of responsibilities:

> *"On these barbecue days, it was also my job as a female to help my mom in the kitchen by washing the vegetables while the males (my dad and brothers) did God knows what. However, if the sesame leaves were ready to be picked, I would have the additional task of picking them from the garden first. I didn't particularly enjoy the extra work for a vegetable I disliked, especially when I didn't understand why a woman's place was in the kitchen. The bitterness usually dissipated once my mom praised me for fulfilling my filial duty and remarked what a good wife I would make by helping her, all things to strive for in Korean culture."*

left: meat, defrosting in the dish rack

Kara first speaks to the confusion that she experienced as a result of facing this gendered role in the garden and in the kitchen, initially unclear about the context behind this expectation. But in moments of clarity brought on by her mom's praise, Kara reflects on the perpetuation of these expectations—noticing they are held and perpetuated intimately by her mom, and on a larger-scale by Korean culture. Navigating her "filial duty," which will put her in a position to excel as a wife, Kara highlights the persistence of these expectations and how they are passed down from generation to generation. Elaborating on another moment of clarity, this time regarding expectations around eating her mom's homegrown foods, Kara recalled:

> *"I do remember after a certain age, there was an instance when my mom couldn't mask a crestfallen look on her face when I rejected her homegrown sesame leaves for the store-bought lettuce. At whatever age I was at the time, she decided for me that I needed to be mature enough to eat her sesame leaves, even if I didn't like them, out of respect to her."*

In this memory, Kara reflects on her mom's disappointment, which resulted from her rejection of this special food. Introspectively, she considers the value placed on respect—in a way that appears to be deep and intuitive—within her family's dynamic. In addition, this anecdote emphasizes a kind of mutual sacrifice by both Kara and her mom, unspoken but understood, especially as Kara grew older. Recognizing how important these acts of growing and cooking were to her mom, Kara further highlights the deeply rooted connections in her family between the gendered act of providing, respect, and pride, noting, *"now, I love sesame leaves, and when we eat my mom's sesame leaves with our meals, I always compliment her on how great they taste."*

In parallel, Molly shared stories about her family's Christmas tamale tradition, which the women in her family were responsible for sustaining:

> *"We—all the women, it's so patriarchal—all the women get together. We buy giant tubs of masa, which we get from downtown—I honestly don't know the store's name, but it doesn't have a sign*

in the front, you know? It looks like the back of someone's house. We order the masa, we buy all the cornhusks from a Mexican grocery store, and then we make an assembly line: we all have our own spatulas, we put the masa on the cornhusk, we pass it down to my grandma. My grandma puts the meat, and she wraps it up. You're a masa bitch for forever until you're either my grandma or one of my aunts…You got to work your way up the pecking order."

Molly walks through the process of making tamales, emphasizing the gendered nature of this tradition but also the strong sense of community and insider status that comes with knowing about special places to obtain ingredients and being included in this significant holiday ritual. Though she recognizes the heaviness that accompanies gendered expectations around preparing this food—calling it "so patriarchal"—she also speaks to larger dynamics of belonging and familiarity that are at play, with a sense of candor and pride in how they collectively sustain this meaningful practice. Calling attention to an additional hierarchy that exists among the women in her family in regards to this tradition, with her grandma at the very top, Molly highlights a power in the "pecking order" that they all adhere to—speaking to the many different expectations that come with this tradition within Molly's family.

In both Kara and Molly's narratives of specific food traditions within their families, there are elements of gendered expectations that appear deeply embedded. At some points, the expectations are given a direct voice; at other points, they are unspoken but understood, intertwined with ideas of respect and belonging. Their stories highlight the challenges of navigating roles in the kitchen and garden as a daughter/granddaughter of immigrants, where there is a resistance to perpetuating harmful norms but also a desire and an obligation to honor the traditions and legacies of older generations. Ultimately, they speak to a continual negotiation of values and identities within the realm of family expectations around food, particularly across generations.

strength in struggle

"You know how some immigrants are wealthy immigrants? And then some are not wealthy immigrants? My family was not wealthy in China, or Vietnam. They were pretty poor. And **growing things wasn't a hobby; it was their dinner, their livelihood.**"

Julia

The varied ways in which families have experienced struggles related to poverty and immigration was something that emerged often and organically alongside discussions of food, as critical context for understanding the significance of contemporary behaviors around food. Many people reflected on how these struggles informed the way their parents and grandparents exhibited strength and lived their lives in a new place, embodying resilience. Julia shared a poignant story about her family's immigration experience; her parents are ethnically Chinese, but grew up in Vietnam. She reflected on their time in a refugee camp before they came to the United States, seeking peace and safety:

> *"Around the time of the Vietnam War, ethnic Chinese people were being persecuted in Vietnam...Each of their families spent a few months in a refugee camp, just trying to figure out where to go, and my understanding is that there was some sort of lottery system for each country, because of immigration laws and whatnot. Certain countries were only accepting certain numbers of refugees at a certain time, so they had to wait in this refugee camp until the right opportunity came."*

Julia describes the precariousness and vulnerability in their situation—"certain countries... certain numbers...certain time"—as they waited at the mercy of a process that saw them as numbers. Later in our interview, she expanded on her family's background, noting that their early struggles informed their food-growing practices in the west SGV:

> *"You know how some immigrants are wealthy immigrants? And then some are not wealthy immigrants? My family was not wealthy in China,*

left: green onions, thriving in recycled plastic bottles affixed to a handmade structure

or Vietnam. They were pretty poor. And growing things wasn't a hobby; it was their dinner, their livelihood."

Drawing attention to socioeconomic differences among immigrants and how her family was not wealthy in their home countries, she points out an important distinction between growing food for fun and growing food to survive. Julia also explained why her grandparents raise chickens—another practice, rooted in survival, they carried with them across borders:

"They didn't raise them for eggs; they raised them to eat them. Some of the more prominent memories I have are of watching my grandma kill chickens. This is not a very pleasant story, but I remember watching my grandma kill chickens, and she would tell us, 'oh, this is for dinner.'"

Julia draws attention to the pragmatic and functional qualities of her family's food-growing and animal-raising practices, emphasizing that for some people, these practices are rooted in a context that includes a struggle to survive. There is strength and resoluteness in the way Julia perceives and describes her grandma's approach to killing chickens. Rather than romanticize food-growing and animal-raising as idyllic activities based in recreation and choice, she suggests a deeper unpacking of history and motivations.

Like Julia, Allison gave context for her grandma's food-growing practices, related to the struggles she faced before immigrating to the United States:

"They all came from the village; they grew up really dirt poor. Seeing them harvest this fruit and seeing how successful they were—I think that really taught me to appreciate grit, and patience. It's just so special, you know? Your grandma puts all this hard work into growing these delicious fruits for you to eat. It's just a lot of love, and it tastes so good because it's so fresh."

Her reference to "the village" is an intentional choice, reflecting the way she has heard her grandma and other family members talk about the impoverished conditions they came from. In contrast to this origin story, she describes in emotional detail how the literal fruits of their labor embody their past and contemporary hard

work. Reflecting on what her grandma's struggles and successes mean to her, she says they have influenced her to appreciate qualities such as "grit" and "patience"—inspired by what her grandma has overcome. Joy also reflected in emotional detail on her grandma's early struggles. She talked to me about how her grandma grew up, very much in contrast to her own lived experience:

> *"My grandma grew up in a completely different time. She didn't go to school, she married at a super young age (I think it was an arranged marriage), she grew up in a time of extreme poverty. Growing up she always told me I was super blessed, and I couldn't really understand what she was talking about. Now that I'm older looking back, I can really understand what she meant as I spent time in Taiwan, visited her hometown, and was able to see the life that she lived and how different it was from the life that I lived."*

As an adult, Joy recognizes the privilege she carries in comparison to her grandma's circumstances—something she was not able to see or understand when she was younger. Expanding on this, she talked about her grandma's passion for growing vegetables in their backyard garden, and how this was something she could understand:

> *"The life I lived was obviously so different from the life she lived, but I knew that the one thing she was so passionate about was growing vegetables. She spent morning to night in our backyard, growing these vegetables. I remember my mom would always be like, 'oh, you're so lucky to be able to eat these organic, home-raised foods every day.'"*

Seeing her grandma grow vegetables was an activity that existed on a digestible scale; the differences between their lives were vast, but her grandma's gardening practices were discrete, tangible and relatable.

Other people reflected on difficult decisions their families made in order to ensure more fruitful lives for their children. Kara's parents are both immigrants from South Korea, and she talked about what they sacrificed in their move from Koreatown in Central Los Angeles to the west SGV:

"In 2000, we moved to a condo in Arcadia with a smaller backyard and effectively no front yard. For my parents, the sacrifice of our bigger home and yard in Koreatown of Los Angeles was justified by the amazing school district of Arcadia. [My mom] gave up growing all her vegetables in Koreatown for us, and the most common vegetable she grew in her limited gardening space of our Arcadia home was the sesame leaf."

In Kara's case, her parents moved to the west SGV to ensure better educational opportunities for their children. This meant giving up the comforts of their bigger home and yard, as well as the proximity of their Korean community. Kara recognizes the enormity and significance of this sacrifice, especially as it pertained to her mom's garden and her ability to grow as much as she wanted.

As demonstrated through these excerpts, many people I interviewed had thoughtful and evocative reflections on how their immigrant families had navigated and overcome significant challenges. Often, these were not struggles my interviewees experienced personally, but were ones they were adjacent to or grew up hearing about. Perhaps as a result of this, there is a sense of heaviness that is communicated—of feeling the weight of a loved one's impoverished beginnings—but also pride, in how a full life in a new place has been built from seemingly little. Strength and determination runs throughout these narratives: resilience manifesting differently but poignantly in each one.

right: a buddha statue and a weathered metal ship greet visitors at the back door

homesickness

"When I left for college to New York, **there was nothing really familiar, and there was nothing that was comforting there that I could find**. Trying to scrap together just anything was a real challenge."

Rachel

Perhaps intuitively, memories of home surfaced quite often in our conversations about food. Many people—having moved across the country or across the globe—expressed longing for the familiar: foods which reminded them of home and its associated comforts. Some people spoke to how certain foods were difficult to find or replicate in their new location, further exacerbating their distance from home and highlighting the specificity of cherished foods that I referenced in previous chapters. Other times, people were able to carry these remnants of home to their new locations, and mitigate feelings of homesickness. Rachel and I talked about her cross-country move from the SGV to New York, and the challenges she faced in finding what was familiar to her:

> *"When I left for college to New York, there was nothing really familiar, and there was nothing that was comforting there that I could find. Trying to scrap together just anything was a real challenge."*

When I asked her about what defines comforting food, she replied, *"familiar food, or familiar flavors. Food that I can easily get in the San Gabriel Valley that I cannot get here."* For Rachel, feelings of familiarity and comfort were tied to foods common to the SGV but uncommon elsewhere; she speaks with disappointment but acceptance of this reality. She continued to reflect on moving away from home—currently living in a neighborhood adjacent to Chicago's Chinatown—and described a Saturday park scene that helped her regain some semblance of familiarity:

> *"On Saturdays in the park, you can see people dancing with the swords, and the fans, and martial arts. There's a group of older Chinese women who do this dancing exercise, and they*

all wear matching shirts and pants and have different uniforms for different days. It's very comforting, even though I don't actually interact with any of these people and they belong to a different generation than I am—generation in terms of age and immigration generations. But it is somehow all very familiar."

Even though there is an age and immigration generation gap between Rachel and these older Chinese women, their presence is comforting to her because they are reminders of home, emblematic of a large demographic group in the SGV. Seeing this group consistently occupying the park—distinct uniforms and all—reinforces their visibility, suggesting that this is place where they (and perhaps Rachel by proximity) feel they belong. Rachel also told me about wanting to volunteer at a nearby meal service program that she observed being frequented by many older Asian immigrants, highlighting another opportunity to connect to glimpses of familiarity. Because moving away from home in the SGV has meant moving away from comfort and familiarity, these examples speak to how Rachel has attempted to remain connected to her cultural identity.

Like Rachel, Joy also reflected on her experiences of moving from the SGV to Kansas City and how her perspective on home shifted:

"When I left California, it was this childlike naivete; I wanted a change. I was desperate for a change...I wanted to go out and see the world. But after 2.5 years, struggling to really find my community out here, really struggling to find my roots here, when people ask me where I want to go after med school, California is slowly becoming a possible option because home is home."

She references being "desperate" for change, wanting to move beyond the comforting and familiar to experience something new. But as she struggled to feel connected and grounded in a very different place, she realized she needed to regain glimpses of what she had tried to leave behind:

"Recently I started checking out a Chinese church, because I feel like I got so desperate to experience something that was kind of familiar to me. I even called my mom and was like, 'hey, how do you make this one vegetable that you used to

always make?' I've been cooking it like the way she told me to cook it, and it tastes exactly the way she makes it, and it reminds me of home. All these little things remind me of home, because I think I really miss that comfort, you know?"

Here, Joy highlights her attempts to reconnect with home through community and through food. Replicating her mom's cooking while far away helped bridge the distance in a meaningful way, speaking to how this particular vegetable dish held particular memories of home for her.

Expanding on these ideas of mitigating homesickness and bridging distances from home through foods, Celine and Allison shared examples of planting foods directly from or reminiscent of home countries. Celine described bringing okra seeds from the Philippines, because she was not able to find them at stores near her in the west SGV:

"The okra [seeds] was from the Philippines too, because I can't find okra in here...There's a lot at the market, but I don't want to buy it. I want to eat my own crops. It's better when you see your crops growing. (laughs)...In the Philippines they're five inches long. It's neat to cut them and put them in your basket."

Her insistence on growing her own okra, despite its availability at markets near her, is an indication of what is actually valued—placing meaning on creating a familiar visual that brings her back to fond memories of home. Similarly, Allison explained the reasoning behind the foods planted by her mom and grandma:

"It's so much work, and it's something that we take for granted. On top of that, the fact that it's produce from the homeland makes it even more special because it's not something that I would ever have exposure to, had they not been adamant about providing what they feel is good. They're not growing random things; it's very purposeful, and symbolic—for example, the persimmons are symbolic, but other vegetables are full of nutrients, you know?"

Allison highlights the intentionality behind her family's growing practices, calling the foods "produce from the homeland" and pointing out

their purpose and symbolism. She reflects on the uniqueness of this experience, heightening the difference between what is available locally and what is available in her family's home country. Both Celine and Allison speak to experiences of creating familiarity in new places by planting specific foods tied to memories of home. Across all of these stories, there is a longing for the familiar, and the use of different strategies to either minimize the distance from home or bring home to the present.

navigating identity

"I remember when we went on the east coast trip, a teacher/chaperone kept asking me what my heritage was. **She was like, 'you don't look like anything.'** I remember her saying that; you don't look like any specific ethnicity."

Molly

Intertwined with previously mentioned discussions of family, struggle, and homesickness were conversations around people's experiences with navigating identity, having grown up in a unique set of conditions in the west SGV. Some people reflected on shifts in their understanding of their identity upon moving away from the west SGV, as they were forced to confront their minority status for the first time in parts of the midwest. Other people reflected on their experiences of feeling like minorities in the west SGV, even as they were part of majority panethnic groups; despite the region's overall majority Asian American and Latinx makeup, neighborhoods undeniably vary in their demographic specifics and carry their own flavor of exclusion. Across these stories, an underlying thread is the ongoing struggle to determine who belongs where, and why.

Allison, Joy, Kay, and Rachel all speak to experiences of feeling like a minority for the first time upon moving out of the west SGV to other parts of the country. Allison reflected on her chapter of living in the midwest, and the struggle of facing her othered status for the first time:

> *"It's so weird, you know, growing up in these places you don't notice how the rest of the world actually views Asian people. That was kind of mind-blowing for me when I went to school in the midwest. Growing up, we were the majority, but we didn't grow up being that Asian kid. We had identities outside of being Asian."*

Growing up in the west SGV, she had more agency in determining what qualities made her stand out. This was something lacking in her experience in the midwest—a shock heightened by the unique comforts of spending nearly two decades surrounded by a strong Asian community.

left: ripening guavas, each veiled in protective netting

Elaborating on this idea, she reflected on the pride she now feels about being raised by a Chinese immigrant family:

> *"Now that I'm older I'm not ashamed of where I come from—I'm proud of it...I don't need permission to embrace different facets of each culture because I think there's benefits to both; it's really different being raised American, coming from a Chinese immigrant family."*

Joy, currently based in Kansas City, described the internal conflict she has encountered even in everyday situations, such as figuring out what to bring to a birthday gathering:

> *"I knew the birthday girl liked dumplings, and it would be so cool if she could experience my mom's dumplings because I love them and I hope she would love them too. But I remember thinking—this sounds so dumb—will people look down on me for being the Asian girl bringing Asian food to a potluck where everyone's white, you know?"*

Feeling torn between sharing something culturally special to her and being judged for embodying some sort of stereotype, she highlights an example of a place-specific identity-related struggle that would not have been an issue in her community in the west SGV. She continued to reflect on being the only Asian in the room, for the first time:

> *"I've never been the only Asian in a room before. Now that's my experience, you know? It's my life now. A lot of people talked about how that was their life, being the only Asian in school, but we really never had that experience before."*

Joy recognizes the privilege of growing up in the west SGV and being surrounded by a strong and supportive community. Kay echoed this privilege, feeling out of place in her new home in Vegas: *"there's a decently-sized Asian population here, but I do feel a little out of place sometimes. I took it for granted how diverse it was growing up in LA, and being able to grow up around people who look like me."* Rachel also reflected on her cross-country move to a largely white school in New York, succinctly summarizing her experience, *"the gradual process of learning what it's like to be a minority all happened there."* These excerpts speak

to a significant shift that occurred upon leaving the west SGV and the familiarity and safety it symbolized—there is a sense of disorientation, but also an uncomfortable but informative revelation in seeing herself through different eyes and the perspectives that process reveals.

Other people that I interviewed spoke to experiences of discomfort and disorientation within the borders of the west SGV. While this region is majority Asian American and Latinx and represents significant gains in regards to inverting traditional ideas of suburban norms, each neighborhood carries a different demographic makeup and its own complexities in terms of ethnic hierarchies. For example, Kara described moving from Koreatown to Arcadia in the west SGV, and feeling different as a Korean American among many Chinese and Taiwanese American students:

> *"In Koreatown, the automatic assumption was that I was Korean, and I felt comfortable in the tacit pride of our ethnicity and culture in this region of Los Angeles. Moving to the SGV, I felt like an outsider, because even among the other Asian Americans, I knew I was different for not being specifically Chinese or Taiwanese. Wanting to fit in or be cool in the SGV, I demanded that my mom stop packing pickled vegetables and other "stinky" dishes for lunch."*

Her sense of belonging shifted, as her family moved from a majority Korean enclave to a very different type of Asian American community. Expanding on this desire to fit in at the school lunch scene, she shared an detailed memory of a time when her outsider status was amplified through her food:

> *"I still remember the name of the white boy who asked me what I brought, took one look, spit on the ground for dramatic effect, and told everyone else not to sit next to me because of the food I brought…I cried silently that lunch break still eating my food because I didn't want that white boy to win. I hated that white boy, but I also wished I was white."*

The concurrent anger and desire for mainstream acceptance that she highlights here contrasts with later high school and college experiences, as she was able to regain pride in the things that made

her feel different:

> *"Bringing homemade Korean dishes to the dormitories in Stockton actually made me more popular with my friends. I was able to share different dishes that students were either never exposed to or were excited to try."*

Food became a bridge across gaps in understanding, instead of a barrier reinforcing difference— something that was once stigmatized was now interesting and exciting to other people. In parallel to Kara, Molly reflected on struggling to define herself while growing up in the west SGV with a Mexican mom and a white dad. She shared a memory of a teacher commenting on her supposedly ambiguous ethnic presentation:

> *"When I was younger, I definitely struggled with it; which side do I fit in—am I Mexican or am I white? In Arcadia especially, because there's not a lot of Mexican kids...I remember when we went on the east coast trip, a teacher/chaperone kept asking me what my heritage was. She was like, 'you don't look like anything.' I remember her saying that; you don't look like any specific ethnicity."*

She highlights this struggle of feeling pressured to fit into boxes, an issue exacerbated by lower numbers of Mexican students relative to other groups in Arcadia specifically. We also talked about her fiance and his traditional Mexican family, and the excitement around recovering traditions and reconnecting to this part of her heritage:

> *"His family is super traditional; there's so many things I didn't have when I was growing up. On Christmas, his mom makes tamales, homemade tortillas, and rice pudding. She also makes hot chocolate and you put the tamale masa in it, which sounds gross but it's good...I think my mom was excited for me to experience the stuff that she maybe thought she took away from us."*

Molly calls attention to not only the complexities of navigating traditions as a person of mixed heritage, but also the complexities of raising mixed children—she recognizes that her mom was compelled to make challenging decisions as they were growing up, balancing priorities of passing on traditions and protecting them from feeling

othered by their peers.

Across these stories, there are elements of discomfort and dislocation related to feeling culturally out of place. The west SGV, with its uniquely majority-minority makeup, is implied by many people I interviewed as a place of familiarity, comfort, and safety—and upon leaving this community and bubble of sorts, many have experienced uncomfortable revelations for the first time regarding how they are perceived by those on the outside. The region is not infallible; neighborhoods within the west SGV carry their own exclusive energies that are felt by those not within the most dominant or visible ethnic group. But there is a recovery and reinvigoration of pride in traditions, as people continue to navigate who they are and carve space accordingly.

in lieu of language

"**Because I can't verbally communicate as much with my grandparents, food in a way is our form of communication.** They feed me, and that's their way of showing love. They'll cook for me, they'll send me home with extra food that they made, they'll pick all of these fruits."

Kay

The final theme centers on the ways in which language can function as a barrier between generations. Some people that I interviewed shared regrets about their waning ability to speak their grandparents' language, a result of having to prioritize English when they were young or moving out of an intergenerational household. Other people told me about never having the ability to speak their grandparents' language, and the complexity of emotions this engendered. Together, these reflections highlight the weight that language carries, in how connected people feel to older generations as well as their cultural heritage. These very real gaps in verbal communication, however, were often eased by the sharing of homegrown and home-cooked foods—in lieu of language, a new kind of communication emerged.

Kay, Julia, and Joy all shared their experiences of having little to no shared language with their grandparents, and how this affected their relationships. Kay, previously able to speak Chinese when she lived with her grandparents, told me about the struggle of losing this ability and its effects on her relationship with her grandma:

"My grandma's ethnically Chinese, but they lived and worked in Vietnam so she speaks Vietnamese and Chinese. Her English is very limited, but she understands it. She'd always want me to try to speak in Chinese; I think she was a little upset that my brother and I don't anymore. Growing up, we used to live with her, and she used to watch us when my parents were at work—so when we were kids, we could speak it fluently. But once we started school, we moved out into Arcadia, and we lost all of that. She gives me a little bit of a hard time with that sometimes. I really wish I could be able to talk to my grandparents more,

left: family feast at the classic round table, with multiple dishes to share

because our interactions are really limited in terms of having deep conversations."

The contrast between Kay's limited ability to speak only English and her grandma's ample ability to speak many different languages is felt, and heightened by her grandma's disappointment. Kay recognizes the limitations of their interactions as a result of this gap in communication, but expanded on how they have used food as a bridge for understanding:

"Because I can't verbally communicate as much with my grandparents, food in a way is our form of communication. They feed me, and that's their way of showing love. They'll cook for me, they'll send me home with extra food that they made, they'll pick all of these fruits. Especially since I've been away at school. They always just want to make sure that I have enough."

She calls attention to how her grandparents express themselves and their love for her through homegrown and home-cooked foods, even more than language. Julia also spoke to the language barrier between her and her grandparents, and the difficulties in connecting on a deeper level:

"It's kind of difficult because I can't really speak the same language as my grandparents, and they're not great at English, so my interaction and relationship with them is pretty limited—which makes me sad. But it's hard for me to do something about it; the language isn't something that you can learn in school because it's not a common dialect. So that's difficult, and I guess when I think about it, I don't feel like I have very significant connections with them, except that they raised me, so there's a lot of fond affection of course. But in terms of sharing my life with them or hearing about their lives and their backgrounds, I don't really get that much of it. It's unfortunate."

Calling attention to the challenges of learning her grandparents' uncommon dialect, there is a sense of resignation that their relationship is not one of deep sharing or conversation. However, when I asked her if their weekly family meals helped them to connect, she replied:

"I think it is very important for my grandma that

she can still cook these traditional, home dishes for her children and her grandchildren. And you know, she's getting older now, so sometimes my dad or my aunts and uncles will tell her, "don't work so hard, don't cook these elaborate things, because you're getting older; you're tired, you might hurt yourself," but she's pretty stubborn about continuing to do it. And I mean, I think that that's right. It is something that we can share, and it brings her joy when she can see that we're enjoying it and coming together because of it."

Here, she speaks to how they have managed to use food as a mechanism for sharing space and really seeing each other—it may not be verbal or extensive in nature, but is still significant. Julia reflects on how hard her grandma works to provide home-cooked foods for her family, and this recognition and understanding is meaningful regardless of their gap in verbal communication. Lastly, Joy reflected on the various barriers to understanding between her and her grandma: *"her interests were so different from mine because she couldn't read, write, or understand English... There were a lot of times where I felt like I didn't really have a lot in common with her."* Despite these differences in language and in interests, she was able to connect to her grandma through her garden and the way she put care into preparing home-cooked meals. These foods continue to leave imprints on her memory, as she remarked, *"I remember all the little dishes! I don't really even know how to say them in English."* This highlights further how they were able to understand each other in meaningful ways though food, ultimately transcending a need for a shared language.

The reasons provided for loss or absence of language ability are varied, and carry different levels of regret and introspection. Though having a shared language is a significant way to connect with others, there are meaningful ways in which to bridge these gaps that still help people feel seen and understood. The stories shared here provide examples of food as a powerful mechanism for connecting across generations with different levels of language ability.

reflections

In looking across themes, there are two significant underlying ideas. First, that both food and landscape are mediums through which meaning and memory are retained and that they are intimately intertwined. Second, that these examples of physical and symbolic marking, in suburban contexts with historically-bound associations of whiteness, are assertions of ethnic identity manifesting in both private and public ways. Both the physical and symbolic marking engage with ideas of who has ownership and claim to shaping space, not only challenging long-perpetuated suburban norms but also redefining the landscape of possibilities for the future as children and grandchildren of immigrants continue to mark this space as their own. All processes by which hegemonic spatial imaginaries are destabilized, the nuanced and complex perpetuation of immigrant food traditions, carried across great distances, reinforces how the intimately scaled interactions with food reflect larger processes and histories across time. Through maintaining access to cherished homegrown and homecooked foods, through engaging in food practices carrying elements of homes and struggles near and afar, through

left: sunset backyard reflections

connecting intergenerationally through culturally-special foods in the absence of shared language—these are all ways that enable preservation and continuity of identity in this particular place.

George Lipsitz has referred to the primary goal of landscape architects and others working within the built environment as "disassemble the fatal links that connect race, place, and power," recognizing the power of these professions to shape environments in ways ranging from damaging to empowering.[46] Reflecting back to earlier discussions in the introduction and literature review of the histories of exploitation, exclusion, and larger-scale cultural shifts in the west SGV, I see the collection of these individual narratives as an attempt to reveal the nuances laden in this contested, richly textured landscape, to breathe life and tangibility into histories that are in fact very personal but are often told in scholarly ways that feel clinical, removed, devoid of lived experience. The fact that these individual narratives are situated within the context of larger histories grounds them and amplifies their significance, because they are examples of resistance, redefinition, and resilience, with food and land as their medium. The objective of this thesis has never been to make inappropriately grand generalizations based on a limited number of perspectives—but in stringing together a constellation of lived experiences and finding patterns and motifs among them, there is a collectivity, a solidarity, in how people have contributed to the shaping of their environment in culturally-resonant ways. To disassemble the links that connect race, place, and power undeniably requires work at the systems scale, but can this disassembling occur too in the more intimate moments of an immigrant "making it" to the suburbs, to then promptly uproot their lawn to plant vegetables? Or a fruit tree shared between immigrant neighbors that stays rooted for generations and signifies their presence, as though saying, *"I am here and I am not going anywhere"*?

I was drawn to landscape architecture for what I saw as an unparalleled opportunity to reveal stories over time with land as our medium, recognizing that each place carries its own powerfully layered histories. In pursuing a thesis about untold/unheard stories, rather than offering

a site design response, my intention was to learn about lived experiences with food and land in in-depth ways that other disciplines have done for a very long time—bringing and integrating threads from anthropology, geography, and food justice into the picture. I was curious to experience a space of sharing where deep listening rather than problem solving was prioritized. I wanted to learn about the assets of this particular place through other people's eyes. In the process of interviewing people that I knew, I was invited into spaces of trust and vulnerability and had the opportunity to reflect on the experiences of my friends and family through different lenses. This experience highlighted for me the incredible robustness found in personal narratives and how powerfully resonant they become when joined, amplifying each other.

Recognizing the limitations of interviewing a small number of people, a next iteration of this work could aim to incorporate many more voices to amplify the ones presented here. The inclusion of more voices, continuing to represent a variety of age and immigration generations and cultural and ethnic identities, could contribute additional insights on the themes identified in this thesis. In addition, continuing to visualize and illuminate flows through space and time through mappings and diagrams would build upon the textural richness of this anthology and analysis of stories as a whole. Nevertheless, reflecting on the rich memories that have been shared with me about so many personally-meaningful foods and gardens (in a seemingly benign, yet incredibly symbolic suburban community) I wonder how designers might be more reflexively curious about uncovering assets of the landscapes around them—given that they have much to suggest about the past, present, and perhaps also possibilities for the future.

Endnotes

46. Lipsitz, "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race," 10.

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left: abundant citrus

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